

UWC MONTHLY

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A Fresh Take on Tutoring Writing

Eleven peer tutors with majors ranging from Public Policy and Administration to Communication Sciences and Disorders joined the UWC team this January. My diverse group of new tutors is united by our experiences in a Fall 2012 WRTC 336 Tutoring Writing course that emphasized awareness, sensitivity, and nonjudgment.

Visits from the Counseling and Student Development Center, the Office of Disability Services, English Language Learner Services, and the Director of JMU Learning Centers exposed us to the variety of challenges students encounter, including language barriers, learning disabilities, and anxieties. Major themes included cultivating awareness, working with sensitivity to difference, and focusing on our own responsibilities without judging others. These exchanges helped us to appreciate how JMU's student services departments overlap and collaborate, and fostered a broader

awareness of student needs. In turn, as new UWC tutor Drew Watt observed, "We as tutors can sometimes be in a unique position to help spread awareness of these services."

Our professor, UWC Coordinator Jared Featherstone, also introduced approaches he developed this past summer during a week-long Center for Contemplative Mind in Society session on pedagogy development. We began each class meeting with several minutes of meditation, which strengthened our ability to focus on writers' needs and to maintain a calm, constructive attitude. "The hope is to give tutors a way to focus on one thing, cultivate a calm state, and convey that calmness to writers who are anxious," Featherstone explained.

Mindfulness exercises brought the focus we learned during meditation into our tutoring practice. One memorable activity started with us silently reading (*continued on page 2*)

Behind the "Magic Numbers"

The UWC assessment team's conference proposal has been accepted for the Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association conference in April 2013. Prabin Lama, Megan Brenneman, and Emiline Buhler plan to record and analyze tutoring sessions to assess how pedagogy from the WRTC 336 Tutoring Writing course translates to consultations. The team has applied to JMU's Institutional Review Board for approval to study human subjects.

Other assessment projects are also underway. The UWC assessment team is evaluating demographic information and administering surveys to understand students' awareness of UWC resources. The resulting data will be used to inform marketing initiatives: the UWC's marketing team will know which student populations are most likely to use the UWC resources and which students need more information about what UWC has to offer.

- Emiline Buhler, graduate tutor



WRTC 336 students Sarah Piper, Christiana McGuigan, Emily Hudson, and Jillian Woolley.

Photo: Carly Botero

The Magic Numbers

January/February

Wilson Hall consultations: 204 / 345
Carrier Library consultations: 21 / 66
Rose Library consultations: 15 / 47
FYI consultations: 7 / 20
APC consultations: 3 / 7
Total: 250 / 485
Workshops total: 29
Students and faculty attending: 987
Link Library visits: 506

A New Fantastic Point of View

In my first few weeks as a University Writing Center tutor, the old adage “you learn something new every day” took on a new meaning. Not because it was suddenly used with an increased vigor or a fresh interpretation, but because it was amplified, because I was—and still am—learning multiple bits of knowledge every day I tutor for the UWC.

The most unexpected feature of the Center for me has been how many efforts to improve and expand are constantly in the works. Whether it’s planning and delivering classroom presentations, meeting with the tutors in my Professional Development group, or collaborating with colleagues to create newsletters, videos, and online resources, there is always a challenge to embrace.

I had a good idea about what tutoring would be like after my experiences in the WRTC 336 Tutoring Writing course; even so, it took me only a few sessions to appreciate that tutoring in the UWC will never be routine.



UWC Tutor Drew Watt with Lauren Ambrose

Photo credit: Caroline Prendergast

Every student has different concerns and a different learning style, and the same strategy rarely works twice in a row. I’m very happy to know that I can become a better tutor every time I sit down for a tutoring session.

My favorite aspect of working in the UWC has been the opportunity to see life through different lenses. I’m only 25 sessions into my tutoring experience, but the

diverse cultures, values, interests, and skills students bring to the UWC have already changed me. Working with international students has helped me to recognize and rethink a familiar American narrative. Writers with distinctive, personal ways of writing have shown me the unique shapes and forms different texts can take. Finally, students new to the demands of college writing have reminded me of the importance of every stage in the writing process.

I’ve been a UWC tutor for just over a month now. The work and the challenge—and, indeed, the pleasure—of spending time in the Center is that new knowledge, different opportunities, or a fresh perspective can hit any UWC employee or visitor at any time, opening up a whole new world and new horizons to pursue.

- Drew Watt, peer tutor

Tutoring Writing continued

a student text; every few minutes, Featherstone asked us to reflect on our mental focus as readers. Thinking about how and where we had—or hadn’t—focused our attention helped us to appreciate the importance of mindfulness and nonjudgment as we approach student writing.

