I think in that moment I recognized a spontaneous window of freedom and jumped. Our ubiquitous teacher-student relationship had necessarily been transformed into a give-and-take exchange. We had accepted each other, I by encouraging their humor, and they by trusting me with it. On several occasions after that day, when I needed to restore focus in the classroom, I only had to say “I need a whistle” before twelve students would simultaneously whistle themselves to attention. And in the fray of group work, when any of them felt the need to motivate their peers, I often heard renditions of “Edit like the wind!” They had successfully negotiated a community by developing a common language, and had learned to participate in it fully by listening and responding to each other. And so had I.

Of course, any pedagogical breakthrough should be accepted cautiously, and there is a fine line between generative humor and extraneous gimmicks that I’m still learning to differentiate. Like most forms of discourse, I found that our classroom humor was community-specific and I couldn’t always use it as a teaching tool. I also found that the most productive humor couldn’t be orchestrated, but had to be nurtured. It isn’t something I can successfully bring to the classroom unless everyone is willing to participate. I can be funny without ever inspiring any real sense of community or helping to develop any real language. I had first constructed that applause sign as a defense mechanism, feeling ill-prepared to take on multiple sections of at-risk writers. I needed to relax, so I was prepared to deliver stand-up comedy in order to diffuse the hostilities of my students. With one group I got lucky, but in other classes it was the wrong approach to take. Not all of my composition classes will share the same, rare chemistry that this particular group experienced. But when that chemistry is present, I have found that humor has transformational powers beyond just spicing up the curriculum. As it turned out, these “basic writers” lacked nothing in the way of creativity, inventiveness, and maturity: they only needed help in finding the right mode of expression as they became comfortable with the course’s agenda. Once empowered in this way, my students were free to express themselves in writing and discussion without holding back. And in the process, I became a better teacher. By the end of the semester, I was more able to let go of my carefully crafted lesson plans and respond to them as learners; in turn I found them to be inquisitive and resilient when they knew that their identities and ideas were safe within the little community they had built.

I’d like to take an opportunity to let you know about some of the work that the Introductory Writing Committee has been engaged in and to invite your participation in that work.

During the fall semester, members of the committee reviewed the IWP website and discussed some revisions that Kevin Eric De Pew will be compiling. Our goal is to make the site as useful as possible for a wide range of users—students, prospective students, academic advisors, faculty and staff across the university, and instructors in the program. To that end, we will be revising some documents to make sure that the most current information is available, adding the “Shared Goals” statements for Introductory Writing courses, and revising the Resources and Showcases pages. I would like to invite you to contribute to the development of the website in any of several ways. Please assist us in any of the following ways by contacting Kevin (in 302 Heav or at pepepew@purdue.edu or 43730):
1) visit the site at http://www.sla.purdue.edu/IntroductoryWriting/welcome.htm? . Navigate around the site, see what it contains, and propose any suggestions to Kevin.
2) volunteer to work with Kevin on a committee to develop additional resources for the Resources page.
3) submit materials from courses you have taught for possible inclusion on the Showcase page. We hope to include both actual course documents, such as course descriptions, innovative assignments, and excellent student work, as well as links to instructors’ course pages.

I also want to inform you about the status of the revision of the first-year composition course offerings. As many of you know, in 1999 the Intro-
Never squat with your spurs on. This “Texan proverb” of sorts left my basic writers in stitches the day I spoke on logical fallacies—this, and the mangled rhetoric that I borrowed from the marquis of most small-town convenience stores in America: Eat here and get gas. This is not typical writing curriculum, I know, but since teaching composition I have turned shamelessly to Richard Lederer for grammar help, to Gary Larson for proverbial wisdom, and to Dave Barry for a mimicry of so many language conventions. In short—I have begun to understand the need for using humor in my classroom, and to take humor seriously; but I didn’t always used to be this way.

