

Michigan Writing Centers Association Newsletter

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the Michigan
Writing Centers
Association*

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SVSU center serves 'developing student writers'

*By Diane Boehm and
Helen Raica-Klotz*

Writing Centers are amorphous. They are shaped by their history, their campus location, their staff, even by the number of tutoring tables they can accommodate. This flexibility is due in part to their grassroots beginnings; to thrive in the academic world, filled with competition for resources, administrative support, and campus recognition, Writing Centers must be adaptable. This amorphous nature has served Writing Centers well; they have been able to create and recreate themselves effectively in many different contexts.



One constant, however, remains: our commitment to developing student writers.

Like most Writing Centers, SVSU's Writing Center history began with the efforts of a few committed individuals who believed in North's tenet of "writers helping writers." Diane was hired as the SVSU Writing Program Director in January 1995. That summer, she participated in an institute focused on the development of Writing Centers, hosted by MSU, that became the genesis for multiple Michigan Writing Centers (and for the MWCA).

With this background, she was ready to establish the SVSU Writing Center as the "home" of the University Writing Program. . Because SVSU had never had a Writing

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Fall 2008 conference to be hosted by Madonna University

MWCA's next Bright Ideas Conference will be held on Saturday, October 4 at Madonna University in Livonia.

The 2008 conference theme is "Reaching Out: The Campus, the Community, and Beyond."

Ann Russell, Writing Program and Writing Center Director at Madonna, said she intended the theme

to be "something you can run with, be creative with."

"There are various ways in which a writing center might extend its services, concerns, and commitments outside the center itself," said Russell. "Satellite sites, collaboration with other units or programs, community service, service learning—these are just a few ideas."

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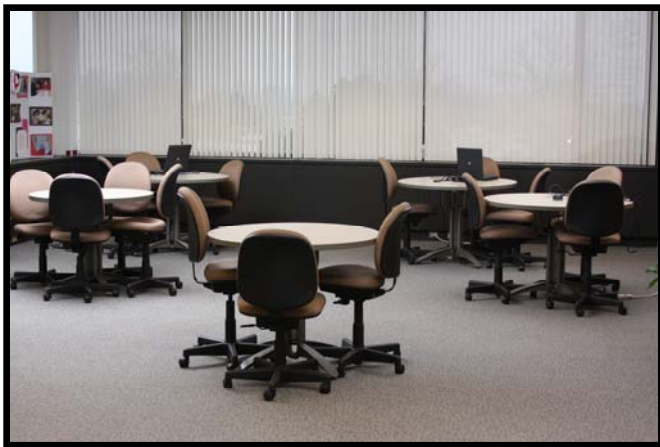
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'Because SVSU had never had a Writing Center, the staff has been able to create and re-create a Center that addresses campus-wide needs.'

create and re-create a Center that addresses campus-wide needs. The Center has continued to grow and change within the broad scope of its mission.

The SVSU Writing Center has operated in three different campus locations. In each instance, space has in some ways defined operations. When it opened in the Fall of 1995, the Center was in a high-ceilinged space with lots of glass, across from the library, near the center of campus—the only unclaimed space then available. It was light and centrally located, an attractive space. However, because it had formerly been occupied by the Conference Bureau, it took awhile for people to recognize this



new entity in their midst. The flexibility of the space was limited as well, both because of its size and because of the “fishbowl” effect of the glass walls that sometimes intimidated students.

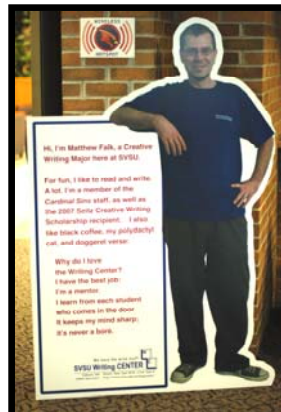
In January of 2005, this space was claimed to become an eatery and the Writing Center moved to a classroom, flanked on one side by a small conference room that became an office space and on the other by another classroom for presentations. We were in this location for 2 ½ years. This relocation prompted us to rethink our processes; we digitized all our record-keeping and for the first time hired a part-time receptionist to welcome students and sign them in. However, for the first year Diane’s office had no access door into the Writing Center and Helen, the Coordinator, had no office at all, only a desk in the corner of the Center.

Late in the summer of 2007, we moved to a space on the third floor of the Library with one wall of windows and another of glass; this space required significant planning and construction, since it created a formal space where none had previously existed. We gained more usable space, including a presentation room on the same floor and a tutor break/storage room. At last the tutors had a refrigerator and a whiteboard to leave messages for one another! We also gained an external check-in space with a lovely desk and hired corresponding staff, so now our actual tutoring area is quieter, more efficient, with fewer interruptions. However, we are guests in someone else’s house, which means negotiating everything from art on the walls to access after hours.

