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Triangulation in the Writing Center: Tutor, Tutee, and Instructor Perceptions of the Tutor's Role¹

Terese Thonus

In 1994, Stephen North admitted that the picture he had painted of writing tutors as “unobtrusive” coaches in “The Idea of a Writing Center” (1984) was misleading. In “Revisiting ‘The Idea of a Writing Center,’” he represented tutors as “enmeshed in a system or systems—educational, political, economic, social, and so on—in ways that render such innocence (and I think that’s the right word) impossible” (12). The role(s) of the writing center tutor are heavily contextualized, and self- and other-definitions divorced from their institutional contexts are inherently flawed. This inability of institutional representatives to be “unobtrusive” was investigated on a larger scale by ethnographer Michael Agar, who argued that in the pseudo-conversations between institutional representatives (for our purposes, writing tutors) and their clients (for our purposes, tutees), the former always dominate time allocation and topic. Agar argued that even “motivated” institutional representatives and clients can do little to change participant roles, the balance of status and power, and the content of the institutional discourse (165). In like manner, writing center theorists Burns and Shamoony argue that there is no such thing as “pure” or “unadulterated” tutoring. To imagine there is, as North alleges, is to remain “innocent.”

Notwithstanding, a decontextualized notion of tutor, somehow unenmeshed in “a system or systems,” is often reflected in tutorial manuals. The prospective audiences for Harris’ *Teaching One-on-One* (1986), for example, reflect a multiplicity of tutorial contexts and roles: (1) classroom teachers who have not yet seen the usefulness of writing center conferencing with their students; (2) writing teachers who already spend a considerable amount of time in one-on-one teaching; and (3) tutors working or preparing to work in the writing center setting. This

overlapping vision of tutorial providers is pragmatic, but it blurs the important effects of varying contexts in the definition of the tutor's role. Recent work on the role of the tutor in the writing center context by Harris and by others proposes such role metaphors as coach, commentator (a disinterested party to the instructor-student relationship), counselor (offerer of personalized attention), and diagnostician. Though this discussion of a greater range of role metaphors is heartening, the issue of how context constrains and even prevents the fulfillment of these roles is not adequately treated.

In their *Guide to Peer Tutoring* (2000), Gillespie and Learner define the role of the tutor not by relating it to context but by contrasting it with the role of the editor. Editors "focus on the text" and "take ownership of the text," while tutors "focus on the writer's development and establish rapport," making sure "the writer takes ownership." Editors "give advice," but tutors "ask questions." While editors "look mainly for things to improve" and "tell writers what to do," tutors "comment on things that are working well" and ask tutees how they plan to revise their papers. Characterizing what a tutor does in terms of "not being an editor" may be a useful benchmark for prospective tutors; nevertheless, as a definition of the tutor's role it is inherently negative, imprecise, and decontextualized, as editors are not part of the writing center "system" (1-5).

One of the most thoroughgoing metaphors in tutorial manuals is "tutor as peer." Rafoth, in his contribution to *A Tutor's Guide* (2000), argues that tutors should take on the role of "constructive critics" rather than simply sitting back and acting as "cheerleaders." Despite this call for tutors to take on a critical, even authoritative, role, Rafoth assumes that, in their "default" role, tutors are their tutees' peers: "Ideas, arguments, and values are what writing is about, and students who come to a writing center need a real audience. If the writer's paper seems to lack any kind of analysis or deeper thought, who better to hear it from than a peer?" (82). Gillespie and Lerner deal with the ostensible peer relationship between tutors and tutees by warning trainees that tutees will manipulate the tutor-as-instructor and tutor-as-peer dichotomy:

At times writers will position you as proxies for their instructors, expecting an evaluation of their writing. At others, they will put you in the role of "coconspirator," especially when they admit plagiarizing or simply not caring about what they're writing. (22)

Note that the tutee, not the tutor, is painted as the interpreter of the tutor's role; placing this responsibility on the tutee relieves the tutor of the burden of self-definition.

What emerges from characterizations of the tutor role in tutoring

manuals is what Plummer and Thonus term "the methodology as mythology of tutoring." Tutoring *mythology* argues that the tutor's role is distinct and different from that of a teacher, propagating a tutoring *methodology* based on "what not to do," or, more precisely, "how to be a peer and not to be a teacher when in the role of writing tutor." By operationalizing this mythology, tutoring methodology constrains the tutor's role, limiting it to issues of personality and strategies of interpersonal interaction. In an analysis of tutorials at a university Writing Center, Plummer and Thonus have found that (1) tutors evaluate student work and suggest (almost) as often as they ask "Socratic" questions; (2) tutors teach academic writing and disciplinary conventions; (3) tutors teach content, often indirectly; and (4) tutors think and comment critically about others' pedagogy, including the pedagogical practices of course instructors. Based on these findings, they argue that writing center tutors teach and construct themselves as teachers, and that by evaluating tutees' writing and suggesting changes in both content and form, they fulfill a more "teacherly" than "peer" role.

