



Praxis: A Writing Center Journal (2003-2011)

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At Your Service: Teaching Rhetoric In A Business School Writing Center

[Fall 2005 / Focus](#)

by Cristy Beemer, Sarah Bowles, and Lisa Shaver

How a collaborative effort between the English Department and Business School at Miami University benefits writing in both fields.



Lisa Shaver, Sarah Bowles, and Cristy Beemer

In "A Stranger in Strange Lands: A College Student Writing Across the Curriculum," Lucille Parkinson McCarthy describes the experience of a student who struggled to understand the language and discourse conventions across several disciplines. Similarly, we—the graduate students in Composition and Rhetoric who joined the **Howe Writing Initiative** as WAC administrators—initially found ourselves strangers in the Business School. As newcomers from the English Department, unfamiliar with the language, customs, and citizens—not to mention discourse conventions—we soon had to familiarize ourselves with business genres: the executive summary, the memo, the report, the business plan. But as we have earned at least partial citizenship in this new land, we find ourselves constantly negotiating between our two cultures—that of the English Department and that of the Business School.

Fortunately, the constant cultural negotiation required of us makes us uniquely qualified to serve undergraduate students who are often themselves new arrivals in the School of Business. When these students come to the Howe for help with their business writing assignments, they too experience a bit of culture shock. They are often surprised by the advice we serve up: Get rid of the introduction and begin with your "Big Idea"...Use headers instead of in-text transitions...Get to the point as soon as possible...Use bullet points...Keep the length to two pages or shorter...Lose the flowery language. Students sometimes have a hard time swallowing such advice; after all, it contradicts much of what they learn in their college composition courses. Indeed, the advice we offer students in the Howe Writing Center often contradicts the advice we give

students in our own composition classes. In any case, because students are adept at writing academic-ese (thorough introductions that begin with a “hook,” narrative arguments that build up to the big finale, smooth transitions, sum-it-all-up conclusions), the biggest challenge many of them face is making the transition from academic writing to business writing. It’s a message we preach over and over again: stop thinking of yourself as a student and start thinking of yourself as a professional. Like us, business students must negotiate the language and customs of their new land if they are to succeed.

It’s a message we preach over and over again: stop thinking of yourself as a student and start thinking of yourself as a professional.

Often when students are assigned their first business memo or report, they assume it’s merely a matter of mimicking the form—filling in the date, to, from, and subject headers; using block paragraphs; or creating section headings. But soon the questions follow. How do I keep my cover memo to one page? What information stays; what goes? How should I organize my report? How do I determine what information to put in each section? Do I cite sources in business writing? Ultimately, these questions reveal the students’ rhetorical concerns.

In the Howe Writing Center, we serve students by demystifying the rhetorical function of business genres. To understand the concise style of business writing required for an executive summary or the segmented arrangement of a business proposal, students need to understand the purpose and context for these conventions. Therefore, we discuss likely audiences and business scenarios for these different genres. We stress exigency and the importance of foregrounding conclusions and avoiding repetition. We show them that constructing executive summaries or case analyses requires decision-making and prioritizing; they are not neutral, objective genres. In essence, our teaching instills critical awareness. As a result, we are repositioning business students’ roles from that of mimics to analysts and decision-makers. Moreover, by demystifying the construction, function, and effect of business writing, we are preparing students to read and write more critically within the School of Business as well as in their professions outside of the academy.

Just as we encourage students to critically analyze their own writing, we help instructors critically analyze their writing assignments. The Howe Writing Center serves as a recursive space for Business instructors to examine their own pedagogical practices. Many professors encourage students to use the Howe Writing Center, but it’s not required. However, if we find that students are struggling with a writing assignment, we approach the instructor to discuss ways to more effectively introduce students to a particular genre or type of business writing. We review assignments, develop supplemental materials, and serve as guest lecturers and co-teachers in Business classrooms. Yet even while we’re presenting to students, we consider our primary audience the course instructor as we demonstrate effective writing instruction. Indeed, helping faculty interrogate and disclose the discourse conventions they expect their students to use is another way that we try to demystify business writing. To use David Russell’s term, we attempt to expose the “transparency” of business rhetoric to faculty and students. Therefore, one of our goals in the Business School is to highlight and analyze—with faculty before they devise an assignment and with students as they complete it—the rhetorical assumptions,

forms, stances, and styles embedded in the context of the task.

The Howe Writing Center serves as a recursive space for Business instructors to examine their own pedagogical practices.

The rhetorical emphasis of our work with both faculty and students is evident in our recent consultation on a junior-level Marketing assignment. In Fall 2004, we led a workshop entitled "Writ Large: Using Writing in Large Classes" in an effort to persuade and teach professors how to keep writing in their classrooms despite increasing class sizes. At this workshop, one professor expressed a desire to maintain her commitment to writing while teaching a class whose size tripled to 120 students. Using one of our suggestions for team writing, she devised a collaborative project that asked students to write a two-page analysis of a current popular business text. In the spring semester, we visited both sections of her Marketing course and introduced tactics for team writing, including the importance of working together throughout all the phases of invention, information gathering, drafting/revision, and editing/proofreading. But because we know that students benefit little when writing is discussed abstractly, we also held an evening session during which students could workshop drafts.

Despite the professor's instruction to integrate course concepts into their analysis, many students resorted to the familiar academic model of summary. At the workshop we handed out a checklist of the major requirements of this paper. To help students fulfill these requirements, we suggested using headers to group, organize, and succinctly communicate. More importantly, we reiterated the professor's aim that students model common business practice by reviewing current literature to explicate important business concepts. We then fanned out to work with each group on their papers. With a staff of three, and a significant student turn out, this was a challenging event that felt more like speed dating than a workshop. In the days following, we saw more students in our writing center.

We observed some important outcomes from this collaborative effort. Students told us that they started writing earlier because of the workshop. Using headers to organize their analysis around business concepts assisted students in making their papers intellectually rigorous despite the short length. With so much to pack in a two-page essay, students had to prioritize, make decisions, and adopt a concise business writing style. At the same time, the length and organization of the paper made grading manageable for the instructor. Finally, students knew that our advice as consultants came from their professor. The students did not have to negotiate our feedback, but rather were grateful for the mediation between their concerns and their professor's expectations. Soon after the workshop, we received an e-mail from the professor commenting that, "these are some of the best written papers I've ever seen." To close this recursive loop, we will meet with the professor again to suggest ways to make this assignment even clearer by addressing some of the difficulties and concerns students shared with us.

So who was served in this consultation? We directly served the professor and her students. More broadly, we served the Business School as a whole by inspiring pedagogical change and ensuring that writing remained part of Business curriculum. We also served ourselves. Just as we employ rhetoric in the School of Business, we take the concerns of business back to our English classes, fundamentally altering the way we teach, discuss, and think about

writing. In the English Department, we now teach concise writing, highlight real-life applications, and ask students to inventory the rhetorical skills that will easily translate across the curriculum. We also import forms of business writing such as the executive summary, talking points, and project proposals. Ultimately, because we inhabit two diverse writing spaces, we gain a broader view of writing in the university, and we deliver that broader view to our students and ask them to make connections across the curriculum. As English TAs who were initially strangers in the Business School, we learn what any traveler knows: you bring your experiences in a new land back home with you and are forever changed.

Cristy, Lisa, and Sarah are all completing their doctoral degrees in Rhetoric and Composition at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. They have all served, under the direction of Kate Ronald the Roger and Joyce L. Howe Professor, as Assistant Directors of the **Howe Writing Initiative** in the Richard T. Farmer School of Business.

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The Forgotten Clients

[Fall 2005 / Focus](#)

by Bonnie Devet

How best might a writing lab director serve her consultants? Here's one answer.



Bonnie Devet

Desperately waving a draft, a client standing in the doorway exclaims, "Can someone help me with my commas? My essay's due in 10 minutes!" The last-minute student is infamous and, unfortunately, extremely common in most writing labs, as are a few other types: the socialite who, instead of working on her freshman English essay, wants only to discuss the latest campus gossip; the older, non-traditional student anxiously seeking reassurance; the international student needing help with American rhetoric. Although many kinds of clients exist (with the list being long and legendary), labs help all of them in two fundamental ways: to discover their roles as students and to learn about the writing process.

