

Viva Las Vegas and the Recipient of the 2008 Ron Maxwell Award

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Where would be the most eccentric place to stick a bunch of writing-crazed tutors, professors, and directors for four days? Answering my own question honestly, I'd have to say a science fair, but the runner up would be Las Vegas, Nevada! This year writing center personnel from universities all over the country gathered in Sin City from October 30th through November 1st to share ideas, research, and company at the IWCA/NCPTW Conference. Not only was this my first conference excursion, but also a very meaningful trip, as I gave a presentation on subjects I'm passionate about as well as witnessed my own school's writing center director, Penn State's Jon Olson, receive the 2008 Ron Maxwell Award. Experiencing the city was an exciting change of pace from the traditional campus setting and only added to the success of the bustling conference atmosphere.

Anxious to leave the mini blizzard occurring in State College, PA, the members of the Penn State Undergraduate Writing center were dismayed when we learned that our flight had been cancelled due to maintenance problems. The next ten hours were filled with what we tend to call "tutor-bonding" as we shared meals, cars, couches, and airport waiting areas with each other. The annual conference has always provided writing tutors the opportunity the chance to get to know each other better, both within their own school's group of travelers and with tutors and directors from other universities. This year was no exception. From the beginning of registration throughout the various activities and presentations, students and professors were introduced to new colleagues and shared discussions and opinions poolside and in the hotel's small square of free wi-fi space. Most important, though, were the connections and discussions established in the conference sessions, workshops, and poster presentations.

My own presentation, titled "Peer Tutors and Emergency Medical Technicians: A Healthy Comparison" was a unique session created by myself and fellow tutor-EMT, Candace Whitten, revealing the parallels between the collaborative nature of both the writing center and our work as emergency medical technicians. Our session was one of many unconventional, yet interesting, presentations. Others included subjects such as what not to wear in the writing center, the role of YouTube in writing center advertising strategies, and life after the writing center, a presentation given by two graduated writing tutors who shared how their experiences in the writing center have affected their lives in graduate school and their careers. Several presentations were centered on technology in the writing center, including tutor involvement in multimedia, writing center websites, and voice recording in online tutoring. One presentation in particular that caused a stir, both during the actual session and back at Penn State when our tutors relayed the ideas in a staff meeting, was called "The Ethics of Self-Plagiarism," which sought to determine whether or not re-using one's own work can be considered plagiarism. The amount of thought, creativity, and research put into this year's presentations is commendable, and those who contributed should be extremely proud of their efforts.

The highlights of the conference occurred during a luncheon held in the hotel ballroom. We heard from keynote speaker, Dr. Nancy Grimm of the Michigan Tech Writing Center, who gave a powerful speech describing the evolution she has witnessed across writing center

practices. Grimm spoke of her writing center's transition from protecting "standard" English to teaching the writing process to monolingual students to including diversity in the writing center to conduct flexible, productive engagement. Grimm stressed the importance of multi-literacy in the writing center environment, describing it as "complicated and demanding, but something beautiful [tutors and directors] can do together." The keynote speaker also mentioned the gains of working in a writing center that accepts and embraces differences in literacy across cultures, including creating positive working relationships in the future and developing more than one set of standard English skills. The luncheon also featured an award ceremony for the recipient of the 2008 Ron Maxwell Award, Jon Olson. Dr. Olson gave a heartfelt acceptance speech on what collaboration means to him and thanked those who have helped to give life to his vision of a successful writing center; he even invited his tutors and assistant director to join him up on the stage. The quote Dr. Olson chose to be displayed on his plaque reads "Come together and make it work," words sung by Bob Marley. A video tribute played later that night portrayed just how valuable Dr. Olson has been to the writing center community across the nation.

The conference experience is one that should be enjoyed by all peer tutors of writing at least once during the college years. Learning about other centers' practices and listening to new ideas and viewpoints of your writing center colleagues makes you a well-educated, stronger tutor. I walked away from this year's conference feeling enlightened, knowing that the part-time job I've chosen at college is more than just that—it is a meaningful part of my life that will continue to teach me valuable skills. Viva the conference at Las Vegas!