Such findings contrast with the relative unanimity of opinion in tutorial manuals that tutors are supportive peers rather than authoritative teachers, and that this is the role that tutees expect their tutors to play. More extensive writing center research, particularly those studies with an ethnographic bent (e.g., Blau et al, Briggs, Davis et al, Roswell, Seckendorf), support this interest in the tutor's role and examine the interplay between authority, expectations, and role perceptions. What emerges from this contextually-embedded research is that "tutor" is not a sharply-defined role but rather a continuum of roles stretching from teacher to peer, negotiated anew in each tutorial.

Who defines the tutor's role(s) may be just as important, if not more important, than *what* role definitions emerge. The course instructor and the tutee play a part in the definition of the tutor's role, and these definitions create the context(s) and system(s) within which tutorial interaction occurs. What makes writing tutorials different from other institutional conversations (e.g., doctor-patient, teacher-student) is that the third party, the course instructor, is a silent participant. While what the instructor "wants" becomes the agenda of the tutorial session, and what the tutee produces becomes the object of the instructor's evaluation, the instructor is not present. Nevertheless, his or her tacit participation strongly impacts the tutee's and the tutor's definition of the tutor's role. And although in writing center research tutees' interpretations are often ignored, their perceptions of the tutor's role, particularly as they relate to their course instructor's, create and modify the context of interaction. To sum up these observations, (1) some instructors expect tutors to act as instructors, and some do not; (2) some tutors expect to be like instructors,

and some do not; and some tutees expect tutors to be like instructors, and some do not.²

This paper investigates how these participant expectations are enacted in tutorial conversations and in self-reported role perceptions. How do tutors, tutees, and course instructors perceive the tutor's role? What are the tensions implicit in expectations they hold of the tutor's role(s), especially as they compare to those of the course instructor? And, finally, how can the answers to these questions offer a better understanding of the context(s) of writing center interaction?

Method and Analysis

Because one cannot deal directly with role *realities* (whether tutors *are*, in fact, instructors), one must rely on the evidence of role *perceptions* as presented by the various parties to the interaction. To this end, a qualitative, ethnographic methodology combining participant observation with informant interviews was selected, based on Deborah Schiffrin's *interactional sociolinguistics*. The methodology (1) makes explicit the assumptions of what instructors, tutors, and tutees think tutors should be, should not be, are, and are not, and (2) invites the student-tutee's voice into the discussion of the tutor role. This is an enhancement, I believe, of Neuleib and Scharton's study in which the participant "triangle" consisted of the tutor, the writing center administrator, and the student's instructor—but not the tutee. This *triangulated inquiry* demonstrates that the reality of the construction of tutor identity in at least this writing center reflects the lack of unanimity about the tutor's role in writing center literature and challenges the methodology as a mythology of writing tutorial manuals.

The Indiana University, Bloomington Writing Tutorial Services (hereafter, "the Writing Center") serves as the study setting. Participants are seven undergraduate students and their respective tutors and instructors. Student-tutor-instructor groups are labeled Tutorials A-G and the individual participants by pseudonym (e.g., student Annie, tutor Arthur, instructor Prof. Arnold). The seven instructors are defined as "faculty clients" of the Campuswide Writing Program because they have received summer fellowships to revamp their courses to include more writing and requested course-specific tutors and/or a class visit by a tutor. Data are (1) tape and transcription of each tutorial; (2) the student's assignment sheet and paper; (3) the tutor's record of the tutorial; and (4) tapes and transcriptions of two interviews each with tutor and tutee, and one interview with each course instructor. This table summarizes information about the participants:

Tutorial	Instructor Gender, Age, and Rank	Tutor Gender and Age	*Tutee Language Proficiency, Gender, and Age	Tutor Area of Primary Expertise	Tutee Paper Content Area
A	Prof. Arnold F (32) Assoc. Prof.	Arthur M (36)	Annie NSF (29)	English (literature)	Political Science
B	Prof. Brown M (43) Assoc. Prof.	Betty F (28)	Brian NSM (22)	English (literature)	Mathematics
C	Prof. Clark F (35) Assis. Prof.	Cathy F (50)	Carrie NSF (19)	Education	English (composition)
D	Dolores F (31) GTA	Donna F (37)	David NNSM (20)	English (literature)	English (composition)
E	Donna F (37) GTA	Ellen F (32)	Erin NNSF (20)	English (literature)	English (composition)
F	Prof. Fitch M (62) Professor	Frank M (32)	Fay NSF (20)	Philosophy	Sociology
G	Gary M (27) GTA	Gilda F (26)	Grace NSF (19)	English (rhetoric & composition)	Folklore

*NS = native speaker of English; NNS = nonnative speaker

Role perceptions of tutors by course instructors are mainly gained through interview data. However, three features of tutorial conversation—directives, pronouns, and talk-off-task or "small talk"—are linguistic exponents of role perception. While these are not the only indications of role perception in the tutorials, they are easily tracked in the transcripts and corroborated during participant interviews.

