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The So What of So in Writing Center Talk

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Abstract Even small, taken-for-granted words can have a strong influence on the pedagogical effect of a writing conference. In this study, we examined how experienced and trained writing center tutors' use of the discourse marker *so* helped them to connect ideas and to manage their conferences with students. We examined the extent to which tutors' use of six types of *so* varied according to the English L1 (EL1)/English L2 (EL2) status of their interlocutor. We studied 26 conferences: 13 involved eight tutors working with 13 EL1 students, and 13 conferences involved eight tutors working with 13 EL2 students. We found that conclusion/result *so* occurred most frequently in tutors' conferences with EL1 and EL2 students and that prompt *so* was the only type that exhibited a significant difference in frequency of occurrence between the two groups, occurring more frequently in tutors' talk with EL1 students.

We focused our qualitative analysis on prompt *so*, finding that it served two main purposes. We argue that examining discourse marker *so* generates implications for tutor training and shows the importance of paying attention to the small, seemingly unimportant words that tutors use.

Keywords writing center discourse, writing center talk, discourse markers

Introduction

It raises no eyebrows to say that writing centers rely on the talk between tutors and students. Clearly, most tutors and students co-construct their sessions verbally: Tutors instruct and scaffold using verbal strategies (e.g., Haen, 2018; Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2018b), and students engage verbally to explicate their intentions and plans, ask questions, and respond to tutor input (e.g., Mackiewicz, 2017, 2018; Park, 2014; Thonus, 2004). Perhaps a more debatable claim is to say that even small, taken-for-granted words can contribute to the pedagogical outcomes of a writing conference.

Our aim in this article is to make that claim, using the easily overlooked word *so* as our exemplifying case.

Using Müller's (2005) and Buysse's (2012) analyses of *so* as a starting point, we developed a six-item coding scheme for the functions of *so* in writing center talk. We used this scheme to analyze occurrences of *so*, particularly in its function as a discourse marker (DM). We analyzed *so* in nine writing center tutors' talk, contrasting how the tutors employed DM *so* in conferences with 13 English L1¹ (EL1) and 13 English L2 (EL2) student writers. Prior research has revealed that tutors use DM *so* for a variety of functions, such

as articulating conclusions based on what students said and wrote in order to move students' thinking forward (Mackiewicz, 2018, p. 86). Our intent in the present study was to determine how tutors' use of *so* helped them manage their conferences with students and how tutors' use of *so* helped students to connect ideas. Also, our intent was to examine the extent to which tutors' use of the six types of *so* varied according to the EL1/EL2 status of the student. Such analysis, we argue, can shed light on the ways that tutors, in this case experienced and trained tutors, organize conferences and the ideas generated within them. We also argue that our study exemplifies how analyses of seemingly unimportant words like *so* can have implications for tutor training.

In the next section, we review the prior research that motivated this close examination of DM *so* in tutors' conferences with EL1 and EL2 students. Then, we explain this study's methods, including the process that we used to develop and test our coding scheme. After, we present the quantitative and qualitative results of this study. We conclude by discussing some of the study's limitations, its implications for practice, as well as ideas for future research on the role of DMs in writing center talk.

Literature Review of the Discourse Marker *So*

According to Buysse (2012), discourse markers (DMs) are small but important words that help people negotiate turn-taking, logic, self-corrections, and more (p. 1776). DMs, such as *well*, *you know*, and *like* (Müller, 2005), are "optional linguistic items" that connect a given utterance to the context that surrounds it (Buysse, 2012, p. 1764). Schourup (1999) described DMs similarly, saying that they "relate utterances or other discourse units" (p. 230). A single DM can also be surprisingly adaptable, taking on different and even overlapping meanings across contexts. Take *so*: In the following excerpt, T1 (tutor) and S1 (student) are setting a session's agenda around APA citations, but they use *so* in different ways:

Excerpt 1²

T1: *That might be the best. I don't know if in APA, if the footnotes are a very common thing to do.*

S1: *OK.*

T1: *I don't read a lot of research papers, so <CR>³ I wouldn't know.*

S1: *OK. This is the first one I'm doing in school, so <PMT>*

T1: *[laughs] OK.*

In this case, T1's use of *so* indicated a logical connection between her evidence and a conclusion based on the evidence, whereas S1's use of *so* signaled an end to her turn and a prompt for T1 to take another turn.

We engaged in this analysis of DM *so* because prior research had revealed the utility of analyzing it as a signal of occasions in which tutors (1) connected their own ideas and claims and occasions in which tutors (2) connected their ideas and claims to those of their student clients. As a marker of connection, *so* provides a specific type of insight into the processes of tutoring writing. Prior research has examined *so* in several contexts, including casual conversations and informal interviews with university students, but not in writing centers.

