Praxis: A Writing Center Journal (2003-2011)

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Praxis: A Writing Center Journal (2003-2011)

A Writer, an Editor, an Instructor, and an Alumna Walk into the Writing Center…

Fall 2009 / Focus

by **Jennifer Jefferson, Amy Cohn, Ellen Goldstein, Chris Wallis**, and **Lindsey Campbell**, *Endicott College*

Real-world professional experience in the writing center

What happens when professionals from diverse writing backgrounds walk into a small New England college writing center?[1] At **Endicott College**, seven professional and ten peer tutors work with a traditional undergraduate population of approximately 2,000 students, as well as with a growing number of graduate students and non-traditional undergraduates. What benefits–besides providing advanced writing support for our graduate community–might the professional tutors' additional experience bring to the writing center?

The Endicott College Writing Center is located on the first floor of the Diane M. Halle Library (Beverly, MA). Photo by Catherine Wechsler.

As the writing center director, I believe our professional tutors provide valuable expert perspectives to student writers. They also help me mentor the peer tutors and push me to reevaluate our practices. They add staffing stability to the center (whose peer tutors never stay for more than three years). Finally, these trusted writing experts professionalize the writing center's status among administration, faculty, and students.

In the following paragraphs, Amy, Ellen, Chris, and Lindsey illustrate the rich variety of skills and perspectives professional writing tutors can contribute to a writing center.

AMY: From Writer to Professional Tutor

I joined the professional staff at the **Endicott Writing Center** more than five years ago. Although it was my first writing center position, I had enjoyed a long career in the children's book field -- publishing, reviewing for a variety of media, graduate-level teaching and writing. How did my expertise transfer to

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this new setting? And how did my background affect my work with undergraduate students? Let's look at the first question first, as any good tutor would suggest!

After working for three decades with professional writers, as well as being one myself, I understand how hard writing is. For anyone. For everyone.

After working for three decades with professional writers, as well as being one myself, I understand how hard writing is. For anyone. For everyone. It is hard to come up with ideas. It is hard to craft cogent sentences. It is hard to wrestle just the right vocabulary word to the page from one's internal (or external!) thesaurus. And writing takes time -- lots of time. I share this with students. I encourage them with anecdotes and stories from the working lives of authors they may have grown up with. I tell them about my own writing challenges. And while I entertain and cajole, I remind them that feeling stuck or lost or fed-up or frustrated is something they will not only work through but come to embrace. It is, after all, part of the process.

Now for the second question. Because Endicott College values and promotes professional caliber internships, students relish advice from non-academic experts. It is natural to draw upon my particular piece of the professional world while tutoring, and what happens during our sessions reflects a professional writer's everyday challenges, such as: Which word? What phrase? What stays? What goes? Can I do better? But I'm not just a professional writer. I'm also a professional reader. I've had a lot of practice making sense of texts–not in order to grade them, but to learn and grow from reading, to have my curiosity first aroused, then satisfied.

My perspective as a professional reader-writer, I believe, enables the students to relax. They know I won't evaluate them in the way faculty might. I read, ask questions, talk things through, and never judge. Conferences have an air of collegiality and a feeling of partnership. We can talk as one writer to another, as a less experienced one with a more experienced one–as an apprentice, if you will, to a master tradeswoman.

ELLEN: From Editor to Professional Tutor

Like Amy, I tutor from outside the traditional student—faculty relationship, in my case drawing from my experience as an editor. Tutoring uses many of the same skills as editing. Both require an eye for detail, the ability to locate an argument–even when it is well-hidden–and a respect for the author and the writing process. The difference between the two jobs lies, in part, in how these skills are used. The editor is often more focused on getting to the finished product while the tutor lingers in the process in order to help students understand the steps necessary to improving their work. As a result, a tutor coming from an editorial background needs to remember to slow down and show their work, as in a math problem.

One of the unexpected benefits of my professional editing background is the ability to provide context. A professor can talk until she is blue in the face about a literature review and its role in a research paper, and students will still come into the writing center not quite sure why they have to do one. Often I can draw on my experience copyediting academic journals and can offer a concrete reason as to why certain conventions, such as literature reviews, exist. Students tend to respect my experience (and are sometimes surprised to learn

that these things occur in the "real" world). They can go back to class with my quick professional explanation, and are able to follow the professor when she talks about the bigger research issues involved. Once students see the connection between the academy, their own thesis or paper, and the professional world, they are much more likely to see the writing process as a whole. The professors and the professionals make a great tag team.

CHRIS: From Instructor to Professional Tutor

Whereas some students enjoy sessions with Amy and Ellen because of the perspectives they bring as "outsiders," others choose to work with me because they consider me an "insider."

Over my nine years of tutoring college-level writing, the phrase I heard most was "I just don't know what Professor X wants."

In *The Transition to College Writing*, Keith Hjortshoj notes how students often believe in a handbook that will tell them everything they need to know about effective writing (189). I might take this a step further and say that many students are on a quest to discover another more general handbook, *What Professors Want,* and that some students choose to work with me precisely because they think my identity as an instructor also means I can provide them a glimpse into their professor's mind. Despite chuckling a bit at such a possibility, I also acknowledge that this belief underscores a fundamental disconnect between college students and faculty, one that becomes especially apparent during some of my tutoring sessions.

Over my nine years of tutoring college-level writing, the phrase I heard most was "I just don't know what Professor X wants." This grievance highlights a frustration that writers take with them into tutoring sessions, and their anxiety only increases when they realize their professors all seem to want different things. Certainly, I felt a similar frustration when I first started tutoring and had to negotiate unfamiliar disciplines–how to use APA citation in addition to MLA, how to organize a lab report, how not to fall asleep when reading an overly technical paper. And yet, though it's true that my colleagues represent various disciplines and practice a number of writing styles, it's also true that there is a consensus when it comes to student papers: they should contain clear openings and closings, strong arguments and reliable evidence, coherent organization, few distracting language problems, and a steady sense of audience.

What most college faculty desire from student writing, then, is *consistency*, something that students often misinterpret as *uniformity*. As both a tutor and an instructor, I am in a strong position to help students recognize this vital difference, and perhaps even shrink the ideological gap.

LINDSEY: From Peer Tutor Alumna to Professional Tutor

There is no better way to get the inside scoop than from a former insider. Not only was I once a student at Endicott College, but I also acted as a peer writing tutor for three of my four undergraduate years. After graduation, I went on to receive a master's degree at Boston University and have since pursued a copywriting career in advertising. Now as a professional tutor, I am not only able to rely on my education and background as a writer, but I am also able to pull from my time as a student to become a better tutor, listener, supporter, and at times, psychologist (sometimes it can take more than a little coaxing to convince a student to hit "delete" and start all over again).

From my experiences as both a tutee and peer tutor, I've found that I am able to connect with the students in a unique way. At the beginning of each writing session, I introduce myself as a former student at Endicott. This statement gives me instant credibility with my tutee–and it has nothing to do with my writing skills. For instance, I once had a senior business major that scheduled an appointment with me to go over a chapter of his thesis project. After our first session, I could tell he was frustrated with all of the changes we made to his work. To ease his disappointment, I explained to him that I had also written a thesis at Endicott, and I knew exactly how he felt. It is not just the thesis that is difficult to handle, but also the additional internships, classes, and part-time jobs that most students juggle. He seemed relieved and grateful for my empathy, and left the session a little lighter than when he had arrived.

Initially, this student sought out the writing center only under his professor's advisement. But eventually, he made a standing weekly appointment and even made a point to share his final product with me. What helped my tutee more than my writing expertise was the benefit of my experience as a former student. He knew that I, too, sat on the other side of the table; wrote papers; wrote and re-wrote a thesis; and horror of horrors, had to hit delete and start all over again. But in the end, I survived. And by knowing I had, he knew that he could, too. Sometimes all it takes is a lot of understanding mixed with a little advisement and a dash of confidence to make an impossible writing situation seem possible for a student. Speaking as an insider, I can definitely relate.

JENNIFER: Final Reflections

The common thread throughout these narratives has been what gives the individual tutors credibility with student writers. As a director, I also see what the tutors accomplish from a campus public relations perspective. Faculty know these tutors bring expertise to their interactions with students, they see the improvements in student writing, and they encourage students to visit us. Many of those students who initially visit to work with a professional tutor then experience working with peer tutors as well. These students take positive reports back to their faculty, and faculty continue to refer and to reinforce this affirming cycle. The presence of professional tutors therefore seems to enhance the campus perception of their peer tutor colleagues. Each professional tutor brings to the center a wider range of writing experiences than could peer, graduate student, or faculty tutors alone. These tutors professionalize the entire center, which ultimately benefits students, faculty, and the College. That, for us, is what happens when a writer, an editor, an instructor, and an alumna walk into the writing center.

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Jennifer Jefferson directs the writing center and teaches writing courses at **Endicott College**. She holds an MA in composition and rhetoric from **Northeastern University** and a BA in English (*Phi Beta Kappa*) from **Hamilton College**. She chairs Endicott's Writing Advisory Task Force and has served on the steering committee for the **Northeast Writing Centers Association**. Jennifer also spent several years in the publishing industry; she continues to edit books and professional articles on a freelance basis. Her recent publications include two *Writing Lab Newsletter* articles: **"Knowing the Faculty (Too?) Well: An Advantage or Disadvantage for Small College Writing Centers?" (March 2009)** and **"Instructors Tutoring Their Own Students in the Writing Center: A Conflict of Interest?" (December 2007)**.

Amy Cohn: After a distinguished career in children's book publishing and reviewing, which included serving as marketing director of **The Horn Book, Inc.** and editor-in-chief of three different children's imprints at William Morrow and Co., writing two books, teaching graduate-level courses at **Simmons** and **Lesley** colleges, and appearing regularly on various National Public Radio programs and the CBS Morning News, Amy Cohn joined the staff of the writing center at **Endicott College**. There, she works daily with great pleasure helping students improve and mature as writers of all sorts of texts. Amy is a graduate (*Phi Beta Kappa*) of **SUNY Binghamton** (now Binghamton University) and holds an MA in children's literature from Simmons College.

Ellen Goldstein is a freelance editor by day and a professional writing tutor at **Endicott College** by night. She has a BA in English from **Carleton College** and an MFA from **Emerson College**. Ellen is a poetry reader for *Junctures: A Journal of Thematic Dialogue*. She has published poetry in *Mid-American Review, Valaparaiso Poetry Review, StorySouth, Able Muse*, and *you are here: the journal of creative geography*, as well as in the anthology *Letters to the World*, published by Red Hen Press.

Chris Wallis began his tutoring career as an undergraduate at **Saint Michael's College** in Vermont, where he earned a BA in French and English (*Phi Beta Kappa*). While pursuing his MA in English literature at **Boston College**, he continued to bolster his tutoring skills at the school's **Connors Family Learning Center**. Currently, in addition to tutoring in the Endicott College Writing Center, he teaches composition and literature courses at both **Endicott College** and **Wheelock College**. His research focuses on gender and sexuality in early modern English literature and culture, and he has written essays exploring sodomitical discourse and representations of the female body in Renaissance drama and anatomical tracts.

Lindsey Campbell is a professional tutor at the **Endicott College Writing Center** and a copywriter experienced in cross media: print, television, radio, outdoor, online, and guerilla copy for advertising. She has won "Best Overall Package" for the development of a web-based interactive children's game and published an international feature article in *Hot English Magazine*. She holds an MS in advertising from **Boston University** and a BS in communication from **Endicott College**. She worked as a peer writing tutor and a communication tutor during her undergraduate years. Lindsey is currently pursuing a copywriting career in the advertising world.

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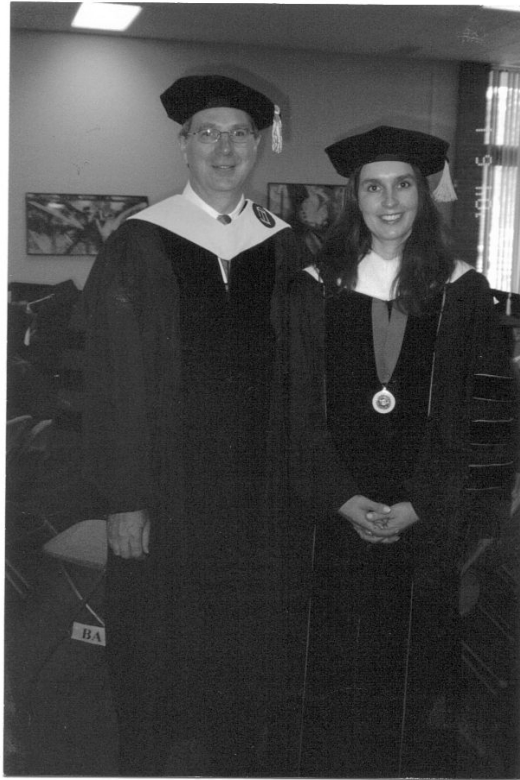
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An Interview with Ben Rafoth on Writing Center Research, Dissertations, and Job Opportunities

Fall 2009 / Training

by **Rebecca Day Babcock**, *University of Texas of the Permian Basin*

Ben Rafoth discusses current trends in the writing center field

Rebecca Day Babcock and Ben Rafoth

Ben Rafoth has directed the writing center at **Indiana University of Pennsylvania** for the past 20 years, and he currently directs the graduate program in Composition and TESOL there. He has edited *A Tutor's Guide: Helping Writers One to One and ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*, with Shanti Bruce. Rafoth served as the Treasurer of the **International Writing Centers Association**, and in 2002 he was awarded the Ron Maxwell Award from the National Conference of Peer Tutoring in Writing, one of the highest honors in the writing center world. Rafoth is one of the original founders of the writing center movement, and a mentor of writing center researchers, theorists and practitioners. I wanted to speak more in depth about current issues in writing center scholarship, so I interviewed him in his office adjacent to the writing center on IUP's campus.

Interviewer: Thanks for agreeing to speak with me today. I would like to begin our talk with the topic of *research*. What, in your opinion, are the *most interesting or promising areas of inquiry right now*, either current or potential,

in the field of writing center research?

Prof. Ben Rafoth: Oh, that's a good question. Well, I think that one is *online tutoring*, and how we can make use of the available technology in ways that are really sound pedagogically, and not just quick or easy or efficient or cheap. And you know, there are definitely movements in that direction, for example, with Smarthinking [1]. I think a lot of schools now have started to eye Smarthinking as an alternative to their writing centers, because they see it as a lot more cost-effective, but the real question is not whether or not it's more cost-effective, but whether it's any better or at least as good. So, I think one area of research would be to see *whether these commercial ventures are really effective in helping students*. I think another thing related to that is to figure out *just exactly what these online tutoring sites are doing*. I've talked a little bit about it with someone who works for them and I think there's quite a bit to be done just describing what it is that they do, and then at some point, it would be good to write up a formal descriptive study along those lines [2].

Within some of our writing centers we have online ventures where we do email attachments. That's something I get a lot of here at IUP's writing center, and we also do real-time exchanges. I think it's also important to see how the technology is working when it's homegrown, when it's local, and what kinds of advantages that brings. So there's one area where more research is needed.

I think *the relationship between writing centers and the curriculum* [3] is always ripe for research. I think that there's not been nearly enough research in that area. I think the writing center does primarily serve the curriculum, and that's not to say that we simply should be doing whatever teachers tell us to do, or that they just send their students here with specific agenda, as if we don't have some ideas of our own about how to help students become better writers. But I think that writing centers generally just need to be more clear about the goals of instructors, and what instructors are doing in their classrooms.

I think *research into effective tutor training programs* would be beneficial for all of us who are working on a peer model, which I think is about one of the hardest to do.

On the other side of it, of course, instructors need to be more in tune with what's going on in the writing center; there just needs to be a *closer working relationship* between the two. For example, students need to have a better idea when they come to the writing center of exactly what it is they're coming for help with. Sometimes they're coming to the writing center just because they have to--they're told they have to come here. Or because they've gotten some bad feedback on their writing and they're frustrated and they really don't know what else to do. So, they come to the writing center. Or, their instructors don't know what else to tell them, and can't really be more specific about why they're unhappy with their writing. So there's a process of *education about writing*, and more specifically, a process of *education about what the writing center does*, and how tutors can be helpful. So, I think we need to research programs that are doing that successfully, how they've established *collaborative relationships with faculty* and how they translate that into tutoring, to helping students right there in the tutoring session. How does that play out in a way that is beneficial to the student?

Interviewer: Do you just mean in English, or in all disciplines?

Rafoth: Yes, English and all disciplines, because we're always serving students from a variety of majors. I think in the IUP writing center we probably have more English faculty than any other as a group sending students here.

Interviewer: It's not so surprising when the other faculty don't know what the writing center does, but you would think English faculty would have some idea. Are there any other areas that are ripe for research?

Rafoth: I think a third area is in *tutor training* for writing centers that work on a *peer model*, like we do here at the **IUP Writing Center**. We use peer tutors opposed to professional tutors or adjuncts or whatever. In my position I'm constantly training tutors. Every semester we have tutors graduate or begin student teaching. So, with that degree of turnover, I'm constantly training tutors, and it's a challenge to work with the new tutors and yet at the same time provide something beneficial to the existing veteran tutors without repeating the same thing they've heard before.

Another thing about the peer model is that we don't have students from only one major. That's not even a desirable thing, so I try to recruit tutors from other majors. Currently we have someone from psychology, someone from speech pathology; we have religious studies majors, journalism majors, but most are English majors, or English Education majors. But that presents also another challenge to tutor training, which is *instruction in the vocabulary used for talking about writing*.

I think *research into effective tutor training programs* **[4]** would be beneficial for all of us who are working on a peer model, which I think is about one of the hardest to do. It seems to be easier to have a writing center where your staff is fairly stable. The peer model has tremendous benefits; I wouldn't trade it for anything because I think the students relate best to students and there are some real clear advantages. I would like to know how I could do a better job-- within the limited resources that I have--for how I might more effectively train tutors. Sometimes I read descriptions of complicated or intense tutor training programs and think, "Yes, but I only have six hours of release time to do this." I really don't have any additional money to pay tutors for extras such as going to conferences, for example.

Interviewer: Is there anything that's going on right now, any research projects that are going on in your writing center, or plans for the near future?

Rafoth: Well, there is an online study that I am working on. We have quite a good record, that is, a paper record or a digital *record of students who've submitted papers online*, asked for feedback, received feedback from tutors, and then agreed to be interviewed in a follow-up interview, or, after they turned that paper in and it was graded and they received it back from their instructors. What I'm looking at is *how the tutor responded to the paper and what the writer got from the tutor's response*. That is to say, does the student understand what the tutor said? Were they able to act on it or were some of the things the tutor said a problem for the writers? Were they confused by them? Were they, I don't know, offended by them? These are all things I'm turning up in the analysis, and I hope to be writing it up here soon. That's the project that I'm working on **[5]**.

Well, it's a field, I mean, it's changing; you're seeing now writing center dissertations where there were no such things many years

ago.

Recently, Jennifer Ritter defended her dissertation, and she was looking at native speakers helping *non-native speakers* with their papers, and the negotiated interaction that they engaged in in those tutoring sessions–how they helped, or how they dealt with, for example, unclear meaning. Did they like to draw it out, construct it, or did the tutor go over it, did the tutor figure that it meant something, you know, and go on. So there are many ways for handling unclear meaning in a tutoring session with non-native speakers. And it arises so often, so she tape recorded those sessions, and she collected just a wealth of data, and some of it is really fascinating.

I had the pleasure of reading her dissertation since I was on her committee, and she did that study here in our writing center with our tutors. And that research also led to her job at the **University of Alaska at Anchorage**, because one of the things that they wanted her to do is start a writing center. That's not something she has to take up right away, but that's kind of on the horizon there for her.

Interviewer: How many *writing center dissertations* have there been at IUP **[6]**?

Rafoth: I wanna say half a dozen, but I think there are more, if I went back and looked at every dissertation, I think, but I've only been here since '87 and haven't been involved in all of them. Beth Boquet's dissertation, for example, was a writing center dissertation with Mark Hurlbert who directed that one. I was a reader on her committee. So, there's Boquet, and there are other people who've done writing center dissertations but not in this writing center, in a writing center of their own institution.

Interviewer: I noticed that many writing center directors and scholars did not actually do writing center dissertations.

Rafoth: I think probably a very small number of people who are directing writing centers now actually did writing center dissertations.

Interviewer: So, it's not necessary. Is it recommended?

Rafoth: Well, it's a field, I mean, it's changing; you're seeing now writing center dissertations where there were no such things many years ago. But there were writing center directors and you're starting to see now job ads specifically looking for writing center people and of course, as soon as you can see that, then you know that a writing center dissertation is probably a prime qualification then **[7]**. The *job market* is there and the job ads now do in fact specify somebody to direct a writing center. And, I think that if you really want to be *at the top of the list* for institutions and departments that are going out and looking for a writing center director, you'll want to have a dissertation in that area. Yeah, I really think so. I think that like anything, there's no single thing, there's no golden key that's going to slot you right into a job, that's going to insure or guarantee that you get a job; the best thing you can do is look for the kind of job that you want, to *network*, and to *have contacts* with people who have jobs, know about jobs. That's always still partly about who you know. And it's important not to make yourself too narrow. And, show breadth in a number of different ways, even if your dissertation is on a very narrow or specific topic, you can have breadth in terms of your coursework, your life experiences, your job experiences, your MA degree.

Interviewer: There seem to be many opportunities for new and exciting research projects and job openings in the writing center field, and your ideas were very helpful. Thank you very much.

Rafoth: You're welcome.