Featherstone surveyed his current Tutoring Writing students at the beginning of the Spring semester, before he introduced mindfulness training. Already, though, before the empirical data is in, the new group of prospective tutors has written positively about the course’s impact in their own lives and in their initial tutoring sessions with GWRTC 103 students.

As a recent graduate of the course, I see the fruits of its emphasis on sensitivity and nonjudgment every time I work with students in the Writing Center. I know that as JMU and the UWC continue to grow, so too will the pedagogy and experiential learning available in the Tutoring Writing course.

- Michele Patena, peer tutor

Schick and Schubert Talk Schop

JMU Learning Centers Director Kurt Schick and UWC Peer Education Coordinator Laura Schubert know a lot about the writing process. Over the past year, they've had an inside look at the publishing process. Their new first-year writing textbook, titled *So What? The Writer's Argument*, is slated to appear on bookstore shelves in 2014.

So What? teaches an argument-based approach to writing in the academic disciplines and in public and professional settings, promoting a thesis that UWC tutors often share during tutoring sessions. "The central message in the book is that good writing is about good choices," Schubert said, "We're trying to help writers be more thoughtful about their decisions rather than just following rules, because they're more likely to make informed decisions if they understand the rationale behind them."

Schick and Schubert seek to equip writers with the tools they need to make these good decisions after they leave their FYW classrooms. *So What?* encourages new college students to see their writing as an apprenticeship—a process of learning to write as scholars and academics in their disciplinary fields.

Schick and Schubert drew on their years of experience as first-year writing instructors during their own long writing process; Schick is in his twelfth year at JMU and Schubert is in her seventh. But *So What?* is very much a product of the authors' time in the UWC as well. Schick became UWC Coordinator in 2006, taught the first Tutoring Writing course in 2007, and tutored in the center for three years before moving into his current role. Schubert also joined the UWC team in 2006; like Schick, she has amassed thousands of hours in the UWC working with and for James Madison's student writers.

So What? reflects the authors' familiarity with the variety of assignments and concerns that JMU students routinely bring to the UWC. "If we were both just teaching first-year writing," Schick observed, "we never would have seen all of the different kinds of writing." Their many

one-on-one-tutoring sessions over the years have also informed the book's engaging, commonsense style. "I think about the kinds of explanations I provide in sessions and try to use those, not the abstract, scholarly explanations but the accessible ones," said Schubert.

Schick and Schubert received positive feedback when they shared draft versions of *So What?* with their GWRTC 103 classes this past semester. The two collaborators hope their finished textbook will prove equally useful in the UWC. Featuring an appendix full of heuristics—including practical strategies and questions for analysis and invention sessions—*So What? The Writer's Argument* should serve as a useful resource for UWC tutors during their collaborative one-on-one meetings with JMU writers immersed in their own writing processes.

- Kristin Gatti, peer tutor



So What? authors Laura Schubert and Kurt Schick

Photo credit: Kevin Jefferson

UWC Alumna Christina Wulf: Lessons in Respect

UWC Alumna Christina Wulf spent two years as a graduate tutor in the University Writing Center, emerging with fond memories and a heightened belief in collaboration, flexibility, respectful communication, and active listening. She draws on her UWC experiences in her current position coordinating the Accessible Media and Technology program for JMU's Office of Disability Services.

After earning her undergraduate degree from UVA with majors in Religious Studies and Political and Social Thought, Wulf worked in environmental conservation and advocacy for a decade, finally joining the UWC team in Fall 2008. "The program was a lot smaller then," she reflected after a recent pilgrimage to the bustling fourth floor of Wilson Hall. Wulf had a hand in this growth: in addition to hundreds of one-on-one tutoring sessions, she led the first version of the UWC's Professional Development program for undergraduate peer tutors. She also witnessed the Center's expansion to its satellite locations in Carrier and Rose Libraries and Jared Featherstone's first year as UWC Coordinator. In May 2010, after earning her Master's degree in History, Wulf joined four UWC faculty members on a panel at the International Writing Across the Curriculum Conference.

Wulf was happy to share how her years in the Center inform her recent efforts. "My time in the UWC taught me to be actively respectful of students' work and to keep in mind that every student, regardless of his or her confidence or expertise, has a valuable story to share," she said, "In addition, the experience of spending a semester working closely with a student with dyslexia encouraged my interest in Disability Services and the many types of



challenges that students face."

In her current job, Wulf holds one-on-one consultations with students who have accommodations for Accessible Media through the Office of Disability Services. "It's not as in-depth as tutoring," she said of the service that provides resource options to supplement traditional academic texts, "but it definitely involves many of the same skills: active listening, withholding judgment, and trying to empower students to make their own decisions."

Wulf also coordinates the efforts of four undergraduates, employing the collaborative style that she saw in the UWC. "The level of respect at the Writing Center was amazing," she said, "I loved the cohesive atmosphere and hope to create the same environment for my student employees, so that they see staff and faculty as their colleagues and feel encouraged to share their ideas."

