

THE WRITING LAB

N E W S L E W T T E R

Volume 36, Number 9-10

Promoting the exchange of voices and ideas in one-to-one teaching of writing

May/June, 2012

— FROM THE EDITOR —

For many of us, the academic year is ending and visions of a quiet, relaxing summer dance in our heads. As this issue of WLN concludes Vol. 36, we look forward to starting up with Vol. 37 in Sept.

In this issue, you'll find articles addressing different concerns, but all are also responses to the important question of what tutors learn from their training and experience. Clyde Moneyhun and Patti-Hanlon-Baker report on their study comparing tutors' responses to student writing in tutorials to their responses as teachers to their students' writing. These tutor-teachers also discuss their attempts to incorporate tutoring approaches in their conferences with students in their classes.

Claudine Griggs explains her method of observing tutors while they tutor her on her own writing. Her goal is to reduce the degree of formality and discomfort that tutors may feel when being observed. Another problem for tutors is how to handle the delicate matter of not having to defend the premise that the teacher is always right. Nancy Effinger Wilson and Keri Fitzgerald confront this problem by helping tutors see the value of empathizing with the student and perhaps helping the instructor see that some assignments are not appropriate for all students. Finally, Alexandra Yavarow, a tutor majoring in interior design, reflects on how she initially lacked confidence as a non-English major and began to see that principles and skills gained from her studies in interior design transfer to tutoring writers.

I'll be looking forward to meeting up with you in Sept. and wishing that in the meantime, you find time to read an enjoyable book, relax, and enjoy some well-earned rest.

◆ Muriel Harris, Editor

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TUTORING TEACHERS

◆ Clyde Moneyhun,
Boise State University, Boise, ID
and

◆ Patti Hanlon-Baker
Stanford University, Stanford, CA

Most research on writing center work focuses on the students who come to us for help, particularly on the effects tutoring may have on their writing. Some research has focused on the effects of tutoring on the tutors themselves, notably the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project (Hughes, Gillespie and Kail). But little has been published about the effects of writing center work on the pedagogy of classroom writing teachers who also tutor in a writing center. In "Writing Centers and Cross-Curricular Literacy Programs as Models for Faculty Development," Linda Bergman recognizes the role that writing centers can play in faculty development that, rather than simply communicating a program's pedagogy and procedures, would "encourage faculty to rethink their practices" (524). Irene Clark is more explicit about the possible benefits of tutoring for teachers, since writing center work enables teachers who also tutor to "become directly involved with process teaching, to interact with students in a variety of pedagogical roles, and to gain important insight into the nature of writing assignments and teaching response" (347).

As writing teachers who tutor, and as administrators of both writing programs and writing centers, we are encouraged by comments from colleagues who tell us (as one recently put it) that writing center work "helped me see the purpose of my course more like a writing center consultation: the purpose isn't to get students to write the way I want them to; the purpose
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Manuscripts: Before sending in submissions, please consult the guidelines on the *WLN* website. Recommended length for articles is approximately 2500-3000 words, 1500 words for reviews and Tutor's Column essays, in MLA format (including Works Cited). Please send files to the *WLN* website.

is instead to help them figure out their own goals and how to write toward those goals." However, heeding the call of Elizabeth Boquet and Neal Lerner in "After 'The Idea of a Writing Center,'" we'd like to rely on more than practitioner lore as we attempt to measure the effects of writing center work on the classroom teaching of writing (185). We will describe a modest study designed to flesh out previously published insights and our own anecdotal evidence. Though we were interested in the possible impact of tutoring on a range of teaching practices, we decided to compare the ways our teacher-tutors responded to student writing in writing center tutoring sessions and in conferences with their own students.

THE STUDY

The research was conducted at a large research university on the west coast where all instructors in the writing program tutor for several hours a week in the writing center. We chose five newly hired teachers who had little or no experience as writing center tutors and interviewed them several times across their first eighteen months of teaching and tutoring. We also observed their tutoring sessions in the writing center and out-of-class conferences with their own students.¹

Our participants had an average of seven years of teaching experience before joining our program. Mary had some tutoring experience as well, which she felt had already had at least some impact on her pedagogy, especially during conferences. At the same time, she speculated in an early interview that more tutoring would help her "read" her students before "teaching" them. Steve had only a little tutoring experience. Conferences with his students, he told us at the beginning of the study, started "with questions regarding the students' understanding of the criteria for the paper" and then moved to varying "levels of directness" in comments and directions. Heather told us that she responded to student work with comments on every aspect of the essay ("covering sentence-level and style issues and discussing larger issues regarding argument and evidence"), and her conferences with students were basically a debriefing based on the comments, which students had already read. LaVonne said that while her general pedagogy was "student-centered and hands-on" with "very little lecturing," she also commented on student writing, in her own estimation, "too extensively," using an hour per paper to make voluminous notations using Microsoft Word's comment function. Michael wrote comments on student work "by recounting what the student seems to be doing in terms of argument, structure, and evidence." During conferences, he focused on "a few main things to talk about with the student."

One experience our participants had in common was a day-long writing center orientation before the start of the year, where they were exposed to tutoring theory and methods, discussed their responses to sample student essays, and conducted practice tutoring sessions with each other. We did not make explicit any possible transference between writing center practice and classroom teaching of writing, though this was a common topic of conversation among the program's teachers. All our participants expressed curiosity about how writing center work might influence their teaching, and all were optimistic that the experience would improve their teaching effectiveness.

GOOD INTENTIONS

After the first quarter of teaching and tutoring, participants reported on their experiences, reflecting on the main questions we had posed from the beginning: Does tutoring influence teaching, particularly methods of oral response to student writing? If so, in what ways? Most reported during interviews after several months of tutoring that they didn't expect to enjoy it as much as they did; as Steve put it: "I thought it would be more monotonous that it was. It was one of my favorite times of the week. 98% of my meetings were like this: The student would come in frustrated or stuck and they would leave giddy, sometimes about what they were going to do next." Heather agreed about enjoying tutoring much more than she expected, and she especially valued "the range of students that I got to work with" compared to her usual classroom teaching of composition. LaVonne, who ran highly structured and teacher-centered conferences with her students, but hoped that tutoring would teach her to "defer to my students more,"

commented that it was “fun just to watch the students think.”