In their interviews, tutors in this study repeatedly use the adjective *directive* as they characterize and criticize their interactional contributions. As a folk term, *directive* refers not only to uttering directives

frequently but also to “repeatedly providing too much assistance to students” and “fixing” rather than asking “Socratic questions” (these definitions drawn from *The Writing Center Guide for Tutors*). Like all myths, *directiveness* and its associated concepts “provide a powerful means of communicating a homogenous set of social expectations for behavior” (Rubin and Rubin 27). *Being directive* is the strongest criticism a writing tutor can levy against self or a colleague; it signals “too much” involvement in the student’s work. In this analysis, the term directive refers both to *interaction-internal directives* (as defined by West) and *suggestions* (as defined by Searle). Interaction-internal directives deal with the “here and now” of tutorial interaction (e.g., *Let’s look it up in the dictionary*), whereas suggestions refer to actions the tutor wishes the tutee to perform once the tutorial is over (e.g., *Get someone to proofread this before you turn it in*).

Pronouns signal self- and other-perceptions, and changes in pronoun use indicate changes in conversational footing. Tutoring manuals, such as Meyer and Smith’s *The Practical Tutor*, recommend that tutors avoid first-person pronouns and use third-person pronouns instead: say “*most people* allow” rather than “*I* usually allow” (8). Consistent with this admonition, tutors in this study appeal to third-person, indefinite referents. However, the “idealized third person” (*writer, reader, audience*) often co-occurs or is metamorphosed into second- and first-person referents and pronouns as conversation progresses. In this excerpt³, the tutor, Arthur, refers to his tutee, Annie, in the third person, but in the next turn he reverts to second-person *you*:

- ⇒ ARTHUR: Back to the notion of making sure that, that Annie, in the **Annie’s argument** is in the limelight here.
- ANNIE: Uh-huh.
- ⇒ ARTHUR: O.K., that was a question that I had, and **you’re in the better position to know what your reader is looking for**, you know, in terms of the final product here.
- ANNIE: O.K.

(Tutorial A, Turns 56)

Of particular interest are first-person pronouns. *I* often coincides with personal opinion and *we* is an expression of “group indexicality” (Mühlhäusler and Harré 168). In “What Makes a Writing Tutorial Successful,” Thonus found that student use of *we* is viewed by tutors as manipulative if it solicits directiveness. However, *we* is considered a movement toward solidarity if initiated by the tutor, consonant with the requirement that tutors “coach.”

Small talk encodes tutor and student movements toward solidarity and of tutor movements away from the instructor role. In the Writing Center, small-talk topics include the students’ progress in the course or other courses, the weather, days off, entertainment, and, occasionally, the tutor’s academic life. Comembership talk, reported by Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford in their study of academic advising interviews, is a subset of small talk that marks peer status even more clearly, as interactants refer to topics and roles outside of the immediate institutional context.

Instructor Perceptions of the Tutor’s Role

Although all seven of the course instructors are considered “faculty clients” by the writing program and had at some point heard an exposition of philosophy and practice, each has acquired a different concept of the role of the writing tutor in the development of their students’ written work. Four of the seven appear to believe that tutors act as their surrogates and want them to fill that role, with or without direct contact and supervision. Prof. Arnold, for example, confers on the Writing Center the responsibility for helping her students because she simply does not have time to read student drafts. Profs. Clark and Fitch describe tutors as “auxiliary” readers. “A lot of them [students] want to see me, [but] sometimes they’re going [to the Writing Center] if they can’t get to see me,” said Prof. Clark. Prof. Fitch reported that student consultations with a tutor or with him would yield similar results. Should students feel too “embarrassed” to attend office hours, they could go to the Writing Center, where “it was a little more anonymous. . . . If you get a hold of a good tutor they can teach you a hell of a lot relatively quickly because I think most of these things are pretty straightforward.” GTA Gary is particularly willing to have tutors act as his surrogates given the high level of frustration he and his GTA colleagues have experienced with student writing:

Some were just terrible at proofreading, and so it was hard to struggle through because noun and verb stuff didn’t agree. . . . Then there was the type where the thoughts were just muddled. There was no attempt at any sort of a thesis statement. It’s one thing to struggle through some typos. It’s another thing to struggle through what you think is a glimmer of a good idea there, but you just can’t find it.

Such comments indicate that tenured/tenure-track faculty and GTA instructors may pattern differently in their expectations of tutors, and that especially those instructors not working as tutors (e.g., Gary vs. Donna

and Dolores) anticipate that tutors act with greater authority than their training warrants or permits.

In contrast to the perception of the tutor role as instructor surrogate, several of the instructors appear to want the tutor role to differ from their own. They expect tutors to carry out specific instructor recommendations. This stance can be inferred from Prof. Brown's and Prof. Clark's requests for class visits and course-specific tutors, and from Dolores' "grabbing" of tutor colleagues to discuss her assignment sheets and her checking of the Writing Center appointment book for student and tutor information. Dolores, who works both as a course instructor and as a tutor, explains her take on the difference between the two roles:

As a teacher you have the privilege of seeing your students much more often, so if your student comes to you with a problem or with a question, you have the opportunity to say, "Why don't you think about it a little bit on your own," or "Here are some options," whereas as a tutor you don't have that as much because you only may see the student once.

Ellen, a tutor who is also a GTA composition instructor, perceives a strong distinction between tutoring and teaching, but offers a more positive interpretation:

I like the way that being a tutor does feel like I'm in a different position than a teacher. As a teacher, you're simultaneously guiding, helping, educating, and judging, evaluating. I always feel frustrated with that as a teacher, and I think that students are aware of it, so they're simultaneously trying to press you and get help. It doesn't always create an environment in which the student can learn as much.