Because we would now be located within another space rather than having a separate location, and because people must come up to the third floor of the library to find us, we determined that we needed a marketing plan. This encouraged our creativity as we developed lifesize tutor cutouts, profiling tutors and advertising our new location. This advertising campaign has generated many positive comments from both students and faculty—and given the Writing Center a unique presence on campus.

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Ideas Exchange offers helpful tips on working with student writers

By Frances Fitzgerald

Associate Editor



Humanities instructors tend to be abstract thinkers, and sometimes we forget that many of our students are not. Concepts such as focus, purpose, voice, reflection and “going beyond the obvious” may leave students confused and frustrated.

The 2007 Michigan Writing Centers Association Bright Ideas Exchange took place on Saturday, October 20, at Muskegon Community College. This was the 13th year that representatives from college and university writing centers across the state met to exchange ideas and learn more about how to help our students become stronger writers.

In “Getting the Point Across: Building Effective Methods of Representations,” Bethany Erickson and Julie Lenhart, student tutors at Grand Valley State University’s (GVSU) writing center, talked about making abstract writing concepts more concrete at the Michigan Writing Center Association’s (MWCA) 2007 Fall Conference.

Lenhart shared an analogy she used for a student who struggled to stay focused in his writing. She told him to imagine a long hallway with several doors on either side. His goal was to reach the end of the hallway without wandering off through any of the doors. Eventually, he began to recognize when his writing headed toward one of the doors and pulled himself back—metaphorically—to the hallway. Finally, the student was able to complete a clear, focused essay.

A session participant cited a student essay that offered plenty of support but no obvious thesis statement or topic sentences. A suggested analogy started with an invitation to come over for a meal. The host put rutabaga, carrots, potatoes, beef, onion, garlic and various herbs in a row on the counter. The guest came in, the host pointed to the ingredients and said, with an inviting smile, “Bon appetite.” In other words, having all the right ingredients isn’t enough; the student still needs to put them together in a controlled and meaningful way.

Other highlights of the conference:

In “Whole-Brain Learning,” Annette Scheid of Southwest Michigan College discussed ways to make connections between the right and left hemispheres of the brain to improve learning. She addressed the importance of good nutrition, fresh air, and a safe learning environment.

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Fall conference, *cont. from page 1*

“I hope next fall’s presentations will generate some thought and discussion on a wide variety of topics related to reaching out.”

Proposal deadlines, lodging arrangements, and other informa-

tion will be sent at a later date to all MWCA members.

Livonia is located in the northwest part of Wayne County. It is the eighth largest city in the state, situated about 22 miles northwest of downtown Detroit.



SVSU, *continued from page 2*

Though this history and our spaces have shaped our Writing Center in multiple ways, both tangible and intangible, the greatest influence on a Writing Center's development is its staff. Diane, the Director, has multiple roles on campus, including teaching a composition course each semester and conducting an institute for new faculty every August. Each of the four Coordinators (from varied departments) has in turn contributed in unique ways to the program. Helen, the current Coordinator, teaches half-time in the English department, edits a campus publication, and works on multiple committees. She has expanded the multi-faceted tutor training program and coordinates the day-to-day activities of managing the Center.



Our tutoring staff is a diverse group. Early in its history, the Writing Center began to invite faculty from different disciplines to volunteer two hours a week, working alongside the student staff. Currently we have six Teachers in the Center: from biology, English, and psychology, as well as the Endowed Chair in Ethics. These collaborations have had significant impact, for the faculty see their own work in the larger university context and begin to understand student writers in multiple disciplines from inside the students' thinking processes, rather than from papers alone. And our student staff feel affirmed by working alongside faculty who share their values.

2007 conference highlights, *continued from page 3*

Ellen Schendel from GVSU shared her research about writing priorities in "We Don't Proofread, So What Do We Do? A Report on an International Survey of How Writing Tutors Help Writers With Grammar and Mechanics." She found that writing tutors in the U.S. are less likely to make grammar and mechanics a priority than writing tutors in other countries.

In "When the Words Don't Reflect the Writer's Ideas: Practical Application of ESL Listening Strategies," Bridget Bailey from Northwestern Michigan College pointed out that international students tend to feel more comfortable when the writing tutor is more directive. She also emphasized the importance of not placing value judgments on those students' abilities and cultures.

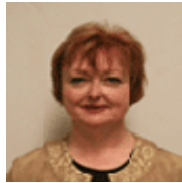
Noah Essenmacher, a student at Saginaw Valley State University, presented "Listening to Our Past: Building a Tutor Comment Guide for the Online Writing Center." He explained that the online tutors were spending two to three times longer on online essays than on the essays that students brought in. The comment guide offered a supplement—and a shortcut—to make better use of tutors' time.

