Welcome to the “new, all new” Writing Lab Newsletter, where much has happened. It’s taken a year to to work with designers on the new format and to confront mind-boggling difficulties as I coped with learning the new software to use in putting each issue together. All of you who have been jolted out of comfortable and simple software programs as you move on to new, sophisticated (and daunting!) ones have also experienced this feeling of utter confusion. But we survive—somehow. Writing center people are always ready for new challenges, right?

We hope the new look pleases you, and given the fondness for the old familiar “W” in our logo, it remains. Please, let us hear from you, including suggestions as to other changes you’d like. Also, almost completed is our archive of past volumes, in word-searchable format: <owl.english.purdue.edu/wln>.

And we have a new Managing Editor, Wendy Madore, who is at the same old e-mail address (wln@purdue.edu) and phone number (765-494-7268). Wendy looks forward to meeting you and handling your subscription matters. With postal rates going up almost as fast as printing costs, please remember that after many years, we have raised subscription rates, but hoping to keep the cost to your ever-stretched budgets as minimal as possible.

– Muriel Harris, editor

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What passes for “good academic writing” is socially and culturally constructed by scholars who are both narrow in their vision and exclusionary about their club. And the terms of membership in this club are, of course, those of acculturation; to join, one must discard perfectly reasonable ways of thinking and communication and, in the process, learn to disparage those ways, and pity those who cling to them.

– Helen Fox

As a graduate student, I am working hard to break into the discourse of writing center and composition studies theory and pedagogy. This requires that I learn a specialized language, read and write in an academic voice, and in general, assimilate myself within the fields. Additionally, I am working as a tutor in a midwestern university’s writing center, and I ask for the same willingness to assimilate from the students who visit. To help them succeed within the university (which at a minimum means achieving passing grades), I aim to guide them towards becoming better academic writers who can create effective, well-organized arguments that include thesis

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

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Manuscripts: Recommended length for articles is approximately 2500–3000 words, 1500 words for reviews and Tutor’s Column essays, in MLA format. If possible, please send as attached files in an e-mail to wln@purdue.edu. Otherwise, send hard copy and a computer disk or CD-ROM, and please enclose a self-addresses envelope with return postage not pasted to the envelope. The deadline for announcements is 45 days prior to the month of issue (e.g. August 15 for an October issue.)

As many educators and experts in the field have argued, non-mainstream students need to acquire dominant discourses in order to compete within the current system of power and privilege (Fox, Courts, Delpit, Bizzell). At many colleges and universities, writing centers function as sites to help these students assimilate, with the aforementioned goal in mind. However, when writing centers fail to acknowledge or question the power structure within which they operate, they perpetuate a loyalty to the current system of domination, which can work to eliminate diversity and difference (Bawarshi and Pelkowski, Grimm, Vandenberg). Students of color, in particular, suffer from this uncritical validation of academic discourses (Barron and Grimm).

RACING TOWARD A SOLUTION

With such a large gap between academic discourses and the discourses of many students of color, it is not enough for writing centers to operate as sites of assimilation where students learn how to change themselves to better fit the mold of academia. Instead, writing centers need to be aware of the values and ideology inherent in academic discourses and to rewrite the writing center as a place where students of all races are able to negotiate the difference between their discourses and those of the academy. As such, it is crucial for writing centers to offer a space where differences can be acknowledged, welcomed, and accommodated—or as Gloria Anzaldua has it, a borderland.

When I tutor students who do not speak (or write) English as a first language, the tutorial sessions almost always include discussions about the student’s primary language. These conversations help me to better understand students’ writing and acknowledge their ability and skill in their primary languages. Why then, isn’t it as common or easy to have similar conversations with students of color who operate outside of standard edited English because of dialects as opposed to languages? Perhaps it is a symptom of our society’s continual avoidance of the topic of race, or perhaps it is white guilt (for those of us who are white). Whatever the reason, we owe it to the students to move past our own anxieties and to provide students with awareness and understanding of how race and writing intersect.

