5 Creating a Community of Teachers and Tutors

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(Joe Essid assumes no responsibility for any bawdy, surreal, or hilarious errors created by scanning this document)

Administrators of WAC programs and writing centers tend to believe in social constructivist theories of knowledge. Hence, they often ask themselves questions about authority: the roles writers play as both teachers and students. How can teachers give up their authority, their centrality in the classroom, without giving up their expertise? How can they model collaboration for student writers and for tutors so that students learn from each other? How can technology support the exploration of these questions and the implementation of collaborative pedagogies?

Consider, for example, the focus on authority in the following transcript of a synchronous electronic conference. Here, four tutors-in-training use the software to discuss a typical problem-how to assist a writer who has received harsh criticism off a paper:

Tutor 1:

During the conference, I would try to point out the positive points of the paper along with the things that could use improvement. I would also try to phrase criticism in the form of a question in order to avoid sounding too authoritarian. Finally, I would remind the writers that my commentary is only a collection of suggestions, and they could choose what to change and what not to change

Tutor 2:

I think Tutor 1's point about criticism is important. We don't want to seem as though we're a "mean professor" or too authoritarian. [I would ask the writer) Where is the first place you would start with improving this paper?

Tutor 3:

As tutors we should not take the side of the teacher or the student, but simply move away from this topic and begin focusing on the actual writing ... by getting the student to focus on a goal.

Tutor 4:

I agree with Tutor 1. I think it's important to not seem authoritative. One

way of conveying your equality to the tutees *is* by making the conference very conversational. By doing so, you can discuss both the positive and negative aspects of the paper without seeming too superior.

Tutor 2:

 So we all agree that we should not be too authoritative and remain neutral. Additionally, we should *focus* on both the positive and negative points *of* the paper. But where do we head from there?

As this electronic conversation reveals, tutors arrive at an issue that inform much of their work: the nature of the tutor/writer relationship. It is important that the tutors-in-training arrived at this question and their consensus about neutrality in an online synchronous conference in our composition theory class, rather than face-to-face or at the writing center. Through the visual record of such conferencing across the semester, students can see knowledge as a process of continually negotiated conversation.

Our course, "Composition Theory and Pedagogy," which prepares peer tutors for our writing center and "Writing Fellows" for our WAC Program, includes several uses of technology, including role-playing exercises in which tutors plan strategies for tutorials with resistant or hesitant writers. We also use a class newsgroup, electronic mail, and the World Wide Web, technologies that seem to minimize face-to-face dialogue at a small, private university that offers a high teacher-student ratio. So that readers might see how our story compares to their own, we'd like to offer here some information about the University o Richmond before we describe more specifically how and why we combine tradition and technology in our approach to tutor-training.

The University of Richmond is an independent, privately endowed institution that provides a comprehensive academic program for more than three thou sand men and women. It offers degree programs in the liberal arts and science and in business, as well as graduate and professional programs in law, business leadership studies, and selected areas of the arts and sciences.

In assisting students to select and prepare for careers and for graduate an professional study, the university is committed to improving student literacies--cultural, textual, and technological. In service of this goal, WAC and an enhanced writing center were proposed on our campus in 1990 to integrate writing instruction into the core curriculum and across levels of study and disciplines These proposals and the plan to create a networked English lab were in keeping with the university's objectives and strategic plan. Creating "electronic class rooms" is part of the university's commitment to "substantial and continuing investments in technology" for the purpose of "enriching and intensifying the intellectual life on campus" *(Engagement in Learning* 1994).

A networked English lab seemed ideal for the acquisition of literacies in collaborative setting. When we piloted the three-credit training course in the fall of 1 992 we wanted students to learn social constructivist theory and apply

it in the Writing Center, as part of a weekly practicum. Although we anticipated the potential for that mode of learning in the intensely collaborative environment of networked computing, we underestimated the degree to which technology would enrich teacher-student dialogue and help students become more active learners.

