

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E T T E R

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...FROM THE EDITOR...

If you're in the countdown mode awaiting winter break and a breather from a hectic fall term, consider finding some room on your agenda of heavy-duty relaxing to act on suggestions found in the articles in this month's newsletter. Steve Sherwood presents a compelling rationale for developing a code of ethics for your writing lab, and Lissa Petersen makes an equally compelling case for following her lead in organizing workshops for students led by faculty who offer their thoughts on how they write and what they look for in student papers. Then, if you're in a reading mode, Steve Bray and Jo Koster Tarver review a new book on type theory that can be useful in tutor training. If you're near a copying machine, another thing you may want to do during winter break is make copies of the two excellent Tutors' Columns in this issue for your tutors to read. And one final item to be put at the top of that agenda: pat yourself and the tutors on the back a few dozen times for all the important work that's been done to help student writers this semester.

I wish us all a superb vacation, meaningful holidays, and a great year ahead.

• Muriel Harris, editor

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Ethics and improvisation

While I was a graduate student working in a new writing center, one of my professors stopped me in the hall to ask, "You're not writing the students' papers for them, are you?" He interrogated me about his other suspicions, implying that he found the work we did in the writing center equivalent to plagiarism. Until then, I had believed that the English department unanimously endorsed the center's mission. And I had gone blithely about my various roles as a tutor—coach, critic, collaborator, cheerleader—seeing little cause for alarm. As D. Don Welch says, "Only when taken-for-granted actions are challenged . . . does ethical reflection occur" (30). I realized, as a result of this confrontation, that I had to remain continually on guard to be sure I wasn't violating, or being seen as violating, my ethical duties.

But what exactly are these duties? After ten years' experience in three writing centers, I sometimes still find it hard to decide precisely where to draw the line between ethical and unethical behavior. As tutors, we must help student writers to the best of our ability. But we also have an obligation to others who have a stake in our work: our-

selves, our colleagues, the students' teachers, the administrators who oversee our centers (and evaluate our performance), and the society at large (which, for some reason, expects college graduates to be able to write). Our obligations often conflict, in part because the definition of "help" shifts with one's perspective. To students, help means anything from a quick, impressionistic reading of their work to proofreading. Some of them expect to leave the center with a perfect paper. Some teachers and administrators ex-

pect the same, and hold us accountable for the students' errors or poor grades, while others consider even a stray pencil mark from a tutor's hand to be a breach of ethics. Meanwhile, we often take the position that the quality of a paper, like the grade it receives, is strictly the student's responsibility (and I'm not sure we should so easily let ourselves wriggle off this accountability hook).

Most professions have a formal code of ethics to guide their practitioners in resolving dilemmas. In fact, the adoption of an ethical code is one of the criteria (in addition to having a national organization, national journals, professional schools, state licensing, and relatively high social status) that distinguish professions from mere occupations (McDowell 14). Based on these criteria, despite a national organization, three journals devoted to writing center theory and practice, and innumerable calls for professional recognition, writing center practitioners do not appear to qualify as professionals.

Establishing a code of ethics would seem to be a next step toward achieving the professional status many of us crave. Ironically, though, we professional types apply the most stringent ethical guidelines to our peer tutors (especially rank beginners), reserving for ourselves the right to break such "rules" when circumstances so dictate. For example, as coordinator of peer tutor training at my center, I have my tutors take Jeff Brooks' "minimalist" approach, which involves refusing to edit papers and making students do most of the work. Even in my tutors' case, though, I try to keep the list of do's and do not's fairly short because I cannot anticipate all the dilemmas my tutors might face, and I fully expect that, as they gain experience, they will develop their own sense of propriety. Each tutorial, after all, is a singular interaction between two or more people. And if, as Christina Murphy and I have suggested, "a simple technique-driven

approach would be inadequate for operating in the fluid, unpredictable, give-and-take atmosphere of the tutorial" (2), then a formal, rule-bound ethical code would serve as a poor guide for tutors working at this intersection of complex and conflicting duties, agendas, and philosophies. In this sense, tutoring is more improvisational art than science. To adopt an ethical code—to paint by the numbers—might actually be a step away from, not toward, true professional status. So rather than formalizing a list of do's and do not's, I propose that we embrace this artistic aspect of our work, becoming what Welch calls ethical improvisers, or persons who work in "a landscape that is in constant flux" and must learn to deal with moral challenges in ways that "are especially sensitive to context, interaction, and response" (122).