Much prior research on DM *so* has discussed its various functions (e.g., Blakemore, 1988; Redeker, 1990; Schiffrin, 1987). More recent research has examined differences between EL1 and EL2 speakers' use of it. Not surprisingly, research on EL1 and EL2 speakers has consistently found differences between the two groups' use of DM *so*. For example, studying EL1 speakers (American English) and EL2 speakers (L1 German), Müller (2005) identified 14 functions of *so* and calculated their frequency of occurrence per 100 words. Müller found statistical differences between EL1 and EL2 speakers in three of the 14 uses: (1) for *so* marking result and consequence, (2) for *so* used to summarize, to reword, or to give an example, and (3) for *so* used to mark sequence from one event in a narrative to another. Similarly, Anping (2002) found differences between EL1 speakers' (British English) and EL2 speakers' (L1 Chinese) use of DM *so*. Focusing on participants' written language and

participants' use of connective *so* (i.e., *so* used to mean *so that*, *thus*, and *therefore*), Anping found what he called an "inappropriate use" of the word in the EL2 corpora (p. 51). He hypothesized that these findings might stem in part from a lack of awareness of the less formal stylistic impact of *so*, a reliance on "early-learned or simpler means of expression," and transfer from the L1, specifically, the high frequency of the Chinese pragmatic particle *gum* (p. 51). Similarly, Buysse (2009) found that EL2 speakers (L1 Belgian Dutch) used elaborative *so* significantly more frequently than the EL1 speakers (British English) did (p. 81), arguing that EL2 speakers overextended the function of *so*, using it when an EL1 speaker would use some other DM. Buysse's later research on DM *so* (2012, 2014) confirmed his original finding that EL2 speakers use *so* more frequently than EL1 speakers. In short, though research has found differences between EL1 and EL2 speakers' uses of *so*, the findings have been inconsistent.

Other researchers have examined DM *so* outside the context of looking for differences between EL1 and EL2 speakers. Raymond (2004), for example, studied the environments of what he called "stand-alone or *so*," *so* as a means to regulate the "range of contingencies" that arise as people manage their conversations—the next speaker and the content of that contribution (p. 210). More specifically, Raymond argued that stand-alone *so* generates a conversational turn from the recipient "in sequential environments in which *either* speaker could produce a *wide* range of actions" (p. 212; emphasis in original). In other words, Raymond's research focused on *so*'s use as a conversational prompt.

Bolden's (2006, 2008, 2009) work on *so* has been particularly illuminating. Bolden (2006) compared the functions of *so* and *oh* when they occur in an utterance-initial position, looking specifically at whether the discourse markers consistently introduced either recipient-attentive matters or self-attentive matters. *So*, she found, "overwhelmingly" prefaced recipient-attentive utterances, and *oh* prefaced self-attentive matters. In a later study, Bolden (2008) examined how interlocutors introduced their first conversational

topics (for example, stating a reason for calling). She found that speakers used *so* to manage the move from a conversation opening to discussion of the first item on the agenda. Building further on this research, Bolden (2009) argued that speakers use *so* to signal that an upcoming topic has been "incipient or pending" (p. 997). Such *so* prefacing, as she called it, conveys that the topic "has been prompted not by the immediately preceding talk but by some outstanding conversational agenda" (p. 977). Collectively, Bolden's analyses revealed the potential of *so* to connect one discourse topic to another.

Finally, and specifically in relation to writing center talk, Mackiewicz (2018) examined the keyness of *so* (both DM and non-DM functions). In this study of 85 conferences (41 from 2000 and 44 from 2017), the keyness ranking of *so* in tutors' talk rose from 307 in 2000 to three in 2017—a substantial leap in the word's import to the aboutness (see Goźdz-Roszkowski, 2011; Mackiewicz, 2017; Philips, 1989) of tutors' talk. This large shift in tutors' use of the word pointed to the need for further analysis, particularly analysis of its DM functions. The present study builds on prior research about tutors' language use and student learning, examining the frequency and function of DM *so* in tutors' conferences with EL1 and EL2 students.

Methods

In this section, we describe the study participants, the coding scheme that we used to classify occurrences of *so*, and the statistical methods that we used to determine the extent to which tutors' use of *so* differed depending on whether they interacted with EL1 or EL2 students.

Participants

The 26 conferences examined in this study were recorded in a small, public university in Wisconsin.⁴ Of the 26 conferences discussed here, 13 involved eight tutors working with 13 EL1 students, and 13 conferences involved eight tutors working with 13 EL2 students.