Writing Across the Curriculum at Richmond: Faculty Involvement

The WAC program, based on the models at Brown University and Swarthmore, is voluntary. Participating faculty from across disciplines agree to attend two orientation meetings and to require at least two substantive writing assignments in the course for which they have requested WAC assistance. One of those assignments must be due in the first half of the semester. Faculty also agree to require mandatory conferences between students and Writing Fellows so that peer tutoring can be collaborative-a dialogue between students, both of whom have something to contribute at the session. We want to avoid a hierarchy in which the writer turns in a draft and the Writing Fellow tells how to fix it. We also want faculty to recognize the value of such collaboration and perhaps change their perceptions and practices in order to foster learning communities in their classrooms.

As yearly assessments show (see specific data on page 82), faculty involved in WAC have begun to make changes of their own initiative. They have assigned write-to- learn activities, have increased attention to the writing process (more detailed guidelines, more pre-writing, more re-writing), and have changed the way they respond to papers, echoing Writing Fellow commentary. Even after the program's first year, for example, faculty began to focus more on content and global structure than on mechanics. These changes come about slowly, naturally, and thus more meaningfully than they would if faculty were required, at the outset, to change their teaching practice to accommodate WAC.

To be sure, all faculty want students to write better and are committed to do what they can to facilitate that learning. Commitment varies according to the time and energy faculty can expend in a given course and according to previous training and experience in the teaching of writing. Some, understandably, given their own history as students, see writing as testing, not learning. Unsure about their own ability to motivate, or respond to student writing, faculty welcome the assistance of Writing fellows and regularly recommend as potential Writing Fellows undergraduates who demonstrate strong communication abilities in their courses. Often those same students return to the faculty member's course as Writing Fellows.

Since participating faculty recommend students to the program, most Writing Fellows and peer tutors are not English majors. Like their professors, they represent different disciplines: biology, leadership, psychology, sociology, in

ternational studies, math, theater, and political science. Many students who complete the course are offered paid positions as Writing Fellows, Writing Center tutors, or administrative assistants. Often students assume all of these roles, gaining experience in both programs.

What Writing Fellows Do

A Writing Fellow is assigned to a particular faculty member's course where he or she is responsible for the following:

- reading and writing response to no more than fifteen drafts for two or more assignments (how many depends on the nature of the writing tasks);

- meeting with each student in conference to discuss revision strategies (usually, the writer brings knowledge of the subject matter; the Writing Fellow brings knowledge of rhetoric. Sometimes each brings both);

- and meeting with the professor as needed to discuss expectations and student progress.

Currently, over forty faculty members participate in WAC, rotating in and out of the program, according to their teaching schedules. Now four years old, the program includes, in any given semester, fifteen to twenty faculty and thirty-five to forty Writing Fellows. With such a diverse group of students and faculty, many of whom have little experience with collaborative learning, we find it daunting to have only one semester in which to provide Writing Fellows and tutors experience with collaborative work and a variety of tutorial strategies and writing heuristics. As part of this accelerated program, we want them to become independent of any one approach to tutoring. As in the scenario at the beginning of this chapter, tutors and Fellows must be able to conform their practice to the learning needs and temperament of the peer with whom they are working. Collaborative theory matters greatly for undergraduate tutors who might he tempted to imitate traditional professors by evaluating a draft rather than motivate revision through engaging in dialogue with a writer. In a one-semester course, we need an effective and quick means to teach the relationship between collaborative theory and practice. That need has been met by instructional technology because programs like synchronous and asynchronous conferencing provide visible evidence of the process toward consensus and the construction of knowledge.

Disorienting and Reorienting Prospective Fellows

The training of Writing Fellows emphasizes how computer-assisted environments support contemporary rhetoric and composition theory Early in the se

mester, instructors and students discuss the theory of the collaborative classroom, including Bruffee's (1984) contention that "knowledge is a social construct generated by a community of knowledgeable peers" and Hawisher's and Selfe's (1993) assertion that new methods of instruction are mandatory for a "prefigurative" society whose educators and elders cannot adequately predict the direction or scope of social or technological change. Fellows-in-training also hear a chorus of scholarly voices calling for change in writing instruction, such as Bartholomae's (1980) proposal that we adopt a more sophisticated notion of "error" and Sommer's (1982) critique of how professors' commentary discourages meaningful revision.

