



# Praxis: A Writing Center Journal (2003-2011)

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## Synch or Swim: (Re)Assessing Asynchronous Online Writing Labs

Fall 2010 / Focus

**A former Writing-Center coordinator analyzes the benefits of asynchronous online writing labs.**

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Matthew Schultz

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## Writing Assessment and Writing Center Assessment: Collision, Collusion, Conversation

Fall 2010 / Focus

by **Madeleine Picciotto**, University of California - San Diego

### The benefits and risks of evaluating how writing centers effect students' performance on exit exams.



Madeleine Picciotto

Sophia makes her first visit to the writing center in a state of desperation[1]. Although she's earning adequate grades in the Basic Writing class she's currently taking (for the third time), she has twice failed the institutionally-mandated exit exam that will enable her to enter a college composition course focusing on academic argumentation. If she doesn't pass the exam on her third try, she'll be dismissed from the university. During the exam she'll have two hours to read a short passage she's never seen before and craft a response, supporting her position with appropriate examples. She has only a few weeks before the exam date — just enough time for a

handful of individual consultations with a peer tutor and participation in a group workshop for Basic Writing students.

We're hopeful that we can help Sophia, and the many other students in similar positions who come to the writing center for assistance, in spite of the fact that this is not a constituency our center was originally intended to serve. The Warren College Writing Center at the University of California — San Diego was created to assist three groups: students enrolled in college composition courses, students taking a mandatory ethics course, and students writing papers for general-education and upper-division courses. At UCSD, Basic Writing is outsourced to a local community college (taught on the UCSD campus, but by community college instructors who have no contact with the college composition program or other UCSD instructional units). Basic Writing support therefore was not initially seen as being within our writing center's purview. However, as students begged for help, the center received administrative permission to assist with Basic Writing assignments and the exit exam.

Basic Writing students have now become a significant constituency for our writing center: approximately 15% of our one-on-one consultations in the 2009-2010 academic year involved students enrolled in Basic Writing classes. To assess the center's effectiveness in working with this group, we have begun to compare the exit exam pass rates of students who utilize center services with those of the student body as a whole, and we have discovered that the pass rates of students served by the center have been noticeably higher. This

particular form of assessment is relatively new for us — our first examination of exam pass rates was in Fall 2009 — and we're continuing to review the process. Although we've encountered some ethical concerns as we've undertaken this project, it is yielding important benefits; most significantly, it is beginning to stimulate a deeper institutional understanding of issues concerning writing.

In our center, we've always gathered the data that most writing centers record: the number of students seen for particular writing tasks, the number of repeat visits per student, and so on. We've also moved beyond usage counts to explore whether other goals and expected outcomes are being met. A concentration on outcomes can raise questions and concerns. For instance, Nancy Sommers, the former director of Harvard's Expository Writing Program and the author of a detailed longitudinal study of undergraduate writing experiences, resists the notion of an "endpoint" that may be implicit in outcomes-oriented assessment — the tacit assumption that once a particular outcome has been reached, the learning process is complete (162). We've generally tried to conceive of our writing center's goals not in terms of specific results that imply the end of learning, but rather in terms of an ongoing process of development. Many of our goals are attitudinal (for example, our mission statement includes the goal of "promoting long-term confidence in writing abilities"); we use methods such as post-session questionnaires to discover whether student attitudes may in fact be changing as a result of writing center visits.

At the same time, we've begun to appreciate the need to tackle assessment of specific learning outcomes as well as attitudinal changes. Like most writing centers, ours has two different assessment audiences: internal (our own staff, for self-reflection and improvement) and external (faculty and administrators responsible for funding our center and evaluating its institutional viability). Neal Lerner, who teaches in MIT's Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies and who has written extensively on the complexities of writing center assessment, wryly comments that quantitative data regarding student-learning outcomes can be "perfect for bullet items, PowerPoint presentations, and short attention spans — in other words, perfect for appeals to administrators and accrediting bodies" (59). This may be a somewhat crass aspect of assessment; but given budget realities, it's an aspect we can't ignore. So we're now exploring ways to undertake quantitative studies adhering to a process-oriented view of ongoing student development: for example, examining differences between first and revised paper drafts (inspired by Roberta Henson and Sharon Stephenson's research model). Focusing on exam pass rates, on the other hand, seems to reflect the endpoint-oriented approach that Sommers decries — a concern we've grappled with since we began this aspect of our assessment program.

When we first decided to examine the exit exam pass rates, we weren't thinking in terms of the "bullet items" Lerner describes. Rather, we were addressing internal concerns about our tutors' effectiveness in working with a constituency that hadn't been within the center's original scope. How effective was our assistance? How would we even define "effectiveness" in this context? These have turned out to be complicated questions.

Preparing for formulaic essay tests is not generally seen as writing center business. Indeed, the ethos of most writing centers — dialogic, developmental — is in direct collision with the values implicit in a routine assessment such as the Basic Writing exit exam, and with the goals of a remedial course that concentrates on timed writing exercises and "tried-and-true" formulas (i.e. the

five-paragraph essay) as the exam's presence looms. Critics of impromptu essay exams as assessment instruments are plentiful. Chris M. Anson notes that such exams conflict with a view of writing as an open system requiring flexibility; many others have pointed to a misalignment between essay exams and the writing called for in first-year composition and beyond (e.g. Elbow and Belanoff; O'Neill, Moore, and Huot; White). Nonetheless, the Basic Writing exit exam is a hard-and-fast reality at UCSD. The decision to work with the high-stakes nature of the exam and the high anxiety of those who face it grew out of our center's fundamental commitment to student service. Dennis Paoli, coordinator of the Hunter College Reading/Writing Center, asks, "When we think we have the remedy for our students' suffering, how can we withhold it?" As he points out, there is a "moral imperative to relieve the students' often visible distress" (173).

We've tried to accommodate the collision of values by providing Basic Writing students with assistance that can serve them in all contexts. For instance, students sometimes tell us that they feel daunted by the blank pages of the exit exam booklet, but blank-page-paralysis is a common problem faced by students at all levels. We're accustomed to offering a variety of invention strategies, and we proceed with Basic Writing students much the same way that we would with any of the students we see regarding this issue. Sometimes, however, when working with Basic Writing students, we find ourselves becoming more directive and less open-ended than we'd like. Many in the writing center community have discussed the tension between student desire for direction and a center's commitment to a non-directive approach. Paoli observes, "No enterprise a center undertakes stresses its principles more than remediation" (171). In our center's case — faced with a remedial model, student demands, the pressure of limited time, and the potentially dire consequences of failure — we worry about becoming so concerned with the immediate obstacle of the exam that we lose sight of long-term writing development. We worry that we're acting more like test-prep instructors than writing consultants.

### **[W]e walk a tightrope, in part colluding in test preparation and in part attempting to move beyond it.**

So we walk a tightrope, in part colluding in test preparation and in part attempting to move beyond it. We give advice geared towards exam survival; at the same time we try to do what Paoli identifies as effective process-oriented tutoring in a Basic Writing context, inviting a struggling student to "reread the prompt, rethink her response, reorganize her paragraphs, and add examples and explanations.... The student revises the essay, maybe twice, to make, and understand what it takes to make, a full, successful response to the prompt" (176). We often suggest to students who are anxious about quickly generating supporting examples during the exit exam that they read a good newspaper to keep abreast of current events which can provide essay-writing material. Some ask, "If I just read the front page of the paper for a week before the exam, will that be enough?" We sigh and shrug our shoulders, hoping that a few days of reading may develop an appetite for more. We convince ourselves that we're promoting civic literacy, and that perusal of *The New York Times* — while it can have immediate benefits for exam performance — can also help to build reading comprehension and other skills that go beyond the exigencies of the exit exam. As a student proceeds through multiple drafts of an essay in response to an exam-style prompt, we help her learn how to select appropriate evidence from the news articles she may be reading, and how to effectively

incorporate source material into an argument — strategies that will help her on the exam, but that will also benefit her in subsequent academic writing situations.

We don't always feel confident about the balancing act. Are we leaning too far towards collusion with the exam by offering specific test-preparation tips, or too far away from our students' requests for direction when we resist providing a single formula for success? Are we helping our students with the immediate hurdle they're facing, as well as helping them build a foundation for their academic futures? These questions brought us to our analysis of the exam pass rates for the Basic Writing students we serve — and also to a recently-launched project of tracking the same Basic Writing students when they move into college composition classes.

We were encouraged when our first look at the numbers seemed to demonstrate our center's effectiveness vis-à-vis the exit exam, with a moderate yet significant increase in pass rates for students we assisted through individual consultations and/or group workshops. In Fall 2009 we found that 81% of students enrolled in the standard Basic Writing course who worked with the writing center passed the exam on their first try, as compared to the first-time pass rate of 74% for all Basic Writing students in our undergraduate college (one of six colleges within the university). For students enrolled in specially-designated ESL sections of Basic Writing, the difference was even greater: the first-time pass rate for those who received writing center support was 67%, as compared to a college-wide pass rate of 45%.

Of course, there may be problems with this data. For one, we're working with a small sample; the number of Basic Writing students we assisted in the writing center during the Fall 2009 term was only 33, whose pass rate we compared to that of 140 Basic Writing students from our college. Moreover, students who chose to come to the center may have been particularly motivated, and it might have been their motivation — not writing center assistance — that led to improved exam performance. There are ways to address these problems and adjust for them, as Neal Lerner suggests; we haven't yet undertaken such corrections in our assessment program, though we plan to do so in the future.

**We now worry that this very persuasiveness may affect our tutorial practices, driving us further down the road of "tutoring to the test."**

In the meantime, we've succumbed to the temptation to highlight our apparent success rate with the exit exam as we make a case to external audiences. An assessment project that was initially undertaken to address internal concerns has now indeed become a "bullet item" in reports to administrators. Although we qualify the evidence with the requisite cautions, it has in fact proved to be a persuasive item in our arsenal, convincing those who control budgets and facilities that we are in fact having concrete effects on student performance and therefore deserve continued support. We now worry that this very persuasiveness may affect our tutorial practices, driving us further down the road of "tutoring to the test."

Does using this data in our reports and presentations to faculty and administrators pose more risks than benefits? Given that the values implicit in the exam may be at odds with our center's view of writing development, is it ethical for us to use exam pass rates as evidence of our effectiveness? When

we see significant problems with the exam as a method of **writing** assessment, should we be using it in **writing center** assessment? We've reached the somewhat uneasy conclusion that we can legitimately present our exam pass rates as long as we simultaneously discuss our qualms and questions. In fact, we see the potential for such discussion to promote greater awareness of issues involving writing instruction and support at UCSD. Conversations may, at some point, lead to change.

And we are having many conversations. To begin with, we engage with the Basic Writing students themselves, particularly in group workshops. We tell them about our center's positive track record with the exam, but with caveats attached. We explore the values implicit in the scoring rubric, we consider how these values may conflict with other perspectives, and we encourage students to develop their own conceptions of what constitutes good writing. We talk about writing for an audience, and about how the expectations of Basic Writing exam scorers may differ from those of UCSD's college composition instructors or biology lab report readers. We try to bring students to a deeper understanding of the position the exit exam holds in their ongoing development as writers.

Conversations among writing center staff have furthered our own growth and understanding. As we've confronted the challenge of tutoring in the context of a remedial instructional model and contemplated the ethics of using exam pass rates as evidence of effectiveness, we've had to reexamine our philosophy and rethink our practices. Several of our peer tutors delivered a panel presentation on related issues ("Tutoring to the Test: Negotiating a Basic Writing Exit Exam") for a regional conference, and in the process they gained a deeper awareness of the complexities of their roles as writing mentors.

We also hope that conversations we're having with university faculty and administrators may lead to a more coherent approach to the teaching of writing at UCSD. When we raise our ethical concerns about using exit exam pass rates as a measure of writing center effectiveness, or when we discuss the disjunction between the skills called for to pass the exam and those called for in college composition classes, we find that some faculty haven't given much thought to how the various components of writing instruction on our campus work — or don't work — together. Clarifying our concerns, and using them as a way to raise awareness of problems that might otherwise go unrecognized, has been an unexpected benefit of the assessment process. We are creating an opening for further conversation about writing, about good writing, and about good writing instruction. Any opportunity for such conversation is welcome indeed.

### **Notes**

[1] Name changed to protect student privacy

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## Bridging Institutions to Cross the Quantitative/Qualitative Divide

Fall 2010 / Focus

by **Pam Bromley**: Pomona College, **Kara Northway**: Kansas State University, and **Eliana Schonberg**: University of Denver

**Considering qualitative and quantitative student response data and comparing those data cross-institutionally improves writing center policies locally and helps define broader objectives of the writing center as a campus institution.**

As writing center practitioners, it can be difficult to determine whether we should focus our research and assessment energies on gathering quantitative or qualitative data. Few of us are trained as “numbers people,” yet most of us regularly collect masses of quantitative data in the form of user statistics, exit surveys measuring student satisfaction, and demographic information about the writers who use our centers. Still, qualitative data often *feels* like the best illustration of our pedagogy to us, our tutors, and our faculty and administrators. When we do collect qualitative data, it frequently reflects recurrent themes in our scholarship. Even if our qualitative data manifests cross-institutional similarities, it is difficult to compare across different schools. **[1]** Convinced that both quantitative and qualitative feedback is essential to effective assessment of writing center work, we - three very different writing center practitioners from three very different institutions - set out to create a collaborative research project that would allow us to harness the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Much of the writing center field hesitates to embrace cross-institutional approaches such as ours because of concerns about making large-scale statements about the work that we collectively do; much current research has favored conclusions based on “local” situations (see for example, Carino and Enders 101, Donnelly and Garrison 17, and Gillam xx). We share this belief in the importance and impact of local context. However, we still see our centers as part of a larger writing center community with trends, directions, values, and expectations. We therefore designed our joint research project to enable us to gather and compare both quantitative and qualitative data by using the same student exit survey at all three of our institutions: a large, public land-grant university; a medium, private doctoral university; and a small, selective liberal arts college. Because our institutions are so different, we hoped that both the similarities and differences we found would illustrate some of the broader trends in the writing center field. Identifying common outcomes among our writing centers allows us to speak more persuasively to those outside the writing center about what we do as a field and why it matters, as well as to understand better the unique features of our local institutions. **[2]** (Any similarities we found would also be relevant for our tutors, who often move from undergraduate tutoring at one institution to graduate tutoring at another.)

We thus created a primarily quantitative study (with a simple four-point rating scale) that, by design, engaged with the values of our pedagogy usually shown through qualitative studies. We were most interested in what made a session “work” from the student’s perspective. Thus, we included the usual questions about why students decided to come to the writing center, whether they felt welcomed, their overall satisfaction with their visit, and demographic questions about their class year, gender, race, and home language. But we also asked questions that we hoped would get to the heart of what students learned in a session: did they feel able to transfer what they learned in that session to future assignments, and did they feel that, afterwards, the project better reflected their own writerly identity? We chose to include one open-ended question designed to probe for qualitative data because we believed that students’ own words would best illustrate the dialogic, affective, and cognitive sides of our work.[3]

**The applications of our common findings can still be local, tailored differently to our specific audiences of consultants or administrators, depending on our interests as directors and the concerns of our particular staffs and institutions.**

From our survey responses, we learned that a strong majority of students felt welcomed at the writing center, that their consultant addressed and focused on their concerns, and that their consultation was productive. Interestingly, we also learned that there are strong connections between students’ assessment of the success of their writing center consultations and their expression of writerly identity and that a large percentage of students feel able to transfer skills learned in their writing center sessions to future work.

The applications of our common findings can still be local, tailored differently to our specific audiences of consultants or administrators, depending on our interests as directors and the concerns of our particular staffs and institutions. One of us, training tutors who are exclusively undergraduates, uses students’ satisfaction to reassure anxious new tutors that their first sessions will almost always go well. Another of us, faced with often-reluctant graduate student tutors, uses this same data to talk about the importance of consistently practicing certain writing center fundamentals, such as beginning each session with a few moments of conversation to welcome and set the tone. We can therefore use these results as a jumping-off point for tutor-training workshops, devoting a staff meeting to an issue highlighted by the survey data. There have been other applications in tutor-development as well: two of us asked students to identify their tutor when completing the survey and then used this data to talk with tutors about their performance. To administrators, all of us can trumpet our finding that nearly 100% of students who visit the writing center plan to return and would recommend it to a friend.