Arguing for what amounts to moral relativism is risky, but as Michael Pemberton acknowledges, writing center ethics "are deeply embedded in institutional and situational contexts, and as such they resist reduction to a simple set of principles or universal guidelines" (13). This resistance often results from a genuine sense that a particular action (such as editing) is wrong in one student's case but right in another. And although some of our best minds (including Muriel Harris and Irene Lurkis Clark) have wrestled with them, these dilemmas remain unresolved. Perhaps our central ethical quandary involves how to limit the amount and kind of help we give students, which derives out of a larger question of whether knowledge resides in the individual mind or is socially constructed. In other words, is writing a solitary act of discovering meaning in our own minds and transcribing it onto paper or is it a dialogic process of making meaning in collaboration with others (including the society embodied in language itself)? Many of our ethical dilemmas stem from this one because how we perceive the act of writing (and learning how to write) will

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determine how we feel about assisting the writer.

Consider, for example, the December 1994 "Voices from the Net" column, which chronicles a WCenter discussion about whether tutors should bring pens to tutorials. This apparently simple question, as Jeannie Simpson points out, "gets immediately at the heart of the style of the tutorial and the relationship between tutor and student" (Crump 6). In fact, it raised complex issues of authority and text ownership that writing center practitioners from around the country debated for nearly a week. At one point in the exchange, Dave Healy observes, "It seems pretty clear from our discussion that we're not of one mind on these issues. Should we be?" (7).

By asking this question, Healy seems to imply that consensus on key issues is unlikely and possibly undesirable in so diverse and lively a group as writing center folk. Our differences of opinion and practice keep the field vital, prevent ideas and techniques that may work well in one setting (but not so well in another) from hardening into doctrine. This does not mean, however, that we are plagued by universal disagreement, especially about general principles. Most of us, for instance, would agree that tutors ought to treat students with respect as opposed to wanton cruelty. As Pemberton points out, we also believe that "our instructional attention in conferences should focus on higher-order problems (organization, development, focus, etc.) first, and then move to problems of grammar, mechanics, and syntax as the occasion warrants" (13). In an effort to hone writing center ethics to the essentials, he offers his Three Laws of Tutorics (loosely based on Isaac Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics), which follow:

1. A writing center consultant should teach students how to write and revise their own work, not do the writing or revising for them.

2. A writing center consultant should help students identify the most significant problems in their texts, so long as the help they provide does not violate the First Law.
3. A writing center consultant should follow a student's agenda for the writing conference, so long as that agenda does not violate the First or Second Laws. (Pemberton 13)

Pemberton's laws set a "clear hierarchy of values" (13), expressing underlying principles most of us already attempt to follow. With the exception of prohibiting the writing or revising of papers for a student, they do not prescribe or forbid specific actions, thus allowing us a some freedom to decide for ourselves how best to help each student. Invoking Ronald Dworkin's distinction between "principles" and "rules," I would classify these laws not as rules, which "are applicable in an all-or-nothing fashion," but as principles, which state "a reason that argues in one direction, but does not necessitate a particular decision" (qtd. in McDowell 30). According to legal professor Banks McDowell, a rule dictates decisions in a legalistic manner while a principle "has weight or strength in the context of balancing this injunction against other principles, policies or goals" (31). The problem with ethical rules, McDowell says, is a tendency to use them to establish a "minimum competence" for professionals. Ethical principles, by contrast, require "the professional to strive for ever increasing mastery. One must always improve, because one never quite reaches the goal of being a complete master of the profession's expertise and skill" (31).