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Seven of the eight tutors participated in conferences with both EL1 and EL2 students. The tutors ranged in age from 19 to 34, averaging 24.2. The 26 students ranged in age from 17 to 61, averaging 23.1. Even though a few of the tutors and students were older than traditional college age, all were undergraduates. Most of the tutors were from Wisconsin and the adjacent states. However, two were international students from countries where English is an official language, and both of these tutors spoke English as an L1. All of the tutors had worked in the writing center for one to two academic years. They had all received at least four weeks of on-the-job training that involved observing, cotutoring, and finally solo tutoring. They had also all received ESL training.

The 13 EL1 students were from Wisconsin and adjacent states. The EL2 students were international students from a diverse array of countries: Cameroon, China, Egypt, Italy, Japan, Mongolia, Nepal, Peru, and South Korea. Students sought help on papers from a variety of subjects: business law, creative nonfiction, ESL writing, first-year composition, history, legal studies, philosophy, psychology, social work, and sociology. Two students came in for help with scholarship application letters, and one sought help on a cover letter.

Conferences

The 26 conferences lasted either 30 or 60 minutes. Some conferences contained sustained silences, times when the tutor and the student reader read quietly. Because of these differences, we report here the number of words spoken during the conferences. Conferences with EL1 students averaged 3,293 words per conference; conferences with EL2 students averaged 3,470 words per conference. Thus, the amount of discourse in EL1 and EL2 conferences was roughly the same.

Coding Scheme

We used Müller's (2005) and Buysse's (2012) analyses of discourse marker (DM) *so* as a foundation for our own coding scheme (see Table 1). Through iterative rounds of reliability testing and with reference to other

researchers' analyses of DM *so*, we honed our original scheme for usefulness in analyzing tutors' talk in writing center conferences and, importantly, for reliability. Critical research on the functions of *so*, including prior research by Schiffrin (1987), Anping (2002), Raymond (2004), Müller (2005), Bolden (2006, 2008, 2009), and Buysse (2009, 2012, 2014), failed to test researchers' functional types for reliability. That is, researchers have analyzed numerous occurrences of *so* that they identify in their own data set or in existing corpora without determining whether their functional analyses hold up under reliability testing.

In developing our coding scheme, we found that reliably differentiating the functions of *so* was difficult; functions seemed to overlap. For example, Buysse (2012), like Redeker (1990), differentiated between *so* used to state a result and *so* used to articulate a conclusion. But in writing center talk, a result and a conclusion often seemed indistinguishable, as shown in excerpt 2, when T2 told S2 that he could use a webpage from the university's library to double-check his reference list because that page would be up-to-date:

Excerpt 2

T2: *This- It's- It's- up-to-date so <CR> you can definitely double check it at that website.*

Thus, we counted these two senses together, coding them as one type: conclusion/result (CR). We also added other codes that pertained specifically to the writing center context. For example, tutors often used *so* before reading aloud from students' texts and after reading aloud or silently from students' texts. We classified these occurrences as reading related (RR). We also coded *so*-initial inquiries separately (INQ). We ended with a six-type coding scheme for *so*. We achieved a Cohen's kappa of 0.88, which constitutes a strong (McHugh, 2012) or a very good (Altman, 1991) level of agreement.

The *so* types we coded fell into three main categories. First, we coded occurrences of non-discourse marker *so* (NDM). As mentioned earlier, NDM *so* includes *so* used as an adverb of degree or manner (*so interesting*), *so* in fixed expressions (*and so on*), and *so* as a

Table 1. This study's coding scheme for so, modified from Buysse (2012) and Müller (2005).

Category:			
Type	Explanation	Code	Example
Non-DM	Not a discourse marker , for example, an adverb of degree or manner.	<NDM>	The only thing I've been noticing so far is, um, a couple things with, um, the tense and issues of uh-
Interpersonal: Prompt	Ceding the floor by trailing off and thus prompting the interlocutor to talk next.	<PMT>	You started this paragraph talking about one topic and switched to another, so-
Interpersonal: Holding the floor	Continuing the turn and thus holding the floor without interruption.	<HF>	Oh, I know the answer, so- It'll come to me in a sec.
Textual: Conclusion/result	Stating or continuing a conclusion or result .	<CR>	And then, we're going to end this here so capitalize this. So like gender in that sense and usually in sociology is seen as a social construction. So it's not what you're saying it is.
Textual: Inquiry	Introducing an inquiry , usually a question.	<INQ>	Excellent wordplay on that last sentence. So , do you feel it matches the language of the rest of the paper?
Textual: Reading or responding	Introducing reading a passage or responding to a passage.	<RR>	So , this feels rushed to me. How did you get to that conclusion from the topic sentence? So as a reader, I got lost in this section.

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proform (*I guess so*) (Buysse, 2012, p. 1767; for a full discussion of criteria differentiating DMs and non-DMs, see Schourup, 1999).