As we analyze the results of our survey, we are increasingly aware that many of the remaining questions we have about student assessments of the effectiveness of a writing center visit can be better understood through additional qualitative research. We are therefore planning to convene student focus groups at each of our institutions. These will give us an opportunity to talk with students and to hear, in their own words, why they decide — or don’t decide — to visit the writing center and why, exactly, a session sometimes works and sometimes doesn’t for them. Student voices are all too often lost in quantitative studies. These voices, what Muriel Harris calls “the language of students,” demonstrate the real-life impact that our tutors have on writers that

they meet (30). Student feedback therefore serves both as a motivator for tutors and as an important way to highlight the impact of our work to faculty, administrators, and trustees. Gathering more qualitative data will help us learn what steps we should take to improve our student outreach and what issues we can address in tutor training to make sure that more sessions work for more students. We also hope to use what we learn from our focus groups to refine our quantitative questions.

Through our survey and our practice, we've found that quantitative and qualitative data complement one another. The quantitative information — such as the number of students we serve each year and their overall satisfaction with writing center appointments — enables our centers to know whose needs we are or aren't meeting and reflect on how we should adjust our services. Presenting these numbers with appropriate and well-analyzed quantitative data—counting well-chosen beans, as Neal Lerner puts it — enables us to justify our use of funds to those administrators in charge of budget allocations (“Counting Beans” 1; “Choosing Beans” 1). Qualitative information — such as comments from individual students about their appointments or student focus groups convened to ask how we can serve them better — is equally valuable. This feedback deeply influences how we see our writing centers operating within our institutions; the stories we relate when we talk with faculty, administrators, and tutors; and the issues we raise in tutor training. Quantitative information helps us know better *whom* we are serving, and roughly what they have gained from the experience; qualitative data helps us better understand *how* we might serve them better. Through analyzing qualitative data, we may subsequently produce further questions that can best be addressed quantitatively. When taken together and used to inform each other, qualitative and quantitative data provide a more complete picture of writing center work.

While our qualitative data is both fascinating and illuminating to us, our tutors, and our campus communities, the striking similarities across multiple questions in our numerical survey results have allowed us to draw broader conclusions about trends in writing center practice. For example, we found that a large percentage of students felt that they had a breakthrough about their text, felt intellectually engaged in their session, or felt that they were better prepared to handle a similar assignment in the future. Such quantitative data, gathered across institutions, can help the field articulate the ways in which writing center pedagogy may differ from the learning students experience in the classroom. In addition, though demographic data was not the focus of our initial survey, the disproportionately high percentage of both non-native speakers and minority students we each see compared to our institutions' enrollments suggests that our three different writing centers are all places that welcome and encourage diversity on campus. With the increasing focus in the field on making writing centers more welcoming to diverse campus populations (see, for example, Baron and Grimm; Condon; Dees, Godbee, and Ozias; Denny; Gellar et. al.; Leit et.al.), it was reassuring to see that we are already succeeding in these endeavors, both as individual practitioners and as members of the greater writing center community.

**[O]ur research has taught us the importance of mixing quantitative and qualitative research methods and the value in considering as broad a perspective as possible, even while maintaining a necessary focus on local context.**

Conclusions such as these lead us to encourage other writing center practitioners to engage in cross-institutional studies. Studies such as ours are essential because we, as a field, have not yet collected much data that demonstrates writing centers do what they say they do. Cross-institutional studies allow us to move away from writing center lore [4] — the ideas and practices that shape and inform our work, whether or not supported by research — to substantive data about writing center practice across institutions. Our survey findings suggest that many writing center values that have become part of our lore substantively shape writing center practice across institutions and lead to more sessions that work, at least from the student perspective. For example, we find that tutor-student rapport and empathy strongly correlate with students feeling that their consultation was productive and that they can take what they learned in one session and apply this knowledge to future papers. Such quantitative findings are echoed in our qualitative responses: my consultant “was really willing to sit down with me and help me figure out what I was thinking. She even went through part of the text (no easy task!) to see if she could help me find areas to look at to further my argument.” These common findings suggest that much of writing center lore has become embedded in the practice of writing centers more broadly and shapes our daily work, and we can point to both qualitative and quantitative data to support these claims.

The calls for more robust writing center research, both quantitative and qualitative, have reached a critical volume, and our voices are not needed to amplify them further. Rather, our research has taught us the importance of mixing quantitative and qualitative research methods and the value in considering as broad a perspective as possible, even while maintaining a necessary focus on local context. Perhaps the writing center field needs to think differently about the way that it approaches research. We do not mean to recommend any sort of norming of writing-center practices, but as we enter into a more thorough analysis of our data in preparation for sharing it with the greater writing-center community, we look forward to entering into conversation with additional cross-institutional studies

### **Notes**

[1] Indeed, in order to truly compare qualitative data across institutions, we would need to create an appropriate scoring rubric, code each comment, and do it in a reliable way — that is, turn the qualitative data into quantitative data.

[2] We thus see our project as adding to the cross-institutional perspective of work such as the Writing Centers Research Project.

[3] We will be presenting more detailed results in future work once we have completed our analysis.

[4] For a recent examination of the role of writing center lore, see Thompson et. al.

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From left to right: Pam Bromley, Kara Northway, and Eliana Schonberg at the **IWCA-NCPTW 2010 Conference**

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## Toward a More Perfect Union: Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Data in Writing Fellows Program Assessment

Fall 2010 / Focus

by *Christopher Hoyt and Maryann Peterson*, Western Carolina University

**Independent quantitative evaluation of student essays affirms positive qualitative responses to Writing Fellow consultations.**

### Introduction

**Writing Fellows administrators should articulate meaningful and measurable goals and move beyond the limitations of traditional survey-based assessment.**

Curriculum-based peer tutoring programs such as Writing Fellows typically have multiple goals, ranging from the grand purpose of transforming university-wide curricula to making all students feel included in a community of writers (Haring-Smith 177). Fellows programs are expected to meet the increasing and oftentimes conflicting demands of various stakeholders, including university administrators, faculty, students, Fellows themselves, and possibly employers and other members of the wider community (Condon 46-47). For example, students might want to earn higher grades, instructors might want to require students to write multiple drafts, and administrators might want to encourage a university-wide writing culture and promote collaborative learning. The interests of stakeholders vary, of course, so measuring the success of a Writing Fellows program necessarily means assessing and relating multiple outcomes. However, a review of the literature shows that many Writing Fellows programs rely exclusively on qualitative tools such as student satisfaction surveys and open-ended questionnaires to supply evaluative data. (Soven, "Curriculum-Based Peer Tutors and WAC" 220). While such tools provide potentially useful insight into participant sentiment, they neglect other critical outcomes such as demonstrable improvement in student writing. Further, faculty, Fellows, students, and program administrators are vulnerable to selective interpretation of survey results. As with all research in the social sciences, good data regarding the impact of Writing Fellows must actively eliminate such potential bias. In this time of limited funding and increased pressure to demonstrate program effectiveness, Writing Fellows administrators should articulate meaningful and measurable goals and move beyond the limitations of traditional survey-based assessment. This article details one Writing Fellows program's attempt to address these assessment concerns by using a quantitative study to complement and enhance existing qualitative measurements.

### Study Overview

Our study took place at **Western Carolina University (WCU)**, a comprehensive regional campus of the University of North Carolina. During the 2009-2010 academic year, **WCU's Writing Fellows Program** applied for and received funding to establish a pilot study designed to assess quantitatively the impact of Fellows on student writing. Our study focused on paired philosophy courses that provided a unique opportunity for comparison. During the fall and spring semesters of the 2009-2010 academic year, the instructor (Hoyt) taught pairs of otherwise identical courses, only one of which was assigned Fellows. More than 20 students were enrolled in each of the four sections, providing a sufficient sample to yield meaningful results in a comparative study.

The Fellows, successful upper-class philosophy majors, were instructed specifically to support the goals of philosophical writing as articulated by the course professor. Following the model established by the respected programs at Brown University and the University of Wisconsin — Madison, the philosophy Fellows worked closely with no more than 15 students (so in our case, both were assigned to a single class) providing focused one-on-one support. Students submitted drafts (rough drafts were accepted, though more polished essays were preferred) to their assigned Fellow, who read those drafts analytically, making minimal annotations but writing extensive endnotes. Fellows then met individually with their assigned students to discuss strategies for revision. Students revised their papers based on this consultation and submitted final drafts to the instructor. At the end of the semester, students completed a traditional qualitative survey, which invited them to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the Writing Fellows program (**Appendix A**).

In addition to gathering data from the end-of-semester surveys, which provide information about students' perceptions of the program, grant funding allowed us to engage an independent reader to analyze the students' essays. A Visiting Assistant Professor of Philosophy with no ties to the Writing Fellows program was hired to review anonymous copies of essays from both the control group and the group to which Fellows were assigned. With the students' names and class sections deleted from the essays, the reader could only consider content objectively.

Following a detailed five-point rubric, the reader assigned each essay scores for philosophical focus, philosophical depth, and mechanics (Appendix B). Thus, each essay received three distinct scores.

Our goal was to find out if the perceived impact of Writing Fellows could be verified. We set out to determine (a) if there is any significant, objectively verifiable difference between those essays reviewed by Writing Fellows and those not reviewed; (b) whether those results correspond with the students' subjective assessment of their experience with Writing Fellows, as reported in traditional qualitative surveys; and (c) whether those results correspond with the instructor's assessment of student work, as recorded in grades issued.

### Qualitative Findings

Prior to the onset of this study, our program's assessment approach was primarily qualitative. Students were invited to complete an end-of-semester survey, using a five-point Likert scale to indicate satisfaction with the program. While data extrapolated from these surveys have been useful in assessing student perceptions of the program, the impact of Fellows on student writing quality seems badly suited to assessment by survey. Nevertheless, such surveys are tempting not only because they are relatively inexpensive and easy to implement, but also because the data that they do yield is ostensibly encouraging.

Students who worked with Writing Fellows during this study completed exit surveys in which they were asked to rank their agreement with the following statement: "My Writing Fellow's feedback helped me write essays with greater philosophical depth and focus." Table 1 summarizes the results:

Table 1: Students' perception that Fellows helped them improve depth and focus

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
7	22	10	0	0	39

Students were also invited to respond to open-ended questions, one of which asked them to identify what aspects of the Writing Fellows program worked well. While many students reported that the Fellows served as thorough proofreaders, some students suggested that the Fellows' input helped them better understand and write about complex course material:

I liked having a neutral third party with more college writing experience, especially as a freshman. [My Writing Fellow] helped affirm my ideas and encouraged me to elaborate on them, which has been a weakness in my past essays.

Having a Writing Fellow who took the same class with the same professor helped guide me to what my teacher was specifically looking for. I felt like he was able to show me where to go with my draft when I was unclear.

He was very welcoming and helped me a great deal with understand the class and philosophy.

It was nice getting feedback from a friendly student. Sometimes teachers can't explain things as well as students.

Overall, a significant majority (74%) of students who responded to the survey agreed or strongly agreed that the Fellows' feedback was useful, and many students offered additional praise in response to the survey's open-ended questions. Survey results suggest that students who work with Writing Fellows believe that their essays demonstrate greater philosophical depth and focus.

A review of the literature suggests that faculty members are similarly convinced that Writing Fellows positively impact the quality of student work. Soven reports the following remarks by faculty in response to questionnaires ("Curriculum-Based Peer Tutoring Programs" 66):

Tremendous improvements in final products. (John Bean, Seattle University)

Better writing. It definitely improved their papers. ... (Robert Vogel, Education Department, LaSalle University)

Improved performance of at risk writers. GPAs in these classes [tutorial sections of the freshman composition course] equal those in regular classes ... (Janice Neulieb, Illinois State University)

Are such positive perceptions of the impact of Writing Fellows warranted? Our quantitative data suggest that they might be.

### Quantitative Findings

In total, 44 students who worked with Fellows agreed to contribute sample work to the study, along with 30 students from the control group who worked without Fellows. The median scores (on a scale from 1 to 5) issued by our independent reader are summarized in Table 2:

Table 2: Independent reader's assessment of student work

	Depth	Focus	Mechanics
With Fellows	3.29	3.53	3.89
Without Fellows	3.03	3.23	3.97

Students working with Fellows scored about 6% better in two out of three dimensions evaluated by our reader. Put otherwise, their median scores improved from average to above average. It is notable that depth and focus were emphasized in Hoyt's instructions to the Fellows and students, as well as in his final grading. Since students are motivated to participate fully in Fellows programs by the prospect of earning higher grades, it is interesting to compare our reader's results to the grades Hoyt issued (on a traditional 100 point scale). Hoyt's median grades are summarized in Table 3:

Table 3: Instructor's grades issued for student work

	Essay Grade	Semester Grade
With Fellows	81.76	78.15
Without Fellows	76.57	77.54

The data show that the grades Hoyt issued reflect approximately the same average impact of Writing Fellows on student work as was detected by our independent reader. The average difference appears to be approximately 5-6 points on a typical 100 point scale, or one-half of a letter grade. Our results support the students' positive perceptions of the program and demonstrate that Writing Fellows have the potential to improve both the quality of student work and grades earned.

Surprisingly, our independent reader detected no improvement in the third dimension, writing mechanics, of those essays reviewed by Fellows. Most of us would expect that writing mechanics would be the first and most certain area in which strong writers could help weaker ones. There are two factors that we believe explain this counterintuitive result. First, we allowed students to bring rough drafts to their Fellows, and most showed up with essays in rather crude form. Thus, the Fellows really did not have the opportunity to help them with mechanics, whereas they could — and apparently did — help students think through their ideas more carefully. Second, the course instructor explicitly emphasized depth and focus over mechanics in his grading scheme, and thus both students and Fellows likely put less effort into improving writing mechanics than they might have done otherwise.

### Conclusion

While our research budget did not allow us to conduct a more complex and sizeable study that would better isolate the influence of Fellows on student writing, we were able to collect enough meaningful data to achieve our initial goal: to determine if the perceived impact of Writing Fellows could be quantitatively verified. Given our small sample size, we must acknowledge the possibility that other factors explain the difference in work quality confirmed by our independent reader. We also acknowledge that our results might be pertinent only to a very narrow set of circumstances. For example, Writing Fellows might have a measurable positive impact on philosophical writing, which has discipline-specific standards unfamiliar to many undergraduates, while they would have a less discernable impact in courses where writing conventions are more familiar. Nonetheless, we believe that our quantitative findings lend moderate support to student and faculty perceptions, expressed in qualitative surveys, that properly trained Writing Fellows can help students produce better essays. Such findings have the potential to enhance program credibility and satisfy increased performance demands from university administration. By incorporating both qualitative and quantitative assessment tools, Writing Fellows administrators can offer a more realistic and persuasive representation of program effectiveness, emphasizing concrete successes. By identifying the right program goals and the metrics by which to measure our success or failure achieving those goals, we also put ourselves on the path to meaningful program revision.

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Christopher Hoyt

Christopher Hoyt is an assistant professor in the **Department of Philosophy and Religion at Western Carolina University**. His scholarly focus is on Wittgenstein and the philosophy of culture, but he teaches a wide variety of classes, including reasoning, philosophy in and of film, and bioethics. When he's not at work, Christopher can often be found out on a mountain trail with his trusty hound, Zero.



Maryann Peterson

Maryann Peterson is the former Associate Director of the **Writing Center at Western Carolina University**. She coordinated WCU's **Writing Fellows** program—the first of its kind in the UNC system—and taught

courses on  
writing  
center  
theory and  
practice.  
She is  
currently  
taking time  
off to care  
for her  
baby  
daughter.

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### Appendix A: Student Evaluation of WCU Writing Fellows Program

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ (If you are willing to have your answers used in the Writing Fellows research project, please provide your name above. Before data is entered or evaluated, your name will be replaced with an anonymous ID.)

My Writing Fellow's feedback helped me write essays with greater philosophical depth and focus.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

I put an honest effort into my draft and was prepared for my meeting with my Fellow.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

As a result of this experience, I am more likely to make voluntary use of the Writing Center services.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

What specific aspects of the Writing Fellows program worked well?

What specific aspects of the Writing Fellows program could be improved?

Is there anything else you would like to share about your Writing Fellows experience?

Appendix B: Assessment Rubric for the WCU Writing Fellows Study

Directions

Please rank each essay numerically from 5 (best) to 1 (worst) in the three areas identified below, according to the standards provided.

1. Philosophical Focus

(5) The essay the essay focuses effectively and insightfully on a philosophical problem and demonstrates clear logic and structure.

- (4) The essay focuses on a philosophical problem; the structure and logic are mostly consistent.
- (3) The essay focuses shallowly or ineffectively on a philosophical problem; logic and structure are lacking.
- (2) The essay lacks focus and displays little attention to logic and structure.
- (1) The essay displays no meaningful focus, logic, or structure.

#### 2. Philosophical Depth

- (5) The essay displays active engagement with philosophical ideas via imaginative examples, original arguments, personal experience, and other supporting evidence.
- (4) The essay displays clear and substantial comprehension of philosophical ideas, employing some examples, original argument, personal experience, or other supporting evidence.
- (3) The essay displays a basic comprehension of philosophical ideas but would benefit from examples, an original argument, personal experience, or other supporting evidence.
- (2) The essay displays a confused or extremely simplistic understanding of philosophical ideas and lacks examples, argument, or other supporting evidence.
- (1) The essay displays no meaningful effort to engage philosophical ideas.

