

Center for TEACHING & LEARNING

Writing Center Newsletter

Volume II, Issue I

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February 12, 2009

The Writing Expedition:

Writing Center as Training for Climbing

by Tracie Kennedy

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Since the dawn of time, writers have struggled with writing. Everyone knows that writing is difficult, but the part of a writing assignment that is the most difficult depends on the person. Teaching college students to write effectively is a big problem in today's society. Irregardless of your experience with writing, your own voice as a writer is fairly unique, and you shouldn't of had to try to literally force it into a particular formula just to get a good grade. But for all intensive purposes that's what most high school writing experiences end up doing, and at the end of the day I personally feel that they end up doing more harm than good. In this article I'm going to try and tell how the Writing Center can help make students get better at writing just as college helps them have more knowledge—and hopefully

without having to struggle at it 24/7. No matter how overwhelmed you feel about your writing assignment, remember the Writing Center can help you see the rainbow at the end of the tunnel!

If you're laughing (or cringing) right now, chances are you're a teacher or upperclass student, and you're laughing with recognition, because you've either seen—or committed—at least one of the errors in the above paragraph. Every emerging writer has, I submit, at some stage in his or her development, relied on structures borrowed (sometimes inaccurately) from others. In some contexts (the personal email, the hastily-jotted reminder, the love note to a sweetheart) writing competency is not necessarily at the top of our list of concerns. However, there are contexts in which effective writing is essential, where our writing is an important reflection of our legitimacy

(as in a complaint or cover letter) or of our competency (as in a professional memo or graduate application essay). It is in these latter instances that we do well to remember that everyone can—and should—work to improve his or her writing skills. And, the way to do so is through training, which means sharing our work, seeking feedback, committing to the practice.

As Monica Petrilli relates in her article "We're All in This Together," I too once thought of writing as a solitary enterprise. It was only after I started teaching and participating in writing workshops, both risky endeavors for me, I might add, that I came to think of writing as a group effort, perhaps akin to a mountain climbing expedition, where an individual's performance, however experienced, can

Continued on page two

Social Justice in the Writing Center:

Encouraging Students to Become Engaged Learners

by Maria Cipollone

Writing Specialist

My current situation is more than exasperating; it's cathartic because I am experiencing the very same pain that I tell my students not to dread. But I am afraid—very afraid. I am faced with the same harrowing plight: a looming deadline, an audience's frightening expectation of greatness, and the worst view of all—an excruciatingly empty document with a quite judgmental cursor insufferably blinking back at me. In the midst of my panic attack, I remember the advice that I constantly give out: *start with your sources*. Following this advice, the conversations that inspire this article begin chatting with me like old friends and suddenly, I am confidently tapping the keyboard with an emerging smile. Now armored with aplomb, I reflect upon my recent panic attack. If I didn't have my sources, how would I have gotten through the terror of writing? This same fear undermines the path to scholarship for many young students. Because student writers often feel they have to begin with something totally original—they grow terrified and can "draw a blank." As professors at the University of Chicago, Gerald Graf and Cathy Birkenstein, tell us in their very approachable work on academic writing (*They Say, I Say: Moves that Matter in Persuasive Writing*):

In our view, then, the best academic writing has one underlying feature: it is deeply engaged in some way with other people's views. Too often, however, academic writing is taught as a process of saying "true" or "smart" things in

a vacuum, as is if it were possible to argue effectively without being in a conversation *with* someone else ...[I]n the real world, we don't make arguments without being provoked. (3)

Thus, my query becomes: how does a student gain the authority to approach academic writing? I claim that, as instructors, we must grant our students the authority to jump into the critical conversations presented to them in classroom experiences—lest they remain bystanders to their own educational journey. Furthering their movement toward active engagement as writers is a contribution to social justice education that the Writing Center can provide. I recognize that many students' unpreparedness for completing these critical tasks may stem from their inability to "collaborate" with sources because as dutiful students they're merely reporting the sources. In his essay, "Breaking into the Conversation: How Students Can Acquire Authority for Their Writing," former preceptor in Harvard University's Expository Writing Program, Mark Gaipa uses the ingenious technique of having students envision themselves arriving at a dinner party.

