# THE WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

## – FROM THE EDITOR –

In this issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, Sam Van Horne focuses on the importance of information literacy and offers tutors suggestions for helping students move beyond relying on whatever Google turns up as search results. Karen Kalteissen and Heather Robinson report on a research project tutors engaged in, to learn more about online tutoring. They concluded from their study that a hybrid form of tutoring, a mix of face-to-face and online interaction, was deemed to be the most successful context for meeting with writers.

As yet another indication of the educational benefits tutors derive from their work, Amy Gerald reflects on what she learned as a tutor and how that has improved her classroom teaching. And Brianne McClelland narrates her story of how their writing center became a collaborative center built by and for the students.

Finally, a gentle reminder: As we move towards the end of another academic year, many of us are planning budgets for next year and trying to anticipate amounts needed for travel funds. So a plea to conference planners who are currently organizing and deciding on next year's dates and sites for conferences of interest to writing center staff, please send me an e-mail with your calls for proposals and contact information so that I can list them in the remaining issues of *WLN* for this academic year. (We will be publishing issues for May and June and then not again until September.)

✦ *Muriel Harris, editor*

## TEACHING INFORMATION LITERACY IN THE WRITING CENTER

✦ *Sam Van Horne*
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Two years ago I was conferencing with a student who requested help with a complete draft of her writing assignment, an analysis of a speech by a candidate in the primary stage of the 2008 presidential election. The student had analyzed a speech by former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, but the analysis contained overflowing praise for the current president, George W. Bush, rather than references to Giuliani's own worth as a presidential candidate. When I asked the student where she found the speech, she replied, "On Google." We found the text of the speech online: it was not one of Giuliani's stump speeches; it was the speech he gave in support of President Bush at the 2004 Republican National Convention. I immediately became worried for the student when I realized that her analysis may not have completed the assignment. Perhaps if she had conducted a better search for information to use in her analysis, she may not have been faced with having to re-do her paper. All too often students encounter difficulties in their academic writing because they have not had adequate instruction in information literacy.

According to the Association of College and Research Libraries' "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education," "Information literacy" is a set of abilities requiring individuals to 'recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed in-

formation'" (ACRL). Often, undergraduate students who come to a writing center need help developing their own "set of abilities" to search efficiently for information. A 2005 survey conducted by the Online Computer Library Center showed that 54% of the students polled did not seek help when they were using their college or university library's electronic resources. And 89% of students began their search for information not at their academic library's website but at a commercial search engine such as Google (De Rosa), which excludes many relevant resources for academic writing such as articles in propriety databases and information in large government websites that may not be completely indexed.

Many colleges and universities are trying to find ways to teach students about information literacy. There are three approaches to teaching information literacy at higher-education institutions. In one approach, students are not required to take any courses in information literacy. Instead, they learn about information literacy while conducting research in their courses. In the second approach, students are required to take a class in information literacy, but the course content is not integrated with other courses the students are taking. In the third approach, information literacy courses are integrated with students' course work, which provides more opportunities for students to learn about information literacy in the context of their own research and writing projects, not through rote exercises in searching for information not relevant to the students' academic writing. Because students at my institution, the University of Iowa, are not required to take an information literacy course, I have tried to collaborate with students in the writing center to help them learn better techniques for finding and evaluating information they find electronically. And I believe it is vital for writing tutors at any writing center to be capable of not only helping students with their writing processes but also collaborating with students to help them develop better information-literacy skills in the context of their own academic writing projects.

As the amount of information available electronically to student researchers continues to proliferate, so does the discourse about the importance of teaching information literacy in the writing center. Irene Clark, in "Teaching Information Literacy," argues that the teaching of information literacy can happen "right at the screen" (567). Tutors must realize the ways that technology impacts literacy and be willing to discuss how technological tools mediate the writing and research processes. In "Libraries and Writing Centers in Collaboration: A Basis in Theory," James Elmborg emphasizes that it is vital for students to be able to make effective word choices when searching for information because topics may be organized under various keywords. By talking about what students already know and want to find out about their topics, tutors can help students refine their research questions and search terms to facilitate better searching. Also, tutors can enlist the aid of librarians during and after conferencing because librarians will usually have additional expertise to share with students.

But what can writing tutors do in a conference to help students learn about information literacy? Often, it is helpful to get students writing about their  topics through some focused freewriting exercises. For example, students can write about what they already know and then make a list of questions. Such exercises help determine students' level of interest in a topic and which directions they would be interested in pursuing; and these exercises help ensure that the students will take an active role in the conference by determining just what kind of information they want to search for. If students have difficulty writing down questions (which is likely when they are researching an unfamiliar topic), then I might ask some specific questions, but I avoid suggesting specific topics to research because it is important to let the student decide which avenues to pursue. After the freewriting session, the student and I discuss not only how words and phrases can be used in keyword searches, but also how certain terms describing controversies have rhetorical significance. For example, "genetically modified foods," "transgenic crops," and "Frankenfoods" are not neutral terms that are used to describe a controversy—their very meanings can stand for positions in a controversy, and the use of these terms in searching may provide the user with a certain kind of search results.

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

After some freewriting, it is important to discuss the next steps in searching for information—should we begin with Google or online databases that are available through the institution's library? Discussing the strengths (and weaknesses) of search options draws students into the conference, enabling them to take a more active role in the search process. For example, much current information and information from the government and other organizations is available on public websites, but electronic databases may contain specialized information that search engines cannot locate. Learning to decide which online resources to use to search for information is critical for students who are often expected to find and use special sources for their research writing—special sources that are not always accessible through commercial search engines like Google.

It is helpful, however, to talk to students about commercial search engines such as Google and how they work. For example, commercial search engines only index a fraction of what is available. They are unable to index the hidden (or deep) web, which has been estimated to be 550 times larger than the surface web (Lewandowski). The hidden web includes proprietary databases, password-protected websites, dynamically generated content, and other information that is not accessible from the Google search box. Researchers have also tried to find out how much of publicly available websites Google and other search engines actually index by measuring the amount of pages of a certain website that Google reports in its search results. Google, it turns out, only indexes the first 101 KB of a website that it adds to its database (Notess, "Google Review"). Yahoo! Search does a little better—500 KB (Notess, "Review of Yahoo!"). This means that many large, publicly available websites (such as government websites) may not be accessed through Google or metasearch engines (such as Dogpile) that can provide results from several search engines. Also, because the web is text-based, the only information search engines can index is text—so multimedia content such as images and video can only be found if people have named them with search engine terms that people would use in their searching.