Frances FitzGerald is Coordinator of the Madonna University Writing center.



Writing Center history

By Ann Russell
Editor



UM-Flint ‘parent’ of Madonna University Writing Center

The Madonna University Writing Center opened in Winter 2007 with thirteen brand-new peer tutors supervised by half-time Coordinator Frances FitzGerald. In September 2007 the Writing Program began offering two basic writing courses—one for freshmen and one for transfer students—that require regular tutoring in the writing center.

In a way, this was slap-dash work for me as the new writing program director and *de facto* writing center director, beginning in Fall 2006. Lobbying for creation of a writing center, finding the space, recruiting and training tutors, writing master syllabi, putting an assessment program in place....I still haven’t quite caught my breath.

Good thing I didn’t have to make it all up from scratch.

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Long ago, in the mists of an earlier era, I was earning my A.B. at the University of Michigan-Flint—just as two young English professors, Patrick Hartwell and Robert Bentley, were creating UM-F’s writing center

I’ll always be in debt to the late Patrick Hartwell, an inspirational teacher whose passion for language in all its sloppy complexity still shapes the way I look at student writing. When I turned down his offer of a job as writing center “manager” in favor of grad school on the Ann Arbor campus, Hartwell coached me for the GRE and put me in contact with former UM-F students doing graduate work in Ann Arbor.

Later I taught as a lecturer in the English Department at UM-F for about fourteen years. By this time both Hartwell and Bentley had left for positions at other institutions, but their influence on writing at UM-F lingered on—and I recognized a bit of it in virtually everything I did. During my time teaching at UM-F, I directed the assessment program for ten years, taught the lab-tied basic writing course, and eventually eased into directing the writing center. That’s where I met my husband, Scott Russell, who was (and still is) the center’s multi-talented coordinator.

Well before I left UM-F to teach for the English Composition Board at UM-Ann Arbor, I realized that this particular writing center was something of a phenomenon—ahead of its time in theory and pedagogy. My 1997 Ph.D. dissertation at Michigan State University was a history and case study of UM-Flint’s center.

These experiences have made MU’s one-year-old writing center—unquestionably unique in its own ways—a descendant of the Marian E. Wright Writing Center, founded at the University of Michigan-Flint in the spring of 1971.

What first inspired you to teach or tutor writing? How have your own ideas and experiences influenced your work in the writing center? Write a column that addresses personal history and its impact on the writing center. Send it to arussell@madonna.edu for publication in our next issue.

Tutors' corner

MU tutors adjust to new 'lab-tied' basic writing courses

At the Madonna University Writing Center, one of our tutors' responsibilities is to keep a journal of reflections on their daily experiences. Below are snippets of journal entries in which tutors comment on their first semester of working with students in a lab-tied course.

John Allasio

10/23/07

Today was very slow up to about 7:00 p.m. At this time, an English 1000 student came in and I worked with him until it was almost time to close. I really have seen some significant improvement in the Eng 1000 students. At the beginning of the semester, these students' writing abilities were a bit discouraging. It is gratifying, therefore, to see that we tutors have been able to make a difference, albeit a modest one. I am interested to do the midterm evaluations with students and see just how far they have progressed.

11/05/07

One of the students I worked with today was an adult CJ [Criminal Justice] major. The woman had brought in a research paper on which she was working. Her knowledge of grammar was quite inadequate so tutoring by question-asking was largely unsuccessful. The woman was very pleasant but not as cooperative as one might hope, so the session was a bit trying. However, I restrained myself from pulling out my (or her) hair and I was able to effect some significant changes.

Holly Kuhnle

10/4

A couple days ago I worked with "Suzie" on her Incident of the Curious Dog paper. She had to do this for class... it wasn't one of our assignments. I read her paper through when she was ready and helped her reword a few ideas. I didn't notice anything different about the paper. After she left however, Jeff came up to me and looked at her paper. He had seen her copying and pasting a review from the internet right into her paper. Sure enough, there it was in her paper. We let Ann know about the situation. I really think "Suzie" didn't know that what she did was plagiarism. It looks like Ann left some notes for "Suzie" to redo the paper.

Lindsay Boyle

9/12/2007

We're getting more students from English 1000, and I'm getting more comfortable with the Fluency assignments. It's strange to me to see the different levels of these students -- some of them can write a significant amount fairly easily, while others can't really write much at all. Most of the students really want to learn and are trying to work at it, but today I had someone who really just didn't care. That's the hardest part -- getting someone to care about writing when they really don't. I need to learn how to motivate students and get them to really think about what they're writing.