Notes

[1] Smarthinking is an online tutoring service. Individuals or organizations can contract to pay for its services. In addition to writing, Smarthinking offers tutoring in various subjects such as Math, Chemistry, Physics, Biology, Anatomy and Physiology, Accounting, Economics, Introductory Finance, Spanish and Statistics. For more information **click here**.

[2] Some studies have already been done on Smarthinking. See for example the studies done by Teresa De Fazio and Michael Crock of the **Open University of Australia** and by Jane Calfee of **Kapiolani Community College**. Both of these studies involve essay improvement, student success and satisfaction rather than a description and analysis of the actual feedback received, as Ben suggests. Beth Hewett, a former employee of Smarthinking, conducted such a study: "Synchronous Online Conference-Based Instruction: A Study of Whiteboard Interactions and Student Writing." Earlier, Holly K. Moe caused a controversy with her 2000 study of Smarthinking. Her full report can be seen in *ERIC*, and a shortened version was published in the **Writing Lab Newsletter**. A few issues later, Beth Hewett and Christina Ehmann of Smarthinking issued a response, to which Moe also had the chance to respond. One of Moe's criticisms of Smarthinking was the lack of interaction between students and e-structors. Smarthinking has since added a synchronous whiteboard component, which Hewett discusses in her article.

[3] Robert W. Barnett and Jacob S. Blumner's book *Writing Centers and Writing Across the Curriculum Programs* is one resource. Early work on faculty attitudes toward the writing center can be found in articles by Malcolm Hayward and Patrick Sullivan. As Rafoth suggests, more work needs to be done in this area.

[4] There have not been many studies of this type, since most articles and books on tutor training are based on theory and personal experience, rather than actual research studies. One recent and notable exception is Karen Santos Rogers' dissertation "Investigating Tutor Training and Evaluation Practices in Colleges and Universities in the Mid-Atlantic Region."

[5] Some of the results of this study can be seen in Rafoth's chapter in *ESL Writers*. Other recent studies of tutoring online are "Between Technological Endorsement and Resistance: The State of Online Writing Centers" by Stephen Neaderhiser and Joanna Wolfe, and "A Comparison of Online Feedback Requests by Non-Native English-Speaking and Native English Speaking Writers" by Carol Severino, Jeffrey Swenson, and Jia Zhu, both appearing in the first issue of the **Writing Center Journal** (29.1) to be edited by Melissa Ianetta and Lauren Fitzgerald.

[6] According to Neal Lerner's research there have been 14 to date, but there were only nine at the time of this interview, and two of these were done before Rafoth worked at IUP.

[7] Partially inspired by this conversation, Interviewer, Carter-Tod, Levin,

Stahlnecker and Thonus discussed the relationship of the writing center dissertation to the job market, job preparation, and job prospects at the **2008 IWCA conference**.

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by *Virginia Tucker*, *Christopher Newport University*

Michel Foucault and student discourse

Virginia Tucker

Assuming student discourse is prone to error, teachers have long implemented rules that ensure "safe" discourse, particularly in composition instruction. My fifth grade teacher taught me to place a comma in a sentence whenever I take a breath rather than teaching me the language of comma rules. To my dismay, many of my first-year composition students raise their hands in agreement that they too have been taught to place a comma wherever their lungs suggest. These students learn to call independent clauses a complete sentence, and to them an ellipsis is merely "dot, dot, dot." In an attempt to reach students, some teachers are using this student-driven discourse instead of bringing students into the discourse of the subject itself. The results are students who cannot effectively engage in academic discourse in their own writing. Peer collaboration can mend student discourse if they are encouraged to participate in contextual learning and confront the restrictions of discourse students have faced throughout their writing instruction. Such restrictions have sought to create "normal," safe discourse at the risk of abandoning contextual learning. I met with these issues years ago as a writing tutor when I learned how to empower student writers by engaging them in purposeful, "abnormal" discourse about their writing. Today, as an instructor of English, I practice the very same methods I used as a writing tutor each time I conduct one-one-one writing conferences. Essentially, I am still tutoring my students, even as a university composition instructor.

To overcome this fear of contextual learning, teachers, tutors, and students must develop an academic discourse shared through collaboration.

In "The Order of Discourse," Michel Foucault describes society's rejection of the discourse of the "madman," whose wisdom and discourse is different than ours.

The madman's language is dangerous because he does not adhere to society's conventions, perhaps because he does not understand them. Therefore, his discourse is ignored or trivialized–not unlike the discourse of the first year composition student who stands in the doorway to Kenneth Burke's parlor, awaiting an invitation to join the conversation buzzing among academics in the field. Students entering college tend to create their own academic wall, one not meant for scaling ivory towers, but for filtering information they deem useless. This wall has been built brick by brick on foundations laid in grade school where students must remain quiet while the teacher provides knowledge. This knowledge is wrought with restrictions imposed by the teacher in an effort to control student discourse and circumvent "dangerous" discourse, which in a writing class may be poor writing habits. Students abide by these because, as Foucault's will to truth explains, they desire to only engage in "true" discourse that will create true knowledge–the precise, correct answer–and will ignore discourse that they perceive will not. This is a common belief among students who feel that their instructor is the only source of knowledge and so they reject the value of peer reviews. To overcome this fear of contextual learning, teachers, tutors, and students must develop an academic discourse shared through collaboration.

I don't mean that students are madmen, but there are similarities between the boundaries they and Foucault's madmen face. Foucault writes that the "discourse of the madman was taken for mere noise, and he was only symbolically allowed to speak" (1461-62). He goes on to assert that society has stifled discourse as a knowledge-making event ever since Plato declared the existence of an absolute Truth and the need for language to communicate it. If this is the case, then the madman's speech is heard, but disregarded because it is assumed that he is ignorant of knowledge-making discourse and cannot produce absolute Truth. It is this will to truth that causes society to assign limitations to language that will censure the dangers, the uncontrollable modes of discourse that could result in "ponderous, formidable materiality" (1461). Similarly, first year composition students are entering a new academic discourse that they are not attuned to; therefore, they are believed to be (and believe themselves to be) *unqualified* to speak on the subject. As a result, peer reviews may produce only positive responses lacking depth or analysis. It is possible, however, to improve student discourse through the kind of collaborative learning that typically takes place in a writing center.

College students are in the midst of transitioning from absolute to contextual knowing, a process educators can facilitate by encouraging students to make their own decisions as writers and be confident about those decisions.

Many students resist the idea that collaboration creates knowledge, but instructors and tutors of writing often find that collaboration produces academic conversation conducive to making knowledge. Collaboration allows us to address these issues, discuss our thoughts, and learn from the experiences and ideas of others. Foucault believes that the restrictions of discourse are perpetuated through education and the ways in which students acquire and use knowledge: "this will to truth, like the other systems of exclusion, rests on institutional support; it is both reinforced and renewed by whole strata of practices…But it is also renewed, no doubt more profoundly, by the way in which knowledge is put to work (1463). Traditional classrooms are hierarchical; the teacher gives knowledge and the students accept it. Students then produce

work that reflects that knowledge. This is the difference between absolute knowing (knowledge obtained from the instructor) and contextual knowing (knowledge that is socially constructed).[1] Learning is a process; one that ends with contextual thinking. Throughout their education, students will become less dependent on their teacher's knowledge, instead learning how to analyze and integrate the knowledge of their peers in preparation for their academic discourse community.

It is here that we find a need to direct the discourse without controlling or restricting it. If there is only consensus among a group of students, then they are not creating new knowledge. In other words, without direction students are merely creating "normal discourse" and maintaining knowledge (Bruffee 407). Kenneth Bruffee, who supports collaborative learning, asks, "How can student peers, who are not themselves members of the knowledge communities they hope to enter, help other students to enter those communities?" (405). The answer, as Bruffee himself states, is a peer tutor–a person who is knowledgeable of the conventions of discourse, but is able to communicate with the student on a less authoritative level. The conversation between a student writer and a tutor creates "abnormal discourse," which is necessary for producing new knowledge (407). In other words, "normal discourse" abides by societal language restrictions wherein students will not advance their discourse in fear of breaking one of these rules. For example, a student engaging in "normal discourse" would avoid using a semicolon because he was told by his teacher that semicolons are too difficult for novice writers to use correctly and should be avoided altogether. His peer reviewer would not correct this during the review because she too was told of the complicated nature of the semicolon. However, his writing tutor, with whom he gets ample one-on-one attention, will be able to explain to him how to use a semicolon correctly and provide him some guided practice, thus engaging him in knowledge-making "abnormal discourse" that does not abide by the kinds of language restrictions that Foucault described.

Expressive writing values the unique views and experiences of each individual, giving students the opportunity to share their knowledge.

Abnormal discourse may be met with doubt unless a tutor, or teacher, appeals to the student as someone who is invested in that student's writing and understanding of writing. Their collaboration is truly a partnership where the goal is to instill confidence in the writer so that he or she can progress from absolute knowing to contextual knowing and responsibly handle the restrictions of discourse that hinder student writing. I've observed many instructors and professors who only conference with students after a paper has already been graded. This conference attempts to explain the grade to the writer, and may even provide the opportunity for revision. But this is not a true collaborative effort since the instructor has already decided what is wrong with the paper. Tutors assist a student before the paper is submitted for a grade, and so too should instructors intervene while the writing is still in its adolescence.

College students are in the midst of transitioning from absolute to contextual knowing, a process educators can facilitate by encouraging students to make their own decisions as writers and be confident about those decisions. The will to truth is a result of the traditional classroom hierarchy. It gives students the false idea that they and their peers have little knowledge to contribute to the class. They also lack the confidence to believe that they can compose and

evaluate good writing, yet they depend upon the instructor's evaluation of their ideas. It seems that the will to truth is the biggest obstacle to overcome since we can not thoroughly teach students if they are more concerned with knowing *of* than knowing *about*. By questioning the will to truth and encouraging students to do the same, educators can relieve them of this dependency. Most students are satisfied to revise a paper when the errors have been corrected for them, but when an instructor takes on the role of tutor–intervening before the paper is submitted and engaging the student in a discourse about writing as two members of the same discourse community–then students can no longer impulsively conform to simplistic rules.

If we can resolve the restrictions of discourse through the partnership created between a tutor and a student, then why not do the same in the classroom? Collaboration in the classroom takes the form of discussion groups, peer responses and conferences with the instructor. There are obvious benefits to collaborative learning and the discourse it creates, so how can educators elicit this type of discourse from students?

A tutor is successful in reaching a student because of the equality, respect, and trust that they share. Irene Lurkis Clark, who advocates active collaboration, writes,

> True collaborators respond to one another honestly and do not withhold information from one another about trivial aspects of a paper…the more information withheld from a student and the more a tutor refrains from presenting information he knows, the more he is acting like a traditional teacher and the less likely it is that true collaboration will occur. After all, only teachers, not colleagues, ask questions to which they already know the answers. (95)

Clark describes the role of the tutor as someone who is expected to teach (and create abnormal discourse) as a part of the collaboration within the writing center. She doubts that this partnership can exist between a teacher and student, but I believe that it is possible for teachers to construct a learning environment where equality, respect and trust exist. This is a task that many tutors-turned-teachers have assumed. Their classrooms tend to value expressive writing, close interaction with the students, and peer discussion and response groups. Most importantly, the course moves at the students' speed. A tutor-turned-teacher may be likely to ask: "Why did you place a comma there?" rather than "Does a comma go there?" The former question opens up a dialogue on the student's knowledge of comma rules without assuming the teacher knows the answer. I find that students eagerly discuss what they have learned as they attempt to engage in a discourse about how one makes knowledge. This brings them to the realization that knowledge is contextual and that it may be time to tear down that academic wall.

This is where we really part from the traditional classroom hierarchy. Rather than being a source of knowledge, the composition instructor is more of a resource on writing. Expressive writing values the unique views and experiences of each individual, giving students the opportunity to share their knowledge. Students also benefit from close interaction with their instructor, which includes constant feedback about their writing and lessons covering issues of concern to students. Imposing rules that mirror the restrictions of discourse reflects a lack of trust and equality, so instructors need to avoid hastily discussing grammar and other writing matters. By creating a

partnership, the instructor learns more about the students and can tailor the lessons to their needs in much the same way that a tutee leads a tutorial session. When the instructor moves at the students' pace, then they feel like equal members of the discourse community. Likewise, when we teach them the conventions and vocabulary of this particular discourse community, then they are better equipped to create new knowledge as a group rather than engaging in normal discourse.

The traditional classroom has ingrained students with the belief that instructors are the only source of knowledge. Students are eager to learn and they've developed their own towers to protect their knowledge and values about writing; unfortunately, their misconceptions are the result of impulsive rules designed to prevent dangerous discourse, but instead serve to disempower student discourse. This produces students who are afraid to make changes to their writing style and process when they enter the university, as was the case with one of my own students who insisted he had been taught to never use semicolons since they were difficult to apply. The restrictions of discourse underestimate those who participate in it, so, like writing tutors, writing instructors must take the time to explain to students the conventions of writing, encourage them to use this knowledge when faced with writing quandaries, and instill in them the confidence to think contextually.

Notes

[1]Described in Baxter Magolda's Epistemological Reflection Model

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Job Opportunities

Praxis is a project of the **Undergraduate Writing Center** at the University of Texas at Austin

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Consultant Spotlight

Fall 2009 / Consulting

Praxis interviews **Sydney Boyd**, an English and applied music major and a writing consultant at University of Idaho

Name: Sydney Boyd

Age: 22

Writing Center: University of Idaho Writing Center

Size of School: approximately 12,000 students enrolled

Year in school and area of study: Senior with a major in English literature and applied music

Number of years working in writing centers: Two and one half years

Job title: Writing Tutor

Describe the work you do in the writing center: I help people write, from brainstorming to fine-tuning and from 100-level English papers to graduate dissertations.

Describe the training you've participated in: Tutors at the UI Writing Center are required to take an internship class. As an intern, I learned writing and teaching strategies for working with students, particularly ESL writers. I presented my final paper for the course at the Annual Rocky Mountain Peer Tutoring Conference in March 2008.

How do you normally start a consultation? I feel it is critical to establish a brief rapport with the person I am tutoring, not only to discern the type of tutoring they need and how I can best help them, but also to make them feel comfortable before sharing their writing. Thus, I usually begin by asking why they felt the need to talk to someone about their writing.

Describe your consulting style: My style is adaptive. When I began tutoring, I had a stricter sense of who I was as a tutor, but I quickly learned that no one student is the same, and no one approach should be either.

My favorite kind of consultation is . . . when the student is engaged and enthusiastic about learning how to improve their writing.

My greatest strength as a consultant is . . . my approachability. I am an open, friendly person who can easily put a person filled with writing anxiety at ease.

My greatest weakness is . . . explaining grammatical and language rules to ESL students. I often find myself wanting to say "I don't know why it is, but it just is."

What I like about working in a writing center is . . . when the intellectual light bulb turns on, especially when I have a hand in it.

What I don't like is . . . the occasional inaccurate expectations of what I can do for a student as a tutor–my tutoring cannot guarantee an A; I cannot edit your paper for you; I cannot help you very much thirty minutes before your paper is due.

My oddest consultation was . . . with an ESL student who chose me to work with because he was in a women's psychology class, and he wanted to work specifically with a white female to get a first-hand perspective.

What advice would you give to beginning consultants? Always remember the main goal is to help students learn–do whatever makes that happen–and keep writing priorities straight: don't focus on comma splices when a thesis doesn't exist.

What kind of writing do you do? I mostly write literature analysis papers, but I have dabbled in creative writing as well.

How has working in a writing center affected the way you write? I have become a better writer in every way. There is no better way to learn something than when you're responsible for teaching it as well.

How has working in a writing center helped your professional development? I have learned to work intimately with a plethora of different people and how to quickly discern what style I should adapt to best help them.

What else do you want to tell us about yourself? In addition to my affinity for writing, I have a passion for music–I have played the violin since I was six and began college as a violin performance major. My two majors have complemented each other very well, and I hope to continue building my interdisciplinary skills by studying opera's influence on 18th-century literature at the graduate level.

Editor login

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Engaging Peer Tutors in Voicing Insights from the Tutorial Process

Fall 2009 / Focus

Julian Brasington and **Wendy Smeets**, *Liverpool Hope University*

The place of the peer tutor in the British educational system

Introduction

Writing centers are a very recent phenomenon within the United Kingdom (UK) and only one of a variety of institutional responses to what is widely held to be a decline in the standard of writing at university[1]. Prior to the 1980s, UK Higher Education (HE) was an elite system serving only 5 per cent of the population and induction into academic discourse was implicit; writing was not taught, but assumed to be "pick[ed] up" through doing (Lillis 32). With successive government agendas set on widening access to HE, student numbers have since grown exponentially and, with a student body less versed in what is loosely termed "academic writing," universities have responded by employing academic or academic-related staff to offer direct, and in most instances, generic learning or study skills support. The majority of British universities now have centrally funded learning centers and or language centers in which such staff are based, and Orr, Blythman and Bishop argue that it is to the mainstream status of their staff that such units owe their centrality (209)[2]. Privileging the "life experience," pedagogic range and knowledge of salaried staff over that of the peer tutor, and, more importantly, their power to affect institutional change, Orr, Blythman and Bishop view the arrival of peer tutoring to the UK as a threat to the "very centrality" of study support (209). Whilst rejecting Orr, Blythman and Bishop's fundamental concern that peer tutoring will undermine the work of salaried staff, we do recognize that perceptions of status are critical in UK HE; this we see, however, less as a reason for silencing the peer tutor than as an encouragement to find ways to enable peer tutors to voice the insights that they too derive from their work.

Peer tutor development at Liverpool Hope University

Established in 2004, the **Writing Centre** at **Liverpool Hope** is the longest running university writing center in the UK, and one of only a handful of such centers[3]. Supported through funding from the **Write Now Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning** (CETL), the writing center has run a peer writing tutor program since 2006. Early experience suggested a measure of reserve on the part of students to engage with peer tutoring and a sense of self-doubt amongst the tutors with respect to their "right" to tutor. With numerous students reporting that they would rather see "a professional tutor" and that they failed to see what working with "another student just like me" could bring to their writing, and with the tutors themselves feeling insecure, both peer tutor and student seem to echo the concerns noted above. Professional development and the assumption of status by peer tutors is then

central to the success of such a program.

The main aim of our research project was to give the peer tutors an opportunity to make their voices heard and to stress the value of the insights they gained through their tutoring.

Peer tutor development — or training, as it is more frequently termed — generally amounts in the UK to no more than a two-day induction. In contrast to this in-at-the-deep-end approach, tutor development at Hope is conceived of more as a long-distance swim, with the swim lasting the length of a tutor's employment and being characterized by four distinct phases. Given that the waters in the UK are cold, I call these stages, *getting oiled*, *the shock of the cold*, *embracing waves*, and *points of arrival*. In *getting oiled* the tutors spend their first four weeks reflecting upon their own experience as writers and in considering issues of difference: difference in writing process, difference in genre, difference in approaches to tutoring and learning. The *shock of the cold* comes when tutors first begin to tutor, an experience supported by further workshops, team meetings and peer observation. As the tutors *embrace waves*, meeting times diminish, tutorial hours increase, and the tutors become increasingly confident in swimming away from the support boat and, not infrequently, in throwing fish at it. Then come the *points of arrival*, those different locations upon which each tutor beaches at the end of their time in the center.

Throughout the swim, tutors are encouraged to speak, to write and to publish and to redress that imbalance which Bouquet identifies when she asserts that: "conclusions are drawn about peer tutors, information is produced for peer tutors, but rarely are these things created by peer tutors" (Bouquet 18). In *getting oiled*, the tutors generate writing guides and website reviews; in *embracing waves* they meet with tutors from other writing centers in order to exchange experiences and develop collaborative research projects; during *points of arrival* they write what one of the tutors, Jim Davis, termed their "legacy" — an attempt to capture what they have discovered through the act of tutoring and to communicate this to whatever audience they see fit. Tutors arrive at these individual legacies through a sequence of pre-writing tasks, including question generation, audience identification, and self-directed focus groups. With the focus groups being recorded, they provide an opportunity for further reflection, and in addition, rich data for publication. Subsequent to writing their legacies, four tutors (Jim Davis, Carly Rowley, David Tatlow and Bella Craddock) worked together to analyze the focus group recordings, as well as student writer data and feedback collected throughout the year, and along with Smeets, presented their analysis to an audience of teachers, researchers and policy makers at the **European Association of Teachers of Academic Writing** (EATAW) **2009 Conference**. Smeets now reports on the main findings.

Findings

The main aim of our research project was to give the peer tutors an opportunity to make their voices heard and to stress the value of the insights they gained through their tutoring. We hope the results of this project are valuable to those involved with the day-to-day coordination of peer writing tutors and we feel they are of equal interest to departmental staff and other (future) peer tutors.

Another point the tutors made was that, from their point-of-view,

the ability to motivate was even more important than knowing the technical aspects of writing.

As mentioned previously, data was collected from a number of sources: a symposium, written legacies, focus groups, and student statistics; what follows is an overview of the tutors' main conclusions and an analysis of their reflections.

Training needs

The current peer tutors assessed the training they received as well the training needs they perceived for future peer tutors. The tutors felt an important part of any pre-service training should be dedicated to practicing generic tutoring skills such as active listening, paraphrasing and asking questions. This suggestion stems from the tutors' belief that essential qualities for their job are an awareness of student differences, being a good listener and the use of positive reinforcement. Another point the tutors made was that, from their point-of-view, the ability to motivate was even more important than knowing the technical aspects of writing. As for this more technical part, tutors indicated that in addition to theory on writing processes, they thought grammar refreshment clinics would be helpful for new tutors, mainly to help them meet the needs of international students.