The first step in this process is to initiate several conversations: conversations among writing center professionals, among writing center tutors, between these two groups, and ultimately, between tutors and tutees. Furthermore, to transform writing centers into sites of negotiation and change, we may need to differentiate the assumptions and practices of the center from those of the college. By critically evaluating the relationship between race and writing and the position of each within the academy and society, writing centers (including the directors and the tutors) can enact a critical consciousness of the values and assumptions of standard edited English and academic discourses and acknowledge the role of writing in maintaining the status quo (where white, middle-class students are privileged at the expense of all others). Ideally, this critical consciousness will better prepare tutors to address race within the tutorial by guiding tutees in exploring the conflict between their primary discourses and those of the academy and to recognize that no one discourse is naturally better than another.

Furthermore, tutors must caution students that when acquiring a new dominant discourse (or discourses), they will also be expected to accept the values inherent within these discourses—most
likely values of white, middle-class Americans. Discourse acquisition, then, can change students’ perceptions of their primary discourse systems, obscuring the bread-crumb trail that leads back to “the way things were.” However, by providing an opportunity for students of color to begin thinking and talking about the contention between their primary discourses and those of the academy, writing centers can offer an inroad to a critical negotiation of these conflicts.

POTENTIAL ROADBLOCKS

The difficulties in initiating this transformation can, at first glance, be overwhelming. Rewriting the writing center calls for adjustments in tutor training programs, confronting the time limitations within the tutoring session, and finally (and perhaps most importantly) building trust. Despite these limitations, creating a writing center that better meets the needs of all students is possible.

TUTOR TRAINING

To begin with, even if directors are committed to a vision of writing centers as a borderland, it is often the student tutors who are responsible for enacting and representing this position, and their willingness or ability to do so depends largely on their understanding of and commitment to the director’s vision. Even in the best of circumstances, where tutors receive training in the form of a credit-bearing course, given the myriad issues entwined in writing center theory, tutors are often not prepared to address the relationship between race and writing in a tutorial. Moreover, orientation training programs, which are more common, may not be able to address the issue at all. Without the proper training, tutors will not be qualified to discuss the role of race in writing and risk offending students or representing a negative image of the writing center if they approach the topic unprepared—especially in the potentially charged dynamic of white tutor and a student of color. Furthermore, even when prepared, white tutors may be hesitant to talk about race with students-of-color.

To address these issues, writing center directors should initiate conversations about race (including whiteness) and writing at the onset of tutor training, thereby making this topic a priority. Through these discussions, directors can encourage tutors to be critically aware of and challenge their participation in perpetuating the writing center as a site for assimilation. Regardless of the length of tutor training programs, writing center listservs offer an inexpensive forum for tutors to negotiate their way through theory about race and rhetoric into addressing the topic in a tutorial. This setting would allow experienced tutors to provide informal case studies of sessions that address race and all tutors could discuss their confusion or anxiety regarding this topic.

TUTORING SESSIONS

In addition to tutor training, the time constraints of the tutorial session present another challenge. It is often a struggle to fully address aspects of a student’s writing, let alone the relationship between identity and writing, within one session. The first, and perhaps most obvious, solution would be to encourage regular appointments with the same student, which would offer tutors an opportunity to not only address underlying issues in a student’s writing, but also build trust. However, convincing students to make a weekly commitment to their writing is not a simple feat. Perhaps when tutors are discussing the goals for the session with tutees, they can also discuss what they will not be able to cover given the time constraints, including the interaction of race (and other social categories) and writing, and they can then suggest additional appointments. Regardless, reminding students that academic discourse is simply one option—albeit an option that is given preference and privilege by those within the academy and the dominant culture in general—may help them begin to view writing as a social construct and lift the mask of ideology from some of the discourse conventions.
BUILDING TRUST