Gaipa proposes (and I fully endorse his proposition) that student writers are permitted critical voice because of their co-mingling with critics, metonymically, almost an academic osmosis (402). Furthermore, Gaipa uses clever stick-figure drawings in order to demonstrate to the audience the "moves" that scholars must make when engaging sources—such

as "picking a fight" with or "piggy-backing" on a source (427-9). I reiterate: these are the moves that instructors must encourage our students to make—not only that they must be made, but made deliberately so that our students may take an active role in their writing and intellectual journey. I "piggy-back" on Gaipa's comments: "No longer bystanders, students become scholars by participating, with their essays, in a scholarly debate" (420). Through engaging and collaborating with sources, students become more invested and more actively partnered in academic discourse.

I believe that this spirit of engagement and collaboration with scholars fits well with the new social justice curriculum at Cabrini College: one that promotes the same values of investment and partnership. Truly, if connecting with scholars (through composition) can encourage students to assume their roles as budding scholars themselves, this relationship can surely bolster their intellectual growth. Once again, I join in conversation with my source, Mark Gaipa: "[Students] can also see how controversies and trends emerge over time, how scholarship has a history and a direction; it is not just a competition but also a common endeavor—collaborative knowledge about a text that unfolds dialectically over time" (422). "Common endeavor" is one of the unique characteristics of Cabrini College—and one that instructors can actively promote in young writers—as well as in young citizens.

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The Writing Expedition (continued from page 1)

still be informed and enhanced by others engaged in a similar pursuit.

Having taught and tutored first-year students for many years, I have come to see certain patterns of high school writing that we—teachers and tutors—try to “break” in the classroom and the Writing Center, much as expert climbers might teach novices to understand the requirements of higher elevation climbs. I’ve illustrated a few of those faulty patterns in the sample paragraph above, but in their illuminating and inspiring monograph *Critical Passages: Teaching the Transition to College Composition* (2004), writing teachers Kristin Dombeck and Scott Herndon classify the typical patterns of early writing samples by first-year writers as follows:

- **Accumulation of Sameness:** making direct correlations between texts or from a text to a personal experience, without context, depth, or nuance, e.g., “Amy Tan struggled with fitting in at school, and so did Richard Rodriguez, and so did I” (12). This to me is the hallmark of the beginner: a lack of ability to make distinctions. Many first-year college students tend to treat all texts the same, much as a novice climber might not recognize the utility of specific tools for specific situations. In fact, beginning climbers are advised to buy all-purpose shoes since a general application of a basic tool is precisely what must be mastered first.

- **Conversion Narratives:** presenting a change or development as occurring spontaneously, “an epiphany in place of a genuine turn of thought” (12). As a climber, it is sometimes daunting to hit the trailhead at first light, feeling perhaps cold and groggy, with the summit seeming impossibly far away. Experienced climbers know this feeling can still crop up but also know to ignore it (much as we advise students to ignore the inner critic that can pop up during brainstorming sessions). The climb is long; there are no shortcuts. It is the process of embracing the journey to knowledge or to the summit which is the lesson.

- **Polemical Arguments in Support of a Thesis:** “students marshal all their textual and experiential evidence to prove their thesis is the only viable way to think” (12). Students, like novice

climbers, may be reluctant to let go of their customary ways of approaching a task, especially when that task presents a challenge. Perhaps it is the fear we face in risk that leads us to cling to the familiar, but in pushing through this risk, taking the leap across the chasm or spanning the rocky ledge, there is both great satisfaction and reward in the elusive view that is afforded from the other side.

In my years teaching emerging writers, I’ve come to learn from them the experiences they’ve had with writing, the struggles they’ve experienced, the negative judgments they’ve continued to carry, and the coping mechanisms they’ve adopted as a result. I’ve long been aware that one of the most common (and dangerously self-defeating) myths entering freshmen entertain about making the transition to college is “I’m in college now—I should be able to do it alone” (“it” referring almost exclusively to academics).

“ . . . I came to think of writing as a group effort, perhaps akin to a mountain climbing expedition, where an individual’s performance . . . can still be informed and enhanced by others engaged in a similar pursuit.”