As a lab director for almost twenty years, I have found that there is another group of clients; however, they are often forgotten—the peer consultants or tutors themselves. They are frequently overlooked because, as successful students, they have learned how to negotiate the academy's demands, or they would not have been hired to work in the lab in the first place. Then, too, they are likely to be good writers, or they would not have the grades to qualify as tutors. So, in rushing to train consultants, directors all too often forget that these students are, indeed, clients, who, like the others seeking the lab's assistance, need help in learning a role; in the consultants' case, however, it is not how to be students but how to grow as tutors. And even though they are good writers, they, too, can, like the "other" clients, learn even more about the writing process, with directors' widening the tutors' perspective on the craft of composing and the nature of academic writing.

[I]n rushing to train consultants, directors all too often forget that these students are, indeed, clients, who, like the others seeking the lab's assistance, need help in learning a role; in the consultants' case, however, it is not how to be students but how to grow as tutors.

Learning About Their Roles

My experience shows that most consultants assume they understand all about how to be tutors once they have completed the basic training that covers such topics as avoiding proofreading, showing empathy, being a good listener, and using resources. But, as all directors know, learning to be a consultant is the classic never-ending-story, in which tutors are always on a learning curve, or should be, if they want to give clients excellent help. How, then, can directors encourage trained tutors to keep thinking and rethinking about what it means to be a consultant?

Debriefing works well. On a daily or even weekly basis, I find it useful to call consultants aside to inquire about their latest sessions. Following a business model of handling personnel, I do not ask "How did the sessions go?" This wording, according to business management literature, would elicit only the vague "Ok" or "Fine" because workers do not want to look bad by mentioning difficulties. So that consultants have a chance to brag as well as to reflect on what they have done with clients, I ask questions that do not elicit only one-word answers, such as, "What do you think was your best technique you used with the last client?" "What problems did you encounter?" and, then, "If you could re-do the last session, what would you do differently?" Each of these questions evokes long responses. As consultants talk, they begin to understand what they have done well or not so well in their sessions. Such self-reflection is an effective means to learning.

Another technique is to ask consultants to create a treasure hunt exercise for the next group of newly hired tutors (Devet). For this exercise, consultants write down five questions they have been asked by clients, questions newly hired tutors should be able to answer. An example would be, "I don't know how to write a good title for my paper. Can you help me?" Consultants then create a key telling where to find the answer in the lab ("Go to the brown file cabinet to the left of the computers and pull out the handout on "Effective Titles") and what answers to give the client ("Use a working title first, perhaps condensing your thesis; start with a one-word title and build up the title word by word; use alliteration to create a witty title; do not over promise"). In this exercise, consultants "slow down [to] reflect on details [they] had already internalized as a tutor" (Devet 15). They also learn even more about the lab's resources; one consultant said that, until he wrote the treasure hunt exercise for newly hired tutors, he did not realize the lab's files contained a handout about writing titles.

Another way to show consultants that they are growing as tutors is to suggest that they follow the tutor certification criteria from the national organization **College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA)**. Each level of certification offered by the CRLA (regular, advanced, and master) helps consultants to progress in their training. After completing the regular (or first level) topics, such as basic tutoring dos and don'ts, role modeling, and critical thinking skills, consultants move on to the advanced and master levels where they read articles about composition theory, write for publication, and make presentations at conferences (CRLA). Having established steps at each level

shows consultants their increased sophistication as tutors.

Learning Even More about Writing

Consultants are good writers, but they need to learn even more about the processes of composing so they can better serve clients. Although they know from their training that they are “consultants” acting like audiences for clients who will talk through ideas or read aloud papers, I still find the dominant feeling among tutors is that writing is primarily a solitary act done in Lunsford’s famous garret: to many tutors, writers are inspired Romantic poets. After all, as successful students, they think that they write that way, too. So, as a director, I need to expand the consultants’ perceptions, helping tutors understand that writing can also be seen as socially constructed, with writers and readers arriving at a consensus of the truth. To help tutors understand this view of writing, I demonstrate the process. If a consultant, for example, is struggling to explain what is causing a client’s sentence to read awkwardly, I slip into a chair next to both client and consultant, and reassuringly say to the client, “Isn’t it terrific to have all these people who want to help!” Then, I ask both client and consultant to explain what is troubling them, so we all can work on it together. Clients, and more importantly, consultants, learn that it is ok to talk over different ways to write. Such talk demonstrates that knowledge and writing are created through a give-and-take, revealing the socially based nature of writing, a concept about which most consultants are little aware.

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Consultants also need to learn about different types of writing. When first hired, tutors, all too frequently, think there is a generic form of college writing called only “academic writing.” But this vague, overly general label does not serve them as they struggle to help clients with papers in specific disciplines, such as English, Biology, Communication (especially newspaper articles), or History. So, I hold training sessions, using the now-overly-famous composition classification first espoused by James Kinneavy: grouping writings by purpose or aim. Consultants learn there is expressive writing (which helps with English papers); trans-active writing (such as Biology lab reports); informative writing (like most news stories), and persuasive writing (such as History papers arguing the causes for a particular war).

Conclusion

In racing to get labs up and running each term, directors sometimes forget consultants are clients, perhaps not the students who frantically wave their papers in the air, nor the socialites seeking friendship, nor any of the others who frequent labs. Still, consultants are special clients needing to understand both their roles as tutors and the sophisticated nature of the writing process itself. Directors, then, should see that these forgotten clients need a lab as much as a lab needs them.

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Dr. Bonnie Devet, Professor of English and Director of the **Writing Lab at the College of Charleston**, teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in composition, grammar, technical writing, and writing lab theory. She has a chapter in the forthcoming *The Writing Center Director's Resource Guide* (Eds. Christina Murphy and Byron Stay), and recently the College of Charleston Writing Lab was the co-recipient of the **2005 Southeastern Writing Center Association Outstanding Peer Tutor Award (pdf)**.

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Faculty Consultations: An Extra Dimension to the University of Wyoming Writing Center

[Fall 2005 / Focus](#)

by Margaret Garner

The writing center at the University of Wyoming welcomes faculty as clients.

People are often surprised to learn that the [University of Wyoming Writing Center](#) provides services for faculty as well as for students and staff. We help faculty members with their writing, provide assistance with writing assignments, and consult with them regarding other aspects of writing instruction, such as the creation of rubrics. Do we not have enough to do when consulting with students? Why reach out to faculty?

Do we not have enough to do when consulting with students? Why reach out to faculty?

The simple answer is that we feel our writing center work is accomplished in collaboration with both faculty and students. It is a center for everyone to talk about writing. The more complex answer is that many benefits are realized by working with faculty as well as students.

One direct benefit is that we remove the stigma that the Writing Center is a place for poor writers, a place primarily for remediation. When we give classroom introduction talks, we can honestly say that we work with writers at all levels on all kinds of writing. We mention that we work with faculty as well as graduate and undergraduate students, and that the staff members make appointments with one another. When freshmen arrive at our door, they should not feel they are there because they are problem writers. We want people on our campus to know that everyone can benefit from talking about writing in our writing center, and working with faculty helps get across that idea.

Obviously, it also helps if faculty members have a good impression of the Writing Center, and working with them is an effective way to create that impression. They can see first-hand how we operate and understand what we do and what we do not do and are, thus, more likely to recommend the center to their students.

Helping faculty with writing assignments and rubrics has several benefits as well. We help improve writing instruction across the campus. Teachers in disciplines other than English, often feeling uncomfortable about teaching writing, find that talking over their writing assignments and receiving suggestions can help boost their confidence levels as well as improve the assignments themselves.

Perhaps there is also a selfish motivation on our part. Few writing center situations are more difficult than the one in which the consultant does not understand the assignment any better than the student. The student asks:

"What does the teacher mean when she says, 'Define an abstract concept using analogy and examples. Be sure to use specifics and not abstractions?'" The consultant looks at the assignment and gulps. What does the teacher mean? How will the consultant be supportive of the teacher's assignment if she does not understand it? Will the consultant be giving incorrect suggestions? Clear, well-written assignments benefit everyone, so the more we can help with them, the happier we are.