DM occurrences of *so* fell into two categories: interpersonal and textual. With interpersonal *so*, tutors managed the interaction at hand, relating to and interacting with the student writer. We found two interpersonal functions of *so*; first, as mentioned earlier, tutors used *so* to fill time, thus holding the conversational floor (HF). Tutors also used *so* to let their turn fade, indicating that they were willing to cede the floor and that the opportunity to speak was open to the student (PMT) (see Raymond, 2004). With these interpersonal functions of *so*, tutors manipulated how the interaction unfolded, as opposed to addressing relationships between and among the ideas conveyed in the interaction.

Occurrences of *so* in the textual category created connections between ideas, either

between something the student said (or wrote) and what the tutor said, or between the tutor's utterance (or silent reading/reading aloud) and the tutor's next utterance. CR *so* types initiated tutors' conclusions or statement of a result based upon what they had said before or what the student had said before. Sometimes those conclusions were assessments, similar to what Müller (2005) classified as opinions: "So marking opinions includes an element of result. The speaker presents [their] opinion as motivated by what [they have] said before" (p. 84). For example, T3 stated an assessment based on S3's affirmation that she had intended a new paragraph:

Excerpt 3

T3: *So* <INQ> *this is a new paragraph right?*

S3: *Mmhm.*

T3: **So** <CR> *this seems like um, this paragraph needs more.*

Based on S3's confirmation, T3 issued a so-initial assessment of the extent of the paragraph's content. Excerpt 3 also exemplifies tutors' use of so to begin inquiries (INQ), as in T3's question: *So this is a new paragraph, right?*

As mentioned above, tutors also used so to introduce and respond to reading (RR), as when T4 began a response to what she had just read from S4's text:

Excerpt 4

T4: [Reading silently, 1m 12s] OK. So <RR> here. [2s] "Moreover the experience" and then here I would say something like about you, like 'The experience I had' [because you want to like personalize it
S4: [Mmhm.
T4: maybe.

With this type of so, tutors introduced written text for comment, using the text as evidence for a comment to come. Tutors also used so-initial comments after they read aloud or silently. In these cases, the written text served as support for a so-initial comment, as when T5 responded to what S5 had written with a suggestion for rewording the phrase:

Excerpt 5

T5: All right. "The United States' engagement"- So <RR> you're going to want, like, some kind of a- I would probably use "the" first, but um- 'The United States' engagement'

Counting RR types of so separately allowed us to determine the extent to which so helped tutors move into and out of other texts that informed the conference.

After we tested the reliability of the coding scheme, we coded all occurrences of so in the 26 interactions and calculated the frequency of each so type. Because the conferences differed in length, we normed these raw frequencies per 100 words. To determine whether tutors significantly differed in their use of each type of so when interacting with EL1 and EL2 speakers, we ran t-tests for each so type.

Results

In this section, we first present descriptive statistics, namely, the raw frequencies of the so types and the frequency per 100 words of each so type. Then, we present inferential statistics, the results of the t-tests we used to determine whether tutors' use of so types differed by the EL1/EL2 status of the student. We conclude this section with a qualitative analysis of the so type that differed significantly between tutors talking to EL1 and EL2 students.

Frequency of So Types

The raw frequencies of the so types show that by far conclusion/result (CR) so occurred in tutors' talk most frequently in conferences with EL1 and with EL2 students. Table 2 displays the raw frequencies for each type of so. Tutors' use of DM so with EL1 and EL2 students was relatively balanced, with 584 occurrences in their talk with EL1 students and 536 occurrences in their talk with EL2 students.

More important, the CR so type occurred most frequently per 100 words, as Table 3 shows. Tutors used this type of so most frequently both when working with EL1 and EL2 students (0.935 times per 100 words with EL1 students and 0.778 times with EL2 students). Thus, in an average conference, tutors used CR so about 29 times in conferences with EL1 students and about 27 times with EL2 students.

Table 3 also shows that other so types occurred far less frequently. For example, tutors used inquiry (INQ) so just 0.161 times per

Table 2. Raw frequencies of tutors' so types.

Type	With EL1 students	With EL2 students
Non-DM (NDM)	11	8
Holding the floor (HF)	11	24
Prompt (PMT)	22	7
Inquiry (INQ)	53	87
Reading or responding (RR)	89	87
Conclusion/result (CR)	398	323
Total	584	536

Table 3. Average occurrence of tutors' so types per 100 words.

Type	With EL1 students	With EL2 students
Non-DM (NDM)	0.022	0.016
Holding the floor (HF)	0.024	0.052
Prompt (PMT)	0.058	0.010
Inquiry (INQ)	0.161	0.226
Reading or responding (RR)	0.181	0.202
Conclusion/result (CR)	0.935	0.778

100 words with EL1 students and 0.226 times with EL2 students. That equated to using INQ so 5 times in an average conference with EL1 students and 8 times in a conference with EL2 students. They used reading or responding (RR) so just 0.181 times per 100 words with EL1 students and 0.202 with EL2 students. That equated to using RR so just 6 times in per average conference with EL1 students and 7 times with EL2 students.