The fact that in her tutorial record and in interviews Ellen reconstructs tutorial activities as *we* events illustrates her positive orientation toward the tutor role.

It is therefore not surprising that similarities and differences between tutors and course instructors and expectations of how much tutors know and transmit are major themes of instructor interviews. Only one advanced composition instructor, Prof. Clark, wonders about the writing philosophy of her assigned tutor, Arthur.⁴ She recalls a conversation with him: "We didn't necessarily talk about social constructivist views versus expressivist pedagogies and tutoring strategies, because frankly, I don't see my job as also training the tutors."

Tutor Perceptions of the Tutor's Role

From the tutor's perspective, the first negotiation of power and authority in these tutorials centers on the definition of the tutor role compared to that of the course instructor. Taking on the instructor surrogate role appears uncomplicated for tutors who have taught or are teaching the same course for which their tutees seek assistance (i.e., Donna and Ellen). More than the other tutors, they report the likelihood of acting on "instructor intuitions" rather than on information relayed to them by the tutee or by the assignment sheet. In cases where no assignment sheet is presented, "to be really careful" tutors resort to general writing principles in the absence of specific instructions (Betty, Cathy) or send their tutees back to their instructors for clarification (Frank, Gilda). This excerpt is from Frank's tutorial with Fay:

- FRANK: Who's doing the grading?
 FAY: Um Prof. Fitch.
 FRANK: The instructor himself?
 FAY: Uh-huh.
 FRANK: O.K. Does he have office hours between now and the due date?
 FAY: Um, no.
 FRANK: Accessible by e-mail?
 FAY: Yeah.
 FRANK: Very, or just sort of?
 FAY: Very.
 ⇒ FRANK: O.K. **Would you be comfortable running a thesis by him** and saying, "Does it look like?"
 FAY: Yeah, uh-huh.
 FRANK: O.K. Maybe that's another thing to do, is once you can do that, once we have sort of a tentative thesis, you might try a few lines and say, "You know, I've done this comparison, and I think this is on track as far as comparing them. Does this thesis seem to capture what the paper"
 FAY: What I'm trying to say?
 ⇒ FRANK: Yeah, is it on track? **So you might e-mail sort of with the thesis if you think that's doable.**
 FAY: O.K. *I think I'll have to do that.*

(Tutorial F, Turns 138-143)

The Writing Center Guide to Tutoring, the in-house manual, enjoins tutors to avoid lateness, absenteeism, and directiveness, and also "suggesting a grade for the paper," a clear reference to what Arthur termed a "teacherly" function. In addition, the *Guide* warns against "Demonstrating to a student, by word or deed, any dissatisfaction with an assignment, instructor, or course." In their interviews, however, tutors are almost unanimously critical of course instructors. Criticisms voiced by the tutors range from the instructor's lack of feedback, to the instructor's assessment of the tutee's writing difficulties, to the lack of an assignment sheet. If actually available, assignment sheets are labeled "inconsistent," "difficult to decipher," or "not tutor-friendly." Along these lines, tutor Betty complains, "There was no assignment sheet. It's not clear to any of them what they're supposed to be doing in these papers. Are they supposed to be thesis-driven, or are they supposed to be chronologies or narratives that are reports?" She has asked her tutee, Brian, "What is it you all are supposed to be doing?" and confesses to "pushing him to come up with an argument, however general." Betty also disagrees with Prof. Brown's assessment of Brian's difficulties:

[Prof. Brown] wanted him to work on the intro and conclusion. And that's what he was most concerned with, therefore that's what Brian was most concerned with. . . . When I realized [Brian] hadn't actually done anything to the body, that was kind of disturbing to me because I didn't agree with that assessment.

Such comments suggest that tutors criticize course instructors precisely because they view themselves as *colleague* pedagogues. That is, it appears that tutors view instructors, not tutees, as their peers.

This orientation is most clearly expressed by tutor Gilda. Fascinated by the interface between teaching and tutoring, which she calls the "switching of hats," Gilda voices concern about the negative outcomes of a "peer" relationship with a tutee:

It seems to me that the Muriel Harris "totally let them be in the driver's seat" makes them uncomfortable. . . . Just from what I've seen, they see writing as something that has rights and wrongs, a right way to write what the teacher wants, or a right way to write for the academy.

In Gilda's mind, it is her role to get students to understand this "right way."

This alignment with the normative instructor role is reflected in "directiveness," cited by nearly all of the tutors. Their comments on

directiveness fall into three categories: (1) being too directive, that is, offering too many directives; (2) deliberately avoiding the "teacherly voice;" and (3) warranting directiveness through the offering of *accounts*, "culturally acceptable justification for what is considered to be unacceptable behavior" (Rubin and Rubin 27). Arthur, Cathy, and Donna link directiveness to the "teacherly voice." Whereas Frank is unswervingly critical of his behavior as "too directive," other tutors offer accounts for theirs. Certain similarities emerge in these accounts. First, suggestions are offered for the student's own good, so that skills will transfer to other tutorials (Cathy, Donna). Second, suggestions are judged to increase tutorial efficiency within institutional time constraints (Betty). Betty, for instance, interprets her directiveness in this excerpt as resulting from "time running out." She is forced to pull Brian back to the main point of the paper and away from his "distraction" by telling him what to do:

