

**The Dangling Modifier Staff**

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**“Looking Ahead, Looking Back” at *The Dangling Modifier***

**By Alex Doehrer**

*The Dangling Modifier* is back after a year hiatus with the same philosophy of keeping tutors talking across writing center lines. Using the framework of the recent National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing at Merrimack College, "Looking Ahead, Looking Back," we will look at the history and future of *The Dangling Modifier*.

Looking back, the antecedent was an in-house newsletter at the Penn State writing center, which "came and went with the enthusiasm of tutors," said Ron Maxwell, the former Writing Center Director at Penn State.

The concept for the current model of *The Dangling Modifier* began with a group of Penn State peer tutors in 1993 at the NCPTW in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Volume one, issue one of *The Dangling Modifier* was published in the following year for the brainstorming workshop for the 1994 NCPTW in Birmingham, Alabama.

The workshop was led by a group of peer tutors from Penn State, but was attended mostly by writing center directors. With the goal of laying groundwork for the newsletter, the tutors and directors conferred and came to the conclusion that *The Dangling Modifier* should be published biannually in the fall and spring semesters.

The fall issue was designed to be a preview issue for the NCPTW conference held every October, and the spring issue was to respond with articles about the previous conference and to help writing centers conduct searches for new topic proposals. "It would ferment topics, and address what topics we should be attending to," said Maxwell.

Maxwell's role as advisor was to help find writing projects for the tutors. "We wanted to keep writing tutors writing by creating an ongoing project in which our tutors do what they talk about: writing," said the former writing center director.

With the first few issues, it was often difficult to obtain submissions because of the hectic schedules of writing tutors. "We learned in the early years it isn't enough to wave the flag," said Maxwell. "Tutors are busy people. Of what practical value, with no reward, would an article to *The Dangling Modifier* be for the busy peer tutors at writing centers across the nation? A grace note on a resume? Finally, we had the most success in going to

the NCPTW, talking to people from specific workshops and inviting them to write up what their presentations were about."

In some cases, Penn State peer tutors would be "investigative reporters" and write their views on the presentations at the annual conference.

Some past features have included a featured writing center, The Director's Chair—sharing writing center directors' opinions, and articles about workshops at the NCPTW.

Our future will hold some of the same features and we will be adding some new ones, like the Tutor Guru, a question and answer column where tutors can send in questions or concerns about issues in writing or tutoring. Another section is the Dangling Doodlers' Page where readers may indulge in fun word puzzles created by current peer tutors.

Looking ahead, the new intern-based staff at Penn State advised by Julie Story, Assistant Director of the Writing Center, has high hopes that *The Dangling Modifier* will continue to be a "part of an ongoing nationwide peer tutor conversation" as stated in the very first issue.

### **The Fine Line between Tutoring and Plagiarism** **By Traci Frye, Peer Tutor, Penn State University**

When do our suggestions begin to infringe on authorship?

I can still remember my crazy seventh grade Language Arts teacher introducing my class to direct and indirect objects, how to avoid making some common grammatical errors, and how to improve our proofreading skills. Yet, the one lesson that stands out from all the others concerns plagiarism. When I first heard this word and interpreted the definition, I realized that I had technically been plagiarizing others since I began to write. After all, I had copied my teachers' definitions verbatim from the blackboard, duplicated countless poems, and quoted my friends without citing them as sources. Taking a deep breath and calming down a little, I rationalized that these techniques had helped me to learn basic writing skills and that I had not, in fact, committed any serious criminal violations in my first grade reading and writing class. I soon realized that the definition of plagiarism is not concrete and can vary widely depending on the people involved and the context in which they develop their writing. For instance, writing tutors help students to formulate their own ideas by offering critical thinking questions and examples, but do not actually write or simply proofread their papers for them.

On the other hand, the examples that a tutor gives or the ideas that they might imply can provide a role in the practice of plagiarism. According to John Peterson of Indiana State University, plagiarism can occur even when a writer uses another person's idea, opinion, theory, or paraphrases their spoken or written words without giving them credit. Students in the Writing Center often implement what their tutors say or use the examples that they

give in their papers. Therefore, if a tutor helps a student to reword the thesis in their first paragraph, they are unknowingly contributing to the plagiarism of their own words.

