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## An Ongoing Tutor-Training Program

*Evelyn Posey*

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Although tutors are usually excellent students, they seldom have previous tutoring experience. For this reason, tutor training is an important aspect of any writing center program. A general training program—which includes two to three hours of orientation focusing on procedures, tutoring roles, responsibilities, and policies—is usually required of all new tutors. During their first semester of employment, additional training in study skills, communications, critical thinking skills, and interpersonal skills may also be required. In addition to this general training, tutors also need specific training in the tutoring of writing. Most tutors learned to write using the product method—a formal, grammatical approach with instruction beginning at the sentence level, moving to the paragraph, and finally culminating with the entire essay.

The challenge for the writing center coordinator is to convince tutors that the writing process itself is a powerful means of discovery and learning and that the emphasis should be on this process. Tutors must realize that intervention at all stages is more beneficial than reading only the finished product and that evaluation should be based on the student's success in communication with an audience. The purpose of this article, then, is to describe three ways to involve writing center tutors in daily, ongoing training—training that is not added to their already heavy work and class schedule but is incorporated into their daily tutoring job. These three methods encourage tutors to develop writing center resources, to use a process-oriented worksheet while tutoring, and to participate in a writers' workshop.

## Development and Administration

Recent management theory, as described by Peters and Waterman (13), indicates that “productivity through people,” with every worker a respected source of ideas, not only improves quality and production, but serves as excellent training. If tutors are encouraged to become involved in the development and administration of the writing center, they learn to be better writing tutors. Thus the first method of training involves the participation of tutors in writing center development and administration. This participation includes encouraging tutors to write resource materials, teach workshops, plan promotion, and administer parts of the program.

Tutoring students has top priority in a writing center, but there are times when tutors are not busy (rainy days, the first few days of the semester, the day of the Homecoming Parade). Tutors can be asked to use this available time to work on some aspect of administration. For example, at the beginning of each semester, I post a list of projects that need attention and encourage tutors to add other projects to the list. Tutors are then asked to volunteer to work on one of these projects when they are not busy tutoring. The list includes projects in four categories: writing resource materials, preparing and teaching workshops, promoting tutoring services, and performing clerical duties. Experienced tutors usually volunteer for writing and workshop projects while new tutors prefer promotion and clerical projects, possibly because these do not demand as much expertise.

During the past two semesters tutors who volunteered for writing projects updated our “Handbook for Writing Room Tutors,” a manual that explains the goals and procedures of our program. Two Computer Science majors worked on CAI (Computer Assisted Instruction), transferring usage drills to the computer and writing simple programs that provide feedback to the student on correct responses and that allow the student to try again on incorrect responses. Four tutors prepared and taught workshops in spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and research papers. These tutors planned and organized notebooks of instructional and evaluation materials for the workshops. After going over their plans with the coordinator, they taught the workshops and then spent the remainder of the semester reworking, refining, and adding to workshop materials in preparation for next semester. Four new tutors volunteered to sit in on the preparation and teaching of the workshops so that they will be trained to instruct them in future semesters.

Because new tutors are often not confident enough to write resource materials or to present workshops during their first semester, they often volunteer for promotion projects. These tutors are responsible for distributing fliers and writing promotional spots for radio, television, and the campus newspaper. Another important promotional project is making classroom visits. For example, one semester two tutors organized tutor visits

to approximately 150 sections of freshman composition and linguistics. They notified the instructor of our visit, assigned a tutor to make the visit to the class, and finally confirmed that the tutor actually went to the class.

New tutors also often volunteer for clerical duties. Clerical jobs include updating files with new handouts, updating library materials by sending for complimentary copies, and keeping student records current.

No matter what the project, writing center tutors learn about the center and its resources and services by working to improve them. Of course, it is important to highlight the accomplishments of the tutors, so the coordinator should spend a portion of each staff meeting acknowledging tutors who successfully complete their projects.

Although there are some drawbacks—such as overzealous tutors who want constant attention paid to their projects, disappointment in some project results, and a few projects that are not completed—the benefits to the tutors far outweigh the disadvantages. Many times, too, tutors are extremely capable and will think of innovative ideas and ways of doing things. Therefore, both the coordinator and tutors benefit from their involvement.

## Referral/Response Worksheet

The second way of providing ongoing, daily training is to ask tutors to use a writing-process worksheet while tutoring. Much has been written in the past fifteen years about teaching writing as a process, particularly since the publication of Britton's *The Development of Writing Abilities* (11-18) in 1978. Therefore, at the beginning of each semester, I discuss writing as process to the tutors and ask them to role play a tutoring situation using their knowledge of this process. But after this initial session, tutors often forget the details of using the writing process if they are not reminded. To train tutors to use their knowledge of the writing process when tutoring, I designed a referral/response worksheet. The referral/response worksheet acts as a daily training guide for the writing center tutors. It reminds them of the writing process, it allows them to communicate with the instructor, and it provides a heuristic by which the students can complete a writing assignment.