Few writing center situations are more difficult than the one in which the consultant does not understand the assignment any better than the student.

As director of the Writing Center, I also offer faculty workshops on rubric creation and the integration of writing in courses. What I think is the most beneficial in these workshops is the conversation that occurs among faculty members. I am there only as a guide. The faculty members discuss the problems and questions they have and give each other suggestions. I give them models and suggestions as well and usually follow up the workshop with individual consultations.

The Writing Center staff and I also give workshops to classes across campus. Sometimes we conduct these in the Writing Center and sometimes in the students' classroom. When we plan these workshops (at the teacher's request), we make clear that the workshop is a collaborative effort with the teacher. That is, we request that the teacher be involved in the planning and participate in the workshop. Our desires are not always realized, but most teachers are cooperative. By including the teachers in the preparation and presentation of the workshop, we hope to encourage them to do their own writing workshops and get a better understanding of what the Writing Center does. Of course, these workshops also encourage students to visit our center.

While I am committed to working with faculty in the Writing Center, I realize that there can arise two major difficulties. One is time. I would never want faculty appointments to displace student appointments, but the chance of that happening is slim. Working with faculty does not take up much time. When faculty members use our services for their writing, they are usually just seeking feedback from another listener. They are concerned about clear sentences, logical organization, and clarity of ideas. They are not concerned with grammar, mechanics, and format. Faculty members usually need only one or two appointments for an article. Only one appointment is needed for working on a writing assignment.

[W]e are not an editing service, we do not do the work for the student...we will not put ourselves between students and teachers.

The second difficulty relates to writing center staffing. The University of Wyoming Writing Center is fortunate to be staffed primarily with faculty so it has the personnel to work with graduate students and faculty. Writing centers that are staffed primarily with undergraduate students would have more difficulty working with faculty as clients. The problem is not that undergraduate consultants are poor listeners. Rather, the faculty members may not have confidence in the undergraduates' feedback. In addition, most undergraduate consultants tend not to have much experience with the expectations of professional-level writing. The University of Wyoming Writing Center usually has

three or four undergraduate consultants each semester, and I make sure they are not scheduled to work with faculty members.

I also realize that consulting with faculty does not remove all professorial misconceptions about the Writing Center, but it does help. Faculty members learn that we are not an editing service, we do not do the work for the students, and we support the faculty. They learn about our philosophy and realize that we will not put ourselves between students and teachers.

Moreover, our faculty consultations expand the mission of the University of Wyoming Writing Center. The traditional hallmark of writing centers is talking. To be successful, I think, writing centers need to keep up the talking—talking among consultants, talking among students, and talking among faculty members. Through this communication, we can truly have a collaborative endeavor.

Margaret Garner directs the **Writing Center at the University of Wyoming** and teaches in the Department of English. She has published articles on writing center work, health science writing, and dance. She is currently working on a nonfiction book.

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From the Editors: Whom (All) We Serve...and How

[Fall 2005 / Columns](#)

Student writers are not the only folks who benefit from our writing center work. This issue of *Praxis* focuses on whom we serve, how we do it, and for whose benefit.

When we asked writing center practitioners to submit articles focusing on “whom we serve” for the fall 2005 issue of *Praxis*, we were delighted with how writers parsed this theme to include not only whom we serve, but also *how* and *why*. As is evidenced in our Focus articles, writing centers serve students and faculty across the academic curriculum, in one-to-one tutorials and in large lecture classrooms, for the purpose of enhancing writing in all genres. Their authors show a willingness to engage in spirited debate about the efficacy of even our most entrenched staffing, consulting, and training practices. Such debate bears witness to the vim and verve of writing center practice.

All three Focus articles examine how in serving different discourse communities, consultants also serve themselves. Cristy Beemer, Sarah Bowles, and Lisa Shaver propose that by working with writers across the curriculum, consultants learn to examine the rhetorical strategies and goals of writing in their own discipline. Bonnie Devet posits that writing center directors might best serve their consultants by encouraging them to rethink their consulting practices, thereby inspiring them to regularly refresh their skills. And Margaret Garner suggests that by also providing consultations for faculty, we help democratize the writing center. Other articles in this issue also further question whom we serve, how and why. John Blazina and Gabrielle Seeley individually explore alternative methods of empowering both consultees and consultants, while Melissa Nicolas interrogates the effectiveness of employing English department graduate students as writing center consultants.

Just as our featured center this month, Capella University’s Mobile Writing Center, has done its fair share of moving, so has the *Praxis* website. We have moved to a new content management system, Drupal, which provides our readers wider accessibility and gives us greater design flexibility and structural stability. We would like to thank several people who have helped to facilitate this transition: Vince Lozano from the Undergraduate Writing Center at UT-Austin and Mariela Gunn, Matthew Russell, and Hampton Finger from the Computer Writing and Research Lab at UT-Austin. Without their continuing technical advice and support we here at *Praxis* could not have built this site.

Please note that our new web address (<http://lovecraft.cwrl.utexas.edu/praxis>) is temporary; we will move to our new home (i.e. server) in January 2006, at which time our permanent address will be: <http://localhost/praxisarchive>.

And please feel free to send us any feedback you might have as you enjoy this issue of *Praxis*.

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Writing Centers As Training Wheels: What Message Are We Sending Our Students?

[Fall 2005 / Columns](#)

by Melissa Nicolas

Should writing centers employ novice graduate students as consultants? A writing center director questions the practice.



Melissa Nicolas and son, Drew

Over twenty years ago, Stephen North began his famous essay, "The Idea of a Writing Center," by admitting that

This is an essay that began out of frustration [. . .]. The source of my frustration? Ignorance: the members of my professions, my colleagues, people I might see at MLA or CCCC or read in the pages of College English do not understand what I do. They do not understand what does happen, what can happen, in a writing center. (433)

Like North, I began this essay out of frustration, but my frustration is with my writing center colleagues. I have spent a good deal of my (albeit brief) academic career thinking about and researching the marginalization of writing centers, and I am tired of fighting the good fight for respect and recognition in composition studies, English departments, and the institution at large when writing centers sabotage themselves everyday by continuing practices that feed into our perpetual marginalization. I am tired of running up against practices that directly counter attempts I and others make to take writing centers seriously. In particular, I am concerned with the common practice of using "forced" labor in the writing center, especially when this involves using the writing center as "training wheels" for new graduate students until they are ready to ride solo in their own classrooms.

At my current institution, this training wheels model was put in place to satisfy a Board of Regents mandate that no one can teach a course until she or he has 18 credit hours of graduate course work. While I agree with this mandate because I think we do a grave disservice to our undergraduate and graduate students by having too many untrained and under-prepared TAs heading classrooms, I strongly disagree that the writing center should be used as a way-station until our students have the requisite hours of coursework.

Writing centers sabotage themselves everyday by continuing practices that feed into our perpetual marginalization.

This writing-center-as-training-wheels model is problematic for several reasons. First, as writing center scholars take great pains to point out (for example, see Harris) writing centers are significantly different from the classroom; to begin with, tutors do not assign grades, so the power dynamic between a tutor and client, before they even meet each other, is fundamentally and dramatically different from the power dynamic between a teacher and a student. We tutors know this. This is one of the primary benefits of the writing center that we are quick to point out to whomever we need to justify our existence.

Second, the writing-center-as-training-wheels model suggests that learning how to negotiate a relationship with a client—a relationship that very likely will have a life-span of 30 to 60 minutes—is good practice for the teacher-student dynamic that typically lasts for, at a minimum, at least 30 hours. As Muriel Harris explains in “Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Writing Tutors,” these relationships are not analogous in any significant way; one is not necessarily easier than the other—indeed both present their own special sets of challenges—and being successful at one has little bearing on the outcome of the other. These differences are not of degrees but of nature: tutoring and teaching are apples and oranges; tutors do not have to evaluate student writing in the same way as teachers who must ultimately assign grades. One of the very real advantages for a writer who uses the writing center is that he or she gets to experience a non-teacher relationship with a knowledgeable writer who is invested in his or her writing.

