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THE CLASS MENAGERIE: A COLLABORATIVE REVISION OF A TUTOR TRAINING COURSE IN MULTIPLE VOICES

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Introduction:

Ken Bruffee's 1984 groundbreaking article on collaboration in the tutoring of writing set into motion a fundamental change in writing center theory and practice. Since the early 1990s, and Jeff Brook's "Minimalist tutoring: Making the student do all the work," there has been an on-going debate about whether minimalism is collaboration or not. Irene Clark's "Collaboration and ethics in writing center pedagogy," questions whether minimalism is an act of community between tutor and writer or one that serves the ethos of established academics. She argues that when tutors, adhering to minimalist doctrine, withhold information or expertise, they are not collaborating as members of the writer's community. In "Lessons of Inscription: tutor training and the 'Professional' Conversation," Peter Vandenberg raises the connection between pedagogies such as minimalism and the broader idea of professionalism that has also become a popular avenue for legitimizing the place for tutors in the educational establishment. As Muriel Harris concluded in "Collaboration is not Collaboration is not Collaboration: Writing Center Tutorials vs. Peer-Response Groups," a tutor is a "hybrid... suspended with a foot in each discourse community... "(284). This image of straddling a barrier between two communities is an uncomfortable though accurate one, especially when the barrier seems at times to widen. As Vandenberg suggests, we are asking a lot of our tutors (60). On the one hand, we include them as junior staff into professional ranks, insisting on

minimalist practices. Then on the other, we talk about the value of discourse community and collaboration. We even place the tutor within the history of our field as valuable for their academic status as student because they are of the discourse community that we are attempting to assist.

As a result of these machinations, our writing center staff has been sounding a bit like the one Tracy Santa wrote about in "Writing center orthodoxies as Damocles' sword: an international perspective." Tutors that completed our training course, English 363, too often were complaining that they did not feel prepared once they began tutoring in their first term as paid staff. What follows is a collaboration of voices that explain in more detail what was happening and what was attempted.

The Director's Voice:

To provide a better understanding of the training seminar's place in our writing center, we begin with a brief overview of the various functions and programs that make up our writing center operations. Our staff is responsible for six major programs. 1. One major focus is working with our developmental writers in small groups throughout the semester. Students placed in English 109: College Writing Workshop[1], work with tutors once a week on techniques and skills that parallel the work done in our first and second semester composition courses. 2. Tutors also engage in one-on-one tutoring with students from across campus. In 30-60 minute appointments, they guide students through the drafting/revising process by offering focused feedback on how to improve their writing. 3. Members of our staff frequently visit classes to introduce students and faculty to the services we provide; in many cases we send groups of tutors into classes, where they facilitate peer responses of assigned papers and projects. 4. Our staff is constantly engaged in original research that often results in conference proposals and academic articles. Professional development is as important to us as providing services to the rest of the campus. 5. During the summer, we sponsor/host outreach projects for middle and high school students. In the

future, we hope to extend our outreach to teachers as well. 6. Finally, we are responsible for training new tutors to become productive members of our staff and help us carry out the many objectives of our center.

In our seminar on collaborative peer tutoring, then, a semester-long, three-credit course, newly recruited tutors are given a chance to develop and hone their tutoring skills and to gain an understanding of not just what they do in the writing center but an understanding of why. The course is designed to provide new tutors with a thorough examination of the philosophies and practices of a university writing center. Peter Carino's "Theorizing the Writing Center: An Uneasy Task," and Irene Clark and Dave Healy's "Are Writing Centers Ethical?" are central to such an examination. Throughout the semester, we discuss the theoretical foundations of a center that serves an entire campus community, including a fairly large number of developmental writers (English 109). We also examine and engage in the daily tutoring practices that contribute to a successful writing center. Since we all believe that good tutoring is informed by sound theory, we spend much time making connections between the two—in the seminar as well as in the writing center. In the end, newly initiated tutors develop their own tutoring skills and strategies and deepen their knowledge of the role of the writing center on campus.