Originally I viewed “humor” as an ex tant component, only evident in the funny gadgets or teaching tools that I brought into the classroom with me. “Humor” was anything but a stick that kept my students awake and caught their attention. It was one particular group of students who helped me to appreciate the creative possibilities afforded our class when we learned to generate humor ourselves; they taught me that power could be gained from relying on it as a method of interaction.

One semester, I taught a particular group of sharp-witted basic writing students who shared a common interest in movies, one-liners, and bad puns. Because they liked to laugh, I proffered an applause sign to class, and held it up enthusiastically whenever a student made a meritorious comment regarding that day’s assignments. Pretty soon, certain members of the class applauded each other without my having to show the sign, and by the third week of the semester, they were applauding the latecomers as they slid into the room. After the fourth week I never had problems with tardiness. I had not yet discovered that it had also catalyzed a slow-growing sense of community which would empower them as writers.

As far as I was concerned, I had achieved my goal; the applause sign helped to break the ice early on and create a “humorous” atmosphere, and create a community. The realization occurred one rowdy, restless Friday when I shared aloud (somewhat agitated) that although my students were no longer in high school, their class antics made me wonder. On the heels of a pre-class bull session about The Three Amigos, I conducted a peer-review workshop in which I explained the differences between revising and editing. We were running out of time that day and I wanted them to work quickly, so my tension was apparent as I spat directives left and right. That comment elicited a few snickers before several students vied to speak at once. I finally shouted over the din, “I need whistle in here!” There was a brief, shy silence before all twelve students, in one unison note, whistled. While trying to recover my shock, I wondered whether they would equeal me with El Guapo, the movie’s infamous villain. An instant later, as if in response, one student raised his pen and boldly piped up, “Edit,” followed by eleven complaint voices: “Edit like the wind!” They all twelve went to work, encouraged by the fact that I couldn’t control my laughter.

From the Desk of the Director cont. from p. 1

The Empowerment of Laughter and the Language of Community by Tarez Graban

Becky Lou, Who Are You?
The next time you come into the Introductory Writing Office, you will notice that Kalyn Smith, our workstudy for the past five semesters, is no longer assisting Julie; he is student teaching. We are happy to announce that Becky Lou Clark has agreed to assisting Julie, Bud, and Kevin to facilitate your Introductory Writing teaching experience. Although she is still learning how to navigate the IWP office and its responsibilities, Becky Lou is learning fast. Becky Lou came to Boilermaker Country to escape a life as a Nittney Lion that most of her central Pennsylvania peers choose. Within the demanding schedule placed upon Freshman Engineering students (a major that will help her achieve her career goal of working in a consulting firm), Becky Lou finds time to enjoy photography, volleyball, and church events. And seasonally, Becky Lou literally “braves the elements” by participating in snowboarding, skydiving, rock climbing, and hunting. If you see Becky Lou during your next visit to 302, we encourage you to introduce yourself.

Brown Bag Lunches for Spring 2002
Feb. 12 11:00-12:00 “Facilitating Peer Review and Self-Assessment” Kevin Eric De Pew, Jessie Moore Kapper, and Judy Rechberger
Feb. 20 12:30-2:00 “Speaking to the TV Generation: Documentaries in the Composition Classroom” Mica Gould
Mar. 4 11:00-12:30 “Challenging Our Students by Challenging Ourselves: Or, Letting the Inmates Have a Go” Karl Stolley
Mar. 27 12:00-1:30 “Viva la Vida: Publishing in Graduate School” Rob Davidson and Henry Hughes
The Science Connections program is a cooperative venture between the English Department and the School of Science. It places first-year science students into small groups (known as “pods”) who take several classes together during Fall Semester. Two of the goals of the program are to develop a sense of community among first-year students and to increase retention among Science majors, who can often feel overwhelmed and isolated in their large lecture hall classes.

People considering teaching in the program frequently wonder what they will be expected to do and what makes Science Connections different than other first-year courses. Below, I answer some of the most common questions, but I invite you to talk to me anytime about any other questions you might have.

