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# Dialogue in the Lab Conference: Script Writing and the Training of Writing Lab Tutors

Irene Lurkis Clark

According to Jerome Bruner in his well-known work, *Toward a Theory of Instruction*, discovering how to make something comprehensible to someone else is only “a continuation of making something comprehensible to ourselves in the first place.”<sup>1</sup> This principle provides the basis for using hypothetical dialogues as a device in the training of Writing Lab tutors, whether they be experienced professionals or undergraduate peer tutors, who have never tutored before.

The idea of using hypothetical dialogues as a method of training lab tutors first occurred to me last year, when I was writing a film script to demonstrate the resources of U.S.C.’s Writing Lab. Naturally, since tutoring is one of the major services offered by the lab, the film had to include a presentation of a student-tutor conference, and, obviously, it had to be a “good” conference, one which was as close to ideal as possible. But as I sat down to write the script, I became aware of the enormous range of possibilities available to me, and I realized that my task was going to be more difficult than I had anticipated. Before I could even begin, I had to decide for myself exactly what I meant by a “good” lab conference, what I conceived of as the most productive student-tutor relationship, what I thought was the preferred focus and sequence of instruction, the most judicious and effective assignment of future work, the optimum ratio of teacher-talk to student-talk. I sat with my pen poised for quite a while before I began to write.

However, as I pondered these questions and finally did come to some decisions concerning the script, I became aware that in order for anyone to make these choices, one had to have formulated a pretty definite opinion as to what constituted, at least for themselves, a “good” lab conference, and that despite my initial indecision, I had indeed formed such an opinion. Obviously, anyone who has spent a

number of years teaching composition develops a set of standards for a tutorial style and format, and I had certainly given this matter a great deal of thought. However, the task of writing the film script and of becoming aware of all the choices which it entailed, had enabled me to articulate this concept more sharply for myself. I then decided that since I had found this experience to be so valuable for me, that perhaps other tutors and teachers might derive benefit from it as well. Therefore, I decided to incorporate the writing of hypothetical dialogues into the training of my staff in the lab, some of whom had had a great deal of teaching experience, some of whom had had none at all.

The use of these dialogues served as an important addition to more traditional methods of training tutors, such as giving lectures, assigning readings, requiring observations, either live or videotaped, holding discussions, or merely thrusting the staff immediately into tutoring sessions, forcing them, as they say, to learn on the job. I had always felt, however, that merely talking about tutoring behaviors and procedures was not sufficient in and of itself; nor did I think that simply giving tutors the opportunity to practice tutoring would necessarily produce a successful conference. As Patricia Blosser points out in reference to teacher training, most "teachers teach in accordance with the pattern they observed when they were pupils, rather than the pattern prescribed by teacher training,"<sup>2</sup> a failure she attributes to the fact that "teacher training seldom provides opportunities to develop instructional strategies."<sup>3</sup> Obviously, a good training program ought to include both discussion and practice, a combination which, as it turned out, was embodied in the writing of hypothetical dialogues.

During the fall and spring semesters of the past year, then, all of the tutors in the lab were handed a student paper containing numerous errors of all sorts. They were then asked to study the paper carefully, and then to write a hypothetical dialogue between themselves as tutor and the presumed student writer of the paper, their goal being to make the conference as close to ideal as possible. I gave very few specific instructions, other than to tell them what the nature of the student's writing assignment had been, since I wanted them to undergo the same confrontation with issues that I had undergone during my attempt at script writing; that is, to discover through role-playing their own concept of a student-tutor conference, and to understand, by making vicarious choices, that a "good" conference can only be realized through a highly complex process of decision making.

