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Dialogue in Tutor Training: Creating the Essential Space For Learning

Carol J. Singley & Holly W. Boucher

Conversation is the essence of peer tutoring. We mean this statement in a radical sense. Conversation—the form of communication we use for tutoring sessions—should structure all aspects of a peer tutoring program, from tutor training to administration. Our insistence upon dialogue as the underlying structure of a peer tutoring program comes from an even more fundamental conviction that true education consists of dialogue. [1] Where dialogue is lacking, information may be transferred, but little is learned. Students may be able to repeat what they have heard, but they have not appropriated this knowledge, they do not own it, and they will fail to use it. The responsive voices of dialogue create a space for play which enables learning, while monologue fills that space with the voice of authority and stifles any other voice that may intrude.

For learning is born out of a paradox. As Knoblauch and Brannon argue in their work on pedagogy and theory, a problem is what challenges us to create: conflict inspires learning (110). But the creative response to conflict requires the freedom to change—learning depends on the freedom to play. Purpose and play (or intention and creativity) are the prerequisites for the interaction which we call learning. Learning takes the form of conversation, because it consists of two aspects which interact and two or more participants who converse, posing questions and responding in turn. As Brazilian educator and theorist Paulo Freire points out, in learning nothing remains the same. The interlocutors *converse* (turn together) so that neither is *convinced* (defeated) but both are changed, or moved. Learning itself is a

productive paradox because it involves two aspects which we assume are opposites, but which actually create fruitful interplay.

Our educational system involves another kind of paradox—a destructive one this time, a contradiction. Practice contradicts theory in our educational system; the way we teach denies what we believe about learning. Our society is quintessentially practical, but we often forget how intractably backward pragmatism can be. Pragmatism frequently serves as a disguise for authoritarian teaching [2]—thus, it prevents us from questioning the traditional theory behind accepted practice. As Knoblauch and Brannon point out, “Too often apprentice teachers clamor for training programs which are myopically pragmatic, as though all possible class activities assumed the same theoretical underpinnings and were therefore interchangeable, a matter of personal taste” (98). We want to know what works in the classroom, but we remain blind to the fact that the classroom itself often does not work. It will not, in fact, work as we want it to until education includes students as participants in the dialogue which is both the process of learning and knowledge itself.

In order to understand the contradiction between traditional and modern theories of teaching, it is useful to examine the development of Western epistemology. To what kind of epistemology do we subscribe today, and how did this concept develop? What implications does this view of epistemology hold for our philosophy of education generally and for peer tutoring specifically?

Theories of Knowledge

The fundamental shift in the concept of knowledge from the traditional to the modern occurred with the work of Ockham in the fourteenth century. [3] (Here we depart from many historians of thought, such as Foucault, who locates the watershed in Western philosophy at the beginning of the seventeenth century.) It may seem simplistic to place Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas in one category, as representatives of traditional epistemology. But Plato and Aristotle shared a concept of language with early Christian Platonists and medieval realists and neo-Aristotelians, which we reject today: for all of them language was real. Human words reflected the Word, and human concepts reflected—however distantly—the Ideas that made up ultimate Truth. These thinkers insisted that we could know ultimate Truth, or perceive a reflection of it, through language. For words had a necessary, even divinely-ordained, relation to their meanings.

In turn, then, language was responsible for revealing the harmony of the universe. God’s plan was revealed in his Word. Human authors only

attempted to reflect the monologue of this ultimate Authority. Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian literary theorist who describes the opposition between internally persuasive and authoritative discourse, explains: “The authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own. . . . It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers. . . . Its language is a special (as it were, hieratic) language” (342). In the Middle Ages, Latin was the language of this authoritative monologue, and it excluded the very possibility of dialogue by refusing to give other languages the name of language. Latin was the language of learning, which made learning a monopoly of the Church. Thus all texts had to reflect the unique authoritative Text, the Bible. Words were the conduit of Truth, and as such they could not be allowed the perversion of creativity. They were all purpose and no play. Bound to contain absolute Truth, they could not create relative truth through discourse: “Authoritative discourse can not be represented—it is only transmitted” (Bakhtin 344).