The tutors' perceived need for grammar input might be seen as an instance of what Shaughnessy refers to as the "guarding the tower" stage in a teacher's development, reflecting the kind of anxiety new teachers experience where they feel they need to know it all to be able to pass information on to their students (95). As with new teachers, tutors feel less of a need for knowledge as they become more experienced. This is illustrated in the tutors' findings by their appreciation that tutoring skills are more important than technical knowledge about writing.

The peer tutors also stressed that they valued the on-going in-service training that was provided in addition to the pre-service training course. They found that the weekly training sessions helped them feel part of a team. Furthermore, they expressed that this continuous guidance helped them through the stages Julian described above, in particular the *embracing the waves* phase, without feeling they were left to their own devices. Therefore, they would encourage institutions to aim to provide in-service training in addition to any pre-service training program.

Departmental support and the role of the peer tutor

The topic of departmental writing support is closely linked to that of the role of the peer tutor. Both in the focus groups and in their legacies, peer tutors were eager to point out that they are not academics nor do they consider themselves experts in academic writing. They feel their strengths lie in facilitating a dialogue about writing, and in enabling and supporting students from a peer perspective rather than in teaching or correcting. The tutors felt, however, that students often seek an authoritative voice from the peer tutors and stressed that they cannot be expected to bridge the gap between departments and students. One of the main topics students discuss in writing tutorials is the assignment prompt, as students are often unsure of what is expected for their assignments. As our tutors see students from a range of different disciplines, facilitating task interpretation can be difficult. They spend a lot of their time interpreting what is meant by the task instructions provided rather than helping

students master the process of academic writing. Therefore, the peer tutors would recommend departments have a clear statement of expectations, which should be included in the module handbook, and ideally would also be discussed during seminars. They also recommend implementing a personal tutor system in which students could meet with their personal tutors several times a year to discuss any issues they might have with their subject.

Tutors are not comfortable with the label "experts," yet other students tend to perceive them as such.

The peer tutors felt that departments need to become more familiar with their work and with that of the writing center. This could be done by distributing more information to the departments and by setting up meetings between heads of department and peer tutors. This desire to be directly involved with the departments might be seen as a natural progression in their professional development, where tutors engage with the departments without having to go through the writing center coordinator or the CETL staff to promote their work and ask for the departmental support they feel they require.

Being a peer tutor

One of the peer tutors, Bella Craddock, studied the experience of being a peer tutor in higher education as part of her third year dissertation. She conducted a focus group and interviews with several current and former peer writing tutors. Her conclusions indicated that overall, peer tutors experienced high job satisfaction. Bella's and the other peer tutors' research led to the following reflections on the experience of being a peer tutor. On a personal level, the tutors especially valued the relationship they established with other peer tutors over the course of their work at the writing center. It was also felt that being a peer tutor helped them develop as individuals. As for professional development, they felt they benefited from the initial training program which helped them increase both their knowledge of writing and their tutoring skills.

The two slightly less positive elements that emerged were that peer tutors often felt pressure to perform well as students; that is, other students expected them to deliver top-level work as they were seen as "expert writers." This issue can be linked back to the identity issues described in the previous section. Tutors are not comfortable with the label "experts," yet other students tend to perceive them as such.

Conclusion

Overall, their reflections show that the peer tutors have been pleased with the impact their work has had on themselves as writers and as individuals. Their accounts of the experience of presenting their findings at an international conference have been overwhelmingly positive. Following the success of the presentation at EATAW, our hope is now to encourage tutors to publish their insights, and to further redress the imbalance identified by Bouquet above. Whilst in 2008-09 a number of tutors sought advice in regard to publication, none have yet published. The leap from speech to full-blown paper has perhaps been too much. In order to facilitate writing for publication, our focus during the next academic year will therefore be to foster low-cost writing. We hope that encouraging the tutors to maintain blogs will enable them to build incrementally to that point at which they feel confident enough to assert their own voice in a journal article.

Notes

[1] Special thanks to Bella Craddock, Jim Davis, Carly Rowley, and David Tatlow.

[2] See Devet et al. a two-part paper that explores the pedagogic underpinning of the peer tutor model and the implications of its adoption in the UK.

[3] The word centre realizes but one of many differences in US and UK spelling. US spelling has been adopted throughout save for direct mention of particular centers in the UK, in which instance UK spelling is followed.

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Julian Brasington is Co-ordinator of the **Writing Centre** at **Liverpool Hope University**. Formerly Co-ordinator of insessional and presessional EAP programmes at **Aberystwyth University**, he has also taught in Turkey and Spain. Julian is currently engaged in cross-institutional research exploring the impact of peer tutoring upon both tutors and writers, and welcomes the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues working within the UK and beyond.

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Wendy Smeets

Wendy Smeets is currently working a Writing Specialist for the Write Now Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at **Liverpool Hope University**, UK. She holds an MA in Applied Linguistics and TESOL from **Leicester University** and is working toward her PhD in Educational Psychology at the **University of Barcelona, Spain**. Her research interests include hybrid reading and writing tasks, epistemological beliefs, the role of peer tutors and staff development.

Praxis is a project of the **Undergraduate Writing Center** at the University of Texas at Austin

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Featured Center: University of Denver Writing Center

Fall 2009 / Consulting

University of Denver WC

The Denver University UWC

For the Fall 2009 issue of *Praxis*, "Professionalization and the Writing Center," we chose to feature the University of Denver's University Writing Center because its director, Dr. Eliana Schonberg, is a former writing consultant who built on her experience as an Assistant Director of **The University of Texas at Austin's Undergraduate Writing Center** and founding editor of *Praxis* to become a writing-center director.

Name of center: The University Writing Center

Institutional affiliation: University of Denver

City, State: Denver, CO

Web address: www.du.edu/writing/wrc.htm

Director: Dr. Eliana Schonberg

Year opened: 2006

History: In 2002, the University of Denver was given a multi-million dollar endowment by the Marsico Foundation, with the purpose of enhancing liberal arts education at the undergraduate level. An elected faculty committee evaluated and piloted proposals on the disbursement of these funds; the first proposal to be approved was to create a writing center and a program to restructure how writing was taught on campus. The University reallocated funds to make the Center and Program part of its permanent budget.

In fall 2006, the University of Denver launched its comprehensive new writing program. Its mission: create a robust culture of writing on campus; develop strong student abilities through multiple writing experiences; develop the

complex rhetorical skills needed in academic, professional, and civic life; teach according to the best research and pedagogy. A further mission is to provide a national model for colleges and universities seeking exemplary practices in teaching writing. The University Writing Center opened its doors at the start of the 2006-07 academic year and has been actively participating in the creation of a robust culture of writing on campus ever since.

Sponsoring department, school, or organization: The Writing Center is a component of the **University Writing Program**, a freestanding program, reporting directly to the Provost.

Consultation in Progress

Number of consultations in the last year: 3,050

Square footage: 650 square feet

Services offered: one-on-one consultations, hour-long classroom workshops and workshops for student groups, brief presentations about our services, facilitations of faculty writing groups on campus, consultations for clients and staff at two community partner sites

Staff: Our primary consulting staff consists of 19 students (5 undergrad, 14 grad). In the fall quarter, 7 Writing Program faculty also served as consultants, and 3 others helped with classroom workshops. About half of our student consultants work in the Writing Center in exchange for receiving their graduate stipend. Of the remaining group, some are paid hourly, and some are employed through work-study funds. Our consultants are drawn from various departments across campus. Ten graduate students each year come from the divisions of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences; this year they include students in anthropology, English, and human communications. We also have graduate students from the Korbel School of International Studies, the Morgridge College of Education, and religious studies. Our undergraduates this year are majoring in anthropology, chemistry, English, political science, and philosophy.

Each of our community partner sites is staffed by one faculty consultant and one student consultant for two hours each week.

Clientele: Our clientele are drawn from every college and department on campus, except the Law School, which has its own writing support. Last year half of our consultations were with graduate students and just under half were with undergraduates, which represents the grad-undergrad distribution on

campus. Of the 48% of our consultations that were conducted with undergraduates, 18% were with freshmen, 11% were with sophomores, 7% with juniors, and 12 % with seniors. In terms of disciplinary representation, our consultations mirror enrollment quite closely. For example, about 32% of University of Denver students are enrolled at the Daniels College of Business, and about 31% of our consultations were with Daniels students.

Money Matters: Our budget is a component of the Writing Program's budget, so things like office supplies, my salary, and about $12,000 in hourly staff wages come out of the Writing Program's general budget. The salaries of consultants who are working as part of their graduate stipend are paid for by their home division, and some consultants are paid through work-study funds.

Our community writing center sites are funded by a grant from the **University of Denver's Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning**. This grant allows us to pay student consultants to work at our two community partner sites and to pay faculty consultants to continue the project during the summer months.

Computer Consultation

Current events/programs:I'm very proud of our community partner sites. We have weekly drop-in consulting hours at The Gathering Place, a daytime, drop-in shelter for women and children experiencing poverty and homelessness, and at the Saint Francis Center, a daytime, drop-in shelter for men and women experiencing homelessness. Over the past year, we have held 280 consultations for clients and staff at these sites, working on everything from creative projects to resumes.

On the campus front, we had a lively celebration of the **National Day on Writing**, including a Scrabble tournament and a writing-themed "post secret" project.

What else should people know about your center? In its first three years, the Center has changed from "that strange new glass-walled room in the library" to a warm, welcoming center for writers of all sorts on campus. It's the last week of classes as I'm writing this, and we've been fully booked for a week, but despite the rush, our consultants are managing to stay cheerful and engaged, and writers are leaving looking happier than when they came in.

You were a founding editor of *Praxis* and served as Assistant Director of the writing center at The University of Texas. How did your experiences in these capacities effect your career development? *Praxis*

and The University of Texas at Austin's Undergraduate Writing Center were what got me excited about writing center work. I really enjoyed working with students one-on-one, but it hadn't occurred to me to make a career of it. But the greater writing-center community were so generous with their time, their thoughtfulness, and their support of *Praxis*, that I realized I wanted my professional life to be based in this community. When I realized that the collaborative ethos extended beyond consultations, I knew it was the right fit for me.

Praxis is a project of the **Undergraduate Writing Center** at the University of Texas at Austin

Editor login

Praxis: A Writing Center Journal (2003-2011)

Finding a Good Topic is Hard These Days

Fall 2009 / Consulting

by **Kelly Kamp**, *Western Kentucky University*

Conducting effective brainstorming consultations

Kelly Kamp

An uninspired student's eyes roam over horizontal lines hoping to catch a glimpse of something breathtaking.

Many students blame the anxiety of writing a paper on the fact that they do not know about what to write.

Yet, the student only grasps whiteness, a bold blankness that shocks the system causing frustration and anxiety. A pen points at the ready, but words worthy of capture refuse to surface. Finally, the desire to quit settles into both the pen-holding hand and the cerebrum, and both shut off. The student accomplishes nothing.

When a professor assigns a paper, the most daunting task for a student usually involves figuring out how to get started. Many students blame the anxiety of writing a paper on the fact that they do not know about what to write. Thus, they decide on a topic that their teacher suggests or something they may have overheard in passing. Then, they are stuck with an uninspiring topic, and their papers refuse to grow into anything, which leaves blank pages and an equally blank mind. Writing center tutors need to be able to help students brainstorm about the appropriate topic.

Once a student enters the writing center requesting help on finding a topic for a paper, the tutor must fully understand the prompt for the paper to ensure that the student, while selecting a topic, does not flutter away from the point of the assignment. Tutors should read a paper prompt or ask the students to clarify by

asking questions about the class, the teacher's expectations, and the prompt. A tutor must also sing praises about brainstorming. Brainstorming may be imperative to finding a topic because brainstorming helps students jump-start the writing process by providing ideas for the topic or the thesis.

Several ways to brainstorm exist. To break the ice of such an enterprise, the tutor would probably find it helpful just to ask the student some questions. If the paper is a personal statement, for example, the tutor could ask the student about individual aspects of his or her future, including jobs, family, travels, money, and fame. In essence, the tutor becomes the Socrates-type mentor who continually asks the student questions until the student begins to settle on his or her own ideas for the paper.

For example, when I had to help a student brainstorm for a paper about a piece of literature, I started by asking him about types of books he liked to read.

"What was the book you last read?"

He responded, "I don't like to read."

This conversation inspired me to think about things a little differently and to help him find a piece of literature he would actually consider interesting to write about for a paper. Finally, a stroke of brilliance hit and severed the negative responses the student threw at me. "Do you like theater?"

I watched as the student's face broke into a smile. "I just saw *A Raisin in the Sun*. It was the movie version, but it started as a play, right?"

I reassured him while checking the prompt to make sure that plays were appropriate and that he would be able to write about it. Although this particular session sailed smoothly, tutors should remember to implement open-mindedness while working with students, who may be unenthusiastic, tired, or drained from a long week.

Another step, which may also act as another method for a tutor, is having a student write up a list of as many ideas that come to mind within a matter of minutes. During my session with my newly-discovered-theater-enthusiast, I had him take out a sheet of paper. I told him to write as many ideas as he could that pertained to *A Raisin in the Sun*.

If a student does stop writing, then it may be time for a tutor to ask the student continual questions or verbally to spit-ball his or her own ideas in order to get the student's creative juices flowing and to make the list longer.

He refused to make the list silently and would excitedly exclaim multiple aspects of the play. "I could talk about how controversial it was when it first opened, and I could talk about how even though it is about a black family a person could change the race of the family and it could still be just as powerful. It speaks to so many…." The student may say that the list will be short, but if the tutor insists that the student does not stop writing until a certain time-allotment is over, then the student will probably come upon ideas that he or she never thought existed and were just buried within the deep recesses of his or her mind. If a student does stop writing, then it may be time for a tutor to ask the student continual questions or verbally to spit-ball his or her own ideas in order to get the student's creative juices flowing and to make the list longer.

For my particular session, the list began to grow as he began to dissect the play and to get to its meat. A tutor can support this with asking the student follow-up questions about his or her list to see if a more general idea may become narrower for a paper topic. The student happily left our session and promised me that he would return after the next step of his paper: research.

A third method of brainstorming takes place when a tutor has a student research a general topic online or in the library. The research may bring up many narrower focuses that stem from the general topic of the assigned paper. If the student's paper is supposed to be over a piece of literature, the student could sweep the web and skim through books to find a summary or a critical analysis of such a broad idea. Tutors should remind students about credible websites to use, such as newspapers and their university's or college's databases. Also, if students hit a bump with starting the research, a tutor could provide possible keywords to help lead the student in the right direction, such as *literature* or *dramas*. A student may be able to condense the concept of literature into the more defined topic of plays, which could lead into an even narrower topic of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Then, *Raisin* may lead to even better ideas, such as the effect it had on America when it first opened in the 1960s. Soon, a topic that is suitable to the student's taste and the assignment appears and helps the student begin the paper.

A student's eyes already shine with enthusiasm and knowledge and roam over horizontal lines. They grasp whiteness—a bold blankness that excites and inspires. A pen, pointed at the ready, connects to the paper filling in the spaces with worthy words and wonderfully well-thought connections. The student's desire to keep writing until the paper finishes sweeps across body and mind. The right topic helps inspire and helps carry the paper to its finish-line and its winning accomplishment.

Kelly Kamp is a senior at **Western Kentucky University**. She is an English Writing major and Spanish minor. After graduation, she hopes to attend a graduate program for Publishing and then work at a publishing house as an editor.

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From Peer Tutors to Writing Center Colleagues: The Potential of Writing Center Internships

*by **Naomi Silver**, **Carrie Luke**, **Lindsey Nieman**, and **Nicole Premo**, University of Michigan*

Internships and investment in the writing center

From Tutors to Interns

The current conversation surrounding peer writing tutor professional development frequently includes discussions of authority, autonomy, and oversight. At the **University of Michigan's Sweetland Writing Center**, our conversations have followed similar trends with the added complication of an unusual setup when it comes to one-to-one writing consultations. Because Sweetland is staffed entirely by what the field calls "professional consultants" (university writing faculty with MFA or Ph.D. degrees), "professional development" has meant simply carrying out the work of the Academy, that is, attending conferences, publishing books and articles, conducting research, and revising curriculum. Yet in the Peer Tutoring Center – a space populated by upper-level undergraduates who have completed two semesters of intensive training taught by Sweetland faculty in the theory and practice of tutoring their peers – "professional development" has raised many issues of power and authority, at least for the faculty and staff supervising them. When the "professional consultants" seek to "professionalize" the student peer tutors, the emphasis shifts from self-improvement and self-interest (in the economic sense) to quality control and consciousness-raising. The question becomes one of how to help undergraduates transition from self-interest (in the psychological sense) to community- or organizational-interest, that is, how to help them identify with the body that oversees them.

Throughout these revision and creation processes, we found a business-like perspective to be both pragmatic and useful.

Sweetland's mechanisms for fostering this identification beyond the training courses are innocuous enough, and are in fact enriching and empowering: tutors attend special topics seminars related to tutoring writing; receive funding to present papers at national conferences; work as class-based tutors or writing fellows, particularly in UM's Transition to College Writing course; and, most recently, vie for two summer internships. As it turns out, this is also a story of the student teaching the teacher, since the idea of offering internships came organically from a tutor in her second semester of training. The Peer Tutor Committee (a body of Sweetland faculty and staff) found the idea attractive; the internship would provide additional manpower for our summer projects and give two tutors the opportunity to take significant ownership in the center, learning what it means to work as professionals in such a place.

In retrospect, an internship seems like an obvious idea: as we work to enlist students in their own writing processes and encourage active learning, it seems logical to enlist them in the making of their own writing center, and encourage them to participate in the administrative processes of their own program and department. These multiplicities of engagement can only add to the value of the peer writing tutor experience. In the **"Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice"** established by the **National Survey of Student Engagement**, tutoring appears as a form of "active and collaborative learning." Those of us who work with and train peer tutors know that it also ranks high in "student-faculty interaction." Internships, on the other hand, count as "enriching educational experiences" that allow students to "integrate, synthesize, and apply knowledge." Through weekly meetings and full collaboration on a range of complex tasks, our internship model ratcheted student-faculty-staff interaction way up, resulting in significant gains on all sides.

As we reflect on the summer and look ahead to the internship applications that will begin to arrive next March, we believe we have hit on something unexpected and exciting, and it is this story we and our interns wish to tell.

The Interns' Tale

As two self-described "Language Nuancers" and the first pair of peer tutors to become interns at the Sweetland Writing Center, we found ourselves spending a good deal of time debating the minutiae of sentence structure, phrases, and even single words. Our two main projects required all our nuancing abilities as each focused on applying and expanding the cohesive public image Sweetland has worked to develop throughout the UM community. The first was a website update-turned-redesign that involved improving navigability to better serve Sweetland's current audience and attract new users. Similarly, through the development of a synchronous OWL pilot – **our SyncOWL** – we strove to provide a service for a previously untargeted population: undergraduates seeking the feedback typical of face-to-face tutoring but unable, uncomfortable, or uninterested to visit the writing center in person.

Throughout these revision and creation processes, we found a business-like perspective to be both pragmatic and useful. We suspect that most university personnel do not view free educational resources as a type of business. In fact, it may be that many are uncomfortable conceptualizing the work we do in these terms. Yet, Sweetland wants to be a viable presence on campus, and an important part of this goal is understanding and interfacing with our "consumers," an increasingly tech-centric group. We realize that our website is the first place most students and instructors go to understand what the Sweetland name signifies and how it can support their work within the university. Therefore, as our first form of contact with potential consumers, a user-friendly website that accurately and succinctly portrays our services and philosophy is integral to our continued (and expanded) success.

The SyncOWL takes this idea a step further by virtually connecting Sweetland (both literally and figuratively) to a largely plugged-in undergraduate population so well-trained in the uses of technology that instant online messaging and document-sharing platforms seem as intuitive as traditional face-to-face conferencing. As members of this population ourselves, we helped bridge the gap between writing center professionals and students, exposing the unique perspective our multi-faceted identities could provide. We are peer tutors, we

are interns, we are members of the larger professional writing center community and yet we remain undergrads at UM. Through belonging to each of these groups, we were able to help define the center's audiences and therefore better identify our diverse consumers' needs.

The research is clear that peer tutoring in writing benefits the tutors as much as the tutees, and that those benefits extend far beyond graduation or even the first post-college job.

Beginning with our first staff meeting, we were (pleasantly) surprised that a community of individuals committed to the details of writing – fellow "Language Nuancers" – existed outside of our small interns' office. In hindsight, it makes sense that Sweetland is a place where those with a passion for language and writing go to work. Prior to our internships, however, neither of us had considered higher education as a career path through which we could utilize our BAs in English and our genuine interest in words. Although now this path seems an organic extension of our experiences, our internship also helped us hone skills that will ensure our success in the professional world, whether in a writing center or elsewhere. In addition to the obvious – writing professionally, conducting ourselves appropriately, managing our time responsibly – we also improved our professional, interpersonal, and team writing skills. Like tutoring itself, these exercises in collaborative work required the ability to listen well and respond thoughtfully, establish a practical agenda, and prioritize matters based on their urgency and relative importance.

Ultimately, it was through becoming an active part of Sweetland's professional community – no longer only peer tutors working a few hours a week – that we were able to truly engage with the place that now feels like a professional home and the community of writing center professionals who now feel like colleagues. Sweetland prepared us for and helped us better define our professional futures, and in turn (get it? intern…) we hope to have contributed to the continued success of this writing center.