On a campus in the midst of implementing large-scale curricular change, the advice of these and other writers has helped us integrate technology and WAC. In the networked lab, students practice theories of collaborative learning and peer-tutoring that they will need when assigned to the WAC program or writing center. For example, e-mail exchanges with scholars such as Mick Doherty and
Dickie Selfe help students learn how to engage in the ongoing conversation in the field. The value is twofold: they recognize that knowledge is transactional, not static, and they can learn how to question their peers' knowledge by engaging them in dialogue about writing. Not every student who enters the training class is successful in these dialogues, and without that skill they do not make
good Writing Fellows and tutors. That quickly becomes apparent as the class uses technology. Each semester a few students cling to a teacher-centered model of learning, one antithetical to both the nature of the Fellows program and to the networked computer classroom. Often these students have been recommended for the WAC program on the basis of their strong editing skills, and are surprised to find that in the training class we actively discourage their "correcting" other writers' work or ideas. We encourage "facilitative," rather than "directive" commentary in which readers respond not as authorities, but as peer inquirers, motivators, and collaborators. In other words, we are teaching ways to offer guidance without exerting control over the writer's choices (Straub 1996).

In newsgroup discussions of contrasting theories of composition, many of the same students who assume control over other writers' texts tend to want more direction themselves in selecting "the right approach" to a particular problem. They want us to assume control of their own choices. Finally, with a politically conservative student body, it should be no surprise that in every class one or two prospective Fellows find collaborative learning "touchy-feely," associating it with left-leaning politics. As the writer, of one anonymous evaluation despaired, the instructor "has a Ph.D. and knows this stuff backwards and forwards. It would be more effective if he would communicate this to his students rather than allowing them to flounder on their own."

These examples are not news to anyone who has ever trained peer tutors, but the problem of resistance and a sense of floundering are compounded by the nature *of* the WAC program. In our writing center, the director reviews reports,

talks to student supervisors, and sees writers on a regular basis. In our less centralized WAC program, once a Fellow is placed in a class, the director of WAC may not hear about a problem with a Fellow until a tutee or faculty member complains. And yet the answer is not WAC police wearing little blue shirts and packing red pencils in their pocket holsters.

So we shake up prospective Fellows on the first day in class. The disorientation begins when the students walk into our lab and find that they may be sitting with their backs to the teacher. In designing the training class for Writing Fellows, the authors had the luxury of tailoring the design of our classroom to the pedagogy of our classes. When the English Writing Lab, the site for the training class, was designed, space for a seminar table was eliminated in order to fit more labs into the floor plan. With the approval of the chair of English and the director of University Computing, we abandoned the original configuration of our lab, typical of what has been derided as a "proscenium classroom" dominated by the teacher's personality and agenda (Barker and Kemp 1990). In fact, in our other campus labs, rows of immovable work stations face the teacher, an arrangement making the optimal use of floor space but working against active, collaborative learning. In the English Lab, however, we dispensed with the teacher's podium and moved the lab furniture into clusters of three or four work stations. We were also open to students' suggestions for additional refinements, and one Writing Fellow's clever idea has changed all of the classes taught in the room: during seminar discussion, students roll their chairs into about 200 square feet of unused space between the teacher's work station and the white boards, and away from the distractions of the computers.

The Class Newsgroup

Most discussions of readings and tutorial problems begin before class, with exchanges using a class newsgroup. We see debates, even arguments, about tutoring begin online and then continue face-to-face. The student-led discussions can be lively, even heated, about matters such as the influence of technology, social background, and gender on writers' practice and senses of revision. Consider this reply to a post in which a student claimed that it was natural for some poor students to be left behind educationally, since "that is life and you have to accept it." This reply, with the subject "A Post/Tirade," quickly appeared:

That people can sit back and defensively offer a knee-jerk reaction like "life's not fair" or lets "give them (meaning those living in poverty) jobs before we worry about computers" is without serious consideration and is, to me, offensive. Students in a fourth-grade classroom ... are NOT responsible for the inequalities in their education. These children are not learning on the job, they are struggling to learn in their classrooms.