While we were interested in (and asked about) the effect of tutoring on our participants’ classroom teaching, most had more to say about their writing center tutoring and how it evolved in the first few months. Mary, who had some prior tutoring experience, but who still worried about a pedagogy that might be too teacher-centered, observed about her tutoring in our center: “I think I expected to do too much, as I did in my teaching and in my student conferences. I was too intense; I’m kind of intense in my teaching.” However, she began to “settle down after a while,” especially with students she saw regularly, and observed that as students “really worked on their own” during a tutoring session, she felt she “didn’t have to do as much as I thought I did.” She started to see her role as “creating this kind of relaxed atmosphere, just letting the student talk and see where it goes. I’m more comfortable not getting as much ‘done.’” LaVonne felt good about her tutoring from the beginning, though she felt she could work on “timing”: “I’m not really great at gauging how much we can get done in a half hour or an hour.” She also had questions about her early habit of working through the paper from beginning to end, asking questions and pointing to possible issues as the reading rolled along. “I really am kind of a small picture person,” she observed. “Sometimes it would be better for us to go through the whole thing and then come back to the beginning.”

Heather and Steve had more to say than Mary and LaVonne about possible early effects of tutoring on their teaching. For Heather, “starting with lots of questions, always asking them about the assignment, why they chose to write about what they chose, why they chose this text—that was very different for me, but I found that was the best way for them to get into the mode of exchanging ideas.” She considered how she might carry this new habit into conversations with her composition students: “I’d like to think of ways to bring that exploratory character to my conferences so they’re less structured. I think that it might help them see the conferences as active learning, as the students who come to the writing center do.” Steve actually put some new habits into effect with his teaching during that first quarter of tutoring: “I changed the way I do conferences, doing each of my three conferences a little differently from each other.” He observed that as he “got into a writing center mentality” during tutoring sessions (“asking to see the assignment sheet, asking about the course, not touching a pen”), he began asking his own students about the assignment, not assuming they understood it, and using that discussion to clarify what students might do to revise their essays.

Michael expressed the thoughtful reservations of a ten-year veteran of classroom teaching about the out-of-comfort-zone experience of tutoring. Not being in control of the assignment was a major concern. “Sometimes,” he said, “the assignment itself is hard to get a handle on.” Since he didn’t design the assignment, “I don’t know exactly what this piece of writing is supposed to look like,” so “it’s hard to know what to do” in advising a student on revisions. At the same time, in spite of the legitimate frustrations he experienced, Michael made other interesting comments that expressed progress toward his early goals of gaining “more insight into student writing processes” and an understanding of “how students relate/react to the assignments we give them.” For example, after struggling to understand other instructors’ written assignments, he started thinking about “the concepts and phrases that throw students in assignments,” and he thought that one effect of tutoring on his teaching might be more awareness of how his assignments needed to be pitched toward their intended audiences.

“[A]wareness of how tutoring might improve teaching was a different fish from putting that awareness into practice.”

We found, in short, that our teacher-tutors’ early experiences of tutoring engendered thoughtful reflection and for the most part reinforced the intentions they had expressed in early interviews, inspiring them to become “more flexible,” more “exploratory,” less “intense” and more “relaxed,” less “small picture” and more holistic.

ACTUAL PRACTICE

Our key question, however, was: How would the growing degree of pedagogical self-awareness and good intentions for a more student-centered pedagogy translate into tutoring and especially teaching practice? Not surprisingly, the results of our analysis of actual writing center sessions and conferences with classroom students were complicated. We found that, for the most part, our teacher-tutors' good intentions were realized in the writing center tutoring sessions that we observed. All learned and practiced the new habits they hoped they would. For example, we observed that they generally began tutoring sessions by asking questions that led students to set the agenda: "What are you working on?" and "What would you like to do today?" They asked students to clarify assignments, to summarize the logical structure of papers, to explain seeming contradictions in statements from different parts of a paper. Their questions tended to reflect a genuine curiosity about how a student reached a specific conclusion; one instructor's favorite question in these cases was, "Can you explain to me . . .?" Most were very good at paraphrasing students' language accurately, without comment, to check their comprehension: "So the way you see it . . ." In short, in the tutoring situation, our participants learned, partly through training, but we suspect also through instinct, to place thinking, planning, and decision-making in the hands of the students. This led to many instances of what the authors of *The Everyday Writing Center* call "Trickster moments" that are "generative" events of unpredictable learning (Geller et al. 17-18), surely a goal of good tutoring.

We also found, however, that when our teacher-tutors worked with their own students rather than writing center clients, the good intentions they expressed (to become less authoritative, more student-centered, and more Socratic in their methods during conferences with their own students) were realized only in spotty ways. While their tutoring sessions tended toward the student-centered, we observed many consultations with their own students that began with open-ended questions but then proceeded along lines not chosen by the students. (One instructor even interrupted herself by saying, "I keep asking you questions and then talking over you," but this didn't stop her from continuing in the same way.) There were questions, but many of them went fishing for specific answers: "How do we really tell stories like this?" and "Are you going to flesh this part out with that source?" Such questions led many students to do their own fishing: "So what you want me to do here is . . ." When students failed to arrive at the anticipated answer, our participants tended to provide it: "Well, what I was thinking was . . ." We heard many explicit suggestions for how to focus a thesis (with the instructor's language substituted for the student's), many explanations about how to interpret a research source (including mini-lectures on specific essays), many revised outlines showing a student how to organize ideas better. There were unambiguous directions of the kind the same teachers never gave to writing center clients: "You need more sources, and you need some newer ones," and "You should definitely use this film" (which the student had never seen).

We observed, in short, a general focus during conferences with instructors' own students on improving what was already on the page rather than speculation (as in many of the tutoring sessions) about what an essay might be, what might happen outside the box of the teacher's expectations. There was less sense of discovery, fewer instances of learning something new during the interaction, fewer delightful moments of Trickster "jouissance" than during writing center tutoring sessions (Geller et al. 31).

LOST IN TRANSLATION?