BETTY: Because the point of the paper as a whole is not how the Egyptians did their multiplication and division. So you don't want to get, it's cool to, and it's neat to explain it and stuff, but the problem is always sort of, am I getting steered way off from what it is I'm supposed to be doing? **So I think, I think that's a good idea, just to do it, give one example here, and then say, as you said earlier, for more thorough explanation, or however you want to say it, see the appendix.**

(Tutorial B, Turn 93)

Regardless of some movements away from the "teacherly" role, in none of the tutorials do tutors completely abandon it. Pronoun use and small talk initiated by tutors display a retreat from directiveness and its connection to the "teacherly" role. First-person plural pronouns in Tutorials D and E, the refusal to answer tutee questions directly in Tutorials A, E, and F, and amicable small talk in Tutorials A, E, G, however, are not enough to characterize these tutorials as conversations between status peers. Although the tutor-tutee relationships in Tutorials A and C can not have been more different, both tutors Arthur and Cathy engage in the status-differentiated behavior of complimenting their tutees on their intelligence and writing skill:

ARTHUR: **Annie, you are so smart**, you know that? I'm sure you do.

ANNIE: ((laugh)) No, I don't.

ARTHUR: That's, yeah, I'm sure you do. That's yeah, **that's really nicely said.**

(Tutorial A, Turns 75-76)

CATHY: **Well, you're improving very much as a writer.**

CARRIE: I hope so. That's the goal. All right, well thank you very much.

CATHY: You're welcome, Carrie.

CARRIE: I shall see you again. I'll be back with the fourth paper, and the fifth.

CATHY: I hope so, great. I'll be looking forward to it.

(Tutorial C, Turns 103-105)

One can hardly imagine instructors, let alone tutors who are supposed to act as status peers, taking such liberties with student evaluation.

Tutee Perceptions of the Tutor's Role

In contrast to tutor status, tutee status does not fundamentally change when crossing the writing center threshold; tutees are still "students" and "learners." Because of this perceived role stability, tutees, especially first-timers, may not realize that they will be participating in a conversation radically different from one with their course instructors. Not only this, but because the semantic content and institutional definition of "writing tutor" contrast with "math tutor," "Spanish tutor," or any other "tutor" they have encountered in their previous academic experience, tutees must presumably learn the roles of this new helping professional. Because only one of the tutees (Grace) is a first-time client, and because four of the seven tutorials (A, B, C, and F) are repeat visits to the same tutor, most tutees are well ahead on the learning curve.

Whether or not their tutors are trained in the particular academic discipline for which they are seeking writing assistance, all of the tutees believe that their tutors "know" writing. For example, David labels his tutorial with Donna "pretty successful" because tutorials "broaden our perspective on writing in English. . . . In real life you have to use a lot of writing skills. . . . not only in school." Note how David confines his notion of "success" in the tutorial to "writing skills." Annie views the differences between tutors and instructors as creating "a comfort zone" in tutorials but the similarity between them (their expertise) as contributing to her confidence that she would receive assistance. Annie trusts Arthur's knowledge of writing conventions: "He's in the college atmosphere, and

I think he understands what is expected in the college atmosphere, especially in the writing process." Fay comments of Frank, "Even though he didn't have a grasp of sociological terms, he could still steer me in the right direction. . . . He was good at his job." While Annie does not fault Arthur for his lack of knowledge of political science, Fay contrasts Frank's lack of knowledge of sociology with his tutorial expertise.

Grace is the only tutee who expects content information from her tutor. Note how when asked for such information (*Didn't the British come in and ruin their crops?*) Gilda deflects responsibility back on her tutee (*You're the expert in this field*):

GILDA: Well, what, the potato famine, was this when there were no potatoes, or when all they could eat was potatoes? I don't know.

GRACE: I thought it was they had no potatoes. ((laugh))

GILDA: O.K. ((laugh))

⇒ GRACE: **Didn't the British come in and ruin their crops?**

⇒ GILDA: Most likely. **You're, you're the expert in this field.**

GRACE: ((laugh))

GILDA: Well, if they had a potato famine, what does the potato in the stew say to you?

GRACE: It's just that when I talked to my dad. ((sigh)) Geez, I guess I need to research that one a little more.

GILDA: Well this might be a place for where you can do some interpretation of your own.

(Tutorial G, Turns 53-55)

According to Gilda, *You're the expert in this field* conveys to Grace that she, Gilda, is not going to function as the course instructor.