#### 3. Mechanics

- (5) The essay is grammatically sound, containing few errors in spelling, syntax, diction, and punctuation.
- (4) The essay is sound but presents some sentence-level errors.
- (3) The essay contains several sentence-level errors, which occasionally detract from meaning.
- (2) The essay contains frequent and distracting sentence-level errors, which detract from meaning.
- (1) The essay contains sentence-level errors so severe that meaning is obscure.

#### Comment

If the grading rubric seems to miss or misrepresent the quality of a particular essay, please provide a textual comment explaining why.

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## Bridging Quantitative Analysis with Qualitative Experience: Two Concerns Working Together for a More Comprehensive Perspective

Fall 2010 / Focus

by **Jane Hirschhorn**, Mt. Ida College

**Designing quantitative studies sensitive to everyday, qualitative writing-center work allows writing center directors to develop policies based on patterns in student responses.**

People who work in writing centers are drawn to the profession for qualitative reasons: they like to read, they enjoy working with language, and they want to help students become better writers. Good tutors evaluate which practices work best with each student and analyze what they as tutors could have done better. As important and qualitative as an individual tutor's conclusions are, they comprise only one perspective in a writing center. However, as a writing center administrator, I believe it is also important for writing center professionals to embrace quantitative analysis, because these measures can provide both a comprehensive view and sharper perspective of the students we serve.



Jane Hirschhorn

Writing center professionals have noted the importance of conducting quantitative research. David Wallace, quoted in an article by Michael Pemberton, writes: "I think we've forgotten that data can surprise us and that careful reflection about data can help us to see things that get lost in the rush of the actual interaction" (24). Here, Wallace supports the notion that data collection and analysis allows for a sharper perspective that an individual tutor's descriptive analysis cannot provide.

Qualitative experience and quantitative analysis in writing center practice work best together. This belief certainly resonates beyond the walls of the writing center. In *Better: A Surgeon's Notes on Performance*, physician Atul Gawande writes of the connection between narrative and numbers in medicine. The book describes true stories of how he and other doctors have been challenged to provide better care for their patients from a qualitative perspective. In the afterword, however, Gawande offers five suggestions for becoming a better doctor, one of which speaks directly to quantitative measures. He writes: "Count something. Regardless of what one ultimately does in medicine — or outside medicine, for that matter — one should be a scientist in this world." He

concludes: "If you count something you find interesting, you will learn something interesting" (254-255). Gawande's directive to "count something" encourages all workers to think numerically when they seek ways to improve performance.

**Few WC directors would deny that these numbers provide us with important information. However, after two years of counting visits, I wanted data from a more nuanced, qualitative type of counting that focused on the frequency of the types of tutoring help we were providing students.**

### **Counting in the WC**

I found Gawande's idea of combining both qualitative description with quantitative analysis to be useful in analyzing writing center work, where we are asked to do both on a daily basis. As writing center directors, we are required by our institutions to count: number of student visits, number of contact hours, etc. Few WC directors would deny that these numbers provide us with important information. However, after two years of counting visits, I wanted data from a more nuanced, qualitative type of counting that focused on the frequency of the types of tutoring help we were providing students. Were we providing one type of assistance more frequently than another? Was there a pattern based on different student populations or disciplines? I was looking for a more detailed and comprehensive view of our services, and I hoped that I could achieve this goal by asking tutors to track how they spent their time during each tutoring session.

### **Pilot study part I: Fall 2009**

In fall 2009, I designed a study to answer at least some of the above questions. I asked our eight professional and two peer tutors what types of tutoring help they provided students while I also recorded what types of tutoring help I provided students. Using the Client Report Form (CRF) from WC Online, I created a drop-down list of categories from which tutors could select to take part in the study. The types of help offered were: getting started, intro/thesis, body paragraphs, organization, outlining, transition, revision, sentence structure/grammar, developing ideas, conclusion, MLA/citation, and other. There was also space for tutors to write in comments.

When I began the study, I was still unsure of what question I wanted to ask of the data I was gathering. As time passed, I decided to focus on freshmen, since our WC sees them in significant numbers, and most of them have little or no experience with college writing. I wanted to see if the data revealed a pattern that we had observed anecdotally: namely, that compared with upperclassmen, freshmen more frequently arrived in our office needing help with the earliest stages of the writing process.

### **Study results**

The data were based on 458 CRF's out of 587 sessions. Of the 458 visits, we collected data from 175 freshmen and 283 non-freshmen. A close examination of the data supported our hypothesis that freshmen needed more help early in the writing process in the "intro/thesis" category, which was 33.1% for freshmen, compared to 14.5% for non-freshmen.

One result that seemed to contradict our hypothesis was that a smaller

percentage of freshmen received help in the “getting started” category as compared to non-freshmen (9.7% versus 18.4%). Also, the percentages for “developing ideas” were virtually identical (16.0 % for freshmen versus 16.6% for non-freshmen). Based on these results, it was clear that more data needed to be collected over multiple semesters. In this analysis, it is important to note that the total figures for all categories add up to more than 100%, because many tutors documented more than one type of writing help during an individual session.

Despite some conflicting data, the pilot study suggested that freshmen needed assistance with their first college writing assignments in the earliest phases of the writing process: getting started and intro/thesis. These results revealed a broader, yet more specific portrait of freshmen WC users as compared to their older classmates. The numbers support what we as tutors experienced individually, but the data reveal a more comprehensive view of the types of help we were collectively providing to freshmen and all students.

### **Limits to the data and its interpretation: Fall 2009**

There are at least three limitations to the data and its interpretation. First, only 458 of 587 sessions were captured because of noncompliance from tutors. Second, in some sessions, there may have been a difference between what students wanted tutors to address (often grammar or proofreading), and the tutors’ commitment to focus on Higher Order Concerns, in keeping with our writing center policy. The third limitation was tutors may have interpreted the meaning of categories differently from one another.

It was this third limitation of differing interpretation of the categories among tutors that I discussed with my staff after the end of the fall semester. Tutors acknowledged that there was some confusion over the meanings of the categories. For example, several tutors noted that the categories did not indicate whether students had arrived to the session with a draft. Of course, the category “getting started” might include a student with no draft, but the category “developing ideas” could have been interpreted by the tutor to mean a student who had a solid thesis but nothing else written down.

The discussion with staff was highly useful in refining the study. Tutors provided important input regarding their interpretations of the categories. One of the most significant points that we agreed upon was that the categories needed to indicate if the student arrived at the session with or without a draft. We also talked about the fact that much of the work we do with students is revision, which encompasses a host of tasks, including grammar/syntax, organization/outlining, transitions, and developing ideas.

Based on my discussion with tutors, I divided the categories into three major groups: no draft, revision with existing draft, and citation. Before the start of the spring semester, I revised the categories on WC Online. I also created a CRF “cheat sheet” for tutors describing the different categories, which I sent to tutors and posted on the WC’s main bulletin board. These new categories are represented chronologically, as the early and later stages of the writing process and are summarized below. The words italicized in parentheses are the category titles from the drop-down menu on the CRF. “ND” means “no draft” and “ED” means “existing draft.”

- **Getting Started (no draft):** helping the student understand the assignment, brainstorming, outlining, etc.

*(getting started ND)*

- **Introduction/Thesis (no draft):** guiding the initial discussion and drafting of a thesis statement and opening paragraph *(intro/thesis ND)*

- **Revision: Thesis/Introduction (existing draft):** guiding the discussion and refining arguments in the draft *(developing ideas ED)*

- **Revision: Body Paragraphs (existing draft):** helping the student with organization/cohesiveness and/or content *(body para ED)*

- **Revision: Transition (existing draft):** helping students craft effective transitions *(transition ED)*

- **Revision: Incorporating Sources (existing draft):** helping the student incorporate research (quotations/summaries/paraphrases) into body paragraphs *(inc. sources ED)*

- **Revision: Concluding Paragraph (existing draft):** helping the student craft a conclusion that summarizes ideas and is consistent with thesis *(conclusion ED)*

- **Revision: Grammar/Syntax (existing draft):** involves but is not limited to sentence construction, verb tense, vocabulary *(grammar ED)*

- **Citation (existing draft):** involves how to prepare a works cited/references page as well as the mechanics of in-text citations *(citation ED)*

The above changes to my spring study significantly improved the accuracy of my data collection for the spring. These changes may have also contributed to a greater participation rate by tutors in individual sessions.

### **Spring 2010 data**

The spring data confirmed more directly our anecdotal evidence in describing the discrepancies between freshmen and non-freshmen. The data revealed that freshmen were given more help in the early stages of the writing process than non-freshmen. The early stages are defined with the new categories as "getting started" (no draft), "introduction/thesis" (no draft) and "developing ideas" in the thesis and introduction (with draft). Out of 106 visits, 53% of freshmen received help in at least one of these categories.

Out of 229 non-freshmen visits, only 33% received help in one of these areas. Of the three "early stages," the widest discrepancy between freshmen and non-freshmen existed in "developing ideas," receiving 43% of the freshmen visits as compared with 24% of non-freshmen visits.

Since these results primarily examine freshmen visits from English classes, I questioned whether the range of disciplines encompassed in the non-freshmen group was affecting the data. The discrepancy in freshmen English classes versus non-freshmen English classes was also significant. In comparing freshmen English classes and non-freshmen English classes in the early stages of the writing process, 52% percent of freshmen received help over 90 visits

compared to English non-intro courses at 31% for 52 visits. Spring data were collected from 335 CRF's out of 392 total visits.

One unexpected result of the spring data revealed was the percentage of freshmen who sought help without a draft. I had predicted that a higher percentage of freshmen would arrive with no draft as compared to non-freshmen, but the numbers were fairly similar: 24% for freshmen and 18% for non-freshmen. As in the fall data, the categories add up to more than 100 % because tutors could choose more than one category per session.

It is important to note that one limitation of the revised categories is that I would not be able to compare the spring data to the fall data. However, I decided that because the spring data could provide a more nuanced result than the fall data, I would move forward with the revised categories. I also believed that the spring data were more valuable than the fall data, since the spring categories were more specific and their definitions more commonly agreed-upon by tutors.

### **Limits to the spring data and its interpretation**

Some of the limits to the fall data, and its interpretation, were ameliorated in the spring. There was a greater percentage of tutor compliance for CRF's: 335 out of 392 visits in the spring (85%) as compared to 458 CRF's out of 587 visits (78%) in the fall. Also, there was likely a more uniform agreement of what the categories meant among tutors.

Another limitation to the data, however, persisted from the fall to the spring semester: the issue of multiple visits. Most visitors to the WC visited between one and five times in the fall and between one and three times in the spring. However, there were a few students who came in many times during both the fall and spring semesters. In the fall, one student visited 15 times during the semester and another student visited 30 times. In the spring, one student visited 14 times, another visited 23 times, and a third used our services 24 times. Although the reality of multiple visits certainly affects the interpretation of the data, we chose to include them in this analysis, since the presence of numerous multiple visits occurs almost every semester at our writing center.

### **Other studies**

Our study appears to be consistent with a general pattern among freshmen writers at other institutions. According to data gathered from 2003-05 from the **North Carolina Wesleyan College Writing Center**, students in 100-level courses worked on global writing issues at a higher frequency than students in higher-level courses. Doug Enders, the author of the study writes: "The clearest pattern of this decrease occurred in visits addressing 'developing or clarifying a thesis' which dropped from 37 percent in 100-level courses to 17 percent in 400-level courses and 'establishing a proper focus,' which dropped from 29 percent to 18 percent." Based on the results from North Carolina Wesleyan and Mount Ida, there is significant potential for further study of the types of help tutors provide freshmen at other institutions.

### **Writing about it**

Dr. Atul Gawande advises medical students to "write something," because it can help them make meaning from their work, but he also urges people to write for its societal impact. He notes: "By soliciting modest contributions from the many, we have produced a store of collective know-how with far greater power

than any individual could have achieved. And this is true outside science as inside" (255-256). It is no coincidence that his book encourages future doctors to engage in counting and writing, because the former can enumerate a pattern, and the latter has the potential for providing knowledge for others.

**[Q]uantitative analysis allows us as tutors and administrators to see patterns and trends beyond our daily experiences, offering us a broader perspective.**

It is significant that my experience in gathering and analyzing data has taught me the importance of bridging qualitative experiences and quantitative analysis by writing about both. Tutors work from a personal, qualitative perspective to form anecdotal theories about the populations they serve. But quantitative analysis allows us as tutors and administrators to see patterns and trends beyond our daily experiences, offering us a broader perspective. Both our research and the **North Carolina Wesleyan** study supported our theory about freshmen writers. In addition to writing about my experiences here, I plan to share these findings with my colleagues at Mount Ida and at other institutions. I know that these findings will be useful in training professional and peer tutors at Mount Ida and possibly at other writing centers.

My experience of incorporating quantitative analysis into my work has been challenging but informative, and always interesting. I learned to think from a quantitative perspective and developed a keen appreciation of the difficulties of designing a quantitative study. I plan to continue gathering data in this area into the 2010-11 school year. Perhaps I will focus on gathering data on a writing-intensive course required of juniors, or on students from a specific degree program.

Reflecting on my experience with qualitative and quantitative concerns in the **Writing Center**, I am buoyed by the thought of writing as a way to bridge the divide between the numerical and descriptive dimensions of the writing center. These two concerns are two perspectives of the same experience. Writing about qualitative experiences and quantitative analysis can honor both the numbers and the narrative by giving us a fuller, richer perspective of our work.

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Jane Hirschhorn has worked at **Mount Ida College** as a writing tutor since 2002. She became supervisor of the **Writing Center** in April 2007. This is her third article to be published in *Praxis*. "My Path to Management: Experience, Mentoring, Leadership and Ambition," appeared in the Spring 2010 issue. "ESL and LD Students: Different Populations, Common Concerns," appeared in the Fall 2007 issue.

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## Research at the UWC: Understanding the Diversity of Students'™ Experiences

Fall 2010 / Focus

by **Andrea Saathoff and Collette Chapman-Hillard**, *The University of Texas at Austin*

### **A pilot study redesigns data collection to reflect increasing diversity in student populations and to improve writing center consultations and campus outreach efforts.**

The Undergraduate Writing Center (UWC) at The University of Texas at Austin (UT) performs roughly 11,500 writing consultations each year. In addition to providing one-on-one consultations with undergraduate students, a considerable amount of activity happens behind the scenes. For example, project groups are a mainstay of the UWC and are an integral aspect of work we do beyond consulting. Up until now, the Research & Publications Project Group has primarily analyzed data the UWC collects from students' Intake Forms. The Intake Form asks students to report basic information regarding their course prefix, their instructor's information, their assignment, their writing process, and their ESL status. While these forms lend valuable information about the classes for which students request to receive help and the types of problems students encounter with their writing, there is a tremendous amount of information we do not collect (and therefore do not know) about the students who walk through our doors.

Perhaps 10 years ago the type of information the UWC collected via Intake Forms was adequate. The campus environment at UT was more homogeneous, and we saw far fewer students on a yearly basis. However, we are now located on a campus that holds over 38,000 undergraduate students who have come to UT with extremely diverse educational experiences and backgrounds.

### **As we become more aware of the diversity in our constituency, we have the opportunity to not only improve our services but also the ability to explore more directly how our services may impact achievement outcomes.**

For example, in September of 2010 the Office of Public Affairs reported, "For the first time in the history of The University of Texas at Austin, fewer than half of the fall semester's first-time freshmen are white students." This historical shift represents a change in the university climate, and it more broadly demonstrates national shifts in diversity among institutions of higher education.

As such, diversity has become a "buzz" word across the nation's college and university campuses, and the student population at UT is representative of the growing number of diverse students who pursue higher education. Understanding diversity on numerous levels, including race, ethnicity, age, and disability status to name a few, allows writing centers and their host universities a unique opportunity to assess the effectiveness of current organizational strategies. Accordingly, the UWC is taking advantage of its unique positioning to glean information from students about their diverse backgrounds and experiences with writing. As we become more aware of the diversity in our constituency, we have the opportunity to not only improve our services but also the ability to explore more directly how our services may impact achievement outcomes. As indicated in education and composition literature,<sup>[1]</sup> writing and skills related to writing are linked with numerous academic variables that demonstrate differential outcomes among diverse student groups. Bearing these relationships in mind, it is important to consider how current UWC recruitment initiatives, presentation approaches, and consultation strategies are supporting diverse student groups and a variety of student-educational experiences.