In many ways, the writing center-as-training-wheels model is unfair to both writing center clients and the future teachers in question. As we know from our practice, writing center clients often approach the writing center with trepidation. As John Trimbur reminds us, it can be frightening to think about sharing your writing with a stranger, especially someone who has been marked by the very virtue of their role as “tutor,” as an expert on writing, even if that tutor is supposed to be a peer. This is a potentially troubling combination of novices since clients may be seeking some sort of assurance about what they are trying to do in their writing, yet the tutor in this writing center-as-training-wheels-model is often only a few years removed educationally from the client. Frequently, these same tutors are more than likely working in the writing center because they are studying literature, but the writing center is the only place the department can put them because they have not yet taken enough credit hours to run a classroom. In sum, a tutor who has never taught and maybe has only read a smattering of writing center theory is most likely not prepared to offer the kind of reassurance timid and skeptical clients may need about their writing. In this case, clients are robbed of one of the most fundamental benefits of the writing center experience: the chance to talk with someone who is knowledgeable about how writing works.

Many beginning graduate students in English are coming to school to study literature, not to teach and tutor writing.

This scenario, I think, paints a not-so-rosy picture for the tutors, too. I've been doing this work for awhile now, and I still can't see the connection between coming to graduate school wanting to read and criticize literature and the work many graduate students in English are asked to do in the writing center; so I'm sure that the connection for many of the tutors is, at-best, fuzzy. Of course, I'm dancing around a larger can of worms here, which is the insidious problem of the structure and staffing of first-year writing programs on an institutional level, but that is a discussion that needs to be continued on another day. My immediate concern is that the writing center sends a very confusing message to our graduate students, the future leaders of English departments, when we use it as training-wheels. The message seems to be something like this: While there are, of course, students who come to school specifically to study rhetoric and composition at the graduate level, by and large, many, many beginning graduate students in departments of English don't even know what "rhetoric and composition studies" is. In other words, many beginning graduate students in English are coming to school to study literature, not to teach and tutor writing. However, their first experience with "teaching" is being put into a writing center and told to help writers improve their writing.

I know from talking with some of these graduate students that the message they get from this set-up is that tutoring must be easy and not necessarily all that important. After all, their thinking goes, they have no particular training, expertise, or even interest in the matter, and, yet, they are given that job to do. In addition, since graduate students in this model must tutor in the writing center before they enter the classroom, the writing center is positioned as a place for novices, the not-ready-for-the-classroom place, not necessarily a place for people with skills and training. The writing center-as-training-wheels-model has not really moved us any farther away from what Peter Carino describes as early writing centers' function as spaces of remediation for both students and teachers. Indeed, in this model, the writing center is simply a place for graduate students to bide their time until they are "released" and allowed to enter the classroom.

This environment is unhealthy for all parties involved. If graduate students' first experience of the writing center is this one of forced labor, how can we expect them to become professors and departmental administrators who are advocates for the writing center as a place for informed, professional, important work? And, how can we get current administrators to see the writing center as a place that promotes writing and learning if one of the main functions of the center is to provide a place for graduate students to hang out when they need to pay their dues in the form of putting in hours?

My answer to these questions is that I don't think we can. If we really want to make the writing center less marginal, we writing center professionals must stop allowing our center to be this kind of way station. Writing center positions, whether for undergraduate peer tutors, graduate students, instructors, faculty, or professionals, need to be seen as positions of distinction. The writing center should be a place people compete to get into, not try desperately to work their way out of.

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Melissa Nicolas is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Louisiana, Lafayette, serving as Director of Freshmen Writing and Director of **the Writing Center**. Her publications include *By Any Other Name: Writing Groups Inside and Outside the Classroom* (co-edited with Beverly Moss and Nels Highberg), as well as articles in *Lore*, *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, *Writing Lab Newsletter*, *MP: An International Feminist Journal* and chapters in several edited collections. She is currently conducting a qualitative study on the effects of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita on students in first-year writing classes.

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What Does Difficulty Mean in the Writing Tutorial?

[Fall 2005 / Consulting](#)

by John Blazina

The author discusses the kinds of difficulty we might encounter in a writing consultation.



John Blazina in the Black Hills of Wales

One year I tutored a student almost weekly. K wrote with little understanding of her topics and less of English grammar. In our first session the following year, she told me that she was enrolled in two third-year Sociology courses and was under academic warning: she needed a C+ average to remain at York. She wanted help with an essay in her course kit that she had volunteered to summarize in a seminar, but then found she did not understand. It was written in fairly demanding sociological prose, and I found a more readable essay in the kit and recommended she change to it. Then I went back to the first essay to see what in particular she didn't understand. I asked her if she had looked up the word magnitude. "I don't have a dictionary," she said. "You have to buy a dictionary now, this minute," I said. (When students bring in an essay topic they haven't understood, because they haven't looked up key words, I assume panic. It doesn't occur to me they may not own a dictionary.) K did not return. During that last session what I wanted to say was "You have no chance of passing these courses;" instead I told her to get a dictionary. Did the difficulty lie in K or in me? Sometimes the student is recalcitrant, resistant, inadequate to the task. Sometimes the fault lies with us, tutors who make the process more difficult than it need be.

In the same year we (writing tutors in the [Centre for Academic Writing](#)) held three seminars on the subject of difficult students in the context of writing

tutorials. The questions asked were: What counts for you as a difficult student? How do you deal with them and with your response to them? In each session we found ourselves defining "difficult" and spinning into difficult tutors and the difficulties of the system. The consensus was that there are difficult students — those with considerably weak writing skills or with problems of attitude or self-worth, too little or too much — but also that much apparent difficulty stems from the inattention, inexperience, or misunderstanding of the tutor. It also became clear that talking about our experiences of difficulty was good for us. There are kinds of difficulty that are simply inherent in tutoring. Even our most typical tutorials can be impeded by students' desire for editing, their underdeveloped writing and critical skills, passivity, and encounters with writer's block. These typical difficulties become major ones, however, when students bring their personal problems to the tutorial.

On her first session with a tutor a student may say "Please proofread my paper." The desire for editing meets a corresponding inclination in tutors to reshape the student's prose into something acceptable. It's easier to edit than to deal with problems more intractable than syntax, problems of focus, for example, when the student has slipped away from the topic, or of logic, when there simply isn't any. Many of us admitted to doing some editing, but only (we added defensively) in order to teach some grammar and model the right way to proofread. "If I see improvement in big issues," one tutor said, "I'll edit." Other tutors spoke of "demanding students" who want us to "fix" their paper, who exhibit a "learned helplessness," or who express annoyance if their expectations are not fulfilled. One new tutor, responding to student expectations, was relieved to hear that she need not read over the entire paper in the hour. She felt anxiety, she said, as the hour expired, and there were still pages to read. The relevant strategy here is to read the paper quickly, if length allows, for general problems of structure and development (topic sentences on their own may reveal these), and only then move on to the sentence level. If students only want or require editing, because clarity is an issue, I will do two pages, ask them to do the next two, looking for similar problems, and then go over what they did or did not find. With students who make occasional mistakes, and in general with all students, the best advice is "Read your sentences aloud." The plodding ear can hear what the speeding eye overlooks.

The consensus here is that even if the student is not up to some of the challenging aspects of university work, our job is to do what we can, and perhaps in the extreme case learn to say "I can't help you."