Of course, the fact that tutoring involves decision making is something that good tutors have always known intuitively. As I had

discovered for myself, there are all kinds of decisions to be made in determining the format of a tutoring session. To create a successful conference, one must choose those behaviors which best facilitate productive student-tutor interaction, determine the structure and sequence of instruction to be followed, select which techniques should be learned and decide whether they should be practiced sequentially or simultaneously. Then, not only does a tutor have to make instant decisions concerning his interaction with the student and his work; he has to direct his tutoring toward the idea that composition instruction is, after all, primarily an effort to assist or shape growth, and that all tutoring must be viewed, as Bruner points out, as

a provisional state that has as its object to make the learner or problem solver self-sufficient. Any regimen of correction carries the danger that the learner may become permanently dependent on the tutor's correction. The tutor must direct his instruction in a fashion that eventually makes it possible for the student to take over the corrective function himself. Otherwise, the result of instruction is to create a form of mastery that is contingent upon the perpetual presence of the tutor.<sup>3</sup>

Bruner's point is well-supported by the attribution theorists among the social scientists, who maintain that "the allocation of responsibility [that is, the particular reason to which one attributes the cause of an event or accomplishment] manifestly guides subsequent behavior. Attribution theory holds that "within achievement related contexts,"<sup>6</sup> affect is maximized when success and failure are attributed to the internal element of ability and effort, rather than to the external element of luck or chance, or divine assistance, and that "causal attributions influence the likelihood of undertaking achievement activities, the intensity of work at these activities, and the degree of persistence in the face of failure."<sup>7</sup> Thus, in order for writing improvement to continue beyond the present draft, it is extremely important that the student attributes his success to his own efforts and abilities, not to the editing and revising skill of the tutor. We in the lab had become particularly sensitive to the dangers of student dependence on tutor evaluation, since each semester, we attract an enclave of students who seem virtually to live down in the lab. Such students do not view themselves as active participants in the learning process and take little responsibility for their own progress, choosing instead to assign all decision making to the tutor. One of the most significant advantages of these hypothetical dialogues, then, was that each tutor, in writing his script, had to assume the role of both student and tutor. Such role playing helped the tutors

to focus attention on what sort of tutoring session, what sorts of questions, techniques, and emphases would best encourage students to take responsibility for their own improvement.

The writing of these dialogues, then, thrust the tutors into vicarious participation in tutoring, before they began to work with actual students. As a result of this participation, the tutorial staff was able to formulate some of its own ideas about what constitutes a productive lab conference, and as a result of the lively discussions which ensued, we came to the conclusion that most of the decisions one made as a tutor could be classified under four major areas, listed below, which we in the lab incorporated into a worksheet used for self-evaluation:

1. Behaviors facilitating productive student-tutor interaction.
2. Behaviors associated with the focus of the tutoring session and the sequence of instruction to be followed.
3. Composing strategies to be discussed or demonstrated.
4. Decisions regarding the assignment of future work.

Each of these areas is discussed below in terms of the decisions which emerged from the writing of the dialogues.

#### *Decisions Facilitating Productive Student-Tutor Interaction*

Obviously, the importance of developing a good working relationship between tutor and student has long been a given of tutorial instruction. However, defining what constitutes such a relationship and specifying which behaviors best facilitate such a relationship have usually been left to intuition. Everyone knows, for instance, that it is desirable for the tutor to maintain a "positive, cheerful attitude." But how, exactly, is this attitude conveyed? Similarly, most composition theorists agree that the ultimate goal in tutoring is to have the student eventually assume responsibility for his own progress. But which particular activities on the part of the tutor best encourage such student independence?

These specific behaviors were what emerged from the writing of the dialogues, since the tutors could not merely write a summarizing comment, such as "engage student in preliminary conversation"; they had to actually write such a conversation, imagining both their own questions and the student's presumed responses. Therefore, as we wrote, we became aware, vicariously, that certain questions were more likely to elicit full responses from students than others, that it was important to commend a student's work before pointing out errors or problems, and that to indicate right away to the student that his paper was, after all, his own responsibility, it was advisable for the tutor to begin the session

by asking the student himself which areas he wished to emphasize, rather than merely taking the paper and begin suggesting revisions. The writing of these dialogues, then, helped the tutorial staff to make decisions concerning the first few moments of the conference, moments which many communication theorists feel are crucial to any social interaction.