Although I applaud Pemberton's laws for being compact, elegant, and nonspecific enough to allow for individual discretion (and increasing mastery), some of us might chafe under the first law's prescriptive "rule" against revising for the student. There are

times, after all, when such revision effectively teaches a student how to write. Judith Powers, for instance, makes a strong case for directive tutoring of ESL students. As she says, "Since they have no inner editor prompting them to stop and raise questions, we are likely to adjust our technique to their needs and discover we are locating errors for ESL writers in a way that looks very much like editing" ("Rethinking" 43). Irene Lurkis Clark goes further, arguing for active tutor-student collaboration, including rewriting. She cites a writer whose "graceful coherent style is due to his undergraduate tutor at a British university" who "would cross out any awkward sentences he found and replace them with more felicitous wording" (9). Through what amounted to imitation, the writer assimilated portions of the tutor's writing style into his own.

Was the British tutor acting ethically? Based on Pemberton's first law, perhaps not. The help the tutor gave, however, had a lasting, positive impact on the writer. If such an impact is a primary objective of tutoring, then we could conclude that the tutor was acting ethically in revising the student writer's sentences. In fact, forced to condense the ethics of tutoring into a single principle, I would propose that a tutor acts ethically if he or she puts a writer's long-term interests (such as becoming a better writer) ahead of short-term interests (such as a high grade on a particular paper). Often, we protect the student writer's long-term interests by focusing exclusively on higher-order problems; sometimes, we protect them by editing his or her paper. Far from a simple process, deciding which action is appropriate in each case calls for a level of judgment and insight one would normally associate with a professional. As McDowell says, "The craft or art of genuinely competent professionals is . . . knowing which skills and knowledge to use under what circumstances" (164).

As tutors, we learn our skills and

knowledge in several ways. We observe veteran tutors in action, swap ideas and techniques with colleagues, read books and essays on theory and practice, attend conferences, and take seminars and courses. Mostly, though, we gain an intimate knowledge of tutoring in the same way we gain such a knowledge of writing—by doing it, reflecting on our successes and failures (both practical and moral), and trying to do better the next time. We learn to tutor by applying a process of “on-line anticipation and adjustment,” of “continuous detection and correction of error,” that Donald A. Schön (26) calls “reflection-in-action.” In learning to tutor, we are like the novice architect Schön describes, who

is expected to plunge into designing, trying from the very outset to get the sort of experience that will help him learn what designing means. He cannot make an informed choice to take this plunge because he does not yet grasp its essential meanings, and his instructors cannot convey these to him until he has the requisite experience. Thus, he must jump in without knowing—indeed, to discover—what he needs to learn. (93).

From the initial plunge (or series of plunges) into tutoring, during which failure at various levels is likely, we pick up techniques we can use in subsequent sessions. Meanwhile, we also learn to become better improvisers, which, Schön believes, is an essential aspect of professional artistry. Faced with an unfamiliar situation, in which competing ideas and agendas pose a new and difficult challenge, the professional improvises a solution that draws the diverse parts into a harmonious whole. This act, Schön says, is comparable to the artistry of jazz musicians, who by “Listening to one another, listening to themselves, . . . ‘feel’ where the music is going and adjust their playing accordingly” (30). Ordinary

conversation, in which “participants pick up and develop themes of talk . . . is collective verbal improvisation” (30), Schön says, as is the more purposeful conversation between student and tutor.

Because ethical dilemmas infuse nearly every aspect of our work, our conversations during tutorials are, by nature, ethical improvisations. Last semester, for example, I worked with a freshman composition student assigned to write a personal narrative about an event that had changed his life. He had written about a car accident, caused by his sister, that killed her, their mother, and his older brother’s pregnant wife.

“It was all I could come up with,” he said. “My professor likes the idea. She says it’s dramatic.”

“Do *you* like it?” I asked.

He hesitated. “I haven’t done a very good job.”

As he read the draft aloud, I noticed he was being quite candid about his sister’s recklessness in losing control of the car. He also described, in detail, seeing his sister-in-law thrown from the car and watching helplessly as his mother bled to death at the roadside. Meanwhile, the narrative tone was so carefully detached that it nullified the drama his teacher evidently expected.

Judging from his demeanor and tone of voice, I suspected he was having serious qualms about the story. Eventually, he admitted that by writing about the accident, he felt he was betraying the memory of his sister, whom he loved, and exploiting the death of his mother simply to please his professor. “I asked if I could change topics,” he added, “but she said it was too late. Now I don’t know what to do.”