From Interns to Colleagues

As we read our interns' account of their summer experience, one thing that jumps out is how the narrative itself enacts an evolution not unlike what we observed working with them this summer – a movement from being simply tutors/undergraduates to being interns/pre-professionals, until they come to occupy these positions simultaneously by the end of the summer. The conversations they describe sound like tutor talk – the kind of collaborative negotiating of words and meanings that happens in every good tutoring session. Indeed, it is precisely that interest in "language nuancing" that both led to and grew out of their becoming peer tutors in writing at UM. But by the end of their narrative, our interns evince not only a tutor's delight in the nuances of written language but also a deeper understanding of the broader mission of our writing center, as well as a sense of empowered belonging to and identification with a community of scholars and professionals – something still relatively rare in the undergraduate experience.

The research is clear that peer tutoring in writing benefits the tutors as much as the tutees, and that those benefits extend far beyond graduation or even the first post-college job. The wonderful testimonials reproduced on the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project website attest to the powerful abilities tutors take into the workplace and their personal lives: powers of problem-

solving; flexibility and adaptability; meta-communication; sensitivity to process, purpose, and audience; and an ability to glean the larger structure and hierarchize the smaller parts. Our interns brought these abilities to their position, but also grew them in spades as their engagement deepened. By the end of the summer, we felt fully at ease delegating important development projects to them, as they have described.

By offering opportunities like writing center internships, we create occasions for our tutors to move beyond self-interest and gain a more holistic perspective on professional work.

They gained confidence in new media writing and in coordinating and planning highly technical assignments, skills that will only increase in value as we move further into the digital age. But beyond that, their work in new media exemplified the collaborative learning process that has been identified as a core value in peer writing tutoring. Part of this work involved researching Sweetland Writing Center history as well as software tools to digitally represent it. In gaining this broader view of writing center work – where and what it came out of, where it might be going, and what roles they might be able to play in that future – our interns began to step out of what Harvey Kail calls "the fraught but intellectually rich middle spaces between the formal curriculum, student culture, and individual learning" ("Situated") represented by tutoring, and into the equally rich (and sometimes equally fraught) space of self-determining professionalism. Little surprise, then, that our interns joked about wishing to remain the writing center's "forever interns" and opted to stay on through the fall term to complete the pilot of our synchronous OWL and assist us in our study of it. As fully equal members of the SyncOWL research team, our interns will continue their transformation from peer tutor to colleague, and in doing so, gain even broader access to workplace knowledge that in general is kept behind literal and figurative closed doors. For us, the word intern has also been transformed: from writing center worker to writing center professional, from one who performs the daily tasks of the center to one who collaborates in the planning and process work that shapes the center's identity as such.

By offering opportunities like writing center internships, we create occasions for our tutors to move beyond self-interest and gain a more holistic perspective on professional work. Our interns rose to this occasion impressively: not only did they become better-informed and more skilled as a result of our direction, it seems clear from their narrative that they also felt empowered to pursue their own creative visions and professional interests as a result of the freedom we gave them. Striking this balance will be a key measure of success for future internship programs at Sweetland. The experience of working with our interns has also helped to crystallize for us the idea that, as administrators and teachers, it is our responsibility and our privilege to support undergraduates by empowering them to take charge of their experience at the university, and by giving them opportunities to engage deeply in meaningful learning as authentic members of our community. We hope that the interns' experience of having a greater stake in their professional community will better enable them to engage and transform the future professional communities they enter – and in inaugurating and shaping Sweetland's new internship program, they are now part of the center's future as well as its history.

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Naomi Silver

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Naomi Silver is Associate Director of the **Sweetland Writing Center** and Faculty Associate in **American Culture** at the **University of Michigan**. She received her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from **UC Irvine**, and has taught courses in literature and writing since 1990. Her current research focuses on literary and artistic connections between Harlem and Paris in the 1920s, and on metacognitive interventions in upper-level writing in the disciplines courses. She has recently taught courses on writing and visual culture, advanced rhetoric and research, peer tutor training, and Graduate Student Instructor training for advanced writing courses.

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Carrie Luke

Carrie Luke coordinates the **Sweetland Writing Center's Peer Tutor Program** at the **University of Michigan** — Ann Arbor, where she worked as a Peer Tutor as an undergraduate. Carrie holds a BA in English and Women's Studies from UM, and is a graduate of UM's Undergraduate Creative Writing

Program. She currently studies written communication and the teaching of writing as an MA student at **Eastern Michigan University**. Her scholarly interests include: creative writing and community engagement; teaching and tutoring with technology; gender studies; and working with developmental writers.
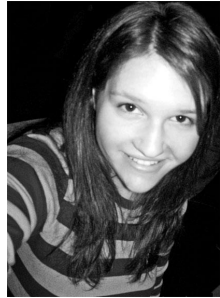
Lindsay Nieman

Lindsay Nieman will graduate from the **University of Michigan** — Ann Arbor in May of 2010 with a BA in English. She currently works for the **Sweetland Writing Center** as an Intern, Course Assistant, and Peer Tutor. While Lindsay has entertained many professional options for life after graduation, she has finally and happily settled on pursuing a career in publishing. She hopes to find new stories to share with readers, and believes her love of literature and her time at Sweetland will help achieve this ambition.

Nicole Premo

Nicole Premo is an Intern, Peer Tutor, OWL Dispatcher, and Course Assistant at the **University of Michigan's Sweetland Writing Center**. She is in her fourth and final year as an undergraduate and is working towards a BA in English, French, and Spanish. Her long-term educational and career goals include a PhD in Education and working to develop education models that serve non-traditional populations, specifically adult prisoners and the homeless.

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From the Editors: Professionalization and the Writing Center

Fall 2009 / Columns

***Praxis* takes on Professionalization and the Writing Center**

Due to an overwhelming response to this issue's theme, Professionalization and the Writing Center, *Praxis* has decided to do its first double issue! The first part of this series takes on a wide range of questions and perspectives on the topic of the writing center's place in professional development. Our idea for the issue came out of our own Undergraduate Writing Center here at UT. In a *Praxis* query of the UWC staff, one consultant had this to say, "Working at the UWC has opened a world of opportunities for me to interact with several departments on campus in a leadership capacity. I have sharpened my skills as a presenter, researcher and writer. Moreover, I have learned new and innovative ways to connect with people, students in particular, which serves me well in my own work. While working at the Undergraduate Writing Center, I have grown as a scholar and as a person." With former consultants becoming directors, such as this issue's director of the Featured Center, Eliana Schonberg, and a dedicated staff of graduate and undergraduate consultants, the *Praxis* editors felt professionalization was a topic close to home for all writing centers.

UWC Consultants Dramatize Professionalization

Our **Focus** section reveals the many ways in which writing center personnel look at the process of professionalization in their own centers. Jonikka Charlton, in surveying larger trends in the field, demonstrates how the roles writing center director and writing program administrator are being professionalized by an increase in dissertations specializing in their areas. Tiffany Bourelle, on the other hand, shows us how being a writing center tutor has prepared her for the administrative responsibilities she faces as a professor, something, she says, that writing her PhD could never have taught her. Julian Brasington and Wendy Smeets show how when directors rely on tutors for insight, the tutors in-turn professionalize their own roles. Similarly, Naomi Silver, Carrie Luke, Lindsay Nieman and Nichole Premo track the growth and development of tutors going from consultants to colleagues. Conversely, Claire Lutkewitte details how her

role as director has been shaped by interaction with her tutors. Jennifer Jefferson, Amy Cohn, Ellen Goldstein, Chris Wallis and Lindsey Campell discuss the role the writing center plays in their varied careers: a writer, an editor, an instructor, and an alumna. And, finally, Tim Taylor, Nia Klein, Kristi McDuffie, Fern Kory, Devin Black and Serena Heath explore how proper timing plays a tremendous role in consulting, professionalization, and personal development as a tutor and writer.

In our **Training** section, Rebecca Day Babcock's interview with Ben Rafoth (a Ron Maxwell Award winner) continues the conversation began in Charlton's essay about the move toward professionalizing the field of writing center work. They discuss the current state of jobs, research and dissertations in the field. R. Evon Hawkins reviews *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice* by Anne Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll and Elizabeth Boquet. Hawkins explains the relevance and importance of this book to tutor practice at the everyday level. Finally, Katerina Koutsantoni discusses valuable training models for tutoring students with special circumstances.

In our **Consulting** section, Virginia Tucker bridges the gap between "normal" student discourse and the "abnormal" discourse of the academy, and writing specifically. At the same time, she emphasizes that classroom discourse needs to more closely approximate the discourse developed between tutor and tutee, using the teacher or the tutor as a resource instead of source of knowledge. Kelly Kamp offers insight into brainstorming consultations and topic generation. Our Featured Center this month is the University Writing Center at Denver University. The DU center was a natural choice for this issue of Praxis since the Director of Denver University's Writing Center, Eliana Schonberg is a former consultant and Assistant Director of the University of Texas's Undergraduate Writing Center, as well as a founding editor of *Praxis*. We asked Schonberg about her specific thoughts on professionalization and the move from UT to DU. Our Consultant Spotlight this issue is Sydney Boyd, a consultant at University of Idaho Writing Center.

In our **Columns** section, the Undergraduate Writing Center Research Group discusses professionalization from the perspective of three graduate students consultants. The paper discusses the experiences of these three consultants and how their varied academic backgrounds play a role in their writing center work. The Merciless Grammarian answers your questions about proper email etiquette.

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Kairotic Moments in the Writing Center

Fall 2009 / Focus

by **Tim Taylor, Nia Klein, Kristi McDuffie, Fern Kory, Devin Black,** and **Serena Heath**, *Eastern Illinois University*

Making the most of proper timing in a consultation

Situating Kairos–Tim Taylor

Those of us who work in writing centers mark our time. We schedule in 30-minute, 40-minute, 45-minute, and hour increments, and we confer, collaborate, and work in those temporal spaces. That type of time represents the linear quality of how long a session runs, when a writing center pedagogy class begins and ends, the temporal arc of a semester–what the ancient Greeks called *chronos*.

But the time tutors [1] spend in conferences and the time directors devote to training and supervising writing consultants is marked by opportune moments that are varied, complex, and diverse. There are myriad spaces for crucial decision-making within the time constraints of writing conferences and directorships. They mark and drive our work. This article will explore the ways a different conception of time–what the ancient Greeks called *kairos*–should inform and improve our work in writing centers since "*kairos* points to a *qualitative* character of time, the special position an event or action occupies in a series, to a season when something appropriately happens *that* cannot happen just at 'any time,' but only at that time, to a time that marks an opportunity which may not recur" (Smith 47). As James Kinneavy relates in his landmark essay about the concept, *kairos* "might be defined as the right or opportune time to do something, or right measure in doing something" (58). So, at the basic level, *kairos* is "an embodiment of *carpe diem* … with a decidedly individualistic motif" (Hawhee 20). This complementary and, we argue, much more important concept of time emphasizes the individuality of each rhetorical situation or occasion (*kairon*). In ancient Greece and Rome, when rhetors attempted to persuade in the assembly or the courts, they had to invent and arrange their argumentative strategies "on the spot," and, likewise, tutors make judgments on the spot (Kinneavy 67). Among many decisions, tutors decide when to be direct, when to be indirect, when to ask a question, when to move to another part of the paper, when to address mechanical or citation issues, and when and how to conclude a session.

Because writing consultants work with diverse individuals on diverse projects, it is crucial that directors and consultants break free from a mindset of how sessions are supposed to proceed and embrace the Isocratian ideals of *phronesis* and *kairos* […].

The demands of *chronos* bind us, however. We only have so much time with writers who visit our centers, and as directors we only have so much time to

observe consulting sessions and help tutors develop as professionals. Similar to Anne Ellen Geller who calls for writing center directors and consultants to think more reflectively about what she terms as "epochal time," we also argue that we should shift our "concerns from the unyielding demands of clock time to the fluidity and possibility of epochal time," an argument that connects to the ancient idea of *kairos*–right timing, propriety, decorum, due measure, wise moderation, the opportune moment (8). Likewise, Debra Hawhee, in "Kairotic Encounters," offers the idea that *kairos* is connected to invention in the classical canon, so she terms it as "invention-in-the-middle" (17). This conceptualization of *kairos* aligns with the idea of students coming to writing centers as they are in the middle of their thoughts–they are inventing themselves as writers and inventing their papers. Writing centers, based on such ideals, are sites for inventing-in-the-middle. And, as described by Muriel Harris, a writing center is emblematic of "a middle person" (27), an intermediary who has practical wisdom (what the Greeks called *phronesis*) since "practical knowing–the knowledge of the practitioner–arises out of the individual's recognition of a set of possibilities for actions, internalized images, descriptions, and prescriptions" (32-33). Tutors recognize possibilities and think about when to intervene, when to sit back, when to be direct in their questions, when to embrace silence to make writers think, when to explain the moves of academic discourse, and when to focus on helping a student learn to edit and proofread more effectively.

We agree with Carl Glover that writing consultants need to have a "'*kairos*-consciousness': a readiness to respond appropriately to the opportunities created in the tutor-client relationship" (15). And this *kairos*-consciousness needs to be developed in tutor training courses and on-going professional development opportunities. Because writing consultants work with diverse individuals on diverse projects, it is crucial that directors and consultants break free from a mindset of how sessions are supposed to proceed and embrace the Isocratian ideals of *phronesis* and *kairos* that help speakers focus on "what is practical and expedient under *any* given set of circumstances–the principle of *kairos*" (Sipiora 9). Since tutors' audiences are directly in front of them and conferences obviously involve spoken communication, the original subject of classical rhetoric, conferences require consultants to adapt and improvise as the writing situation, the writer's ideas, and the writer's reactions dictate. So, rather than having an ideal of how sessions progress, successful writing consultants play and experiment with the ideas, the tangents, the hiccups, the starts and stops, and the multiple ways sessions run like their writers–as *individuals*. Those who study and practice writing center pedagogy, like students of Isocrates, need to have "an intense awareness of occasion, audience, and situational context. Such is a life based on *kairos*" (Sipiora 15).

The sections that follow examine professional lives based on *kairotic* thinking–the work of writing consultants and writing center directors. The stories and reflections showcase how we have developed a strong *kairos*-consciousness in our work, and, as I relate in the conclusion, how *kairos* can work as an essential guiding principle for promoting strong professional development. In "If Aristotle Ran the Writing Center…," Melissa Ianetta challenges us to use classical rhetoric as "a useful analytical framework" (38) for our work, and she also describes her essay "as an invitation to the possibilities offered to both disciplines when the history of rhetoric is read alongside writing center studies" (39). The writing center consultants who have separate sections in this article–Klein, McDuffie, Black, and Heath–had that opportunity during graduate school since they took my History of Rhetoric graduate seminar alongside our writing

center practicum. As they read Gorgias, Isocrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, they made connections between ancient rhetoric and the writing center, especially how *kairos* informs the work they do. Their sections offer reflections on *kairotic* moments they experienced as consultants in the writing center while Kory and I offer our own perspectives on *kairos* and *kairotic* moments as directors of this writing center. The ancient rhetorical concept fosters a strong intellectual investment in the work we do in the writing center, and we argue that *kairos* is a crucial tool for fostering important reflective practice for both writing consultants and writing directors.

[*To continue reading "*Kairotic *Moments in the Writing Center," please click on the links below*]

The Write Time–Nia Klein

The Most Vital *Kairotic* Moment–Kristi McDuffie

Nurturing *Kairos*-Consciousness–Fern Kory

Right Place, Wrong Timing–Devin Black

Using *Kairos* to Mediate–Serena Heath

Situating Our Rhetorical Practice–Tim Taylor

Note

[1] In this article we use the terms consultant and tutor interchangeably.

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Nia Klein is a second year graduate student in English at **Eastern Illinois University**, concentrating in Composition and Rhetoric. She has a particular interest in writing as healing. Nia has been a writing consultant in the writing center at Eastern Illinois University for two semesters, and she also works as a teaching assistant in first-year composition at **Parkland College** in Champaign, Illinois.

Kristi McDuffie

Kristi McDuffie is a Master's candidate in English at **Eastern Illinois University**. Her focus is on rhetoric and composition, and her research interests are Composition Studies, Linguistics, and Gender Studies. She was a writing consultant in the **Writing Center** for two semesters and now teaches freshman composition.

Fern Kory

Fern Kory is a professor of English at **Eastern Illinois University** whose interest in composition pedagogy was sparked early in her graduate work at **University of California, Santa Barbara**, where she was mentored as a teacher of composition by Sheridan Blau, and where she participated in the **South Coast Writing Project** Summer Open Program. For more than ten years, she has been Assistant Director of the EIU **Writing Center** (founded in 1981 by Jeanne Simpson), and during that time she has worked alongside four (very) different directors. She values the truly collaborative nature of writing center work and the opportunity to work with our graduate assistant tutors, who bring fresh energy and insight to the writing center each year. Regional, National and **International Writing Center Association** conferences (most recently the **ECWCA** conference at Purdue) have also been a source of inspiration and growth.

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Mentoring Students with Special Circumstances

Fall 2009 / Training

by **Dr Katerina Koutsantoni**, King's College London

Connecting the personal and the professional

Dr Katerina Koutsantoni

Having worked in education for fifteen years now has given me the privilege to meet students from a range of ethnic, racial, or religious backgrounds. I've taught and supported people of all ages, from 6-year olds to over 65-year olds. I feel rewarded when working with mature students (age 21+)[1] as to me this involves contributing to their learning by presenting them with new interests, equipping them with new incentives, a new focus. I attribute this relationship to the fact that we have both lived through a few decades, acquired experiences which may be similar or radically different, are able to exchange these experiences, and can reach a stage whereby the learning is done on a friendly basis; where the relationship is not one between teacher and student, tutor and learner, superior and inferior, but one between two equals, two learners developing new skills and acquiring different sets of knowledge in a process of feeding each other with new information.

I was employed as project executive in a UK writing center based in a London university for just over two and half years, handling a range of responsibilities, from administrative to research and from one-to-one tutoring in discipline-specific academic writing to pastoral support for undergraduate and graduate students. What I want to share in this article is the experiences I had in offering mentoring support to students who were in difficult situations and who needed more than just academic writing support; these students were primarily seeking pastoral support in the sense of appealing to an active listener, an empathic and sympathetic ear, a person who would be willing to sit down with them and find out why the process of writing assignments and meeting deadlines was taking more time than normal. While I worked with more than three students, I wish

here to concentrate on those three to whom I felt closer emotionally and in a better position to assist, primarily due to similarities I saw with my personal experiences. I will be looking at each of them as a case study, providing a descriptive account and offering personal reflection in combination with theories extracted from counselling psychology to substantiate my thoughts[2]. I hope that my insights will be helpful to mentors who work with students in similar circumstances.

Case Study 1
Yvette: BA Carribean Studies and History

I had been in telephone contact with Yvette for several months before we met in person. She had contacted the writing center, wishing to book an appointment for a tutorial to receive help with a working assignment. Yvette was an undergraduate mature student[3], studying a BA in Carribean Studies and History.

Yvette failed to meet her appointment three times in a row and in a subsequent telephone exchange she explained that this was because she had been feeling unwell and was booked in for a scan at the hospital. Unable to shed my inquisitive streak, I asked her what was wrong. Blood tests had shown there were abnormalities in her uterus, therefore a scan was necessary to investigate further. I tried my best over the telephone to reassure Yvette that her health came first and that her academic responsibilities would eventually fall into place, and I for one would be more than willing to help her if she needed me.

She was in need of empathic understanding in the sense of simply being heard and understood.

Yvette did eventually come to the center on the forth or fifth attempt. I asked her how she was feeling, what the progress was on her condition, how it had all started. I tried to create a warm atmosphere simply with a smile and a firm handshake so she could feel comfortable and at ease. In the field of counselling, theorists like Mearns and Thorne argue that a genuine, spontaneous smile will be a means of communicating, while others will show their warmth by using words or physical contact (69). Similarly, Sharpley, Jeffrey, and McMah remark that basic rapport, accepted as a building block of the therapeutic alliance, can be supported by the appropriate use of facial, among other types of, expressions which convey this interest and engagement from the counsellor to the client (353). Yvette was able to share with me that she had been in discomfort for years since giving birth to her second daughter and often in and out of hospitals. It had taken doctors a long time to discover that she had cancer of the uterus and that a hysterectomy was imperative. She had been coughing up a dark substance for a few days, yet she seemed oblivious to its seriousness and appeared fine with doctors' reassurances that they just needed to get it checked out as they couldn't be sure what it was.

All that did not seem congruent with the healthy-looking person I had before me, yet I thought it best to put that aside and focus on the help Yvette needed with her essay and about which she was becoming increasingly worried. A constructive session followed, with both of us going through her draft and making suggestions. Yvette had not written a conclusion as she felt she could not quite put down on paper what she wanted to say. I asked her to give me a verbal account of her idea and, afterward, I suggested that she write down exactly what she'd told me, thus encouraging a type of freewriting exercise.

She did and was astonished at herself and the shape her paragraph quickly assumed.

The session finished with Yvette feeling satisfied with her progress and agreeing to go home and complete her draft. She promised to come back for a second appointment to show me the completed draft; sadly, I lost track of her. I like to think today that Yvette has been able to complete her course and wish I had been able to help more.

Case Study 2
Haydeh: BSc Computer Science

Haydeh contacted me by email to say that she had heard I had helped other students in the past. She enquired about the possibility of meeting me to get advice on a personal statement she was writing for her Master's application to a different institution. I agreed to help her, and booked an appointment for the following day. Haydeh was Turkish, very close to me culturally (I am Greek), and very friendly, albeit quite hesitant and reserved. When I asked her to supply me with a few details about the background to her studies so I could help her formulate the statement, she mentioned that this exercise was taking her a long time because personal problems prevented her from concentrating.

