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## The Tutor as Messenger

*Judith Fishman*

“I was a messenger,” said Mitchell, one of the tutors in the project, “returning from a distant planet. I knew the land because I’d been there before, and I went back to tell them that they could make it across.” Interplanetary journeys were not foreign to the tutors in the Queens English Project, an articulation program in New York City. The tutors traveled daily from the college to a local high school. And being city folk, attending a neighborhood college, several of them shuttled back to their old high schools.

The journey the college tutors took, the land they entered, and the messages they carried—these are the subjects of my essay. I have said elsewhere that tutoring and writing centers and writing all must be centered around writers and their work. Often the writing center wobbles about, uncentered, being shaped by swift administrative change that causes it to fluctuate and lose balance. Centering ourselves in our home institution is often a tricky matter.<sup>1</sup> What happens when we venture out?

The Queens English Project, a FIPSE (Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education) program, placed high school and college faculty<sup>2</sup> and administrators, and high school and college students in a working relationship for two years. At our peak, in 1979–80, 40 college tutors worked in newly formed tutoring centers in five Queens high schools, with 15 teachers and their classes. While the tutoring arrangements in each school varied—tutors worked individually or in small groups in the writing center; they worked in small groups in the classroom; they met students during classtime; they met them before or after their classes—our purpose was to center on the student, as writer, as reader, as thinker, as respondent. Whatever the arrangement, the tutor was there to meet with the student, person to person.

We went into the high schools believing that we could share with our high school colleagues the insights we had come to in teaching reading and writing. We believed we had been successful in our work with CUNY

open admissions students,<sup>3</sup> and we believed that we could turn back the “institutionalization” of remediation by opening the doors for mutual work and open exchange.

The land we entered itself was not foreign—some of us knew it quite well, having been teachers in the secondary schools. The tutors had all been there, some of them only the year before as high school seniors. We knew we would face difficulties in establishing the writing centers—locating a space to work, in the overcrowded school, finding ways for students to meet tutors within the squeeze of the high school day. We expected to face the lock step, the 50-minute hour, the teachers’ overloaded schedules; we knew that lack of space and time would weigh heavy on all of us. We even knew to expect the unexpected—and in the beginning we often met crises daily. In this school, tutors were prohibited from entering the building until they were immunized against tuberculosis. In that school, near the end of the project after we had worked with a teacher for three semesters, just as she had begun to realize the potential of the program, she was moved: a water leak in her room forced her to the basement in a windowless, airless space, three floors below the writing center. In that school the jets on their daily paths to La Guardia roared above, smothering the sounds of the classroom.

What some of us had forgotten was that in the writing center at the college and in the project as a whole, we had been looking at teaching and learning in particular ways. We failed to remember that ours was but one way of viewing the world. The bolted-down desks, the ringing bells, the lock step signalled an approach to education, a view of students and their learning that is very much in the tradition of this subject called *English*. Arthur N. Applebee, in *Tradition and Reform in the Teaching of English: a History*, reminds us that most of what we have inherited as a profession focuses on the teaching of English as a *subject*. And English is a subject to be done. The teacher is the primary doer; work is to be done. Literature is to be done, to be covered, so many titles in such and such time. Writing is to be done, so many compositions to be written in such and such time. Student writing is to be read—every piece marked and returned. The 50-minute hour is generally a time for whole group instruction, much as Dora V. Smith described the classes she observed in New York City in the late 1930’s. Smith found a “wholesome emphasis upon the reading of literature...and not on facts about books, their authors and the literary periods from which they came.” She found, however, that “new instructional approaches—the project method, socialized class procedures, small group work had not fared well....Intensive reading of a single selection by the whole class was the usual situation....Attention to individual need had very little place in the

classrooms visited.

My high school colleagues work hard. They plan and they teach and they read and grade papers, neverendingly—the image of the treadmill with all the relentless clichés of the factory. And as the students pile in, one class after the other, the teacher-centered, subject-centered classroom allows them a way to control and balance it all.

The tutor came to the high school, however, with a different message. He had come from a program where the writer and his work was the center. Many of the tutors were themselves writers and tutors in the college program, the Writing Skills Workshop. They were readers and respondents. Through their own writing, through their tutoring, through the training they experienced, through the intimate work they engaged in with their supervisors, they had come to see writing and reading as vitally engaging personal acts. They brought to the high school their respect for writing and reading, for the writer, for his already written language and for the language that is unwritten, but that we believe is there. The Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education says it in a catch phrase: *learner centered*. The college tutors, by and large, had learned a particular world view: to see themselves as writers and readers and doers. In working at the college writing center, they had met their peers who are passive and unsure and often unwilling to risk their thoughts into words. But the writing center, an enclosed, comfortable space at the college, allows the one-to-one partnership and encourages the tutors' efforts to focus on writers and their work.

In the high school, the tutors met students with the same passivity, the same reluctance to take risks, the same insecurity—*en masse*. Their peers in the college, after all, had succeeded; they had journeyed across. The high school students, on the other hand, often did not project beyond their immediate experiences. They did not see themselves as “college material,” many of them suffering what Richard Sennett calls the “hidden injuries of class:” many of them are silent.

I watched one of the tutors, Beverly, as she worked with a group of six high school seniors; they were reading *Death of a Salesman*. And as I watched her, I understood that what she was doing was penetrating the silence. She aroused them with questions. She asked them to write, to free write. She asked them to read their writing to each other. She asked them to make observations about their writing. She asked them to turn to the text, to read passages aloud. She asked them more questions:

- what do you think?
- what ideas does Willy have about her?
- what about the kids?

