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Negotiation, Inquiry, and Collaboration in a Peer Writing Conference

Robert Barnett

Introduction

As liaisons between students and instructors, most beginning tutors have never operated within the complex, sometimes nebulous, teacher-tutor-student relationship, and they often feel overwhelmed with apprehensions. To help alleviate some of that initial stress and anxiety, we need to make a tutor's initiation a smooth and productive one. This essay offers a model of tutoring that encourages both tutors and their students to become more active, informed participants in the writing and revision process. The philosophy behind this collaborative approach has grown out of the work I do in all of my writing courses, and I believe classroom instructors can easily adapt this model to collaborative peer work in their own courses.

Background

In my seminar on collaborative peer tutoring, a semester-long, three-credit course, newly-hired tutors are given plenty of chances 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 them with a thorough understanding of the philosophies and practices of a university writing center. Throughout the semester, we discuss the theoretical foundations of a writing center that serves an entire university community. We also examine and engage in the daily tutoring practices that contribute to a successful writing center. Since good tutoring is

informed by sound theory, we spend much time making connections between the two. In the end, students develop their own tutoring skills and strategies and deepen their knowledge of the role of the writing center on campus. Of all the elements I include in the training of new tutors—the readings, the writings in response to readings, the case studies, the seminar research projects, etc.—none has been more valuable for me in helping them build a repertoire for tutoring than modeling a more effective tutoring session. We all know that every tutoring session is unique and carries with it a new and unique set of challenges. Having a general game-plan established, one that every tutor can rely on no matter what the circumstances, is a good starting point for shaping effective tutoring. Basing my thoughts on an inquiry, collaboration, and negotiation approach—that is reading a paper, asking good questions that engage a student in conversation, and offering goal-specific suggestions for revising the paper—I'd like to share what I see as the earmarks of a successful tutoring session.

The First Five Minutes

Walking into an unfamiliar environment, especially one in which writing is the primary focus, can be an intimidating experience for students who seek our help. Even students who are familiar with the Writing Center may not always work with the same tutor, and thus may not always be familiar with the dynamics of each tutor's style. A tutor can help ease some of a student's discomfort in

the first few minutes of a tutoring session by simply establishing a comfortable rapport. Introducing herself and making eye contact often helps a tutor settle some of the pre-session jitters that students may feel (and it may alleviate some of her own nervousness). A brief introduction also makes the transition from cordial chit-chat to a paper-focused dialogue seem less awkward. The first few minutes of a session is also a good time for the tutor to gather information that may be useful as she guides the student through the paper at hand. As a way to help new tutors develop their own initial, focused line of inquiry, I give them the following list of questions as a point of reference:

- What kind of paper are you writing?
- When is the assignment due?
- Do you have an assignment sheet? Do you understand it?
- What, specifically, is your instructor asking you to do?
- Are there new changes in the assignment?
- Where are you in the process of writing this paper?
- What are you struggling with at this point?
- After I finish reading, what should I have learned from your paper?

It would be inconceivable, of course, to always ask all of the questions on this list, but incorporating a few of them in the question-asking sequence can help a tutor determine what kind of session should transpire. For example, I always ask students when their papers are due. The answer will dictate what I do or do not focus on in the tutoring process. If a student tells me the paper is due in three hours, I offer very different suggestions for revision than if the paper is due in three days. The bottom line in asking these initial questions is that the tutor who processes the student's responses is most likely to make the best mental game plan for how to conduct the session. And though this opening dialogue often lasts five minutes or less, it can arguably prove to be the most pertinent to the outcome of the tutoring experience.

What's Going to Happen?

A good way for tutors to set a clear and productive tone is to explain in detail what is going to happen in the session. Once a tutor has gathered sufficient information on the assignment at the beginning, she is in a perfect position to map out the rest of the session for the student and for herself. I often find that students who go into a session with a clear understanding of how the tutoring process works are able to let go of some of the anxieties that would otherwise inhibit their abili-

ties to contribute productively to the process.

Perhaps the best way to reinforce the importance of my point is to use a hypothetical tutoring session as an example. Mary has come to the Center for help on her philosophy paper, which is due next week. After orienting myself to the assignment and what Mary needs to accomplish to finish the paper, here's what I do. First, I read the paper back to Mary. I read it aloud so that she can hear what she has done so far. What actually happens in this situation is that Mary is taken out of the role of the writer and placed in the role of the audience. When she becomes the audience for her own paper, she will most likely hear it quite differently than when she read it to herself as she drafted it. She'll hear things that sound well written to her; and she'll hear things that sound out of place or that do not sound the way she had intended them. After I finish reading the paper, I focus our discussion for revision mostly on the latter.