The student’s dilemma became mine. His professor should not have commit-

ted him to write about so emotionally charged an event, I thought, but to tell him so—to drive a wedge between student and teacher—struck me as clearly unethical. Together we needed to improvise a way to satisfy the professor’s requirement, but in a way that did not leave the student riddled with guilt.

“What happened after the accident?” I asked. “How did your life change?”

Among other things, he mentioned that his relationship with his father grew closer. Aloof and ambitious before the accident, his father began working shorter hours in order to spend more time with him, assuming the roles of cook, housekeeper, nurturer, and confidant. As a result, the student and his father were now best friends. The evolution of their friendship sounded like a wonderful story to me. However, I was unsure how his professor might react if, instead of the highly dramatic car wreck story, he turned in a quiet narrative about how he and his father survived the tragedy and learned to like each other. In my view, several important outcomes hinged on the decision. If he conformed to the professor’s wishes simply to earn a higher grade, especially if doing so meant betraying the memory of his sister and mother, he might never gain the independence of mind he needed to grow as a writer. But deviating from the approved course had its own risks. His writing skills might not be sufficiently developed to do justice to the other story. And imagine his confusion if he actually wrote a good piece but received a low grade because of the change in focus. Based on the grade alone, he might make mistaken assumptions ranging from “my teacher dislikes me” to “I’m a lousy writer.”

As Welch says, professionals often “encounter a set of circumstances that causes us to pause, to consider options or review how fitting the automatic response really is. We are forced to stop

and ask the normative question, "What ought I to do?" (29). In this case, having reviewed some possible consequences of my advice, I gambled that the student would be better off without the guilt, even at the risk of displeasing his professor. I like to think the gamble paid off, but the student did not return to tell me what happened, so it looks like I'll simply have to live with not knowing if I made the right decision.

Such ethical uncertainty is common among writing center practitioners. Fortunately, as Judith Powers' experience illustrates, when faced with a situation in which accepted tutoring strategies fail, we improvise. When the faculty at Powers' writing center realized that their "well-ingrained notions of model writing center conferencing" ("Assisting" 16) were ineffective when applied to graduate thesis and dissertation writers, they changed their policies (and their sense of protocol) to meet the legitimate needs of these students. In their willingness to be what Schön calls "corrective on-line" (272), they exercised improvisational artistry worthy of professionals. For as Schön says, a professional person's "knowing-in-action is dynamic and 'facts,' 'procedures,' 'rules,' and 'theories' are static" (25).

In describing the qualities of an ethical improviser, Welch echoes Schön, saying that a "fluid, evolving response to circumstances may be risky, but it is rich with the potential of new possibilities" (122). Welch adds that while a formal ethical code

might impose more order in the decision-making process, it is an artificial order that obscures the complexity and particularity of moral life. For an ethics of response, the decision-maker is left to rely on ideas of moral intuition, seasoned judgment, sensitive imagination, and the like. (148)

As we work within the unpredict-

able, ever-changing context of the tutorial, we'll continue to make and regret our mistakes. Meanwhile, we'll find no lasting comfort in doctrine. Our best chance of resolving our ethical dilemmas, and qualifying as true professionals, lies not in painting by the numbers, but in relying on experience, intuition, and conscience to lead us toward ever-increasing mastery of this improvisational art we call tutoring.

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Call for Proposals

The last few years have witnessed a proliferation of online writing centers but only minimal critical attention to their effectiveness in serving students. For a volume on this technological phenomenon, I am collecting essays on the effects of such electronic extensions of traditional centers, their various purposes, and assessment of their work. Possible topics include, but are not limited to, role of design in a website, parallels between hypertext and use of hard copy handbooks, interpersonal communication in traditional labs vs. greater dependence on student initiative in an online center, aspects of distance learning. I am interested in theoretical considerations as well as practical approaches. Please limit proposals to 250-500 words (1-2 pages). Publisher contacts will begin with the selection of abstracts.

Inquiries or proposals can be sent, by January 15th, to:

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