Q. Do I have to know about science to teach in the Science Connections program?
A. No! Many of the instructors join the program because they have an interest or background in the sciences, but many others (such as myself) have no scientific training.

Q. Is my course expected to be on a science theme or to teach students how to be scientists?
A. Again no. Some instructors decide to make their course science-intensive and to concentrate on writing in the disciplines, while others teach a course similar to other 101 or 103 classes they have taught outside of the Science Connections program, though most select readings and develop paper assignments that have some connection to science and/or technology. The choice is completely up to the composition instructor. In the past, instructors have had a wide variety of emphases in their courses. Previous classes have included such topics as physics and personal writing, professional writing and web page design, and projects involving close observations of the natural world.

Q. Are there any special requirements if I decide to teach in this program?
A. The Science Connections program is now part of the Lilly retention initiative, so if you decide to teach in the program, you will be expected to go to an orientation workshop where you learn more about the student population and the goals of the Lilly retention initiative. You will also be expected to do two or three outside of class activities with students to facilitate the community building that is part of the program. These activities can be done on your own or can be planned with other instructors. This year, instructors designed diverse extracurricular activities, including a trip to Wolf Park, a cross-class barbeque, a class lunch at the Sagamore room, and a poster session where students presented their research to their advisors.

To compensate instructors for the extra work, they receive a small pay raise while working in Science Connections and will get money to spend on the out of class activities. In addition, the instructors in Science Connections will meet a few times during the semester to offer support to each other and to brainstorm ideas for the course. I encourage you to apply to teach in the Science Connections program next fall. It is a great opportunity to teach an interesting and exciting group of students. I invite you to email me with any questions you might have.

When I received a letter from Professor Weiser back in China two years ago, you can hardly imagine how stressful I felt. He told me I had never been granted a teaching assistantship, and I would be teaching a section of Introductory Writing in two months. I was excited about going to Purdue for sure, but felt heavy-hearted about teaching native speakers English—I had never been to any English-speaking countries before.

The trip coming to the U.S. was quite enjoyable. The next thing that pleased me was I would be mentored by an experienced writing instructor before the semester started. In the mentoring group, I got to know Tania, Shigetake, Martha, Chao-Mei, Carol and Christina, teaching assistants from five different countries. And Joe Wenig, my mentor, greeted us with his hair dyed orange, which I considered the first piece of valuable information about liberalism in American academy I picked up at the mentoring meeting.

The five-day intensive mentoring before the class started helped us immensely. We discussed together how to use the textbook, Four Worlds of Writing. Step by step, Joe guided us through the first project for our class and every mentee ended up with a detailed teaching plan. He also helped us prepare syllabus and course policy handouts for the class we were going to teach. So when I walked into my classroom full of American freshmen, I was quite certain about what I was going to teach, although still feeling quite nervous.

Our mentoring group met once every week after the semester started. Usually we exchanged among us reports of the progress made and some new situations encountered in our individual classes, and we would comment on them and make suggestions to each other. Then we moved on to preparing a section or a chapter of the book soon to be dealt with in our class. This continual exchange among the teaching assistants, facilitated by Joe, fostered a cultural and linguistic cushion for me. Whenever I ran into a brand new circumstance in my class, Joe and other teaching assistants were always the first-hand source I would go to for consultation.

During the spring semester, our mentoring meeting shifted from a family-style meeting to a colleague meeting. Instead of meeting in Heavilon, we met at Cafe Vienna. Joe geared his more-or-less parental role to a more experienced colleague’s role. He set us loose in selecting our own textbooks and pedagogy; he listened to us more and talked less; he engaged us in discussing some issues surrounding academic writing and threw in some enlightening comments once a while.

The mentoring meetings during our first year at Purdue temporarily provided us with a shelf “walking sticks”—not only knowledge about composition theories and guided teaching practice, but also English language and American culture which most international teaching assistants desperately need. By the end of my first year, I never walked into my writing classes with a heavy heart anymore.