The belief that Google is an all-knowing agent of the web is just an illusion; if students are engaged in a discussion about these ideas, and are helped to understand why the search results of commercial search engines leave out much of what may be important to them, they may consider learning new ways to search for information online. In addition to discussing how commercial search engines index websites, it is important to discuss how Google prioritizes search results. When someone conducts a search in Google, the results are produced by an algorithm that is one of Google's most prized secrets. No one knows for sure how it works. And web-search optimizers are always seeking to find ways to manipulate the content of a website to try to increase a site's rank in the search results. A better position in the search results means better visibility. The most reliable websites in the search results may not be near the top of the list.

> " *The belief that Google is an all-knowing agent of the web is just an illusion.* "

Now, tutors should not portray the web as a repository of bad information, but rather emphasize to students the importance of effective search skills. Students can learn helpful search tips such as these:

- Search for information on the search engine's Advanced Search page where users can restrict their searches to specific domains such as .edu,.org, or .gov (and omit the commercial .com);
- Enclose phrase searches in quotation marks or use Boolean operators (such as NOT) for fewer, more pertinent search results;
- Use simple commands in the Basic Search box such as "intitle:" (which focuses the search to the titles of web pages) to limit search results;

- Use search engines besides Google such as Ask (http://www.ask.com), Yahoo! (http://www.yahoo.com), and Live Search (http://www.live.com);
- Use online directories that have been vetted by information professionals, directories such as The Librarian's Index to the Internet (http://lii.org), The Digital Librarian (http://www.digital-librarian.com), Infomine (http://infomine.ucr.edu), and The Open Directory Project (http://www.dmoz.org).

To learn more about online search strategies, students and tutors can consult with librarians or read helpful articles about web searching such as William Weare's "Find It on the Web Using Search Concepts You Already Know" in the March 2008 issue of *Library Media Connection.*

Tutors can also offer guidance on the benefits of searching through online subscription databases. In these cases, it is helpful to have a working knowledge of the electronic databases that you may use. For example, at the University of Iowa, students may use a variety of databases such as EBSCO's Academic Search Elite, which indexes magazines and journals on current events and topics in the humanities; New York Times ProQuest, which provides electronic copies of articles published in *The New York Times*; and JSTOR, an electronic database that indexes many different journals in the humanities and arts. Tutors should take the time to learn about the online subscription databases their libraries offer because these available databases vary from institution to institution. Here are some important tips for searching in electronic databases such as EBSCO's Academic Search Elite or JSTOR:

- Find out how much of a certain journal that a database indexes;
- Learn the ways that particular databases handle keyword searches. (Some databases, such as New York Times ProQuest, will treat all two-word searches like phrase searches.);
- Limit search results to peer-reviewed (if appropriate for the research) or full-text records;
- Create an account within the database to save relevant search results and access later (e.g., when the student is using a home computer);
- Search within a subject to find more relevant search results; and
- Know the dates of the database (for example, JSTOR archives older sources of information so students will need to access other databases to find current resources).

A little more should be said about subject searching because it is a vital concept for students to learn about. Once students find a relevant record, they can search the subjects to which the record belongs in order to find resources that have been deliberately associated with that subject. For example, in EBSCO's Academic Search Elite, searching for information about ethanol gasoline can result in records with the subject headings "ethanol gasoline," "alcohol gasoline," and "energy policy." In many cases, subject searching will provide better results than keyword searching. Subject searching is an important technique to show students because they may not know that a topic or controversy has a particular subject name in an electronic database.

Being willing to help students with their search skills has helped me to become a more flexible tutor in face-to-face contexts. I often find that I am learning alongside my students. For example, when a student told me that he was looking for resources to help him write about Area 51, I contacted a librarian to ask which database would be most helpful. I learned about New York Times ProQuest, which contains years of articles from *The New York Times*. But when my student began searching for "Roswell conspiracy," the two search results were both crossword puzzles. (Hint: the answer has three letters.) The student and I laughed and tried to search again. I think it was important for the student to see that often the first few searches do not return the best results; searching requires patience and a willingness to learn how databases work. (It was here that we learned that ProQuest treats all two-

word searches as phrase searches.)

My own online writing conferences also seem to have improved as a result of helping students in face-to-face tutorials learn how to search for information and enlisting the help of librarians when appropriate. For example, at our institution, a reference librarian is usually online and able to chat with students or faculty. When I was tutoring a student who needed to find resources that would help him evaluate the cost of living in a different part of the country, I contacted the reference librarian through instant messenger to say that I was working with a student who needed help finding information. I was able to "send" my student to the librarian and also send the transcript of my tutoring session so that the librarian could understand what we had discussed so far. When I was conferencing with a student who was writing about a local initiative to raise the bar-entry age to 21, we brainstormed search terms that she could use to find letters to the editor in the local newspaper. In an online tutorial, this brainstorming works well because the student must do the searching at his or her computer and must search for information in ways other than dropping a few keywords into a Google search box. Sometimes helping students with searching can be difficult if students misspell their search terms or cannot name the local newspaper (as this last student could not do).

Before the end of the tutorial, it is important to emphasize that the library has information professionals who are much more adept at using their electronic databases and search tools. Information professionals have much knowledge that both students and tutors can avail themselves of. As writing tutors, we are perfectly situated to examine students' writing processes and help them grow in areas in which their skills need development. We should be just as willing and able to help students with how they access information electronically as we are to help students with planning or revising. Such assistance can provide a constructive basis for learning about information that is found on the web and how students can find it, evaluate it, and integrate it efficiently.✦

<div align="center">Works Cited</div>

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## IWCA RESEARCH AWARDS

The IWCA Research Awards Committee is pleased to announce the recipients of the most recent round of research grant review. After considering an impressive and unprecedentedly large pool of proposals, we decided to fund two truly exceptional ones.