The worksheet includes a checklist to be used by the referring teacher and the responding tutor. When the instructor checks a particular item, the tutor knows specifically how to focus the tutorial. After the session, the tutor checks the appropriate items and indicates how much time was spent on the session.

## Referral/Response Worksheet

Name of student \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Course \_\_\_\_\_

Referring Instructor \_\_\_\_\_ Responding Tutor \_\_\_\_\_

Please assist this student in: \_\_\_\_\_ Tutored in: \_\_\_\_\_

### PREWRITING

_____	selecting a topic	_____
_____	generating ideas	_____
_____	determining audience	_____
_____	understanding purpose	_____
_____	tone	_____
_____	other (please indicate)	_____

### COMPOSING

_____	thesis paragraph development	_____
_____	paragraph development	_____
_____	supporting detail	_____
_____	introduction/conclusion	_____
_____	other (please indicate)	_____

### REVISION

_____	organization	_____
_____	clarity/unity	_____
_____	sentence structure/variety	_____
_____	additional supporting detail	_____
_____	word choice	_____
_____	transitions	_____
_____	other (please indicate)	_____

### COPYEDITING

_____	spelling	_____
_____	punctuation	_____
_____	grammar/mechanics (specify)	_____

Tutor Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

Time tutored: \_\_\_\_\_

Tutors like the worksheet because it protects them when a student comes into the writing center thirty minutes before a paper is due to ask for help with an assignment. The tutor does the best job possible with the time allowed, but when the student receives a low grade on the paper, the student's reaction often is "I don't know what happened; I went to tutoring. I guess those writing center tutors don't know what they're doing." The referral/response worksheet lets the student and instructor know just what instruction was given and how much time was spent.

The tutors are asked to use the worksheet as a guide each time they tutor a writing assignment. The tutor might begin by asking "What is your topic?" "What ideas do you have about it?" "Who is the audience?" When the tutor feels that the student has completed the prewriting stage, they move on to composing. The tutor may ask, "What is your thesis?" "Will you read your paper aloud so that we can hear how you've supported your thesis?" Finally, when all rhetorical considerations have been addressed, the tutor reviews the spelling, punctuation, and usage errors with the student.

## Writers' Workshop

The third method of training is to involve tutors in a writer's workshop. Writing center tutors are usually good writers, with a desire for more recognition of their abilities. If we encourage them to write, to share their writing, and to publish, we not only help them with their writing, but we also have an opportunity to "shape" their tutoring. In a workshop in which their own work is edited and critiqued, they also see how it feels to be the tutee and realize that it can be a painful experience.

The idea for using editing response groups is not new. Elbow in *Writing With Power* devotes much of his discussion of revision to them. Judy also has many good suggestions for using editing response groups in *An Introduction to the Teaching of Writing*. However, in addition to participating in the workshop, we encourage our tutors to publish. Thus we have organized a weekly Writers' Workshop for writing center tutors to which they are encouraged to bring anything that they are writing, including essays, research papers, short stories, and poetry. Only those tutors who are writing and willing to share with the group may attend. The coordinator also shares personal writing projects to assure the tutors that we all struggle with the process. Judy suggests "that there is a 'transfer' from learning how to help another person with a paper and the long-range goal of helping students learn to revise their own work" (96). There is also a "transfer" when tutors learn to revise their own work and then begin to help another student with a paper.

In the writers' workshop we insure that tutors practice good response techniques. Groups are limited to five or six members, with each member required to bring some type of draft. One person in the group reads a draft aloud while the others listen. After finishing, the author may want to explain the purpose of the paper and ask if it has been achieved. Does the paper work for the audience for whom it is intended? The group may then comment on organization, tone, supporting detail, or other areas requiring major revision.

If the major concerns are taken care of, the author may request criterion-based feedback. In other words, are there any awkward sentences, incorrect word choices, misspelled words, or usage errors? The discussion must include supportive suggestions for revision, and tutors are encouraged to be tactful in giving suggestions. When members of the workshop finish revising their work, we encourage them to publish. We have collected information on all campus publications and have purchased books that list professional and commercial sources for all types of writing.

The Writers' Workshop is excellent training for tutors. They are less likely to be critical or dictating with students who come for tutoring because they know the feeling of having someone listen to and criticize their own writing. They practice non-directive responses in the workshop and are therefore more likely to use this approach when tutoring.

The only drawback to the workshop is that not all tutors participate. Those who are in creative writing classes seem to be the most regular participants, with those writing essays or research papers less likely to attend. Also, some tutors say they are not required to do any writing in their classes. It would be ideal if all tutors wrote every semester and were willing to share their writing in the workshop.

## Conclusion

These suggestions for daily, ongoing training by no means exhaust the possibilities for achieving well-trained writing tutors. But some form of continuous training in tutoring and writing is essential as a supplement to the usual orientation sessions and handbooks that are typical of most tutor-training programs.

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