Although the tutoring process does not always involve plagiarism, it does occur more often than anyone may realize. Tutors often willingly grant their suggestions and hint at how they would write something by asking the writer questions, which could also be construed as plagiarism. However, no matter what questions the tutor asks, the writer must brainstorm their own ideas. Thus, the writer assumes ultimate ownership of their written words. Tutors simply facilitate thoughts in writers, which refutes the notion that writers adopt "another's artistic or literary work, ideas, research, etc. as one's own" (Webster's Dictionary).

Successful tutoring equally engages the tutor and the writer in a collaborative process that encourages them to learn together in a cooperative atmosphere that allows them to develop and refine their writing skills. Once in awhile, a student will plagiarize the suggestions that their tutor offers, but glitches happen in every aspect of life because no system is completely flawless. One cannot possibly cite every idea, thought, or opinion that they have borrowed since they first learned to write. However, everyone must use caution to give credit where credit is due when helping someone to revise an assignment or when writing their own papers.

**In the Middle: Negotiating Space between Teacher and Students  
Written and delivered by Liz Voltman of Montclair State University at the 17th  
Annual National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing at Merrimack College  
on October 15, 2000**

As a second-year graduate assistant in the English Department and the Writing Center's coordinator at Montclair State University, I have gained invaluable experience through teaching and tutoring composition. Though upon reflection, I have come to question the current roles that we, as tutors, see ourselves taking on at the Writing Center.

**"...The variety of roles I'm filling enables me to see things from a variety of perspectives that are most likely difficult for the student and the teacher to see."**

The variety of roles I fill enables me to see things from a variety of perspectives that are most likely difficult for the student and the teacher to see. As a graduate student who has written countless papers, I realize what a challenging, intimate, and often intimidating process academic writing and writing in

general can be. Therefore, I certainly know the pressure that comes along with meeting teachers' expectations. As a teacher and tutor, I know what it means to either place these demands on students or have to help them meet these demands. Lastly, as a writer, I know the importance of feeling a sense of pride and connectedness to the writing I produce. But how do we help students to fit all of these roles...and is that, in essence, our purpose? I hope that as you read through this brief essay, you're prompted to reflect upon the roles you play at your Writing Center so that together we can continue this on-going dialogue about what we believe our genuine purpose as tutors should be in comparison to

what it often actually is. I know that personally, sometimes I feel that what I want for students and what I provide are world apart. And it's easy for this central issue of purpose to get overlooked because we are so busy tutoring and handling the center's daily concerns, that the time we spend reflecting is minimal. In addition, I plan to share some ideas that have enabled us to encourage teachers and students to open the lines of communication between teacher's expectations and students' needs.

As a tutor, I perpetually ask myself: "In addition to meeting teacher demands, how can I get the students I work with to see writing as something more than a dull or threatening assignment to be dreaded, finished, and forgotten about? How can I encourage each student to find more value in the struggle they must go through to produce meaningful composition?"

**"...the students aren't as frustrated about having to go through the motions as they are about figuring out what it takes to please the teacher."**

Because there are so many teachers with varying agendas and even more students who, over the years, have been conditioned to please the teacher, there are no simple answers. I think these questions resonate in my mind because I'm a student who has written many papers simply to meet teacher expectations in order to do well. This realization has caused me to become a firm believer that this cycle of "going through the motions" solely to please the teacher needs to be broken. There has got to be something more to it... otherwise the whole experience can seem like a farce in that your writing reflects discipline but no real thinking. But working with students at the Writing Center has shown me that this de-programming process is extremely complicated, especially when students are writing papers for teachers whose stifling standards go against everything we stand for at the Writing Center. Yet the students aren't as frustrated about having to go through the motions as they are about figuring out what it takes to please the teacher. Therefore, sometimes we seem to be fighting an uphill battle.