There are students with poor writing skills or undeveloped critical skills who may be registered in courses with complex reading assignments. To some degree this is the typical first year student who comes to the Writing Centre. The typical tutorial becomes the difficult one when we are presented with garbled pages by students begging for help. Most of us have met students in this situation. One of my students, in her second year (and not ESL), had been asked to summarize and discuss an essay by T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," and to decide whether two other authors, Hulme and Santayana, were as conservative as Eliot. She had several pages of rambling, hard-to-follow text in which the word "meteorocracy" occurred frequently. There was no sign that she had read and understood Eliot or the other authors. When I suggested that "meritocracy" or "mediocrity" might be the word she had in mind (had heard in a lecture) she guessed "mediocrity," but did not know

what it (or “conservative”) meant. I spent the hour trying to simplify the topic as much as possible (especially difficult with topics designed to show how clever the instructor is) and provide a structure for her next draft. Another student had been asked to write a paper on racism in the media, using concepts from the course lectures and from a collection of feminist theory. So far she had cobbled together three pages of unacknowledged quotations from the critics, sometimes merging, sometimes severing sentences she did not understand. Again, my job was to extricate two or three concepts she had grasped and show her how to apply these to a text. The consensus here is that even if the student is not up to some of the challenging aspects of university work, our job is to do what we can, and perhaps in the extreme case learn to say “I can’t help you.”

More often we will have to deal with students who are passive, who have not have developed an active response to problems of understanding or execution. Some will bring an essay topic with words they don’t understand and haven’t looked up in a dictionary. Some will return week after week with the same problems. They listen without entering into dialogue. Or they ask us to write down a comment or suggestion. There is a temptation among tutors to hold forth, when we happen to know something about the topic, brightly exhibiting our stifled expertise to a worshipful audience of one. This can, in moderation, be useful to the student, encouraging her to think aloud in response. This can also stifle the student. There is also a temptation to take control, tell the student what to do, revise the paper. This will produce adoring fans, not independent writers. Some students will unconsciously encourage us to take this role by expressing admiration. Others may try to manipulate us: one tutor described a student who worked hard at getting her to put a lot of energy into the project: “She wanted me to take responsibility for how well she had done on the assignments. She emphasized her imminent deadlines. Also, she wouldn’t leave.” The issue here was one of manners and boundaries. This student tried to undermine or at least ignore the implicit boundaries between tutor and student. There are times when it is necessary to be explicit about our own expectations and ground rules.

Students with some form of “writer’s block” are frequent enough to be typical. Often they’ve done some reading, taken notes, but “don’t know where to begin.” Such students may simply misunderstand the writing process, especially its initial messiness. They may think they need a thesis or a plan before they can begin writing, and for some of them it may be appropriate to work on these elements. Others are relieved to hear about “writer-based prose,” Linda Flower’s phrase for the distinction between writing at first only for oneself and subsequently writing the “reader-based prose” that takes one’s audience into account. Freed from the need to get it right the first time, many students begin to look forward to writing. I find it useful to ask students who still “can’t get started” to write an introductory paragraph during the session, which we can then appraise together.

We are not counselors, but we should make allowances for the strategies with which students respond to feelings of shame.

There are typical and atypical forms of self-esteem. Even the mildest forms of egotism can impair the peaceful progress of a tutorial. More extreme forms of egotism may induce warfare. One student complained bitterly about Ds I could see were well deserved, telling me he was American and knew his rights and

would sue if his grades did not improve. I tried soothing his injured pride, without success, and eventually wrote a report for the committee that dismissed his complaint of anti-Semitism against his professor. Students also can display resistance, even hostility towards the tutor. The writing tutorial can be a very personal relationship, and we should keep in mind how potentially shaming the experience is for students told their work is inadequate. They may well respond defensively with shyness and discouragement or with inappropriate anger against their teachers or tutors. They may find it hard to listen to, or accept, criticisms and corrections. We are not counselors, but we should make allowances for the strategies with which students respond to feelings of shame. I find it useful to place their work in context. I tell them 3000 students come to the Writing Centre with similar problems. I suggest they notice how many students sit silently in class, afraid that they alone do not understand, afraid to speak lest they expose their stupidity.

When students are anxious or under stress (perhaps from family difficulties), they may be more interested in talking about their problems than the essay topic. There was some inconclusive discussion about the tutor's role here. Some tutors prefer to accede to the student's agenda, for a while, and advise counseling if that seems appropriate. Others prefer to reframe the session, tell the student we only deal with writing. Some students may be more seriously disturbed; a few tutors spoke of having been threatened. Some difficulties arise from gender. The best advice here is to leave the office, report the problem to the director, or call security.

There are times when the difficulty lies not with the student or tutor but with the professor or the system. For instance, the essay topic is poorly constructed, vaguely explained, or lacking entirely: some instructors tell students to concoct their own. Or a grade may strike us as unfair. When students complain about grades we can see are justified, and we confirm the grade with precise explanations of the essay's problems, they usually, if grudgingly, demur. When the grade seems unjustified, we can advise the student to approach the instructor and ask for a rewrite or reconsideration. We can make the student aware of her rights. We can try to boost her morale, focus on the next essay. We can try not to criticize the instructor, difficult as it may be not to voice our feelings. The problem here is partly systemic: not enough time, too many students in a class, unrealistic reading lists, inadequate faculty. These problems are beyond our scope.

Our problems often arise from our own inexperience and error. . . . [W]e resort too easily and frequently to "strategies" that scarcely rise beyond cliché.

For almost an hour we are alone, warts and all, with a student who has come to us for help. There are difficult tutors, tutors whose own egotism creates problems, as well as tutors responsible (on occasion and by mistake) for difficulty. Very difficult students are rare. Our problems often arise from our own inexperience and error. We expect too much or too little from the student; we are inattentive or thoughtless; we resort too easily and frequently to "strategies" that scarcely rise beyond cliché. We should also be aware of our own proneness to shame. We too may fear incompetence or failure, have sessions with students with whom we cannot but fail. I was present when a tutor speaking with insufficient tact about a student's misunderstanding of the topic drove her to tears. I made a similar mistake myself. The student had the topic and an article on immigration and said she needed guidance. When I

asked what she meant by guidance, she was vague, halting in her speech. When I asked what she had done so far and she said "Nothing," I told her, brusquely, that it was important to do some work first, then come in. I went over the topic with her, asking if she knew where to find the "proposed changes" to Canada's immigration act. She said no. Had she consulted her instructor? No. I advised her to go to her instructor and to the reference desk in the library. She began to cry as she got up to go. I asked her to stay and found out that she had a disability (a childhood stroke, difficulty reading and writing) and worked with a syntax tutor and a content tutor. In tears she told me that, unlike everyone else, everything was hard for her. Mortified at my initial brusqueness, I talked about her strength, how much I admired her, and about the myth that everyone else was fine. The difficulty here was mutually constructed, I think; she didn't contextualize, I wasn't observant.

We all make mistakes, lack appropriate strategies, and need to admit our own need to learn. Our own institutionalized shame - we are merely writing instructors hired to deal with the mess beneath the notice of tenured elites (Hjortshoj 492) - should not lead to careless, hasty, or indifferent tutoring. Nor should we hide our frustration and failure from ourselves and others. One tutor spoke of how helpful it was to know others have problems. Perhaps the most emphatic lesson of the seminars is that we should consult one another as much as possible.

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John Blazina is now cross appointed to English and the **Centre for Academic Writing** at York University, after working as Contract faculty for 25 years. His recent publications include articles on Wislawa Szymborska and on the symbolism of pots in poetry and painting, along with "Ungrammatical Verse," poems on some of our favorite errors.

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Featured Center

Fall 2005 / Consulting

Capella University's Mobile Writing Center puts its shoulder to the wheel.



Mobile Writing Center group at May 2005 colloquium in Minneapolis: Front row, l-to-r: Neil Cunningham and Leslie Olsen, Writing Center Coordinator; middle row, l-to-r: Jack Stack, Alex Block, and Dr. Gretchen Michlitsch; back row, l-to-r: Dr. Andrea Luna, Dr. Stone Shiflet, and Dr. Carole Chabries, Writing Program Director. Not pictured: Deb Bailin, Dr. Jody Cardinal, Alice Robison, Dr. Richard Schreck, Dr. Donna Connolly, Dr. Allen Helmstetter, Dr. Mark Peters, and Dr. Kim Surkan.

Name of center

Mobile Writing Center

Institutional affiliation

Capella University

City, State

The Mobile Writing Center doesn't have a "home" — it travels to cities around the country, including Anaheim, CA; Atlanta, GA; Chicago, IL; Minneapolis, MN; Dallas, TX; Dulles, VA, and Scottsdale, AZ.