We found then, that awareness of how tutoring might improve teaching was a different fish from putting that awareness into practice. Why? We know that in any learning process, awareness precedes practice. Educational theory (and everyday experience) tells us that turning knowing into doing takes a while. We'd like to check in with our participants again in another year or two, after many more tutoring sessions and conferences with their classroom students. It's possible that the good intentions and the growing sense of possible change in pedagogical practice will push our participants to experiment more with writing center methods in their teaching. Indeed, as one participant reported in a comment on an early draft of this essay:

It was interesting to read what I had said I wanted to do and then how my actions contradicted those stated desires. Reading this paper . . . has caused me to rethink my conference and teaching style in a way I wasn't able to at the time these transactions were occurring. (I think I may now withhold my written comments until later in the conference instead of sending them out beforehand.)

Of course, for even the best-intentioned writing instructors, the teaching situation itself can thwart efforts to be less authoritative and directive, more collaborative and student-centered. Like it or not, teachers simply exercise more authority than tutors, creating assignments that delineate a writing process, list due dates, describing steps along the way (proposals, annotated bibliographies, drafts, revisions), and setting out criteria for assessment of the finished paper. It's also true that students' expectations of the role we play as teachers exert an enormous influence on the possibilities for our pedagogy, delimiting how non-directive we can be when conferencing with our own students.

Is the tutoring situation so different from the teaching situation, then, not just in degree but in kind, that we must learn to live with different pedagogical approaches? In the end, we think not. We are encouraged by our participants' willingness to consider that good tutoring practices might translate into good teaching practices, particularly in the area of response to student writing. Several participants, reading an early version of this essay, appreciated our acknowledgment of the limitations imposed on their adoption of tutoring practices in classroom teaching, but also mentioned their strong intention to continue trying. Our teachers acquired priceless first-hand knowledge and a richer understanding of how students interpret assignments and use feedback, and they gained a better sense of how to direct student work on writing projects. While putting their insights into practice proved challenging, their enhanced awareness of tutoring theory and their hands-on experience of tutoring led them to fruitful reflection on their habitual teaching practices.

The conclusions of our limited research must be cautiously drawn. However, we feel we learned enough to go forward with more ambitious research that would focus on possible effects of tutoring on practices including how teachers create assignments and respond to student drafts in writing. We will be guided by our belief, supported by this study, that a writing center, in addition to everything else it may be, is an ideal place to learn to be a better writing teacher. ♦

Notes

1. Many thanks to the teachers who agreed to participate in this study and to allow us to publish the results. They were generous with their time, energy and creativity, sitting for interviews, taping writing center tutoring sessions and consultations with their own students, and responding to drafts of this essay. All names are pseudonyms.

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TAKE NOTE

WRITING PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS

Preconference: July 15-19, 2012
Conference: July 19-22, 2012
Host: University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, NM

“Writing Directions: Connecting Literacies, Languages, and Localities”

Plenary Speakers: Linda Adler-Kassner, Marilyn Valentino, Paul Kei Matsuda

What does it mean to connect literacies, languages, and localities? How do such connections affect writing program administrators, instructors, students?

These are questions that many WPAs and writing instructors have long considered as we’ve engaged in teacher-research, classroom research, or programmatic assessments. But as the landscape of postsecondary education continues to shift, they are also questions being asked with increasing urgency by individuals beyond our classrooms and programs, and even outside of the academy.

For further information, contact Charles Paine. E-mail: wpa2012@unm.edu. Conference website: <http://wpa2012.unm.edu/index.htm>.

DIRECTOR AS CLIENT: PARTICIPATORY OBSERVATIONS IN THE WRITING CENTER

◆ *Claudine Griggs*

Rhode Island College, Providence, RI

When I was a tutor at the University of Rhode Island Writing Center during 2007-08, Director Jeremiah Dyehouse observed one of my client sessions. I was not overly concerned. After all, I had two years’ prior experience as a Writing Specialist at Soka University of America where I tutored domestic and international students. I judged myself a competent tutor and felt self-assured about responding to a student paper under scrutiny. The session went well, but I was acutely aware of being watched. Despite my confidence, I was nervous.

A year later, when I assumed the directorship of the Rhode Island College Writing Center, I considered implementing formal observations, perhaps modeled around my experience with Dyehouse or strategies in Bonnie Devet’s “A Method for Observing and Evaluating Writing Lab Tutorials.” Devet’s recommendations include asking tutors which appointment they would like to have observed (81), using a standardized evaluation checklist (77), and conferencing with tutors soon after the session (81). But I decided, based on a vague discomfort, not to observe individual client sessions of our peer tutors. This decision was troubling because, at the time, I didn’t have an alternate plan, and yet I felt obligated to gauge the tutors’ practices. After several weeks of internal debate, I decided to try “participatory observations” (working as a client directly with each tutor).

WHY I DID THIS

To a large extent, I developed the procedure based on a desire to avoid formal client observations in a peer-tutoring center. I understood that my presence in a session (with notepad in hand) would almost certainly unsettle the most confident peer tutor—just as Dyehouse’s presence had unsettled me—and I played a hunch that personal tutorials might offer a holistic impression of the tutors’ abilities. Further, because I am a writer in need of reader response and a writing center director who must appraise staff performance, I hoped that the evaluative method could serve both functions.

Also, the writing center is confronted with a peculiar variation of the Lake Wobegon Effect and Strategy¹, i.e., all of our peer tutors are, by design, “above average.” Each applicant secures two faculty recommendations; submits two representative pieces of their writing; passes an interview with me, the center’s administrative assistant, and one or two experienced tutors; and then completes an eleven-week seminar on writing center theory and practice. So if I formally evaluate the tutors, I must inevitably measure degrees of excellence. And as Ben Yagoda explains in “Why I Hate Annual Evaluations” that he “deeply and irrationally resent[s] being judged by a boss,” I similarly resent being a boss who must judge. And the evaluation process itself, Yagoda writes, “is undignified and unseemly.” The real arbiter of a tutoring session seems to be tutor and client, together; plus if I must insert myself into that relationship, I wish to minimize the unseemliness.