This discussion led to the issue of how access to educational technology might affect students' writing ability. Each semester the level of debate varies, with the "hot button" issues of one semester eliciting only polite discussion or even yawns the next. Surveys of Fellows reveal that those who most enjoy posting responses to the class newsgroup claim that it offers more time for reflection and provides less distraction than either synchronous conferencing or face-to-face discussion about their reading and tutoring practice.

Are such electronic exchanges, often noteworthy for the instructors' lack of intervention, productive to the students' training as Fellows? The Fellows' work, done without direct supervision of the program director, demands maturity and careful judgment. A lack of these qualities often becomes apparent early in online work. So after we have modeled and practiced productive conversation with students, we intervene less and less as the semester passes. At the same time, we carefully observe students' participation. Hard experience with our first few classes of Fellows revealed that the online work provides an indicator of future success in the WAC program. Specifically, students who fail to post responses to the newsgroup, or who habitually post mediocre responses not related to an ongoing discussion, tend to forget deadlines, appointments, and other commitments once they become Fellows. We find that in most cases the newsgroup posts and subsequent discussions serve the benign purpose of testing how well the Fellows can think for themselves, while working within a community of peers, and base their strategies upon theory, experience, and educated guesses: the tools of the peer-tutor's trade.

WAC and Core

Our interdisciplinary Core course, required of all first-year students, draws faculty from all the disciplines on campus. instructional technology, especially newsgroups and the Web, plays an increasing role in the classes staffed by Writing Fellows. Because the Core course makes up at least one third of our WAC offerings in any semester, and because it offers Writing Fellows a specific set of challenges, we create a mini-Core practicum in the training course. A participating faculty member volunteers to work with us in the following way:

1. The faculty member visits class to discuss a writing assignment.

2. Each prospective Fellow reads and provides written commentary for a student's draft in the class, then meets with the student to discuss revision strategies.

3. The faculty member returns to our class to discuss how well we met student and faculty expectations.

4. We repeat this process one more time.

"Core" has been required for all first-year students since the 1994-95 academic year, and its goals include developing students' "ability to read, think, speak, and write"; engaging students in serious discussion "of the problem of giving meaning to life"; establishing "a foundation for University-wide conversation about serious questions" (Core Course Committee 1995). Faculty from most departments teach the class, and each instructor may conduct the course freely as long as she assigns papers, gives two exams, and adopts a standard syllabus. Guidelines for Core instructors encourage collaborative learning; most professors use seminar discussion as their teaching model, although a few still shift the balance to lecture.

Teaching Commentary-Synchronous Conferences

All prospective Writing Fellows have completed Core, and although they share common readings, pedagogy can vary widely, as suggested above. To assist students with diverse classroom experiences, Fellows often use synchronous conferencing to recreate and solve common problems: unclear assignments; disgruntled, lost, or resistant students; grammar-focused faculty; papers returned with scant, overwhelming, or confusing commentary.

- We have asked ESL students, biology majors, and Core students to contribute drafts of revised essays for the conferencing exercises previously described. With the writers' permission, Fellows then go online to prepare commentary and plan for hypothetical tutorials that would begin in half an hour. Later, using the class newsgroup, the Fellows critique their work in the synchronous conferences or compare it to actual experience as apprentices in the writing center or with a section of Core. Using transcripts in this manner has been judged effective in a number of different sorts of classrooms (Kolko 1993; Reiss 1995). Consider this analysis, completed after the student had reviewed a semester's worth of conference transcripts:

> Looking at our posts, one notes the frequency with which we use one another's names-think about what that suggests. Were we, in fact, writing to someone, writing for an audience? ... In some ways this might be more valuable than writing papers-because in papers, audience is seldom, if ever, so clear.