Tutees are not as adamant in asserting that tutors are different from instructors, but when questioned they revealed that they view the tutor role as distinct and less authoritative. Moreover, at times tutees refuse to bestow authority on their tutors even when they show them deference during tutorials. This is the case in Tutorials C and D: Although Carrie is more vocal than David in her rejections of tutor suggestions during the session, both tutees feel free to decline them once outside the confines of the writing center. Tutor suggestions, David believes, are to be accepted with a grain of salt: "Even though the tutor said something, it doesn't mean that it's correct. You have to think before you go on in the session." Citing her statement from the very beginning of the tutorial, *This is like almost, well, pretty much is my final draft*, Carrie explains she is "attached" to her paper with its myriad quotations and wants to avoid

“hacking it up.” The conflict between Cathy’s diagnosis and her own imparts a strongly adversarial tone to their interaction:

- CATHY: I think I’m going to agree that you could probably cut down on the quotations because I think that
- ⇒ CARRIE: **More?**
- CATHY: Well, if you look at what you’ve written, you really have made your argument, and the quotes may either be unnecessary or you can work with them a little bit and just use the citation because whoever reads this, it will give the reader the flexibility to check your source on that particular page. You’re not plagiarizing if you take an individual’s idea, use your own words to explain it, which you do, but make sure that the reader knows that you’re at least reworking the author’s own statements. There were a couple of times when I was more enthralled with what you were saying and felt that you made a good argument, and then I felt, “Huh, I don’t know that I really need this, this particular quote.” So we can go back and sort of look at that and
- CARRIE: The sad part is that I already took out some. Can you imagine how much the rest of that was, and you’re like, “Take out more.” ((laugh))
- CATHY: Well
- CARRIE: The whole damn thing. ((laugh))
- ⇒ CATHY: **You need to realize, Carrie, that it’s easier to let, in some ways it’s easier to let the authors write it for you,** but you have analysis in here, and you’ve read these essays quite
- CARRIE: A whole bunch of times each, trust me.
- ⇒ CATHY: And that shows. **You don’t need to have so many quotes as a crutch** because it’s obvious that you’re not just merely retelling the story. You’re analyzing, and you’re making comparisons, and you are critiquing.

(Tutorial C, Turns 21-25)

Carrie alleges she is “being patronized” while what she was looking for was “affirmation.” She models a “better” suggestion from an “ideal” writing tutor: *Maybe you could try a quote about this.* Comparing Cathy to Prof. Clark, Carrie explains that she prefers “someone real honest but also more positive and helping me with what would make it better [rather] than saying what’s wrong with it”:

When I go to Prof. Clark, she reads what I have, then sets it aside and says, “O.K. This is what you need to do.” And she starts giving me ideas, but she really doesn’t say anything about the work. I appreciate that because then I feel like I’m not being attacked for what I’ve already done. She’s just giving me suggestions on how to make what I have done better.

One way tutors decline the instructor role is through conversational avoidance (e.g., tutors refusing to answer tutee questions). At least one tutee, Annie, appreciates this. She characterizes her interaction with Arthur as “talking in a circle”: “His point would spur me to think something, and I could make something from that point, and then I would say it, and he’d say, *uh-huh.*” Without losing consciousness of who is the tutor and who is the tutee, they function “as a team”:

- ⇒ ARTHUR: So and the thing to keep in mind, too, for this kind of, for argumentative writing, **I suspect the primary interest of your reader is going to be Annie, right? Is going to be Annie’s argument that she’s making, O.K.**
- ANNIE: Right, right.
- ARTHUR: And this other stuff, you know, bringing in Mill, bringing in, you know, Gutmann and Thompson, or whoever, that’s just, that’s important, yes, but that’s fuel for your argument, support for you.
- ANNIE: Right.

(Tutorial A, Turn 50)

Arthur’s third-person reference to *Annie’s argument*, she believes, reflects his purpose “to make everyone aware that even though I need help with this, it’s still mine.” Despite their acknowledgment of tutor’s writing expertise and limited authority, several of the tutees (Annie, David, and Erin) believe that the results of the tutorial have more to do with what *they* did during the session than what their *tutors* did. Erin, for instance, views her tutor as a partner in “teamwork,” yet if a tutorial is not successful, she explains, it is probably because she “told the tutor something different from what the teacher wants.” Thus, Erin displays the conviction that it is the *student’s* job to represent the course instructor’s wishes to the tutor: “If I go to see the teacher first, and then go to the writing center, that’s better.”

Although the majority of tutees express some concern about what Grace calls “the type of writing [the instructor] likes,” three of the tutees

(Brian, Erin, and Fay) make no explicit reference to what their instructors expect of them either during their tutorials or during participant interviews. This indicates that tutees may arrive at the Writing Center anticipating that their tutors' task is to interpret assignments and convey those interpretations to them in a way their instructors have not or cannot. One instance is the case of tutee David, who hopes that his tutor, Donna, will "make sure" body paragraphs in his essay "meet the requirements" of the assignment. Despite her help, his instructor, Dolores, assigns a "B" to his paper. Disappointed, David does not blame his tutor: "It's not the fault of anyone, actually. It's just that probably I did something wrong or didn't meet the requirements." Although neither instructors nor tutors fault tutees for failing to convey instructor intentions during the writing tutorial, the analysis of participant interpretations of student assignments suggests that in at least four cases (Tutorials B, C, D, and G) tutors fail to acquire a sense of what instructors expect.

Synthesis: Perceptions of the Tutor Role

Whether one asserts that the identity construct "tutor" and its attendant role and status expectations are preimposed by institutional context (see Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford's research on academic advising roles) or created through talk (see Agnes He's work on classroom identities), members of the tutorial "triangle" are keenly aware of identity and willing to discuss it. Negotiation of the definition of the tutor's role in these tutorials often hinges on the similarities and differences between the tutor and the student's instructor. The comparison between tutor and student roles is referred to less often and less directly than the comparison between tutor and instructor roles.