And so this is the overall paradox that I face as a well-intentioned writing tutor: I'm caught between wanting to help students please their teachers so they will do well while also looking for ways to ensure that students are finding value in their writing. This multi-lensed vantage point from which I gaze has enabled me to become more familiar with the unspoken tension that exists between teachers and students when it comes to doing writing assignments. It seems that students, for various reasons, are often intimidated to seek the teacher out in order to clarify expectations and communicate needs. On the other hand, teachers rarely if ever get to hear the behind-the-scenes chatter that is generated within the tutoring cubicle. And so the Writing Center tutors frequently take on the role of "allies" in that we listen to their ideas and concerns and try our best to advise them with little or no input from the teacher. Now although it is important to students that we are their "allies," I contend that there is a need for more public discourse between teachers and students about this underlying tension. Perhaps then students would find more value in their experiences with writing in college, and teachers and tutors would gain a greater sense of purpose concerning their professions.

So how can we as tutors go about provoking this public discourse? At Montclair State University, the Writing Center's community of graduate assistants has begun to earnestly

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encourage students to talk with their teachers, for the main reason that it is a healthier situation than trying to dance around unclear or intimidating expectations. It also provides us with more to work with as we try to meet our multi-faceted goals.

There are three additional ideas that we have developed to encourage communication between teachers and students. For one, we've created a triplicate form that enables the teacher, tutor and student to remain in the loop; a portion of the form is devoted to "teacher response" so tutors can gain some insight as to teachers' expectations. Next, we presented on this issue at a conference held at Montclair State, and I expounded upon our main ideas at a recent conference held at Merrimack College. At both events, the audience was comprised of both faculty and students, which allowed us to bring our concerns to a larger forum. And the discussion it prompted was provocative, eye-opening and necessary. Thirdly, we have arranged visits into virtually every basic and freshman composition classroom; at this time we explain our philosophy and engage in a dialogue with teachers and students about the pressures and purposes of writing in academic life as well as writing in general.

On a personal note, in addition to my work as a tutor, I can see how I have become an even more flexible and accessible composition instructor. Yes, I have challenging standards for my students and I go to great lengths to communicate clearly, but I want my students to feel comfortable to approach me. I encourage them to candidly discuss anything they are confused about and to tell me their needs. Perhaps, if these real issues our students are facing in the composition classroom are heard and responded to by faculty, students and tutors, Writing Center tutors would not be looked at just as allies but facilitators. Further, students will find more value in their writing, and teachers would reflect upon and reevaluate the types of expectations they are placing upon their students.

### **Did you know...**

The name "Dangling Modifier" is a controversial one. When discussed at the NCPTW in 1994, most writing center directors felt it was a terrible title because they thought "people would think it focused on the mechanics of writing," said Ron Maxwell, Penn State University's former writing center director. The title was voted on and maintained as a collaborative decision in a staff meeting at Penn State in 1994.

The tutors involved "unpacked" the phrase "Dangling Modifier." Not only was the title a play on words, but it also stood for something more communicative and progressive. Maxwell explained that "Modifier" implied the students' desire to help other students modify their writing. "Dangling" referred to the students' roles in the hierarchy of the university, as they were only in the school for a short amount of time relative to the faculty and staff.

The concern with this "terrible title" as some called it, was that it may have been affecting the publication's reputation. "If writing center directors opposed the name, might they be discouraging students from contributing?" asks Maxwell.

## **NCPTW: Not Just another Resume Builder**

**By Amanda Moore**

As both a first-time presenter and a participant at the NCPTW conference of 2000 hosted at Merrimack College, I became very enlightened. Besides the many new perspectives and techniques on tutoring I acquired at the conference, I was surprised on how much I was able to discover about my own tutoring and presenting incapacabilities.

My presentation, delivered with Leigh Zanetti and Katy Swetkoski, was the first I had ever done at a national level. To be honest, I was more than slightly nervous. I was so worried about being able to get my words out right. Maybe I wouldn't be clear? Or maybe I would just ramble on for minutes without realizing it. Or the worst, maybe I wouldn't be able to find my presentation room, and I would be late! But none of those things happened. Merrimack did a wonderful job of making sure the classrooms for the different sessions were very accessible. And when the three of us were standing at the front of the room ready to begin our workshop, I discovered I was at ease—the people in the audience weren't people I was talking at, these were my peers. They too were tutors trying to acquire new ideas at the conference.

