

## Building Community in the Writing Center

By Joe Gyekis

Building community in the writing center has potential to be an effective measure for improving many aspects of the services we provide. In the process of building interpersonal relationships between directors, peer tutors, and other staff, an open line of communication can help a writing center to solve problems more quickly, disperse information and expertise more freely, and develop and implement innovative programs more efficiently. Furthermore, when people are familiar with one another, it may be easier to maintain a stress-free atmosphere, which benefits clear thinking and encourages people to maximize their potential in collaborative learning. While some forms of writing center community will inevitably arise spontaneously, coordinated efforts to bring staff members together on a regular basis can enable further development of this socially and academically important aspect of writing center culture.

Every writing center has a different situation. In some, tutors who work different shifts may never meet one another, and contact with their boss may never be more than business as usual. In other centers, everyone involved may be great friends, and it may appear impossible to ask for a tighter community. However, by paying special attention to building community and what to do once a harmonious, familiar environment exists, the writing center can be much more useful as a service institution. At a fundamental level, every tutor has room for improvement in the consultation and conversation process. Most likely, peer tutors in the same lab have better-developed skills in different categories, such as working with English as a Second Language students, thesis development, or expressing ideas, and everyone could stand to learn from each other for the benefit of students coming into the center. Tapping into each other's resources could be extremely cost-effective and fun for all parties involved, but it will not take place if they do not know each other or have a forum to exchange ideas. This is where the writing center director can step in to offer some programs which can help to build the community, establish the social infrastructure for comfortable learning, and introduce events to learn from each other.

Here at the University Park Campus of Penn State University, this process begins with a peer tutor training program that happens to be a 3 credit English course for all aspiring tutors. In this course, a significant amount of time is invested in sharing personal history, formally preparing and presenting personal statements to the class, and tutoring one another's works.

Only a few weeks into the course, students know one another by name, share common interests and know it, and have become familiar enough to ask each other questions and offer constructive criticism, which may not be possible without community building exercises.

Afterwards, it is important to integrate this group into the established writing center work force. At a certain stage of learning, the peer tutoring class begins to infiltrate the writing center itself, to observe experienced tutors at work, to conduct interviews about their techniques, ask any questions that may arise, and have time to chat and maybe make a new friend.

Once the next semester comes around and freshly-trained students are ready to join the payroll, they get a chance to participate in the weekly or bi-weekly staff meetings that are held in the writing center. Of course, this is a great opportunity for elaborate introductions: games that require mentioning where we come from, what we like to do, and what goals we have set for ourselves. While it may not be easy to get to know everyone all at once, this establishes enough of a foundation that people can start up conversations or ask one another for advice if they wind up working the same shift and get a tricky situation. As the semester goes on, the staff meetings make it possible for many different kinds of events. Since a large percentage of tutees are working on introductory composition assignments, having a professor from one of those courses attend and give a preview of the upcoming assignments and goals of learning would be one good topic for tutor development. In addition, tutors who are participating in big events like the National Conference for Peer Tutoring in Writing can rehearse their presentations and get feedback from their peers about the topics can be especially beneficial. Having more experienced peer tutors teach other about services beyond the normal drop-in peer tutoring routine, such as the various types of writing workshops, is an effective way to pass on information and maintain expertise in a quickly cycling population.

Yet another way of maintaining contact and solving problems in the community is through e-mail listserves. These highly convenient technological achievements grant the writing center greater flexibility and a worldwide bulletin board for announcements. A college student's lifestyle is obviously hectic, and often enough peer tutors wish to give up their shifts. A simple e-mail in advance can alert every subscriber of the available timeslot, which can be taken by the first tutor to fill the need. In addition, events or important announcements can be communicated clearly in a timely manner. The listserve is a good way for a writing center director to prepare the group for upcoming changes of routine and bring everyone up to date on the correct way to handle certain situations. Even the peer tutor training course has made innovative use of e-mail to post entries in an on-line "Dialogue Journal." Each week, one student posts an topic for discussion in the journal, usually in reference to something like previous experiences in English writing, observing tutorials, the merits of certain principles (e.g. conversations vs. editing, open vs. directive approaches, etc), and the trials and tribulations of the first tutorials. Certainly students realize how much they have in common coming into the process; they share the many concerns as time goes by, and they get a heads-up on what extra nuances to prepare for when the first session with a learning disabled, minimal English speaking, or stubborn writer happens to occur. Even on one of the most impersonal looking media, tutoring skills and community foundations can be developed if the process is initiated and emphasized by the person in charge.

Whether it's a course, a regular meeting, or a group list serve, there are many opportunities for turning any writing center into a more comfortable and useful one through community development. Balancing the fun and games with direct motivation for contributing to the development of an ever-improving service for the university can prevent a center from being a humdrum spot, an over-casual hangout—even make a good writing center into a great one. I hope that with emphasis and application, every student who comes into a writing center will meet a tutor who has gained expertise from many fellow tutors, has a friendly attitude and likes the work, and a goal to get even better.