Dombeck & Herndon argue that students “default” to the above-mentioned forms “because they do not yet understand the secret we keep when we ask them to demonstrate thinking in their writing: that we want them, actually, to explore what they do not yet know” (13). It is this frightening and delicate—yet potentially fertile—experience of “not-knowing” Dombeck and Herndon describe as the heart (and challenge) of the successful first-year writing experience. And it is here, I believe, that the Writing Center can be a safe training ground for that experience, much like the rock wall is practice for

the mountain climb—a place where an emerging writer is guided in the process of cognitive risk-taking and into the domain of independent thought and academic discourse.

In discussing the underlying causes of the kinds of error patterns they find in first-year writers, Dombeck & Herndon suggest “students find ways to treat the imperative to think as an imperative to solidify thought into a one-dimensional form by cutting back on their own ideas or taking the path of least resistance through their reading” (13). In this way, students continue to approach a writing assignment as an assembly-line production process: one that is linear, methodical, and passive. Moreover, they seem to value the product—a finished piece—over (or, as opposed to) the process, and are thus often more focused on simply “getting it done” rather than on considering the purposes behind it. One might conceptualize a mountain climb in a similar fashion: there are destinations one can select that can be reached simply by following a road, but to invest in the climb to the summit—and to enjoy the satisfaction of that effort—requires an entirely different approach.

That’s precisely why a visit to the Writing Center can be so valuable—as several other articles in this issue discuss. In collaboration with instructors, classmates, and tutors, students may come to see a writing task more like that mountain climbing expedition, where the resources of the whole team can benefit each member’s experience: novice climbers (writers) come to appreciate that even experienced climbers (writers) must work and that the effort itself can provide its own reward; the success of the team makes the view from the summit not just more precious, but also more valuable for the sharing. Also, writers are solicited not about the paper itself, but about the ideas contained therein. Students thus learn to examine their thoughts and I hope come to trust as well as to see evidence that when the ideas behind the construction of a piece of writing are explored, developed, and tended to, the finished piece reflects that effort by necessity. *To belabor an overused metaphor yet again, it’s the journey, not the destination!*

Persistence Is Key: Peer Writing Tutor as Life Coach

by Chelsie Eyler ‘11
Writing Tutor
Psychology Major

As a tutor in the Writing Center, I often hear first-year tutees moan that they “aren’t good writers” or that they simply “can’t do it.” In this situation my subtle role as life coach can come into play: how can I inspire persistence? Marcia Clark, Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy for the University at Buffalo, asserts that persistence is an influential personal characteristic that drives individuals to persevere through any struggle they are encountering at the time (2005). Let’s face it: transition to college does not happen overnight. Students set their own foundations for success, but fear of inferiority often thwarts some students’ desires to persist. Fundamentally, their successes are heavily dependent on their abilities to overcome obstacles within that first year and beyond.

As I talk with tutees, my conversation about their papers becomes more significant because constructing a paper is not the only challenge they face. There are many other obstacles. I find myself coaching tutees in both writing and life. In my encounters with overwhelmed tutees, I always remind them of their ability to achieve,

because they’ve already taken their first step by coming for help even when their prevailing mentality was negative. With just this small comment, I watch their motivation levels jump. Further, it’s not as though my advice comes without experience. I too have at times felt like giving up and succumbing to the belief that my work is and always will be inadequate.

In those instances, I’ve learned to draw on both my own experiences and examples of well-known writers who have themselves demonstrated the value of persistence. A website dedicated to the theory of composition, writingclasses.com, sheds light on the fact that several noted authors’ works have been rejected by publishers. Satirical commentator George Orwell was told (about his famous novel *Animal Farm*) “it is impossible to sell animal stories in the U.S.” On a much more serious note, many students who may have read *The Diary of Anne Frank*—one of the most invaluable accounts of the Holocaust—might be surprised to learn that Frank’s priceless work was also discounted: “The girl doesn’t, it seems to me, have a special perception or feeling which would lift this book above curiosity level.”

Many students will also remember fondly

from childhood Dr. Seuss’s work, *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, never suspecting that it was deemed “too different from other juveniles on the market to warrant its selling.” Knowing that these authors were not dissuaded by their critics helps me to follow that example and to pass that message on to emerging writers, which is valuable advice for both writing assignments and for life.