In the old version of the course, students read and discussed assigned articles, wrote critical responses to them (we called these crit. bibs.), and engaged in a fair amount of role playing activities that mimicked possible scenarios which would eventually play themselves out in real tutoring situations. The role playing was complemented by a good deal of practice tutoring throughout the semesters. Students also observed veteran tutors and wrote tutor profiles, created a major theory-into-practice project, and presented their research in a poster presentation at the end of the course. (This seminar, we should note, has evolved over our center's thirty year history from an informal training orientation to a full-fledged academic offering.)

If the idea of a tutor training seminar is to prepare future tutors for the many challenges they will face in one-on-one and collaborative group tutoring, then we as a staff felt obligated to make sure our goal was being achieved. By observing the work of tutors in semesters immediately following their training, by discussing issues of tutoring in monthly staff meetings, and by encouraging all tutors to articulate how the seminar succeeded or didn't succeed in preparing them to do their jobs, we discovered some obvious shortcomings in the way we structured and carried out our training. For example, tutors were not well trained to work with students in groups, yet they were being asked to do so every semester. They also worked with students individually, yet the seminar barely addressed the differences/similarities in these approaches to tutoring. Though we were training tutors to take Muriel Harris's advice and "view tutoring as a collaborative effort in which the tutor listens, questions, and sometimes offers informed advice about all aspects of the student's writing," our design of the course did not reflect our initial intentions (371). Suffice it to say, much frustration and disappointment emerged over time about the growing inadequacies in our training seminar.

That's when the director decided to make a radical change. Until the fall semester of 2001, he had planned, organized and carried out the seminar himself. Tutors came to the weekly classes and contributed their expertise, stories, and advice, but the seminar was really in his control. Collaborating with tutors who actually took the seminar in an attempt to rebuild the class from the ground up, the director's hope was to establish a training course that would better prepare future tutors.

The Veteran Tutor's Voice:

Having taken the old version of the tutor training course in the winter 2001 semester, several veteran tutors indicated that they felt unprepared for the various responsibilities that awaited them as tutors. The course had not adequately trained them to deal with many of the tutoring challenges they were now facing. So when the director asked for veterans

to help him restructure the course, three tutors jumped at the opportunity to participate in a collaborative revision of the seminar.

In the original version of the class, students began the semester by studying various writing center theories. Lacking any experience with tutoring, however, they quickly became intimidated by the experience. Terms like *minimalist, directive,* and *prescriptive* were difficult to interpret and nearly impossible to apply in a meaningful way. While they understood Brook's argument in "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work," there was no context for them to relate the subject matter of such readings to any practical application or specific methodologies. Because the discussions focused so much on theory, less time was allotted for hands-on training.

In the revised seminar, veterans decided to divide the 3-hour class into two, or if necessary, three chunks of time. The first section would be devoted to discussing theoretical and "up in the air" aspects of any given tutoring issue. A practical activity would then be introduced in the second half of the class period to give students a chance to apply the theories they were learning. This change gave the seminar students an opportunity to see a theory in its practical application and context on the spot. Not only did they better understand otherwise difficult terms, they also developed a feel for playing the complicated and multi faceted role of tutor. They were learning, in essence, to negotiate the tug of influences that would demand their attentions in future tutoring sessions.

Another serious problem stood out in the old version of the course that would require extensive revision. Primarily, tutors were not well prepared for dealing with developmental writing groups. In fact, the previous course emphasis was almost entirely directed towards tutoring one-on-one appointments. Students were exposed to many different techniques and issues, such as how body language can affect the student, why tutors should read the students papers out loud to them, ways of fine-tuning our approach to interpersonal communication, and discussions on who should have possession of the paper during a typical session. As a result, the course did not allow time to cover the developmental writing groups that make up a large part of the daily tutoring in the center.

