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## Writer, Peer Tutor, and the Computer: A Unique Relationship

*Pamela B. Farrell*

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During the last two years, I have observed something unique in the relationship between tutors and writers in our writing center. The interaction has probably always been there; I just had not been aware of it. Tutors and writers, all high school students in grades 9-12, have varying social, educational and ethnic backgrounds; yet when they are working together in front of the computer, all differences vanish and a new relationship develops. As Dawn, a tutor, explains, "Once you are able to put aside all the unimportant stuff and learn to trust one another, then I don't think background really matters." Another tutor comments, "I think variety [in backgrounds] is very important, because you not only give to someone what you have experienced and what you know, but you also get from them a new viewpoint or a new perspective, a different opinion, a new idea." Students who normally would never meet in the course of the school day now have new friends with whom to collaborate in a different way.

In order to study this interaction, I have interviewed some of the student tutors and writers (Endnote #1). The results are not surprising, yet these writers and tutors immediately focused on the very ideas I had not been able to pinpoint. To summarize their responses, they see the computer acting as a third party or neutral ground, encouraging collaboration, giving immediate feedback and ease of revision, inviting more writing, opening dialogue between writer and tutor, acting as a learning device, and giving writers pride in their work. If the computer does, in fact, interact with writer and tutor in these ways, what more could we as writing center directors want? With some examples of each of these kinds of interaction, perhaps we can encourage more of what is already happening among writer, tutor, and computer.

The experience of working with a tutor while writing on the computer is an unusual one. Sometimes when I am working on an article or poem for publication, I become the writer and ask new tutors to help me as I work at the computer. This role-playing experience helps us both understand the role that each has in this relationship. Terry, a gregarious honor student and tutor, describes the difference between tutoring a writer who is working at the computer and one who is not at a computer:

There's a big difference because when it's [the writing is] on the screen, . . . you're both looking at it . . . you can both look for errors and not feel that it's the student's paper, because you are both looking to fix the printout on the screen. . . . It's a third party. . . . when you have a class look for grammatical errors, it's much easier if it's someone else's writing or something that's not close to you. The screen sort of gives you some distance.

Other tutors agree with Terry's perception. Dave, a writer who also became a tutor, says that when writers see their work on the monitor, they get the idea that "I didn't do it, you didn't do it, the computer did it. And the computer can't talk back to you, so you can attack it!" I am sure we have all written work we would like to blame on machines. The monitor becomes neutral ground where both writer and tutor can work on a clean copy which can be read by both. "It's easier because you don't have to worry about the person's handwriting or if they've revised on the same written paper," comments Dawn. Even the writers are aware of the difference. As Jay, a writer with minimum basic skills, comments, "I was able to see clearly what I was writing and I could benefit from the help of others."

Collaboration has become the key word as students share work on the monitor, share problems with writing, and collaborate on ideas from pre-writing to final drafts. Steve, a sophomore tutor, explains, "If we're done with something of theirs [the writers], sometimes I put something of mine on the screen, and they like to see what I've done." From the other side, writer Rob thinks, "For other people to judge it [my writing] and evaluate it, I think it makes it a lot easier for them to see it up on the screen instead of seeing me work with it on paper." A collaborative revision results from this interaction. For instance, after working with Dave, Rob says, "Dave and I could see the work on the screen; we could see what was going on; we could see where to change punctuation, where to change words if any needed to be changed, and you know that's a lot better than writing on paper."

One of our frequent visitors for two years has been Walter, a dysgraphic student (Endnote #2). Many of the tutors have worked with him on the computer, and we have all seen his pride when he shared something he had written on the monitor. When Walter has asked him how to spell words, Dave encouraged him to "just type it out on the computer and see if it looks right" before going to the dictionary. Dave believes that on the computer

“you say the words and spell them out in your mind, and you’ll see it on the screen and you also hear yourself saying it. So it really helped him [Walter] spell words better.” Collaboration is just one way in which the computer has helped Walter. The immediate feedback which he receives by seeing his work appear in neat form on the monitor “gave him that lift he often needed to be positive about his writing . . . and it gave him a feeling that he belonged, that he wasn’t different from other students” (Dawn).

Walter is not alone; Rob, a creative writing major, describes how the computer “just makes it [my writing] right where you can see it. You can see what’s going on and sometimes that’s better than when you’re writing—you can see everything you’ve written already up on the screen.” Another writer admits that he “could see the mistakes when I looked at the monitor with the peer tutor.”