Breaking with this traditional schema, Ockham asserted that words are not necessarily related to truth; a word is only arbitrarily linked to its meaning: “Language, no longer conceived as a sacrosanct and solitary embodiment of meaning and truth, becomes merely one of many possible ways to hypothesize meaning” (Bakhtin 370). Words are arbitrary because the bond between signifier and signified is recognized as a product of convention, not a reflection of reality. Ockham argued, further, that language exists only in the mind. Ideas are no longer considered universal truths, the constituents of ultimate reality, but are mere mental constructs, figments of the conceptual realm. Significantly, the modern theorist Bakhtin expresses the same view of language when he asserts, “Language—like the living concrete environment in which the consciousness of the verbal artist lives—is never unitary” (Bakhtin 288). Language becomes entirely relative in this new view of knowledge. It loses divine authority, but gains its own autonomous power, free of responsibility to ultimate authority. Language thus empowers its user. It is precisely this withdrawal of traditional authority which allows space for the play of learning (cf. Bakhtin 343).

Once discourse stops attempting to reflect a truth which exists prior to the human apprehension of it, discourse itself becomes a discovery, even a formulation of truth. As we recognize, what stimulates discourse is not the requirement to imitate, but the need to change. Discourse does not reflect the harmony of the universe, but addresses a disjunction in reality. Discourse begins a dialogue by attempting to respond to a problem; thus, discourse is essentially creative.

For modern thinkers, discourse constitutes knowledge. We do not write to reflect a reality beyond our text—instead we discover a reality through

the text, and the text itself is conceived in this dialogue between mind and world. Clearly teaching and peer tutoring must respond to modern discourse as it is, rather than attempting to ignore discourse even as we are “teaching” it, or trying to force discourse into the mold of classical and medieval epistemologies. We can only conclude that teaching must consist of dialogue, not monologue, since dialogue opens up the space that would foster true learning.

Paulo Freire translates the dichotomy between modern and traditional views of language into more political terms, but he still sees the shift as significant for pedagogy. Freire argues that the traditional perspective (that of the oppressor) treats language as a static entity in an attempt to resist change. Liberation and empowerment require seeing reality as a process and as a dialectic. Thus, Freire conceives of education as a “problem-posing,” as a consideration of reality’s disjunctions in an attempt to overcome them (116). Freire opposes this concept of problem-posing to the traditional treatment of education as banking: the teacher deposits knowledge in the passive students and can withdraw it at will—by submitting the students to exams, for instance (58). This educational structure locates all authority in the teacher, Freire argues, because the teacher speaks a monologue for which the students are a silent audience. The teacher actually steals the words of the students by reserving the authority to talk; the teacher thus also retains the authority to doubt the competence of his silenced students (129). Freire argues that education must, in contrast, consist of dialogue, and dialogue has no spectators. Education involves neither teachers nor students, but participants. Rather than accepting the teacher’s prescription as a cure for their ills, the participants, possessing their own language and using it in dialogue, begin to think critically and respond to the problems they now perceive in their world (81).

We may posit peer tutoring as the method for learning as our theory suggests it should be: where the “class” becomes a conversation, and teacher and learner cannot be distinguished. The participants interact to change each other—no one monopolizes knowledge, no one receives knowledge passively, because knowledge cannot be separated from the dialogue itself. This dialectical or dialogic method has profound implications for tutor training and for collaborative learning in general, for while we readily embrace the notions of collaboration through dialogue in our models of peer tutoring, we tend to neglect such notions when we design and implement tutor training programs.

More than teachers of writing or trainers of tutors, we are, as Ann Berthoff explains, philosophers. The way we structure our courses of instruction says everything about who we think we are and how we think we learn. Whether we like it or not, “pedagogy always echoes epistemology”

(Berthoff 11); very often our pedagogy reveals unexamined theories of authoritative learning. In the great variety of tutor training programs we see across the country, some, for reasons of economy—shortages of staff, time, or money—have only the barest essentials of a training program, with little formal training beyond orientation and end-of-semester reviews. In these programs, tutors, if and when they get together, seldom do more than relate very generally, “how things are going.” More typically, a full-fledged tutor training program is in place, usually in the form of regular meetings, sometimes with credit-bearing courses. Obviously, some training is better than none, but there are still problems in most programs in that the syllabus for the training is usually developed and fixed by the trainer/instructor, not created in collaboration by the peer tutors.

A tutor training model should work *with*, not *against* collaborative learning theory. This means that both the ends and means of tutor training should be collaborative. Regardless of the amount of discussion built into it, a syllabus designed by the trainer exists as a fairly non-negotiable contract. All dialogue must take place either within the confines of this syllabus or as an approved departure from it. In a Bakhtinian sense, the traditional training model, then, is “authoritative discourse.” As such, it is “sharply demarcated,” has “a single meaning and demands our unconditional allegiance” (343). The syllabus itself is an “authorial monologue” that more or less presumes passive listeners.