For the new syllabus, then, the team attempted to split the course 50/50 and dedicate the first seven weeks to developmental group training and the remaining seven weeks to one-on-one tutoring. Because of the enormous amount of work involved, the veterans decided to revise the first seven weeks of the seminar and leave the second seven weeks to a future collaborative revisers. The initial sketch of the new syllabus looked something like this:

Week 1
placement of developmental writing students and a thorough discussion of the writing process.

Week 2
understanding and tutoring different personalities and writing abilities.

Week 3
learning tutoring techniques for handling key weaknesses in developmental writing students, such as fluency, sustaining an idea, and topic development.

Week 4
discussing audience, voice, organization, and other similar areas.

Week 5
understanding and tutoring the revision process.

Week 6
evaluating the developmental writing students' performances.

Week 7
beginning the transition into one-on-one appointment tutoring.

The new tutor training seminar would be designed to mimic the developmental writer's experience, either in a group or one-on-one setting. By developing an awareness of their own writing processes in addition to their own tutoring styles, future tutors identified more closely with the students they would eventually work with. This also challenged them to discover ways to make the tutoring sessions less stressful and more productive.

In the old version of the course, each student was assigned to an individual veteran mentor. During their time in the writing center, veteran tutors observed the emerging tutoring styles of the seminar students and offered constructive feedback on how best to develop their skills. The staff discovered over time that since each student had only one tutor/ mentor, the amount of feedback they received was limited. Since their in-class, hands-on tutoring experience was equally limited, the tutors in training felt ill prepared to handle tutoring sessions on their own. Also, personality clashes often occur between staff members, and if such a problem arose between a seminar student and her mentor, the whole mentoring experience would be put in jeopardy.

In the revised seminar, students were asked to observe and work with as many veterans as possible. The mentor's roles would also change. Instead of being assigned to one student from the seminar, veteran tutors would mentor whomever they worked with. This collaborative approach to mentoring allowed more voices to contribute to the feedback that our future tutors relied on.

Since the mentoring process was undergoing alterations, the focus of the tutor profile assignment project was also adjusted. Instead of writing a profile of one mentor tutor, seminar students created a collage profile, comparing the tutoring styles of several different veteran tutors. Tutors in training had opportunities to learn and absorb different styles in addition to engaging in further hands on experience. Hence, new tutors acquired a broad view of how to function in a multi-purpose writing center. The new profile assignment also allowed them to bounce back to theories discussed and carried out in the center. Moreover, if a seminar student felt intimidated by or

ill at ease with a specific tutor, she could avoid direct contact with that person without missing out on the inherent value of the mentoring experience. Finally, the dynamics of the new mentoring program have helped establish a higher level of comfort and camaraderie between new and veteran members of the writing center staff.

From its inception, we viewed the Theory-Into-Practice paper project (TIP) as a highlight of the training seminar[2]. The project allowed students to explore issues in more detail than the course would otherwise allow, and it offered them a chance to tackle issues that weren't covered throughout the semester. The main focus had been, "How can we make the Writing Center better?" While the original approach to the TIP was useful, many of the projects related only peripherally to the theory and practice of tutoring.

In the revised edition of the course, staff encouraged new students to focus their TIP papers on improving themselves as tutors and developing their own positions, both theoretically and practically, in the larger writing center picture. In short, the project became more tutor-centered, since the initial goal in revising the course was to provide more immediate learning opportunities for future tutors. Tutors in training could then write about the use of multiple strategies and create new ones that would help them become better tutors. Or they could conduct in-depth research on the prospective students themselves. They could also focus their energies on creating a project that could help them better apply their training long after the seminar ended.

The new students became more aware and more capable of attending to different demands as they emerged as tutors. They created their own syllabi, agendas and bag of tricks to aid them in their groups and in one-on-one appointments. Each member of the training seminar learned to become what Harris calls "a hybrid," operating "somewhere between a peer and a teacher (382). They felt increasingly more comfortable and willing to contribute to possible changes in the writing center's strategies, becoming further invested in their own learning.