Web address

www.capella.edu

Director

Carole Chabries, Ph.D.

Writing Center Coordinator

Leslie Olsen, M.A.

Year opened

2003

History

The Mobile Writing Center (MWC) was started as a way to provide face-to-face writing center services to our online PhD learners. These learners are required to attend three Residential Colloquia during their coursework; at the colloquia, learners attend workshops on research methods and writing, as well as on wide-ranging discipline-specific content. The MWC runs concurrently with these workshops, so that at any point during the day learners can opt out of the workshop setting and choose instead to work one-on-one with a Writing Program faculty member in the Writing Center.

The MWC started small, with four faculty, five writing workshops, and half-dozen handouts. Today we operate with a staff of eight faculty (including a Writing Center Coordinator, a position new in 2005), eight workshops, and twenty handouts. And we're still growing!

Sponsoring department

Department of Academic Support in the Provost's Office

Number of consultations in the last year

The number of consultations we offer is influenced by learner attendance, as well as overall curriculum, at each colloquium.

In December 2004 we had five days to serve 1042 learners; in that setting we offered 117 30-minute consultations and worked with approximately 500 learners in writing workshops; in February 2005 we had four days to serve 970 learners; in that setting we offered 93 30-minute consultations and worked with approximately 250 learners in writing workshops.



writer Ola Mopkins (left) and faculty member Dr. Andrea Luna

Square footage

varies from site to site, but the average is about 600 square feet.

Services offered

face-to-face consultations; 90-minute group workshops; use of computers (with internet access) and printers; and access to resources, including handouts and reference material.

For Writing Program faculty, a day in the Mobile Writing Center usually includes working one-on-one with students, teaching group workshops, and an end-of-day curriculum review.

Staff

Staffing varies according to the number of learners registered for each colloquium. Generally, our staff-to-learner ratio ranges between 1:75 and 1:125.

Our one-on-one consultations, as well as our writing workshops, are offered by Writing Program faculty, all of whom have extensive experience teaching in brick-and-mortar settings—in university writing centers and/or in university-level writing courses. All WP faculty are experienced graduate-level writers themselves; many have completed (or are completing) terminal degrees.

Of the 10 Writing Program faculty and 2 full-time staff members, six hold the PhD; two hold the MA; one holds the MFA; two are ABD; and one is completing an MS in Technical Writing. Our cumulative experiences add up to more than 83 years of Writing Center instruction, 124 years teaching writing in classrooms (virtual and traditional), and 59 years teaching writing in “other” capacities (training instructors or tutors, being a writing mentor, teaching workshops, etc.).

In their “other” lives, our faculty are tenured professors at land-based institutions; run Writing Centers in their home states; teach writing to community college and 4-year college students; play music in bands; quilt, knit, surf, sail, bird-watch, study computer games, write poetry, make videos about bugs, and root for the Seattle Mariners.

Clientele

Our learners are all returning adults working on PhDs in one of four fields: Education, Human Services, Psychology, or Business. Some of them are just starting their PhD programs while others are preparing to write their comprehensive examinations or dissertations. Many of our learners are already working full-time in their chosen field, and many have extensive personal responsibilities (family, home, etc.) in addition to their graduate work. Their average age is 41, and they live in all 50 states and in 55 other countries.

Our learners have two overwhelmingly common questions: “Can you help me with APA?” and “I got an ‘A’ on this paper but I don’t know why — can you help me figure out what I’m doing right?” In our experience these questions address the same general concern: uncertainty about what it means to write well at an advanced academic level. To help learners feel more confident and competent as advanced academic writers, we focus on global concerns as well as local ones (when appropriate), and pay a lot of attention to the relationships among writing, research, and thinking.



foreground: writer Christine Lustik (left) and faculty member Alex Block;
background: writer Ellen Weber-Segler (left) and Writing Center Coordinator Leslie Olsen

Money Matters

Believe it or not, the Mobile Writing Center operates without a budget of its own; its funds come out of the larger budget governing Capella's Residential Colloquia. WP faculty are paid a flat fee by the day; their hotel and air fare are covered by the University; breakfast, lunch, and breaks (usually with lots of cookies) are included, and faculty receive a per diem to cover dinner expenses.

Our corollary to fund-raising is increasing the number of staff who are funded to work in the MWC. In the year and a half since we opened we have doubled the number of staff working in the MWC, and hope this number will continue to grow as the demand for our services increases.

Current Events

In March 2005, a group of Writing Program faculty presented a panel at CCCCs entitled "Opening the Doors: Building a Mobile Writing Center for an Open-access Online University"; this panel addressed some of the pedagogical issues we see in the MWC that seem specific to online adult learners.

In April 2005 we hired our first full-time staff member: Leslie Olsen, our Writing Center Coordinator. Leslie will be rebuilding the Online Writing Center so that its services, mission and resources are closely integrated with those we are building in the MWC.

Sometime in late 2005 or early 2006, the Writing Center will begin sponsoring a Dissertators' Retreat: a writing retreat for advanced dissertators that provides writing consulting and coaching one-on-one and in groups, dissertation group support services, and more.

Philosophy

Capella's Writing Program helps prepare learners for the rigors of academic writing by fostering connections between clear thinking and clear communication. We enhance our learners' educations by providing quality writing support in all disciplines and at every degree level. Through our writing courses and support resources, we help learners establish strong writing habits

that will carry them through their academic work, and will continue to serve them throughout their professional lives.

Praxis would like to thank Carole Chabries with the Mobile Writing Center for her assistance in helping produce this feature.

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A Delicate Balance: Employing Feminist Process Goals in Writing Center Consulting

[Fall 2005 / Training](#)

by *Gabrielle Seeley*

A writing center consultant explores strategies for empowering students writers.



Gabrielle Seeley

When I began training to work in the [Writing Center at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs \(UCCS\)](#), I perceived it to be an inherently feminist learning space. The very wording of the center's mission statement seemed to assert its intention to nurture writers in a feminist way: the center operates "in support of writers," it "brings writers together with readers," and it strives to infuse those writers "with confidence and authority" (Odell 1). This mission statement subtly addresses a power imbalance which exists in the university between members (professors) and non-members (undergraduate students). The statement implies that student writers operating within the university often lack confidence and authority and, by extension, that the Writing Center seeks to empower those writers. The statement further addresses the issue of power in the way it names the persons who work in the center, calling them "readers." This careful wording reflects an attempt to equalize the clients and the employees of the Writing Center; a reader has no more power than a writer. By avoiding loaded names that imply hierarchy—coach, tutor, mentor—the mission statement communicates this sense of equality to clients and employees alike.

Aside from the written language of its mission statement, I perceived that the Writing Center strives to deconstruct traditional authority roles through the

spoken language its consultants are trained to use. Consultants-in-training read Andrea Lunsford and learn that we must “valu[e] collaboration” but recognize and confront “the issues of control” which inevitably arise (Lunsford 97). Consultants are trained to pose careful, thoughtful questions to student writers; Stephen M. North charges consultants to “not only listen but draw [writers] out,” in order to facilitate writers’ control over their own writing processes (North 71). Consultants are trained to continually monitor the balance of control in each session; we urge students to direct consultations, we position ourselves as peers, and we quell any urge to play “little teachers.” In short, we writing center consultants strive to divest ourselves of authority and hand that authority to student writers.

In contrast, the classrooms at UCCS largely preserve the traditional patriarchal power structure of higher education, in which administrators and instructors have power and undergraduate students have little. Administrators impose curricula and grant or withhold degrees; instructors select course materials and grade students’ work. Even in classes where students are encouraged to participate in discussions, they perceive that power resides in the institution and not in the individual. So different is the atmosphere in the Writing Center from the environment of the classroom that I feel downright subversive while I am consulting! I love that feeling—knowing that with each session, I might be helping writers find their voices, overcome their fears, or gain the secret weapon of a trusted reader.

I feel downright subversive while I am consulting!

