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Who Owns the Truth in the Writing Lab?

Nancy J. Allen

Imagine this scene. You are the director of a writing lab, and among this year's applicants for a tutoring position is one bright-eyed young man, rather eccentrically dressed, who answers to the name of Socrates. His credentials say that he has extensive experience in one-on-one teaching situations, and indeed you have heard of his reputation as a fine teacher. During his interview he expresses real interest in the lab; in fact he asks at least as many questions as you do. The question for you now is, should you hire this young man? Does his past experience show that he will make a good writing lab tutor?

No doubt most writing lab directors would jump at the chance to hire Socrates. He is, after all, one of the classic role models for teachers. But before you send him a note welcoming him to the staff, you should take a few minutes to examine the theoretical implications of this decision. What does hiring Socrates tell you about your lab's approach to a tutorial session? What goals would such a lab set for tutorials? What philosophy of writing do these goals reveal? The relationship between the kinds of tutors we hire and our theoretical positions toward both tutoring and writing is too often overlooked in the day-to-day activity of running a lab. In this article, therefore, I would like to discuss these issues by examining the theoretical implications of tutors' roles and by relating these roles to what Plato tells us of Socrates' thoughts on rhetoric and truth in the *Phaedrus*. A closer look at the theory underlying our decisions should help us to make more deliberate and effective decisions.

Writing lab directors and those responsible for training new lab tutors often question what roles tutors should play when they help students, and

they wonder how best to train the tutors to perform these roles. Because there is no standard scale for evaluating applicants or sure method for training new tutors, directors and trainers usually treat these problems with whatever means are near at hand. They talk to each other about what works well, they listen to presentations at conferences about the percentage of tutor-talk versus student-talk in tutorials, and they read articles describing a dazzling array of possible role models. Some of the role models that have been included in recent articles are: teacher, coach, commentator, ally, writing authority, our applicant Socrates, and even the angel Raphael (Elbow 328; Harris 63-64; Lorch 145-48). One writer has even suggested that tutors shift between the various ego states of child, parent, and adult during a tutorial (Smith 4).

The possibilities seem endless, or at least bewildering. In the end, decisions on which of these roles tutors should follow are usually based on pragmatics; whatever works well, making both tutors and students feel reasonably satisfied, is what trainers most often choose to adopt. The theoretical implications of these roles are forgotten in the press of getting tutors ready for the onslaught of students in the new semester.

The roles tutors assume, however, do not function only as a means of providing satisfactory and productive experiences for the people involved in tutorials. As I suggested above, these role decisions reflect fundamental theoretical differences in our goals for a tutorial and in our viewpoint toward writing itself. For example, when a student comes to the writing lab for help on a problematic paper, we as tutors make choices about how to approach that paper, and these choices reflect our stance on the issue of Truth in the writing process. By Truth I am not referring to writing conventions but to the Truth of the paper itself, the Truth that is the insight, feeling, or idea that the writer wishes his paper to convey.

As tutors looking at a paper, our initial decisions about its Truth determine how the tutorial session will go. Is the Truth clearly stated, so that we should now help this writer to develop and organize it? Is the Truth hinted at but still largely within the writer, so that he needs help in discovering and articulating it? Or is the Truth for this paper still waiting to be formed? Our answer determines the role we as tutors will play and our attitude toward truth in writing.

To illustrate how the tutor's role relates to a theoretical position on Truth, let me show some examples of how different roles might operate in a tutorial. Although articles on tutors' roles use all of the different names mentioned above and more, these discussions usually include in their list some version of an Authoritarian role and an Inquirer role, along with one or more other options. We'll begin with one of these standard roles, the Authoritarian.

To be sure, tutors in a writing lab must in some way be authorities. If tutors were not knowledgeable about writing problems, why would a student walk all the way to a lab for help? It would be simpler to ask a roommate for advice. So a tutor must always have some authority or expertise concerning writing. But the tutor need not spend time cultivating an image of authority. Her credibility as a person able to help with writing problems is provided by the very fact that she is working in a writing lab. The label of Authoritarian as a tutorial role relates instead to the tutor's approach to helping a student with his writing problems.