The Newly Initiated Tutors' Voice:

Because the process of feedback is so essential to the ever-evolving writing center, we asked two students who had taken the revised version of the training seminar to give an honest critique of their experiences and to articulate how the course prepared them for actual tutoring.

From the start, veteran tutors and the director emphasized that new tutors would be expected to manage group tutoring, one-on-one tutoring, in class tutoring, and certain professional responsibilities. They were informed of the multiple, and sometimes conflicting roles they would take on as writing center tutors (see Davis, Ashton-Joes, and Fulwiler).

However, even with the care and detail that went into the newly revised seminar course, new tutors continued to echo the feelings of veteran tutors of past seminar courses that there were still gaps in their training. Areas mentioned by new tutors included: beginning 109 groups, managing group personalities, one-on-one tutoring, connecting theory to practice and transitioning from seminar student to tutor. Interestingly, those critiques tended to vary by individual tutors. The director and veterans again realized that the new tutors possessed valuable insight into the changes of the seminar course and have actively asked for those critiques to use for further revision.

In order to accurately critique the seminar class, it was important for the new tutors to reflect on their immediate feelings and reactions during their first semester of tutoring. Many admitted that they felt uneasy about beginning and managing so many students. During the winter semester of the seminar class, there were only a few developmental writers, but in the fall there were over 200. Some of the new tutors felt overwhelmed and relied heavily on the veteran tutors for guidance and assistance. However, the veteran tutors began to resent how much time they spent with the new tutors whom they felt should have known what to do from taking the class. Yet, from the perspective of many of the new tutors, it wasn't so much that they felt unprepared for the practice of tutoring; they felt more unprepared for the multiple personalities of the groups with which

they worked. They were surprised at how different groups could react and behave, and they felt unsure of how to begin managing those differences.

Even though the director and veteran tutors did their best to present a broad view of what it would be like to manage large 109 groups in the fall, the new tutors still felt uncomfortable about taking on the responsibility of so many students. One of the primary critiques from new tutors about the seminar class was that in the beginning, there was almost too much emphasis on theory. During their observation hours in the writing center, they could only occupy the position of observer. They felt they missed out on the practical, hands-on experience of beginning a 109 group and learning how to establish those semester long relationships. As seminar students, they had to occupy the role of developing tutor and student. Often, those two roles came into conflict.

For the most part, the new tutors felt the mentors acted as valuable interpreters for developing an understanding of the writing center philosophy. There were essentially two forms of mentors, those who helped design and facilitate the seminar class, and those who worked in the writing center during participation hours. All of the mentors spent a great deal of time talking, listening and answering questions about their work. During the seminar class they re-enacted scenarios and discussed their own experiences to help the students understand the multiple roles they would be expected to occupy as tutors. In the writing center, they talked at great length about their roles, what they did, and why. However, complications arose in the writing center when it came time for the seminar students to transition from the role of observer to active participant.

Because the seminar students were still seen as students, and because they lacked the confidence that comes from experience, the mentors not involved with the seminar class often had a difficult time relinquishing control over the 109 groups they had spent half a semester developing. As a result, the seminar students came out with varying degrees of experience. Later in the semester, when it came time for one-on-one tutoring, there was less emphasis on

the dynamics of a one-on-one session, and so the seminar students felt reluctant to take on the full responsibility of a session alone. They had come to rely on the guidance and experience of the mentors too much and did not feel confident in the role of tutor. Many of the new tutors reflected on their seminar experience and explained that it was frightening and overwhelming to move from the student to tutor role. Many agreed that part of the problem was that the transitions were abrupt. They felt they weren't involved early enough in the semester to begin identifying themselves as tutors. So, after being accepted as tutors in the fall, many agreed they still felt like students and expected the mentors to continue holding their hands through the process as they once did in the class. Although some also admitted that their own fears about tutoring and their lack of experience led to their reluctance to take tutoring on alone. The manager discussed this as the "baby bird syndrome." Sometimes, the answer was to immerse the new tutors in the experience to help them get over the initial insecurities of becoming a full tutor.