Rather than see the topics for training as fixed, we should aim for a dialogue between the agenda and the tutors using it. That is, the agenda should create the *conditions* for a dialogue, should be the space where authority withdraws and where the conversation which is learning can go on.

By this we do not mean to propose agenda-less training sessions. On the contrary, in our experience fairly predictable issues will emerge during the course of a tutor’s involvement with a program. These include interpersonal topics like the nature of the tutor-tutee relationship; the appropriate uses of conferencing and commenting on papers; faculty-tutor relations; strategies for working with reluctant, dependent, or hostile tutees; and so on. We similarly find topics related to critical thinking, reading, and writing: choosing or finding a topic, organizing information, developing a thesis statement, testing the validity of evidence, polishing style, managing time, blocks to reading or writing, strategies for essay exams and research papers, and so on. While all of these topics certainly could be selected and arranged on a syllabus and placed in the order we know they are likely to emerge, they will have more relevance to tutors when they arise naturally from actual experiences and when tutors themselves have responsibility for generating topics. For example, meeting in small groups or rotating responsibility,

tutors themselves can draw up plans for future training sessions, choose the topics for sessions, lead discussions, and otherwise structure their training as a natural extension of their own tutoring experiences.

Neither are we saying that in such a tutor-centered training we dismiss the role of the instructor or trainer. On the contrary, the trainer has the difficult task of ensuring the conditions for fruitful dialectic. This responsibility demands dedicated and creative teaching. The result is not a class in which tutors are free to do whatever they like, but a rigorous, challenging enterprise in which tutors are responsible for their own learning. As I. A. Richards' studies of language and learning have shown, "information stored in the course of *exploring activity* is more readily recovered than information passively received" (11-12). When we ask tutors to select from their experiences what is successful, provocative, or troubling, we are expanding their opportunities for learning. Bartlett clarifies this concept: "The exploration must definitely aim to make use of the structural features of the situation" (12). We can not distinguish between the structure and content of the training session: whatever the topic of discussion, the chief thing that students learn is the structure of dialogue, which is also the form of the session itself.

We do not argue against the *idea* of topic-oriented agenda, but we believe a syllabus is best left as an abstract concept that does not take concrete shape until the tutors themselves discover the need to explore respective topics. We are thus advocating an environment in which tutors generate and respond to issues that are important to their tutoring. In sharing this responsibility for learning with tutors, we are in a sense viewing them not only as student tutors but as incipient or potential directors, participants in the shaping of the peer tutoring program. Of course, eliminating all defined roles is impractical as well as undesirable since tutors will naturally look to directors, trainers and more experienced tutors for guidance or advice. But again, Bakhtin's commitment to interaction and dialogue is helpful. We are aiming, through dialogue, for tutors to tell their own stories and achieve an "internally persuasive discourse—as opposed to one that is externally authoritative" (343). This discourse is achieved by tutors' observations and analysis of their own tutoring experiences, presented through role-playing or analyzed case studies. In this way discourse is drawn into what Bakhtin calls the "contact zone" in a process of the "outside word being assimilated with one's own word." This leads to new applications, new conditions, "interanimating relationships with new contexts." More important, one enters into "interaction, a *struggle* with other internally persuasive discourses" (345-46). Through the conflict between these discourses, new learning takes place.

A Dialogic Method of Training Tutors

We introduce in this section not simply a list of steps or a static model, but something which is, in the sense that Berthoff uses the term, a “method.” As Berthoff explains, a method is “reflexive,” “dialectical by definition,” and useful to us as a “way of relating ends and means”; it provides a necessary incorporation of both theory and practice without the static connotations produced by the word “model” (51). Following this method, we place attention on the on-going discoveries of our tutors, allowing their own questions, problems, dilemmas, and discomforts to construct the agenda from which discussion, new perspectives, and eventual new actions spring. Practically, this is accomplished when tutors discuss the actual contacts they have with tutees. The result is highly individualized training that takes into account the unique features of each tutor, program, and institution. Our method is in three parts: Assessment, Interpretation, and Action. It offers not only a way to troubleshoot difficulties within a program, but a plan for the training itself. [4]