REFINING AND IMPLEMENTING THE PLAN

I decided to present myself to the staff as a client whose papers would ultimately be submitted for publication, emphasizing the need for honest feedback. I even shared my rejection slips and editorial responses (plus two acceptances) with the students, which I hoped would illustrate some of the rhetorical negotiations among audience, purpose, and context during the peer-review process. At the very least, tutors might understand that not even a writing center director fires off prose like a Hollywood gunslinger fires a six-shooter (nor does she typically hit the target in a first draft).

These special sessions would supplement my more casual observations as I passed through the center for a cup of tea, listening to interactions between tutors and clients, tutors and clerical assistants, or tutors and tutors. Muriel Harris refers to this as an “eavesdropping observer” (14). And their tutorials with me might enhance the bi-monthly staff meetings wherein tutors are encouraged to talk about productive or unproductive appointments. Traditional observations could also have added to the meetings, but I hoped our participatory sessions would deemphasize my supervisory role and encourage a power-sharing dialogue.

So armed with “good” rationalizations for something I wanted (feedback about my writing) and against something I disliked (formal staff evaluations), I booked individual appointments with all twelve RIC tutors at least once, occasionally twice, resolving to test this evaluative procedure during the 2009-10 academic year. I am convinced that participatory observations have benefits, some of which I did not anticipate.

THE TUTORING SESSIONS

As a writer, I was pleased that the tutors² often gave me genuinely good advice. For example, one woman reviewed a story about a quirky entomology student. Her comments (paraphrased from my session notes and written responses on the manuscript) include: “Good, but the main character reads like a prototype grad student. I’d like to know what makes her unique . . . The description of the ant colony is excellent, but the story is too short. . . . Some of the puzzle pieces seem missing. For example, what do fellow students think of the protagonist?”

Most tutors did not appear to allow my role as director to censor their responses, but again, I stressed that the writing was a work in progress, editors would eventually read it, and I wanted advice. Some comments were bold: “Claudine, you really lost me here.” “This struck me as over the top, too much detail.” “Why not move this section up front? The real story’s buried on page five.”

Part of being an effective tutor is confidence, and I could often sense a tutor’s self-appraisal during the sessions. Some were timid about assessing “professional writing” and said they didn’t “feel qualified.” Others seemed more confident working with fiction versus nonfiction, so I began asking tutors what genre they preferred.³ And when I sensed hesitation, I countered with: “I’m trying to present academic material for a popular audience. Does it work?” Or, “This story has been rejected twice. Is there any hope?” The questions typically delivered personal reassurances from which critical opinions would follow, and my primary objective in these moments was to build tutor confidence.

Also, the tutorials sometimes generated ideas that flowed toward our regular clients. In one session with a first-year tutor, “Jennifer” complimented my use of dialogue, which we discussed further. A week later she came to my office and said, “Claudine, a client plans to introduce her essay with a dialogue that will lead into why she wants to become a nurse. I thought about your story and wonder if this is the best approach.” Jennifer and I talked about how such an introduction might be handled, its potential downside, and a possible prose conversation. I asked Jennifer whether she needed me to intervene with the client. “Oh, no,” she said, “I can handle it. I just wanted to talk because our session made me question this student’s paper.” Based on Jennifer’s recommendations, the client dropped the opening scene.

PERIPHERAL OBSERVATIONS

In *Training Tutors for Writing Conferences*, Thomas Reigstad and Donald McAndrew write, “Although the basic structure of most tutoring sessions is the same, every encounter with a writer demands an

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Tweet WLN? “Like” WLN?

If your writing center and/or tutors have Twitter accounts and/or Facebook pages, we invite you to “follow,” “tweet,” “like,” and/or “post” on our Twitter account and Facebook wall. We occasionally post photos from writing center websites for everyone else to enjoy, so if you have a photo or maybe a particularly useful resource on your website (e.g., an online tutor’s manual, a Powerpoint, etc.), let us know. We also invite you to post occasional comments about what’s going on in your writing center and also links that other writing center folk would be interested in.



@WLNewsletter



Writing Lab Newsletter

ANNOUNCEMENTS

IWCA Conference Proposal Deadline Extended

The proposal deadline for the IWCA conference in San Diego, Oct. 25-27th, has been extended to midnight, May 14th, 2012.

The Call for Proposals and submission form can be found at <www.socalwritingcenters.org/iwca2012/index.html>.

TAKE NOTE

ALABAMA WRITING CENTER DIRECTORS' DAY OUT

May 18, 2012
10:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.
University of Montevallo
Montevallo, AL

Writing center directors in Alabama will convene to describe their centers, exchange ideas for future work, make plans for possible future statewide tutor training meetings, and make plans for representing Alabama's writing center work through the Southeastern Writing Centers Association's "Alabama" web page. Participants are encouraged to "show and tell about" their centers, and the meeting rooms will allow for the sharing of websites, images, videos, and/or print documents over a large screen. This invitation is open to all writing center directors, co-directors, and any other faculty/staff members who include writing assistance and instruction in their work (i.e., student services). There is no registration fee.

If interested, overnight accommodations are available at the University of Montevallo for \$30/night. Please contact Dr. Glenda Conway for reservation details. Phone: 205-665-6425. E-mail: conwayg@montevallo.edu.

Please RSVP to Tony Ricks, Athens State U., 300 North Beaty St., Athens, Alabama 35611. Phone: 256-216-6670. E-mail: Tony.Ricks@athens.edu.

individualized response. . . ." (29). I often question whether tutors respond more to the writer or writing, and I was able to consider this by working with different tutors on the same piece of writing, different tutors with different pieces, and a single tutor with two pieces in multiple sessions—but always the same writer.

My impressions suggest that the paper initially sets the tone for the session and, to some degree, defines the writer. For example, when I discussed a humorous essay, "Ten Reasons Why You Probably Won't Quit Writing (Even if You Should)," with two upper-division English majors, our dialogue seemed to flow effortlessly. The topic was of great interest to these tutors, "easy to understand," "inspiring," and "fun." Both sessions were consequently chatty and enthusiastic, and each tutor volunteered his or her literary ambitions at personally meaningful sections of the essay. This was contrasted by tutorials that employed a speculative, quasi-postmodern story, "The Protectionists." One reader said that she "sort of got it." The session began awkwardly and gradually improved as the tutor recognized Cold War, Alice in Wonderland allusions and became overtly more interested. Another tutor spent too much time reading the story, and when we finally began talking five minutes before the end of the session, it was clear that, despite having underlined 29 passages and highlighted another half-page, my tutor had no idea what to say or ask. He was likewise apparently frustrated, perhaps embarrassed, by his lack of authoritative understanding. And because I was the same writer in all instances, I assume that the writing itself played an important role in the tutor's "individualized response."