But while each session offers me the chance to nurture and empower writers, it also holds the possibility that I will mislead them. I am mindful that, despite my best intentions, the session may serve the patriarchal goals of the university, to the detriment of the Writing Center’s goals and, by extension, to the disadvantage of the writer. For example, the university seeks to evaluate students by grading their work; grades are, in fact, the main currency of the university. The patriarchal system of higher education rightly—and necessarily—retains the power to label students through the issuance of grades. But this system becomes problematic for writing center practitioners because it focuses the attention of student writers on their product rather than on themselves as writers; after all, it is the quality of the product that will determine the grade. If consultants allow themselves to discuss grades in writing center sessions, they too will be focused upon the product instead of the writer. This kind of poor Writing Center practice fails to serve our goal to “make better writers, not better writing” (North 69). More importantly, this kind of practice does not allow students to take control over their writing processes.

Writing centers, then, are equalizing spaces positioned within a larger hierarchical system; consultants must constantly move between the two. Writer and writing center director Meg Woolbright articulates this positioning particularly well in her 1992 essay, “The Politics of Tutoring: Feminism Within the Patriarchy.” Woolbright connects her own writing center practice with feminist teacher Nancy Schniedewind’s five process goals for analyzing interactions with students. Although Schniedewind developed the goals for classroom use, they seem useful for writing center practitioners: they are “the development of an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust, and community; shared leadership; a cooperative structure; the integration of cognitive and affective learning; and action” (Woolbright 228). Using these goals, I have reflected upon my observations of writing center sessions. I have noted

sessions where good intentions were derailed—understandably—by human fears, worries, or habits. But consultants who use the five process goals to assess their own Writing Center sessions will most effectively negotiate a delicate balance between the values of the Writing Center and the values of the university; these consultants will best serve both the Writing Center and the writers who use it.

While the Writing Center at UCCS already offers writers “an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust, and community” (Woolbright 228), consultants might improve this atmosphere by simply changing the way they read student papers. Most consultants use a line-by-line reading style, commenting upon the text as they read. Consultants begin commenting before they have a wider view of what the writer is trying to say; in fact, I would argue that this stop-and-start reading habit largely disregards the writer and focuses the attention of both consultant and writer squarely upon the text. Consultants have the best of intentions, but their focus on sentence-level issues (which is at the heart of the stop-and-start method) might preclude a focus on writers’ ideas. I maintain that to sit down with a writer’s work and read it completely before picking through it is an act of respect—a gift—to the writer. Consultants insist when pressed that there is not time enough in a session to read first and talk later, but breaking this established reading habit is worthwhile. A consultant who reads the entire paper first sends an empowering message to writers: your grammar is less important than your ideas, and I am interested in hearing those ideas.

A consultant who reads the entire paper first sends an empowering message to writers: your grammar is less important than your ideas, and I am interested in hearing those ideas.

The process goals of shared leadership and a cooperative structure complement each other; consultants and writers must negotiate a balance of power in each session, which requires cooperation (Woolbright 228-229). Although writers sometimes expect (even hope) to find consultants who will take control of the session, consultants must constantly avoid this trap. In the writing center, I have often observed how shared leadership is derailed when a consultant tells a writer what is wrong with a text rather than showing the writer what is happening in the writing. Cooperative structure, by definition, implies that both parties are “operating” in the session, but when consultants take over, I have noticed that writers often stop operating; in fact, they shut down. I fell into the same trap in one particular session because of my own worry for the writer. She immediately voiced her concern about the poor marks her previous essays had received; clearly, this writer was focused on the grade and not her writing process. The student’s essay had serious problems, and I inwardly panicked, knowing we could not address them all in our 45-minute session. Unfortunately, the more I explained and modeled, the more I felt the student shut down. If I had relaxed about her grade—even though that was her main concern—I might have given her a strategy to address one of her recurring habits. My own fear caused the derailment of shared leadership and cooperation, thus robbing her of an opportunity to gain some power over her writing and to move in a new direction.

The next process goal, integrating cognitive and affective learning, means connecting thinking with feeling. Woolbright illustrates how a consultant with good intentions can stifle the “cognitive and affective capabilities” of a writer by

forcing her to accept an idea she feels uncomfortable with and by “teaching the student to ignore her emotional responses” (Woolbright 237). In my observations of Writing Center sessions, I have noted how closely thoughts are linked with feelings. One writer I worked with serves as an excellent example of the ways in which feelings about an assignment can either liberate or shackle the thought process. This writer felt intimidated by the prospect of using a citation strategy for the first time; she was unable to discuss her ideas for addressing the assignment because she found APA so daunting. I addressed her feelings about APA directly, giving her models from the handout for the two types of works she would be citing. Armed with those models and the knowledge that she only had to be responsible for two types of citations, she felt as if she could handle APA on this assignment. She relaxed, and we began to discuss her ideas for the essay. While she felt overwhelmed by APA, she could not articulate her thoughts about the assignment itself; her thoughts were paralyzed by her feelings. As consultants, we must be attentive to feelings and be willing to address them in order to best serve writers and the goals of the Writing Center.

But consultants must be willing to address more than just writers’ feelings; we must take action, naming the “political circumstances in which we write and talk to students” (Woolbright 237). Since those political circumstances—disciplinary conventions, unchangeable assignments—often are the cause of conflicting or negative feelings in student writers, naming them and discussing them seems intuitive. However, consultants do not often discuss the larger pictures that swirl around each assignment; they may be too focused on the text at hand rather than the ways in which that text represents one unique voice within several larger spheres of knowing. For example, one writer’s essay might be viewed as a part of the discourse of literary studies, and the writer could benefit from the consultant’s naming that discipline and its warrants (e.g. that studying literature yields meaning and value, that certain symbols and themes are archetypal). In this way, the consultant empowers the student by acting as a native informant; students can take better control of their writing when they understand the larger circumstances that surround it.

Consultants must be willing to name political circumstances on several levels, and they must be able to discern which level should be named.

Consultants must be willing to name political circumstances on several levels, and they must be able to discern which level should be named. Consider, for example, that some student writers might view essays as vehicles for belonging; writers may be reluctant to make bold claims that reveal their true voices (at the risk of being left out), and the consultant could name that behavior of “going along to get along” in the system. In contrast, a writer might be writing in a personal voice so strong that it is not appropriate for a particular assignment. In this final case, the consultant could name the political circumstance (the language expectations of the university) and generate dialogue with the writer about why the chosen approach might be inexpedient. Naming, through consultant-student conversations, is essential to clarify why an approach is acceptable and how student writers can achieve the same effect in their own voices.

As writing center consultants, we are charged to achieve a delicate balance between the values of the university and the values of the writing center; these five process goals of a feminist pedagogy can help us strike that balance in our

sessions. The effort is worthwhile; each session holds enormous possibilities for those brave enough to be fully present in the experience. For me, the consulting experience is an exciting one. I am in a unique and challenging position; I am called to navigate within and between two well-established systems. By carefully feeling my way, making adjustments to my performance, and allowing myself to learn from practice, I know I will slowly become a valuable consultant—a trusted reader.

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Gabrielle is a junior English major and writing consultant at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. After a thirteen-year career in corporate retail management and corporate training, she is shifting to a career in education. She is especially interested in timed writing experiences and in convincing students that strong writing skills are crucial for success in the workplace. Gabrielle lives with her husband of twelve years and their fantastic three-year-old son in Colorado Springs.

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Fall 2005 / The Merciless Grammarian

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The Merciless Grammarian spews his wrath on nasty problems of grammar, mechanics, and style.



Drawing by Nathan Baran

Dear Merciless One,

I've been afraid to venture to the upper-right corner of my keyboard. Now and then I like to use a dash—a great way to spice up sentences. (There! I just did it!) When I look back at my punctuation, though, it just doesn't look right. What's happening?

Out of sorts,
G. Culpepper Micklethwait

My dear Mr. Micklethwait (assuming that to be your gender, G.):

No wonder your mind is troubled. You have sought escape in the heady rush of a well-placed dash, but what you have used is no dash at all! Your puny mark pants and strains to make the brilliant display that a true dash could do in an instant.