Quantitative data collection strategies represent one of the most efficient methods of assessing program effectiveness and providing us with a clearer picture of the diverse student groups we serve. Our goals in collecting data are twofold: to assess the frequency of UWC use among diverse student populations and to examine UWC students' experiences with writing. By examining variables related to campus diversity (e.g., race and ethnicity, ESL, SES, etc.) and student experiences (e.g., writing concerns, course for which student sought consultation), we can further assess the role of diversity in the UWC. Attaining this information will contribute to the improvement of the writing services we offer to all students who walk into our writing center's doors.

Using a quantitative survey approach to data collection, we have developed several research questions that support our efforts to explore diversity and examine students' experiences in the UWC. Our survey includes a number of self-report items that provide UWC constituents the opportunity to share demographic information and indicate their experiences with writing and in the writing center. Demographic items include: race/ethnicity, gender, international student status, and language. Other variables tap into students' perceptions of writing preparedness and their concerns with writing. Using these data, we will explore the following areas: 1) Writing concerns most common among diverse student groups; 2) the frequency of UWC use and satisfaction among diverse students groups; and 3) the average UWC student's perceptions of writing preparedness and its relation to overall school achievement. In addition, we are gathering data about the recommendations students receive to come into the UWC.

**These data offer a unique glimpse into students' backgrounds and into the potential challenges they endure not only at our university but with their writing processes. We hope that other writing centers across the country can utilize this information to consider their own training initiatives, resources, and ability to attract a diverse subgroup of students into their centers.**

Moreover, this valuable information also has the potential to inform our training and writing-center practice in an integral way. As of now, training modules address basic consulting strategies, including how to work with ESL students and students with disabilities. However, the UWC does not offer training or resources for students who may have a unique set of experiences. For example, bilingual or multilingual students who may struggle with specific aspects of the writing process may have unique needs that the UWC has not previously considered [2]. We will also have the opportunity to redirect our presentation efforts because we will have a fuller understanding about the students we regularly assist at the UWC. Furthermore, we will gain insight about the stages of the writing process that most concern students and our presentations can be altered to reflect these needs. Additionally, by knowing this information we can improve our resources for students to reflect the central challenges they endorse regarding the writing process. Lastly, by comparing UWC data to the UT registrar's data, we will gain an understanding of the students who do not access UWC services but who could benefit from receiving assistance with their writing.

Beyond assessing our own writing services, we hope that these data will inform other writing centers unable to collect data for various reasons. While there is variability among the types of students who attend UT in comparison to those at other universities, we hope that our results will encourage the larger writing-center population to consider important issues related to writing center patron diversity. These data offer a unique glimpse into students' backgrounds and into the potential challenges they endure not only at our university but with their writing processes. We hope that other writing centers across the country can utilize this information to consider their own training initiatives, resources, and ability to attract a diverse subgroup of students into their centers.

To date, we have over 600 survey entries that we will use to inform internal reports and peer-reviewed articles. Because we are still in the process of obtaining IRB approval, these pilot data will only be used internally. After obtaining IRB approval the Research and Publications Group will begin a second data collection phase. We look forward to sharing this information and the implications it holds with other departments at UT and with other writing centers across the country.

#### Notes

[1] Harklau, Linda, Kay M. Losey, and Meryl Siegal, eds. *Generation 1.5 Meets College Composition: Issues in the Teaching of Writing to U.S.-Educated Learners of ESL*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1999. Print.

[2] "Harvard Writing Project." Published online at [http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic235511.files/HWP\\_Bulletin\\_Responding\\_to\\_Student\\_Writing.pdf](http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic235511.files/HWP_Bulletin_Responding_to_Student_Writing.pdf) [cited November 10, 2010].



Collette Chapman-Hilliard

Collette Chapman-Hilliard is a doctoral student in **Counseling Psychology at The University of Texas at Austin**. She has been a writing consultant at **UT's Undergraduate Writing Center (UWC)** since 2008 and actively participates in the Research and Publication and Outreach Groups.



Andrea Saathoff

Andrea Saathoff is a doctoral student in **Counseling Psychology at The University of Texas at Austin**. This is Andrea's third year working at the **UT's Undergraduate Writing Center (UWC)**, and second year as an Assistant Director there. She is involved with several project groups that work together to enhance UWC's services and presence on UT's campus. She studies student anxiety as well as learning and motivation surrounding the writing process.

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**2011 Association for Academic Language and Learning conference in Adelaide, South Australia. Deadline March 31, 2011**

[Fall 2010 / News and Announcements](#)

We are pleased to announce that the call for papers for the 2011 Association for Academic Language and Learning conference in Adelaide, South Australia, is now open. Please note that we are using an online abstract submission system, and that abstract submissions are due by March 31st, 2011. Further information is available on the conference website:  
<http://www.adelaide.edu.au/clpd/aall2011/>

You may also like to contribute to the discussion about the conference on the AALL Forum: <http://aall.org.au/forum/2011-aall-conference> If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact any of the conference organisers. We look forward to receiving your abstracts.

Regards  
Chad Habel

On behalf of the 2011 AALL Conference organising committee

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# Praxis: A Writing Center Journal (2003-2011)

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### CFP: Spring 2011 issue of Praxis

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#### **From Triage to Outreach: Raising the Institutional Profile of Writing-Center Work**

For our Spring issue *Praxis* invites authors to reflect on the various ways writing centers serve student populations and wider communities. We are concerned that when writing centers are perceived only as writing hospitals, places that universities expect will "fix" student writing, they are more susceptible to budget cuts and funding crises. This makes it difficult for centers to sustain non-directive, non-evaluative consultation practices and to serve large, diverse communities of writers.

*Praxis* understands that, despite common institutional perceptions, many writing centers already assume more than a "triage" role. We welcome articles that describe existing efforts to carve out a broader purview for writing centers, as well as speculative essays about how writing centers help host institutions realize their pedagogical and cultural missions.

We are especially interested in how writing centers can raise their institutional profiles. *Praxis* believes that non-directive consultation practices, outreach initiatives, and extracurricular writing-center work can be powerful and economically savvy ways to bring accolade to universities, colleges, and high schools. We ask contributors to consider how, in the interest of securing funding, writing centers might present such an argument to institutional audiences.

As always, *Praxis* also encourages submissions on a wide range of topics related to writing centers. We welcome articles from writing-center consultants and administrators related to training, consulting, labor issues, administration, and writing center news, initiatives, and scholarship. *Praxis* is also interested in reviews, interviews and survey data related to writing centers.

#### **Submission guidelines:**

Recommended article length is 1000 to 2000 words. We will consider longer articles but ask authors to contact us prior to their submission. Articles should conform to MLA style, 7th Edition. Please send submissions as a Word document e-mail attachment to Anthony Fassi at [praxis@uwc.utexas.edu](mailto:praxis@uwc.utexas.edu). Include the writer's name, e-mail address, and affiliation. Because *Praxis* is a web-based journal, please do not send paper; we do not have the resources to transcribe printed manuscripts. Images should be formatted as jpeg files and sent as attachments.

**Deadline for Spring Issue:** February 15, 2010

*Praxis: A Writing Center Journal* ([praxis.uwc.utexas.edu/praxisarchive](http://praxis.uwc.utexas.edu/praxisarchive)) is a biannual electronic publication sponsored by the **University of Texas Undergraduate Writing Center**, a component of the **Department of Rhetoric and Writing** at **The University of Texas at Austin**. It is a forum

for writing-center practitioners everywhere.

For further information about submitting an article or suggesting an idea, please contact the editors at [praxis@uwc.utexas.edu](mailto:praxis@uwc.utexas.edu).

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## Featured Center: Universidad del Turabo Writing Center

Fall 2010 / Consulting

**Nancy Effinger Wilson interviews Silvia M. Casillas-Olivieri, Writing-Center Director at Gurabo, Puerto Rico's Universidad del Turabo. A Spanish-language version follows the English-version below**

Nancy Effinger Wilson's commentary:

I conducted this interview with Sylvia M. Casillas-Olivieri, Director of the Universidad del Turabo Writing Center, because I wanted to learn more about writing-center practice in Puerto Rico. Although Puerto Ricans are citizens of the United States, both English and Spanish are official languages of Puerto Rico, a fact that challenges the English-only view that many (Theodore Roosevelt, John Tanton and Tim James, for example) have argued is crucial to the future of the United States of America. Before speaking with Cassillas-Olivieri, I had erroneously believed that instruction at Puerto Rican universities is conducted in English and that all are students bilingual. For these reasons I asked about code-switching. However, as Casillas-Olivieri explains "the majority of students at the University of Turabo are monolingual in Spanish and have a rudimentary understanding of English." Mentors at the University of Turabo do code-switch in their sessions, but strategically "in order to help their Spanish-speaking clients learn English with the goal in mind of providing additional English-speaking practice and ultimately conversing exclusively in English."

1. Tell me about yourself. For example, what languages do you know? In which community or professional organizations are you a member?

I was born in Humacao, Puerto Rico. When I was 17 years old, I went to the United States to study English and Psychology in Massachusetts. Then I lived in California for ten years. There I completed my Master's in Spanish and worked in a Spanish for Spanish Speakers program at the University of California, Santa Cruz. In 1995, I returned to Puerto Rico and did my doctoral studies in History at the University of Puerto Rico. I speak three languages: Spanish, my mother tongue; English; and Italian. I am a professor of Spanish at the University of Turabo in Gurabo, Puerto Rico, and I have directed the Center of Reading and Writing for one year. I belong to NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) and IWCA (International Writing Center Association) due to my work in the Writing Center (in which we provide services in English as well as in Spanish). I also belong to the Conservation Trust of Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rico Chapter of the Sierra Club.

2. Describe the most rewarding educational experience you have had.

I have had many rewarding educational experiences as a teacher and in my student life. One that stands out was at Brandeis University where I studied for my Bachelor's degree. While taking English for foreigners, I had an excellent professor who helped me a great deal to adapt to university life and, above all, to improve my level of writing in English to a level on par with my native English-speaking peers. That professor impressed me with her dedication both inside as well as outside of the classroom. For example, I had many problems with the pronunciation of certain words. My teacher, on her own time, met with me in order to help me with my English speaking skills. Her dedication as a professor has always remained etched in my memory.

3. What do you consider most important in a job?

In a job, it is most important that I feel passion for what I do so I can give my best to others. It is also important for me to have a mission, to feel that I am making a difference, however small it is, while I contribute my knowledge and skills to the welfare of others and of the community. I do that through teaching.

4. Describe the relation between your writing center and the general objectives of your university.

As the Writing Center was founded with Title V funds, one of its principle objectives is to increase student retention. The retention at my institution is very low and, in that sense, the objectives of the project and of the institution coincide. Moreover, in its latest evaluation of my institution, the agency accrediting Middle States had various recommendations. One of those consisted of incorporating significantly more writing in all disciplines and in particular moving from multiple-choice tests to essay exams. The Writing Center has a "writing across the curriculum" component that provides professors with workshops. This program is instrumental in helping different disciplines to work toward incorporating a lot more writing, of creative and relevant forms, into Spanish, English, Social Science and Humanities courses. "Writing across the curriculum" is our principal focus at the moment.

4. Which aspects of work do you consider priorities?

The most important for us is to provide a professional and quality service to the students in order to strengthen their reading and writing skills. In addition, it is essential to establish a safe space in which students have confidence to explore their ideas and develop their skills without judgment and without the pressure of grades.

5. What is your administrative philosophy for your Writing Center? What is your style?

My administrative philosophy is based on providing the space and opportunity needed to contribute ideas and solutions to the problems of all the members of the Center—student mentors, student writers, and the director. To the degree that students, both mentors as well as writers who seek our services, are actively involved in decision-making in the Center, they use it as their own and make it an integral part of their educational experience. My role at the Center is that of guide and facilitator. If it is necessary to make a final decision on something, I make it, but always taking into account the contributions, recommendations and concerns of the other members of the Center.

6. Describe the process that you have used for hiring employees. Have there been any surprises, or has there been any disappointment with respect to someone hired?

The process of hiring writing mentors is as follows:

A call is made across the campus, with advertisements and through referrals from professors and the Honor's Program. Interested candidates are asked to submit two writing samples, one in Spanish and another in English; two recommendations from professors; a completed application; and their transcript. Once applicants are evaluated, the most promising are offered an interview. In that interview the Writing Center Director, the General Director of Project Title V and, if possible, an English professor, are present. As part of the interview, the candidate writes an essay and responds to questions in both English and Spanish. After the interview the job is offered to the best candidates. To date we have had no unpleasant surprises or disappointments in relation to one of the mentors. On the contrary, you could say that we have had some pleasant surprises in relation to work-study students (who look after the reception area and participate in all activities along with the mentors) who are much more committed to the Center than I could have imagined.

7. What things contribute to your success as a supervisor or manager?

I like the people who work in the Center, both mentors and work-study students, to take ownership of the Center in the sense that they feel that their opinions and their ideas count and that we all are working together in the same direction.

8. What things can interfere with your efficiency as a supervisor or manager?

The administrative bureaucracy and, specifically, the lack of understanding of our work in the Center by certain sectors of the University administration.

9. Why did you choose to study this career?

Because language in all its expressions has always excited me. In addition, I believe that teaching gives me a unique opportunity to be an agent of positive change in the lives of many young people.

10. What has been the most gratifying experience during your time as a director?

The comments of those students who have used our services and indicate that the Center was key to their confidence and improvement as writers and as students.

11. What are your goals in the short, medium, and long term?

In the short term, our objectives are to continue to offer an excellent service to the first and second-year students who take classes in Spanish, English, the Social Sciences, and the Humanities. Another objective in terms of physical space is to move from the temporary buildings where we are operating these days in order to occupy a new building that is being constructed on the campus that will house the Writing Center and the Biopsychosocial Support Center (the other component of Project Title V). In the medium term, a goal is to expand our services to students in their third and fourth year and to offer workshops to entire groups both in the classroom and in the Center. In the long term, our goal would be to be an integral part of the promotion of writing in all the disciplines on the campus.

12. What percentage of your tutors are bilingual? Your clients?

100% of the mentors are bilingual. I have not determined the exact percentage of clients who are bilingual, but I suspect that it is very low. Most writers are monolingual in Spanish and request our services in order to help them with basic English writing skills.

13. Do your tutors code-switch? Your clients?

The mentors code-switch to the extent that they try to move forward with speaking in English completely in the sessions in which writing advice is given in English in order to offer clients oral practice in addition to what they receive in class. The same goes for monolingual students in English (we have a few), but in reverse. In general clients do not code-switch since many are working with their English skills and have difficulty speaking in that language.

14. How do professors perceive code-switching?

Many professors, particularly English professors, do code-switch in their language classes in order to ensure that the students understand.

15. Can students in your university write in Spanish or English?

The vast majority of students at the University of Turabo are monolingual in Spanish with a rudimentary knowledge of English.

16. Please describe your tutor training program.

Each new mentor receives 18 hours of initial training, which is paid, before the semester, followed by continuous training throughout the semester. Part of the training consists of observing sessions of the more experienced mentors. During the continuous training process that takes place throughout the semester, mentors participate as students and as workshop leaders. Everyone is asked to identify an area he/she considers important in his/her work, conduct research on the same and provide that information in workshop form to his/her colleagues.

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Entrevista con Sylvia M. Casillas Olivieri, Directora Centro de Lectura y Redacci3n, Universidad del Turabo, Puerto Rico

Comentario de Nancy Effinger Wilson:

En esta entrevista con Sylvia M. Casillas Olivieri, Directora, quer3a aprender acerca de un Centro de Redacci3n en Puerto Rico porque los puertorrique3os son ciudadanos de los Estados Unidos, pero tanto ingl3s como espa3ol son los idiomas oficiales de Puerto Rico. En los Estados Unidos, muchas personas (Theodore Roosevelt, John Tanton y Tim James) sostienen que los Estados Unidos deber3an tener s3lo una lengua oficial (ingl3s), Sab3a que la instrucc3n de la universidad de Puerto Rico es en ingl3s (la instrucc3n es en espa3ol pero es requisito tomar clases de ingl3s), y por esa raz3n le pregunt3 sobre "code-switching." Seg3n Casillas Olivieri, "los estudiantes de la Universidad del Turabo son en su inmensa mayor3a monoling3es en espa3ol con un conocimiento rudimentario del ingl3s." Por eso, como dice Casillas Olivieri, los mentores hacen 'code switching' en la medida "en que tratan de moverse hacia hablar en ingl3s por completo en las sesiones en las que se da asesor3a en redacci3n en ingl3s para ofrecerles pr3ctica oral adicional a la que reciben en clase a los clientes."

1. ¿Le es difícil de usted misma. Por ejemplo, ¿cuáles idiomas conoce? ¿En qué organizaciones comunitarias o profesionales participa?