I could not help but ask what those problems were. She explained that she had an older sister who had in recent years developed symptoms of schizophrenia making her very aggressive and violent. She had two children, both of whom she had to look after, in addition to caring for her sick sister. Being alone in the UK with no support from her parents or other family was causing her mental and physical exhaustion and taking a toll on her academic performance as well as her chance to simply live her own life while she was still young. It was an emotional hour with Haydeh collapsing into tears and expressing despair about what to do, how to help her sister, and how to help herself be free from such obligation. She was in need of empathic understanding in the sense of simply being heard and understood. She needed a listener who would try to see things from her perspective and be open to her experiences so that she could move from a position of alienation to one of intimacy (Culley and Bond 61). I tried very hard to listen to Haydeh, calm her down, console her, talk about the logistics of what she could do, offer suggestions.

To take her mind off the issue, we then worked on Haydeh's statement. I tried to help her list factual details chronologically for more coherence as well as elaborate further on her academic achievements in order to strengthen her statement. Here was a bright person who had graduated with a distinction from university and even got a conference paper accepted, which is rather unusual for someone at the undergraduate level. With input from Haydeh and extensive collaborative work, the experience of eventually seeing a complete statement by the end of our session was very gratifying to us both.

Case Study 3
Greg: Graduate Diploma in Law, Common Professional Examination (CPE)

Greg was a profoundly deaf student and a regular user of the writing center. During the times I met him either face-to-face or through email correspondence, he appeared a rather stern student who was well aware of what he wanted and demanded to have it. A few months elapsed between the times Greg used the center and had tutorial sessions with mentors and the

occasion I met him to discuss our potential collaboration.

When Greg spoke to me at the center, he explained that he needed to see someone to help him finalize his last two assignments before completion of his course. He stressed that the Disabilities and Dyslexia unit in Student Services was unable to help him as it did not seem to have knowledge of British sign language or of helping a profoundly deaf student. He asked me in passing whether I knew anything myself and was ready to dismiss me assuming that I did not, when I told him that my parents were in fact also profoundly deaf and that I was very much familiar with their difficulties having grown up in a quiet environment. Greg looked surprised, and I was relieved to notice an instant shift in his attitude from a stern, serious look to a very soft, friendly one. While not a person who lacked self-confidence, Greg had learned to be very self-conscious, guarded, defensive about his disability and eager to secure acceptance by others. Such acceptance consisted of recognizing and respecting his difference and prizing his uniqueness (Culley and Bond 17).

A personal interest one may have in a student's case, because of a gender, cultural, or disability affinity need not be the definitive and indispensable factor in utilizing skills that such training or knowledge can give.

Greg remarked that because of my personal experience I could probably understand the difficulty deaf students faced when trying to express themselves in writing, precisely because of not being able to hear speaking intonation and subsequently sentence construction in writing. He was worried about the quality of his assignments and, as they were the final ones, he wanted to make sure they were of an acceptable standard. I reassured Greg that I would do my best to help him. He was free to email me his assignments, and I would go through them and provide extensive feedback for his consideration and subsequent revision.

In the course of the following weeks, I checked two very complex pieces by Greg. These were at times significantly poor, not however missing evidence of knowledge in the subject area (very much the contrary as they demonstrated clear evidence of extensive research and reading), but lacking hearing people's ability to write, which is precisely what Greg had identified himself. Sentence structures were often incoherent; there were long chunks of text with consecutive clauses but no pauses in between; definite and indefinite articles were often missing — all completely understandable errors as, according to my personal experience at least, deaf people tend to use key sentence components when they speak or write (i.e. main verbs, nouns, adjectives) while they are also addressed in the same manner to ensure understanding of basic concepts.

In the space of a couple of sessions, it was difficult to help Greg significantly improve his writing. I encouraged him to pause more between sentences using basic punctuation; to avoid producing convoluted chunks of text which were more likely to confuse both him and his readers; and, to read and re-read his writing to ensure coherence. I don't know how Greg did in his assignments but kind emails of thanks that followed our meeting felt particularly rewarding.

Conclusion and Reflections

These experiences had a profound impact on me. Following the end of that academic year, I went on to study for a one-year course in Counselling Skills, one of the university's professional development courses, which changed my life

both personally and professionally. Especially with regard to female students, I developed a strong desire to be empathic and attempt to forge a bond with them, which might help towards alleviating their problems. After all, as Sasaki and Yamasaki report, personal and interpersonal problems are particularly stressful for women, more so than men, with the former suffering more from internal problems (64).

While I am not suggesting that this type of training is essential for writing center tutors, it can certainly bring invaluable benefits in understanding students' mindsets, especially in cases where personal problems become entangled with their academic responsibilities, can demonstrate that the boundaries between academic and pastoral support are not clear cut, and can render the help that the tutor can offer even more comprehensive. A personal interest one may have in a student's case, because of a gender, cultural, or disability affinity need not be the definitive and indispensable factor in utilizing skills that such training or knowledge can give.

Notes

[1]"Mature student": term used in the UK Higher Education system to refer to students aged 21+ for undergraduate programmes, and 25+ for graduate programmes.

[2]Permission to use the story of all three students was requested and received before the article's submission to the journal. The names used are fictitious.

[3]Please refer to endnote 1 for an explanation of the term "mature student."

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Nurturing Kairos-Consciousness

by **Fern Kory**, Eastern Illinois University

The process of becoming a better writing consultant is just as incremental and recursive as the process of becoming a better writer. For that matter, so is the process of becoming a better writing center administrator. As Assistant Director of the **Writing Center**, I occupy a space one level "up" from consultant, but what that means in practical terms is that I am one step *removed* from the action. Students who come to our writing center work with consultants that the Writing Center Director and I have oriented and trained. We supervise the work of these writing consultants, but supervision is not x-ray vision, and we have no reason to believe that our position gives us a superior view of the action. For that matter, since the directors of our center do not work as consultants, and I (unlike Taylor) have never held a position as a peer tutor, I do not have as much direct, situated experience as Klein and Heath do after one semester or Black and McDuffie after two, though I have been Assistant Director of the Writing Center for eleven years now. Still, I do not feel superfluous as I orbit around consulting sessions and consultants. I look for ways to increase the likelihood that students who visit the writing center are assisted by consultants who are increasingly able to recognize *kairotic* moments.

Right-minded consultants prepare themselves for this moment as McDuffie did: they do not rest until they are satisfied that their methods align with their goals.

I like Benedikt's description of *kairos* as "the right person doing the right thing at the right time *and for the right reasons*" (233). A big part of my job is to help each consultant become the right person for this job, starting at Orientation during which Taylor and I focus as much on "right reasons" as on procedures. As this suggests, our ideal consultant is not someone who consistently works through a pre-determined sequence of right actions–though we do have standard practices, cherished principles, and a process-oriented "visitation sheet" we ask consultants to use during sessions. These are important components of the scaffolding we provide to tutors-in-training. But that is not all that they will need.

The right thing to do in a particular consulting session is going to emerge from the right reasons in an "unprecedented" moment (White qtd. in Hawhee 14). Right-minded consultants prepare themselves for this moment as McDuffie did: they do not rest until they are satisfied that their methods align with their goals. From that principled position, and with "intense awareness of occasion, audience and situational context" (Sipiora 15), consultants can seize the *kairotic* moment by using methods that are "practical and expedient" (9) and perhaps even unorthodox. Klein's decision to take that writer's draft away from her and "set it upside down on the other side of the table" does not obviously align with the statement in our current handbook that it is the writer, not the consultant, who owns the writing, but it does align with the principle behind it:

Klein intuited that the best way to help this particular writer take ownership of her writing was to abduct the draft to which she was in thrall.

Kairos has been described as "the right or opportune time to do something, or right measure in doing something" (Kinneavy 58). This plays out differently for writing center administrators than it does for consultants. As the pronouns in my section imply, I do not make as many unilateral, spontaneous, intuitive decisions about what to do and when to do it. I am one member of an administrative team, so my part in these decisions is necessarily more collaborative, deliberative, and externalized. This is fine since Taylor and I meet with consultants in various configurations (one-to-one, two-to-one, in groups, as a group) at regular intervals throughout their first year in the writing center. *Chronos* is on our side, and we each have the benefit of the others' intuitions to guide us in making decisions or learning from the decisions we have made.

In practice I have found that that the right time to intervene in a consulting session is very seldom "now," only occasionally "later," and often "never"–at least in the early stages, when consultants are gaining the experience that will help them get a feel for what does and does not work, with whom, and under what circumstances.

Sometimes being one member of a team does complicate our ability to create or respond to *kairotic* moments. We are still trying to figure out how to coordinate our blog posts so that we are not confusing our staff or excessively appropriating the public space of the blog to reflect on our writing center practice. Talking through possible strategies has been valuable and interesting. In classical rhetoric, *kairos* is not just a matter of seizing the moment but of biding your time, of "knowing when to speak and when to be silent and knowing how much to say or how little to say" (Glover 16). My experience suggests that both aspects of Socrates' "concept of the propriety of time" (qtd. in Glover 15) are vital to tutor training, particularly in relation to the supervision of tutors-in-training.

In practice I have found that that the right time to intervene in a consulting session is very seldom "now," only occasionally "later," and often "never"–at least in the early stages, when consultants are gaining the experience that will help them get a feel for what does and does not work, with whom, and under what circumstances. Like Boquet, "I don't want tutors to fear mistakes–because they *will* make them. The real skill lies in figuring out what to make of those mistakes" (81). For directors of writing centers, the trick is to create situations in which consultants can own their answers to this question.

Intervention by invitation–whether during an individual conference or a meeting of the collective–creates a potentially *kairotic* moment in which we can consider a variety of "right reasons" for taking different kinds of action. In our weekly practicum meetings during the first semester, but also in individual conferences, weekly blog posts, and informal discussions with peers, consultants select challenges or issues they want to discuss. They set the agenda for their own learning by identifying those moments that they are already thinking or worrying about. Because "tutors often have a hard time identifying moments when decisions get made," Taylor and I push for metacognition in discussion and in assignments, which include reflection memos, observation memos, and a philosophy of writing center consulting (Geller 20).

Hawhee describes *kairos* as a "mode of intervention" characterized by "a simultaneously interruptive and connective hooking-in to circulating discourses" (24). As administrators, Taylor and I are responsible for adding to the circulating discourses available to consultants and for helping them make connections among theories, principles, and practices. We set the agenda for practicum so that, through assigned readings and presentations, consultants learn more about the choices writers and consultants have in the context of a consulting session, and we try to get that information to them in a timely manner. Because English Language Learners are among our earliest visitors each semester, we have moved ELL-related readings closer to the front of the syllabus. In the past these had appeared around mid-term, partly because we worried about introducing complications (especially those related to how directive a tutor should be) before our consultants had a grip on "the basics." At one time this looked like a sensible pedagogical progression to me, but it now seems obvious that this linear (and chauvinistic) vision of tutor training did not equip consultants with the theory (the "right reasons") or the menu of practical possibilities that these tutors-in-training needed to work–and play–with the individual student writers they would meet, and to begin to develop their *kairos*-consciousness.

[*To continue reading "*Kairotic *Moments in the Writing Center," please click on the links below*]

Right Place, Wrong Timing–Devin Black

Using *Kairos* to Mediate–Serena Heath

Situating Our Rhetorical Practice–Tim Taylor

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Professional Development at the UWC: Three Personal Experiences

Fall 2009 / Columns

by **Alanna Bitzel, Stephanie Odom**, and **Andrea Saathoff**, *University of Texas at Austin*

The intersection between various fields of study and leadership

The Undergraduate Writing Center (UWC) at The University of Texas at Austin (UT) employs both undergraduate and graduate students from a variety of backgrounds and academic fields. Many graduate students work at the UWC to develop professionally in a unique environment while earning their graduate degrees. They bring their own skill sets, academic areas of interest, and life experiences to their work, consulting or otherwise, at the UWC. This variety of backgrounds influences not only how these consultants conceptualize the writing process but also how they interact with students getting help writing as well as their relationships with their fellow consultants. The following perspectives of three graduate students at the UWC highlight how their personal histories have contributed to their roles as consultants and employees at the Center. Furthermore, they illustrate the unexpected intersections between various fields of study and leadership in this unique setting.

Stephanie:

When we first began discussing what individual strengths we brought to the UWC from our professional environments, I had trouble identifying mine because I took for granted that consultants shared my areas of expertise — literary studies, rhetoric, and pedagogy. But during our conversation, I realized that assumption was not the case. One thing I love about the UWC is the chance to work with talented peers from across disciplines; many of us, but not all, are from the English department. Discussing professionalization in the writing center has given me a chance to learn more about what my colleagues bring to their jobs as well as how my skills are unique and valuable to consulting.

One thing I love about the UWC is the chance to work with talented peers from across disciplines; many of us, but not all, are from the English department.

I have realized that my training in literature has equipped me with close reading skills and a vocabulary for talking about language in detail. I am comfortable reading a passage very slowly and carefully and dissecting what works and does not work about it because in literature classes, we spend long periods of time on small selections of texts. Having the patience to slow down and focus on a small but representative sample of writing can really help students with sentence-level issues.

Working in the UWC during my third year of graduate school was actually a

factor in my decision to leave literature behind and concentrate in rhetoric for my Ph.D. In rhetoric coursework and in my rhetoric dissertation group, the first aspects of a text we discuss are audience and context. Attention to these aspects of writing have become second-nature to me when looking at a piece of student writing, since really only the audience's reaction to the writing will help the student realize his or her goal. I can offer my feedback as a reader, but I try to be clear when I do not know that my reaction is likely to approximate the specific audience (e.g., the professor, admissions committee reader, potential boss, etc.). Often, at the end of consultations, students leave with a list of questions they need to ask their real audiences, or readers more closely approximating their real audiences. I feel that I can help writers find out as much as they can about and from their intended audiences in order to meet those audiences' needs and expectations and to differentiate from readers who are unlike them in some way. For example, just because a student's roommate and mother think her personal statement is stellar does not mean that medical school admissions committees will evaluate it the same way. Trying to anticipate an audience's reaction based on what one already knows about it is one rhetorical skill that will help students throughout their lives in college and beyond.

From my reading, I am also familiar with some theories about how the writing process works and can help students abandon the idea that one "correct" writing process exists or the idea that "good writers" must implement a particular writing process. Sometimes students are anxious that their papers do not conform to the thesis statement that they started out with or that got their instructor's approval. In most cases, once they wrote a draft of the paper they ended up with a much more interesting argument, so I give them permission to abandon their working thesis and work in a new one that reflects their new thoughts on the subject. For experienced writers who know that thinking changes after you write intensively on a topic, such a decision is obvious, but we need to explain this variation from the traditional, rigid, prescriptive writing process to novice writers.

In addition to having studied literature and rhetoric, I have also taught for six years and bring pedagogical training to the table. I know that writing assignment prompts take a lot of forethought and refining once you see how students read and address them. I have certainly been guilty of not communicating some of my assumptions in my assignment prompts, and only after students ask questions am I able to clarify what I mean in more explicit language. Therefore, I encourage students to ask their instructors for help interpreting assignment prompts when they are not sure what their task is. Sadly, as an instructor, I have seen some very interesting papers that did not address the prompt, and thus were DOA when I received them. I try to prevent UWC writers from making that early mistake by encouraging them to ask questions that clarify what task they need to fulfill.

I also know from working with students that they learn and express themselves in many different ways. Some students are quiet and need to be drawn out of their shells with very specific questions. Some students are very vocal and think problems out by explaining them verbally to an interlocutor; in these situations, listening and recording students' thoughts on paper can be the best way to help them. Some students write a lot and then narrow their focus and need to eliminate what is no longer relevant. And some students think they do not have anything original to contribute until you ask questions to indicate what is unique about their argument. Trying to adapt my teaching to different learning

and writing styles has been good preparation to deal with the range of students we see in the UWC.

Andrea:

I was nervous when I first started working at the UWC because I am not getting my degree in literature, nor have I taught a class in rhetoric. I attended the fall 2008 orientation for new consultants and fumbled through a mock consultation with one of the veteran consultants. Throughout the mock consultation I felt unsure of my abilities and how to handle the issues we examined on the paper in front of us. After being at the UWC for over a year, I have realized that I possess a number of qualities and skills that not only aid me in being a great consultant but also a contributing member of the UWC staff and a leader among my peers. Many of the skills I use at the UWC have been acquired from being involved with athletics, the MS.Ed. program I completed in mental health counseling, and new strengths that I have acquired from being a psychology doctoral student at UT. I quickly learned that much of what we do at the UWC is beyond what one sees on a piece of paper.

By truly listening and showing students that I am invested in the assignment and their progress in writing, the 45 minute consultation turns into a time when they truly feel acknowledged and heard.

I am continually amazed at how vital it is to truly listen to the student I am helping. Many times I have found that students get so overwhelmed with the technical aspects of writing that the clarity of what they intend to communicate is lost. By truly listening and showing students that I am invested in the assignment and their progress in writing, the 45 minute consultation turns into a time when they truly feel acknowledged and heard. When it happens, I appreciate how quickly they identify areas for improvement in their work and how much more at ease they are with the consulting experience.

Compassion for others is consistently present in my life. I have compassion for my friends, family, clients, students here at the UWC, and the peers with whom I work. Compassion is present within me when a student arrives at the UWC two hours before a paper is due. I remember what it is like in college to have assignments due simultaneously in several classes, to have practice at 6:00 AM for the rowing team, and then to somehow find the time to get help on a paper on which I truly wanted to do well. I remind myself that I am the "middle ground" between the student and the teacher/professor, which is an integral part of my role as a writing consultant. Many of the students I help do not need another authority figure to direct them; they need someone who believes in their abilities to improve as writers.

Teamwork is another aspect of working at the UWC that I find both appealing and enjoyable. Before starting to work at the UWC, I had the opportunity to collaborate on several manuscripts and presentations in the social sciences. I did not realize how valuable these experiences would be and have helped me to prepare articles for Praxis, present at conferences, and write White Papers. These experiences have also helped me to enjoy the Project Group work at the UWC because of the teamwork mentality that the UWC supports and holds necessary for the writing center to continue to expand and meet students' needs.

I have also found that students are receptive to a teamwork approach to their

writing. Helping students feel that we are "in it with them" brings comfort and ease to the consulting process. This skill also sheds light on our role as consultants and the non-directive philosophy upon which the UWC is based. I try to empower students to feel ownership over their writing. At times, this task can be more challenging than others, especially if the students lack confidence or feel forced by their instructor to get help from the writing center. In these cases, I find it most helpful to encourage students to be in control of what happens during the consultation. Ultimately, they decide the focus of their consultations. I help them identify the aspects of their writing that they can strengthen, which involves teamwork, trust, and collaboration.

In addition, I never realized that I would utilize my research skills at the UWC. I have found my science writing skills and experience with grant writing to be useful with the variety of assignments students bring to the UWC. I have helped many students with biology, chemistry, and engineering reports. Even if the subject matter is one in which I am unfamiliar, I look for a style of writing and degree of clarity when reading their assignments. I am grateful for the skills and experiences I can draw upon to help students with a wide range of assignments and concerns.

As my confidence has increased over the course of the past year, so has my role within the UWC. This semester I have taken on a leadership position as one of the Assistant Directors, and I am grateful to be a part of the vision of the UWC. I enjoy learning about the inner workings of the UWC and the ways in which we work together with the other resources on campus. I plan to continue to learn more about the writing process, hone my skills as a writing consultant, and work closely with those around me in this leadership capacity.

Alanna:

I started working as a consultant in the UWC in 2003 as an undergraduate, studying English, Government, Psychology, and Spanish in the Liberal Arts Honors program. I continued on as a graduate student in the joint program between UT Law and the LBJ School of Public Affairs, with a background in violence against women and a specialization in Public Management and Leadership. I am also participating in the Portfolio Program in Women's and Gender Studies. The heart of my studies in this academic program is public service. More specifically, I am committed to working with individuals on developing their writing skills and to improving access to writing assistance and support.

The range of my academic work has allowed me to work effectively with students from many departments across campus, and having gone to UT as an undergraduate, I can empathize with the unique needs of UT students. In addition, as the only one at the UWC in the joint UT Law-LBJ School program, I have been able to serve as a resource for students who are applying to law and/or public policy/affairs programs. It has also affected my writing center work and philosophy.

It has also simultaneously emphasized that questions do not have just one right answer, which is useful in terms of both explaining to students how to approach writing but also the content of writing itself - no one "right" argument exists; rather students must use materials to develop a strong argument, one on which individuals may disagree.

I began my joint program at the law school. Importantly, my legal education has informed my work at the UWC in a variety of ways. For example, it has helped me to work in highly-time structured capacities, which is useful, for example, in the context of the 45 minute consultation. I can assess a situation and work with a student to set goals or priorities for the consultation fairly quickly, structuring a consultation to best meet that student's wishes and needs. It has reinforced my practical (as opposed to theoretical) mindedness, which has helped me to better think about and de-mystify the writing process to students, explaining it as a series of steps, strategies, and questions through which students can progress. It has also simultaneously emphasized that questions do not have just one right answer, which is useful in terms of both explaining to students how to approach writing but also the content of writing itself - no one "right" argument exists; rather students must use materials to develop a strong argument, one on which individuals may disagree. I use this approach not only as a consultant but in my work as an instructor at UT. I taught RHE 306 last year, and this year, I am teaching RHE 309K: The Rhetoric of American Social Movements, a course influenced by my work in women's issues and leadership.