An Authoritarian tutor might approach a tutorial in the following way. While reading through a student's draft, the tutor notes some problems, perhaps a missing thesis or some undeveloped paragraphs, or both. In spite of these deficiencies, the tutor is able to figure out what she believes the student intended to say. The tutor also knows that by adding a sentence here, some examples there, and more vivid details throughout, this can become a good essay. The tutor determines the Truth of what this paper should be and proceeds to advise the student on how to achieve this goal. When the tutor perceives her appropriate role in this way, as one of puzzling out a student's efforts on a paper in order to arrive at its Truth and then dispensing advice as to how the student can proceed to convey that Truth, the tutor is acting as an Authoritarian. The student will no doubt be grateful for the advice, since the grade on the paper will probably improve, but on the next paper the student will again be unsure of what to say and stuck on how to proceed. The Truth on this paper belongs to the tutor.

The other popular role model for tutors I call the Inquirer, a model patterned after a common interpretation of our applicant Socrates' method. The Inquirer would handle the student's problem a little differently. In the tutorial, this tutor may also read through the student's draft, or, to be more true to Socrates' method in the *Phaedrus*, she may have the student read the paper aloud. Again the tutor notices the missing thesis and the undeveloped paragraphs and, with the partial evidence available, is able to figure out what she believes the student wanted to convey.

But this time the tutor's technique is different. The tutor believes that the student has an idea of the Truth for this paper but hasn't yet articulated it clearly. The student probably also has plenty of vivid details stored away in memory that would contribute to the paper. The tutor therefore plays the role of Inquirer and, by asking probing questions, leads the student to think about the undeveloped paragraphs and to articulate the partially formed thesis. While the tutor and student discuss the ideas or describe one of the examples, the student may remember some details that he had omitted or discover a meaning that he hadn't thought of before. This student, too, leaves the tutorial grateful for an improved paper, but he takes away more

than that. This student has more confidence in his own abilities as a writer and probably more satisfaction with the paper.

In this tutorial the student formed the words used to express the Truth of the paper and discovered the material needed to convey it. Perhaps on the next paper this student will ask himself some probing questions in order to reach the truth. An important point to note, however, is that, although the student formed the Truth into words, it was the tutor who determined that Truth and then led the student to recognize and articulate it. The paper may express what the student originally had in mind, but the tutor's interpretation of the intent may have altered it, either slightly or drastically.

Socrates' method of teaching through dialogue was designed to bring his companions to discover new understandings. But as this Inquiry method is often interpreted and applied in writing labs, its view of Truth is not very different from that of the Authoritarian tutor's. The questioner or tutor determines the Truth and leads the student to it, either by explicit directions or by guiding questions. In both cases the tutor tries to be sensitive to the student's intention, but even the most sensitive tutor still runs the very real risk of partial or mistaken interpretation. As long as the tutor is in control of the Truth for a paper, this Truth may not be what the student intended.

Socrates, as pictured by Plato in the *Phaedrus*, describes Truth as lying in a region that is reached only by the gods. Humankind cannot possess Truth, but the more worthy of us do get occasional or partial glimpses. Acting as one of these worthy who has had some glimpse of Truth, Socrates asks questions and constructs the dialogue that will lead his students to new understandings.

An example from the *Phaedrus* dialogue will illustrate one way in which this method was used in this book. In the opening, Phaedrus is convinced that no one could treat the topic of lovers more worthily than his friend Lysias. Socrates takes up the challenge to give a better speech on the same topic, agreeing with Lysias' views. He then delivers a speech with his head covered, a trick that he says will help him speak more quickly and avoid the embarrassment of being watched by Phaedrus. But after his speech, Socrates declares he has realized that he was wrong to agree with Lysias. He then delivers a second speech, with his head uncovered, contradicting Lysias' position completely.

These speeches serve a purpose in the dialogue that is similar to that served by a student's paper in a tutorial. Socrates uses the speeches as the basis for engaging Phaedrus in a discussion of the ideas expressed and asks him several questions about them. These questions ultimately lead to the new contradictory view expressed in Socrates' second speech. At the end of the discussion Phaedrus is convinced that his friend Lysias was wrong about

lovers and that Socrates' views were indeed true. He does not, however, feel that he has been lectured to or given the answer but that he has discovered something new for himself.

Throughout the discussion Socrates has repeatedly referred to Phaedrus' ideas and comments. He takes no credit for any of the ideas himself, but attributes these ideas to other scholars. He even thanks good fortune and the muses for providing just the right illustrations for his points. We know, however, from Socrates' covering of his head that he intended to contradict Lysias' points from the beginning. When he spoke what he knew to be untrue, he covered his head, but when he spoke what he believed to be the Truth, his head was bare. Socrates was sure of what he believed to be the Truth on the subject of lovers, and he constructed the dialogue in order to let Phaedrus discover this Truth. Socrates was playing the role of the Inquirer through his skillful questioning, thus leading Phaedrus to a pre-determined goal.