What I find phenomenal about reading the paper aloud is how focused students become as I read. Oftentimes, they will interrupt my reading to make corrections or to comment on a sentence or paragraph that doesn't sound "just right" to them. Before they realize it, they are actively engaged in the session. Reading aloud is helpful for me as well, because my reading speed is much slower than when I read silently, and I am able to process more information from the text. After explaining to Mary the concept of reading papers aloud, I describe what I see as her role in the session, and I encourage her to actively participate. Understanding the tutor's commitment may provide clarity and direction for students, but they also need to be made aware of their own role in the tutorial and how they fit into the tutoring process. In short, they are active participants, negotiating the meaning of the text with the tutor and collaborating to make the writing as clear and concise as possible. I find myself reinforcing this point often in the tutor training seminar because I believe a great challenge in successful tutoring lies in the ability to pull reluctant students from the fringes of a session in order to help empower them to make their own best choices.

Text-Centered Tutoring?

Writing center literature has moderated many debates over the years on the issue of the tutorial focus. Should we be concerned with improving the text or with helping students better themselves as writers? Today, most writing center practitioners would agree that helping writers should be our first priority. The improved writing, the argument goes, will follow. In "The Idea of a Writing Center" Stephen North, adhering to the fundamentals of

expressivism in writing center pedagogy, argues that tutoring should be "student-centered" as opposed to "text-centered." In manifesto-like fashion, he claims that the writing center "defines its province not in terms of some curriculum, but in terms of the writers it serves" (438). And I agree with North—sort of. It seems to me that North's idea about "student-centered" tutoring has to include some degree of "text-centered" tutoring. The typical tutoring session is driven by the dialogue between student and tutor, but the impetus for that dialogue is the paper itself. The paper, with all of its strengths and weaknesses, provides the major source of inquiry, negotiation, and collaboration. I do find an inherent importance in paying close attention to the text in a tutoring session because, as I tell my tutors, the text-focused element of tutoring can often produce useful clues that may actually dictate the direction and focus of the tutoring session. A balance, then, between focus on the text and focus on the student is what will maximize a tutor's effectiveness in helping the student through revision of the paper.

As I mentioned earlier, reading the paper aloud is important for both tutor and student. This practice, though sometimes laborious, forces a slower articulation of the material, which allows both tutor and student to process it more thoroughly. The student is given time to decide if what her mind is hearing is what she actually intended in her initial drafting. The tutor, on the other hand, has the opportunity to thoroughly experience the writer's thought process and detect continuity and/or lapses in organization.

Using the text in this manner creates a critical starting point for negotiation and collaboration that will ultimately allow the tutor to help the student make informed choices about the paper's revision. In "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do all the Work," Jeff Brooks notes that "fixing flawed papers is easy; showing the students how to fix their papers is complex and difficult" (4). This is true. But tutors can use the text to help make that process less complex and less difficult. They can also use the text to lead the session back into an active dialogue, where the real work of tutoring actually begins.

Developing a Line of Inquiry

As a teacher of writing I have come to appreciate the challenge of drawing out the reluctant student—the one who does not want to speak in class, who feels he has little if anything at all to offer. The similarities between this student and the student who visits the writing center are quite striking. They are sometimes difficult to engage, ready to be told how to "fix" their papers, and too

often willing to let someone do the "fixing" for them. Asking the right questions and making appropriate suggestions to get my students involved in the process and to help them through a revision of their papers is the same task I challenge new tutors to conquer.

Based on the transcript analysis of 20 different tutoring sessions at the University of Michigan-Flint, I have isolated and identified what I see as three types of questions that tutors typically ask of the students they are helping. While other question types no doubt exist in tutoring situations, these are the ones I think are the most successful in collaborative peer tutoring: 1) yes/no questions; 2) discovery questions; 3) goal-oriented questions. I'm inclined to believe that understanding the function of each question type and knowing when to ask what question is more to the point than whether, for example, tutors should ask all yes/no questions or not ask them at all. Developing an effective line of inquiry in a tutoring session is so important because it can help or hinder the tutorial dialogue, the catalyst for collaboration between the student and the tutor.