Insight into which behaviors best facilitate a productive student-tutor relationship was also gained through the scripting of the stage directions, particularly those regarding the spatial arrangement of the session, setting up the actual physical placement of the tutor and the student. As each tutor engaged in setting his scene and positioning his character, he became acutely aware of what we all know intuitively, but about which we often don't think when we run a tutoring session: that certain positions tend to acquire symbolic value and to be associated with fixed roles, particularly those which place the tutor in a position of authority, the student in one of submission. Since these roles are often associated with unpleasant memories of previous unsuccessful encounters with teachers, and since these roles are counterproductive to the ultimate goal of tutoring - that is, to have the students assume final responsibility for their own progress—the tutors, in writing their stage directions, learned to focus upon counteracting the undesirable effects of fixed role positions. Thus, they discovered for themselves that it was better for the tutor to sit beside the student as they worked, not separated by a table or desk, which constitutes a barrier. Similarly, they found that it was not desirable for the student to sit while the tutor stood, in that such an arrangement would make the tutor seem very large in comparison to the student, increasing his position of authority. Neither was it judged advisable that the tutor sit while the student stood as this position was also suggestive of fixed role behaviors.

Another important issue revealed through the dialogues was that concerning how much talking it was desirable for the tutor to do as opposed to that done by the student. In any teaching situation, there is a tendency for the tutor to monopolize the conversation; after all, it is the tutor who has the information to impart, and it is the tutor who is directing the session. Moreover, often the student has great difficulty articulating his ideas and is unaccustomed to discoursing at length about his work. However, as anyone who has had teaching or tutoring experience knows, when the tutor does most of the talking during a conference, there is a tendency for the student to withdraw his attention. Often, he fidgets in his seat or glances nervously around the room. More significantly, he stops listening to what the tutor is saying and

takes little responsibility for the success of the conference. Therefore, in order to maximize student attention and responsibility, it is crucial that the tutor engender a substantial amount of student participation.

Once again, this involves making a decision. How much student participation is desirable? Presumably, it would not be advantageous for the student to talk all of the time. Similarly, what percentage of the conference should be devoted to "teacher-talk"? Obviously, the tutor has to do at least some of the talking.

Unfortunately, no definitive answers to these important questions are available in the literature; no one has as yet decided absolutely which ratios are considered ideal. In quantifying our dialogues, we found that the percentage of the total conference devoted to "teacher-talk" ranged from 39% to 91%, a wide range, indeed, and that the mean percentage was 68.7%. This mean figure corresponds to similar figures obtained by Ellen Nold at Stanford University, who maintains that 85% teacher talk is too much, 64% desirable.<sup>8</sup> We therefore decided tentatively that 60% to 70% was probably a desirable figure, since it was somewhat more than half, but not so much as to produce student passivity. What must be emphasized, however, is that this is an area of research which is still quite new and which needs a great deal more investigation. As a training device, calculating the ratio of teacher-talk to student-talk enabled the tutors to see what percentage of the total conference they had assigned to the tutor and helped them to be aware of their tendencies in this regard when they engaged in actual conferences.

Related to this concept of "teacher-talk" was the concept of effective questioning strategies, particularly the use of "open questions," that is, those designed to generate a wide range of responses, thereby decreasing "teacher-talk," as opposed to those requiring one word answers, which would tend to increase it. Writing the dialogues provided a wide range of questions to study, which made for some interesting and worthwhile discussions among the lab staff concerning the most effective inquiry techniques used in tutoring.

#### *Behaviors Associated With the Focus of the Tutoring Session and the Sequence of Instruction to be Followed*

The second set of decisions we felt had to be made for a productive tutoring session to occur were those associated with determining the focus of the session and with choosing the sequence of instruction to be followed. Once again, the staff discovered as they wrote the dialogues that there were many choices available to them concerning the proper focus of a good lab conference and determining which facets of the writing process should be given emphasis.

Making such decisions was additionally complicated by the fact that many of the students who came to the lab, driven by memories of the derisive red pen, seemed to be primarily concerned with their mastery of the conventions—that is, with correcting errors in spelling, usage, and punctuation. Such students seemed curiously unaware that writing is primarily concerned with producing a desired effect upon an intended audience and that the success or failure of a text is influenced more significantly by the writer's decisions about topic, audience and form than it is by errors of sentence structure and other conventions. Should we as a staff begin with sentence level errors, a policy which would cater to the students' expectations and which was relatively easy to teach? or should we start the students thinking right away about the more global concerns of topic and organization? Should we discuss all of these issues during the conference, reading the paper through and mentioning each one as it comes up? Or should we ignore most of the problems in a paper, focusing on one at a time?