The Socratic or Inquirer technique has positive benefits for tutorials. In such a dialogue, a student will feel the satisfaction of active participation and may later apply the method himself to investigate his feelings on other subjects. But the risk of misinterpretation or obscuring of the student's vision is ever present. The Truth in the Phaedrus dialogue was Socrates' Truth.

Our interpretation of the Socratic method, however, need not stop here. The *Phaedrus* tells us more about the relationship between Truth and dialogue, and this additional information leads to a third possible role for a writing lab tutor, that of the Explorer. In the last section of the work, Socrates and Phaedrus have an extended discussion on the nature of rhetoric, and in it Socrates describes his belief that such discussion is essential to obtaining wisdom or Truth. The popularity of written texts, he fears, will produce pupils who have learned only through reading without benefit of teachers. He believes these pupils will suffer from the delusion of having knowledge while they are in fact incapable of real judgment.

He describes dialogue between people as the slower but surer route to knowledge. Verbal interaction produces new ideas and better thinking through the words, which, Socrates says, "can transmit their seed to other natures and cause the growth of fresh words in them" (Plato 72). Ronna Burger calls the dialogue "the drama of thought" (*Plato's Phaedrus* 195). C. Jan Swearingen, in an article on dialogue in Plato, calls conversation "the process of understanding through which, occasionally, insight is attained" and says that "even ordinary conversation can be an act of knowing" ("Rhetor as Eiron" 320). In dialogue the participants are adjustable. Each can bring up points or questions which must then be incorporated into the

whole and thereby lead to truer knowledge. Swearingen states Plato's strong belief in conversation as epistemology this way:

Understanding and knowledge, Plato argues, can only be achieved through a long process of dialectical dialogues among colleagues conducted in a spirit of "knowledge, goodwill, and candor." (318)

In the *Phaedrus* Socrates refers to this ability of conversation to produce insights and knowledge when he sums up the conclusions he and Phaedrus have reached concerning rhetoric: "This is what our entire past discussion has brought to light" (71).

This dimension of Socrates' view of Truth suggests that in her discussions with students, a tutor can be, and whenever possible should be, an Explorer. To apply the example used earlier, the tutor as Explorer does not attempt to define the Truth that the student has hinted at in his paper but instead allows the Truth to remain unknown. The tutor and student then collaboratively explore the thoughts suggested by the paper, reacting to one another's comments. When the Truth emerges through their interaction, it is a richer Truth than either could have produced alone. A predetermined viewpoint of the Truth, however well intentioned, could have acted as a set of blinders in their discussion and cut off potentially rich directions for investigation. By being willing to explore with the student, this tutor opens up possibilities for trying out ideas and engaging in the excitement of discovery. In this tutorial the student gains confidence as a writer and a more positive attitude toward the writing process. The Truth that emerges is, as much as possible, the student's Truth.

Each of these three roles has its value in a tutorial. The skilled tutor can learn to vary them according to different students' needs or even to use different roles at different times during one tutorial. For example, the unmotivated or resistant student, who visits all of our writing labs occasionally, may respond only to an Authoritarian approach. He will accept advice only from one who appears to be an expert. With a more willing student, the questions of the Inquirer can often lead to information buried in the student's memory or even to an insight on a subject. At the end of a tutorial, the tutor can use either of these two approaches, by summing up the accomplishments or by asking the student to do so. But both of these roles place the tutor in control of the Truth. It is as Explorers that we find the student's Truth, and we should seek that Truth whenever we can.

When we choose what roles to play as tutors, we should also consider the theoretical positions our decisions invoke. Our awareness of the theoretical implications of our roles will make us better able to choose the best approach for each student or problem. As trainers of tutors, moreover, we should be sure that each of our tutor trainees also becomes aware of these theoretical implications. A discussion of these aspects of their tutorial roles

should become part of their training. The tutors will then be able to make informed decisions, which should in turn lead to more productive and satisfying tutorials.

The role of Explorer is a challenging one for a tutor. It is much easier and certainly more secure to deal with a firm structure or to head toward a clear goal. But if the tutor is willing to venture into uncharted territory, the tutorial can become a two-way experience from which the tutor can also learn. If the tutor can approach the student as a collaborator in learning, the tutorial will become enriching and rewarding for both of them.

What then should you do with your applicant Socrates? Hire him, by all means, but not just as Socrates the Inquirer, who can lead students to a predetermined Truth. Encourage him also to be Socrates the Explorer, who sees the value of Truth emerging from conversation. Both the tutor and the student will be better for it.

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