Nací en Humacao, Puerto Rico. A la edad de 17 años fui a los EE.UU. a estudiar Inglés y Psicología en Massachusetts. Luego viví por 10 años en California. Allí hice mis estudios de maestría en Español y trabajé en un Programa de Español para Hispanohablantes en la Universidad de California en Santa Cruz. En 1995 regresé a Puerto Rico. Hice estudios doctorales en Historia en la Universidad de Puerto Rico. Hablo tres idiomas: español, mi lengua materna, inglés e italiano. Soy profesora de Español en la Universidad del Turabo en Gurabo, Puerto Rico y dirijo el Centro de Lectura y Redacción de dicha institución. Pertenezco al NCTE y al IWCA, principalmente debido a mi trabajo en el Centro de Redacción, en el cual proveemos servicios tanto en inglés como en español. Otras organizaciones a las cuales pertenezco son el Fideicomiso de Conservación de Puerto Rico y el capítulo de Puerto Rico del Sierra Club.

2. Describa la experiencia educativa más gratificante que haya tenido.

He tenido muchas experiencias educativas gratificantes, tanto como docente como en mi vida estudiantil. Una que sobresale, quizás, fue en Brandeis University, donde estudié mi bachillerato. Mientras tomaba un curso de Inglés para extranjeros, tuve una profesora excelente que me ayudó muchísimo en mi adaptación a la vida universitaria y, sobre todo, a mejorar mi nivel de redacción en inglés para que estuviera a la par de mis compañeros cuyo primer idioma era el inglés. Esa profesora me impresionó debido a su dedicación tanto dentro como fuera de la sala de clases. Por ejemplo, yo tenía muchos problemas con la pronunciación de ciertas palabras. Mi profesora, en su tiempo libre, se reunía conmigo para ayudarme con mis destrezas orales en inglés. Su entrega como profesora siempre ha quedado grabada en mi memoria.

3. ¿Qué considera lo más importante en un trabajo?

Lo más importante en un trabajo es que sienta pasión por lo que haga para que así pueda dar lo mejor de mí misma a otros. También es importante para mí tener una misión, sentirme que hago una diferencia por más pequeña que sea, a la vez que aporto mi conocimiento y destrezas al bienestar de otros y de la comunidad. En mi caso en particular hago eso a través de la docencia.

4. ¿Qué aspectos del trabajo considera prioritarios?

Lo más importante para nosotros es proveer un servicio profesional y de calidad a los estudiantes para que fortalezcan sus destrezas de lectura y redacción. Además, es esencial establecer un espacio seguro y en el cual los estudiantes tengan la confianza de explorar sus ideas y desarrollar sus destrezas sin que los juzguen y sin tener la presión de las calificaciones.

5. ¿Cuál es su filosofía de la gerencia de su "centro de escritura"? ¿Cuál es su estilo?

Mi filosofía de gerencia se basa en darle participación y espacio para aportar ideas y soluciones a los problemas a todos los integrantes del Centro: estudiantes mentores, estudiantes escritores y directora. Me parece que en la medida en que los estudiantes, tanto mentores como escritores que solicitan nuestros servicios, se involucran activamente en la toma de decisiones del Centro, se apropian del mismo y lo hacen parte integral de su experiencia educativa. Mi papel en el Centro es el de guía y mediadora. Si hay que tomar una decisión final sobre algo, la tomo yo pero siempre tomando en consideración las aportaciones, recomendaciones y preocupaciones de los demás integrantes del Centro.

6. Describa el proceso que ha utilizado para contratar empleados. ¿Se ha llevado alguna sorpresa o ha tenido alguna desilusión respecto de alguien a quien haya contratado? Explique, por favor.

El proceso de contratación de mentores de redacción es el siguiente:

Se hace una convocatoria por todo el campus, con anuncios y a través de referidos de profesores y del programa de honor. A los candidatos interesados se les piden dos muestras de sus redacciones, una en español y otra en inglés, dos recomendaciones de profesores, completar una solicitud y entregar una transcripción de créditos. Una vez se evalúa a los solicitantes, se les ofrece una entrevista a los más prometedores. En esa entrevista están presentes la directora del Centro de Redacción, la Directora General del Proyecto Título V y, de ser posible, un profesor de inglés. Como parte de la entrevista, el candidato escribe un ensayo y responde a preguntas tanto en inglés como en español. Luego de la entrevista se les ofrece trabajo a los mejores candidatos. Hasta la fecha no hemos tenido ninguna sorpresa desagradable o desilusión con relación a uno de los mentores. Todo lo contrario, podríamos decir que hemos tenido algunas sorpresas agradables con relación a estudiantes de estudio y trabajo (quienes atienden el Área de recepción y participan de todas las actividades junto con los mentores) quienes están mucho más comprometidos con el Centro de lo que yo me hubiera podido imaginar.

7. ¿Qué cosas considera que contribuyen a su éxito como supervisor o gerente?

Me gusta que la gente que labora en el Centro, tanto mentores como estudiantes de estudio y trabajo se apropien del Centro en el sentido que sientan que su opinión y sus ideas cuentan y que todos estamos trabajando en conjunto hacia una misma dirección.

8. ¿Qué cosas considera que pueden interferir en su eficacia como supervisor o gerente?

La burocracia administrativa y, específicamente, la falta de entendimiento de nuestro trabajo en el Centro de parte de ciertos sectores de la administración universitaria.

9. ¿Por qué eligió estudiar esta carrera?

Porque siempre me apasionó la lengua en todas sus expresiones. Además, creo que el enseñar nos da una oportunidad única de ser un agente de cambio positivo en la vida de mucha gente joven.

10. ¿Cuál ha sido la experiencia más gratificante durante su tiempo como un directora?

Los comentarios de los estudiantes que han utilizado nuestros servicios y nos indican que el Centro fue clave para su confianza y mejoramiento como escritores y como estudiantes.

11. ¿Cuáles son sus objetivos a corto, medio y largo plazo?

A corto plazo nuestros objetivos son continuar ofreciendo un servicio de excelencia a los estudiantes de primer y segundo año que toman cursos de Español, Inglés, Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades. Otro objetivo en términos de espacio físico es mudarnos de los

vagones en donde estamos operando actualmente para ocupar un edificio nuevo que se está construyendo en el campus y que albergará el Centro de Redacción y el Centro de Apoyo Biososocial (el otro componente del Proyecto Título V). A mediano plazo es expandir nuestros servicios a estudiantes de tercer y cuarto año y ofrecer talleres a grupos enteros tanto en la sala de clases como en el centro. A largo plazo nuestro objetivo será ser una parte integral de la promoción de la escritura en todas las disciplinas en el campus.

12. ¿Qué porcentaje de sus tutores son bilingües? ¿Sus clientes?

El 100% de los mentores son bilingües. No he determinado el porcentaje exacto de clientes que es bilingüe, pero sospecho que es muy bajo. La mayoría de los escritores es monolingüe en español y solicita nuestros servicios para ayudarle en sus destrezas de redacción básicas en Inglés.

13. ¿Practican "code-switching" sus tutores? ¿Sus clientes?

Los mentores hacen "code switching" en la medida en que tratan de moverse hacia hablar en inglés por completo en las sesiones en las que se da asesoría en redacción en inglés para ofrecerles práctica oral adicional a la que reciben en clase a los clientes. Lo mismo pasa con los estudiantes monolingües en inglés (tenemos unos pocos) pero a la inversa. Los clientes por lo general no hacen "code switching" puesto que muchos de ellos están trabajando con sus destrezas en inglés y les cuesta hablar en ese idioma.

14. ¿Cómo perciben "code switching" los profesores?

Muchos profesores, particularmente los profesores de Inglés, hacen "code switching" en sus clases de lengua para asegurarse de que los estudiantes los entienden.

15. ¿Pueden los estudiantes en su Universidad escribir en español o inglés?

Los estudiantes de la Universidad del Turabo son en su inmensa mayoría monolingües en español con un conocimiento rudimentario del inglés.

16. Por favor, describa su programa de entrenamiento de los tutores.

Cada nuevo mentor recibe un adiestramiento inicial de 18 horas, las cuales se le pagan, antes de comenzar el semestre seguido por adiestramiento continuo a lo largo del semestre. Parte del adiestramiento consiste en participar como observador de las sesiones de mentores más experimentados. Durante el proceso de adiestramiento continuo que se realiza a lo largo del semestre los mentores participan como estudiantes y como talleristas, puesto que a todos se les pide que identifiquen un área que consideran importante en su trabajo, realicen investigación sobre la misma y ofrezcan esa información al resto de los compañeros en forma de taller.



Sylvia M. Casillas-Olivieri

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Nancy Effinger Wilson

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# Praxis: A Writing Center Journal (2003-2011)

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## From the Editor: Quantitative and Qualitative Visions of the Writing Center

[Fall 2010 / Columns](#)

***Praxis* asks how data collection and research informs writing-center training, consulting, and administration.**

Welcome to another issue of *Praxis*. We received an astonishing number of excellent submissions for this issue, an indication that more centers are conducting research and generating data about writing-center work. Below is a brief summary of the fine articles *Praxis* is fortunate to publish this fall.

In our Focus section Matthew Shultz argues that online writing labs should spend less time trying to mimic face-to-face consultations. His article, which comes to us in the form of a Prezi, explores how OWLs can exploit certain online tools to conduct asynchronous consultations. Madeleine Picciotto, director of the Warren College Writing Center at the University of California, San Diego explains the difficulties and successes of her center's decision to start offering test-preparation support to "Basic Writing" students. Next, Pam Bromley, Kara Northway, and Eliana Schonberg compare student-response data at three different institutions to ask how centers might improve their local practices while better defining their broadest objectives. In another collaborative piece, Christopher Hoyt and Maryann Peterson explain how they integrated quantitative and qualitative data to assess the effectiveness of a Writing Fellows program in philosophy classes at Western Carolina University. Next, writing-center director Jane Hirschhorn integrates quantitative and qualitative data to explain how centers can generate general policies that are informed by the insights and practices of everyday writing-center work. Finally, Andrea Saathof and Colette Chapman-Hillard, consultants at the University of Texas at Austin's Undergraduate Writing Center, discuss a pilot program designed to understand how writing centers benefit diverse populations of students in different ways.

Our Consulting section begins with an article by Jenny Poon, an undergraduate consultant at Virginia Tech University who reflects on the similarities between her work as a writing-center consultant and a crisis counselor. Our featured center this issue is the Universidad del Turabo's Writing Center in Gurabo, Puerto Rico. Texas State University's Nancy Effinger Wilson interviews the center's director Silvia M. Casillas-Olivieri. We publish the interview along with Effinger's commentary in both English and Spanish. The subject of our Consultant Spotlight, Anna Jones, is a first-year graduate student and writing consultant at Marshall University.

Our Training section includes three articles by writing center directors. In "Researching Micromoments in the Writing Center" University of Texas at Tyler Writing-Center Director, Jennifer Pooler examines post-modernist consulting, bucking the status quo, and how the "micromoment" affects the university at large. In "Mapping the Meaning of 'Help': Tutor Training and the Sense of Self-Efficacy" Janet Gebhart Auten, Writing-Center Director at American University

explains how the concept of "self-efficacy" helps define successful strategies and objectives for both writing consultants and student writers. Finally, in "Watch and Learn: Peer Evaluation and Tutoring Pedagogy" Jane Van Slembrouck, Director of Rose Hill Writing Center at Fordham University explains that by observing fellow tutors' consultations, writing-center tutors can better evaluate their own work with students.

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## Mapping the Meaning of "Help": Tutor Training and the Sense of Self-Efficacy

Fall 2010 / Training

by **Janet Gebhart Auten**, American University

**A writing-center director explains how the concept of "self-efficacy" helps define successful strategies and objectives for both writing consultants and student writers.**

"I don't feel like we accomplished anything." With a frown of frustration, one of our writing consultants[1] — let's call her Amy — sank wearily into the chair beside my desk to chat about the session she had just had. "He seemed overwhelmed, and after a while I felt that way too. I tried to get him to talk about his ideas, but he just kept saying he was a bad writer and couldn't do papers." I pointed out that after 45 minutes with Amy, the student seemed more positive and left expressing gratitude. But Amy sighed, "I can't see how I helped him at all."

I could have continued, protesting that we are teachers, not magicians; tutors can only do so much in a single 45-minute session. Yet I knew all my conventional reassurances couldn't quell the doubt Amy felt about this nebulous task of "helping" students. While fervent beliefs in the power of writing and in the importance of peer tutoring empower our writing consultants, the lack of closure inherent in our work creates an inescapable uncertainty. Particularly in training new consultants, I was looking for a better way to wrestle with their persistent questions: What does it *mean* to help students become "better writers"? How can tutors *know* their efforts are helpful?

During an internship project last year, one of our consultants came upon a concept called "self-efficacy" that educational psychologists link to students' academic success. At first, this term seemed simply a fancy way of saying confidence.

**The social-cognitive concept of self-efficacy fits easily into existing training material, for it helps us to describe and define ways of building students' sense of agency in their own learning.**

However, I discovered that the term gives specific and scholarly definition to our vague goal of enhancing "confidence" in student writers. While of course



Janet Gebhart Auten

confidence alone won't write a good paper, efficacy research suggests that "writing self-efficacy and writing performance are related" (Pajares, Johnson, Usher 105 ) and that therefore, "one important step in improving writing would be to strengthen individuals' *efficacy expectations* about their writing ability" (McCarthy et al. 466 emphasis mine). Thus the self-efficacy concept offers a more precise version of the general writing center goal of giving students "the confidence and strategies to keep growing and improving" (Leahy 47): it suggests we need to raise students' *expectation* that they will be able to complete a writing task. And it brings not only a welcome way of defining a benefit of writing center visits, but also an opportunity for refocusing tutor training, for mapping the meaning of "help" for writing consultants.

### **Self-efficacy: what tutors need to know.**

The social-cognitive concept of self-efficacy fits easily into existing training material, for it helps us to describe and define ways of building students' sense of agency in their own learning. Early in our training sessions and in our Writing Center Handbook, I draw students' attention to the idea that a task (writing a paper) can be accomplished best by people who *believe* they are capable of doing it—a belief that Stanford psychologist Albert Bandura labeled "self-efficacy" in a 1977 article. And that belief can be nurtured—or discouraged—in four ways.

- First, and foremost among the sources of self-efficacy are personal experiences of **success through effort**, what Bandura calls "mastery experiences." He puts it simply: "Successes build a robust belief in one's personal efficacy. Failures undermine it" (1).
- A second source of self-efficacy beliefs is the "vicarious experience" of observing **models similar to oneself** who "teach observers effective skills and strategies" by example (2).

By this time, new consultants readily notice the similarities between Bandura's list and our own writing center "do list": help students experience success, model strategies for writing.

- A third factor, what Bandura calls "social persuasion," involves **encouraging** students' capabilities while giving them **opportunities** to exercise them.
- The fourth and final way to build positive self-efficacy beliefs is to reduce the anxieties and negative **attitudes** writers have concerning the writing task and their ability to complete it.

As we talked about these principles in training and staff meetings, experienced consultants were quick to point out the striking similarities between these sources of self-efficacy and the goals and practices of peer tutoring. Using the framework of enhancing students' self-efficacy beliefs, our writing consultants found a more explicit focus for our writing center goals: helping students experience *success through effort*, aided by tutorial *modeling, persuasion, and emotional support* of those efforts. But perhaps more importantly, the four factors help define what consultants can *do* to address these goals and give four flexible components to consider as they assess the needs of individual students and sessions.

### **Structuring sessions to build self-efficacy**

#### Component 1: Success through effort

Bandura's main point is the need to help writers *actively* experience success in overcoming obstacles. Whether first-semester undergraduates still hoping high school strategies will see them through or older students faced with the demands of more complex research projects in their major field, the students we serve often lack positive experiences of success in academic writing. Consultants give students an opportunity to talk about ideas and try out skills and strategies in a tutorial session, offering small increments of positive experience in addressing writing assignments. In training, we talk about building in moments for students to produce some tangible "take-away" during the session, whether it is notes from brainstorming, an outline, an improved thesis statement, or simply a plan for revisions.

A look at recent consultants' session reports[2] (in our center, these are written to inform other consultants only) reveals how a student who arrives with negative experience gains confidence by working through steps in the writing process:

She had no confidence in her ideas, as her professors had already shot her down in a few of her other subjects. She was very wary of the length of the paper and didn't know how to structure or organize her views. We brainstormed a bit, created a rough outline, and talked a lot about the best and most logical organization. She had a great topic and lots of valuable ideas; she just didn't have faith in them.

As the student left the Center, she told her consultant she felt "pretty confident" and ready to write her paper. Writing center sessions easily can become sites of much talking and little actual writing. Bandura helps us recognize that active, guided practice — whether in a laboratory, a music lesson, or a writing center — furnishes learners with the experience of improving through effort.