In writing the dialogues, the staff came to the conclusion that since readers are affected primarily by violations in expectations about meaning and form, and only secondarily by errors in sentence structure and other conventions, and that since our goal was to have students make progress beyond the present text, that the best approach would be to begin with more global concerns and then to move on to problems occurring at the sentence level, perhaps through the assignment of exercises or textbook work. We also concluded that it would not be advantageous to discuss all of these matters during the conference, in that the student was likely to suffer from information overload if all instruction were hurled at him at once.

The dialogues also enabled us to discover that to focus upon the global concerns of topic and organization was to approach the tutorial as a heuristic; that is, in order for a tutor to help the student understand where his thesis was vague, his paragraph undeveloped, his point of view inconsistent, the tutor had to ask the student numerous questions which the student should have asked himself during the writing of the first draft. Which questions to ask, how best to phrase them, what responses to expect, were concerns brought to the tutor's attention during the writing of the dialogues, enabling them to decide on a focus and sequence of instruction for a productive lab conference.

#### *Composing Strategies to be Discussed or Demonstrated*

The third set of decisions which we felt had to be made were those concerning composing strategies to be discussed or demonstrated. Since we had decided that the goal of a good lab conference was ultimately to



make the student responsible for his own improvement, it became clear that the tutor's duty was not fulfilled after merely informing the student of the weaknesses in his writing; obviously, a good tutor must also recommend specific behaviors which would make it possible for the new knowledge to be reflected in future drafts. Some of the techniques which emerged as a result of these dialogues included heuristic devices, outlining and classification strategies, as well as common sense maxims such as reading the paper aloud to a friend, typing it in triple space, or using a ruler to check for typos and careless errors in punctuation and usage.

Most of these techniques were quite familiar to the tutors, but the act of writing the dialogues made them aware that such strategies might not be as familiar to the students. Scripting in the interchanges between the tutor and the student engendered questions about which strategies to discuss in what sequence and for which sorts of writing difficulties. Once again, the tutoring session was perceived as being a process of decision making.

#### *Decisions Regarding the Assignment of Future Work*

The fourth and final set of decisions which had to be made to facilitate a productive lab conference were those concerning the assignment of future work to be done by the student. Most labs, ours included, contain a great deal of useful material for the student to work on—modules, tape cassettes, computer assisted instruction—resources of all sorts. What sort of assignment should students be given to complete after the conference was over? Should they be given any at all? Most of the tutors decided that some future work should be assigned, and, particularly for sentence level errors, most of the tutors included in their dialogues some practice exercises to be done in the lab, enough to make the student familiar with the principle, not so much as to discourage them from returning. Other tutors included rewrites of various parts of the paper, a return visit after the writing of the next paper, or setting up future sessions with the student on a weekly or biweekly basis. Once again, the writing of the dialogues helped the tutors to decide whether or not they felt that the assignment of future work or the establishment of a working program with the student was a necessary feature of their concept of a good lab conference.

The above four classifications provided a useful framework for discussing and evaluating the dialogues which the tutors wrote. At our training sessions, held at the beginning of the semester, we read all or parts of the dialogues aloud, either in front of the whole group or in

groups of two. Thus, by examining and comparing numerous excerpts, we were able to decide what we felt were the do's and don't's of successful conferencing.

For instance, under the first classification, "Decisions Facilitating Productive Student-Tutor Interaction," we compared the following two excerpts:

*Student:* This is an essay my teacher sent me to review. I'm not sure what's wrong with it.

*Tutor A:* What do you think is wrong with it?

*Student:* I really want to get a good grade in Comp, but I don't know what I'm doing wrong.

*Tutor B:* (tutor takes about two minutes to read the paper silently) Hmmn, yes, I can see a few problems that are really interfering with your writing. You have a good vocabulary—that's obvious—but there are some basic problems of structure and style. It'll take some work, though. In other words, we can clear up your problems if you're willing to spend a fair amount of time in the lab.