Through discussions with mentors and new tutors, further revisions will be made to the seminar course to involve all mentors so that issues of control can be minimized, future seminar students can begin transitioning earlier, and, thus, end the class with more confidence.

Overall, the activities and discussions with mentors were excellent preparation for new tutors. Through mock sessions and writing activities in the classroom, the seminar students were able to understand that the writing center's responsibility is to the writer, as Stephen North would advocate, and not just to the paper, as Brooks would advocate. While in the writing center, they were able to observe and begin participating even as they were learning about the difficult theories and philosophies that underline the writing center's practice. The director and veterans constantly encouraged the students to think critically about the theory they learned. The seminar students often occupied a difficult place within the group discussions. Answers were not always obvious and they were not given

freely. Even though the students found this form of learning difficult, it forced them to look closely at everything and to ask questions; and since question-asking is one of the primary skills a tutor must master, this approach seemed even more appropriate.

The mentors proved to be the most important tool for the seminar class. Each week, they provided patience, guidance, advice and encouragement. Also, they challenged the seminar students during class discussions, forcing them to defend or re-evaluate their theoretical and practical positions about tutoring. The seminar students developed through their mentors' experiences and guidance, and they continue to do so even after becoming tutors.

The Manager's Voice: Practice as Inquiry

In *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*, Stephen North argues that practice is not by nature inquiry unless it contributes to lore, or produces "new" knowledge. North observes that writing centers often work from known lore (34) so that practices proceed from what is already believed or assumed about student writers and their writing. The a-b-c rubric he provides, we have been constantly confronted with North's *(b):*

> (b) when, although the situation is perceived as familiar, the standard approaches are no longer satisfactory, and new approaches are created for it; (34)

Sometimes we suspect that this may have to do with the way we have conceptualized the situation. Perhaps it is not as familiar as we have assumed. However, it could also be that, as North suggests, the situation is a phenomenological problem, as concepts of it are always made seemingly obsolete by individual experience.

Since 1971, when the founders of our center (Patrick Hartwell and Robert Bentley) cobbled together a working model of a writing center, the focus was on the student writer to the degree that the writing center (then "writing lab") tutor was a complete assumption. Tutors weren't trained so much as recruited for their interest in or ability with writing. Thus, at that time all of the training would have to be classified as on-the-job or on-going. Most

of the inquiry focused less on tutorial practice than on writer problems. The assignment file for developmental writers (the center's mission in those days, with the opening of enrollment) included grammar exercises with fill-in-the-blanks, as well as sentence combining. Tutors in these early days were of what might be called the archaic type, or *kindly proofreader*. Due to Bentley's input, socio-linguistics, much of the reading material had to do with the validity of dialects and the problems their speakers had when required to write in a standard English. True to the era, the pedagogy was founded that championed the disenfranchised minority.

In the early 1980s, with the advent of process pedagogy on the national scene, our tutors were influenced by a new director, Patricia Murray, who introduced us to process along with Ross Winterowd's *Contemporary Rhetoric*. Though there was still no official training course, weekly staff meetings enabled writing center director Murray to introduce us to the literature on how writers wrote.

