Letter From the Director

This newsletter reflects the spirit of a place where writing happens, not only for the students who come to the Writing Center seeking support for their writing but for the consultants as well. By staying open to new ideas and opportunities for intellectual engagement, consultants make the Writing Center a dynamic and constantly evolving space for themselves and the students who walk through our doors. This newsletter extends that engagement one step further, and I’m grateful to Michelle Nathani and Jamie Novak for the idea as well as to the consultants who contributed to it. Let us know what you think.

-Geeta Kothari

Learning To Fish: Common Writing Challenges

Jamie Novak

If you give a man a fish, he eats for a day. If you teach a man to fish, he eats for life.” While I am hesitant to reduce the Writing Center’s mission to such a cliché, I cannot deny that it is sound in principle. Writing pedagogy confirms as much:

Mostly, we just reflect a student’s own thoughts so that they might appear clearer than before

The difference between teaching about writing and helping a student learn to write on his or her own is crucial to a student’s ability to grow as a writer and a thinker.

This fundamental, albeit seemingly small, difference in wording prompted me to consider the contrast between simply teaching something to a student as opposed to actually adopting the mentality of a tutor as a lens through which to view the world. A teacher typically must adapt to a classroom, a curriculum, and a group of students, whereas a tutor acts as a mirror that can be pulled out in any environment, for whatever reason. As tutors in the Writing Center, for example, we occasionally supply a gentle prod in the right direction, but, mostly, we just reflect a student’s own thoughts so that they might appear clearer than before. Whether in the capacity of teacher or tutor, the goal of all individuals involved with the writing process should be to help students learn to write on their own, as opposed to making all of the revisions themselves. While a teacher or tutor could easily tell students where they went wrong and

No Stapling Here: The Peer Tutoring Program

Michelle Nathani

There is a constant and tedious battle in which many students at The University of Pittsburgh partake when they realize they need to augment their resumes with internships and awards. Filling out an endless pile of applications only to receive nothing in return is a major obstacle in the relentless battle to find an exceptional internship. Eventually, and maybe through some acquaintance, you might obtain an internship in which

Having a great vocabulary didn’t save the THESAURUS from extinction/eradication/expiration

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How did you come to be a tutor?

I came to tutoring sort of through the back door—as an extension or elaboration of my teaching work. I came to teaching as an extension of my writing life. I guess I came to tutoring the long way, through two back doors.

Is there a clear relationship for you between your teaching and tutoring roles?

Working one-on-one with students has turned out to be a really nice complement to working with groups, and has, I think, made me a more sensitive and (I hope) more effective teacher. I’m interested in the ways the space of the tutoring session—for both tutor and tutee—call for a kind of emotional or interpersonal work alongside the intellectual work of thinking and writing (I suppose at a certain level they are the same work). When tutoring, I get the sense much more vividly than I do when teaching that writing just is very, very hard for students; that it brings them up against a whole set of fears, frustrations, inadequacies, etc. that they’ve likely struggled with all their lives. In the classroom it is easy to forget that in addition to the learning of, say, the technical fluency required in writing sentences and paragraphs, there is also this raw, emotional work going on. bell hooks says somewhere that teaching is, essentially, about “being with people,” and I’ve always thought that that’s true—and I think the same applies to tutoring. A big part of being a student, it seems to me, involves mustering enough humility and vulnerability to open oneself to new ways of thinking and acting and looking at the world. And part of the teaching/tutoring role involves just being there in those moments of vulnerability. It sounds as if I’m describing a kind of expressive arts therapy, not writing—but I don’t mean it that way. Mostly all of this stuff occurs beneath the surface in a tutoring session or in the classroom. But I have tried to become more aware of it as it happens, and it has changed the way I work with students.

Sten Carlson worked as a tutor in the Writing Center from 2008–2011 and now manages The Pittsburgh Contemporary Writers Series.
Learning to Fish

show them how to fix their mistakes, this type of teaching is concerned only with finished products, not with the betterment of the students.