With the conclusion/result (CR) so type, tutors drew conclusions and explained results—both from what they had said themselves prior to the so utterance and from what students had just told them. For example, T4 used CR so three times as she ensured that S6 understood the function and placement of a thesis statement and as she presented an idea of a way to begin the introduction that would contain the thesis statement:

Excerpt 6

T4: *Do you know like what a thesis is?*

S6: *Yeah. Like a main sentence that explains what I'm going to be talking about.*

T4: *Yeah. And it's kind of- of like your argument on what you're writing about.*

S6: *OK.*

T4: *So <CR> it's like something you're trying to like argue. Something you're trying to like, I don't know, explain. So <CR> that's usually going to be like more towards the end of your introduction, your thesis statement. So <CR> maybe- I mean it's kind of- of harder now because you haven't done any research yet-*

S6: *Mmhm.*

T4: *But I mean, even if you just start out by talking broadly about the challenges that people with disabilities face-*

S6: *Yeah.*

T4: *Or maybe you could even talk about like-*

S6: *If I should focus-*

T4: *The daily life of someone with it.*

T4's first use of CR so in this excerpt (*So it's like something you're trying to argue*) rephrased her prior definition of a thesis statement and introduced further information about its function (*Something you're trying to like, I don't know, explain*). Her second use of so built on this conclusion and presented (as a given) a result based on it: A thesis states the paper's argument; thus, it appears at the end of the introduction. So, for T4, signaled "that the speaker takes the message following to have a consequential relationship to the prior material" (Fraser, 1990, p. 394).

T4's third use of CR so referred back to her previous instruction that the thesis statement would likely appear at the end of an introduction paragraph, implying that S6 could work first on the rest of the paragraph (*even if you just start out by talking broadly about the challenges that people with disabilities face*), and perhaps through this research would come upon an argument that she could make about the topic. This interaction between T4 and S6 was typical, illustrating how tutors used so to link their comments together, drawing conclusions and pointing out results.

Less often, it seemed, tutors also used CR so to build on comments from students. In excerpt 7, T3 used CR so as she came to a conclusion about possible wording for the next sentence in S7's paper. T3 had just asked S7 a knowledge-deficit question, a question aimed at filling in a knowledge gap (Thompson & Mackiewicz, 2014, p. 42). Namely, T3 had just asked S7 to clarify exactly what had happened to her expectations about courtroom procedure after she observed a hearing at a courthouse (*Changed in what way?*):

Excerpt 7

T3: *This, um- um, in context. So <RR> "From my courthouse visit, my expectations experience it in an actual view of the*

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courthouse.” *Did you change or did it- What happened?*

S7: *It changed. Yeah, it changed.*

T3: *Changed in what way?*

S7: *Um, a lot of ways. [laughs]*

T3: *A lot of ways? Changed- OK, so <CR> we can just say- We can do ‘in many ways’ and maybe we can elaborate on that a little bit.*

S7: *Yeah.*

T3: *Further later on.*

Upon receiving the vague response, *Um, a lot of ways*, T3 used CR so to draw a conclusion about a sentence that they might add to S7’s paper (*so we can just say- We can do ‘in many ways’*), thus using S7’s input to revise the existing sentence, yet noting that S7 should subsequently dive into specifics: *and maybe we can elaborate on that a little bit.*

To summarize, with both EL1 and EL2 students, tutors used CR so far more frequently than any other type of so. With it, they strung together their utterances and built on students’ contributions. Both of these functions of CR so helped tutors develop greater coherence in the discourse being co-constructed. In the next section, we examine prompt (PMT) so, the one so type that manifested a significant difference in tutors’ use of it with EL1 and EL2 students.

Tutors’ Use of PMT So

Independent samples *t*-tests comparing tutors’ use of so in conferences with EL1 and EL2 students revealed no significant differences, except for tutors’ use of prompt (PMT) so with EL1 students ($M = 0.058$, $SD = 0.004$) and EL2 students ($M = 0.010$, $SD = 0.000$); $t(12) = 2.74$, $p < .05$. Tutors used PMT so statistically more frequently with EL1 than with EL2 students. Indeed, with EL2 students, tutors used PMT so least frequently of any so type—only 0.35 times per average conference with EL2 students versus 2 times with EL1 students. Presumably, tutors used PMT so significantly more frequently with EL1 students because they more frequently perceived EL1 students to be able to identify and react in a productive way to this interpersonal cue. In the

remainder of this section, we explore tutors’ use of PMT so.