Assessment Stage

In the Assessment stage, tutors and trainer identify areas of concern or need within the program. This collection of data and observations—a self-conscious review rather than simply an airing of complaints—will become the stuff and substance of the training sessions. Data may be obtained through a variety of means, for example, informally when members of the program get together to exchange views and experiences, or formally through a director’s arranged observation of tutors in session with students, the taping of a tutoring session, or tutors’ observations of each other. The key point here is that the assessment procedure should suit the program and the people involved with it. For example, an assessment through informal discussion among tutors and trainer may be sufficient for a small, newly-formed program, but become inadequate once the program expands, when written surveys or periodic reviews may be more appropriate. Customarily, the trainer is responsible for collecting and presenting these data, but in assuming this role, the trainer positions herself as an authority figure. Therefore, we believe that tutors should present their own material for discussion, thus becoming more involved with and responsible for their own learning. It might be noted that non-verbal messages constitute “data.” For example, a tutee’s aggressive or diffident body language in a tutoring session or the fact that the tutor is doing all the writing in a particular session can provide significant information for discussion later.

Interpretation Stage

In this second stage, that of Interpretation, we engage our tutors in conversation about the distinct roles of tutor as friend, teacher, judge, collaborator, interested reader, and so on—and the appropriate occasions for each of these roles. We also engage in dialogue about what constitutes an appropriate response to student work—written comments or conferencing—and how and why each form of response is valuable under certain circumstances.

Tutors might analyze sample responses such as these, drawn from an actual questionnaire.

Sample A

More than a teacher, I think of myself as primarily a friend to the students I work with. I haven't seen any papers yet, but when I do, I'll try to emphasize to the students that I'm just another peer trying to help them out with any writing problems they might have. I want more than anything to make my suggestions clear without being too overbearing; I hope that my comments will be accurate without sounding "teacherly." I think I'm more comfortable, though, with the idea of written comments than I am with conferencing—what am I going to say to students once they are in the office? I really have no idea what these conferences are supposed to be for. I AM excited to work with students, though, because I think they'll be really enthusiastic about the program—I think they'll take it as seriously as I do.

Sample B

I'm a lot different now than when I started as a peer tutor a year ago. I think I'm much more "business-like" or professorial. I found that students took advantage of me . . . when I was much more of a "peer." Now I think I've become a bit less compassionate; I just don't take as much crap anymore.

These sample responses invite a number of interesting interpretations, all of them revolving around the problem of the tutor's roles and responsibilities *vis à vis* their tutors.

In Sample B, for example, we meet the experienced, even jaded, tutor. We will want to discuss with tutors what it means to be taken advantage of, how tutors can identify the "leaning syndrome," and how they help students take responsibility for their own learning. How important is compassion? When is it appropriate in the tutorial session? What is its opposite? Are there approaches that avoid the extremes found in the sample?

Our method for tutor training, though tutor- and experience-based, does not overlook the need for challenging readings to inform and shape that experience. We endorse a training program that includes reading as well as reflection and discussion. Now, however, most training programs include readings of a practical nature—tips for marking a text or organizing a paper, for example. Some programs may even include pedagogical theories for teaching reading or writing.

Useful as these practice-oriented readings are, it is important to balance them with readings on the philosophy and theory of learning. For example, in addition to reading Isabella Halsted's plea to teach *writing* not *error* ("Putting Error in its Place") or Nancy Sommers' enjoinder to make comments on papers specific ("Responding to Student Writing"), students should also challenge their assumptions about teaching strategies in an article like Peter Elbow's "Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process." We believe that tutors must first understand themselves both as learners and teachers—or at least be engaged in this endeavor—before they can offer useful assistance to others.

Furthermore, readings should be presented in the spirit in which they were written, as dialogues in a continuing debate over teaching and learning. For example, juxtaposing Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer's conclusions that formal grammar instruction does not improve the teaching of writing with Martha Kolln's argument for functional or applied grammar; or Orwell's injunction to use concrete language with Ohmann's advice to remain abstract, or Comprone's "wheel" with D'Angelo's paradigms; or Piaget's division of language learning into predictable stages with Vygotsky's argument that development varies according to the acquisition of language and culture all present tutors with controversies that surround a topic, again reinforcing the notion that learning is itself dialogue. Trainers must not only be familiar with the current literature on composition, rhetoric, and the psycho/social dimensions of learning but must also know how to present these findings effectively in order to promote dialogue and challenge students' previous conceptions.