For a teacher or a tutor—no matter how official or unofficial the environment—the ability to teach students how to help themselves address or correct their own writing can prove to be extraordinarily constructive in any discipline. Therefore, in order to provide a few examples of how a teacher or tutor might help students approach their writing, the “Writing-Centered” editors took a poll of faculty tutors, peer tutors, and peer interns at The University of Pittsburgh’s Writing Center.

We asked them to describe the three most common writing challenges they encounter in tutoring sessions—including one that explicitly relates to English as a Second Language (ESL) students. After reviewing the responses, we compiled a brief list of the three most common and significant challenges that writers face so that our “Writing-Centered” readers, in turn, may become more aware of problems, learn to recognize them, and thus address them in their students’ writing or their own:

1.) The poll’s participants almost unanimously identified agreement as the most noticeable problem for ESL students; whether in reference to verb (or tense) agreement, singular and plural subject-verb agreement, or even article use, the challenge to make their writing consistent poses the greatest threat to the argument, coherency, and cohesion of their pieces.

2.) A multifaceted issue present in the writing of both ESL and traditional students is word choice and/or wordiness (or repetition). Tutors point out that students often utilize overly generic language that fails to illustrate their points effectively. In many cases, the students do not truly understand the assignment and thus either employ words they do not understand or use “filler” words and phrases to disguise their overall lack of comprehension.

3.) Finally, tutors also stressed that students frequently struggle to achieve coherence and focus. As one tutor explained, “Sometimes student writing doesn’t follow through on the promises the sentences make, so the writing seems unfocused and disconnected.” In these situations, tutors find that they must ask a lot of questions of force the students to take a stance on their topics. A lack of focus in students’ arguments often coincides directly with their use of broad language; students must firmly grasp their subjects and be able to explain those subjects explicitly before they can construct cogent arguments. First, students should work on constructing a solid foundation for their arguments that are rooted in strong opinions before they support those arguments with specific language.

PUNCTUATION RULES!

After years of reading my peers’ essays and an enlightening first semester of tutoring in the Writing Center, I came to realize that writers of all levels struggle with certain punctuation rules. In order to help rectify this situation, I decided to institute this column. Even if you personally feel confident in your own use of punctuation, I hope that you will be able to use this column’s punctuation rules to help other writers.

So, for the inaugural issue of this newsletter, I could think of no better rules to explain than those associated with one of the most feared punctuation marks in the English language: the semicolon.

The Semicolon

- The most common use of a semicolon is to connect two independent clauses (clauses that could exist as separate sentences) that bear some relevance to each other.

Example: When a party gorilla uses a semicolon, he tends to roar; party gorillas roar to show excitement.

- You can also use a semicolon as a sort of super-comma to separate items into a list that already include commas (such as locations, dates, descriptions, etc.).

Example: While searching for a party gorilla, I travelled to Los Angeles, California; London, England; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.
Since this publication represents an extension of the intellectual engagement that occurs in the Writing Center, we would like to extend that engagement even further.

Therefore, if you come across any egregious mistakes in terms of basic grammar, spelling, or punctuation, we would like to give you the opportunity to gloat. Please feel free to email us at jln43@pitt.edu or rae54@pitt.edu.

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**Fall 2011 Schedule**

**Sept. 16**  
Fall Semester Launch - “the spaces between”  
Dilruba Ahmed & Allison Amend  
poetry  
fiction

**Sept. 30**  
Considering an MFA in Creative Writing?  
Geeta Kothari & Ellen McGrath Smith  
fiction & CNF  
poetry

**Oct. 21**  
Sentenceshop  
Lois Williams  
poetry & CNF

**Oct. 28**  
“Writing in The Genres” Panel  
Kathleen George, Timons Esaias, & Salvatore Pane  
crime fiction  
science fiction  
comic books

**Nov. 18**  
Wordplay  
Jenny Johnson & Renee Prymus  
poetry  
CNF

**Dec. 2**  
End-of-Term Workshopping Session  
Tom McWhorter & Ronna Edelstein  
fiction  
CNF

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