Even those tutors and students who decline to engage in the identification of tutor-as-instructor still regard the tutor role as comprehending higher status vis-à-vis the tutee. The frequency of tutor directives (approximately one every two conversational turns) supports tutors' beliefs that they are "directive" according to their folk definition of the term. In contrast to this perception of the tutor's role, the majority of tutees, both NS and NNS of English, believe their tutors have the right and duty to be directive. To illustrate, Erin (a NNS) explains what she wanted her tutor, Ellen, to tell her: "I want the tutor to say, 'What do you really mean [by] this?' And when I explain, she says, 'O.K. You should write in this way'" (note the question + directive sequence). And while NS Fay applauds her tutor's suggestion that she "run the thesis by the instructor," she voices her gratitude at Frank's "knowing where he wanted to go," and "helping [her] get unstuck." These observations expand previous findings by Young and by Thonus ("How to Communicate Politely") regarding the

role perceptions NNS tutees have of their tutors to role perceptions shared by all tutees, including NSs of English.

In contrast to tutors, course instructors have very little to say about "directiveness." Prof. Fitch, who sees tutors as his surrogates and a writing center visit as analogous to an office hour with him, explains that he expects tutors to pay attention to the details of his marking scheme:

Everything that's wrong is marked: a comma, a misspelled word, a period that's misplaced, an incorrect cite, a punctuation error. Anything that I see that's wrong, anything that's not up to normal writing standards is marked.

There is no question in Prof. Fitch's mind that tutors "know writing" and therefore know what he wants "fixed" during tutorial sessions. He is not alone in his perceptions.

This orientation to the tutor role as "director" is also demonstrated by tutees' acceptance of all but a few of their tutors' directives after little or no negotiation. The exception to this rule is Carrie, who, although she shows a certain amount of deference to her tutor while at the Writing Center, in an interview admits she refuses to grant Cathy authority over her work but feels "guilty" about her attitude: "I feel like if I'm going into this writing tutorial, I'm supposed to listen to what kind of advice they're giving and. . . I shouldn't try to argue with what they're saying." Perceiving Carrie's resistance, Cathy recalls physically moving away from her at several times during the tutorial to create "a measure of authority, a measure of inequality," in order to reclaim her role as tutor.

In contrast to tutors' movements toward authority exemplified in Tutorial C, several tutorials feature relinquishment of tutor authority or overt negotiations of tutor-student solidarity. This is best seen in pronoun use in tutorial conversations. The fact that in her tutorial record and in interviews Ellen reconstructs tutorial activities as *we* events is illustrative of this orientation. She uses the first person plural consciously because she conceives of "the interrogation of student writing" as "teamwork." Consistent with the admonishments of training manuals, tutors in this study appeal to third-person, indefinite referents. However, the "idealized third person" (*reader, audience*) often co-occurs or is metamorphosed into second- and first-person referents and pronouns. Tutor use of second-person *you* is nearly always cited by tutors and tutees as a move towards nondirectiveness, of giving the tutee "ownership," whereas tutee use of first-person plural *we* is viewed as manipulative if it solicited directiveness on the part of the tutor (e.g., Tutorials E and F). Switching from *I* to *we* is one way Fay admits she extends her ploy of getting her tutor, Frank, to answer her questions and to work with her:

- FRANK: So maybe that's part of the thesis, too.
 ⇒ FAYE: **So I can introduce that, right?**
 FRANK: **What do you think?**
 FAYE: **I think so. I want to.**
 FRANK: O.K.
 ⇒ FAYE: **So how do we do that?** ((laugh))
 FRANK: **O.K. What have you got so far?**
 FAYE: Just that they were happy with their way of life, and they were introduced to new beliefs and values . . .

(Tutorial F, Turns 197-200)

Note how Frank responds to Fay twice with the pronoun *you* even though prompted with *I* and *we*. In his view, *you* indicates a transfer of authority away from himself to Fay rather than a coordinated movement towards solidarity. Frank's choice is consistent with the mythology-as-methodology, which advocates tutor encouragement of tutee "ownership" of the paper, but it is inconsistent with writing center theories that construct tutorials as collaborative events.

Small talk and its subset, comembership talk, are infrequent in these tutorials. Joking episodes in Tutorials C and G qualify as small talk; interspersed as they were among directive phases, they offer tutor and tutee a "breather" from intensive negotiation of tutor evaluations suggestions, as exemplified here:

- GILDA: Yeah, have you ever had the Irish stew at the Irish Lion?
 GRACE: Have I ever had the, no. Is it good?
 GILDA: Oh! It's so good!
 GRACE: ((laugh))
 GILDA: I'm hungry. It's close to dinner. Excuse me. ((laugh))
 GRACE: ((laugh)) Oh, I don't mind. I have to admit I've never had Irish stew.
 GILDA: ((laugh)) You need a research field trip for this paper.
 GRACE: I know! ((laugh)) Interview a good chef.
 GILDA: ((laugh)) Interview, hell! Eat some stew! ((laugh))
 GRACE: ((laugh))

(Tutorial G, Turns 40-44)

The most extensive small talk in the tutorials occurs at the close of Tutorial A, when Arthur and Annie talk at length about Annie's progress in her political science course and about the upcoming spring break. Annie comments: "Not that we're talking about anything that's important. Just

relax. We did our part, and it's been successful, and let's reward ourselves." While the incidence and quality of small talk may reflect something of the tutor and tutee's perceptions of their mutual roles, its co-occurrence in tutorials where tutors have strong views of their own (necessary) authority suggests that it is not a strong measure of perceptions of the tutor role.

