

## Crossing Genre Lines

By Pamela Baker

My first visit to the writing center was for an interview to become a consultant. Having thought that the writing center was something equivalent to the remedial English class, I left the interview somewhat confused about what exactly it was I might be doing if hired. I would read students papers and give them feedback? Not so much on grammar as on organization, clarity, and flow? Like a workshop, but one on one?

When I started, I found the writing center's philosophy to make better writers invigorating. Three other graduate students in my major-creative writing-were working with me and I quickly recognized the potential for a service I hadn't understood before. I scheduled a consultation with one of my peers for what I considered to be my own personal workshop. I took in a personal essay in which I sought to address the need for finding a sense of place through cultural interpretations of placental afterbirth. My concerns about the essay included transition statements, overall flow, and the ending.

I left the consultation in a panic-my peer, a poet, didn't see the main connection I was attempting to make. He also told me that there wasn't enough "submerged meaning" in my detailed imagery. The essay was due in two days and suddenly I needed to reorganize the entire thing. Fortunately, I ran into my professor and was able to discuss my concerns with her. She told me that, while I was welcome to tinker with changes, she wanted to see the piece as it was, before I made the planned revisions. It turned out that she thought the essay was the best I had written, needed no structural changes, and that I should seek my feedback from other writers of creative nonfiction and not those who only write fiction or poetry.

This experience brings in a new layer to the issue of consulting creative writing students. Should a student only seek a consultation with a peer who reads and writes in their genre? My immediate inclination is to say no. That would be like saying that only historians can consult history students, and only nursing majors can consult nursing papers. It robs the fundamental premise that we are consulting writing and not subjects. I think the issue of panic from my experience with being consulted has less to do with genre and more to do with confidence. Because I am insecure with both my writing talents and subject matter, I was quick to take what my peer said as gold and metalsmith my paper with it. But, if I had restructured the essay, the essay would have been his and not mine.

What this consulting experience emphasizes is the role of the consultant. Instead of being *told* that there wasn't "enough submerged meaning," I should have been *asked* about it. If I had been invited into a conversation about the burden of meaning that imagery is expected to carry, I would have been left to decide for myself if the details in my essay were too many. I think it's fair to say that, if I'm getting a masters degree in writing and I feel insecure about my writing to the point where I'm willing to change it completely based on one consulting experience, other students who leaves the writing center could be burdened in the same way. Finding ways to ask writers questions about their work is my most challenging task as a consultant. I am often tempted to just tell a student something because it's easier. It saves time. Unfortunately, it doesn't always help. And it's not my job.

Creative writing students are often told to "*show, not tell.*" Telling deadens the writing by making it boring. The reader is told what to see, feel, or think instead of being allowed the delicious discovery process of determining something new for themselves. This is what we're trying to do as consultants-let the students discover something surprising, fresh, and wonderful on their own. We know their papers are not ours to write. The papers are also not ours to change. The students who come to us with their writing are entrusting us with something fragile. What we say to them can either encourage or frustrate their writing process. By twisting the telling into showing, confidence and writing skills will mature. It is for these reasons we are there to show the writers, not tell them, new ways to angle their writing.