Yes/No Questions. If the tutor's objective is to ignite a dialogue with the student, then using yes/no questions is probably not the best idea. Questions that elicit simple, one-word answers tend to stifle the very conversation a tutor should be trying to create. I have taken an example from one of the 20 transcripts that I mentioned earlier to illustrate my point. After reading the student's paper, the tutor in this particular session is confused about her opening paragraph and needs clarification. How he poses the question about clarity will determine the usefulness of the information she gives him. He asks: *Is this what you want to say?* Her response: *Yeah.* So, not only does the tutor's tactic fail to create meaningful dialogue, it also fails to produce useful information from the student to help the tutor offer a suggestion. A better question might have been: *What is it that you mean to say?* (a difficult question to answer with yes or no). The yes/no line of questioning is perhaps most beneficial to the tutor in the first five minutes of the session. In fact, half of the list of questions I have provided earlier in this essay fall into the yes/no category.

Discovery Questions. Just as the yes/no questions are important early in the session, discovery questions tend to dominate the post-reading stage of tutoring. They are intended to help students discover, for themselves, what they meant, what they said, and what they have yet to say. What I find so pertinent about this type of question-asking is that when it is done well, students are led back into their texts where they can grapple with

the questions we pose and pull additional information from their own data banks rather than from a tutor's. To witness this activity is to witness the process of critical thinking in action, the making of meaning that epitomizes the evolution of all writers.

I'm reminded of an occasion in one of my own writing courses that illustrates my point. The assignment was a personal experience. One student, Damon, wrote about the experience of his father's near-fatal illness. In characterizing his relationship with his father, Damon wrote in an early paragraph that "My dad is a really nice guy." He said little else and moved on to discuss the onset of the illness. My question to him as I responded to the paper was: *What makes your father a nice guy?* He thought for a second, then pulled the paper close to him and re-read the paragraph containing his vague statement. In a somewhat authoritative tone he began sharing examples with me that supported his original statement. He knew all along what made his father a nice guy. My role in asking the question led him back to his text where he brought to the surface the beautiful details that were already in him. The discovery for Damon came when he made the connection between the vague statement and the descriptive stories that gave it life.

Goal-oriented Questions. Like the discovery questions, goal-oriented questions take the student back into the text where the decision-making process associated with developing and revising takes place. Goal-oriented questions, however, are always linked directly to the writing assignment itself. Whether the student brings an assignment sheet or not, the tutor must determine as specifically and accurately as possible the goals of the particular assignment.

For example, the personal experience paper I alluded to earlier was written in a way that encourages goal-oriented questions both in my in-class peer response groups and in writing center tutoring sessions. My concern with this assignment is not whether a student can write a personal experience essay. If I construct an effective assignment, the experience will emerge. More important for me is that my students learn some characteristics associated with this type of essay. In the assignment sheet I list all of the goals I have set for this paper—to create detail, to include description, to use examples that show rather than tell. In fact, the assignment sheet becomes the response

sheet for peer response and for tutor response. I train students in my classes and tutors in the Center to ask questions that address these specific goals: *How big was the tree? What does an angry cat look like? How would you describe your friend's depression?* Not only do they act as discovery questions that empower students to make their own choices for developing and revising their writing, but these are questions that support the goals the instructor has spelled out for the assignment. The need to address goal-oriented questions in tutoring is paramount considering the fact that students will be evaluated as to how well they meet the instructor's goals.

Conclusion

In addition to directing the Writing Center at UM-Flint, I teach almost a dozen different writing courses from developmental writing to advanced composition to composition theory. And no matter what I am teaching in any given class, I always intervene at some point in my students' writing processes by creating peer response groups. When I use the writing center model for tutoring that I have just described, I am helping students become much more critical readers and responders of writing, and I am watching them apply what they learn about inquiry and collaboration to their own writing. Over the course of a semester, students become much better at negotiating their texts, their comments, and their classmates' comments during the crafting and revising stages of writing. The improvement becomes obvious in the quality of writing I see by the end of each course. It is the same improvement I see every day in the writing that students bring to tutors in the Writing Center, which is perhaps the best testimonial to success.

Works Cited

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About the Author

Bob Barnett is Assistant Professor of Composition and Writing Center Director at University of Michigan-Flint. He currently serves as chair of the Michigan Writing Centers Association and is a member of the Board of Directors of the National Writing Centers Association.