Tutors used PMT so as they managed the topical and procedural flow of conferences. In excerpt 8, T2 used PMT so to manage the progression of topic episodes, “segments of talk that focus on a specific topic,” within the conference’s teaching stage (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2018b, p. 71). After T2 had figured out what S2, an EL1 student, was describing—a research database—T2 used PMT so to move S2 forward toward articulating what he wanted to know about such databases:

Excerpt 8

S2: *So <CR> when I went to WITC they had- I think it was BadgerLink or something of the sort- A resource- a resource page where you could- or [unclear]*

T2: *Oh um, yeah yeah. I know what you’re- Yeah yeah.*

S2: *You know what I’m talking about?*

T2: *I think that’s a database.*

S2: *Database- Yeah. A research database.*

T2: *Yeah yeah. I know what you’re talking about so- <PMT>*

S2: *What do you use?*

T2: *Um, usually when I’m writing a paper I use the school’s database. Like the library has like a database you can use.*

S2: *OK.*

S2 seemed to pick up on T2’s implied message. Rather than continuing his recollection of the research resource he had used before, S2 moved on to a question, one aimed at identifying what T2 used to do her own research: *What do you use?* T2’s use of PMT so in excerpt 8 exemplifies Schiffrin’s (1987) observation that DM so can help a speaker transition from one topic or task to another (p. 217). In this case, T2’s PMT so helped move S2 from identifying the type of resource he had seen before to articulating what he wanted to know about it.

A similar instance of PMT so used to manage the sequence of the conference’s activities occurred when T6 used PMT so to help signal that the conference could conclude. In this, T6 shifted the conference from the teaching stage, the stage in which, according to Mackiewicz and Thompson (2018b), “the main pedagogical

work of the conference takes place" (p. 71), to the closing stage, the stage in which the tutor and student wrap up their interaction. The switch between these two stages, according to Mackiewicz and Thompson (2018b), is often signaled by a tutor question such as *Do you have any other questions?* (p. 83). The present study showed that tutors can lead into the conference's close even before they ask students about further questions. Excerpt 9 shows how T6's use of PMT so after praise (*you make some good points about, like, why you thought it used each element or whatever, so-*) left S8 responsible for raising a new topic. When S8 bypassed the opportunity, T6 led into the closing stage with her (nearly obligatory) question about additional questions:

Excerpt 9

T6: *OK. Yeah, I think it's- I mean, you make some good points about, like, why you thought it used each element or whatever, so- <PMT>*

S8: *Mmhm.*

T6: *Yeah.*

S8: *OK. Cool. So that's it?*

T6: *Yeah. Do you have any questions about any of it?*

S8: *Um, no. I think we kind of- You kind of explained it as we were going through it pretty well, so-*

T6: *OK.*

With PMT so, T6 ceded the conversational floor and placed S64 in the position of generating another topic. But S8 could think of nothing more to add, except to verify that his sense that the conference could end was indeed correct: *OK. Cool. So that's it?* Thus, PMT so helped T6 to direct the procedure of the conference, in this case, to close it down.

Besides using PMT so to manage the flow of the conference, tutors also used it to modulate the clarity of their tutoring strategies—with varied success. For example, they paired it with the tutoring strategy of hinting, relying on context to convey the point (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2018b, p. 38). Tutors' use of PMT so allowed them to articulate observations but avoid stating advice explicitly. For example, after reading through a paragraph, T7 listed

phrases containing the word *factor*, raising the implication that she saw a problem with his repeated use of the word. S9 inferred her meaning, counting the occurrences that he found in the paragraph. Assured that they both had identified the problem, with PMT so, T7 left S9 to articulate the next step:

Excerpt 10

T7: *So <RR>, my only comment about this paragraph is- I'm just going to make-*

S9: *[Mmhm.*

T7: *[Uh. [4s] "One major factor." Uh. [3s] "Key factor."*

S9: *Oh right, reuse that. Yep. [I- I do. Yeah.*

T7: *[laughs]*

S9: *[That's one of things too, yeah,*

T7: *[Factors. [laughs]*

S9: *[that I reused-*

T7: *[Factors.*

S9: *four times. Wow. There it was.*

T7: *There we go. So- <PMT>*

S9: *Define it, in different words you use, or?*

T7: *Yeah, because sometimes, like, when, there's a repetitive use of a word it can get kind of distracting to a paragraph.*

In response to T7's PMT so, S9 did indeed articulate a next step: a potential solution: *Define it, in different words you use, or?* After confirming that S9's solution was on the right track, T7 explained that readers can become distracted when they encounter repeated words. In response to PMT so, S9 generated advice himself. With PMT so, then, T7 was able to identify the problem and explain its possible ramification without, in a sense, "piling on" by stating explicit advice as well. S9 did not seem to need explicit advice; he understood that getting rid of repetition meant finding different words that conveyed the same idea. But relying on students to suss out an underlying meaning might lead to misunderstandings and confusion. Many students would likely be better off with more explicitly stated advice.