According to Ted Remington, Director of Writing at the University of Saint Francis, "One possible shortcoming of the [participatory] method . . . is that the level of the writing . . . is quite high. As a tutor, I have certainly experienced the phenomenon of 'tutoring to the level of the writing', . . . [and] it's often easier to respond thoughtfully to writing that is quite good already than to an essay that's a train wreck." Remington's observation echoes responses from tutors who preferred the method because of the higher level of writing. Katie Brunero, now a graduate student, said, "This provided an opportunity to spread our wings, to test ourselves as tutors, maybe talk about structure, effect, rhetorical devices, instead of rehashing comma splices and fragments. And it was nice for you to see us spread our wings." Another tutor commented, "It was fun to read and respond to your stuff."

As a director, I know that dealing with train wrecks is important, but it also seems fun and beneficial for tutors to tackle more advanced writing (even if it comes in the form of a quasi-evaluation). Fun, because the tutors tell me so. Beneficial, because working with complex material can increase tutor confidence in train-wreck triage and/or in diagnosing rhetorical strategies (such as dialogue) that may be used ineffectively. And while about 45% of our clients come from first-year writing classes, the tutors must also work with advanced writing that is generated in senior seminars or graduate courses. Finally, because I was a discerning writer with an eye toward better prose, and because the tutors had to negotiate that client package, the special sessions functioned as supplemental training in what Remington calls the "fuzzy, messy, intangible . . . human interaction between tutor and client."

PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

I was relieved that, during my sessions, I did not doubt any tutor's foundational ability to work in the center. This is not to say I did not have moments of pause, some of which I described above, but I tried to incorporate concerns into discussions that would lead to more effective practice. For example, after I encountered unproductive timidity or time management, I would ask at staff meetings: What's the ideal ratio between assessment of an essay and conversation with the writer? How would you handle a tutorial where the client's disciplinary understanding, perhaps a graduate paper in philosophy, is beyond yours? Or a client who seems a better writer than you are? But I would hinge the questions around my institutional past, not the sessions at RIC.

One-to-one tutorials seemed to strengthen our working relationship in more productive ways than direct supervisory observation, which is, to some degree, confrontational because of institutional power structures. A proper writing consultation should regulate power between tutor and writer like a limited-slip differential, providing equivalent force to each axle while accommodating varying momentum. After my first year of participatory observations, I plan to supplement my “theory and practice” course for new tutors with more complex exemplary papers that might build confidence in negotiating with advanced writers.

TUTOR RESPONSES TO BEING EVALUATED

At a regular staff meeting, after I had held sessions with every tutor at least once, I asked for opinions about their work with me. One tutor said, “I was a little nervous at first because, let’s face it, you’re the boss. But after awhile, I was fine.” Another, “It was good. I appreciated the fact that you needed real feedback. When you sat down, it was like, What do you think? Do you have recommendations? I felt that I was working with a writer who wanted help.” A third echoed the first, “I was nervous at the beginning. Then OK.” A fourth, who read a science fiction story in early development, said, “The experience was good, especially since you started low key—What did I like? What worked and what didn’t? And you specifically valued my science background. That was nice.”

Two first-year tutors were quiet during this discussion, and I approached them together after we adjourned. When prompted, one admitted, “I was really scared because I thought you were going to give me a paper and say, ‘Now! Find all the errors!’ Like a test.” The other said that she worried our meeting would resemble the summer’s mock tutoring sessions, adding that those were more nerve-racking than her first real client appointment. Yet both women concluded that once we began our conferences and they realized that there was no hidden agenda, they could relax into a more conventional discussion.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I can’t say that participatory tutor evaluations provide the best system for skills assessment because I do not know anyone else who uses them, and I suspect that no one method is right for every center or management style. But I find my participatory approach more comfortable and, I believe, more constructive than formal observations in a peer-tutoring venue. I also believe that our writing center community will spread the word about these sessions to upcoming tutors, reducing apprehensions. Nonetheless, at the end of the above-referenced staff meeting, I asked the tutors directly, “Would you prefer to work together in a session or have me observe a client appointment?” The collective response was immediate and (to my surprise) unanimous. They would rather be my tutor.

It is impossible to avoid the reality of my supervisory role, yet I try to reduce or obscure the authoritative framework whenever possible. I might have used formal observations or random client surveys, but when I began to work in a law office in 1978 and was considering law school, my boss gave me a piece of advice. “Beware the client,” he said. “Those who want the most improbable outcomes will often bite the hand that kept them out of court or prison.” I do not trust clients as impartial evaluators of tutors⁴; I do not want to defer my responsibilities, to rank tutors by client review, or to disrupt regular appointments through observations.

A writing center director can perhaps exert the greatest managerial influence with the least managerial footprint by prescreening tutor applicants for language skills, work ethic, attendance, attitude, and sensitivity to diverse clientele. Beyond that, once I hire peer tutors for an academic season, my super-

visory commitment is to mentor all of them. My job requires that I field complaints from faculty and clients about the writing center, and my subsequent investigations are evaluative in nature, but when I began working directly with tutors, I placed myself in the middle of the tutorial process—a fortunate writer in search of a better paper and a mindful supervisor in search of better service. My first round of participatory observations felt like a firm handshake between me and the tutors, and this is why I will continue to be a director who is also a client. ♦

Notes

1. According to a web posting by Peter Norvig, Director of Google Research, “The Lake Wobegon Strategy” implies that organizations should “only hire candidates who are above the mean of . . . current employees.”

2. Seven of the twelve tutors were English majors; other disciplines included anthropology, history, biology, pre-med, and education. Eight were seniors, three were sophomores, and one was a graduate student in English who worked only during the fall semester 2009. Six were first-year tutors.