Wulf notes the effects of her time in the Center in her own writing as well. "I have learned to welcome and celebrate feedback from other readers," she said, "I also use techniques I learned at the UWC, especially reading out loud. For my master's thesis, I did reverse outlines all the time (and paid several visits to the Writing Center)." Wulf is currently working on a personal narrative about her own experiences with disability and plans to return to her first love—environmental history writing—once that project is complete.

Looking forward, Wulf is excited about Disability Services' move in 2014 into the Student Health and Success Center, where it will be neighbors with the UWC. Wulf hopes the move will create more space for collaboration between JMU's student services departments.

- *Emiline Buhler, graduate tutor*

Writing on the Brain

Writing theorists and tutors think and talk about writing, and they are always looking for ways to facilitate and understand the writing process. Some 35 years ago, composition guru Janet Emig pointed out that “writing is markedly bispherical” and “epigenetic, with the complex evolutionary development of thought steadily and graphically visible and available.” In other words, writers use both sides of their brains, and writing reveals traces of the evolution of the brain. Perhaps we can use a brain-hemispheric framework to shed light on the interrelationships among evolution, thought, speech, writing, and tutoring writing.

Studies show that the halves of the human brain have different structural and chemical compositions, which give rise to distinct sub-personalities that normally overlap to generate a more flexible overall personality. That blended binary is based on the evolutionary need for complementary **automatic avoidance** and **deliberative approach** responses, and its poles have been driven farthest apart by our opposable thumbs and tool making, factors which encourage more deliberative approach responses.

In rare medical crises, the nerve bundles connecting the hemispheres of the brain have been severed, and the resulting “split-brain” patients studied. Consequently, we know that the right hemisphere (RH) tends to emphasize more automatic, holistic, **associative-emotional** thought, while the left hemisphere (LH) tends to emphasize more deliberative, abstract, **linear-logical** thought. The functional nodes known as the brain’s “language centers” are typically LH-localized, and linguists often analyze language only in terms of abstract concepts and connections.

Abstraction, however, is necessary but not sufficient to explain the emergence of language either over hundreds of thousands of years or during a tutoring session. The more emotional RH processes environmental cues to establish the ground of attention upon which LH abstraction operates; specifically, the RH values gestures, facial expressions, and voices as holistic images. We can thus treat the “utterance” (or basic unit of human speech and narrative thought) as a **holistic image-abstract word** couplet, permeated by feedback, in which the approach response sublimates the avoidance response.

| | RIGHT HEMISPHERE | LEFT HEMISPHERE |
|-----------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| EVOLUTION | automatic avoidance | deliberative approach |
| THOUGHT | associative-emotional | linear-logical |
| SPEECH | holistic image | abstract word |
| WRITING | early-order concerns | late-order concerns |
| TUTORING | motivational scaffolding | cognitive scaffolding |

So what does all of this mean for the writing process and writing tutors? In brain-hemispheric terms, **early-order concerns** such as audience, occasion, and purpose spur RH attention, and **late-order concerns** such as word choice, grammar, and punctuation finalize LH interpretation. Revision—that crucial but often-neglected stage of the writing process—involves mid-order concerns such as the organization and development of ideas and the integration of sources or other voices, where feedback (within tutees’ brains and in conversation with tutors) enables both persuasion and discovery.

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The two broadest classes of body language that writing tutors use as “scaffolding” during tutoring sessions can also be considered in brain-hemispheric terms. On the one hand, **motivational scaffolding** emphasizes the more associative-collaborative creation of a supportive ground through posture and attitude. On the other hand, **cognitive scaffolding** allows for more linear-directive deployment of techniques and knowledge through questioning and instruction. For example, outgoing “interactive gestures” are instances of motivational scaffolding and are less dependent on the verbal components of the tutoring process, while focused “topic gestures” are instances of cognitive scaffolding and occur alongside the verbal components. Note that, just as the RH establishes the ground of attention upon which



Eric La Freniere and Kelly Foelber model an “interactive gesture” (left) and a “topic gesture” (right). Photo: Carly Botero



LH abstraction operates, tutees must first be motivated in order to partner with tutors during more cognitive activities, that is, *in order to approach rather than avoid*.

Writing theorists can unpack Emig’s neuro-evolutionary insight by using a brain-hemispheric framework to view and organize their subject, especially in relation to other disciplines. More immediately, we writing tutors can profit by understanding how our conversations with tutees are developmental recapitulations of the evolution of thought and speech—recapitulations that introduce human gestures, facial expressions, and voices into a writing process that can otherwise be overly abstract, solitary, and intimidating.

- Eric La Freniere, graduate tutor



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