In my second year of my program, I took courses exclusively at the LBJ School. During this time, I discovered that the atmosphere at the LBJ School is quite different from that at the law school. At LBJ, students frequently participate in group work and team efforts to develop solutions to problems. This collaborative spirit is in keeping with and has reinforced the non-directive, non-evaluative philosophy we employ at the UWC. It has assisted me on both an individual level in my consultations, working with undergraduates on their writing or co-writing white papers and articles for publication with consultants at the UWC, as well as on an organizational level as an administrator, allowing me to put my study of leadership into practice. Previously at the UWC I served as an Assistant Director for two years, and I have worked as a project group leader, overseeing various non-consulting projects in which consultants can participate.

Currently, I am a Community Outreach Coordinator. This role is ideal for me, as it builds on and extends my previous work at the UWC and incorporates my skills as a writing instructor. It has also allowed me to re-focus my energies at the UWC and apply what I have learned about leadership at the LBJ School to this leadership role at the UWC. In this outreach position, I have developed and implemented writing institutes designed to train tutors, advisors, and instructors at UT with students on writing and to in turn train their staff members to work with students on writing. These institutes not only provide the opportunity for students to learn, grow, and develop their capacities from the writing help they will receive, but they also enable individuals to develop their abilities and serve as leaders who will go back into in their communities, translate our writing center pedagogy, and put it into practice with their students.

Overall, I have been able to combine my experience at the UWC with my undergraduate and graduate studies to examine myself and my practices and have gained a broader perspective about the work we do at the UWC. Specifically, my work as a graduate student has given me the language to talk about our work at the UWC from an organizational perspective, identifying areas for improvement in a well-functioning and successful organization and learning how to bring about change. Studying and working in different environments has enhanced my flexibility and has helped me in negotiating the

difference between working with consultants as peers and interacting with them when I am in a position of leadership. Finally, it has emphasized the importance of reflecting on my practice, as a consultant, teacher, and leader, knowing my own capabilities and the skills I bring as well as how to delegate certain roles to others.

Alanna Bitzel

Alanna Bitzel is a graduate student specializing in Public Management and Leadership in the joint program between the Law School and the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin. She is currently serving as Community Outreach Coordinator at the Undergraduate Writing Center.

Stephanie Odom

Stephanie Odom is in her fifth year of UT's English PhD program. Her concentrations are Rhetoric and American Literature, and her writing consultant experience includes working for two years in UT's Undergraduate Writing Center and as a writing consultant for UT's School of Social Work graduate program. She is currently an Assistant Director for Lower-Division Writing in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing.

Andrea Saathoff

Andrea Saathoff is a Counseling Psychology doctoral student in the Educational Psychology Department at the University of Texas at Austin. This is Andrea's second year working at the Undergraduate Writing Center and her first year serving as an Assistant Director.

Praxis: A Writing Center Journal (2003-2011)

Professionalizing the Everyday

Fall 2009 / Training

by **R. Evon Hawkins**, University of Southern Indiana

A Review of *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice*

R. Evon Hawkins

When I think of tutors' professionalization, I inevitably consider the texts I encourage tutors to read — not just tutor training manuals but also the theory and research that shape my understanding of our field. One such text that I've recently adopted for a new tutor training course is *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice* by Anne Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll and Elizabeth Boquet. Although I find this to be one of the most progressive writing center texts in our scholarly canon, it's likely not on many tutors' reading lists because it was written ostensibly for writing center administrators. Despite its title, this book's insights into writing center leadership are not confined to the everyday nuts and bolts of running a center but are also valuable for tutors.

Tutors, of course, know better than anyone that the "ideal" tutor/session/client/writing center we describe in tutor training and in most writing center scholarship doesn't exist.

Geller, et al., present writing centers as training grounds for literacy leaders who are able to flexibly blend theory and practice by focusing on the learning moments available to everyone in the writing center. As a former tutor and current writing center administrator, I believe *The Everyday Writing Center* is an important text for tutors because they are integral to writing center leadership, as this issue of *Praxis* makes clear. The authors conceive of leading, learning, and collaborating as intertwined activities; this view can help tutors

move beyond thinking of what should or should not happen in a writing center and enable them to theorize what actually happens in their writing centers every day.

The Everyday Writing Center focuses on two interrelated strands: the "everyday" of the title and the "community of practice" of the subtitle. Tutors, of course, know better than anyone that the "ideal" tutor/session/client/writing center we describe in tutor training and in most writing center scholarship doesn't exist. The everyday is the difference between the carefully constructed mock tutorial and the messy, imperfect, and sometimes frustrating tutoring session that a tutor engages in multiple times a day. Rather than lament the nonexistence of this ideal, *The Everyday Writing Center* asks us to build theory and improve practice by reflecting on what *does* happen and why — not by emphasizing what *should* happen and analyzing why it doesn't. As the authors put it, we should embrace "the ability of everyday exchanges to tell us something about our writing centers as representing what Etienne Wenger calls 'communities of practice'" (6). Even our best, most elegant theories can't describe that "something," for theory divorced from experience doesn't account for the interactions between real writers, readers, tutors, students, directors, and teachers.

To be theorized, the everyday lived experiences of writing center work must be approached through what the authors term a "Trickster" mindset. In other words, the everyday is only valuable if approached through a particular lens. "Are we willing," they ask,

> to be awakened by jarring moments, by anxieties about our practices, policies, and procedures? Are we prepared to question the value of a set of prescribed and relatively stable steps that get the tutor from here to there in exchange for a philosophy that might leave tutors and writers standing alone (yet together) at a potentially fantastic crossroad? (18)

The Trickster figure, a Coyote or a Loki or a Hermes (to use the authors' examples), challenges us to see the everyday in new ways and to forgo complacency in favor of complexity.

Respect for plural identities is part and parcel of the authors' idea of a writing center community of practice constructed out of everyday lived experience.

We see the everyday complexity of our work when we consider just two of the challenges the authors pose about received theories of writing center practice: the dichotomy between "directive" and "non-directive" approaches and the assumption that tutors have a stable, univocal identity. Chapter 2, "Trickster at Your Table," asks why tutors should strive for an "ideal" technique (whether directive or non-directive) instead of responding to each client's needs and focuses on how tutor training methods can teach responsiveness instead of idealism (21-22). The road to being a Trickster tutor starts with reflecting on what we actually do in practice and *why* we do it, rather than staunchly adhering to techniques from tutor training manuals, which tutors may (falsely) hope will provide "no-fail strategies" or "quick, easy answers" (25). Trickster tutors embrace ambiguity and uncertainty. In the everyday life of the writing center, the Trickster mindset requires time set aside for tutors to reflect — to journal, to talk to colleagues, and to read writing center theory.

While tutor training manuals provide a necessary repertoire of strategies for tutors, anyone who has ever experienced an actual tutorial likely appreciates the freedom to respond to clients as individuals rather than feeling compelled to force each session into a predetermined, theorized mold. *The Everyday Writing Center* furthermore prompts us to recognize that tutors' roles outside of the writing center necessarily contribute to the sorts of tutors they become; that is, just as the ideal session doesn't exist, neither does the ideal tutor. Respect for plural identities is part and parcel of the authors' idea of a writing center community of practice constructed out of everyday lived experience: "Together, we [the authors] have come to reject the idea that writing center directors wear different hats for different tasks, and to embrace instead a style of leadership through which interactions with writers, tutors, faculty and administrators emerge from a common set of principles and a shared sense of goals" (114). This same logic applies to writing center tutors, who well know the impossibility of donning their "tutor hat" when they step into the center, as if every other "hat" they wear (parent, woman, African-American, international student, teacher, Christian) can be placed in the proverbial closet and picked up at the end of their shift.

***The Everyday Writing Center* is, at bottom, an important text for tutors because it scripts a central role for writing centers in the ideology and practices of secondary and higher education.**

The complex identities of writing center tutors, directors, and clients intersect in Chapter 6, the book's most compelling and timely chapter, titled "Everyday Racism: Anti-Racism Work and Writing Center Practice." This chapter poses the disturbing possibility that writing centers are complicit in pervasive, institutionalized, systemic racism. Tutors (not to mention directors) may balk at this accusation, yet consider for a moment that racism is not limited to the overt, individual acts (a racial slur, a racist joke) we normally classify as such. If, like critical race theorists, we define racism as "race prejudice magnified, enforced, and reproduced by systemic and institutional power," we understand that racism "is characterized most particularly by the abuse of power within the institutions and systems that shape all of our lives — including the high schools, colleges, and universities in which we learn, teach, and tutor" (94-95). As an example, *The Everyday Writing Center* relates the heartbreaking story of Krista, a black tutor at a predominately-white university who left the writing center after colleagues repeatedly mistook her for a client, assuming that a black student would only be there for help (87-88). As a community of practice, the authors maintain that writing centers have not done all they could do to promote anti-racist agendas; we assume that the lack of overt racism in the writing center marks it as a "safe," "neutral," perhaps even "sanitized" space exempt from racist beliefs because "race" does not figure into the identity of an "ideal" tutor/client/session. While Krista's example may be extreme, the fact remains that racism is real and present on our campuses, and all writing center professionals need to be agents for what the authors call "transformational change," a "collaborative, process-oriented, holistic [approach] in the sense that it requires attentiveness to the systemic and institutional context from which conflict emerges" (104).

What does an anti-racist agenda have to do with tutor professionalization? Like the authors' exhortation to assume a Trickster mindset that resists reification of received traditions, the challenge to work for transformational change in the educational community at large reminds tutors that the work we do in writing

centers influences and is influenced by our institutions. *The Everyday Writing Center* is, at bottom, an important text for tutors because it scripts a central role for writing centers in the ideology and practices of secondary and higher education. The book recognizes that writing centers are enmeshed in the everyday negotiations of meaning that take place between tutors and students, between students and teachers, between students and the academy, between tutors and directors, and so on. To effectively and ethically occupy this central position, we need a community of practice based in a learning paradigm (one that focuses on helping students learn, not on university "services or teaching") and fostered by dynamic leaders (111). The authors maintain that writing center directors are what John Tagg has called "structural leaders" by virtue of their institutionally appointed roles, yet they should strive to combine with this role that of the functional leader, "those who assume a leadership role out of a sense of mission, of need, of purpose and who require the participation of others to accomplish this purpose" (11). Tutors, too, are structural leaders by virtue of their institutionally appointed roles (after all, not just any student is invited to work in the writing center) and, like directors, tutors have the option to also become functional leaders in the writing center.

At the **International Writing Center Association's 2009 Summer Institute for Writing Center Directors and Professionals**, a panel of tutors and tutor alumni from Philadelphia's Temple University stated that the biggest influence on their practices was not theory but the techniques and attitudes they observed in other tutors and in the center's professional staff. Those tutors' everyday experiences, echoed in my own memories of tutor training, are what make the philosophy behind *The Everyday Writing Center* important for tutors. "As communities of practice," the authors write, writing centers

> have a history of exploring the ways in which meaning is negotiated among mutually engaged participants… [T]his design must be based on something other than the familiar stratification between directors and tutors, tutors and writers, directors and professors, peer tutors and professional instructors. Though all of these participants come from their own many sites of practice, within the writing center they become members of the writing center community of practice and, as such, should be viewed as learners on common ground. (7)

Every day, each one of us constructs what a writing center is — for our clients, our colleagues, and ourselves. *The Everyday Writing Center* is a valuable professional resource for tutors, one that they should read and discuss together and that directors should include in tutor training courses. For writing centers to carry out their work, both directors and tutors need to operate from a Trickster mindset, attuned to the learning moments occurring every day in their centers.

Work Cited

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Praxis is a project of the **Undergraduate Writing Center** at the University of Texas at Austin

Editor login

Praxis: A Writing Center Journal (2003-2011)

Right Place, Wrong Timing

by **Devin Black**, *Eastern Illinois University*

Consulting sessions in the writing center occur at a unique time during the writing process. Generally, a student will bring in an entire draft of a paper–oftentimes with the idea that it is completely finished–for a tutor to look over. Thus, we do not have the advantage of engaging the student over the entire writing process but only during a small sliver *in medias res*. Approaching a student writer in the middle of his or her work as opposed to either extremes of chronological time–namely, the beginning or the end–limits a consultant's ability to engage the student effectively in a sequential, temporal sense.

As a result of being put "in the middle of things," *kairos* enables consultants to stretch the limits of chronos both through our restricted session time and in being placed in the center of the student's writing progression. As a consultant, I am unable to discover everything significant about a student's paper in an hour-long or shorter appointment, but then again I am not an editor. As McDuffy noted earlier, one of the toughest concepts to put into practice is setting the agenda at the beginning of the session. For example, while looking over the assignment sheet and asking students what they think about their papers, important questions such as "What do you want to accomplish with this paper or this session?" sometimes waste time. I have asked these questions before in sessions, but the replies almost always come back as versions of "I just want to get this paper over with" or "I came in here to get it fixed." Of course, such disappointing replies provide opportunities, but time is pressing for them in terms of due dates, and time is limiting me in terms of session length.

In addition, while I am focused on higher-order concerns such as a strong thesis, the student is almost always preoccupied with that looming gloom of being evaluated on "grammar." Finding a negotiated space is exactly where *kairos* enters the equation. I recall one session with a student in which he was adamant about fixing grammar issues.

My most personally memorable session–and the one I often think of in terms of kairos–is also perhaps my biggest failure.

I tried to negotiate an agenda with him: we would look at some higher order concerns, then we would focus on grammar. The student would have none of it. Fixing grammar would enable him to get a grade high enough to avoid revision. Seeing that the tension was building–similar to Klein's experience–I decided on the spot that we would work on grammar first, allowing a lower order concern primary significance in the session. For the introduction of his paper, we worked sentence by sentence, figuring out how unclear sentences could be reworded so as to capture his intended meaning. We also addressed verb shifts and comma issues. When we reached the thesis statement, the issue that most concerned me, I framed our discussion of it as I had in earlier sentences: "What are you trying to say *here*?" Knowing what a thesis statement is supposed to

accomplish, he began to come up with different ways of wording it to make it stronger. Using "grammar" as a blanket term, we managed to discuss both mechanics and higher level issues without sacrificing either to *chronos*.

My most personally memorable session–and the one I often think of in terms of kairos–is also perhaps my biggest failure. The student brought in an assignment that was two pages in length. The assignment called for an analytical paper four pages in length on Louise Erdrich's short story "The Red Convertible." This student was one of the few who came in and did not mention grammar as a major issue. Instead, she needed to come up with at least two more pages of analysis. Before she read her paper aloud, she briefly mentioned a previous trip to the writing center for this assignment and how that session did not help her at all. After reading her paper, it became clear that she was struggling to understand what constitutes literary analysis. In the past I have found it challenging to describe what constitutes analysis to students, and I have attempted to refer them back to their professors to explain the concept in greater detail since professors conceptualize "analysis" in myriad ways. This student, however, did not have the luxury of time; her paper was due around four hours after the session would end.

My strategy was to ask her about some of the scenes she wrote about already in her paper, which was more summary of specific scenes than analysis. Yet she chose those scenes because they were important. I asked exactly that: "Why choose to write about this?" Prompted by more questions, she proceeded to draw connections to other parts of the story as well as contemporary situations dealing with war and suicide that reflect those in the story. The strategy was indeed working because the student became more engaged and was doing more and more of the talking, reasoning, and writing. I thought that the impromptu exercise of expanding the text she already had was another triumph of *kairos*. Then a warning sign came. The student said, in no uncertain terms, "I can do this now, but on my own I won't be able to." With that, the session went from being productive to at a standstill in a matter of a minute. Given that she was able to do the analysis when prompted with questions, I let her sit there in silence to think about what else she could write about since I wanted to avoid putting too many of my own thoughts or questions into the paper. I thought at *that* particular moment with *that* particular paper and *that* particular writer, she only needed time and some encouragement to continue her analysis. I thought this judgment call was the right one given the circumstances. And I was wrong.

Quickly, the student grew visibly frustrated as I sat there silently. All of a sudden, she gave me a very curt "Thank you" and left the writing center. While a *kairotic* moment delivers help to the student and can turn a stalled session into an effective one, I ended up making a choice that inadvertently turned a session from working *for* this student to working *against* this student. If I had made a different decision, such as to keep questioning the student about scenes she remembered the most, the session might have rolled on to its full length and the student may have left the writing center feeling confident. The failure at that one point in the session underscores the importance of *kairos* in consulting sessions and how a very un-*kairotic* moment could negate everything the student might have gained.

[*To continue reading "*Kairotic *Moments in the Writing Center," please click on the links below*]

Using *Kairos* to Mediate–Serena Heath

Situating Our Rhetorical Practice–Tim Taylor

Praxis is a project of the **Undergraduate Writing Center** at the University of Texas at Austin

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Praxis: A Writing Center Journal (2003-2011)

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Situating Our Rhetorical Practice

*by **Tim Taylor**, Eastern Illinois University*

As the writing consultants and Assistant Director have demonstrated, *kairos* is a core concept that we can use productively to situate and reflect on our rhetorical practice. The idea of "right timing," the "opportune moment," and the "embodiment of *carpe diem*" will further help us push past the false dualism of either directive or nondirective tutoring (Hawhee 20) . As the reflections above show, enacting *kairotic* thinking in the writing center can move us beyond that either-or choice and perhaps move us towards a stronger both-and philosophy. Since consultants are creative individuals who make important decisions on the spot when working with complicated individuals, this core concept invites us to reflect on our practices and our principles. Hill describes *kairos* as a "habit of mind, one that expresses itself in a kind of time that is living and creative" (212). The creativity of writing consultants brings to life the possibilities explored in Geller's discussion of "epochal time" and coheres with the call put forth by the authors of *The Everyday Writing Center* that "[a]t the very heart of what we five have come to understand as we've talked about time is our belief that writing centers should be most focused on time that is relational" (33). Tutoring with *kairos* in mind provides a way to conceptualize that relational model of writing center practice.

Writers–and writing consultants–need to play with language, play with ideas, and play with details as they develop a sense of themselves as writers and broaden their appreciation of the possibilities inherent in a piece of writing.

So while it is important to study and use strategies produced and broadcast through what some might call writing center "lore," *kairos* validates our beliefs, values, and research that writers are individuals who work within the socially-mediated act of crafting discourse, and these writers need one-to-one consulting to help them grow as writers and thinkers (Thompson, et al. 79). Embracing a stereotypical or lockstep way of proceeding or running a tutoring session is antithetical to *kairotic* thinking since each rhetorical situation changes based on subject, audience, writer, and purpose. Hawhee supports this idea well in her description of the concept: "the movements and betweenness of kairos necessitate a move away from a privileging of 'design' or preformulated principles" (24). While writing consultants should be professional and have a strong *ethos*, as Heath notes, we also want to nurture a sense of intellectual play that is important to learning. That sense of play, quick thinking, and brainstorming in consulting sessions is crucial to helping students see writing as something more than the act of slapping words onto screens or papers. Writers–and writing consultants–need to play with language, play with ideas, and play with details as they develop a sense of themselves as writers and broaden their appreciation of the possibilities inherent in a piece of writing. A sense of relational time or what the authors of *The Everyday Writing Center* call

"body time" complicates our view of how sessions should progress, as our writing consultants have pointed out (34).

The challenge–how do we teach *kairos*? John Poulakos underscores that important question: "Even if we assert the centrality of *kairos* in the early days of rhetorical theory, its teachability still emerges as a practical issue" (89). Klein, McDuffy, Black, and Heath all learned about the concept as we studied ancient rhetoricians, in particular Isocrates and Aristotle, and awareness of the concept and the search for connections to *kairos* helped them situate and enrich their writing center practice. Their examples support our contention that *kairos* is a core rhetorical concept that should be introduced into writing center courses to help tutors reflect on their sessions and develop a metacognitive awareness of *kairotic* moments they capitalized on and those that escaped them. Those of us who teach writing center courses can introduce the concept through Glover's helpful article and then use various pedagogical approaches to bring out the "*kairos*-consciousness" he argues for (15). At our writing center, for example, we have had tutors write reflective memos about their own conferences or colleagues' consulting sessions. Integrating the concept of *kairos* into those assignments would be a simple but fruitful step in helping them become even stronger reflective practitioners by learning from their missteps and successes.

Thompson, et al. assert that "tutors are flexible in the strategies they use, sometimes directive and sometimes not directive, based on their ongoing diagnoses of students' needs" (81). The classical idea of *kairos* provides a conceptual model for that flexible style of tutoring, and the concept also offers a sound "analytic framework" for the work we do (Ianetta 38). This concept of "opportune time" is a crucial heuristic and guiding principle that can be used for reflection and implementation of tutoring strategies. Both directors and tutors can use this concept of qualitative time to guide their work in conferencing and collaborating in the writing center since exhibiting *kairotic* thinking is adapting to rhetorical circumstances–audiences, writers, tutors, occasions, and situations that change from conference to conference, week to week, and semester to semester.

Praxis: A Writing Center Journal (2003-2011)

The Future of WPA Professionalization: A 2007 Survey

Fall 2009 / Focus

by **Jonikka Charlton**, *University of Texas-Pan America*

PhD specialization in writing-center and writing-program careers

Jonikka Charlton

My entry into administrative work, as has been the case with many writing program and writing center administrators, was the result of serendipity **[1]**. I had just graduated with my Master's degree in literature, and I had no immediate plans for what to do. I had spent several years working as a writing tutor and teacher while in my graduate program, and, like many, I found the work meaningful and significant. The stars aligned, it seemed, as the writing center director at my institution retired the very semester I graduated with my master's degree, and the department needed someone to step in while they could convince the upper administration they needed to hire a tenure-track faculty member to fill the position long-term.