3. Overall, they chose fiction at about two to one. I considered whether fiction was appropriate, but the tutors often commented about audience and purpose, as well as character and plot, and they do occasionally meet with our creative writing students, so I continued to allow this option.

4. Many clients are unhappy for reasons that confound tutoring pedagogy. For example: Last year, we received a complaint regarding our satellite location (the campus library) because “the tutor wasn’t there and nobody knew how to find her”; the client neglected to mention that she was an hour and a half late for the appointment and arrived thirty minutes after the close of tutoring. Another client, a graduate student, put under my door a one-page note about her peer tutor, a sophomore, complaining that the client’s writing was so advanced an undergraduate could not be of assistance, and furthermore, as a graduate student, she should automatically be provided with a graduate-level tutor. The client did not mention that, because she had delayed coming to the center until the evening before her paper was due, there was only one available appointment, or that the tutor had offered to reschedule the session with “a senior tutor,” or that the client had belittled the tutor to tears before settling down to work (and during my follow-up conversation, the client admitted that the tutor had been “somewhat helpful” after all). I also received reprimands from clients who said, “I forgot my appointment, but the tutor should have called to remind me.”



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EMPATHIC TUTORING IN THE THIRD SPACE

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“Stay impure: welcome mixed descent and cross purposes” (Terrance Riley 150)

Sabina comes to the writing center because she is struggling with an assignment requiring her to research her last name using the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Sabina explains that her last name is her father’s first name, and she cannot find his name in the *OED*. Sabina also mentions that her professor calls her “Sabrina,” but she is afraid to correct him. Joseph visits the writing center because he is struggling with an assignment that requires him to select magazine advertisements that feature people of the opposite sex whom he finds sexually attractive. Joseph remarks that he does not find anyone of the opposite sex to be sexually attractive.

Many writing center administrators, ourselves included, might be reluctant to confront faculty members, our “customers,” about the blind spots their writing assignments expose. And we caution our tutors, as does *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, for example, to “never comment negatively to students about a teacher’s teaching methods, assignments, personality, or grading policies . . . Keep in mind that students are relating their impressions or interpretations, and these may be incomplete or even inaccurate. More often than not, there are valid explanations for what may appear to be a problem” (1). Should the tutor relate a concern to a writing center administrator, such conversations are usually kept “in house,” sending a message that the writing center must protect/fear the professor, even if at the expense of the tutee. Unfortunately, by publicly supporting a “the professor is always right” policy, we are supporting a faculty—>writing center—>student hierarchy that resembles Paulo Freire’s “banking education” whereby knowledge is “bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (72). Not only may tutors feel uncomfortable expressing concerns to their tutees for fear of angering professors, they may not even feel concern if they believe their job is solely to side with the professor. For example, when we mentioned Sabina’s and Joseph’s dilemmas in a training session, a tutor recommended that Joseph pretend to be heterosexual, and another noted that surely Sabina could just research an American name. In other words, even though the professors’ assignments were flawed, the student had to adjust; in contrast, the professors would not even know there was a problem.

Fortunately, though, rather than telling Sabina and Joseph that the professor is always “right,” their actual tutors opted to move beyond tutoring to advocacy. We still recall Sabina’s tutor’s exact words: “Can you imagine? Can you imagine how Sabina must feel?” We contacted the professors to ask if the assignments could be modified: “Could a student use the *OED* to research another person’s name or use another source to research his/her own?” and “Could a student analyze images of people from the same gender?” Both professors were shocked by their oversights and apologized for them. Sabina and Joseph acted as our and the professors’ teachers that day, and in the process provided a model of what a writing center could/should look like—a metacognitive, flexible third space—a part of the university but also apart from it. In particular, by replacing the top-down, unidirectional communication chain with an interactive, empathic conversation that included faculty members, we began to chisel at heteronormative and ethnocentric biases. Although we must continue to acknowledge the professor as the audience of most of our tutees’ papers, we believe writing centers must also empathize with the audience of essay prompts—our tutees—because they have much to teach us and the faculty.

STEP ONE: RECOGNITION

New tutors often arrive at training with the same blind spots as the faculty they support. For example, William Broussard, in “Collaborative Work, Competitive Students, Counter-Narrative: A Tale from out of (the Academy’s) Bounds,” chronicles faculty and tutor biases against student athletes, lamenting that “when students are socially constructed as ‘uninterested’ and ‘unmotivated’ on one end and alienated from their labor on the other before they ever enter their classrooms, then

what hope do they have of succeeding within its walls unless the stereotypes are destroyed?" (3). In order to help tutors develop the emotional intelligence known as empathy and achieve critical consciousness, they must first recognize their own bias. To that end, in a training session we call "I'm Not Waving, I'm Drowning," we ask the tutors to list various individuals with whom they could never empathize. They typically note individuals associated with horrific deeds—"rapists," "pedophiles," "murderers," "Hitler." We then ask the tutors to list various types of tutees with whom they could never empathize. The tutors begin tentatively with individuals they perceive as clearly in the wrong: "cheaters" and "people who try to get the tutor to do their work." However, the list quickly grows as individuals happily shout out "underachievers," "whiners," "people who arrive late to an appointment." Each of the three times we have led this session, the tutors have had no qualms about marking themselves as "good students" and declaring their peers as "bad students," people unworthy of compassion, even though some of these "wrongs," such as being late, the tutors themselves had committed.

The first time we witnessed this melee of attacks, we were taken aback; we presumed that at least a few tutors would say that, short of a murderer or rapist, they could empathize with every tutee. However, as one tutor later noted, becoming a tutor is "a huge boost to the ego," and obviously the power can be so exhilarating that it warrants protecting. Fortunately, we had a strategy in place to help these tutors see their own biases (e.g. egocentrism and exceptionalism). We first called the tutors' attention to the absurdity of placing a student who tries to coerce a tutor in the same category as a rapist, an indicator that the tutors were taking their tutees' disinterest, lack of desire to achieve academic competence, or resistance personally and defensively. We also asked the tutors to generate reasons someone might "underachieve": a lack of self-confidence, a non-communicative professor, life's stressors. And we asked the tutors to consider innocent "cheating," as when students plagiarize unwittingly. Our goal was to force tutors into the third space, or what Gloria Anzaldúa calls *nepantla*, a "site of transformation, the place where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures" (548-49). We knew these tutors needed these different perspectives in order to recognize how judgmentally they were behaving and in order to swap out insensitivity and arrogance for empathy.