Zanice Bond de Perez and Moira Ozias of Kansas University will use a $750 grant from IWCA to help underwrite an oral history project that seeks to give voice to student narratives of difference and struggles to achieve social justice in the space of the writing center. Their work aims to challenge a dominant professional narrative in which the writing center comes to see itself "as already having arrived in an oppression-free promised land."

Pamela Childers of the McCallie School will use a $750 grant "to research whether college/university models of Writing Fellows Programs can work effectively in a secondary school setting. By starting a Writing Fellows program, researching existing programs in higher education, and evaluating a year-long pilot program, I hope to determine whether the college model will or will not translate to the secondary level."

We congratulate the winners and all the applicants on the quality of their research plans and anticipate hearing their voices in print and at conferences in the years to come.

✦ *Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, Chair*

## SWCA Awards

Michael Pemberton, Director of the Georgia Southern University Writing Center, received the 2009 Achievement Award from the Southeastern Writing Centers Association at its conference February 28 in Greensboro, North Carolina. The award recognized him for his extensive twenty-year service to the writing center community at the national and international levels, his impressive scholarship, his excellent direction of the Georgia Southern Writing Center, and his service to SWCA.

Sarah Hamrick received the 2009 Tutor Award from SWCA for her leadership, commitment, and overall excellence as a tutor at the writing center of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

# BUILDING AN ONLINE WRITING CENTER: STUDENT TUTORS LOOK TO THE PAST TO CONSTRUCT A FUTURE[1]

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In the spring semester of 2007 at Rutgers University, eight undergraduate student tutors and the Coordinator of one of Rutgers's three Writing Centers met every two weeks to participate in the Writing Center Internship course. The mission of that internship was to consider the following question: "What does the future hold for tutoring?" The future, for us, concerned online tutoring. We decided to try to understand how an online writing center resource could work at our school; the interns' task was to read and respond to texts that considered the philosophy of writing centers, for both face-to-face and online tutoring, and to survey the different kinds of online writing centers that already existed. They then tested their preferred versions of online tutoring with students while reflecting on the experience in the context of the literature that we read in the course. At the end of the semester, each intern wrote a 10-page paper, offering answers to the question that formed the foundation for the course. Collectively, their main conclusion was an obvious but important one: any form of online tutoring which does not foster the same kind of metacognition that is often brought about in face-to-face tutoring does a disservice to the student and to the tutor.

The semester after that internship, the Coordinator of another of the Rutgers Writing Centers launched four pilots in online tutoring to further explore the ideas the interns had posited. Four tutors took part in these pilots: two of them had been interns in Spring 2007, and their work in the pilot extended their internship projects; two started working on the project in Fall 2007, developing their own original approaches to online tutoring. In this article, we discuss the concepts developed by the interns and the pilot tutors as they tested various kinds of online tutoring. During both the internship and the pilot stage, our tutors were working within the structure of face-to-face tutoring at Rutgers. When students sign up for tutoring, they commit to five one-and-a-half hour tutoring sessions over the course of five consecutive weeks. Students get course credit for attending tutoring; attendance is compulsory; and missing more than one out of the five sessions results in the student being dropped from tutoring and receiving an F for the course.[2] This structure is a restrictive one when compared to those employed at many other writing centers, and so it had a significant impact on some of the decisions that the tutors made.

During both phases of the online tutoring research project, the interns and pilot tutors started with minimalist tutoring as their basic pedagogical philosophy, an approach described by Brooks in which tutors cede most of the instructional authority in the tutoring session to their students and help the students to make their own decisions about invention, organization, and revision in their writing. The goal of minimalist tutoring is to help students develop strong writing practices rather than to fix individual pieces of writing. Minimalist tutoring is the official tutoring style of the Rutgers Writing Centers, having been mandated by the directors of the Writing Program there (see Lioi's "Small Victories" for more discussion of the philosophy and practice of minimalist tutoring at Rutgers). During our discussions in the internship and during staff development workshops over the course of 2007, we considered the merits and limitations of minimalist tutoring; in the end, the tutors decided that what they do is something they called "active minimalist tutoring," whereby the tutor takes on more authority than in traditional minimalist tutoring, as the situation requires. We recognize, however, that this foundation of minimalist tutoring limited what the interns and the tutors involved in the pilot identified as a successful online tutoring interaction,. That is, even if the session was successful in developing a student's understanding of what made a piece of writing more effective, the session was judged to have been a successful one only if the tutor managed to be as non-directive as is possible in a face-to-face session. The interns in particular identified the online environment as one where it was easy to become directive and to fill in silence with chatter, and so they were skeptical of any session where they ended up giving directive responses, even though other studies of online tutoring considered such sessions to be successful (e.g. Jones et al.'s "Interactional Dynamics").

## CONCLUSIONS FROM THE INTERNSHIP

The eight interns went into the internship skeptical of online tutoring in terms of what it offered both the student and the tutor, inculcated as they were with the principles of minimalist tutoring and the value of an ongoing face-to-face relationship with their students.[3] The interns felt strongly that without an ongoing tutor-student relationship there is less incentive on the part of the tutor to lead the student towards independence, and so a "maximalist"[4] style of tutoring is much easier to adopt.

The interns considered models of online tutoring that would allow students to work more independently, but they were not impressed by the usefulness of many existing online resources for helping students achieve this independence. The interns agreed that the "storehouse" model (see Lunsford) of an online writing center was best suited for use as a supplement to a face-to-face tutoring session; so, interns and pilot tutors instead focused on an interactive online writing center model, one where the students' voices were as important as those of tutors and instructors. Only with this balance, they argued, would the tutoring experience online be different from a face-to-face classroom setting, where the teacher is the primary focus of all learning, and the student who does best is the student who can internalize the lessons according to the rules set by the teacher. An interactive online space places the students in a position of power, where they can control the tutoring sessions and thereby learn how to work independently in different kinds of personae from the ones they assume in the classroom. Students' familiarity with electronic media, too, would reinforce this relatively authoritative student position.