Conclusion

Results of this study indicate that little unanimity exists in perceptions of the tutor role by the members of the tutorial "triangle." This should hardly surprise writing center personnel, who realize from their daily practice that tutors, tutees, and course instructors approach the writing tutorial with vastly different ideas and expectations. That tutors persistently deviate from the training they have received, and from the idealized portrayal of their role(s) in tutorial manuals, and that they are often unaware of how they play out their actual roles(s) is not astounding. That instructor and tutee perceptions of the tutor role differ substantially from the idealistic peer characterization in writing center theory and training materials is also no novelty. In addition, that as a result of their own and others' role misapprehensions tutors engage in ongoing struggles with issues of authority and directiveness and fight off the temptation to "act like a teacher" is not startling.

While the results of this study break no new ground, they corroborate anecdotal observations by writing center personnel and researchers that the tutor's role must be redefined and renegotiated in each interaction. The singularity and idiosyncrasies of each tutorial notwithstanding, contextualized investigation of these seven "triangles" indicates patterns in the perception of the tutor's role by the three participants, patterns that can serve as the basis for open discussions of expectations and realities in the writing center. Instructor, tutee, and tutor perceptions and misapprehensions of the role of the writing center and of tutors as well as tutor criticisms of instructors and accruals of the "teacherly" role indicate that more communication between course instructors and writing center personnel is desirable and in the tutees' best interest. The primary role of writing programs and writing centers, therefore, should be not only to mediate between faculty and tutees but also to educate both faculty and tutees in the complementary role of writing tutors in the pursuit of excellence in academic writing. Tutors should be trained to become neither servants of instructors nor their critics, but rather writing instructors of a different sort, supportive yet independent of the classroom.

This study also suggests possible outcomes of theorizing about perceptions of the tutor's role. One is that the relationship between

tutoring and teaching is a far more vexed⁵ one than is portrayed in tutoring manuals and in most writing center research. Second, it is conceivable that the relationship between tutoring and teaching is a very flexible one and that qualitative, contextualized research like that reported here is only now revealing what has been for years *de facto* practice. Third, including all three voices in the triangle—the tutor's, the tutee's, and the instructor's—provides a richness of detail and perspective that can inform theorizing in a way that speculation about “silent participants” never could. Perhaps as a consequence of such research tutorial manuals and theories will correspond more closely to evidence, not anecdote, and to what the practice of tutoring *is* rather than what it *should* be. Perhaps then we will truly have lost our “innocence” and be ready to move on to more mature, contextualized constructions of the writing center and of the tutor role.

Notes

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² I thank an anonymous *WCJ* reviewer for this summary of my argument.

³ Close transcriptions of tutorial dialogue have been modified here for readability. They exclude hesitations, filled pauses, backchannels, and overlaps noted in the originals. Turns focused for analysis are indicated by arrows in the left margin (\Rightarrow).

⁴ Instructors, tutors, and tutees were under no illusion that students would meet with assigned tutors when making appointments at the writing center. Although Arthur was the tutor assigned to Prof. Clark's course, he was not available at the time Carrie scheduled, and for that reason she was assigned Cathy as a tutor.

⁵ For this adjective, I am indebted to Laura Plummer.

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Does Frequency of Visits to the Writing Center Increase Student Satisfaction? A Statistical Correlation Study—or Story

Peter Carino and Doug Enders

Introduction

This essay presents a correlation study of student satisfaction with Writing Center services based on the number of visits students made to the Center during two different semesters. It also tells a story of how we learned to stop fearing numbers and love the interpretation of them—of how we came to use quantitative research to gain some answers to a question we could not have addressed as efficiently using only qualitative methods. In conducting the quantitative study, we wanted to extend our semesterly evaluation beyond measuring student satisfaction of services to answer the research question posed in the essay's title. Or, in other words, we wanted to know if we could say confidently that the more students came to the Writing Center, the more they liked it. While we believe the essay sheds some light on this question, we also offer it as an example of quantitative research, not because we believe such research is definitive or necessarily "better" than other methods, but because we want to try to demonstrate and perhaps encourage yet another way of attempting to know about writing center phenomena.

Writing center scholarship generally privileges qualitative methods, such as ethnographic narratives, individual case studies, and even stories, to assess writing center work. These methodologies produce finely grained and locally specific descriptions of various writing center concerns: issues of consultant training, consultations with disabled or honors students, issues of institutional politics, and the like. While qualitative methods have produced an impressive body of scholarship on the rich and complex work of writing centers, Cindy Johaneck has argued in *Composing Research: A Contextualist Paradigm for Rhetoric and Composition*, winner of the 2001 IWCA Scholarship Award, that the