Our system of punctuation is a much richer menagerie than you realize. What you have employed is a hyphen, the merest horizontal jot, used to connect compound modifiers (a fine-honed adze, a well-deserved boot to the head) and to divide words when they are interrupted by a line break. The uninitiated also use them to indicate ranges of numbers (fatalities 9-37), but let me open up a few cages whose inhabitants are new to you.

The world of publishing employs two different kinds of dash, both of them longer than the meager hyphen. Those in the know use a medium-sized dash to

represent ranges of numbers (fatalities 9—37). This specimen is called an en dash because once upon a time this mark was as wide as a capital *N*. More exotic uses for the en dash exist that need not trouble us here, considering how troubled you are already.

The kind of dash you seek in your “spicy” sentences, however, is longer even than this. Twice as wide as a hyphen, the em dash is used to indicate abrupt shifts in thought or to point out a following example—like so. As you can deduce from the previous paragraph, this mark is designated “em” because it was originally as wide as a capital *M*.

Dependent on a computer as you no doubt are, you have several ways to generate both of these dashes. A combination of keys may allow you to type an em- or en dash directly (search the recesses of your computer’s operating instructions). A certain popular word processor automatically replaces a double hyphen (--) with an em dash unless you tell it to stop. You can also insert either mark as a symbol, again using a feature of the word processor that dare not speak its name.

Quite simply, there is no excuse for underfed punctuation. Learn how to type a proper dash and use it!

Abruptly,
The Merciless One

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The Writing Center Journal is an official publication of the International Writing Centers Association, which is an Affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English. *WCJ* is published twice a year, in the fall/winter and spring/summer.

The Writing Center Journal's primary purpose is to publish articles, reviews, and announcements of interest to writing center personnel. We therefore invite manuscripts that explore issues or theories related to writing center dynamics or administration. We are especially interested in theoretical articles and in reports of research related to or conducted in writing centers. In addition to administrators and practitioners from college and university writing centers, we encourage directors of high school and middle school writing centers to submit manuscripts.

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Submit to *The Writing Lab Newsletter*

The Writing Lab Newsletter, a monthly publication for those who work in the tutorial setting of a writing lab or center, invites manuscripts on relevant topics such as the following:

- theory and practice of tutoring writing
- tutoring strategies
- tutor training
- administration (funding, goals, publicity, etc.)
- useful materials
- specific programs and services
- computers in the writing lab
- evaluation

Authors are invited to submit articles, reviews, papers presented at conferences, articles by tutors, and news of regional writing center associations. Recommended length is 2000-3000 (at most) words for articles and 1000-1500 words for tutors' essays for the Tutors' Column, though longer and shorter articles are also invited. Please use MLA format.

We encourage manuscripts via "e-mail": <mailto:wln@purdue.edu> (wln@purdue.edu) as an attachment in Word (with no line breaks). The email "cover letter" should include author's name, address, and phone/fax, as well as the name of the file attached and name plus version of the word processing package used. If it is not possible to send a manuscript via the Internet, send hard copy and a 3 1/2 in. computer disk (any Macintosh or DOS is acceptable, and we can work with most word processing programs). For hard copy with disk, please enclose a self-addressed envelope with sufficient postage clipped (not pasted) to the envelope. Send to address listed below. Inquiries are invited.

Mitchell Simpson, Managing Editor, Writing Lab Newsletter
Dept. of English, Purdue University
500 Oval Drive
West Lafayette, IN 47907-2038
"wln@purdue.edu": [mail to: wln@purdue.edu](mailto:wln@purdue.edu)
phone: 765-494-7268 fax: 765-494-3780

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WHATThe Writing Lab Newsletter

- is a forum for the exchange of ideas and information about writing centers in colleges, universities, and high schools.
- focuses on challenges in directing a writing center, training tutors, adding computers, designing and expanding centers, and using tutorial theory and pedagogy.
- includes articles, reviews, conference announcements, and a column by and for tutors.
- accepts manuscripts on all aspects of writing center administration, theory, and pedagogy.

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Muriel Harris, editor (or) Mitchell Simpson, managing editor
Writing Lab Newsletter
Department of English
Purdue University
500 Oval Drive
West Lafayette, IN 47907-2038

Phone: (765) 494-7268

Fax: (765) 494-3780

E-mail: harrism@cc.purdue.edu or wln@purdue.edu

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CFP: National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing at University of Michigan (4/10/06; 11/10-11/06)

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23rd National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing: Negotiating Authority in the Writing Center

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
November 10-12, 2006

Gayle Morris Sweetland Writing Center at the University of Michigan

Call For Papers: Gayle Morris Sweetland Writing Center at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, seeks proposals for 75-minute sessions that consider practical, historical and theoretical aspects of the theme of authority in the writing center. We emphasize tutor-led, active presentations providing the opportunity for audience interaction and/or discussion. Applicants should submit a one-page proposal (250 words) and an abstract (50 words) no later than April 10, 2006. Proposals should include the kind (workshop, panel, individual) and length of presentation, name, affiliation and email address of presenter(s), and title of the presentation. Send these materials as attachments to NCPTW06@umich.edu.

As trainees in the writing center, peer tutors are initiated into a specialized practice designed to identify and, in some cases, resist exercises of power and authority in the academy. Many have been selected to become tutors because of excellent writing skills, and have long played the role of editor and expert in their classrooms and with their friends. But in the course of training, these same students are advised to subordinate such skills to the authority of the writer and learn to think of themselves as collaborator, facilitator, guide, or to balance "minimalist" with more "directive" techniques. In turn, writers come to the writing center seeking the authority that the title and training of tutor implies, but often meet with tutors learning to share their authority with the writers.

Questions of power and authority are further complicated by the role of the writing center within the university at large. Harvey Kail and John Trimbur identify writing centers as "semiautonomous" institutional spaces located "outside the normal channels of teaching and learning." So positioned, centers can help students "demystify the authority of knowledge and its institutions," and better resist institutional prescriptions. In Nancy Welch's words, writing centers can become sites to "reconsider the kinds of conversation we value in academia."

Mastery of language and its associated social conventions conveys a sense of agency, signaling for many a positive personal transformation. However, discourse (including academic discourse) regulates personal knowledge, sometimes erasing or subordinating it to the dominant institution. Given these tensions, both peers and professionals, tutors and writers, negotiate a subtle and flexible line between submission and authority, collaboration and control. We encourage proposals (workshops, panels, and individual) that consider practical, historical and theoretical aspects of this theme of authority, and that

promote wide-ranging debate. Submissions from all perspectives are welcome, although they may consider addressing some of the following questions:

• How can tutors best balance their roles of authority and facilitator?

• How do tutors transcend current-traditional notions of writing and correctness when student writers come to them for that very same current-traditional correctness?

• What roles can writing centers play in offering a critical alternative to the university, or to academic discourse?

• What happens when student writers (and tutors), instead of seeking alternatives to academic authority, wish to unreflectively learn and master the authority of academic discourse?

• How do race and language factor in the exercise of authority in the writing center?

• What is the place of "assimilationist," "accommodationist," or "separatist" (Matsuda and Cox) methodologies in the writing center?

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Columns

From the Editors: Whom (All) We Serve...and How

Student writers are not the only folks who benefit from our writing center work. This issue of *Praxis* focuses on whom we serve, how we do it, and for whose benefit.

Writing Centers as Training Wheels: What Message Are We Sending Our Students?

by Melissa Nicolas

Should writing centers employ novice graduate students as consultants? A writing center director questions the practice.

Consulting

What Does Difficulty Mean in The Writing Tutorial?

by John Blazina

The author discusses the kinds of difficulty we might encounter in a writing consultation.

Featured Center: Mobile Writing Center

Capella University's Mobile Writing Center puts its shoulder to the wheel.

Training

A Delicate Balance: Employing Feminist Process Goals in Writing Center Consulting

by Gabrielle Seeley

A writing center consultant explores strategies for empowering students writers.

The Merciless Grammarian

The Merciless Grammarian spews his wrath on nasty problems of grammar, mechanics, and style.

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