Soon our presentation on nurturing individual writing, "Pump up the Volume", grew into an engaging discussion. Coming into this conference, I expected to only teach; however, I was surprised to discover how much I could learn from my audience's feedback. From my audience, I discovered the many varied views other writing centers have on style, or the nature of tutoring itself. Some tutors from my audience expressed that they had more difficulty tutoring style than writing mechanics, while other tutors expressed the reverse;

One strategy our workshop offered for helping create a stronger writing voice was to have the writer write the way they would talk to their best friend, then reword it to sound more appropriate to their intended audience. Other methods, I hadn't thought of, for promoting individual styles were also brought forth. One tutor described how the writing center where she works makes audio recordings of a tutoring session. This recording gives the student the opportunity to refer back to the session and hear his or her own voice express the ideas that he or she was trying to put into their writing.

There were many other aspects to the conference that I found rewarding as well. For example, keynote speaker Michael Pemberton's interactive speech provided a lot of insight while he described the changing mission of the writing center. He illustrated that in the past writing centers were more centered on the product produced and tutors were seen as fixers rather than helpers. However, in writing centers of the present, the focus is on the process of writing and on the writer him or herself.

Even lunch was a learning experience as I met tutors from other colleges, and we discussed our tutoring strategies over pizza. The three conference sessions I was able to attend were all very thought provoking. Most of these revolved around tutoring styles. During one of those sessions we discussed whether different tutoring styles should be

utilized for tutoring men and women, ESL students, freshmen and seniors, or students with disabilities.

Originally, in my mind the conference was all about my group presenting, but obviously, I had a lot more to gain than a good note on my resume. The experience of presenting, and the information I learned from other presentations will continue to positively influence my current tutoring, and my future professional life as a secondary English teacher.

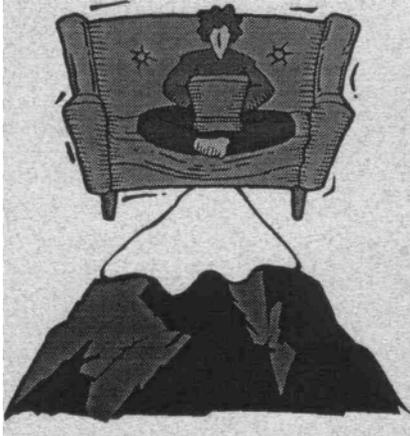
### **A Listserve Specifically for Peer Writing Tutors**

Join the worldwide conversation of peer tutors. WRITINGC is specifically designed to "promote discussion for and among peer writing tutors." The National Peer Tutor Listserv is easy to subscribe to, and at no cost, your email inbox will be filled with inspiring, controversial and heartwarming stories from peer tutors across the world.

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### **Dear Tutor Guru,**



Dear Tutor Guru,

I'm a peer tutor in writing and am very frustrated right now. I have finals coming up, papers due, and GRE's to take. It is really hard for me to tutor students right now who are apathetic to the collaborative process. It is also wearing me out to work with several students (especially the apathetic ones) in one evening with my life as hectic as it is. I can't take it anymore! Do you have any advice for me? Help me Tutor Guru – you're my only hope. —Burnt in PA

The Guru suggests you keep in mind that your regular school work and your work at the Writing Center are kept in separate spheres. Try to leave your outside stress where you obtained it: outside the tutoring session. This may be hard to do, considering all of the other stressful academic situations a tutor must deal with.

Since a tutor's main concern tends to be time and where to get more of it to accommodate many academic pursuits, the Guru recommends that you prioritize your time by organizing your activities into a list or schedule. The well-organized mind is a calm mind.

The Guru also believes in small activities used to lighten a shift. Take a walk to the bathroom to clear your mind, or partake in carbonated refreshment. If you find yourself still unbalanced in your mind from the stresses of school work, you can relinquish your shift to a more fresh-minded tutor – and allow time to calm your mind and body.

Always keep in mind this most important idea: as happy and productive tutors, we can instill some of our positive qualities in the writers that seek our help. With a sound mind, we'd be happier and more willing to help the next student—thus continuing to fulfill the cycle of productive sessions.