Not only do writers see their work immediately, with and without mistakes, but they also know how easy it is to revise what they have written. Terry explains, “What the computer helps [you] do is go from . . . a good or strong paper to a really good paper, you know, changing a B to a B+ or a B+ to an A-, adding that little difference there.” Several writers agree that revision is easier on the computer and that this ease takes the fear of writing away. Others indicate that the ease of revision “makes you more willing to change things around knowing that you don’t have to waste paper, you don’t have to erase, and it’s fun.” Some people, however, just come to the writing center when they have to type a paper. Jessica, for instance, admits that the reason she uses the computer is that “it’s so much easier than the typewriter.”

With the encouragement of the tutor, writers tend to do more writing on the computers. Last year, a writer discovered, “I’ve written over 20 long poems since using the computer. Without it, I probably would have written only three. Every time I sit in front of the computer, I somehow manage to work out and write down at least a rough idea that otherwise might be lost in my questionable memory.” The ease of revision and desire to collaborate may be the reasons for the increased output. On the other hand, Dawn senses that you don’t have the classroom atmosphere of writing at a desk when you are sitting at the computer, “so the writer who often times can’t think of anything to write may come up with some great ideas at the computer.” Another tutor believes that “students write more when they can write on the computer, and they save it all together so they don’t have to worry about a paper being lost or ripped or anything like that.” Those of us who have lost files on the computer may differ, but one tutor even thinks a writer’s loss of a file is important because she has “done the same thing, and it’s a shared pain!”

Once the tutor and writer can share an experience at the computer, the dialogue begins. Tutors have made me aware of a technique many writers use to open a dialogue. I refer to it as the computer ploy. Writers use the excuse of not knowing how to do something on the computer; then the tutor discovers that “the questions were really about writing and not about the computer.” Another tutor found out that “they [the writers] will want to underline [using the computer], but before they do that they want to know what you think or how this reads, so they usually have another motive behind their question.”

Some tutors enjoy the opportunity to get to know a writer by working on the computer. For instance, one admits that he does “weird things” at the computer, because “it’s very easy to get to know someone when you’re working at the computer.” A dialogue between a student writer and a tutor who are working together at a computer frequently takes the form of a dialogue in which the student’s writing is developed through questioning. Dawn describes how she is able to get information out of the writer by looking at the writing on the monitor. She asks writers how they feel about the assignment and if they have any idea what they want to say, while she and the writer are sitting eye to eye with the monitor. The computer seems to act as a catalyst to open the dialogue necessary for an effective tutor-writer relationship.

Invariably, a tutor must occasionally assume the role of instructor. Our tutors are trained to be readers/listeners, yet learning takes place on the part of both tutor and writer, and the computer becomes a learning device in this interaction. Dana, a senior, explains that, when she puts something on the monitor, she asks the tutors to help her “construct the sentence better or add a different word that would sound better.” Although many teachers would suggest that Dana refer to a thesaurus or grammar book instead, the computer becomes the means by which Dana and the tutor may question grammatical structure or word choice; they may, in fact, look in a thesaurus or grammar book for reinforcement and will probably remember what they have learned! The tutor also learns from this experience to apply the lessons learned. One tutor notes, “I see on the monitor problems the writers have and relate those to my own writing.” Another mentions a similar advantage: “As a peer tutor, I get to see how others write, observe what they’ve done right and wrong. I then use this [knowledge] to better my own writing.”

Finally, one of the most important yet unexpected benefits of the interaction between the writer and tutor at the computer is the pride writers develop in their efforts. Some of our brightest days have been the ones in which both advanced placement students and basic skills students have successfully completed a piece of writing and printed a neat, legible copy to

share. All of us feel a sense of accomplishment when we have completed a written assignment; but when that writing has involved others throughout the writing process, the pride becomes greater when we are able to show that completed product. Several of the tutors and I remember the first time our dysgraphic student wrote and printed out something. One tutor recalls, "He was so proud of himself and so proud of his work. . . . It [the computer] really made a difference!"

Does the computer make a difference in the interaction between writer and tutor? My response is enthusiastically affirmative. In any writing center, the director depends on an outstanding team of trained peer tutors who create the kind of atmosphere in which writers grow, share, collaborate, and enjoy writing. If the computer adds another element to that atmosphere, then why not use it to its full potential as part of the interaction between writer and tutor.

## Notes

1. The interviews were taped January 22-23, 1986, and February 26, 1986, in The Writing Center at Red Bank Regional High School.
2. *The Dictionary of Reading and Learning Disabilities Terms* defines dysgraphia as the "inability to perform the required motor tasks for handwriting and, thus the power to express ideas by writing."

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