In the first interchange, that written by Tutor A, one may note that the tutor did not immediately assume responsibility for the revision and that he indicated right away that the student would have to think about this matter for himself. But in the interchange written by Tutor B, the tutor assumed immediate control, instantly diagnosing problems and recommending solutions. Moreover, the solutions offered were depicted as time-consuming and tedious, more likely to discourage the student from returning to the lab than to work on a revision.

Under the first classification, we also compared excerpts designed to develop camaraderie between student and tutor, as in the following:

*Tutor C:* Did you have a plan or outline for this paper before you wrote it?

*Student:* No. I just wrote it. I didn't have much time to work on it.

*Tutor C:* (smiles and nods) A "night before job," eh? Sometimes that happens to all of us.

Of course, there are occasions when one might choose not to be so understanding with a poorly prepared student. Nevertheless, the above interchange was deemed more effective than the following interchange written by Tutor D:

*Tutor D:* Did you work with an outline before you wrote this paper?

*Student:* No. I just wrote it. I didn't have much time to plan.

*Tutor D:* You should always write an outline before you begin to write. Otherwise, your work is going to be disorganized.

Examining these two excerpts enabled Tutor D to perceive that he was not only being unnecessarily authoritarian but that outlining is not necessarily a valid strategy for all students.

We also discussed several examples of stage directions and their effectiveness in establishing productive student-tutor rapport. For example, the first two of the following four excerpts were judged to be more desirable than the last two:

(student and tutor sit side by side at a table)

(student reads paper aloud. Tutor listens, nodding from time to time)

as opposed to:

(student and tutor sit on either side of the table)

(tutor reads paper silently, making notes in margins)

The dialogues also provided many examples of questioning strategies, enabling the staff to evaluate questions in terms of the responses they were likely to produce. For instance, in their suggested revision for a paper concerned with the lack of realism in the television series, "Starsky and Hutch," many of the tutors felt that the thesis should be expanded to include the undesirable effects of an unrealistic police series. But several tutors phrased their questions so as to stimulate only limited student response, telling, rather than guiding, the student to make the necessary revision:

*Tutor E:* I think you might make your paper more coherent by writing a thesis sentence saying that unrealistic methods and attitudes on the part of the police are a dangerous influence on the viewer.

*Possible Response:* O.K.

*Tutor F:* Perhaps you might develop the idea of why in your judgment the lack of realism in a police series is bad.

*Possible Response:* O.K.

In both of the above tutor statements, the tutor took the responsibility of pointing out to the student that lack of realism in a police series might be considered undesirable. Tutor E inserted the phrase "negative influence," Tutor F, the term "bad." Moreover, their questions were phrased as statements, engendering limited possibilities for student response. This limited range of response would necessitate additional statements from the tutor, which would then engender further passivity in the student. It is likely, then, that if the paper were finally revised along this line of expansion, that the student would attribute the revision to the reformulating power of the tutor, not to his own insights as a developing writer.

In contrast to these, the following interchange written by Tutor G demonstrated the tutor's sensitivity to the tutorial role. He provided supportive feedback for the student's ideas, but he indicated firmly that the student had to do his own exploratory thinking:

*Tutor G:* I can see that you followed the assignment carefully and wrote about the lack of realism in this T.V. show, and you describe two ways in

which “Starsky and Hutch” are unrealistic policemen—they use illegal tactics and they believe too much in themselves. (tutor gives feedback, articulates thesis)

Student: Right!

Tutor G: But so what? So what if “Starsky and Hutch” is unrealistic? Mickey Mouse is unrealistic, too. What difference does it make if a police series is unrealistic?

Possible Response: Open. (Student moves from a comparison between fantasy and sensationalism in the media. Comes to his own realization.)

In this excerpt, Tutor G has not only indicated to the student that he is responsible for his own revision; he has also established that this first conference should be concerned with only one facet of the writing process, the clarification and expansion of the thesis. Toward the end of this first conference, Tutor G suggested to the student that he work on sentence level errors at a later time:

Tutor G: One more thing, before you make an appointment for next Wednesday. I’d like you to plan to spend an hour or so looking through our comma splice material.

Student: Comma splice?

Tutor: Yes. We’ll talk about it when you come in Wednesday.

Thus, Tutor G was able to communicate in his dialogue what he felt was a preferred focus and sequence for a writing conference, the second area of decision-making.