“In my encounters with overwhelmed tutees, I always remind them of their ability to achieve, because they’ve already taken their first step by coming for help even when their prevailing mentality was negative.”

*“A writer doesn’t solve problems.
[S]he allows them to emerge.” —Friedrich Durrenmatt*

We're in This Together: Writing as Collaborative Enterprise

by **Monica Petrilli**
Graduate Student Tutor

Many students think of writing as a solitary enterprise. When I was an undergraduate, I thought so too. After I received a new assignment, I often felt not only alone, but even more troubling, I also felt helpless. At first, I would stare at the assignment sheet with confusion. I never asked the professor or even other classmates to clarify, for I thought I was supposed to figure it out on my own. With time and a little reflection, I would come to understand the assignment, but then I would convince myself that I lacked any ideas about the topic. Waiting for inspiration, I would often sit alone in front of a blank computer screen staring at the blinking cursor. Although I was reluctant to seek help, in one of my courses the professor required students to visit the college's Writing Center. At first, I was not convinced that someone unfamiliar with the topic could possibly help. After a few sessions, however, I gained a completely new perspective—I came to view writing as a collaborative enterprise, one that I now embrace both as a graduate student and as a tutor in the Writing Center.

For many U.S. college students, writing is often a process completed while sitting alone in front of a computer screen. Yet, in other ways, writing can be seen as a process of conversation, connection, and collaboration with teachers, classmates, tutors, and readers. Such a broadened understanding may in turn alter students' conceptions of Cabrini College's Writing Center. Some students may think of the Writing Center as a place to ensure that papers fulfill their assignments' requirements, a place to take papers to be "checked" for grammar perfection, or even as a place to obtain some magical seal of approval that will lead them on the path to an improved grade. (Unfortunately, such a seal does not exist.) While tutors at the Writing

Center check for grammar mistakes, argument cohesion, and logical transitions, we provide so much more! As Stanford University English Professor Andrea Lunsford argues in "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of the Writing Center," the purpose of the Writing Center is to help "students get in touch with [their interior] knowledge, as a way to find their unique voices, their individual and unique powers" (48). By sharing my own struggles and strategies, I aim to encourage students to be self-reflective about their own relationships to the writing process so that they may find their own unique voices, strategies, and powers.

"At the end of my sessions, I once again assure tutees that many of us feel vulnerable as we commit our thoughts to paper and submit our interpretations for approval."

Tutoring sessions may serve as an opportunity to assist writers with a particular writing task as well as with a new understanding of the writing process. Sometimes, a student comes to the Writing Center with an assignment sheet and an overwhelming frustration. Often this student emphatically states, "I have no idea how to begin!" In such instances, sharing my own struggle with the writing process can help alleviate this anxiety. When the tutee hears that I too am challenged every time I compose a piece of writing, that leaving my computer to talk through my ideas with professors, classmates, friends, and writing tutors has proven to be an extremely beneficial, and therefore essential, part of my own writing process, I'm modeling something

new—and important. Now, we are partners. We might continue the session then by generating preliminary ideas. Together, we work on developing those ideas. Often the student leaves with a whole list of ideas generated in the session and possibly a deeper connection to and more enthusiastic view of the writing process.

This relationship is ultimately a process of collaboration not only in the project, but also in confidence-building. The confident writer accepts that challenge is a companion at every stage in the writing process, not a judgment on the writer or the outcome; not a terror to be feared or avoided. In fact, I believe that writing should always be a challenge. Writing can be enjoyable precisely because of that challenge. Through writing, we do not compose a finished product that solves all of the problems a text addresses. Rather, we produce a text that augments our own and others' understanding of an issue and participates in a conversation with other thinkers who explore similar topics. I hope that through learning about writing as a collaborative process, students will discover writing to be not only less arduous, but also extremely beneficial to enhancing their understanding. At the end of my sessions, I once again assure tutees that many of us feel vulnerable as we commit our thoughts to paper and submit our interpretations for approval. I remind them not to worry...we're in this together!