The model of tutoring adopted by the interns and the pilot tutors predominantly became a hybrid model, combining online and face-to-face tutoring. Linking up online and face-to-face tutoring meant that the tutors set up an expectation that the students would have to participate actively in the *online* tutoring process in order to make the most of their face-to-face sessions. Crucially, the interns were mostly seeking a way to supplement their face-to-face tutoring sessions with online resources rather than providing a self-contained tutoring experience, either online or face-to-face. In the following sections we will see the models of tutoring that the tutors tested out in the internship and pilots, along with the reasoning behind the various decisions that the tutors made.

## FROM INTERNSHIP TO PILOT

*Chat tutoring*

Throughout the internship, the interns thought that a chat-room mode of online tutoring could provide the closest approximation of face-to-face tutoring possible and so should be considered and tested seriously.[5] Justin and Victoria tested this method during both the internship and the pilot, while several other interns discussed the possibilities in their internship essays. But the eventual conclusion was discouraging, especially given our initial optimism: chat tutoring, via an instant-messaging service, was not productive, for the reasons predicted by another intern, Nanci. She wrote:

> I can conceive of a chat-room being detrimental to a student . . . if face-to-face tutoring were eliminated altogether, or if a tutor were to become maximalist in this particular realm and a student were to become too reliant on chat at a set time that would serve as a last-minute "fix-it-shop" session before a paper is due. (Aydelotte 5)

Victoria experienced exactly this problem in her sessions during the internship and the pilot: she found that her persona in the chat room departed from that of the minimalist tutor. She struggled to keep on track throughout the internship and the pilot, finding herself becoming directive in her tutoring sessions and being tempted to actively edit her students' writing. From the Coordinator's point of view, however, Victoria's experience underscored another advantage of online tutoring practice: it made an already strong tutor acutely aware of the temptation to take charge and forced her to rethink how to create a student-driven, minimalist tutoring session.

*Email tutoring*

Many of the interns saw email tutoring as a good supplement to face-to-face tutoring, especially because the once-a-week format of tutoring at our institution meant that our students' tutoring session often did not coincide with the due dates for their papers. Justin, an intern who went on to participate in the pilot, therefore set up his online tutoring sessions with his students so that they would email him with specific questions about a paper draft a couple of days before the draft was due. The student would then have enough time to implement the suggestions from the exchange in her paper. Patrick also used the email model in the pilot; he had his students email him two days before their face-to-face sessions with a progress report on their papers. Both tutors found that this structure opened up the space for them to prepare their students for their face-to-face sessions. Furthermore, once coached, the students were generally more reflective about their own writing, as well as about the specific papers they were working on.

Justin and his students found the email exchanges to be productive for two main reasons. First, Justin coached his students to provide concrete questions and concerns in the email that accompanied the paper drafts that they were sending. Getting them to do this required some coaching, which Justin did in the face-to-face prelude to the online tutoring sessions. Justin posed several questions to students submitting a final draft by email, primarily questions about the strengths and difficulties the students perceived in their own writing and the areas in which they were seeking help. This structured set-up elicited good responses from his students. In his final essay for the internship, Justin provides one example of a student's response, which he received via email the day after his regular face-to-face session with this student:

> If you get a chance I would really appreciate if you can look over my essay. It is due this Thursday. I think the strengths so far are that I stay on topic and my thesis is clear. The biggest weakness might be that my supporting paragraphs don't support my thesis enough. I would like you to look at the flow/organization, the development of ideas, as well as surface level concerns. (Brown 5)

As we see in this response, this student has clearly made decisions about what he wants from the tutoring session. Several of the interns noted similar experiences: an asynchronous online tutoring experience could be more student-driven than even the face-to-face sessions that these emails were supplementing; furthermore, the email sessions gave the students practice with a vocabulary which they could bring to their face-to-face sessions.

The second main finding was that, contrary to initial concerns, the email approach allowed and, indeed, forced a tutor to be more minimalist in his approach to tutoring than he was even in face-to-face sessions. Justin and several of the other interns noted that this format eliminated the uncomfortable silences and the tutor's perceived need to fill in those silences. A student's responses to any tutoring appeared in the draft. This was a crucial point that several interns noticed: rather than the student expressing brilliant ideas orally and then asking the tutor what she had just said, all breakthroughs happened in writing. Justin's exchanges with his students show the potential that asynchronous systems hold to enhance and supplement face-to-face tutoring. They also suggest a way that email exchanges outside of regular face-to-face tutoring might be used advantageously, provided that the set-up is strong enough. Furthermore, because tutors were responding to students' paper outside of the texts rather than using editing tools such as Track Changes, they avoided falling into the fix-it shop model that is so readily available in an online environment.

## MORE EXPERIMENTS IN ONLINE TUTORING: THE PILOT

*Online Tutoring and Grammar*

During the pilot, Patrick sought to use online tutoring to encourage students to think about their papers before their actual tutoring sessions. He also focused on using online tutoring sessions to help students recognize patterns of error and attempt to make their own corrections before the face-to-face meeting. Most of his students were, not surprisingly, reluctant to make use of this service: their response was something like, "If I knew what was wrong, I would fix it!" But those who did use this service surprised themselves and their teachers with the progress they made. Patrick would ask for a paragraph or two from the student, paragraphs that the student believed contained sentence-level problems. He highlighted one kind of problem only (such as pronoun reference), offered his own explanation of the cause and fix, and modeled one or two corrections. Additionally, he linked the errors to fuller online explanations and models, thereby using the storehouse model of the online Writing Center in a way similar to that which the interns considered to be the most effective.

*Online Tutoring for Non-traditional Students*

Our most marked success in our online pilots came from the work of Peter, a graduate TA who teaches not only Expository Writing but also "bizntech," i.e., Writing for Business and the Professions, and Scientific and Technical Writing. Many students in those classes are non-traditional students, often paying their own way through college and usually accustomed to working independently despite schedules involving full-time jobs and children. Traditionally, very few of these students come for face-to-face tutoring at the three Rutgers writing centers, yet we often hear from their teachers that they need help both in basic writing and literacy skills as well as the more specialized research and analytical writing their long proposal projects require. Originally, Peter worked with only two sections of these classes, both synchronously and asynchronously. The semester following the pilot (Spring 2008), demand for this service became so great that we added three additional tutors to the program, eliminated the synchronous aspect, and created a program as close to an online version of our face-to-face program as possible. This system departed somewhat from the ideals set forth by the interns but did fulfill the metacognitive goals that the interns identified as being most important in any tutoring interaction.