In the next example, however, Tutor H conducted his hypothetical conference as do so many beginning tutors when first confronted with a student and his paper: He and the student read the paper through, and he simply pointed out the errors as they occurred:

Student: (reads first paragraph aloud) I think I have repeated “television series” twice. I would cancel the second.

Tutor H: Very good. Now how about the word “tender.” Can you replace that with a more effective word?

For Tutor H, the group discussion of this excerpt from his dialogue in comparison with excerpts written by some of the other tutors provided the valuable realization that it was generally preferable to predetermine a focus and sequence for a conference, rather than to work through the paper on a “hit and miss” basis.

The third classification, “Composing Strategies to Be Discussed or Demonstrated,” similarly included many interesting interchanges, illustrating a wide range of techniques to be shared. Tutor I, for instance, presented a creative method for helping students to check that their paper was organized and balanced:

Tutor I: Good. Now that your idea is clear, let’s take the three unrealistic things about the cops on the show and code them, X, triangle ( $\Delta$ ), and

box (□). (Student goes through and we mark each example appropriately.)

*Student:* It looks as if I need more triangles and boxes.

Other excerpts included outlining techniques and a variety of brainstorming and editing strategies, which were helpful to everyone.

Under the fourth classification, "Decisions Regarding the Assignment of Future Work," were included return visits, rewrites, or, as was noted above in Tutor G's interchange, the assignment of exercises. By examining this facet of the writing conference, several tutors discovered that they had envisioned assigning far too much work, which would probably discourage some students from returning.

All of the tutors felt that writing these hypothetical dialogues constituted an interesting and worthwhile experience. In addition to helping the staff to formulate its own concept of what characterizes a productive lab conference, the act of writing these dialogues enabled prospective tutors to participate vicariously in a conference before they ever had to hold one, and to understand through role playing just how many decisions are involved in running a tutorial. In addition, most of the staff discovered that writing these dialogues enabled them to think of many ideas that they would not have thought of under the pressure of conducting an actual conference, that having the time to plan a model tutorial session enabled them to conduct their actual tutoring sessions with greater control and ease and to be able to evaluate themselves more objectively in terms of the model they had constructed.

It must be qualified, however, that writing these dialogues can never completely substitute for other methods of training a tutorial staff, nor, for that matter, for actual experience. One cannot assume that there really is such a thing as a "perfect" conference, any more than one can postulate the existence of a perfect paper, a perfect tutor, or a perfect student. Obviously, one's concept of what constitutes a good lab conference must be subject to growth and change; nor is it necessarily desirable that a particular structure be followed. Some of the most exciting things often happen spontaneously. Moreover, merely scripting a model lab conference, even if there were such a thing, does not insure that the tutor would then be able to follow his own injunctions. All conferences are subject to the interplay between tutor and student, and, of course, the tutor can do only so much. A recalcitrant or eccentric student, a particularly difficult assignment, a hopelessly disorganized paper can confuse even the most prepared tutor and redirect even the most carefully structured conference.

Despite these qualifications, however, I feel that using hypothetical dialogues as a method of training lab tutors is one which is well worth trying, whether one is working with experienced teachers or with undergraduate peer tutors. Due to mechanical difficulties, the script I wrote never did get to be a film—in fact, we plan to try to film our model conference again soon. But even if we never make it to Hollywood, the experience of writing such a script is one which every person who has to conduct a conference would find both interesting and valuable.

**Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Jerome Bruner, *Toward a Theory of Instruction* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1966), p. 38.

<sup>2</sup>P.E. Blosser, "A Study of the Development of the Skill of Effective Questioning," *E.R.I.C. Center for Science and Mathematics Education* (Ohio State University, 1970), p. 14.

<sup>3</sup>Blosser, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup>Bruner, p. 53.

<sup>5</sup>Bruner, p. 53.

<sup>6</sup>Bernard Weiner, *Achievement Motivation and Attribution Theory* (General Learning Press: New Jersey, 1974), p. 185.

<sup>7</sup>Weiner, p. 195.

<sup>8</sup>Ellen W. Nold, *Managing Writing* (School of Engineering: Stanford University, 1979), unpublished manuscript.