### Component 2: Modeling

Professor Bandura describes such supervision in terms any educator of writing consultants would recognize: "Through their behavior and expressed ways of thinking, competent models transmit knowledge and teach observers effective skills and strategies for managing environmental demands" (2). One of our consultants recently illustrated this modeling with her session description:

We worked primarily on strengthening her topic sentences and making sure everything linked back to her argument. I helped her with a few of them, and then she revised all of the rest, which revealed to me that she really understood what her topic sentences should be doing.

Even as recent writing center scholarship has called into question the "lore" that "mandates forbidding tutor directiveness" (Thompson et al. 79), a self-efficacy orientation offers a context in which a more directive style fits into our collaborative tradition. The venerable teaching technique of direct modeling, described by Richard Beach in a 1986 article as "*showing* students how to do something rather than *telling* them what to say (59 emphasis mine) comes into play as part of the larger effort toward student self-efficacy. In conjunction with the other components, modeling becomes a natural and essential part of the tutorial session, with consultants showing students how to perform the task at hand. It is a more directive component than the others, so its presence might be greater in a session with a struggling second-language writer and smaller

when a consultant wants the student to do most of the work on her own.

### Component 3: Persuasion and encouragement

Of course an emphasis on showing and demonstrating relies on the student's desire to be shown and advised. In order to try out their skills, students must be persuaded that the outcome will be worth the effort. All too often in our work we encounter students who shake their heads despairingly and mutter, "I can't write." Another task of tutors thus becomes drawing writers away from the precarious ledge of limited expectations. As Isabelle Thompson and her colleagues put it, "the tutor is responsible for making the student feel comfortable enough to take risks and develop and maintain motivation to complete the task" (81). Self-efficacy experts agree that "the messages these students receive from adults and peers about their writing are directly related to the degree of confidence students feel toward themselves as writers" (Pajares et al. 116).

A recent consultant report described the student writer as "frazzled" and "anxious about writing," yet after some talking, "she had a lot to say, and we began to form a thesis. Pulling that strong thesis out of her took a while because she doubted herself so much, but eventually she left with a good thesis and an outline, and she seemed a little more relaxed." Moreover, the student had actively engaged in constructing her thesis and outline. As Bandura puts it, "Successful efficacy builders do more than convey positive appraisals... they structure situations for [students] in ways that bring success" (2).

### Component 4: Reducing anxiety

Bandura's fourth factor, dealing with anxieties and negative attitudes, connects to writing center efforts to help writers "develop control of their feelings so they can focus on writing" and the role of "peer" tutors as empathetic listeners (Hawkins 4, Taylor).

A recent, rather extreme emotional outburst in our center involved a first-year student who began her session "crying and physically shaking," claiming she had "no idea how to write the paper." After friendly, calming conversation with the writing consultant, the student settled down to talk through her ideas. The consultant reported, "I think she mostly needed a confidence boost. We plotted an outline together, talked out an agenda, and setup 2 more appts for next week." Having gained control not only of her emotions but of her writing project, the student left the session visibly relieved and vocally grateful for the "very positive and encouraging" atmosphere of the Writing Center. The importance of such activities — creating an outline, setting an agenda, planning future sessions — may seem obvious to those who run writing centers, but as consultants connect a task-oriented approach to self-efficacy with actions the student can take, they make the moves of a purposeful practice that fosters assurance — in both students and their tutors.

**A dual effect of our shift toward the self-efficacy orientation appeared as a welcome side effect of our training sessions: consultant confidence.**

### **Building a consultant's own sense of self-efficacy**

A dual effect of our shift toward the self-efficacy orientation appeared as a welcome side effect of our training sessions: consultant confidence. Certainly

writing consultants, no less than the students they tutor, need their own strong self-efficacy beliefs in order to pursue this challenging job. As in many other training programs, our new consultants pair off and practice tutoring in “mini-sessions,” observe experienced consultant “models” at work, and of course read, write, and talk about writing center theory. But we tie these training activities to the four components of self-efficacy to define our work as

- giving students **experiences** of “success through effort” during the tutorial session
  - as they engage in practice sessions and also schedule at least one Writing Center session to work on their own writing with an experienced consultant.
- acting as knowledgeable peer **models** who teach by showing, not just telling
  - when they observe sessions and discuss issues in staff meetings.
- seeking out students’ strengths and **encouraging** them to build on skills they have.
  - in writing self-reflections on their own writing strengths and challenges.
- using **empathy and understanding** in relieving students’ anxieties
  - as they read about and discuss common concerns with colleagues.

Because the self-efficacy concept offers a concrete description of “helping students become better writers,” it offers consultants both a sharper definition of their choices in facilitating a tutoring session and a promising new way to value the help they give. And we add more than a bit of professional terminology when we incorporate self-efficacy into our “idea of a writing center.” Therese Thonus argues that effective writing center education “requires training tutors in specific interactional and pragmatic features that research...suggests are most conducive to success” (“Assessments”). Bandura’s four factors involve just such a set of behaviors and “pragmatic features” for conferencing—and they also apply to tutors in training. As we empower writing consultants with this firmer definition of exactly *how* they “help” student writers, they gain a positive sense of self-efficacy themselves.

### Notes

[1] Writing Consultant is the term we prefer in our Writing Center. I use “tutor” elsewhere in the essay when needed as a conventional and convenient term.

[2] All the examples quote from tutor comment sheets written during the semester when this new training was introduced. Thanks go to AU Writing Consultants Amelia Cohen-Levy, Maeg Keane, and Meghan Nesmith for their comments and reflections. Special thanks to Melissa Pasterkiewicz Reddish, whose enthusiasm, comments, and advice as consultant and trainer of new consultants contributed significantly to this project.

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## Researching Micromoments in the Writing Center

Fall 2010 / Training

by **Jennifer Pooler**, University of Texas at Tyler

**UT Tyler's Writing Center Director examines post-modernist consulting, bucking the status quo, and how the "micromoment" affects the university at large.**

Writing center scholars have published several landmark books researching the unique work that is possible in writing centers, such as Nancy Grimm's text, *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*. These texts strengthen a field of study that has in the past (and still today) struggled to legitimize itself. According to Grimm, this legitimacy movement is wrapped around positivist notions of what counts as knowledge at the modernist university, mostly quantitative objective research that emphasizes generalizable conclusions. These conclusions are often large in scope, avoiding specific local references that are difficult to generalize to greater populations.

Unfortunately, the everyday work of the writing center, such as the local practice of training tutors, is still absent in many writing center publications. Tendencies to formalize and generalize our research globally have left a hole in our scholarship because theorists rarely tie their work back to the local. Most of the research that discusses the daily local moments of writing center work is relegated to a "practice" journal, or as in the case with *Writing Center Journal*[**1**], segregated away from "traditional academic essays and book reviews" that "comprise the bulk of the journal's contents" to a special section with content and organizational structure guidelines, titled "Theory In/To Practice."**[2]** This work may be more about "how to" do something rather than an analysis of what is occurring. I do not claim that all local concerns are generalizable to the larger community; I argue, however, that our field needs a grounded local practice that brings together theory, research, and practice. Local writing center moments are examples of "micropractices of everyday life" (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 47). Many local actions ultimately create and are created by the hegemonic structures within the university system and the wider social structures outside the university. We need to clarify these relationships and to acknowledge that local micropractices shape the experiences and thoughts of writers and teachers.

Examining the work of the writing center on the micro level illustrates how the writing center functions at the macro levels of the university. Tutors both shape and are shaped by the social structures surrounding the writing center. How tutors approach writing center sessions, what they choose to focus on, how they discuss the construct of error, what the job of a writing center is at a college, and how they relate to students illustrates what tutors believe is valuable at the university. Tutors' interactions with student writers shape not only students' subsequent thought and practice, but also their professors' appreciation of what students can do with writing. These transactions ultimately reinforce and strengthen what the university finds valuable about writing and writing center work. For example, is writing center work about providing band aids and fixes for student papers, or can it be something else too?

Philosophical explorations of our work are needed, but so are strong practical and local examples of what the more theoretical looks like in action. This article's research provides more specific local direction for practice based on theory, and I focus on tutor education as the everyday micromoment for study. Examining an artifact of tutor education, in this case a tutor-generated newsletter, reveals much about the literacy practices of the modernist university, such as current-traditional objective rhetoric. **[3]** Studying and wrestling with tutor language during tutor education can provide directors and tutors



Jennifer Pooler

with a grounded local practice that contributes to successful writing center work.

Exploring a specific instance of this conflict between current-traditional objective rhetoric and postmodern composition and writing center scholarship (like Grimm's text) illustrates the difficulty faced by directors during local moments of tutor education. While modernism is the dominant cultural form at most universities, many directors are often asking tutors during orientations to immediately adopt a postmodern approach to tutoring. Nancy Grimm examines modernist and postmodernist expressions of legitimate tutoring sessions in a writing center. A modernist approach might be to restrict labels of absolute "good" or "bad" sessions to how much the paper is improved directly; a tangible viewable "help" of some kind on the student's paper is the only legitimate, or good, outcome. For Grimm, a postmodern approach would be to expand the session to ask questions, such as what did the student learn? When the session's unit of measurement is expanded beyond a paper's grade (the object: the paper), writers can begin to imagine possibilities. In fact, a legitimate session could be expanded to include the tutor learning instead of only being locked into a student's visible improvement on a paper.

**Most tutors, such as those in this study, were socialized into modernist ideas, and the writing center will only perpetuate the status quo unless it disrupts these preconceptions.**

Like Grimm, I am not trying to advocate for a binary modernist vs. postmodernist approach, something very un-postmodern; a postmodern writing center includes modernist perspectives because of its broadened interpretations of legitimate writing center work. A postmodern approach requires us to "simultaneously maintain multiple viewpoints" to expand the sessions' benefits beyond the idea of experts fixing errors in a student's paper of errors to increase grades (Grimm 2). Yet still, modernist understandings of "good" sessions continue to pervade writing centers. Most tutors, such as those in this study, were socialized into modernist ideas, and the writing center will only perpetuate the status quo unless it disrupts these preconceptions.

This article's focus writing center receives new tutors yearly who work 20 hours a week as part of their Graduate Assistantship. They take graduate-level courses in writing center theory and attend weekly staff meetings. This center subscribed to Grimm's version of postmodern approaches to recognizing legitimate tutorial sessions. However, tutors indicated a more modernist goal as they felt a need to help students work harder to make papers "right." As many directors may experience, conflicts in interpretation between the roles of the tutor appears quickly during initial tutor education, and there are few moments in writing center scholarship that specifically illustrate and discuss this critical moment of local practice. At the site of this study, what was at first a small newsletter activity became emblematic of this critical juncture.

At the end of their second semester of working in the writing center I directed and studied, I suggested a collaborative activity for the tutors: create a newsletter<sup>[4]</sup> to present the writing center to the university community. In addition to campus exposure, I was eager to get a sense of the tutors' understandings of writing center work and how they might navigate the difficult task of representing that to their teacher/boss and university faculty. I did not see the newsletter until it was finalized and deemed ready for the university community. When the newsletter appeared in my mailbox for "approval," it was clear that current-traditional objective rhetoric guided the representations of the writing center work as well as what it meant to be a writer in a tutoring session. What was produced reinscribed the dominant ideology of the traditional "fix-it shop" writing center. This representation did not match the philosophy enacted through what was taught during class and staff meetings or what I had overheard in sessions for the past two semesters. Textual examples from the newsletter will illustrate this disconnect between theory and actual local practice of representing the "work" of tutoring on paper.

Newsletters have a certain appearance, complete with options for prefabricated templates on most word processing software, such as Microsoft Word. Writers can visit writing websites to find examples of typical content of newsletters, such as mission statements, rules of conduct, and staff profiles. While the tutors had the freedom to choose whatever content and format they wished, the constraints of the genre of the newsletter becomes a powerful guide for content. Looking at the newsletter illustrates the local moments, the creation of a written description of the work of the writing center, by new tutors that help to illustrate tutors' understandings of what it means to be a writing center tutor. Kamberelis

and Dimitridis indicate that practices like newsletter writing are intentional, but that intentions “are always already constructed within particular games of truth in the first place and then appropriated by individuals who are themselves constructed within the same games of truth” (50). In this instance, the game of truth is the university’s construction of writing center work, and exploring the newsletter will help to illustrate the “game of truth” the tutors believe they “should” be doing (their practice) as writing center tutors.

The discussions of everyday life moments in de Certeau’s text, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, illustrate how the local, the micro, is responsible for the larger, the macro, formations of social structures. He suggests that everyday practices should not remain as “obscure backgrounds” because it is helpful to see the “use” of everyday practices (xi). The local practices shape and are shaped by the macro, and studying the local moments, such as the “making” of newsletters, provides a way to see the larger hegemonic forces that mold what it means to be a writing center tutor at a university (xii). Directors can preach about philosophies and writing center theories, but it is the tutors, the “users,” who can provide examples of what writing center everyday work means. “The presence and circulation of a representation (taught by preachers, educators, and popularizers....) tell us nothing about what it is for its users. We must first analyze its manipulation by users who are not its makers” (xiii).

The material the tutors (or users) chose to present on the first page of the newsletter is critically important. The front page of the five-page newsletter would be the first thing people saw, and here in this space, the tutors created an article that summarized the rules of the writing center as well as the proper behaviors to exhibit during a tutoring session in order to get the most out of the session. Here is an excerpt of the front page (use of bold font and capitalization is original), with line numbers added for reading ease:

- 
- 1           **What the WRC does . . . and does well:**
- 2           -We help people to help themselves when it comes to organizing, outlining, and revision.
- 3           -We always begin appointments at the top of the hour.
- 4           -We allow a maximum of two appointments per week.
- 5           -We allow walk-ins on an “as available” basis, if you arrive before 20 minutes
- 6           after the hour.
- 7           **What the WRC does not do, so listen up ladies and gents:**
- 8           -We do NOT look at exams. Not even a little bit.
- 9           -We do NOT have appointments that last longer than 50 minutes.
- 10          -We do NOT proofread or edit your papers for you...even if you ask nicely!
- 11          -Best of all, we do NOT charge for our services! That’s right, your student fees have
- 12          paid us already.

Looking at this language closely will illustrate the conflict between modernist and post modernist interpretations of writing center work. The majority of the newsletter can be cast as a modernist representation of writing center work. The reader receives the information about what the WRC “does” in bolded text that stands out and is easily seen. Each list beginning in line 2 and running through line 5 starts with “We,” a clear establishment of a relationship between those people working in the WRC, the “We” and those not working, those “people” who cannot seem to “help themselves.” The “We” is the authority; the authors could have used a collaborative term, such as “writers” to indicate equal footing, but instead, the pronoun, “we” creates a separation between users and experts. Line 2 shows writing center activity is represented as a service—a place for people unable to “help themselves.” The help described on line 2 is the linear current-traditional presentation of writing process: organize, outline, and revise. It assumes a single process for all “people” who need “help.” Line 2 describes what the writing center “does,” but that is the final instance of space devoted to description of activities.

Lines 3, 4, and 5 are statements of rules. The descriptions of what the writing center “does well” are framed as rules that must be followed. Language like line 3’s “always” and line 4’s “allow a maximum” indicates absolutes, rules that cannot be broken. In line 5, students are “allow[ed]” to have a walk-in appointment, but they have to arrive in the WRC at the appropriate time. Instead of describing actions that the WRC does, something a person who has never visited the WRC might be curious about, the

WRC is framed, on the first page of the newsletter, by rules: we “do” appointments at the top of the hour, or we “do” a “maximum of two appointments” in a week. These are WRC policy descriptions; the WRC “does” policy descriptions, and it “does” that “well.”

The bolded text of line 7 draws the reader’s attention to the binary opposite of the first stanza, what the WRC “does not do.” In line 7, we also see a reminder to the reader to “listen up,” indicating that the following information is even more significant than the prior stanza’s description of what the WRC “does.” This phrase presents the material with a military-like authority to wake up the reader and to state what is most important. Once again, lines 8 to 12 illustrate the “us versus them” use. Line 10 and 11 speak to the user of the WRC, the “you” that is presumably the student. Line 8 presents a rule that must be followed, and this line sets up a trend of capitalizing “NOT” to emphasize this action. This “NOT” capitalization was a rhetorical choice by the tutors to emphasize visually what they felt was important. In addition to the “NOT” emphasis, the reader sees extra attention in line 8 and line 10. Even if you “ask nicely” in line 10, the WRC still will not “edit your papers,” and the WRC will not “even a little bit” look over an exam in line 8. In addition to stating the policy, the writers added more emphasis to these rules by indicating that even if the student essentially begs for assistance, it will “NOT” occur. Line 11 presents the WRC as a service entity. Because the WRC does “NOT charge for” the “services” they provide, the WRC is cast as a service provider. Not only are “we” a provider, but students are even told that they have “paid us already.” This is presented as an exchange of goods—the WRC is a service that students should not overlook because they have already opened up their wallet and paid tutor salaries.