STEP TWO: ACTION

Privately, tutors and their tutees contextualize and complicate professors' writing assignments, assessments, and perspectives all the time, but to critique faculty publicly is a daunting proposition. Although feelings of empathy for a tutee should lead to action—expressions of understanding, a discussion about the issue, advocacy—as noted, tutors function near the bottom of a hierarchical model. In order to help tutors feel comfortable with respectfully disagreeing with professors, we reject "the professor is always right" mentality in favor of the professor is "always the audience." Although this shift does retain the top-down hierarchical model, since the professor is still the ultimate judge, by challenging professor infallibility we are emphasizing that the tutee and the tutor have rhetorical choices to make—have agency—as opposed to being powerless and silenced.

For example, a few semesters ago Roberto visited the writing center after receiving an "F" on a First-Year English essay. When the tutor turned to the last page to read the professor's terminal comments, she found only this statement: "You do not belong in college. Go to the Writing Center." Roberto was also verbally told that his topic (a poignant depiction of the cycles of his grandmother's small family garden and its impact on her community) was "unscholarly"; he also sometimes placed adjectives after nouns, and he incorrectly conjugated irregular verbs. The tutor questioned this professor's statement, emphasizing the unfairness of telling Roberto that he, not his writing, did not belong in college. However, the tutor also stressed that the goal in writing should be to find the best means by which to convey one's ideas to a particular audience (i.e. rhetorical effectiveness). Consequently, given this particular audience, Roberto needed to write one way; on the other hand, for another audience, Roberto's essay might be even more appropriate than an essay written in "Standard" Edited American English. The tutor also explained that many published activists and scholars such as Carol Hanisch and Cherríe Moraga would see the value of an essay on his grandmother's garden because "the personal is political."¹ It is essential to note that the actions of Roberto's tutor do not stand at odds with the objectives of teaching academic writing. In fact, writing centers that enforce a "professor is always right" policy unfortunately suggest that there is only one "right" way to write, an assumption that dissolves the intentions of academic argumentation. Ultimately, Roberto re-wrote this paper, changing his topic and using Edited American English, but he did so conscious of his other options and no longer shamed

1. "The Personal is Political" is the title of Carol Hanisch's essay published in the 1970 *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation*, edited by Shulie Firestone and Anne Koedt. It has become a popular slogan for feminists to counter prejudice against politicizing the personal.

by his original choices, by his home discourse. And through this experience, the tutor and we as her supervisors also began to see the systemic problems of the university and reflect on how we had been complicit in their maintenance.

STEP THREE: REFLECTION

Jay D. Sloan, in his *Writing Lab Newsletter* Tutor's Column entitled "Closet Consulting," exemplifies the empathic intellectual—a tutor who consciously seeks out a means by which he can relate to a tutee, to find common ground between them. Sloan, a gay man, tells of his experience tutoring an individual who was arguing that homosexuality is a sin. Although it would be understandable if an LGBTQ individual were to dismiss outright a homophobic individual, Sloan taps into memories of his own early years at the university and "identifies" with his tutee. Sloan reflects on the experience, "Never had I felt myself, my own identity, so directly threatened—pushed back towards the old ultimatum, that suffocating closet door" (9). Note the physicality of what Sloan experiences: "threatened," "pushed back," "suffocating." We would have encouraged Sloan to share his perspective on the issue of homosexuality as a sin with this tutee. Perhaps the tutee would have likewise discovered empathy, clearly a benefit of engaging in the third space.

Encouragingly, most tutors express appreciation not only for the training that helps them become more empathic and tolerant, but also the chance to reflect on these internal changes, as Sloan is able to do in his essay, and we are able to do in this one. As part of their training, tutors in our writing center regularly journal, blog, and/or tweet their reflections on various pieces of writing center scholarship. Often, these responses turn inward. In a response to Harry Denny's "Queering the Writing Center," for instance, one tutor opted to journal about how tutoring had "queered" her worldview: "When I began tutoring, I would judge Asian people, thinking they were inherently brighter, and when they failed to understand what I told them, I was more disappointed in them than in, say, the black people I tutored. I feel awful admitting this, but I was always surprised to meet a black student with good grammar, and as surprised when the black students tried harder than others to learn what I was saying."

This tutor's biases against African Americans and African American English resemble those Sharroky Hollie cites in "Acknowledging the Language of African American Students": "Still, many African American students will walk into classrooms and be discreetly taught in most cases, and explicitly told in others, that the language of their forefathers, their families, and their communities is bad language, street language, the speech of the ignorant and/or uneducated. They will be 'corrected' and told their 'she be' should be 'she is'" (54). But, as the tutor notes, these were her prejudices; tutoring had led to an internal paradigm shift. As she explains, "tutoring made me examine and alter those prejudices, and my ability to help people increased." Because the tutor's stereotypes were challenged via face-to-face dialogue with students from diverse backgrounds, she began to question her prejudice. She began to empathize.

CONCLUSION

Jeremy Rifkin, author of *The Empathic Civilization*, argues that empathic skills "emphasize a non-judgmental orientation and tolerance of other perspectives" and force people "to live within the context of ambiguous realities where there are no simple formulas or answers, but only a constant search for shared meanings and common understandings" (15-6). Rifkin could be describing a writing center tutorial, or more specifically an empathic writing center tutorial. Sabina's tutor realized what Sabina already knew: despite its rhetoric of encouraging diversity, many in the U.S. academy operate from a monocultural paradigm that assumes/encourages assimilation ("Sabina" is called "Sabrina"). Joseph's tutor acquired perspective into the life of a gay man in a heteronormative world—the pain of feeling invisible but the worry of discrimination should you speak up. And in these examples lies one of the less obvious benefits of one-to-one tutoring: in the midst of conflicting messages and on the border, not the center, of the status quo, one is able to experience and therefore challenge mechanisms in place to support existing privileges at the expense of others.

