

# The CEA Forum

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**SPECIAL SECTION: EMPATHY AND ETHICS**

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## **ETHICS AND EMPATHY IN THE WRITING CENTER**

[Betty Hoskins](#)

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Having established the “Writing Lab” at James Madison University in 1974, I have watched the evolution and proliferation of Writing Centers in colleges and universities over the past 32 years. Common to support services at the beginning of my career as a writing specialist and in the present Writing Center are two primary areas of interest for the topic of ethics and empathy: 1) the relationship of the writing specialist and the student and 2) the relationship of the writing specialist and the faculty.

Until this year, our Writing Center was unique in its makeup. Four professional teachers served students within a particular specialty—Reading, Freshman Writing, Upperclass Writing, and ESOL. In addition, we did not use student tutors. Upon the retirement of two members of our group, our Center is now facing the challenge of change which has brought into high relief questions of our relationship to students and to faculty. We still have no student tutors, but we do have professionals who are teaching half time in the Writing Program and working half time in the Writing Center. They are termed “generalists.” My one colleague and I have been left to see students in our specialties—upper class writing and ESOL. Last year, four teachers saw students in over 2500 conferences with a student survey yielding an extremely high level of satisfaction with our services.

In this essay, I intend to address two questions. First, what is the relationship between the professional tutor and the student? Are we paper-centered or student-centered? If we are paper-centered, we see the paper first and the student second, we limit conference times to a half hour, and we concentrate on the product the student has brought to us. If we are student-centered, we get to know the person behind the paper, take more time in conference and address issues related to writing, including the possibility of reading problems, second language problems, and learning disabilities.

Up until this year, my colleagues and I scheduled on the hour (with some exceptions) and, as a result, established personal relationships with students—those who are unhappy, those who are in a crisis, those who need a friend, those far away from home (internationals), those who have a conflict with a teacher, and those who want to talk out their ideas as my son, a student at the University of Virginia, did. He would call me, ask for advice about a paper, talk for twenty minutes, say thanks for the help, and then hang up. I had given him no advice; I had let him work out the ideas just by listening. That also happens in the Writing Center. We always look at the assignment, the paper or report, or the personal statement, but we are always thinking of the person behind the writing and wondering if a bad paper is the presenting problem of another issue. If we can discover that problem, we can go a long ways to addressing the writing. If we ignore reading problems, for example, we cannot expect to help the student solve a writing problem. We are student-centered, not paper-centered.

That leads to the question of ethics, which here will concern both confidentiality and giving "too much help." What are the conditions of confidentiality? Do we have an obligation to the student that rules out conferring with other professional teachers within our center? We know that university students are considered adults and that we have a legal responsibility to keep confidences. Do we keep to the letter of the law? Can we make a legitimate case for sharing information among the professionals who work in the center? I believe we can.

As professionals, we respect student confidences; however, if we are to help each other in the Writing Center, we need to communicate with each other regarding student problems—I cite reading again. A student who cannot read a philosophy text cannot write a philosophy paper. A student who cannot read a poem cannot explicate a poem. So we teach her how to approach a text, no matter what the subject is. Then we concern ourselves with the writing. A student with a learning disability might not confide that information to me, but if another writing specialist tells me that this student is high-functioning autistic, that information makes it possible for me to help. This information is kept within the confines of the Writing Center and shared only with other professionals.

How much help is "too much"? Do we "proofread?" That is, do we actually write in corrections on the student's paper or do we not? If we suggest a word or two, add a comma, or "fix" a dangling modifier, are we depriving the student of ownership of the paper? When students ask me to proofread their papers, my answer is that I will help them learn to proofread their own. So I teach grammar, sentence structure, and proofreading skills within the context of their own papers. I do not believe that I give too much help. If I am unsure, and with the student's permission, I confer with the teacher and make sure the teacher knows the kind of help I am giving. With a physically disabled student, "help" might mean writing down the student's words as she dictates to me. It might also mean translating ideas into sentences. If the student is dyslexic, it might mean decoding (translating) whole sentences and paragraphs. If we had more support for students with disabilities, that would not be my job.

Too much help also might mean calling attention to obvious errors in content. Do you let a student say "16th " century when you know he is writing about "17th " century meditative poetry? I tell him to check the century. Do you correct a student who says that Islamic terrorists threatened Algeria when you know that, in fact, the colonial French were ruling the country during the time in question? I do give this kind of background, calling the student's attention again to careful reading. For a history class, the student must not confuse historical data, so I become a teacher supporting another teacher. I have never had complaints from professors, only grateful compliments.

The second question concerns the relationship between the writing specialist and the faculty. Here I would combine the idea of empathy and ethics. Faculty members across the curriculum call me to complain that their students "cannot" write and wonder why. They vent their frustration, and I am sympathetic. It is futile and unethical (and unprofessional) to play the blame game. It is not the fault of the composition program, the English Department, the high school, the grade school, the parents, the culture—although it might be a combination of a number of factors all working together. My response is to offer to help (but not to let the faculty member require that all of her students come to the Writing Center). Sometimes, my offer results in a visit to the class, where I teach students to write a "review of literature" for sociology, teach grammar and proofreading skills to an auditing class, or talk about plagiarism to an art history class. Sometimes, I simply go to the class and explain what we

do and then let the students seek help if they want. I leave Writing Center brochures with the teacher. My goal here is to empathize with the teacher and the situation and keep the professional relationships we all want with the faculty.

There are two situations in which it would be easy to cross the line—one is when faculty members write “bad assignments”—that is, when the assignment is so vague the student has no idea what the teacher has in mind. In response to a student's question, “What does my teacher want?” I could say either that I have no idea or that it's a terrible assignment. Instead, I suggest that the student talk to the teacher. The student then tells me that she already has and it has done no good. Then I try to figure out what might be behind the assignment, and I ask my colleagues to share information they might have about the assignment. Collaboration works wonders.

What I do not do is criticize the assignment or the teacher. Most importantly, I never contact the teacher to criticize the assignment. The student and I do the best we can and hope for satisfactory results. Because I have had years of experience, I can usually figure out what is at stake in the assignment. If I am at a complete loss (as I once was in the case of anthropological theory), I might call the teacher (with student approval) and ask how I can help the student. The teacher responded with enthusiasm and, in fact, told me exactly what it was he was looking for. I noted his response and therefore have the information at hand the next time the assignment appears on my desk.

The other time it might be easy to cross the line is with suspected plagiarism. I am always suspicious of a paper that uses words that seem out of place or of a paper that “sounds too good” and is not documented. I ask the student about citing sources and emphasize the importance of attributing credit, but I do not accuse the student of plagiarism, and I do not make the teacher aware of my suspicions. If I call attention the student's attention to a possible honor violation, I let the student assume responsibility for correcting the problem.

Questions regarding empathy and ethics arise almost every week in the Writing Center and deserve attention from the academic community in terms of written policies and unwritten understandings. After 32 years in a writing center, I remain friends with the 200 plus students I average a semester and with faculty members across the curriculum who depend on me for support.

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**Betty Hoskins** received her undergraduate degree in English/German from Augustana College, Sioux Falls, SD and her Master's degree in English from the University of Kentucky. She founded the “Writing Lab” at James Madison University in 1974 and continues to work there, primarily with upperclassmen and graduate students. Her average workload is over 200 students per semester.

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