Indeed, PMT so sometimes generated hiccups in understanding, even for EL1 students. For example, as shown in excerpt 11, T3 used PMT so to prompt S10, an EL1 student, to replace the phrase *at religion* with a prepositional

phrase parallel to *at school*. T3 had just used a pumping question (*Can you be at religion?*), a question that guides students' thinking and pushes them to respond (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2018b, p. 12). But rather than waiting for an answer, T3 went on, identifying the preposition that was causing the problem (*Because you've got "at school"*). S10 responded only with the interjection *oh*, a signal that he had not considered that the preposition needed to accord with each list item:

Excerpt 11

T3: Yeah. "That is a quite a long answer to a question simply meaning to me that we have norms that are seen every day not just by our immediate caregivers. There are peers at school, TV, government, games and religion." I don't know. Can you be at religion? Because you've got "at school."

S10: Oh.

T3: 'On TV.' Like these are different prepositions, so- <PMT>

S10: Mmhm.

T3: You know what I mean? So <CR>, "at school." There are peers at school and you mean like-

S10: At a church.

After S10's *oh* interjection, T3 supplied yet another example of a list item that required a prepositional phrase different from *at* ('On TV') and then used PMT *so* to cede the floor and provide S10 an opportunity to provide an alternative to *at religion*: *Like these are different prepositions, so-*. But rather than provide a preposition that could accord with religion (or some other solution), S10 responded only with *mmhm*, leaving T3 to try again to clarify the problem for S10.

To clarify, T3 switched to a prompting strategy. Mackiewicz and Thompson (2018b) wrote that with a prompting strategy, a tutor "leaves a word or phrase off an answer so that the student can supply it or fill in the blank" (p. 86). T3 constructed a sentence that required S10 to finish: *There are peers at school and you mean like-*. With this lead-in, S10 was able to supply an alternative noun for the prepositional *at*—one with a location as its object

(*a church*) instead of an abstraction (*religion*). In this case, then, PMT *so* generated a bit more work for herself and for the student writer. That said, T3 quickly shifted when PMT *so* failed to produce a substantive response.⁵

PMT *so* might be more helpful when paired with other, more explicit tutoring strategies, as it was in T6's conference with S11, an EL2 student (L1 Arabic). S11 understood T6's PMT *so* as a call to articulate her thesis statement, but T6 had already posed two pumping questions that seemed geared toward getting S11 to articulate a thesis about gender. Rather than waiting for a response to the pumping questions, T6 continued her turn, explaining her reason for posing the questions in the first place. At the end of her explanation, she used PMT *so*. Paired with the pumping questions immediately preceding it, PMT *so* reinforced T6's push to get S11 to articulate her thesis statement:

Excerpt 12

T6: OK. I- I think you might want to make- Can you answer like what- what is gender? Like if you're going to- Like what's your thesis statement? Because I think your thesis- I know this is supposed to be a letter so <CR> it's kind of informal but I also want to, like, make sure you're answering the questions, so- <PMT>

S11: Well gender's nothing. There is no such thing as gender, except what people want to be called.

T6: So <CR> I think you might want to be mentioning that it's socially constructed in there.

After the prompt of PMT *so*, S11 stated her argument: People determine gender. This response seemed to appease T6, reassuring her that S11 did indeed know the main claim that she was trying to support in her letter. After hearing S11 articulate this argument, T6 suggested incorporating a specific term, *socially constructed*, that might encapsulate the idea that S11 was articulating.

Conclusion

Prior research, such as Mackiewicz's (2018) study, sparked a need for further analysis of how writing center tutors used *so*. This study investigated discourse marker (DM) *so* quantitatively and qualitatively to determine its functions. It also examined tutors' use of *so* with English L1 (EL1) and English L2 (EL2) students.

In our quantitative analysis, we found that, by far, conclusion/result (CR) *so* occurred most frequently in tutors' conferences with both EL1 and EL2 students. It was the only *so* type that approached a frequency count of one occurrence per 100 words: 0.935 occurrences in conferences with EL1 students, and 0.778 occurrences in conferences with EL2 students. We found that tutors used CR *so* to state results and to draw conclusions from what they had themselves said and, less frequently it seemed, from what students had said. Tutors might consider their use of CR *so*, viewing it as an indicator of their engagement with students' contributions—their inclination to articulate conclusions and results based on students' ideas.

This result is likely due in part to the expansiveness of our CR *so* type. However, unlike other researchers (e.g., Müller, 2005; Raymond, 2004), who have examined the functions of *so*, we tested the reliability of their categories. We tried (in multiple ways) to differentiate among more specific functions of *so* within what we, in the end, coded as CR, but we were never satisfied with our level of agreement. Future research employing a larger data set might investigate the CR *so* type further, perhaps attempting to differentiate between conclusions and results.