This newsletter is about policies and following directions for a proper understanding of what it means to be a tutee in the WRC. The front page of the newsletter serves as a calibrating device—it attempts to train new WRC users in how to behave, what is acceptable, what is not acceptable, and what to expect from their WRC service. This representation of writing center work fits within a modernist interpretation of literacy practices in the university; Grimm reminds us that writing centers “are more often normalizing agents, performing the institutional function of erasing differences” as well as conditioning students to acceptable behaviors in what it means to be a successful student of an institution (xvii). There is little room for exceptions. There is one correct way to attend a writing center session, and users better be on time and follow the regulations or else the students will “NOT” be able to receive services that have already been “paid” for. And it is the students’ fault if they do “NOT” follow directions to receive these services.

**During the writing center theory course, we worked to “change their minds” from a rigid modernist mindset by asking them to critically examine their common sense.**

So what does exploring this one example of a newsletter mean for writing centers? At this writing center, we attempted to challenge tutors to teach writing in a way that supported a postmodern approach that broadened the notion of successful tutoring. During the writing center theory course, we worked to “change their minds” from a rigid modernist mindset by asking them to critically examine their common sense. Tutors’ common sense tended to replicate the default: the modernist university’s understandings of a “good” writing product as well as the position of tutor as expert who provides “help” to those who cannot help themselves. Most tutors at the study’s site could easily create the type of “good” writing their modernist university valued because they had all been successful performers of this type of writing within the institution. Resisting their common sense involved pushing beyond the simple default performance by becoming more reflective about what it means to tutor and write and by questioning their unreflective common sense. But what this newsletter activity demonstrates is it takes much more than a graduate course or a couple of semesters of talk to broaden a tutor’s view of the enterprise of teaching writing. As Foucault indicates, discipline is enacted through authority figures, or trainers. As the writing center “trainer,” I must reflect on what was taught during tutor education. However, perhaps the most influential trainer for new tutors is their apprenticeship in the modernist institution; they have been students and “users,” trained in mostly modernist behaviors.

If a modernist representation of the writing center is too narrow, but tutors are inscribed in it, what should happen with new tutor education? This is precisely the area our scholarship is lacking, focus and modeling of specific local practices grounded in theory and research. This practice must involve the writing center director continually working against the common sense—not by providing formulas but by engaging tutors in critical exploration of what it is they know and what it means to tutor. It is ongoing and continual learning/teaching. Ira Shor models this approach well in his text, *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*. After first exploring the concepts of critical pedagogy, he included ancillary materials at

the end of his text that illustrate what the theoretical concepts looked like in his local classroom setting. He provides examples of actual assignments that enable readers to envision the more theoretical in action. Knoblauch and Brannon also model the same approach in their text, *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing*. They begin by discussing theoretical concepts of ancient and modern rhetoric in the writing classroom, and then they dedicate entire chapters to practical descriptions of actual classroom activities that illustrate what modern rhetorical practices look like in action.

As writing center directors, we must engage tutors in a critical dialogue about tutoring that applies global theoretical concepts to local practice to require tutors to question and engage. Broader understandings of legitimate writing center sessions happen gradually as tutors begin to reflect on their local understandings of what it means to be a writing center tutor within the institution. Tutors and writing center directors can interrogate how current-traditional practices persist in college classrooms even though the profession advocates alternative pedagogies. The newsletter provided a way to view a micromoment in tutor education that provided a space for interrogation of current-traditional practices at this study's writing center. I am hopeful that research concerning the theory behind local moments of practice like these will continue to have a voice within writing center publications.

[1] The publication guidelines for general Writing Center Journal submissions:  
<http://www.english.udel.edu/wcj/submissions.html>

[2] The Theory In/To Practice can be found at  
[http://www.english.udel.edu/wcj/theory\\_into\\_practice.html](http://www.english.udel.edu/wcj/theory_into_practice.html)

[3] Berlin indicates that the objective rhetoric can be explained as "only that which is empirically verifiable...is real" (7). Language, or the student's paper, is just a "sign system" that exists to illustrate a student's understanding of truth, an "external object" (7-8). Current-traditional rhetoric is found in many first year writing classrooms and modernist universities.

[4] See *The Everyday Writing Center*, p. 83, for a discussion of newsletter writing projects.

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## Watch and Learn: Peer Evaluation and Tutoring Pedagogy

[Fall 2010 / Training](#)

by **Jane Van Slembrouck**, *Fordham University*

**By observing fellow tutors' consultations, writing center tutors improve their abilities to evaluate their own practices when working with students.**

How can we as writing center directors strike a balance between evaluating tutors and allowing them to become independent, self-reflective thinkers? One solution I've found has been to ask tutors to observe and evaluate one another's tutoring.

**I have seen that genuinely productive assessment can occur between equals and that observing a peer is inevitably a reciprocal process, prompting meditation on one's own values and practices.**

In the process, I have seen that genuinely productive assessment can occur between equals and that observing a peer is inevitably a reciprocal process, prompting meditation on one's own values and practices.

Questions about tutor training and evaluation have been on my mind since I added the job of writing center director to my full schedule of graduate student responsibilities last year. [Fordham University](#) has long made it a practice to appoint English PhD students to short-term positions as directors at each of its two main campus writing centers [1]. These positions offer an extraordinary opportunity for professional development for advanced graduate students with backgrounds in teaching and tutoring. Now, with one year of experience managing [Fordham's Rose Hill](#) center in the Bronx behind me, I am in my second, and final, year on the job. My tutoring staff consists of graduate students from several humanities departments who tutor fourteen hours a week in the writing center for their graduate assistantships. In my dual role as manager and peer I work hard to foster a collaborative and even somewhat relaxed approach to tutor training. At our weekly staff meetings the tutors and I take turns leading the discussion of sample student essays and scholarly readings on tutoring theory and practice. We also spend a considerable amount of time role-playing and discussing actual and hypothetical tutoring scenarios.

These training activities are valuable, but I also need assurance that the tutors put into practice the insights gleaned from our meetings. Last year, at the



Jane Van Slembrouck

suggestion of the Rose Hill Writing Program Director, I began observing the tutors as they worked. In my follow-up conversations with each tutor, I invariably asked three questions: What was your student hoping to accomplish in the session? What were you (the tutor) trying to accomplish? How well do you think you and your student succeeded in meeting these goals? My intent with these questions was to encourage the tutor to take the lead in assessing the session, rather than passively accepting my feedback.

Both the tutors and I found these conversations productive, but as a means of assessment the activity seemed incomplete to me. Though the observations took place in the context of routine tutoring appointments, they felt somewhat disconnected from the center's dynamic social habitat wherein tutors routinely confer with one another between and even during sessions, asking questions and suggesting resources. Suspecting that at least some of this productive exchange disappears when the director comes calling, I wondered how I might reduce my role in the evaluation process and find a means of assessment that would take advantage of this nonhierarchical flow of ideas. I soon found myself considering instituting a peer evaluation activity that would require tutors to observe one another's sessions. Peer observation and other forms of peer mentoring already play a crucial role in the English Department's Teaching Practicum, the program that trains graduate students to teach writing courses at the university. Why not use a similar form of pedagogy in the writing center?

As any educator knows, though, peer work can be risky. I initially had doubts about translating this method of evaluation to the tutoring context: What if the tutors regarded the activity as a waste of time—yet another activity to add to their overflowing to-do lists as graduate students? Or what if some tutors resisted learning from colleagues they regarded as below their skill level or experience? And what if—and here my own tendency toward shyness was guiding my thinking—what if peer evaluation just proved awkward?

Yet even with my mental handwringing, I wasn't ready to abandon the idea. It seemed to me that the activity's success, like that of any peer activity, would depend on how it was designed and communicated. With the guidance of the campus Writing Program Director, I crafted a questionnaire for the observers that swapped the loaded term "evaluation" for the more open-ended "observation." I asked tutors to consider specific elements of the sessions they would witness: the apparent goals of the student and tutor, the demeanor of each, as well as effective strategies and challenging moments in the session. Further, since the opening and closing minutes of any appointment are critical, the observers were asked to record what occurred at those times. By inviting the observers to identify moments and strategies that were effective or less so, the activity would yield more constructive feedback than would a vague directive to, say, "discuss your peer's strengths and weaknesses." For their part, the observers also stood to gain; watching a peer make the myriad small decisions that constitute even a 30-minute tutoring session stood to be enormously educational—potentially even more so than having one's own session evaluated.

The questionnaire prompts were as follows:

1. How did the session begin?
2. Based on your observation, what was the student hoping to accomplish during his or her visit?

3. Based on your observation, what was the tutor hoping to accomplish?
4. Describe at least one effective strategy the tutor used and explain why that strategy was effective.
5. Describe a challenge that presented itself and explain how the tutor addressed that challenge.
6. Describe the tutor's demeanor (e.g., communication style, body language) and tone.
7. Describe the student's demeanor and tone.
8. How did the session end?

After conducting follow-up conversations with their peers, the observers turned in their questionnaires. Once everyone had both observed and been observed, each tutor would complete a second questionnaire consisting of two prompts:

1. Reflect on the experience of *observing* your colleague and your subsequent conversation. How, for example, might this experience inform your own tutoring practice? What, if any, observations or questions does it prompt?
2. Reflect on the experience of *being observed* by a colleague and your subsequent conversation. How, for example, might the experience inform your tutoring practice? What, if any, observations or questions does it prompt?

After preparing the two questionnaires, I set about pairing the tutors for the activity. This step presented a challenge. I didn't want the same tutor to both observe and be observed by the same person, so I instituted a chain of assignments: Tutor A observes Tutor B, who in turn observes Tutor C, and so on. These pairings were made solely on the basis of convenience of scheduling for the parties involved. But this neutral criterion also reflected my belief that any dedicated tutor can learn from, and teach, another tutor. After all, this is what happens every day in the writing center.

With the last questionnaire turned in and the exercise complete, I was happy to find that most of the tutors regarded the experience as instructive and in some cases even enjoyable [2]. Through reflecting on the feedback and holding some informal follow-up conversations with tutors, I have reached a few tentative conclusions about the role of evaluation in writing center pedagogy. Perhaps the most important thing I learned is that effective evaluation need not be hierarchical. Several tutors described the advantage of observing and being observed by a peer. "Power differentials," wrote Ben, "no matter how informal, still change the way people act under observation and react to advice. The way this [activity] was structured, it effectively doubled the chances that we would learn something valuable through the double duty of giving and receiving feedback." Though I was thrilled that Ben benefited from the intended "double duty" of the activity, I was caught slightly off-guard by his reference to "power differentials." His comment was a good reminder, though, that despite my efforts to make my role as director somewhat informal, the tutors still regard me as an authority figure. At the same time, it was heartening and a bit humbling to see that Ben and his colleagues can grow as tutors without (and sometimes *especially* without) my intervention.

In addition to what it revealed about authority, the activity helped me see that the context of evaluation matters enormously. Just as a well-designed exam asks students to demonstrate skills inherent to the day-to-day work of the course, tutor evaluations should emerge from the routine work of tutoring. Writing centers that rely exclusively on role-playing and staged tutoring sessions to assess their staff may wish to reconsider their approach. The words and gestures of even the most ordinary tutoring appointment are a pedagogical goldmine, and evaluation ideally should be grounded in these authentic exchanges. In their feedback, tutors described with genuine interest their peers' methods for engaging students. "Revision became an ongoing process for Tina and her student," wrote Robert. "By encouraging the student to perform a given rewrite on the spot, Tina was able to offer the student plenty of immediate feedback." Robert's attention to Tina's use of revision illustrates the "double duty" of giving and receiving feedback that Ben identified: Robert's positive evaluation strengthens Tina's self-image as a resourceful tutor, and Robert, having witnessed the effectiveness of on-the-spot revision, may well try out the technique in his own tutoring; at the very least the experience might inspire him to experiment with more responsive, student-centered approaches.

Observation, then, prompts self-evaluation. After observing John, Melanie admitted that she finds "not telling students what to write a little frustrating at times, so I've really pushed myself to ... create discussion and make the student take ownership." Similarly, Ana was impressed with Victor's "patient and calm manner. Almost reflexively, I thought about my own desire to jump right in and help a student instead of standing back and letting him or her solve the problem.... In the end, observing Victor was probably more useful for my own sessions than having someone observe me and then telling me what they thought."

Melanie's and Ana's comments illustrate the value of loosening the reins of control when tutoring—a lesson that even the most stimulating discussion of abstract tutoring principles could not have taught half so convincingly. General tutoring axioms ("Always do X" or "Avoid Y"), taught to new tutors and reiterated in staff meetings, have a place in any writing center, but an overemphasis on universal protocols can lead us to measure every tutor-student interaction against an a priori standard of "good" tutoring. One of the strengths of peer observation is that it regards people as individuals, and it treats our curiosity about others as an excellent foundation for learning. Discussing collaboration in the writing center, Andrea Lunsford notes that effective peer work "leads not only to sharper, more critical thinking ... but to deeper understanding of others" (5) [3]. I was pleased to see this truth bear out in the feedback. Tutors often described, with not a little astonishment, how their peers' tutoring styles differed from their own. "Robert has a more discreet and understated approach than I do," remarked Victor in his feedback:

**Observing someone else can nudge us out of the worn grooves of our own practice. Likewise, being observed reminds us that we are not alone but that we work within a community.**

His patience, his ability to probe and question the student, and defer, by that one moment, the point where he would suggest the answer himself, often worked, just as often that it did not. But the attitude of not giving up on the student, of not assuming a dogmatic position of "instruction"... made me all the more aware of

the stance of conversational humility which I could aspire to.

Observing someone else can nudge us out of the worn grooves of our own practice. Likewise, being observed reminds us that we are not alone but that we work within a community. In her feedback, Kim admitted that having a peer sit in on one of her sessions “made me feel like I had when I first started working at the writing center—very self-conscious and aware that it was an open space. I suppose the only question this would bring up is: What are the pros and cons of our open workspace when it comes to our tutoring practice? Does the fact that we’re always ‘performing’ for each other to some extent help or hurt us?” I’m sympathetic to Kim’s concerns – and never more so than on those days when I step in at the last minute to sub for a sick tutor. But while I wish our workspace were large enough to allow for more private work areas, I’ve come to regard the public nature of the writing center as, on balance, a good thing. Retreating to our own soundproof corners (whether real or metaphorical) can be tempting, and the world of academia outside the writing center can seem to conspire to make this solitude feel all but inevitable. But this distance can contribute to a dangerous self-sufficiency—the belief that each of us is our best and only resource. Peer observation works from the assumption that none of us is an island, and nor should we be.

I am giving peer observations a second run this year, but before I do, the activity needs a few modifications. Most importantly, I’ll rethink the way I handled the questionnaires. Although the tutors shared their feedback in conversation with one another, their written responses were directed at me. It strikes me now as a little ironic that I was the primary audience for written feedback generated in a *peer* activity. Next time, I’ll ask each tutor to prepare a separate piece of evaluative prose for his or her observee. This feedback can then go into the tutor’s teaching portfolio to serve as an ongoing source of instruction and encouragement.

Revisions notwithstanding, this activity has helped me to rethink the meaning of evaluation in the context of writing center pedagogy. In watching the exercise unfold I was reminded of Paulo Freire’s avowal that education “must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students” (72). It has been liberating to see that evaluation need not be hierarchical or detached from other forms of learning. One of the strengths of writing centers, I think, is that within their walls the roles of student and teacher continually intersect. On a given day, a tutor may be guiding a student through a research project, but in the process she is learning from her student how to ask better, more focused questions; meanwhile she is offering her coworkers a revisable template for tutor-student interaction. As a component of tutor assessment, peer observation is not a departure from the productive network of dialogue that makes up a bustling writing center so much as an attempt to focus in closely, see and appreciate it.

### **Notes**

[1] Fordham has writing centers at each of its two main campuses: the Rose Hill campus in the Bronx and the Lincoln Center campus in Manhattan.

[2] Though my focus here is on the interaction between tutors, it is important to note that the students participating in the sessions also contributed heavily

to the social dynamic of the observations. The students were also under inspection, and their engagement necessarily shaped the course of the sessions. Though it would be very revealing to know how the students reacted to the observation scenario, I have yet to build into the activity a means of gathering their responses.

[3] Emphasis appears in the original text.

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### “Anybody there?”: A Comparison of Writing-Center Coaching and Crisis Counseling

Fall 2010 / Consulting

by **Jenny Poon**, Virginia Tech University

**A volunteer crisis counselor and writing center tutor juxtaposes the skill sets necessary for each position.**



Jenny Poon

It's 4:30 am. It has been a slow night, and I am sleeping fitfully on the pullout couch, tossing and turning underneath a small fleece blanket. The phone rings. I jump off the couch and run across the cheap, blue linoleum to flick on the light, grab a clipboard, and answer the phone by the second ring.