The next three years of my life were devoted to running our writing center, and I loved (almost) every minute of it. When the institution finally approved and eventually hired a tenure-track writing center director, my faculty colleagues gave me a gentle shove in the direction of a PhD program, ensuring me this was the path which would get me back where I wanted to be — a writing program administrator (WPA). While I had gained a great deal of significant experience in my time as writing center director, I realized I had had very little time to reflect on the intellectual work of such positions, so I sought out a PhD program with a specialization in writing program administration. It is still rare to find programs with such an emphasis, but it is increasingly evident that more and more new faculty are finding themselves in administrative positions *deliberately*. Not only are they choosing the work rather than just falling into it, but they're also actively studying it in graduate school.

A number of important surveys have been conducted by writing

center professionals over the past twenty years which have focused on gathering data about the roles and responsibilities of writing center directors.

In 1999, Sally Barr Ebest surveyed **Council of Writing Program Administrators** (CWPA) members to find out whether and how graduate students were being prepared to teach, engage in research, and do administrative work; she concluded that "training in the skills and duties required of a WPA is, in most institutions, a matter of chance" (67). "If we want the next generation of WPAs to avoid the problems and prejudices we have encountered," she argued, "we need to ensure that they learn what we know before they graduate" (Ebest 82). While some are concerned about and object to WPA professionalization — particularly graduate student professionalization in WPA **[2]** — a strong case has been made for both formal and informal study of writing program administration, with an effort to make good on Ebest's request that we do everything we can to help future WPAs understand the field they're entering *before* they're asked to assume full responsibility for administrative work.

A number of important surveys have been conducted by writing center professionals over the past twenty years (Olson and Ashton-Jones in 1988, Healy in 1995, and Balester and McDonald in 1997) which have focused on gathering data about the roles and responsibilities of writing center directors, their status and working conditions, as well as their education and preparation for administrative work. What we see in that early survey work is an attempt by our field to figure out who we are, how we can best do our work, and what we need to do it. Recent work like Melissa Ianetta et al.'s "Polylog" and Rebecca Jackson, Carrie Leverenz, and Joe Law's "(Re)Shaping the Profession: Graduate Courses in Writing Center Theory, Practice, and Administration" has contributed to a more disciplined conversation about how we might prepare future writing center administrators and what effects these new avenues of preparation might have on both individual faculty members and the larger field of writing center studies.

I would like to contribute to that conversation here by sharing data that my colleague, Shirley K. Rose, and I collected about the education and preparation of WPAs in our 2007 survey of CWPA members **[3]**, focusing specifically on the responses we received from those actively involved in writing center work. I would like to concentrate on a few key issues — respondents' education, specialization, and their perceptions of what prepared them to do their work — and place that in the context, when possible, of earlier surveys which provided data about writing center directors **[4]**. Finally, I hope to explore what these trends (where there are clear trends) might suggest for developing administrative identities.

Education

In 1995, Dave Healy reported the results of his survey of National Writing Center Association (NWCA) members and *Writing Lab Newsletter* subscribers, and found that only 40% of writing center directors had a PhD (though it is important to acknowledge those with EdDs were counted in an "other" category with MEd and MFAs, which accounted for 12% of the sample). In 1997, Valerie Balester and James C. McDonald surveyed both NWCA and CWPA members, as well as participants on the WPA-L and WCENTER listservs and attendees at the 1997 and 1998 NWCA conferences, and found that 53% of

writing center directors had a doctoral degree. Ten years later, in our survey, it appears that many more writing center administrators had doctoral degrees; 88.2% of writing center directors had a doctoral degree (70.6% had a PhD while 17.6% had an EdD).

Balester and McDonald suggested that hiring practices were "important indicators of an institution's view of a WPA position and the qualifications it values" and explained that most writing center directors were selected after an internal search (64). National searches, they wrote, "often indicate a desire to find someone highly qualified rather than simply to find someone willing to fill a slot" (64). Their data "strongly suggest[ed] that institutions tend to grant writing program directors more status than writing center directors" and "require their writing program director to have a doctorate and to specialize in composition studies" while they "do not expect the same from their writing center director" (Balester and McDonald 70). While it can be argued that writing center directors often have *more* freedom to act if they can remain outside the traditional academic hierarchy, it is also true that the status afforded us by our degrees significantly goes a long way towards helping us achieve our goals as administrators and advocates for students and writing on our campuses.

Specialization

Balester and McDonald also asked their respondents about their area of specialization, which broke down in the following ways:

- 57% Rhetoric, Composition, or Composition with Literature
- 39% Literature
- 4% English Education or Law

There were markedly few (25%) writing center directors from our survey sample who had focused on composition and rhetoric in their graduate work while double that number focused on literature.

We also asked our survey respondents about their specializations, but we asked a more specific question about the focus of their coursework for their highest degree. We offered a wider range of options, but our respondents fell mainly in two categories: 25% of our writing center directors specialized in Rhet/Comp, 50% in Literature. 25% chose an "Other" response, while none picked English Ed, Speech/Communication, Linguistics, or Creative Writing. In 1988, when Olson and Ashton-Jones surveyed first-year writing program directors to elicit information about their perceptions of writing center directors, they noted that 25% of their respondents felt it wasn't necessary or didn't matter that writing center directors be trained composition specialists (22), yet Olson and Ashton-Jones argue that the "writing center director should be *required* to be a rhetoric and composition specialist, a person well-versed in theory of and research in both composition and writing centers" (24, my emphasis). Balester & McDonald's 1997 survey showed that writing center administrators were moving more in that direction, but Healy's 1995 survey still suggested that the "emerging portrait" of writing center directors revealed they were not "typically trained in composition/rhetoric" (30).

There were markedly few (25%) writing center directors from our survey sample who had focused on composition and rhetoric in their graduate work while double that number focused on literature. Given the trend towards increasing specialization in the academy at large and in "English" specifically in

the past twenty years, it is reasonable to expect that if we sorted our 2007 data according to age, we might find that writing center directors who began their careers 10-20+ years ago may account for the higher numbers of respondents who focused in areas other than rhetoric and composition. At that time, studying "English" often meant studying literature. We suspect this has been changing gradually over time and will continue to as more and more of us choose to study WPA as a focus of our graduate preparation.

Melissa Ianetta et al. identify three positions on a "spectrum of opinions" about administrative expertise — the "Universal Professional," the "Local Professional," and the "Administrative Iconoclast" (14-15). Their "Universal Professional," which most accurately reflects a dominant trend I see in WPA professionalization, "defines WPAs by credentials clearly recognized in the academic universe, that is, Composition PhDs with relevant coursework, experience, and mentoring in administrative matters" as well as "an additional subset of specialized knowledge about writing centers or other curriculum-based writing programs" (Ianetta et al. 14). And, most interesting to those of us who advocate "serious and rigorous study of WPA," Ianetta et al. argue that this "new generation of writing professionals […] will move beyond lore by applying research methods to our experiential knowledge of writing centers and help us see the writing center through new lenses" (Ianetta et al. 14). A focus, not only on the practical matters of administration, but on the scholarly, research-driven aspects of our work, is an important marker of an emerging generation of WPAs who are not only specializing in rhetoric and composition, but taking WPA-related courses, holding administrative internships, and engaging in WPA scholarship.

Preparation

An important finding of recent research in our field suggests that there are more WPAs out there "who have specifically prepared for this work" (Skeffington, Borrowman, and Enos 19) [5], and there is an impressive range of activities — both formal and informal, both in and out of school — which serve our ongoing professional development as administrators. In these next sections, I provide a breakdown of the types of activities our writing center respondents said contributed to their preparation for writing center administration.

Conferences/Workshops/Institutes
We offered several choices that involved attendance at CWPA-sponsored conferences, workshops, and institutes, as well as WPA-related conference and workshops, and we saw that writing center administrators attribute a fair amount of their preparation to their ongoing professional development, particularly from the WPA conference (60%) and the CWPA-sponsored summer workshop (40%). Not surprisingly, 65% of writing center directors identified "other workshops" as a contributor to their preparation; no doubt many writing center directors in our sample are also members of the **International Writing Centers Association** (IWCA) and have attended those summer institutes and annual conferences as well.

Mentoring
Mentoring, for most of us, has had a profound effect on our abilities to do our jobs, and our survey bore this out. We offered two separate choices to describe possible mentoring relationships — mentoring received as graduate students and mentoring received while on the job——and we found that 60% of writing

center directors identified on-the-job mentoring as a source of their preparation. Fifty percent cited mentoring they received as graduate students.

Graduate WPA Preparation
The "most urgent finding" of Scott Miller et al.'s national survey of graduate students published in 1997 was that "by and large, students express great satisfaction regarding the 'present tense' of their lives […], but they are greatly worried — or, frequently, know very little — about their 'future tense'" (393). To address this, WPAs have sought to educate future administrators through apprenticeship/graduate WPA (gWPA) experiences. Almost a third of our writing center director sample (30%) indicated their gWPA work had prepared them.

On the other end of the graduate preparation spectrum are the more formal, discipline-based avenues of preparation, specifically WPA coursework, which, Theresa Enos argues, serves as a credential for WPA expertise (64). Jackson, Leverenz, and Law echo this point, and, after a careful review of their own writing center administration course syllabi, conclude that such courses "certainly prepare future writing center administrators to enter the field with a clear sense that it is a field, that it has a history (a complex, contested history, in fact), that all practice is informed by distinct theoretical or philosophical stances, that research can and should be conducted in a writing center" (132-33). While Anthony Edgington and Stacy Hartlage Taylor's 2007 survey of gWPAs and WPAs only elicited two mentions (out of 63 respondents) of a specific WPA-related graduate course as preparation (165), it is clear from our data that far more graduate students have taken such courses: 15% of writing center directors had WPA-related coursework. Five percent had even written a WPA-related dissertation.

The Future of WPA Professionalization

Almost fifteen years ago, Dave Healy wondered "how and why writing center directors entered the profession," given that "[o]utside the academy, we expect professionals to have sensed some kind of 'calling' to their profession and to have devoted themselves with considerable intentionality and focus to their chosen specialty" (38). While faculty were assumed to have been called to work in a particular academic discipline, administrators, he argued, usually "ended up" there "for a variety of reasons and with a variety of attitudes toward and kinds of preparation for the responsibilities they assume" (Healy 38). While it is still true that many administrators, some of whom are the leaders and mentors of our field, just somehow found themselves in their positions, it is also true, as our survey suggests, that more of us are actively choosing administrative work and deliberately preparing for and embracing its intellectual demands.

Notes

[1] Ianetta et al. ask the question, "Are writing center directors writing program administrators?" in their 2006 article, "Polylog." They, and I, answer that question in the affirmative, so, when I use the term "WPA," I am referring to writing center directors as well as what Ianetta et al. call "curriculum-based program directors."

[2] See Rose and Weiser for one of the most thorough discussions of these objections in print.

[3] The survey questionnaire covered a range of issues, with a total of 57 items

related to demographic data (age, gender, institutional type and size), WPA experience (whether or not they were or ever had been in an official WPA position and if so, for how many years and how many different positions) job responsibilities (based on list in the **Portland Resolution**, including a question about whether they were responsible for scholarship and research in these areas), tenure status and prospects, and preparation for WPA work. We e-mailed survey tokens to 413 CWPA members, and 226 completed the survey, a response rate of 55%.

[4] It is important to note that each survey discussed in this article had a different population (including CWPA and NWCA members, WPA-L and WCENTER participants, and NWCA conference attendees, and Writing Lab Newsletter subscribers), so I am careful not to make direct comparisons or to suggest that the data I discuss here (from our survey and/or other surveys) suggest absolute trends.

[5] While it is true that there are many more writing program and writing center administrators out there who have been prepared (in some way) for their work, our survey results still show a somewhat remarkable number of writing center director respondents — 15%——who say they had "no preparation" whatsoever.

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Jonikka Charlton is an assistant professor at the **University of Texas-Pan American** where she is currently coordinating the First-Year Writing Program. Her scholarly interests tie together her work as a WPA at an HSI, empirical research about WPAs, and her interest in WPA identity and professionalization. She is currently working on two book projects stemming from this inquiry and has an article in the WPA journal and a chapter, with Colin Charlton, in the forthcoming book, *Going Public: What Writing Programs Learn from Engagement* (Utah State UP).

Praxis: A Writing Center Journal (2003-2011)

The Merciless Grammarian

Fall 2009 / Columns

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

Drawing by Nathan Baran

Dear M to the G,

So I've been asked to write a memo to explain some new hiring procedures at my work. Is that 8451c4LLy like an e-mail?

Your BFF,
Kye Whitehead

My loathsome Master Whitehead:

Somewhere amid the alphabet soup of your text-message-addled missive, I gathered that you are somehow confusing two very different genres of writing, each with its own purpose and tone. Let me disabuse you of this conflation.

A memorandum–from the Latin for "that thing we should remember"–is a professional document that both communicates and makes things happen. "Memos," as they are called amid the gray cubicles of today's professional world, may be used to transmit information, invite feedback, assign responsibilities, or communicate policies. As the original Latin suggests, these documents create an official record of whatever they report. Therefore, besides the dictates of form (lines indicating who the memo is addressed to and who it is from, the date it was written and the subject), memos require special attention to audience and purpose. Many other lucky or unlucky souls may read your memo besides the person you address, and whatever you write may be consulted later or referred to in support of important decisions.

An electronic mail message–letting "e-anything" pass my lips saps the ichor

from my veins–indeed shares with its luddite grandsire the "To:", "From:", date and subject lines, the latter labeled with the laudably Latinate "Re:" for "about which thing" (what is it with all these Latin things?). There the resemblance ends. Memos endure. E-mails (e-gad!) are ephemeral. Memos are formal. E-mails may be so but more often than not take a middle ground between writing and spoken chatter. What the two share, however, is the possibility of being passed on to readers other than those directly addressed, much to the edification or horror of the writer.

In the electronically fueled world of today's professional communication, writers may very well send a memo by e-mail, attaching the document with a brief note in the message itself directing the reader's attention to it. Those seeking to help others (not I) have included useful information on writing memos at the **Purdue Online Writing Lab**.

From my mountain crag, I sincerely hope that understanding the difference between these two forms of writing will contribute to–nay, bring into very being–your professionalism.

In the meantime, I remain,
The Merciless One

Praxis is a project of the **Undergraduate Writing Center** at the University of Texas at Austin

Editor login

The Most Vital Kairotic Moment

by **Kristi McDuffie**, *Eastern Illinois University*

Consulting sessions are a constant struggle between *chronos* and *kairos*. Once I make a decision during a session, it is extremely difficult to change paths later in the session. A decision that I make, particularly as it pertains to the session tone and direction, requires me to be committed to the outcome of each *kairotic* moment. After two semesters and 150 sessions in the writing center, I have learned that the most important *kairotic* moment occurs at the very beginning of the session. Although I became aware of the importance of the first five minutes of the session through Thomas Newkirk's "The First Five Minutes: Setting the Agenda in a Writing Conference," the idea was difficult to put into practice. Newkirk cautions, "Unless a commonly-agreed upon agenda is established, a conference can run on aimlessly and leave both participants with the justifiable feeling that they have wasted time" (303).

It took me a few months to realize that simply sitting down and going through the paper chronologically *was* the problem. I was not taking advantage of the most important *kairotic* moment at the beginning of the session.

Despite this solid advice, I was unsure how to set an agenda. When I first sat down with students for sessions, I said hello and asked if there was anything in particular they wanted to work on. More often than not, they would respond with "grammar" or "I need you to fix this." Sometimes I would ask them to read it aloud and we would stop often to address whatever issues arose. On other occasions I walked through the paper with the student and focused on issues I identified in the paper. Forty-five minutes later, I had edited the entire paper. I had learned the importance of addressing higher level concerns like thesis statements, development, and voice, per Donald A. McAndrew's and Thomas J. Reigstad's advice in "What Tutoring Is: Models and Strategies." Yet despite their assertions, it felt natural to fix all of the number and subject-verb agreement issues first. When I kept running out of time before I could address paragraph unity or transitions, I knew that I needed a different approach–I just didn't know how to change direction.

It took me a few months to realize that simply sitting down and going through the paper chronologically *was* the problem. I was not taking advantage of the most important *kairotic* moment at the beginning of the session. Although as a consultant I might be able to step back after ten minutes and talk about structure, students were unable to change course that abruptly. I had passed by the *kairotic* moment when I set the tone of the session for a micro-level improvement. If I began by correcting punctuation or pointing out confusing word choices, it was nearly impossible to suggest a different organization later in the session.

My first strategy to break out of this mold was to read the entire paper first

before discussing it. I made students sit uncomfortably silent while I skimmed the paper. But after reading it, I had a sense of what the paper about, but still no direction on how to first address big-picture items. My next strategy proved more effective. I started the session by walking through the higher-level concerns without reading the paper. If a student responded to me with a blank stare to "What is your thesis statement?" I knew we had to start there.

Eventually I got better at both managing my time and avoiding micromanagement mode, but the first few minutes always remained the most essential. If students asked for an edit or insisted that they only wanted help with grammar, there was often little I could do. Repeat students were particularly stubborn about how they wanted me to help. But if a student was open-minded, I learned how to take advantage of the opportunity. I stopped starting with the paper. I did not even look at the paper when students sat down, especially if it was a draft and they had time for significant revision before the due date. I quizzed students on the topic, purpose, and specifics of the paper. The best strategy I developed was to use the assignment sheet not only just to see what the paper was about but also as a checklist. I could ask students how and where they fulfilled each requirement. This tactic had the additional benefits of clearing up questions and misunderstandings about the assignment and adding areas of development and expansion.

Only by making sure I properly took advantage of the all-important kairotic moment at the beginning of the session did I lessen my struggle with *chronos*. Not getting bogged down by implicitly (or explicitly) promising students that we would get through the entire paper in a session allowed me to break free of the snowball effect of editing. I still had to appease students who insisted on only grammar help. But for students who had only vague notions of how to improve their papers, my focus on the first few minutes of a session greatly improved my ability to help students become better writers, not just to help them write better papers.

[*To continue reading "*Kairotic *Moments in the Writing Center," please click on the links below*]

Nurturing *Kairos*-Consciousness–Fern Kory

Right Place, Wrong Timing–Devin Black

Using *Kairos* to Mediate–Serena Heath

Situating Our Rhetorical Practice–Tim Taylor

‹ **The Merciless Grammarian**   **up**   **The Write Time** ›

The Write Time

by **Nia Klein**, *Eastern Illinois University*

Taylor introduces this article with the differentiation between *chronos*, or a linear and quantifiable aspect of time, and the concept of *kairos*. *Kairos* is less concrete and requires recognition of just the right moment to respond, as tutors, in precisely the way the writing student needs. Like the writing center, our society is in marked off, as he writes, in 30 — 60 minute increments, whether we are waiting for the doctor or watching our favorite television program. Some would argue that we, socially and culturally, are held hostage by this chronological preoccupation with time. Our institutions and business enterprises measure our worth by our "productivity" or how much can be accomplished within a pre-determined time frame. This preoccupation with the linear quality of time also permeates the work of writing centers. We search for ways our resources can be optimally utilized to meet the needs of students.

We, as writing center consultants and directors, must be cognizant of the time constraints we face when working with students, but not to the detriment of the needs of the writer. Our schedules give us definable parameters in which to work, and we can recognize the beginning, end, and time lapsed in a session. A 30 or 45-minute session is easily identifiable and quantifiable, but how do we, as tutors, recognize these *kairotic* moments, these elusive times when a student is particularly receptive to teaching or guidance or learning? The writing center session, while occurring at a particular point in time, should also embrace *kairos*. Paying attention to the *kairotic* quality of the time spent with students will enhance our understanding of the rhetorical situation inherent in the writing center and thus produce better outcomes.

Inspirational or self-help books often promote the idea that a crisis situation is an opportunity for change. Likewise, Carolyn Miller identifies *kairos* as "a time of tension and conflict" and "a time of opportunity" (52). This "time of tension and conflict" often resembles a crisis, if not for tutors, then certainly for student-writers. Often students come into the writing center in a state of crisis or panic over the writing assignment and continue to feel these negative emotions throughout the session. However, as I will show through an experience I had with a student, this crisis state can set the stage for opportunities to connect with students in teachable, *kairotic* moments.

Through recognizing their concerns at the beginning of a session, instead of internally rolling our eyes and thinking, "Oh, no, not again," tutors are enabled to view the upcoming session as one full of opportune moments.

"Emily" came to our writing center with an analytical paper the day before it was due, already a stressful situation for both of us. When asked what areas she thought she needed help with, Emily responded, "Grammar and content," which means everything. It is not uncommon for students to present concerns

to writing center consultants at the last minute, so to speak, but I believe that, when a student does this, it indicates a crisis that goes beyond the time aspect. Students working under serious time constraints see the writing center as the last call for help before drowning in frustration. Through recognizing their concerns at the beginning of a session, instead of internally rolling our eyes and thinking, "Oh, no, not again," tutors are enabled to view the upcoming session as one full of opportune moments. We, as tutors, position ourselves to look for points of tension or crisis where intervention may result in change, and, after good conferences, writers walk away with useable strategies for that assignment and subsequent papers.

