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Tutor Education as Professionalization for Technical and Professional Communicators

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This talk describes an approach to writing center tutor education that has students not only prepare to tutor technical and professional writing, but also connect content to their majors and careers. I draw connections between research on former writing tutors, transfer of learning, and symbolic analytic work to position tutor education as professional preparation for technical and professional writers. I also invite participants to consider how writing centers and professional writing programs can collaborate work toward this dual outcome.

The Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project (PWTARP)

Through multi-institutional survey research, Hughes, Gillespie, and Kail (2010) “theorize peer tutoring as a form of liberal education for peer tutors themselves,” finding that former peer writing tutors reported having developed:

- a new relationship with writing,
- analytical power,
- a listening presence,
- skills, values, and abilities vital in their professions,
- skills, values, and abilities vital in families and in relationships,
- earned confidence in themselves,
- and a deeper understanding of and commitment to collaborative learning. (p. 14)

While these findings apply broadly across a range of professions, the authors highlight that in writing-based careers such as technical writing, “peer tutoring serves with the student’s major as the foundation for entering the profession” (31). A technical writer in the automotive industry connected his tutoring experience with a willingness to seek out and accept criticism:

Before tutoring[,] writing was a solo experience. . . . Now my writing process always includes asking as many people as I can recruit to sit down with me, to read my drafts, and to share their ideas with me. I can’t imagine writing anything important without invoking the writer/tutor conversation. (26)

Teaching for Transfer in Tutor Learning: WRT 320 at Oakland University

While PWTARP tracked impact of learning in writing centers beyond tutoring, Driscoll and Harcourt (2012) describe a tutor education course that is designed intentionally to facilitate learning beyond the writing center.

In order to facilitate both near transfer (application to tutoring) and far transfer (connection to major, career, etc.), Driscoll (2012) drew on transfer of learning theory to emphasize **mindful abstraction, metacognitive reflection, and active connection making** through reflective writing; advanced readings on rhetoric, metacognition, and discourse community theory; and “open-ended, student-driven inquiry.”

Connecting Technical Communication and the Writing Center

Wanting to develop a tutor education course that facilitated far transfer for technical/professional writers, I saw connections between the attributes PWTARP respondents reported developing as tutors, principles of transfer theory, and Robert Reich's (1991) attributes of symbolic analytic work, which are

- Abstraction
- Collaboration
- Experimentation
- Systems thinking

Given the influence of this theory on technical communication, these attributes provided a frame for connecting writing center work to technical communication in English 390B.

Tutor Education for Technical Communicators/Professional Writers: ENGL 390B at Purdue University

The Purdue Writing Lab employs undergraduate business writing consultants (BWCs). While the BWC program started with an exclusive focus on job documents such as resumes and cover letters, it has grown through collaborations with the Professional Writing (PW) Program and Electrical and Computer Engineering to work with assignments in PW major and service courses, as well as other technical documents. Students must first take English 390B before applying to be a tutor. The course:

- Requires a professional writing course as a prerequisite,
- Primarily covers traditional writing center topics in the first half and primarily business and technical documents in the second,
- Tends to attract PW majors and business majors (the current makeup is four PW majors and two business majors),
- Is worth two credits, with an option for three credits in order to count it as an elective in a major,
- Includes one hour of lecture/discussion and 1.5 hours of in-lab work (observation, tutoring on their own writing, mock tutorials, etc.)
- Requires an open-ended final project, with options including a practical resource for the lab, a conference proposal, and a major/career-related project, and
- Invites students to draw on their experiences as writers and students and make forward-reaching connections to their career goals.

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As a concept, **abstraction** is about the capacity to discover patterns and meanings to create something new. (248)

In Reich's definition, **systems thinking** is about "seeing the whole" and "understanding the processes by which parts of reality are linked together" (p. 231). Rather than learning discrete bits of data, students learn to examine why a problem exists and how it relates to other problems. "The symbolic analyst must constantly try to discern larger causes, consequences, and relationships" (p. 231). (250)

Experimentation, however, is about exploring different points of view, finding and applying new patterns of arrangement, and visualizing possibilities and choices. (251)

As Reich (1991) argued, "symbolic analysts also spend much of their time communicating concepts— through oral presentations, reports, designs, memoranda, layouts, scripts, and projections—and then seeking a consensus to go forward with the plan" (p. 233). To **collaborate** means to learn from each other. (251)