The success of the bizntech tutoring program has taught us a lot about how to proceed with other online tutoring. We had suspected that student reluctance to come to face-to-face tutoring, one of the problems we set out to address, might spring from Rutgers's stringent policy of requiring a five-week commitment with only one absence allowed before failing tutoring. However, Peter instituted a similar system for his online students. They register for tutoring just like any other student and are obliged each week to submit by email their current writing project and a metacognitive reflection for a response. Attendance is recorded, and, just as in face-to-face tutoring, students have the option of continuing or terminating the tutoring relationship after five weeks. Instead of discouraging student participation, this system has done nothing to slow down the demand for this service and in fact may have encouraged more word-of-mouth advertising among students.

## CONCLUSION

The potential for increased distance between tutor and student in online tutoring that David Carlson and Eileen Apperson-Williams identify is a real danger, one that our interns and pilot tutors found to be best alleviated by a hybrid format. The conservatism of the interns in their views of online tutoring—seeing it only really working as a supplement to face-to-face tutoring—turned out to produce the most effective model of online tutoring for most of the students at Rutgers, according to the standards of success that the interns had set for themselves. The interns all suggested that the greatest potential for online tutoring lay in its self-help possibilities and the models and incentives it offered for metacognitive reflection. At the same time, the hybrid model that the interns favored is only possible for those students who have free time to spend on campus, whereas the students who stand to benefit most from online tutoring are those students whose on-campus presence is restricted by their work and family schedules.

Our greatest success story, at least by the numbers, was in providing tutoring resources to those students who do not usually sign-up for face-to-face sessions, and those sessions worked best when the tutor, Peter, put in place the same structures that govern the regular Writing Center sessions. We found that building an explicit link between online tutoring and some kind of face-to-face interaction—either in a tutoring session or by visiting the class—helped students take advantage of the online services offered, and teaching students to set up their tutoring sessions made both online and face-to-face tutoring more effective. ✦

*T*AKE NOTE

### Endnotes

[1] We could not have written this article without the dedication and insight of the interns from the Spring 2007 Writing Center Internship, and of the four "pilot" tutors in Fall 2007, and all the students who submitted so graciously to our experiments. The authors' humblest thanks go to Nanci Aydelotte, Justin Brown, Judy Cheng, David Johnston, Caroline Mannaerts, Israel Rubinstein, Victoria Whitfield and Michelle Zjawin (Spring 2007), and Patrick Hosfield, Peter Sorrell, and Justin and Victoria again in Fall 2007. Thanks also must go to Michelle Brazier and Tracy Budd for their editorial help on late drafts, and to an anonymous reviewer for valuable revision suggestions.

[2] Students enrolled in the tutoring course at Rutgers do not receive credit towards graduation, but those credits do contribute to a student's full time status, and it appears on a student's transcript with a grade of "Pass" or "Fail."

[3] See Thonus (125) for evidence that an ongoing student-tutor relationship has no impact on the success of a tutoring session in terms of effectiveness. Our experience, however, is that it makes tutors and students happier and more invested.

[4] Several of the interns independently coined this term in response to our discussions of Brooks's article. They used the term to refer to modes of tutoring that are directive and/or tutor-centered.

[5] An anonymous reviewer points out that replicating face-to-face tutoring practice is not necessarily the best route to success for an online writing center. The authors of this paper agree, and feel that the success of the pilot online tutoring program for non-traditional students demonstrates the merits of taking a different approach to tutoring. The interns, on the other hand, were best pleased when their online interactions *did* resemble their face-to-face interactions, believing that the students got the most out of such sessions. ✦

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## Back to the Future (cont. from p. 13)

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✦

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

# BACK TO THE CENTER: A FORMER TUTOR REFLECTS

✦ *Amy S. Gerald*
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While the mission of a writing center from an institutional perspective is to serve as a resource for students, it also may be "a resource which can be used with great effectiveness in the training of composition teachers" (Clark 347). The student-centered, collaborative, and process-oriented approaches to writing instruction that many tutors encounter, practice, and reflect upon in the writing center can transfer well to the composition classroom. And because some tutors will become instructors, writing center directors can influence classroom instruction by recognizing and emphasizing these complementary pedagogies in their teaching and training of a center's staff. In addition, if tutors' work experiences are positive, if they see that what they are learning and doing is consistent with their coursework in composition studies and relevant to their work as teachers and scholars, they will be career-long advocates for writing centers. The following is an overview of the skills, theories, and practices that I encountered in my writing center work and training that informed my classroom pedagogy and prepared me to guide future teachers to teach writing in the secondary schools. In particular, my writing center experience was important to my thinking about responding to and discussing writing, about collaboration and conferencing, and about interpreting and creating writing assignments.

## RESPONDING TO WRITING

In training sessions, my peers and I were assured that, contrary to how it may seem from the outside, refraining from editing student papers is *not* lazy. We were told that the writing center is not a paper drop-off service and that we were not to sit down with a student and simply correct errors. We were oriented, through discussion and readings, to the mindset that we were there to help students become better writers through the stance of an informed reader or a writing coach. Accordingly, we could ask questions and offer feedback, guidance, and resources, usually verbally. And we were told that most of the writing on a student's paper should be the student's. Still, I know my first instinct was to sit down with pen in hand and correct grammar. I had to fight that urge and shift my thinking about what sort of response from me was best for the student. Not surprisingly, this student-centered approach is espoused in classroom writing instruction. In *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, Erika Lindemann asserts, "The only appropriate purpose for comments on students' papers is to offer feedback and guide learning" (230). Rather than correct each error line by line, writing instructors teach through formative comments, "the kind that support learning, praise what has worked well, demonstrate how or why something else didn't, and encourage students to try new strategies" (233). Eventually, classroom teachers have to assign grades to final drafts, but their formative comments on earlier drafts are usually written in the margins and at the end of papers, and they may also be given verbally during conferences. Student-centered pedagogy makes students responsible for their own learning, so during conferences instructors should encourage students to write their own notes on their own papers as the session progresses, moving students toward becoming independent self-editors. While I have found that demonstrating editing moves on student papers helps students see alternatives, I burn out quickly if I allow my demonstration to extend into the whole paper, in effect revising it myself. Training both tutors and classroom teachers *out* of "fixing" entire student papers is perhaps the most important goal in both instructional contexts. Responding to papers with focused, limited, and guiding feedback encourages students to think critically about their own writing and take responsibility for the improvement of their writing—an approach that seems beneficial to both writing center and classroom work.