Further research on CR *so* might also code and quantify the extent to which tutors used it to link their own ideas and the extent to which they used it to build on something that the student had just said. Our study did not code for this difference, but as mentioned previously, our data led us to think that tutors used CR *so* more often when connecting their own ideas versus responding to students' contributions. Prior research has shown that tutors talk more than students in conference teaching and concluding stages (Mackiewicz & Thompson,

2018b, pp. 71, 84), so part of this tendency likely stems from tutors' greater volubility in general. Nevertheless, future research might employ CR *so* as an indicator of tutors' engagement with students' ideas.

Our quantitative analysis also showed that prompt (PMT) *so* was the only DM *so* type that exhibited a significant difference in frequency of occurrence between the two groups. It occurred statistically more frequently in tutors' talk with EL1 than with EL2 students. Based on this finding, we focused our qualitative analysis on tutors' use of PMT *so*. In this analysis, we found that tutors' use of PMT *so* (mainly with EL1s) served two main purposes. We saw that tutors used PMT *so* to manage the flow of conference talk, guiding it from one topic episode to another and from one conference stage to another. We also saw that they used PMT *so* to modulate the clarity of their tutoring strategies. These findings have some implications for tutor training.

Tutors might employ PMT *so* consciously, as an open-ended prompt that leaves space for a student's contribution. Using PMT *so* in this way might be particularly effective in conjunction with the cognitive scaffolding strategy of pumping questions, a strategy that pushes students to think out loud. PMT *so* could reinforce the push to get students to work out what they want to say and, in some cases, how they want to say it.

Tutors might also consider the extent to which they use PMT *so* in instruction, particularly as a component of hinting. When used to hint, PMT *so*, by definition, generates ambiguity, lengthening "the distance their hearers must travel along the inferential path from what they say to what they *mean*" (Mackiewicz & Riley, 2003, p. 85; emphasis in original). Some students, particularly those with limited English proficiency, might perceive hints less easily.

Second, examining DM *so* shows the importance of paying attention to the small words that tutors use. In this case, examining CR *so* revealed the work that the tutors were doing to connect ideas and examining PMT *so* showed that they elicited students' engagement in their conferences. The same sort of analysis could be done on other small but

important words that tutors and students frequently employ, especially ones that emerge as keywords via corpus analysis. Further, such research might examine the use of such small words by tutors and students who are L1 and L2 speakers of the language in use. It might also account for gender, as some prior research on discourse markers has attempted (e.g., Bu, 2013; Laserna et al., 2014). Such microlevel analysis, we hope this study shows, can help illuminate the macrolevel unfolding of writing center conferences.

Notes

1. L1 refers to a person's first language. Similarly, L2 refers to a person's second language. L2 is often used to refer to a language that a person learns as a foreign language rather than acquires during childhood.

2. See Appendix A for transcription conventions.

3. In the examples and excerpts, less than < and greater than > signs denote codes for so types. We explain these codes in greater detail later.

4. Data collection and analysis were approved by the IRB of Iowa State University, the researchers' affiliation. In addition, they were approved by the IRB of the University of Wisconsin-Superior, where data collection occurred.

5. T3's reading of S10's sentence and her subsequent advice throughout this topic episode were faulty. Each item in S10's list ("peers at school, TV, government, games and religion") did not require its own preposition.

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Appendix A

This study employed orthographic transcription. The following extralinguistic features were transcribed in addition to the spoken words:

- Silent reading, with “reading silently” in brackets, as in [reading silently]
- Occurrences of unintelligible talk, with “unclear” in brackets, as in [unclear]
- Laughter, with “laughs” in brackets, as in [laughs]
- Pauses longer than one second, with the number of seconds in brackets, as in [2s]
- Pauses one second or less, with a comma
- Rising intonation for an inquiry, with a question mark
- Cut-off speech, with a hyphen
- Reference to a word as a word, with double quotation marks, as in the following example:

I had “tell” but the computer wouldn’t let me do “tell.” It kept underlining it and saying “tells.”

- Occurrences of overlapping talk, denoted with brackets as in the following exchange:

T: OK. All right. Well, thanks for coming by. I’ll give you your stuff back here. And I just keep this so I can put it in the computer. [So. But, um, you have a good day and I hope that it goes well for you.
S: [Uhhuh.

- Occurrences of reading aloud, with double quotation marks, as in the following example:

“For example, in the article, there is an example.” Uh, you could say-

- Spoken written-language (SWL),¹ with single quotation marks, as in the following example:

‘Like, one character, Momma Gump,’ dot dot dot.

Note

1. See Mackiewicz and Thompson (2018a).