Tutors need to take the initiative to function as advocates on behalf of students, but writing centers also need to build bridges that will make such advocacy possible without negative repercussions for the writing center tutee and tutor. By challenging the "banking concept" of education and inviting faculty into the conversation, we can hopefully create a network of empathic intellectuals. ♦

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TUTOR'S COLUMN

FROM THE INTERIOR DESIGN STUDIO TO THE WRITING CENTER: ONE TUTOR'S UNCONVENTIONAL JOURNEY TO DESIGNING A TUTORIAL

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I sometimes feel a little bit out of place in the Writing Center. I come from a major that does not put as much emphasis on writing as some others. My sustainable interior design major focuses on interior architecture and design and how the two can be tailored to benefit the environment and consumers. It is a technical major with applications in art, science, math—and not so much in writing. Surrounded by peer and professional tutors with backgrounds in English, creative writing, or communication, I sometimes doubt whether I can conduct tutoring sessions as successfully as they can. What I need to do is reset my outlook from thinking an interior design background is a hindrance to my tutoring to seeing it as a benefit.

What fascinates me about my major is that it is one of the few fields that utilizes both parts of the brain—the right (often called the creative side) and the left (often referred to as the technical side). The field is definitely not just about pillows and window treatments. Writing parallels interior design in that it also is both creative and technical. Creative ideas, sentence structure, word choice, and flow all make for an interesting paper, while proper grammar, spelling, and formatting make a paper technically sound.

As a student of interior design and architecture, I am taught to convey ideas through images, diagrams, and plans—often over words. When I am actually required to write, I write concept statements, or concise and expressive descriptions that highlight a project in as little as four lines. Even my textbooks instruct students to write as few words as possible while still conveying a strong and purposeful idea. While it may seem these teachings would hinder my tutoring skills in the Writing Center, I have instead used the knowledge from my teachers and textbooks to help in sessions. For example, I have had a couple of students tell me that they had completed plenty of research but could not seem to get thoughts out on a page. In situations like these, I revert back to the ways of my major and simply ask the students to give me short phrases or sentences that convey important ideas in their research. These short phrases or sentences are like the broken-down parts of a future whole. As these informative yet loosely connected words, phrases, and sentences flow from the students, I jot them down on a piece of paper. By the end of the “free flow,” we can look at the short yet descriptive ideas on paper and often easily ascertain a strong direction for a paper. Interior design may be focused around diagrams, images, and plans, but writing too can be broken down into these individual segments and phrases to get to a final result.

After a day spent working with spaces and voids in an interior layout, I must transition into a tutoring session working with black text on a white page. However, when I tutor, I try to use my non-conventional background in the design field as a platform from which to develop a strategy for approaching a tutoring session. I have noticed that my techniques in tutoring at the Writing Center often mimic the way I approach a design assignment, and this parallel has been very helpful in making my tutoring sessions successful. For instance, when I start a design project, I begin by gathering bits and pieces of information to create a concept that can be used toward a final goal. This is also the stage of design where I plan what needs to be included in the project and how much square footage is available. The way in which I approach a tutoring session is similar. I start all my appointments with a minute or two of conversation, chatting

casually about the bits and pieces of information I need to know to successfully guide the student to an end goal. It is beneficial to get an understanding of the assignment requirements and what needs to be included in the paper, just as it is beneficial to determine programming and square footages in design.

In the interior design world, another step in a design project is to work schematically. This involves quick sketches, diagrammatical planning, and a bit of organization. Within a tutoring session, the process is similar. This is the phase where I often help the student create a “reverse outline,” or an outline highlighting topics in a written draft of a paper to make sure the intent of the paper is on track. Like schematic design, this writing approach allows the student to organize thoughts, recognize what ideas are similar and important, and progress forward to the next step in the writing process.

Design development refers to the phase of design in which plans are created, finishes are chosen, and most of the ideas come together. The “design development” of a writing piece is the step in which I work with the student to extract further details and develop deeper thoughts and ideas. We may look at specific sections or passages together, address grammar or clarity issues, and make sure that all ideas support a strong thesis statement or idea. This is also the phase in which my interior design background really comes in handy. Interior design projects often have a concept or a *parti*, which is a motif that runs through the entire project from beginning to end. If designers do not develop their concepts thoroughly, then the end results may fall flat. Because I have been trained to carry out these concepts from the beginning of a project to the end, I am also able to extract more and dig deeper to bring a thesis statement all the way through a paper in a developed way. Situations like these make me realize that a tutor does not necessarily need to come from an English background or a creative writing background. Sometimes, a tutor with a major like interior design can view a paper with a different perspective.

Before reaching the final stage of a design project, the designer must understand that the first idea is not necessarily the best idea. Designing is all about reworking ideas. New plans are drafted. Different finishes are selected. The pencil comes out and makes changes. There are always last-minute changes before a design is finalized. Sound familiar to the writing world? Here, too, the first idea is not necessarily the best. Writers need to understand that the ideas or the direction of their papers will likely change at least once throughout the writing process. I try to explain that although it may not be fun, editing and reworking is a part of almost all professions. By telling students about how many times and how many hours I must put into floor plan revisions before a final design is reached, I am usually able to convince them that doing just a couple of drafts of an assignment is really not so bad. Still, students often come to me in the Writing Center searching for my “stamp of approval” or the “green light” to pass in an assignment. I cannot even count how many times a student has approached me and asked, “Can you just look this over and make sure it’s okay for me to pass in?” Often, the students have not once self-edited their work. This is the phase where I encourage the students to read portions of their papers aloud in hopes of exercising their editing skills. Just like the self-critiques I do for my own projects in class, the reading aloud gives the student the gratification of making a piece better by their own means and not the direct means of the tutor. Help from others is great, but help from yourself is the best kind.

Writing and interior design, while very different fields, are similar in that they are both technical and creative at the same time. When these two different fields of creativity and technicality are combined, a positive reaction occurs. One is analogous to the other as their processes are connected. I have been able to hone my tutoring skills by relating back to what I know I am comfortable with—design. Writing a well-structured paper is very similar to constructing a thoughtful floor plan. Therefore, by following some of the basic steps and principles of design, a tutor may be able to uncover a new perspective on tutoring in the Writing Center.





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