In addition to helping future teachers learn how to respond to papers effectively, working in a writing center can also help them assess papers quickly. I recall being exhausted at the end of my writing center shifts, after conducting back-to-back half-hour sessions for three or four hours. Yet, through this volume and repetition, I learned how to assess papers efficiently. I have heard writing center work compared to emergency room triage: staff quickly assess the papers and the writers, diagnose and prioritize major weaknesses, and attempt to remedy the "problems." In "The Language of Exclusion: Writing Instruction in the University," Mike Rose asks us "to reject a medical-deficit model of language" so as not to perpetuate the negative assumption that student writers have "deficiencies" that need to be "diagnosed" and "remedied" (358). Certainly, tutors should remain wary of prescribing a single remedy, which would take away some of the student's sense of ownership over the paper. Still, the triage analogy here is apt because fast and accurate evaluation of written work is vital to both the writing center and the

classroom.  Clark agrees, "Practice in instant diagnosis [. . .] helps new composition teachers to develop sharpened diagnostic abilities which carry over immediately into the classroom.  Most of us who have been in the composition business for a while can merely glance at a paper or sometimes just smell it and we know what kind of work it needs" (348).  Being able to quickly recognize areas to improve helps me respond immediately and confidently to student needs during classroom or conference time, asking questions and suggesting strategies to strengthen focus, organization, development, clarity, grammar, mechanics, or style.

## TALKING ABOUT WRITING

I learned how to talk about writing in the writing center; the terminology of writing instruction became more familiar and relevant to me. Of course, my classes in composition theory and pedagogy and the writing center training sessions I attended were essential to becoming a good tutor and a good classroom teacher.  I learned about the history of composition, its movements and theories, and that has helped me make well-informed and consistent instructional choices.  But the act of talking with students (over and over) about concepts such as focus and transition reinforced what I knew and pushed my view of myself from student to teacher of writing. By learning to clearly articulate what is meant by "transition" rather than relying on the nebulous term "flow," tutors begin to use the language of their discipline, building their ability to talk clearly about writing and bringing them more fully into the professional discourse community.  And this terminology provides students with the language they need to discuss their work.  In the writing center, such discourse happens one-to-one with immediate student feedback, and this intensive attention to the elements of writing helps tutors learn how to communicate those ideas clearly.

One way of talking about writing is talking about grammar, but talking about it in the context of students' own writing, rather than as a separate subject.  Lindemann, Constance Weaver, and others report that isolated, "formal grammar instruction doesn't improve writing ability," but grammar in the context of students' own writing may (Lindemann 73).  The writing center session's very structure is ideal for a contextual approach, since students who visit the center have pressing and specific grammar concerns from their papers that they would like us to address.  I recall working with most students at least partially on grammar, usage, or mechanics—recognizing patterns in their papers, prioritizing concerns, and providing guidance and resources.  Practice in this method as a tutor helped me in the classroom.  In a resource for classroom teachers, *The Grammar Plan Book: A Guide to Smart Teaching*, Weaver says, "[Teaching] grammar intertwined with writing [. . .] is certainly the most efficient use of instructional time and probably the most effective as well, with skills taught in the context of their use" (4).  Accordingly, I advise pre-service teachers to pull errors from students' papers, do mini-lessons on common errors, and dive back into the writing.  Tutors who become classroom teachers are already practiced in this approach, so it is likely that they might also incorporate it into their lessons.

## COLLABORATION AND CONFERENCING

Talking about writing in a one-to-one session is distinctly collaborative.  Tutors learn to ask students guiding questions to discover strengths, weaknesses, and strategies for improvement.  This cooperative, verbal, heuristic approach can be used for invention, drafting, or revision, and it builds students' critical thinking skills.  At the same time, it helps tutors learn more about students' writing and thinking processes. When I began sessions by asking questions, I effectively stopped myself from editing papers or imposing my own views on them.  Instead, *talking* about the papers restrained me from writing on them, and asking questions kept the focus on the students' own thinking.  As Muriel Harris points out in "'What Would You Like to Work on Today?' The Writing Center as a Site for Teacher Training," "[Tutors] sit with writers at work and gain a close understanding of when and how to intervene and what classroom activities help develop students' understanding of their own writing processes" (197-198).  The dialectic, collaborative writing experience gained in one-to-one conferencing can help future classroom teachers assess student understanding, communicate praise and critique, and formulate goals and strategies for revision.  Because I have experienced the benefits of collaboration in tutoring sessions, I now intentionally integrate collaborative writing into my courses.  I schedule writing workshops as a regular part of major paper assignments, and I integrate collaborative writing into formal projects such as reports or presentations about authors, theories, or teaching methods and into informal tasks such as small group or paired work.  These activities combine speaking with writing and promote active learning and a sense of community in the classroom. Also, classroom writing instructors who have writing center experience can see the value in one-to-one writing consultations and may be more likely to incorporate conferencing into their course structure.  That has been my experience and that of some of my friends from graduate school who worked in writing centers and now teach in college classrooms across the United States. Some of my new colleagues think I spend too much time conferencing, but I know that it is one of the most beneficial aspects of my classes for my students, as their end-of-course evaluations bear out.  Students write:  "One-to-one conference went well; helpful to go over feedback in person." "[Individual writing conferences] allowed me to see what the instructor expects of my writing abilities thus allowing me to become a better writer."  Students find one-to-one time with their instructor helpful in immediate and concrete ways. In addition, writing center staff who move to the writing classroom may be more inclined to promote the writing center, taking students there personally, recommending the center for further work

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on papers or as a place to find resources, and perhaps even recommending advanced students to work in the writing center, thus completing the circle and strengthening the complementary relationship between writing center and classroom work.