It seems optimistic (at best) to assume tutors will be able to build trust between themselves and tutees—especially tutees of color who distrust the institution at large—within one session. Without a foundation of proper training and trust, it becomes more difficult and potentially less appropriate for tutors, especially white tutors, to address this highly sensitive issue with a tutee. Complicating the issue for many students of color is a deep-rooted distrust of the academy. John Ogbu links this chronic distrust, specifically for African Americans, to historical evidence that academic achievements do not equate with economic success for blacks and to the belief that academic success is directly tied to acting white and the loss of identity (235, 238). Although Ogbu focuses only on African Americans because of their status as “castelike minorities” (meaning they are involuntary immigrants), I would argue that his analysis can, in part, be applied to other minority groups who struggle economically despite their levels of education.

Because distrust exists on an institutional level, so too must the solution. Writing centers should rewrite themselves as allies for students of color—once this is accomplished and writing centers are trusted, the struggle to build trust in one session will become less important. Furthermore, if students of color see the writing center as a place where they can critically negotiate the difference between their primary discourses and those of the academy, they may be more willing to discuss the effect of race on their writing (assuming it is necessary and appropriate). Writing centers also should attempt to employ a racially diverse staff of tutors—again, this would help position the center as an ally. Finally, writing centers can become liaisons between faculty and students, discussing the issue of race and writing with faculty from multiple disciplines to find acceptable ways to push the edges of dominant discourses from the inside. Connected to the issue of trust is that of carefully listening to students during the tutoring sessions. We must be prepared for the real possibility that students may not want to discuss race at the writing center. In this case, tutors should respect the students’ wishes. However, we can both meet the needs of the students and approach the topic (when appropriate) if we are patient, tactful, and not afraid to talk about race. In accordance with the goals of enacting a critical consciousness and a productive borderland, tutors should alert tutees to the possible connection between race and writing. Beyond this, we must honor the students’ wishes.

FIGHTING TRAFFIC

As a new tutor, I am still working to find strategies for dealing with the many complex situations that can arise during tutorials. However, when it comes to race in the writing center, I am of the mindset that if we are not actively working towards a solution, then we are part of the problem. I am aware that the suggestions I have outlined above are not simple and cannot be enacted overnight. Furthermore, my suggestions are merely a first step towards recognizing, addressing, and erasing the biases that exists within universities and writing centers. Therefore, in order to affect change, we must be fully committed and must remind ourselves and those around us to be continually critically aware of our personal roles and the role of the writing center in either perpetuating the privilege associated with academic discourse or challenging the system.

As individuals committed to the view of writing centers as sites where all students can come to negotiate their place within the academy, we should pay special attention to the students who are stuck between two discourses, fighting their way through the traffic. And, when possible, we should not only keep them company, but also help them find an alternative route to reach their goals. However, we also must make sure these students understand that once they arrive at their destination, they may not be able to go back. ♦
WORKS CITED


CORRECTION

When an article by Moira Ozias and Brian Fallon appeared in the May issue of WLN, they noticed a mistake. Although they referenced Beth Boquet’s Noise from the Writing Centers in both the title and at other points in the text, the accompanying footnote didn’t make it into the publication. We regret the error and are glad that Moira Ozias and Brian Fallon called this to our attention.

CALL FOR PARTICIPATION:
THE WRITING CENTERS RESEARCH PROJECT
SURVEY FOR AY 2005-2006.

Beginning September 1, 2006, the Writing Centers Research Project (WCRP) will conduct its fourth biennial survey to collect benchmark data on writing centers. The WCRP requests that all writing center directors visit its web site, www.wcrp.louisville.edu, and either complete the survey online or download a printable version to complete by hand. Participants may also request a hard copy of the survey.

Questions about the survey or requests for hard copies should be directed to Stephen Neaderhiser, senead01@louisville.edu or The Writing Centers Research Project, 312 Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY 40292. Please complete the survey by Friday, October 20, 2006.