Although difference causes tension and conflict, it also inspires dialogue, which is precisely the essence of peer tutoring (the creative conversation between writers and readers). Participants in dialogue continually readjust their stance, constantly giving and taking ideas. When they achieve agreement, they are not opponents, one of whom surrenders to the other's position; neither do they blindly choose a balance midway between two opposing positions. Instead, the conflicting interests interact dynamically to produce an entirely new conceptual entity. In dealing with a conflict on any level we do not aim merely to balance opposing interests by finding the arbitrary midpoint of compromise. Rather, we wish to address or capitalize upon that conflict by reaching new meanings and actions.

Action Stage

In the third stage, that of Action, tutors modify their tutoring practices as a result of new learning. These new strategies are necessarily temporary; it is impossible to prescribe permanent solutions because a list of actions

generated today will become outmoded tomorrow, as the conditions of peer tutoring are affected by the new changes. Our goal in training, then, is to facilitate critical thinking and provide the opportunities for this thinking to be translated into action. Action engenders more thoughts and impressions—data—which in turn require more reflection and dialogue, and so on, recursively. Thus the same issues in peer tutoring will arise repeatedly, different every time. Just as no linguistic utterance is repeatable, the nature of time itself assures ever-new sets of conditions and responses that demand new interpretations and actions. The two samples presented earlier could conceivably represent the attitudes of the same tutor after a year or more.

Conclusion

The dialogic method has implications for change throughout the college or university as well as within the program. In order to use dialogue on the institutional level in the same productive way we use it in tutoring sessions, we must begin to see it as an essential catalyst for program growth, one of the collaborative processes we want to encourage at every level of learning. These changes can range from improvements in procedure to more far-reaching changes in educational philosophy and practice. For example, the common complaint of tutors that students do not come to sessions ready to work may be solved procedurally, by drawing up a contract for tutoring which both tutor and tutee sign, or by publicizing the rights and responsibilities of each member of the tutoring relationship. But such an issue may also signal the need to reexamine program philosophy. Does the program—or the institution—treat tutors as mere proofreaders or editors? Do faculty take the peer tutor's role as collaborator seriously, or do they see the tutor as a mere transmitter of knowledge, as a kind of convenient "substation" situated between the professor who generates knowledge and the student who receives knowledge? [5]

If dialogue is extended into the area of faculty-tutor relations, tutors and professors can begin to "co-labor" on the subject matter and assignments in various courses. In such an endeavor, each participant has valuable insights that aid the other's task. For example, the professor knows what the goals for understanding and knowledge are in a given writing assignment, but the tutor knows first hand what the student's actual experience with the material or assignment is. The tutor's specific training in writing matters can even help pinpoint students' difficulties with a particular writing assignment. Is the assignment clearly defined? Are students asked to perform cognitive tasks for which they have adequate preparation (critical analysis following a summary, for example)? Are the audience, purpose, and length specified? In an atmosphere of collaboration, both professors and tutors are learning as well as facilitating the learning of others.

Intrinsic to our theory of learning and our method of tutor training is that all learning is a dialectical process and that ALL tutor programs are developing ones. Once fixed, a training agenda loses its ability to respond to the every-evolving needs of tutors and tutees. We should therefore adopt a training method that is grounded in tutors' own experiences. For this reason, we should also examine critically the current tendency to carbon-copy a successful tutoring model onto a new program. We believe that tutor training should develop organically from each program in its institution. Training should grow out of dialogue, the essential ingredient in collaborative learning, and tutors' experiences should serve as the text of their training.

Notes

1 Kenneth Bruffee provides an excellent discussion of learning as a social act in his article, "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind,'" *College English* 46 (Nov. 1984): 635-52.

2. We use the terms *authoritarian* and *authoritative* interchangeably in this article since *authoritarian* seems congruent with the meaning Bakhtin gives *authoritative* in his essay, "Discourse in the Novel," (*The Dialogic Imagination*) discussed later.

3. For a full discussion of the significance of Ockham's theories, see Leff Gordon, *William of Ockham: The Metamorphosis of Scholastic Discourse* (Totowa, NJ: Roman and Littlefield, 1975).

4. We employed a version of this method in workshops at the Second Annual Conference of Peer Tutoring, Bucknell University, October 1985, and the New England Writing Centers Association Conference, Rhode Island College, April 1986. See Proceedings of the Rhode Island Conference for a complete description. We thank Ann Doyle and Joe Fernandez, co-leaders of the sessions, for helping us develop through dialogue many of the concepts we present here.

5. We borrow these metaphors from Harvey Kail, "The Politics of Peer Tutoring," Second Annual Conference on Peer Tutoring, Bucknell University, October 1985.

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