'Lab-tied' basic writing courses, *continued from page 6*

9/21/ 2007

I worked with a lot of English 1000 kids yesterday. I find it strange when they don't know basic grammar. I guess this class is good because people aren't going to be retaught the basics in any other college class, and knowing those things can really help in all classes, not just English classes.

Katie Kramer

11/20/07

I've finally realized what the problem has been this semester in regard to my familiarization with the lab based courses. Because I only work five hours a week, these hours being the least busy of the week, I've had a difficult time getting into a rhythm with the tutees. Entry level English students rarely frequent the writing center on my shifts, and the past few times they actually had come in while I'd been working, I was with someone else and another tutor snatched them up!

While I understand that it is my responsibility to be current in regard to the assignment sequence for these students, I also think that it is not entirely wrong to feel a little uncomfortable with these students when the first one I had was in late November. Though I was familiar with the requirements of these students, I conducted not one mid-semester conference, or end of the semester conference for that matter. All of this can be attributed to the fact that my hours did not cater to my interaction with the lab based students.

I could say that I was not faced with many entry level English students this semester and resign myself to an ill concept of what is expected of them. However, I know that I need to review their lab requirements in greater detail to be ready for next semester.

12/6/2007

It's nice when you see how much students improve. Today I worked with someone I've been working with since early in the semester. He used to have trouble producing more than half a page, but now he can write a couple pages pretty easily. That's really the point of the whole class, and it's a really good experience for me to learn how to teach and how to motivate students to do better, and, more than that, to have confidence in their writing.

Liz Michalek

[undated]

"Suzie," part of the ENG group, is so difficult to work with. She never knows her in-class assignments and we had a problem with her cutting and pasting. Well, she got caught and shaped up for a while. But, now she just asked Sara if she had read one of the articles and then wanted Sara to tell her what it meant. Then, she literally typed what Sara was saying. I don't know if she has a serious literacy problem, or whether she is just not trying because she is thinking of other stuff, but I would recommend keeping her in this ENG class because, even if she does complete the hours. This is because it is hard to say if the revisions are really hers or if she has improved in her own writing due to the plagiarism issue she had, as well as the accounts we have witnessed of not necessarily plagiarizing, but not expanding her own thoughts (that sounds better).



'Lab-tied' writing courses, *continued from page 7*

Stephanie Mastic

December 10, 2007

Thinking back on my experiences with English 1000 students this semester, my feelings are mixed. On one hand, this experience has been very rewarding, particularly as a future teacher. I have really gotten to know some of these students and their writing. I have witnessed several students' tremendous growth as writers and it is amazing to see where they are now as compared to where they were in September. In my opinion, success in the English 1000 course can be attributed to: a positive attitude about the writing process, a willingness to work hard, a desire to improve, and a dedication to come and work in the Writing Center on a regular basis. Conversely, there are those English 1000 students who don't seem to try and what's worse, they don't seem to care. These students are rarely in the Writing Center, and when they are, they do not ask for help or seem to get any work done. While I try to work with these students and make them feel good about their writing, these students also have to want to succeed themselves. But as I remind myself, this will prepare me for the realities of the classroom. There will be students who are apathetic about learning and do the bare minimum to pass my class. There will also be the students who go above and beyond what I have asked them and truly seem to flourish in my classroom. While I am fairly competent in my skills as a peer tutor and as a future teacher, I know I still need to work on reaching the students who have a negative attitude about their work and learning in general.

Writing from the center

Paradise

By Scott Russell

A shoal, the waves returning from their pasts
 To be with us in earthly paradise,
 Where love forgets and recent friendship lasts
 The whole vacation under endless skies.
 The rum is empty of advice today
 And sleepy as an anchored freighter bridge
 Beneath the noonday solar glare. The bay
 Repeats itself in prayer at water's edge.
 The people move in absence past the stalls
 Of straw hats, necklace shells and ivory
 To seek tan shade beneath the fortress walls.
 Elsewhere our souls contend with memory.
 And each desire resembles some new bird
 An ornithologist has not yet named.
 All travelers are known by local word
 And narratives of which we are ashamed.
 The palms writhe when it storms as if in pain.
 One stands beneath the roof and feels the spray
 Come off the eaves as warm as blood. The stain
 Of evening on the water always fades away.

Scott Russell is Coordinator of the Marian E. Wright Writing Center at the University of Michigan-Flint.



Write for our newsletter! Send articles, news in brief, creative writing, book or conference reviews as Word documents to arussell@madonna.edu. Please send photos as separate files. The deadline for our Spring issue is April 2, 2008. Or contact the editor at (734) 432-5438.