- what do they think about the way their father treats their mother?
- Kathy, can you point to where you see that?
- do you know how they feel?
- where did you find out?
- who do the kids really admire?
- what kind of person is the mother?
- how do you know?
- where do you see that?
- what do you mean by *honest*?
- what do you mean when you say Willy is belligerent?
- what do you think triggered his belligerence?
- what does he do when he gets mad?
- where did you see that?
- what do you mean by....

I have thought a great deal about this session—it was not the typical tutoring session in the college writing center, where a tutor in working with one student, one writer, has the opportunity to work more quietly and less directive. Beverly relentlessly asked questions and the students were with her, holding onto the text, listening, quietly responsive, trying to find where it was they had gotten the sense that Willy was belligerent. They were learning to be active readers; they were sharing observations they had made about the text just as they were sharing their own writing—in a group with a college tutor, who was close to their age, and who made it across to the other side.

These students were impelled to read and write because they couldn't do otherwise. They couldn't hide from Beverly. She expected them to read and write and talk. She had learned, as did most of the tutors, that the students often worked out elaborate systems to show they had read—when they had not. They could complete homework assignments by an intricate method of group reading, and they could hide in the mass of their class.

Beverly read and she wrote and she shared her work—she took the first steps and they followed, quietly, slowly, out of the safety of their isolationism and into a working group (where many of the students had worked out schemes to avoid work, they were now being nudged into a collaboration of work). They read together, aloud, they observed together and wrote together and listened to each other's writing. At times they talked about what it was like in college. Some of them visited. A few of them became tutors in their own high schools and joined some of the tutoring sessions at the college. I talked with one of the students who had been in Beverly's group, and she said, "Beverly's expectations were dif-

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ferent. We knew that she thought we could—and we did. I think we worked because she expected us to.”

The work with the tutor often changed the atmosphere in the classroom. The teachers who were watching tutors and students working together began to see that something very different was taking place, that the tutors were uncovering a plenitude of thought and activity that they hadn't seen. Some of the teachers, before, had tried to work closely with students, to shift emphasis from subject to student; they had tried to open their classrooms, and as the fervor and promise of the 60's waned and back to basics was heavy in the air, they shelved some of their early efforts. But as they listened to the conversations and observed the work, they began to think, again, about what they were doing when they teach English.

Toward the end of our second year in the schools, as I was making a last set of rounds, sitting in on tutoring sessions and observing as much as I could of the work, I talked with one of the teachers who had gravitated to the program. She confesses that before the project had begun, she had been feeling “burned out,” thinking about a change of career, and that while she was deeply committed to teaching, she wasn't sure that she was being effective. The project allowed her to see differently. She was now looking at the experience as a way to open up collaborative learning. She began to know that she was not the sole giver of information, that she must find ways for students to be active, and that one way to engage them in their own learning is to provide the opportunity for them to work together as readers and writers. She had begun to question, again, how students learn, to see the benefit—particularly for the shy, reluctant student—of their learning from each other. She would listen to Beverly's sessions in the writing center and see that students who had not said a word in the whole class now talked in the group and read and wrote.

I wondered if she could do it without the tutors, if she could find ways for students to work together as readers and writers, reading aloud their own work and works of literature, observing to each other the text, writing and revising, actively engaged in the work of *English*. If she could, then I might conclude, tentatively, that the tutor could deliver the message and then leave, if he had to, when federal funds ended.<sup>5</sup> Could she carry out the program without tutors? “Yes,” she said, she could. I had hoped so.

Tutors are carriers of messages, embodiments of methods of teaching reading and writing, and while the presence of a tutor would enrich any classroom, to attempt that kind of institutional change would be unrealistic.

The tutor, however, can initiate and facilitate change. If we remember history, we know quite clearly that the message the tutor carries is an old one. The progressive educators said all this a long time ago—the learner must be a doer—echoes of John Dewey and Jerome Bruner and a score of others resound. The “new” British educators repeat the message, particularly in James Britton’s plea for a talk—write—read centered classroom.<sup>6</sup>The tensions, we see finally, are not between different lands or even institutions, for even in our home institution the message we carry is not generally embraced. In this niche of ours, particularly in the writing center, where we often reinforce each other’s world views, we tend to forget that we are message carriers, that the message has been around for a long time, that we are in essence saying it again and helping it be heard by a few more people.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Judith Fishman, “The Writing Center: What Is Its Center?” *Writing Lab Newsletter*, Purdue University, September 1980.

\_\_\_\_\_, “On Tutors, the Writing Lab, and Writing,” *Composition and Teaching*, November 1980.

<sup>2</sup>Six faculty from Queens College received funding from FIPSE to carry out the Queens English Project: Judith Fishman, Donald McQuade, Marie Ponsot, and Sandra Schor from the English Department; and Janet Brown and Betsy Kaufman from Secondary Education.

<sup>3</sup>See Donald McQuade, “The Writing Program at Queens College of The City University of New York,” *Options for the Teaching of English*, ed. Jasper P. Neel, Modern Language Association, 1978; and Marie Ponsot, “Total Immersion,” *Basic Writing 2*, Spring 1976.

<sup>4</sup>Arthur N. Appelbee, *Tradition and Reform in the Teaching of English: a History*, National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, Illinois, p. 127.

<sup>5</sup>The Board of Education of New York and Queens College have allocated funds for 1980–1981 to continue the Queens English Project in several Queens high schools.

<sup>6</sup>James Britton, *Language and Learning*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England, 1970.

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