In making the conferences as realistic as possible, we wanted the technology to be as transparent as possible. The chaos that Moran (1991) claims can attend large-group conferences would not serve our purpose, so we had students work in small groups and return to analyze what was "said" online. Responses such as the one quoted were typical; students avoided the anomie they might feel in an unstructured online environment where an exercise is completed and then forgotten After two years of working with synchronous conferencing we find

that the follow-up evaluation of the conference is often the most important p of the entire exercise, since Fellows can see where they might not have effectively prepared for an actual conference with a writer. Evaluations of the exercises note that tutoring success depends more on common sense or the application of an appropriate tutoring method than upon flashes of genius. Most respondents also note that the synchronous exercises and subsequent study of transcripts increase their knowledge of course materials through sharing ideas wit a large group and having the discussion available for further study.

Program Assessment and Goals

We have conducted assessment surveys of the program since spring 1993. Participating faculty, students enrolled in their classes, and Writing Fellows co Plate surveys in either the spring or fall semester of the year. Assessment result show the following areas of strength and weakness.

Strengths

- Overall, participants are pleased with how the program is working.

- The training course does a very good job of preparing Writing Fellows to handle their responsibilities.

- Responses from recently graduated Writing Fellows indicate that the training courses also prepare them for graduate school and careers beyond the schoolhouse gate. Several Writing Fellows/tutors have found teaching/ writing center assistantships. One was hired as a technical writer by Princeton's Particle Physics Lab, another by a publisher to establish Internet-based writing training for employees.

- Respondents are fairly satisfied with the logistics of the program.

- There is growing evidence that WAC is fulfilling its function of placing the teaching and learning of writing at the level of individual courses across disciplines and at all levels of study; WAC is also fulfilling its corollary function of using writing to enhance the thinking and learning process.

Although faculty do not attend special seminars in the teaching of writing, as they do in other WAC programs based on the Writing-Intensive model, they nonetheless make noticeable changes as described earlier. The most important, we believe, is the addition of write-to-learn activities, which demonstrate to faculty and to students how writing can be used other than as a means of testing. We explain some of these changes in the nature of assignments and in teacher response through a "trickle up" theory: Writing Fellows' written response to students and conferences with faculty often guide faculty to change their own practice. Thus, the relationship between Writing Fellow and faculty is itself

collaborative. As evidence for the "trickle up" theory, here are some specific data from 1995's assessment that reflect previous assessments:

- 8 of 11 faculty required some other writing besides the number of papers required in the WAC program. Most of this other writing was in the form of write-to-learn activities. 75 percent of student respondents described the same activities. 65 percent indicated that this other writing enhanced their learning.

- 7 of 11 faculty changed the way they responded to papers. They described more concern with content; and some faculty described "echoing" writing fellow commentary.

In a moderately sized program of a young age, these results are encouraging. We are pleased with the successes thus far, yet we are also mindful of problems that we are working to resolve.

Weaknesses

- Students need to keep appointments and submit better quality drafts to Writing Fellows.

  Faculty and Writing Fellows need to communicate better and more often.

- Similarly, there needs to be increased and better communication between Writing Fellows and students in a WAC course, and between writers and tutors in the writing center.

- Faculty members need to stress to students that the benefit of WAC is directly proportional to the amount of effort/thought that they put into their drafts.

What We're Doing to Improve

A successful WAC program depends on clear communication of expectations among professors, Fellows, and students. That is what influences the quality of assignments, the quality of drafts, attendance at conferences, and Teacher-Fellow consistency in written response to student writing. Improving the quality of communication is what WAC is about, after all, and it is what influences continual change in the way we train Writing Fellows and tutors. Incorporating contemporary learning theory within the training course has helped potential tutors and Fellows make more informed decisions about their practice in addressing the various learning needs of individual writers. Incorporating instructional technology has helped us create a community of learners so that tutors and Fellows have both a model and the experience of collaboration as they apply theory to practice in the Writing Center and WAC program, Additionally

conferencing software, as well as newsgroups and e-mail, helps tutors practice interpersonal skills in tutoring dialogues. Face-to-face discussions in role-playing sessions help them see how body language and tone of voice can work against collaboration. In training undergraduate tutors, however, it's not always easy to strike the right balance between emphasizing knowledge of composition/rhetoric theory and emphasizing interpersonal skills. Both are crucial to the success of WAC and writing centers, and we need to be mindful of it each semester that we face a new group of students.