Beginning by having Emily read her paper aloud to me, I quickly saw that her difficulty with writing was more fundamental than just "grammar and content." At the most basic level, Emily had problems with sentence clarity (she used many words while saying, essentially, nothing), unfocused ideas, and a misunderstanding of the concept of supporting evidence. At first, I assumed that she had developed ideas, and the problem was simply in the communication of those ideas. To that end, I pointed out lengthy, unclear sentences and asked her to modify them to make them more concise and understandable. After several attempts, I realized that she was unable to write clearly because her thought process had not evolved to that level of clarity. She had read the minimum number of sources required for the paper and was–even in her thinking–merely cutting and pasting what she deemed to be good phrases into her paper (ones she thought would earn her a passing grade).

Unfortunately, I spent the bulk of the session trying different approaches before the tension reached a level that would elicit change. Not only was Emily getting frustrated, but so was I. I decided to take a different tack: I asked her to simply talk to me about her subject and not focus on the paper. When she was even unable to do that, her hands shuffling the paper on the table before her, it was time to do something drastic–to create even more tension. Children learn to ride a bike without training wheels when presented with the conflict of either keeping the bicycle upright or falling. Growth occurs, in muscles, human relationships or writing, when capacity is challenged and new methods of acting are required because the old ones do not work any more. Emily needed to be pushed; she needed the "training wheels" taken off.

I was able to make this moment a productive one for the student and for myself because I understand the role of tension in initiating change. The stress of a deadline and elemental difficulties with the writer's draft were not viewed as insurmountable obstacles but as entry points to allow for new information and writing strategies. It is easy to see a situation such as the one I encountered with Emily as a roadblock that sets up failure for both consultant and student. I propose that, as tutors, we have the power to remove those roadblocks if we are creative in thinking about the time spent with students. *Chronos* limits the specific amount of time spent, while *kairos* gives us the freedom to utilize that time without limits in terms of how we respond when we are aware of the totality of human interaction that takes place in this setting. Our tutoring sessions are more than opportunities to impart the "correct" writing strategies; they are opportunities to affect how students view writing tasks and writing in general.

Kairos in the session with Emily presented itself when she literally could not let go of the paper she was trying to write. I took her paper away from her and set it upside down on the other side of the table. Pushing a blank piece of paper in

front of her, I instructed her to pick up her pen and write down any and all thoughts (without regard to grammar, etc.) that entered her mind about her chosen topic. After a few minutes of silence, she had produced a full page of notes. I looked over the brainstorming she had done and affirmed her effort. Now, she had the makings of a good and interesting paper. We wrapped up with practical ways to convert her brainstorming notes into a solid, well-evidenced paper, emphasizing that this brainstorming technique was one that she could use again with another paper. As stressful as this session was for both of us, it does not get any better than this in writing center work. We both felt a sense of accomplishment–or as Taylor wrote in his notes while observing this session, "*Kairos*, baby!"

[*To continue reading "*Kairotic *Moments in the Writing Center," please click on the links below*]

The Most Vital *Kairotic* Moment–Kristi McDuffie

Nurturing *Kairos*-Consciousness–Fern Kory

Right Place, Wrong Timing–Devin Black

Using *Kairos* to Mediate–Serena Heath

Situating Our Rhetorical Practice–Tim Taylor

Editor login

Praxis: A Writing Center Journal (2003-2011)

The Writing Center and Professionalization: Preparing Teachers for Administrative Responsibilities

Fall 2009 / Focus

by **Tiffany Bourelle**, *University of Montana Western*

Work in a university writing center prepares instructors for later administrative duties.

Tiffany Threatt Bourelle

[T]eaching throughout my graduate studies didn't necessarily train me for a career in teaching coupled with administrative responsibilities. But one thing did: a position I held at UNR's writing center.

As a graduate student in English, I had the opportunity to teach while taking courses. During my five years in the **English doctoral program** at the **University of Nevada, Reno** (UNR), I taught approximately ten classes, mostly within my first two years in the program. These classes prepared me for the job I currently hold, that of Assistant Professor of English at the **University of Montana Western**. They provided important experience and practical training for teaching a multitude of classes. However, what they didn't offer was preparation for other responsibilities associated with the position. For instance, teaching those classes couldn't have prepared me to be a peer mentor or to help my colleagues revise curriculums under budget constraints. Teaching classes didn't prepare me to lead committees or to figure out ways to help implement writing across the curriculum. Let me be clear–I'm not saying I wasn't prepared to enter the job market. What I am saying is that teaching throughout my graduate studies didn't necessarily train me for a career in teaching coupled with administrative responsibilities. But one thing did: a position I held at UNR's writing center.

For the remaining three years in my program at UNR, I also served as Coordinator of Tutor Training at our writing center, and I worked directly under the director. My duties included training our tutors, helping with scheduling, working with the budget, and leading workshops for tutors and teachers across the disciplines. I also tutored for a few hours a week, as well as observed tutors and provided suggestions on how they could improve. I usually observed tutors at least twice a semester, meaning that many of my responsibilities involved mentoring tutors. Because of a limited budget, we didn't have an Assistant Director; therefore, I was lucky enough to have the responsibilities that an Assistant Director might have, giving me valuable insight into what would happen in the "real world."

It's no secret that most of us who work in the writing center believe that the work we do will train us for the "real world" of teaching. In fact, several authors claim that tutoring in the writing center helps future teachers prepare for life inside their own classrooms, and being a teacher, I agree. As Janet Alsup et al. claim in "Tutoring is Real: The Benefits of the Peer Tutor Experience for Future English Educators," peer tutoring enhances the education of "teachers of writing by providing additional, authentic experiences that reflect constructivist, student-centered philosophies often adhered to the English education programs" (328). The experiences of "minimalist tutoring and collaborative learning techniques" often learned in the writing center can help a teacher "motivate students to take ownership of their texts and to see writing as a process" (332). Further, Aslup et al. state that the tutoring position can help future educators gain confidence before entering the classroom, allowing them to feel more comfortable when working with students (332).

But what about the other factors that come with the job of being a professor? While there is no doubt that tutoring can benefit teachers by showing them how to listen and understand their students' needs, there are many more aspects to the position of professor. I argue that the writing center, and specifically, a graduate administrative position such as mine, can help prepare future teachers in many of the same ways that Aslup et al. mention. For instance, they claim that tutoring can help teachers become more confident, as they learn skills that translate to the classroom. Indeed, the same holds true for my position; I am now more confident that I can handle the responsibilities associated with any administrative position. After training my peers to develop and improve their tutoring skills for three years, I realize that I have the confidence to mentor my peers; now these peers are fellow teachers within similar administrative and teaching positions.

Working as the Coordinator of Tutor Training meant that I kept in close contact with administrators, deans, and students across campus [...].

Not only do I have the confidence to mentor peers, but I also have the skills to work with all members of my college community. Working as the Coordinator of Tutor Training meant that I kept in close contact with administrators, deans, and students across campus by informing them of our services, establishing relationships between other departments and the writing center, and holding writing workshops for students and assignment-design workshops for faculty. Establishing these relationships at UNR enables me to excel in terms of the service component associated with my current position at Western. Because it is a small college, everyone works together to ensure student success. I carry the relationship-building skills I learned as Coordinator of Tutor Training into my

position at Western, which enables me to contribute ideas within department meetings, to serve on campus-wide committees, and to work closely with everyone in my new community at Western.

I mentioned previously that my job at UNR also entailed tutoring. As many of us probably recognize, tutoring can help a writer improve her own writing. As Irene Clark discusses in "Preparing Future Composition Teachers in the Writing Center," one of the most important advantages of working in the writing center is that "it provides us with opportunities to learn through firsthand observation how the writing process actually works" (347). The center helps the students and tutors learn the stages of writing, and "the concept that writing is a process becomes something tangible when one works in a Writing Center" (347). In the writing center, teachers who have never reflected on their own composing processes "gain insight as to what actually occurs" when they sit down to write (Clark 347). As a teacher, the insight I have gained from reflecting on my own work becomes beneficial when publishing for an academic audience, as the skills I learned in the writing center translate to the written world of scholarly publication. For instance, from tutoring, I learned to question my own writing, looking for areas of improvement. I also learned the value of outside critique; this particular lesson learned helps me recognize the value of editor's comments, as they often encourage me to elaborate and expand on ideas, improving my writing overall.

Tutors should observe and mentor each other, lead writing workshops for students across campus, and become involved in the day-to-day aspects of writing center work.

Perhaps just as important, as Clark claims, tutoring skills acquired at the writing center can encourage a writer to look inside herself for the answers. As many teachers enter the job market, they may feel fraudulent. Do they know enough? Are they prepared? And if they are anything like me, they are asking themselves what they can bring to the world of academia. Writing center work, including one-on-one conferences and various administrative responsibilities, encourages us to look inside ourselves for the answer to this question. We have to realize that we are ready, and we know the answers. We just have to remember what the writing center taught us well; we have to remember our training and look inside ourselves and use the skills we've learned.

Unfortunately, many of us don't have the luxury of adding an administrative position for our graduate students in the writing center. However, all hope is not lost. Tutors should observe and mentor each other, lead writing workshops for students across campus, and become involved in the day-to-day aspects of writing center work. We should encourage tutors to read articles regarding theory and practice with the intention that these articles combined with the practical skills they gain when tutoring will prepare them for their future teaching careers. If nothing else, we need to encourage them to look inside themselves for the answers so that they may become confident leaders of tomorrow. Writing center work can prepare teachers for future careers outside the center walls–both in the classroom and in terms of administrative duties as well.

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| ‹ **The Write Time** | **up** | **Tutors Teaching Directors about Professionalism** › |

Tutors Teaching Directors about Professionalism

Fall 2009 / Focus

by **Claire Lutkewitte**, *Nova Southeastern University*

Tutors and staff members as valuable resources

The Writing Center at Ball State University

Last spring, as a graduate student working as one of our writing center's assistant directors, I put together a panel for the **East Central Writing Centers Association's** annual conference. The panel included myself, another graduate student, and an undergraduate tutor. As I look back on that experience, I'm in awe of the undergraduate tutor who volunteered to present at the conference. She wasn't *just* an undergraduate. She was an undergraduate who had chosen to present alongside two graduate assistants (who had presented at conferences and had entered the professional conversation long before she had) to an audience that consisted of individuals who had been working and directing writing centers for many years. I'm humbled by the fact that she went to this conference not because she wanted to pursue graduate school or because she expressed an interest in pursuing a career in education or writing center administration. I am also humbled by the fact that she wasn't at all intimidated, nervous, or underprepared. Rather, she put together a successful presentation, one that, I'm a little embarrassed to admit, was more interesting and engaging than my own. Had it not been for her youthful appearance, she might have been mistaken for someone who had been presenting writing center scholarship for many years. Reflecting on this experience, I've come to realize that, while this undergraduate might have learned a thing or two about presenting at a conference, it was I who learned a thing or two about being professional. In fact, I learned just as much from watching her as I did putting together my own presentation.

What can writing center directors, or in my case, graduate assistant directors, learn from tutors and staff members about being professional?

I begin with this short anecdote because the theme for this *Praxis* issue is "Professionalization and the Writing Center." The call for papers asks questions such as "What transferable and professional skills do writing centers teach staff, and how is this training accomplished?" I think at one point or another, all writing center directors have asked themselves questions like these. Often I've heard directors pointing out to tutors that learning to create handouts, newsletters, or other writing center materials can lead to professionalization and help build a resume. However, to the questions posed by *Praxis* I would like to add another question, one that I feel can be neglected sometimes in the writing center: What can writing center directors, or in my case, graduate assistant directors, learn from tutors and staff members about being professional?

There has been a lot of discussion about how directors might help tutors "see their position as more than a work/study job that helps pay for books […] that it has something to teach them about being professionals no matter what their major or chosen career path" (Welsch 2). Usually, this discussion revolves around finding ways to get tutors and staff members to see the link between the tasks they do in the writing center and the tasks professionals do in a "real" workplace. For example, Kathleen Welsch provides a list of five areas of the writing center (administration, public relations, client relations, writing, and personal professional development) that professionally prepare the undergraduates and graduates who work there (2). In a more narrow focus, Lisa Lebduska writes about how helpful it is "to combine technical writing strategies with classical rhetorical principles in tutor training" in order for "tutors to recognize professional contexts" (7). Likewise, a few years ago, in a *Praxis* article, **"Professional Development and the Community Writing Center,"** James Jesson writes at length about an outreach program that can help writing consultants develop professionally. And, the scholarship goes on.

Although sometimes they are overlooked, tutors and staff members are valuable resources when it comes to learning how to be professional.

I do not contend that helping tutors and staff members grow professionally is not important because it certainly is. I, myself, have learned a great deal about professionalism as an undergraduate and a graduate student working in a writing center. But, I do want to contend that directors and graduate assistant directors can and have learned just as much from tutors and staff members about being professional. Although sometimes they are overlooked, tutors and staff members are valuable resources when it comes to learning how to be professional. So, from my recent experiences, I have put together some discussion questions that can help directors and graduate assistant directors reflect on the ways tutors and staff members can help them to grow professionally.

First, at our writing center at **Ball State**, graduate students and, on occasion, faculty come to the writing center seeking help for conference presentations, professional journal articles, book chapters, and other projects. Often they seek to work with undergraduate tutors rather than graduate students. As I noticed the graduate students who visited the writing center this past year, I couldn't

help but think, "How often do directors or graduate assistant directors seek the advice of undergrad tutors about writing their professional texts?" My question was somewhat answered halfway through the fall semester when the director of our writing center asked for help on her research project. During one of our bi-monthly writing center meetings, the director handed everyone a copy of a survey she was designing as part of her research project and asked everyone to read the questions. Then, we discussed which questions we thought were strong and which we thought were weak. Our feedback, no doubt, would later help her to revise. An experience such as this one has prompted me to consider further whether or not directors regularly share their own work with their undergraduate tutors and staff members prior to publishing or presenting it. My discussion questions, then, are as follows: Do most directors ask undergraduates for advice in regards to their professional work? Do directors attend tutoring sessions for their own professional work? If so, why and what do they learn? What stories of professional improvement can directors share with other directors as a result of such a session? If directors do not attend tutoring sessions, why not?

Second, directors often observe tutors as they conduct conferences so that they may later critique them and offer suggestions for improvement. Often during such observations, directors take notes, jotting down strong skills or areas where improvement is needed. But, what happens once directors have given tutors all the praise and advice that is needed? What happens when the observation is over? Do directors just file these observations away and forget about them? After observing several students last fall and spring semester, I know that I just handed over my reports to my director and didn't think much about them afterwards. A part of me regrets doing so because I probably could have learned some valuable skills that I could have used while conferencing with my own composition students or working on my own writing. Thinking about conference observations leads me to these discussion questions: What can directors learn from conference observations in a way that can help them grow professionally? For example, what specific things do they take from these observations and apply to their own work? What do they choose to ignore?

Third, as noted earlier, tutors and staff members' duties sometimes require them to develop handouts and other writing center materials useful for clients. At our center, we have an entire shelf of handouts developed by some of our undergrad tutors. But, I wonder if (and how often) directors use these handouts when they are writing their own professional texts. And if they do, why? What specific resources do they need in order to compose their professional work? If they do not use the materials created by undergraduates, why not? For example, would a director who is getting ready to publish a text refer to an undergraduate handout on how to document sources in order to make sure that what he/she has written has been properly documented? Or, would the director instead go directly to the MLA Guide for advice?

Fourth, while I certainly learned a lot about how to give a professional presentation from the undergraduate student on my panel at the ECWCA's annual conference, I wonder, what have other directors learned from tutors and staff members in similar experiences? What changes have they made as a result? I know that after the ECWCA's conference, I realized that I needed to read less and talk more to my audience, something that the undergraduate on my panel did very effectively.

Finally, this past semester, an undergraduate student working in our writing

center volunteered to run a workshop at one of our bi-monthly meetings. Letting undergraduates lead a writing center workshop or meeting is a good opportunity for them to develop their own professional skills, but it is also an opportunity for directors to do so as well. For example, even though I have worked in a writing center, I have also taught writing classes. Like many teachers, I continually look for ways to improve my own pedagogy so that I may best serve my students. One way of doing so is to observe others while they are teaching because such experiences give us an opportunity to reflect on what it is we do in our own classrooms. And, therefore, such reflections often lead to improvements in how we teach. So, here are a few questions that directors might think about when undergraduate students run workshops: What can a director learn from the undergrad's workshop? How will this learning lead to professional growth? How will it not?

Certainly, these discussion questions are not meant to be exhaustive. My hope is that they raise awareness of the work tutors and staff members do that helps directors and graduate assistant directors grow professionally. I hope, too, that I have pointed out some areas where further research in our field is needed. There seems to be a lot of research on how to help tutors and staff members, especially graduate students, see themselves as professionals, which is great. But, to this we must add more research on how tutors and staff members specifically help directors grow professionally

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Praxis: A Writing Center Journal (2003-2011)

Using Kairos to Mediate

by **Serena Heath** *, Eastern Illinois University*

Kairos is not just a matter of seizing the moment but of biding your time, of "knowing when to speak and when to be silent and knowing how much to say or how little to say" (Glover 16). Carolyn Miller offers another definition. We use *kairos* "to invent, within a set of unfolding and unprecedented circumstances, an action (rhetorical or otherwise) that will be understood as uniquely meaningful within those circumstances. The timely action will be understood as adaptive, as appropriate, *only in retrospect*" (xiii).

For the past two semesters, I have only worked part-time in the writing center. As such, I felt like an outsider observing an environment I was not as familiar with as my co-consultants were, even during our semester of practicum. Although I sometimes felt that this was to my disadvantage, I found I had an opportunity to learn.

We welcome students who are really excited about what they are writing about but cannot focus on a topic, as well as students who are irritable with their assignments or with life in general. For the purposes here, I will focus on what can happen in a really good session.

As an outsider, I noticed several things that threw off the time schedule on days when I was in the writing center but not working. When students come in having procrastinated or with only one hour before their papers are due, those situations throw off the schedule even more. But when these often-unashamed students tell us their dilemmas, we don't have to turn them away coldly. We tell them that we will focus on only the most significant issues in the papers. In other words, we cannot make any promises that they will have stellar papers after seeing us. This is not the result we want, obviously, but I have seen consultants take these situations from bad to good very quickly by focusing on higher-order concerns in the time available. After those less-productive sessions, it is the consultants' turn to look back retrospectively to see what they could have done better. As our directors did for us in our practicum sessions, we can guide these students, showing them more specifically in that moment that their procrastination–not the lack of time we have with them–is what is going to hurt them. As Klein mentioned, a combination of guidance and learning helps develop good writing habits for student-writers. We welcome students who are really excited about what they are writing about but cannot focus on a topic, as well as students who are irritable with their assignments or with life in general. For the purposes here, I will focus on what can happen in a really good session.

I have found from my observations that it is essential for a writing center consultant to try to build a strong teacherly *ethos* with students. They want to know they are working with a knowledgeable professional, or they might get

turned off. Students are in the writing center because they recognize they need help, and I am there to let them know I sympathize and I genuinely care about their papers. But even that empathetic stance is challenging.

Such was the case in my encounter with a student–I will call her "Julie"–who swore her professor did not "get her" and was grading her down because of mutual dislike. As tutors, we deal with that kind of issue quite a bit. As a professor once told me, students are "complicated human beings," and conflicts often happen when students and teachers don't see eye-to-eye. Encouraging students to come to a certain understanding, without having the teacher there to mediate that conversation, is quite difficult. The challenge of mediating an understanding also comes into play when we receive graded papers such as Julie's. Unfortunately, Julie didn't have an assignment sheet, so she could not tell me what her professor expected her to write about when I asked her at the beginning of the session. Regardless, she thought the teacher's expectations were just, as she put it, "too much."

In that moment, I had to deal with this issue diplomatically by addressing Julie's concern without vilifying the professor. I decided to start with the professor's comments and then go back to her paper. This spur-of-the moment choice turned out to be the best idea for that session. Since Julie had to include the source article with the assignment, it was immediately clear to me, as it was to her professor, that she did not understand how to paraphrase and summarize, as indicated by large swaths of the paper being circled and long marginal comments indicating that the writer needed to do something to avoid plagiarism. Her reaction to my suggestion that she paraphrase was less than positive, as I could see her attention or interest in the session was waning. She muttered something about nothing being wrong with the way she had written the paper and did not want to go through the entire thing herself to change it.

This is where I took interruptive action. Personally, I think taking a break from the table and introducing something different can be constructive when I reach the end of a student's attention span in a writing center conference. The last thing we want student-writers to do, aside from walking out, is lose interest. I grabbed two or three of our citation handouts, so we could go over how to work with sources one-on-one. Some students appreciate the handouts because they are more visual learners, but, mostly, giving the students handouts is part of our practice of providing them something their professors often do not – one-on-one attention. In this case, the handout I gave her involved MLA citations and preventing plagiarism. Giving her a handout allowed me to direct Julie's attention back to her original crisis. Each time I came to one of her teacher's comments, I referred to the user-friendly handout in front of her. She had a series of "ah-ha!" moments and started writing furiously on scratch paper everything she had originally wanted to write. This time she paraphrased and cited her source material correctly with guidance from the handout and me.

Afterwards, Julie commented that her teacher's comments weren't "so bad after all" now that she knew that the professor's intentions were not only to improve paper but to improve her writing overall. When I helped her decipher her teacher's objective commentary in a way that helped her understand how to improve her writing, I made Julie realize that the person she previously viewed as an enemy was her ally. That lesson, above all, is one I hope sticks with her.

[*To continue reading "*Kairotic *Moments in the Writing Center," please click on the links below*]

Situating Our Rhetorical Practice–Tim Taylor

Praxis is a project of the **Undergraduate Writing Center** at the University of Texas at Austin

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