"The confident writer accepts that challenge is a companion at every stage in the writing process, not a judgment on the writer or the outcome; not a terror to be feared or avoided."

More Than a Feeling: Finding the Spirit of Writing

by **Michael Costanzo '11**
Writing Tutor
History Major

To me, composing a written piece is as much an artistic and emotional experience as it is an academic one. Writing is an art and an extension of one's self. It took me awhile to find this out, but once I did, it was a revelation. I admit that this attitude may be at times tough to grasp and implement. Trust me: the outcome is worth the effort. Recognizing and embracing the need to incorporate passion, desire, and artistic values into scholarly writing is important, as are the concrete practices of academic writing. Natalie Goldberg, well-known author and supporter of Zen-based writing, states in her book *Writing Down the Bones*, "Sometimes when you think you are done, it is just the edge of beginning. It is beyond the point when you think you are done that often something strong comes out" (103). I wholly agree with Goldberg, yet how can these seemingly abstract ideas be conveyed in a practical sense and put into practice?

"Recognizing and embracing the need to incorporate passion, desire, and artistic values into scholarly writing is important, as are the concrete practices of academic writing."

As a Writing Center tutor, there are two roles I often take on in a tutoring session in order to help tutees find the emotional and creative aspects of their writing:

- **Devil's Advocate.** In my Writing Center sessions, I ask questions of a tutee in order to counter his or her argument. While it may seem that I am being disagreeable, or hard to please, adopting this role helps me to draw out information from a tutee, and to push the limits of his or her thinking about a subject. When tutees come to the Writing Center feeling as though the subject matter they approach is limited, this role allows me to open up the discussion and spark their writing processes.

"To me, composing a written piece is as much an artistic and emotional experience as it is an academic one."

- **Controversy.** Another way to enrich writing is by including a moral, social, or ethical dispute. I often ask tutees: "What are the real-world implications for your discussion?" This tactic adds a dimension of engagement for tutees when they are able to make a connection to larger issues. An example from Nancy Huddleston Parker's and John Timpane's composition text,

Writing Worth Reading: The Critical Process, helps writers to understand this concept. For instance, if a student discusses standardized testing methods used in U.S. Secondary Education, he or she might call for a major re-evaluation of these methods (308). I find that when tutees write about issues that have resonance in their personal lives, they become far more invested in the writing process.

Engagement in the spirit of writing is not an overnight process; it takes time and patience, but is well within anyone's reach. It wasn't until last year (my freshman year at Cabrini) that I began to appreciate those values. The strategies I use in the Writing Center are meant to inspire tutees because I find that having personal investment in academic work makes the workload much more meaningful.

As Goldberg says in her work, "Just keep your hand moving as you are feeling. Often, as I write my best pieces, my heart is breaking" (103). I advocate what Goldberg prescribes—this practice is more than a feeling; it is the spirit of writing.

"Engagement in the spirit of writing is not an overnight process; it takes time and patience, but is well within anyone's reach."

R_x from the Writing Center: To Cooperate, Not to Cure

by Meg Mikovits

Professional Writing Tutor

Folks on college campuses—students and professors alike—love to make analogies to help explain what exactly it is that the Writing Center does. This makes sense, because when we're faced with going somewhere or trying something new, it's natural to frame our expectations in terms of a comparative experience. When it comes to narratives about Writing Centers, however, these comparisons often miss their mark.

One of these narratives centers around the idea of the Writing Center as a repair shop, something akin to the Genius Bar at the Apple Store or the Geek Squad that roams Best Buy. Anyone who's found him- or herself in possession of a malfunctioning iPod or a DVD player that won't play has probably relied on these technical gurus to perform a deceptively quick electronic fix: they poke buttons, unscrew panels inscribed with ominous DO NOT OPEN warnings, and pull on wires that sensible people wouldn't dare touch. The results are usually nothing short of miraculous. Writing tutors are often asked to perform similar feats for overwhelmed student writers. "My paper is almost done," they'll declare. "I just need the grammar to be fixed!" Unfortunately though, tutors don't have a handy repair manual or replacement parts for quick essay fixes.

