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Senior Citizens and Junior Writers: A Center for Exchange

Susan Kleimann and G. Douglas Meyers

A retired librarian scrutinizes a grant proposal written by a dairy science student to implement an experimental milking system on his parents' farm in western Maryland. A retired newspaper reporter queries a mechanical engineering student about the relative merits of heat pumps as alternate energy sources. A retired art critic helps a microbiology major to organize questions for her interview with a National Institute of Health research scientist. Such events occur daily in the Junior Writing Center at the University of Maryland. Our University's required Junior Composition courses place sophisticated rhetorical demands on students, and the Junior Writing Center meets those special needs by employing retired professionals as tutors.

The Junior Composition Program attempts to prepare students for nonacademic professional writing. Students, having earned at least 56 credits, choose either "Advanced Composition" or "Technical Writing" to fulfill the requirement.¹ Non-academic writing intends more than proving students' mastery of a given content area and is designed not for a teacher-authority or an academic journal but for an audience of educated persons who are *not*experts in the students' fields—much like the diversified audience that students will later most often address. Students write about information they themselves know and care about, information emerging from the study of their disciplines, their professional interests, and their career goals. And since Junior Composition students attempt to transmit this specialized information to an audience who wants or needs it, the courses teach students to recognize and to produce clarity without condescension, precision without jargon, and voice without impersonality. Our Writing Center, especially through its tutors' experience, offers a support service keyed to these aims.²

The staff of the Junior Writing Center consists of twelve tutors, and whoever they are, they are themselves; and while retired, they are certainly not retiring. Our staff of retired professionals in their mid- to late



60's have had careers as varied as librarian, newspaper reporter, economist, editor, professor, nutrition researcher, public television program producer, and linguist. In late August, under the auspices of the Retired Volunteer Service Corps (housed in the Dean for Undergraduate Studies Office), we placed an announcement in the *Washington Post* describing the availability of tutoring positions for the coming semester. Our main criteria, we wrote, were that the applicant write and "enjoy working closely with people." During two intensive training sessions in late September, we discussed with those who responded readings centered around the Aristotelean schema of ethos, logos, and pathos and the more contemporary conception of writing as a problem-solving process. We have continued to build on this base, throughout the year, by including our tutors in faculty development activities and by inviting instructors during staff meetings to address specific concerns.

The activities of the Junior Writing Center are rooted in the Platonic practice of dialectic: first our tutors establish a context for conversation on a one-to-one basis and then, through questioning, they try to enable the student to understand, inductively, the nature of the language he has produced. Since tutoring is encouraged at any stage of composition, the entire writing—from the birth of the idea to the delivery of the completed paper—can be processed through this kind of inquiry-based refining, a refining that transforms what Flower has called writer-based prose into strong reader-based prose.³ Our tutors move the student writing toward readability, the communicative efficiency of prose, toward professionalism.⁴

To return to the implied questions in our title: What lets these retired professionals so precisely meet the needs of our students? And what do our tutors receive from the students?

Overwhelmingly, the tutors bring their experience in the "real" world, in the non-academic world, to bear on the students' writing. Through on-the-job experience, they have encountered non-academic writing in its worst and best forms. Their own conception of audience is clear, and by providing a concrete, face-to-face non-academic audience for students, they refine the students' own conception of audience. Additionally, the tutors' practical experience enables them to counter stilted prose by pointing out jargon, awkwardness, and obfuscation. Such practical experience also permits them to propose heuristics for discovering information. In the eyes of our students, our tutors possess a unique authenticity, forcefulness, and objectivity. The tutors, in sum, provide the students with a connection to the real world

of professionalism: like effective writers, the tutors engage in communication that is transactional, moving its recipient beyond egocentricity and fostering the kind of social interaction that Piaget argues is important to all learning.⁵

What begins to get solved in the Junior Writing Center is what Zinsser regards as the problem of all writing: to find the real man or woman behind all of the tension inherent in recording words on paper. This personal transaction, according to Zinsser, is at the heart of good writing, from which emerges two overarching traits—humanity and warmth.⁶ Through our tutors, students learn that effective professionals do not sound like institutions, and they begin to regard the simple style as the art that conceals art, worth all the hard work and hard thinking it requires.

But how do these students benefit our tutors? According to questionnaire responses, the tutors perceive their role as supplemental to the teacher, and that within the tutoring sessions, they reinforce classroom learning. Nearly all of the tutors state that they themselves have learned more about writing, its difficulties, its pleasures, and its intricacies. As one tutor put it, “. . . it made me exercise my gray cells (slowly disappearing though they may be).” Ultimately, though, what motivates the tutors may be what motivates us all as teachers: not the personal gratification or the personal stimulation, but the desire to see the future better.

Within a course designed to help students move more effectively into the professional world, students need more than academic and peer feedback. The very presence of these tutors in our Writing Center assures our students of the course’s context and aim. A writing course alone does not transform a student into a professional, but this Writing Center—like Junior Composition itself—eases the student toward professional stature.

Footnotes

¹During the 1980-81 academic year, a total of 3273 students enrolled in the Junior Composition Program, forming 222 separate sections of approximately 15 students apiece.

²On the other hand, two other support services provide other kinds of help: The Freshman Writing Center is geared toward fulfilling English 101’s objectives, assisting freshmen with writing essays and preparing for a grammar competency exam; the Reading and Study Skills Lab assists any student needing extra help with a wide variety of academic skills, including writing.

³Flower, Linda. "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing." *College English*, 41 (1979), 19-37.

⁴Hirsch, E.D., Jr. *The Philosophy of Composition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1977), p. 74ff.

⁵Wadsworth, Barry J. *Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development* (New York: Longman, 1971), p. 30.

⁶Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), p. 5.