## ASSIGNING WRITING

Through daily interaction with a variety of students and an array of assignments, tutors see the diverse ways that different fields use writing. Perhaps without realizing it, tutors practice and teach rhetorical analysis of assignments, identifying purpose and audience expectations and work to develop that skill in students. As Harris says, "tutors learn why one of their roles is to serve as a translator, someone who is situated somewhere between the teacher and student, helping to interpret the teacher's comments" (199). While this is true for teachers' comments, it is also true for the assignments themselves. When I worked in the writing center, I emphasized audience awareness to help nursing students write lab reports and business students draft proposals. And while I knew little about either field or format, I knew enough to ask the students "Who is your audience?" and "What are its expectations?" Both tutors and students gain the ability to think critically about audience needs and situational conventions in order to write effective prose across disciplines.

Because of their experience interpreting and teaching students to interpret assignments within and beyond English studies, tutors understand the importance of crafting strong assignments for the classroom. They have seen writing assignments from both sides of the table, and so they are positioned nicely to begin developing rhetorically sound writing assignments that are appropriately constructed to communicate goals, parameters, and expectations to students. While having a broad exposure to writing assignments alone may not result directly in stellar assignments, it increased my awareness of writing conventions and expectations outside the English department, allowed me to read both strong and weak assignments, and made me struggle alongside the student to interpret those assignments. Now as a teacher of teachers, I try to model good writing assignments, attempting to be clear and thorough about their purpose, their relevance, my expectations, and the criteria for success.

Tutors also become oriented to writing as a process, an essential concept for creating writing assignments in the classroom. As a tutor, I never got to see the final draft of the papers I helped students create. It was odd to realize that I would never see that final grade. By design, tutors see a range of drafts at various stages of completion *except* final drafts, so their attention shifts from the final product to the processes of invention and revision. Tutors become process-oriented by the very nature of writing center work. And because they do not speculate about or assign grades, the emphasis of their work shifts further away from evaluation of final products towards facilitating the process of creating those products, learning how to encourage invention and revision as integral aspects of writing. As Lindemann states, "As a rule, the more time students spend on a variety of prewriting activities, the more successful the paper will be" (110). Conversely, the papers that are the least brainstormed, planned, and focused are often the most difficult to assess and revise. Because tutors see the benefits of slowing down and drawing attention to the writing process, they are well equipped to incorporate invention and revision into their writing assignments if they choose classroom teaching.

## DEVELOPING WRITING PROFESSIONALS

While writing centers provide a service to students and institutions, the benefits to the professionals who staff them are worth reviewing. Tutors typically receive remuneration for their work, and they gain unparalleled experience learning and practicing good writing pedagogy. They may become composition/rhetoric specialists, literature specialists, creative writers, school teachers, or professional writers. Regardless, their attention to process, assessment, and rhetorical analysis; their practice in collaborative, oral, and student-centered learning; and their use of the language of writing instruction will pay off. A sense of professional authority and first-hand knowledge of the importance of writing across the disciplines increases their facility with diverse rhetorical situations. As tutors grow in ability and confidence, they develop a sense of community with colleagues, supervisors, and students. They learn how to collaborate and develop better oral communication and "people skills" with which to navigate classrooms and careers. Their level of professionalism increases through access to professional organizations and publications. And finally, tutors gain a degree of authority that translates nicely to the classroom. Tutors are, in fact, already writing teachers, so they have experience with pedagogies that work well in both centers and classrooms—this is an advantage. And with this experience comes the "teacher presence" necessary to successfully negotiate a classroom, which is immensely helpful for young women and men who are close in age and appearance to their own students. Writing center directors invest considerable time, energy, and expertise in training tutors, so they are undoubtedly frustrated by the need to replace those who graduate or who become classroom teachers. The turnover rate, however, does nothing to minimize the importance of the experience and training tutors receive. Whether they continue working in the writing center or shift their duties to the classroom, these professionals gain valuable skills and insights that can inform and support writing and the teaching of writing across intradisciplinary boundaries, strengthening the impact and extending the reach of good composition pedagogy. ✦

# TUTOR'S COLUMN

## MAKING THE WRITING CENTER THEIR OWN

✦ *Brianne McClelland*
*Valparaiso University*
*Valparaiso, IN*

If you happened to drop by the first floor of Valparaiso University's Christopher Center for Library and Information Resources on a Friday afternoon in the fall of 2007, you probably saw a group of Christ College[1] freshmen huddled at the circular table in the Writing Center. Their laptops open and snacks nearby, these students were poring over their books and notes as they drafted their papers due the following morning. As a Writing Center consultant, I felt lucky to be on the Friday afternoon shift because it presented a rare opportunity to work closely with these "regular" clients. I also got a chance to see the writing process at work.

Most of the professors in Christ College (and on the rest of the campus) realize that their students have a difficult time adjusting to college writing, so they often suggest a trip to the campus Writing Center for a consultation with a Peer Consultant. (All of the Peer Consultants have completed either the Freshman Program in the Honors College or the University CORE program, so they are able to relate to and understand the writing dilemmas these freshmen face.) In the beginning, these Friday students were like any others who come to the Writing Center individually for consultations, except they all arrived at the same time. As the only consultant at the Writing Center on Friday afternoons, I either had to figure out how to help all of these students or turn some of them away. I remembered how much I benefited from my Writing Center consultations as a freshman and hesitated to turn them away. So, I improvised: I greeted each student who came in and then asked each to wait just a moment. None minded waiting; in fact, many encouraged me to take my time. While I was consulting with one student, the others would set up their computers at the spacious doughnut-shaped table in the Writing Center or hop on one of the computers nearby. They used this time to develop a thesis, jot down an outline, or begin drafting.