In the fall of 1996, prospective Fellows began work on an electronic tool that will assist us in improving communication between Fellows, faculty, and students. The Fellows' Handbook reinforces the practice of collaborative learning with computers. The Handbook takes the form of a Web site created by Fellows in the training class. The collaborative project features small teams of Fellows who

- complete projects about writing in the academic disciplines assisted by the WAC program (most recently, working with ESL students, writing in biology and chemistry, and writing with technology)

- critique and revise other teams' entries, forge links to national and local resources

- develop a set of tutoring guidelines and "quick tips" for working with different types of writers and assignments

- and submit documents for peer review and scrutiny by scholars who visit the site.

The project will grow with each class of Fellows, and we hope, when the site is relatively complete, to use it in training faculty for the WAC program.

New Challenges

While we have a working model for bringing other teachers into the WAC program, we face a very different challenge as the university admits an ever larger number of students who speak English as a second language. Currently, the university plans to offer a summer transition program for some incoming ESL students, and Writing Fellows will be assigned to assist instructors in classes, The Fellows' training class will soon include more TESOL readings and a unit taught by a faculty member who teaches in the summer program. The exchange of information will flow both ways; the English classes for the ESL students will make heavy use of technology, especially newsgroups and electronic mail, familiar to the Fellows assisting the TESOL faculty in the summer program. We expect that, as with paper commentary, Fellows will "teach the teachers" how to integrate technology into their curriculum with success.

Our WAC program does not aim to spread technology across the curriculum but we hope to link WAC to other programs that do. Our Faculty Technology Fellows project, which designates a "technology guru" in each department, spur off a Student Technology Fellows initiative. These students originally were hire(to help peers use the campus network in dormitories. The program has evolve(rapidly, and Student Technology Fellows now lead workshops for faculty an(assist them in one-on-one tutorials. We hope to enhance this program by select ing several Writing Fellows to assist WAC faculty as they create class Wet sites, use newsgroups, electronic mail, MOOs, or synchronous conferencing Meanwhile, the university plans to begin a Teaching and Learning with Technology Roundtable, and this would further increase the awareness of good use! of instructional technology across the curriculum.

Collaborative learning has always included the teacher, but the focus ha, usually been on how students create knowledge. In the possible link between WAC and instructional technology, however, teachers would become co-learners with their students. Our Writing Fellows and tutors have the skills needed for the new millennium. Will teachers make the shift to learn from Writing Fellows who can provide a student's perspective on working with students from Ghana or Guatemala, how the Core class is changing their peers' perception of Islam, and "What's Cool" this week on the Web? It's our hope that teachers will make this much-needed paradigm shift. The WAC program, with its use of technology in the service of collaborative learning, provides. one model for doing so.

Note

Our English Writing Lab consists of eighteen custom-built multimedia Pentium machines and a teacher's station. The machines are connected using a Novell LAN that provides access to software for Windows 95. The room has a Hewlett-Packard 3si laser printer and a high-resolution multimedia projector. For synchronous conferencing, students used the Daedalus Group's Daedalus/DOS and, most recently, W. W. Norton's Connect 1.0 for Windows. Newsgroups are handled by a remote VAX server, and all other software is stored on a UNIX server. Most files that students exchange are ASCII text. The Web browser for our syllabus is Netscape (version 3.0 as of the writing of this article). Most HTML files for class are written and saved in Rich Text Format, converted to HTML using the Macintosh program RTF-HTML Converter or PageMill, and embellished using Photoshop for Macintosh or MacDraw Pro.

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