**Got a question for the Tutor Guru?**

Send your questions or tutoring suggestions to:

danglingmodifier@psu.edu

The Dangling Modifier

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**Creating Teachers, Changing Masks: From the Writing Center to the Classroom Presented by Stephanie Harm, Carissa Jones, Becky Shovan, and Lindsay Swanson of Central Michigan University at the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing at Penn State University**

**Elizabeth Blackburn Brockman and Cassier Taber**

At the CMU Writing Center, many consultants are English education majors, so they understandably ask this question about their WC experience: is it preparing us for our future classrooms? In response to this question, these consultants organized a 1999 NCPTW panel comprised of four WC consultants, a composition methods professor, and a field experienced coordinator. At the conference session, panelists and participants discussed six WC scenarios to learn ways WC experiences might be applicable to future teaching careers. Although WC work can't theoretically recreate classroom settings, in discussing the student-consultant scenarios, we found some important lessons consultants could take from the WC into their future middle and high school classrooms:

- Facilitating Topic Selection. When students select clichéd paper topics that are also too broad, use a WC approach. Ask students open-ended questions about topic choices and then guide them towards global revision so topics are more original and papers more focused.
- Managing "Trouble Makers." Don't stress out about classroom management. Be confident instead! After all, as WC consultants, we have had vast experience working with all kinds of students, including those who are difficult or even resentful. 1
- Fostering Self-Confidence. When students say they are terrible writers, practice WC strategies. Read the students' documents from introduction to conclusion and then I focus on the positive. Highlight and celebrate, for example, the rhetorical features or paper sections that show great promise or are already successful.



- **Teaching Disabled Students.** When disabled students are enrolled in classes, don't be afraid to use different strategies and resources, even those which might not seem standard. Of all the approaches, though, consider engaging students in WC-type conversation. Dialogue in the classroom is a means to the end.

- **Clarifying Plagiarism Standards.** By tutoring ESL students in a university WC, many consultants know plagiarism rules are not universal. As a result, don't assume all students value or even know standards for academic integrity. Be explicit.

- **Promoting Cultural Diversity.** When students from different cultures struggle with assignments, a one-on-one conference reminiscent of WCs may reveal that the assignment (or some features of it) is culturally biased. Transform this epiphany into a "teachable moment" for the entire class. Consider advising the assignment so that all students learn to recognize and value the perspectives of other cultures.

These WCs and classrooms connections aren't surprising. After all, the ultimate goal for each WC consultant and composition teacher is identical: to help individual students become stronger, more confident writers.

Note: We are grateful to Dr. Mary Ann Crawford, who directs the CMU Writing Center, for her guidance in this project. We also thank Becky Shovan. Becky initially proposed the scenario format for the National Conference and later served as the CMU liaison for *The Dangling Modifier* editorial staff.

### **Ron Maxwell Award Winners 1999 and 2000**



The NCPTW Ron Maxwell Award is for Distinguished Leadership in Promoting the Collaborative Learning Practices of Peer Tutors in Writing. The award recognizes an individual for dedication to and leadership in for dedication and leadership in collaborative learning in writing centers, for aiding students in together taking on more responsibility for their learning, ultimately, for promoting the work of peer tutors. Its presentation also denotes extraordinary service to the evolution of the NCPTW.

### **1999 - Molly Wingate, Writing Center Director at Colorado College**

As one nominator wrote, "I think the only and obvious choice for this award is Molly Wingate, who has twice kept the conference going by the heroic measure of sponsoring it. Molly has been the spirit of service—a model in working collaboratively with her own students, a model in collaborating with the rest of us, and a joy to work with in her unending kindness, courtesy, and enthusiasm. Moreover, Molly has been a constant source of support to other programs, floundering Centers, [and] desperate directors.... I can't imagine this organization without Molly."

**2000 - Jean Kiedaisch, Director of the Academic Support Programs at University of Vermont**

Jean has been part of the conference from the outset—she brought peer tutors to the first one in 1984. She co-hosted the conference in 1991, not because the University of Vermont couldn't sponsor the conference itself but rather an attempt to widen the circle of collaborative practice. She has offered counsel as part of the conference steering committee for many years. A collaborative learning philosophy guides her work on her campus and in her discipline, even as it informs her conference presentations and those of her tutors. What she practices among her peer tutors she also practices among her professional colleagues. As letters of nomination noted, "Her passion for peer tutors shines through her work." She leads "quietly" and with an "unflappable manner." "I've always felt that she was ready to lend a hand, even when she was unable to attend the conference." "She has shared her ideas freely."

Congratulations to Molly Wingate and Jean Kiedaisch