As I finished one consultation, I would move to the next student in the queue, and I repeated this process until I had consulted with all of the students. Many would stick around after our consultation to continue writing and expand upon some suggestions or ideas we had discussed. If I was busy talking to one student and another had a question or wanted feedback, she would often consult with her neighbor rather than wait for me. I continued circulating, but marveled at the way the students had really taken over, working through their writing together. It was an exhausting yet invigorating two hours. Many of them stayed and worked long after I left.

The atmosphere was one of peer collaboration. No one was afraid to ask for assistance or evaluation. The freshmen worked hard to come up with compelling and innovative theses, always stretching the limits of the writing prompt. It was amazing to see them week after week. One of the other consultants who dropped by commented on these gatherings, saying, "The Writing Center is a great place for consultants, TAs, and freshmen to interact and bounce ideas off one another, as well as to focus and fine-tune their writing."

The following weeks saw more and more students coming to the Writing Center on Friday afternoons for collaborative consultations and staying for lavish, all-evening affairs. The students brought decorated cakes and flavored coffees for sustenance as they worked. When they needed a mental break, they had fun with the texts and each other, producing lists such as "101 Uses for Aristotle" (doorstop, scrap paper, and coffee filter). The group had fun as we tossed around ideas, read aloud, or argued over a text. But something else was happening, something bigger . . . these students were creating their own writing center. They had moved from an individual, consultant-student writing experience to a group-focused, peer-supported writing environment.

Even as a first-year consultant, I realized this type of collaborative consultation wasn't typical. But after watching these students grow and develop as writers, I realized that these collaborative or group consultations could be a great way to help students take ownership of their work and of the writing process. Although our Friday afternoon "writing circles" were begun out of necessity, this model could be imple-

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mented for a variety of reasons at any writing center. Even though many students are afraid of sharing their work with peers, especially in an unfinished form, collaborative consultations give students a chance to see revision as a necessary part of the process, something every writer must do, rather than as an insult to their work. The freshmen I worked with certainly were not afraid of revision, even if it meant more work. They understood that they all shared a common goal: writing the best paper possible by the next morning.

That small caveat—the time constraint—helped these students discard their anxieties about sharing their work with peers. They knew they had to finish these papers in one evening and that their professors expected them to be quality work. Although the freshmen in Christ College do not receive letter grades for their work during the first semester, none of them wanted to turn in a bad paper. More important, though, were the Writing Center's welcoming atmosphere and our willingness to be flexible and adapt to a new style of consultation. Those qualities allowed us to host such a unique gathering.

The setting of our writing center emphasizes our view that academic writing is communicative and often collaborative. We are located in a large, busy area of the library where at least fifty students usually circulate, writing at computers, working in groups at restaurant-style booths, and pausing at the IT Help Desk, the media center, or the café. It's easy to stop for a writing consultation in this open information commons. Only our professional director works in a private office, but even that space has a glass wall. What we lose in privacy, we gain in inclusiveness. Our doughnut-shaped table can seat a dozen or just two. Consultants can move to booth seating, or anywhere else in the library if they need more privacy, but often they remain in the open, easy-access area of the Writing Center because that is where students feel the most comfortable.

This openness also makes our location ideal for collaborative consultations. Because the Writing Center table is often used by students doing group projects or typing on their laptops, students don't feel that this space is off-limits. Therefore, they feel comfortable engaging in a consultation while other students work or wait across the table. For students who know one another or who are working on similar assignments, this meeting at the Writing Center often encourages them to talk about their papers and thus engage in their own peer consultation.

Even at our Writing Center, it is still rare that these peer consultations evolve into anything quite like these Friday afternoon writing parties, but I hope this Friday group encourages writing centers (including our own) to begin offering, or at least thinking about offering, collaborative consultation sessions.

Although it was hard to admit, I realized that through the use of peer collaboration these students didn't really need me anymore. They still solicited my feedback, but they had become more comfortable in their new college setting and had grown more accustomed to the expectations of their professors. It was then that I began to see the real magic of the Writing Center—it is so adaptable to all student needs. As their theses became more confident and their arguments more articulate, they no longer needed as much feedback from me; instead, they felt confident enough to turn to their peers and some even trusted their own judgment!

The wonderful thing about this kind of open, collaborative environment is that it can be supported at any writing center. These gatherings began almost by accident but became intentional, weekly meetings because of the "fun, productive atmosphere" at the Writing Center. It just may be this environment, more than the expert-advice of the consultants, that students need to grow as writers and claim a writing center as their own. ✦

Note

[1]Christ College is the honors college of Valparaiso University.

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# CALENDAR FOR WRITING CENTER ASSOCIATIONS

**April 2-4, 2009**: South Central Writing Centers Association, in Georgetown, TX
**Contact**: Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton (piedmone@southwestern.edu) and Cole Bennett (bcb00b@acu.edu).

✦

**April 3-4, 2009**: East Central Writing Centers Association, in West Lafayette, IN
**Contact**: Linda Bergmann (lbergmann@purdue.edu) or Tammy Conard-Salvo (tcsalvo@purdue.edu). Conference website: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/ecwca>.

✦

**April 4-5, 2009**: Northeast Writing Centers Association, in Hartford, CT
**Contact**: Katherine Tirabassi; 603-358-2924; email: ktirabassi@keene.edu.

✦

**April 17-18, 2009**: Pacific Northwest Writing Centers Association, in Ellensburg, WA
**Contact:** Teresa Joy Kramer; kramert@cwu.edu. Conference website:<http://www.pnwca.org/>.

✦

**April 17-18, 2009**: Florida Regional Writing Center Conference, in Tampa, FL.
**Contact**: Kate Pantelides: 813-974-9720; kpanteli@mail.usf.edu. Conference website: < www.usf.edu/writing>.

✦

**May 1, 2009**: Nebraska Writing Centers Consortium, in Lincoln, NE
**Contact:** Conference website: <http://wwfp.mccneb.edu/writingcenter/nwcc.htm>.

✦

**October 22-24, 2009**: Midwest Writing Centers Association, in Rapid City, SD
**Contact:** Christopher Ervin (cervin@usd.edu) or Greg Dyer (greg.dyer@usiouxfalls.edu). Conference website: <http://pages.usiouxfalls.edu/mwca/mwca09/>.

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# THE WRITING LAB
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