Another popular idea is that the Writing Center is akin to a doctor's office. The tutors in this story are the medical professionals, ready to examine, diagnose, prescribe. Inherent in this Writing Center-as-exam room parable is the idea that the writers themselves are deficient in some way. Anemic vocabulary? Cirrhosis of the semicolon?

Dislocated paragraph structure? We'll fix you right up. Just take two chapters of *The Bedford Handbook* and call us in the morning.

The main problem with these analogies is that they emphasize something we at the Writing Center try actively to de-emphasize: an unequal balance of power between tutor and tutee. In the inaccurate repair shop and doctor's office narratives, writers don't gain anything beyond a single "fixed" paper; they'll need to go back to the expert the next time there's a problem. This scenario is great for the doctor and the Apple Store guy, who would presumably like long client lists and lots of business. *What's obviously lacking from the stories, however, is the amount of collaboration that takes place in a writing tutorial.*

"The main problem with these analogies is that they emphasize something that we at the Writing Center try actively to de-emphasize: an unequal balance of power between tutor and tutee."

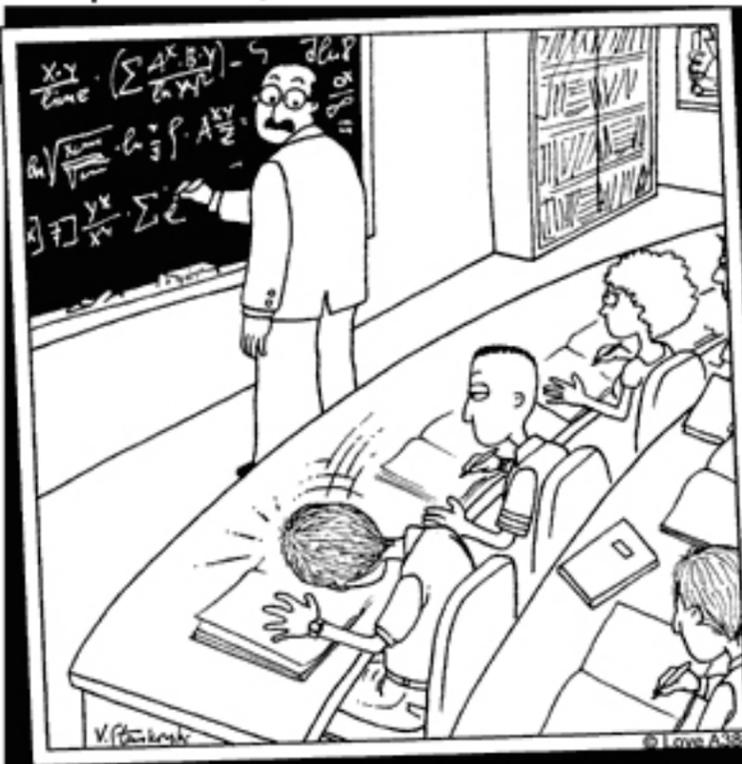
It's true that most writing tutors are themselves excellent writers—but what's more important is that tutors are great teachers, too. Many students who come to the Writing Center are so focused on their current assignment that they tend to forget that writing—like anything else—is a learning process.

*"Anemic vocabulary?
Cirrhosis of the semicolon?
Dislocated paragraph structure?
We'll fix you right up.
Just take two chapters of
The Bedford Handbook and call
us in the morning."*

When students begin college, they often realize that they can't write as well as they thought they could. When they move away from home, many young people also realize that they can't cook as well as they thought. Most young people also realize that the way to rectify this is not to hire a professional chef. Instead, these novice cooks go to someone they can trust—mom, dad, grandma—to get tips and slowly build up their repertoire of cooking skills. The family kitchen is an analogy that is much more accurate when framing the experience of the Writing Center. Your family doesn't expect you to make the leap from cold cereal to chicken cordon bleu overnight, just as tutors at the Writing Center won't expect you to craft a perfect essay on your first visit. Instead, the Writing Center is a place where improvements are made collaboratively, step-by-step, and at a pace that works for the student.

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Professor Herman stopped when he heard that unmistakable thud – another brain had imploded.

Love, Jason. *Snapshots*. 2008: Jasonlove.com

"Mathematics is like love: a simple idea, but it can get complicated."

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