By the 1990s, training had been formalized with the development of English 363, a tutor training seminar. It is at this point that formal, classroom training and day-to-day on-going training become distinct. While the 363 course introduced the literature of the field, the lore that North refers to, the on-going experience, especially the subjective experiences of a variety of tutors formed the basis for on-going training. That part of the experience that requires reflection, discussion, and sometimes changes in the way that a tutor perceives or approaches a tutoring situation begins to create an in house body of lore. For example, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the enrollment of the developmental writing course increased significantly. There were so many students required to take the course that staff found themselves working in what they referred to as the "Writing Restaurant." They complained that they were waiting tables, not working with writers. This caused us to begin to schedule the writers to specific time slots (a practice we had wished to avoid to maintain the center's informality). We began to schedule specific tutors to work with small groups (3 to 5 writers) in a collaborative environment. This change in the fundamental way we operated led to numerous experiences, some successful and some not. We had to begin to train ourselves and to prepare new staff for the challenge of facilitating group work while maintaining a non-traditional class environment. None of this training was part of the 363 course curriculum because it was so new. It took time for us to realize the change in our situation. It forced us to begin to inquire in new directions.

A positive development was the ways in which tutors helped each other to debrief and to develop group activities that expanded the horizon of the course and its environment. Tutors developed a "collage" assignment, in which students made collages and then wrote about them. The activity drew groups together. Another concept that we had never explored before was the field trip in which a tutor would take groups to various locations on and off campus as part of course work. These ideas became knowledge which was disseminated from experienced staff to new staff.

The primary manner in which this lore is passed on from old to new staff is through the mentor system, which is a formal part of the 363 seminar. Though a formal part of the training course, it has to take place outside of class, during the time that new staff are putting in their shifts in the writing center itself. New staff participate with mentors as they work with groups of English 109 writers. The "collage" assignment, for example, is used during a particular two-week period. The new tutor participates as a student in the assignment, following the mentor's lead, and learns how to employ that assignment when she has groups of her own.

The lack of formal (English 363) training for working with groups of developmental writers still presented problems. 363's focus was on minimalist tutoring of appointments, while English 109 writers seemed to require more directive input from tutors. Day-to-day experience, even with mentors, was not enough to address the disparity between the roles tutors had to play. A complete adherence to minimalism might work fine for appointments, but tutors realized that they could not remain as passive a presence when working with developmental writers

taking the in-house writing course. Many of our tutors have been able, with mentoring as well as consultation with other tutors, the manager, and director to develop excellent though non-minimal approaches to tutoring in the 109 course. We have had a long (thirty-year) tradition with these writers and a deep file of course materials to draw upon. Ultimately, though, the focus of day-to-day experience and on-going training is an exploration of the differences in practice that exist between two incompatible tutoring philosophies. The motive for inquiry is the hope for a viable reconciliation.

Conclusion

In our particular collaboration with the tutor-training course, we did not start out to address the disparities between minimalism/professionalism and discourse community collaboration. We did not first think of how we might "construct" ourselves in the discourse of our field. We simply knew that something was wrong: we sought to improve a training course so that new tutors would no longer need to say they felt unprepared.

On the one hand, perhaps we have stumbled upon an inquiry in which all of us at the Marian Wright Writing Center can equally take part. None of us believed we had the answers to the questions we were asking.

Working in this new capacity, as equal designers of course sessions and materials, we now wonder why we had not thought to do so before. By redressing the shortcomings in their own training, tutors offer the one valid critique of how a theoretical concept of tutoring has failed to adapt itself to the reality that they encounter daily. Perhaps no single course design will last us forever: it seems that despite our best efforts something always causes enough change to require adaptation. If that is the lesson, then we must continue to ask our tutors how well the training course prepared them for their work in the center and explore the dialectic between the training course and the lore of practice as tutors experience it in the writing center. That may be the only way to ascertain if our practices and theories are linked in credible ways.

Notes

[1] English 109: College Writing Workshop, was initiated in the early 1970s by Patrick Hartwell and Bob Bentley as a writing center-based course to help under-prepared writers. Their approach was unique because it did not rely on the building block model of skill and drill; rather they created a course based on the emerging process approach to writing. (See works cited entry).

[2] The Theory-Into-Practice project was initially designed as a project for teacher training classes by Robert W. Barnett. The project has become equally effective in the tutor training seminar. (See works cited entry).

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