“Raft and ACCESS, how may I help you?” I say, trying to sound alert.

A melancholy voice, barely audible, answers, “Hi. I had no one else to call. I really want to hurt myself. I don’t know how much more of this I can take.”

“I'm really worried about you. Thanks for having the courage to call us. What's going on?”

Although I didn’t expect it, I have noticed a significant number of parallels while volunteering at the local suicide/crisis hotline and working as a peer writing coach at the Virginia Tech Writing Center. Over the course of almost two years at the hotline, I have accumulated over 200 hours of paraprofessional counseling as well as a valuable set of skills and experiences that transferred remarkably easily to my new position as an undergraduate peer writing coach. Both peer tutoring and paraprofessional counseling require that I build rapport with the client or caller, ask clarifying questions, define his or her most pressing problem(s), effectively implement manageable steps for improvement, engage in problem-solving techniques, and utilize outside resources when necessary.

The most important characteristic for success in both roles is the capacity to use one’s interpersonal skills to successfully build relationships with clients. Indeed, in an article entitled, “Freud in the Writing Center: The Psychoanalytics of Tutoring Well,” Christina Murphy discusses a few ways in which teaching writing mirrors the psychoanalytic process, especially emphasizing the importance of the bond between the therapist and the client or, in this case, the tutor and the student. She contends that “the quality of that interpersonal relationship...determines how successful the interaction as a whole will be” (Murphy 12). Building rapport involves active listening, building trust, understanding and reflecting the client’s concerns, giving feedback, asking questions, and being friendly, supportive, and non-judgmental. When talking to

both distressed callers and writing center clients, I acknowledge and praise their ability to ask for help and validate their concerns.

**Setting priorities is an essential process for both the writing center coach and the crisis counselor that involves deciding whether to address the individual's global or local concerns.**

One of the reasons it's so crucial to build rapport with a client is because, just as many of the people who call the hotline are hurt, many of the students who enter the doors of the writing center are also suffering in that "they display insecurities about their abilities as writers or even as academic learners" or exhibit "behavioral patterns of anxiety, self-doubt, negative cognition, and procrastination that only intensify an already difficult situation" (Murphy 14). With this circumstance in mind, it is clear that fostering a trusting, friendly, and supportive relationship from the very beginning of an interaction can go a long way in quelling an individual's anxiety. Being compassionate makes callers and clients feel more comfortable sharing their concerns with me, whether I'm on the end of a phone line, or seated right next to them at a table.

After listening to the client's or caller's concerns and gaining their trust, both my role as a counselor and as a tutor require me to define or help the client identify his or her most pressing problem. Obviously, it would be impossible for me to solve all of an individual's writing or emotional problems in a single session or phone call, so I must help him or her choose which are the most practical and significant to pursue. Setting priorities is an essential process for both the writing center coach and the crisis counselor that involves deciding whether to address the individual's global or local concerns. For example, at the writing center, clients often come in asking for help with grammar; however, it is our job as tutors, when necessary, to gently direct them from the minutiae to more global concerns, such as organizing their paper in a more coherent manner or strengthening a weak thesis statement. Similarly, at the hotline, I try to get callers to focus on the bigger picture. For example, if they are having trouble coping with stress in a given night, I'll help them brainstorm some ways they can manage their stress in general, such as going for a walk once a day or getting involved in a local community organization. By collaboratively developing with global strategies, I hope to instill a somewhat permanent change in their day-to-day lives that will increase that client's ability to handle stress. However, coaches and counselors alike have to be flexible when setting priorities, as there are always exceptions based on the needs of the particular client. If I am helping an international engineering student with her dissertation, I will mostly address local concerns due to both my lack of knowledge of the subject matter and the client's needs. Likewise, when working at the hotline, if someone is acutely suicidal or is about to experience a panic attack, for example, I need to focus on the local, or more immediate, concern of what is currently happening in order to effectively keep the client safe and relaxed as possible in the short-term.

Yet another similarity between writing center coaching and crisis counseling involves helping clients and callers implement steps for improvement. First and foremost, it is important to demystify the situation at hand. Both novice writers and callers with mental health issues often have trouble even getting started on a pressing problem, whether it is freshman composition assignment or an overwhelming amount of tasks to complete. It's important for both coaches and counselors to demystify the situation by breaking the problem or assignment

down into small, manageable steps to make the task less daunting. In order to do this, one must develop an individualized coaching or counseling strategy that is congruent with the client's priorities, values, and needs. If a client feels overwhelmed at the prospect of writing an essay, he or she can collaborate with the writing coach to come up with an outline and focus on writing, perhaps, just the first paragraph. If a caller feels anxiety when she thinks about all of her bills that have been piling up on her counter, the counselor and caller can try to formulate a schedule that she can follow in order to accomplish the task. It's important to be flexible; not every solution or alternative I suggest will work for everyone. In order to gauge whether or not a particular counseling or tutoring technique is working for the writing center client or hotline caller, I'm sure to ask lots of questions, such as "How do you feel about this change in the order of your paragraphs?" or "Do you think you will be able to use these breathing techniques to help you calm down when you start to feel yourself getting angry?"

The most important similarity between the role of a tutor and that of a counselor is the art of allowing clients and callers to think for themselves. Instead of overtly giving writers better words to use or dispensing imperative advice about what callers should do in a particular situation, a good tutor or counselor utilizes similar skills, such as the ability to explore the problem, ask intelligent, open-ended questions, and otherwise help clients and callers elucidate their own ideas and generate their own solutions. Ideally, a coach or counselor should act as more of a facilitator, cheerleader, and/or sounding board than a drill sergeant. After all, much of the burden of fixing the problem, be it a weak focus or difficulty coping with stressful situations, is ultimately on the shoulders of the student, not the teacher, therapist, or volunteer. As Melissa Weintraub suggests, "most of the work of therapy is done outside the session, in clients' real lives; so, too, is learning how to write" (Weintraub 11). Therapists, paraprofessional counselors, and writing coaches alike all provide support, listen to the clients, help them clarify their thoughts and feelings, and give constructive feedback for them to utilize on their own. Whether they're experiencing anxiety about writing a paper or are in a state of deep depression, my goal is to give students and callers the skills (e.g., organizational techniques, coping mechanisms, and so forth) to help them make the unmanageable a little more manageable.

Another issue that sometimes comes into play in both counseling and tutoring settings is that of "cultural competency," or acceptance and sensitivity to people of diverse cultural backgrounds. As a psychology major, I'm interested in how people of various ethnicities, cultures, and backgrounds express and cope with their feelings of, for example, depression or anxiety, and how their perceptions may differ from those of Americans. For example, generally speaking, Asians come from a more collectivistic society and think more in terms of "we," while American society is very individualistic and people tend to view things from the perspective of "I." This issue was brought to light in my very first writing center session with a young, Asian graduate student named Meo. Her cover letter was very detailed in terms of her past work and academic experiences, but did not mention any of her individual interpersonal qualities. I asked her about her experiences and qualifications for this specific architecture-related internship, and it was clear that, albeit modest and quiet, she had often played a leadership role when facilitating many group design projects. However, when I pointed this out, she said she didn't want to sound "cocky." I lightheartedly explained to her that, in America, it's not called "cocky," it's called "qualified,"

and that it's important to convey to the company that she is both a team player, as well as a leader. She laughed and agreed, thanking me for this valuable cultural insight. In this instance, by acting as a "cultural informant," I challenged Meo's beliefs about her audience and she successfully adapted her writing to an American audience.

In contrast, at the hotline, I was trained to "never discuss [my] beliefs with the caller, regardless of the issue at hand" (NRVCS). However, even though I cannot disclose my own personal beliefs, I still try to broaden the caller's perspective by asking open-ended questions in order to get the person to start viewing their thoughts as hypotheses that can be accepted, refuted, or modified based on evidence or probability. Like the situation with Meo, I'm not telling them that their beliefs or feelings are right or wrong, I'm simply helping them to appreciate another point of view that they might not have considered before. For example, if a young woman calls and tells me, "I just can't live without my boyfriend," I can first validate her concerns (e.g., "I can see why you feel that way; you were very comfortable and committed to one another for a long time"). Then, I can try to help her examine the evidence for this thought by asking her a series of questions (e.g., "So what was your life like before you guys started dating?") in order to show her that she can be independent.

Yet another similarity between tutoring writers and volunteering at the hotline involves encouraging students and callers alike to seek outside help. While it is sometimes difficult, both counselors and writing tutors must acknowledge and address their own limitations, which may preclude them from assisting a client with a particular set of needs. In other words, there is no "one size fits all" approach for counseling or tutoring, and a good counselor or tutor can admit when they cannot adequately serve the needs of the client and may need to point the individual in the right direction for additional help. For instance, at Raft we make a variety of different referrals, depending on the individual circumstances of the client. Those referrals range from facilitating emergency admissions to psychiatric hospitals to giving the client information on pro bono counseling services offered in the area, such as local support groups for battered women or parents of children with autism. While working in the writing center, I often encourage students to speak with their professors to clear up any ambiguities in the assignment or to ask them specific questions that they may be unsure about, I help them find handouts pertinent to their writing problems, and I suggest online resources to assist them with formatting issues and other general grammar concerns (e.g., the Purdue OWL website). Again, I'm not an expert on many topics, such as the format of a aerospace engineering research report or how to parent a child with Asperger's, so it would be irresponsible to not give the caller as much information and as many resources as possible.

**Writing center coaching and crisis counseling are similar in that they both involve building rapport, effectively setting priorities, implementing steps for improvement, facilitating the clients' independence, increasing their perspectives, referring them to outside resources, and ending the call or session on a positive, future-oriented note.**

Finally, when ending either a phone call or a writing center session, I always try to summarize or review what has been covered in the phone call or what we've accomplished in the coaching session and help them generate a plan for the

future. For example, I might encourage a student to work on the final draft of his paper over the weekend, and perhaps make an outline of his finished product in order to ensure that his paper is well organized before turning it in. I would also let him know about our writing center's evening hours, in case he wanted to bring in his essay for a final read-through. Ending the conversation on a future-oriented note is especially important when talking to the hotline callers; before ending the call, I almost always ask them what their plans are for the evening (or the following day), and encourage them to call back at any time if they need to talk to someone. It's always important to thank the student or caller and try to end on a positive, upbeat note, whether it's noon or 5:00 in the morning.

Writing center coaching and crisis counseling are similar in that they both involve building rapport, effectively setting priorities, implementing steps for improvement, facilitating the clients' independence, increasing their perspectives, referring them to outside resources, and ending the call or session on a positive, future-oriented note. However, there are also notable differences between the two. In contrast to working in the writing center, as a volunteer counselor, I don't have a "draft" of the person's life laying in front of me and, unlike many students in the writing center, the callers are generally not looking for a one-time session, but rather continued support over an extended period of time, or at least for the duration of their crisis. In fact, sometimes callers do not want me to give them any type of advice or guidance at all but simply need someone to listen to them with an open ear and provide empathy. On the other hand, virtually all of the students who come into the writing center are looking for concrete help on a particular assignment or essay. Finally, in the writing center, the object of focus is split between the writing task at hand and the client, whereas at the hotline, the entire focus is on the actual (often fragile) person. However, despite these points, there seem to be more similarities than there are differences, and there are many implications inherent in this claim. Even though writers who make mistakes are able to erase them, while callers cannot, one thing remains true: just as people need help collaboratively working on their papers for the better, sometimes people need help collaboratively working through their lives as well. As writing tutors, I feel like we do a little of both. Indeed, lives and essays are both works in progress that are truly never really finished.

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programs in clinical psychology. She has worked at the **Virginia Tech Writing Center** since Spring. She performs research at the **VT Child Study Center**, where she works with children with phobias, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, and other psychiatric disorders. Ms. Poon also serves as undergraduate team leader of the **Stress and Coping Lab**, which specializes in the recruitment and treatment of individuals with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. In her free time, she enjoys volunteering at the crisis hotline, reading, watching movies, and playing with her puppy, Layla.

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## Consultant Spotlight

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*Praxis* interviews **Anna Jones**, writing consultant and first-year graduate student at Marshall University



Anna Jones

**Name:** Anna Jones

**Age:** 22

**Writing center:** **Marshall University Writing Center.**

**Size of school:** 14,000

**Year in school and area of study:** First year English graduate student specializing in Applied Linguistics

**Number of years working in writing centers:** 4

**Job title:** Writing tutor

**Describe the work you do in the writing center:** I meet with students and assist them with all stages of the writing process: brainstorming, researching, developing, organizing, revising, and copy editing.

**Describe the training you've participated in:** Since I first started working in the writing center, I have participated in several training sessions per semester. These training sessions involved mock consultations and discussions geared toward specific concerns we had encountered in the writing center. As a first semester graduate student, I am currently enrolled in a writing center and

composition theory course. In this course, we have discussed in depth the theories behind writing center and composition pedagogy.

**How do you normally start a consultation?** Sharing writing, even for academic purposes, can be an intimidating and intimate situation. A tutee is, essentially, opening his or her brain up to the tutor for analysis and examination. Therefore, I think it is crucial to establish strong rapport with a tutee before jumping into a session. Because of this, I try to greet the student with a smile and engage the student in friendly conversation for several minutes before beginning the actual session. Once we are ready to start the session, I ask the student what assignment we are working on and what he or she is having the most trouble with concerning that assignment. From there, we make a plan as to how we will spend our time the rest of the session.

**Describe your consulting style:** Laidback, but organized. The tutoring session is not a classroom, and the dynamics between tutor and tutee are markedly unique. I, as the tutor, have a role that exists somewhere between peer and instructor. Whenever approaching the tutoring session, vacillating too far in either direction can create hostile reactions from tutees. If I fully embrace the role of a peer, a tutee may question the benefit and need of the tutoring session. However, if I fully embrace the role of an instructor, I risk alienating the tutee by refusing to acknowledge the visible truth that I am really just a student like he or she is. A balance is essential.

**My favorite kind of consultation:** Consultations where students are excited about their own writing (and improving their writing), as well as the subject that they are writing about.

**My greatest strength as a consultant is . . .** My ability to encourage tutees to revise by talking about what portions of the paper need work alongside what portions of the paper have been well-articulated and well-structured. I try to always encourage tutees during a session, so that whenever they go to revise, they do not see writing as something they are incapable of producing on their own.

**My greatest weakness . . .** My weaknesses have changed throughout my tutoring career. Initially, during my first year or so tutoring, my greatest weakness was focusing too much on the mechanics of a student's paper and too little on the actual structural and content issues. I would say that, perhaps, over the years, my weakness has actually swung in the opposite direction. In an attempt to focus on global issues, I now, sometimes, veer away from addressing issues of mechanics in student writing.

**What I like about working in a writing center:** I love the relationships I have developed with "regular customers." There are several students that make appointments weekly, and over the years, I have gotten to know both them and their writing.

**What I don't like:** I really dislike the tutoring sessions that are required by professors/instructors. If a tutee walks into a session and responds to my question, "so what do you feel like you had the hardest time with while writing this paper?" with a simple, "uh, well, we just get extra credit if we come here," then my heart immediately sinks in my chest.

**My oddest consultation:** I don't know if this session was odd, per se, but I once had a session where a student brought in personal poetry (the bulk of the

poems were about her dog, although a few were about her romantic relationships) and asked for me to read the poems. Although I really do enjoy tutoring creative writing in addition to academic writing, she seemed to not be interested in revision, but rather to simply find an audience (me) for her work.

**What advice would you give to beginning consultants?** The goal of a session is not to simply help a student produce a good piece of writing, but rather to see a student leave the session with the skills necessary to become a better writer. In a half hour to an hour session, it is often impossible to address every single composition issue that is apparent in a piece of writing. However, you can address the most crucial issues, and you can then attempt to teach students how to spot the other issues that need development and/or revision in the paper outside of the actual tutoring session.

**What kind of writing do you do?** During my undergraduate years, I specialized in creative writing. While I am no longer "officially" studying creative writing, I still have an affinity for (and during my own leisure time, often write) poetry and creative non-fiction. In addition to the many creative writing courses I have taken, I have also written numerous literary explications and theoretical applications, argumentative essays, and research-driven papers.

**How has working in a writing center affected the way you write?** Working in the writing center as an undergraduate student was, perhaps, one of the most beneficial experiences I have had in regards to my own, personal writing. Assisting other students in brainstorming, analyzing, structuring, and revising papers makes you more self-aware (and gives you more direction) whenever you do the same in your own work.

**What else do you want to tell us about yourself?** Working in the writing center has influenced my future career goals immensely. I've realized that it can be just as satisfying seeing a student have that "a-ha!" moment in his or her writing as it can be experiencing it in my own personal writing.

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