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Asking the Right Questions: A Heuristic for Tutors

Evelyn Ashton-Jones

Perhaps the most critical problem facing writing center directors today is defining the role of the peer tutor and helping tutors understand that role. The centrality of this issue, reflected in writing center literature over the past fifteen years, has been reaffirmed in a current debate initiated by peer tutors themselves, a debate which focuses on exactly what they should be called: peer tutors or writing consultants? Harvey Kail's commentary on the Third Annual Conference on Writing and Peer Tutoring emphasizes the confusion that tutors feel about who they are and what they should be doing in tutoring sessions—tutoring or consulting?

Probably one reason for this confusion derives, as John Trimbur points out, from the very kinds of students we select as peer tutors in our writing centers. They are, he maintains, usually students who have achieved success with the “traditional academic mode of teaching and learning.” Thus, even as they consciously try to establish relationships based on a sense of peer equality, they are likely to reproduce in their tutorial sessions the “hierarchical structure in which the teacher passes down knowledge to the students” (22). For the tutors themselves, ambiguous and hazily defined roles create a conflict of values, as they struggle to assert loyalty both to their fellow students and to an academic system which has freely rewarded them for their efforts (23). It is not surprising, then, that the peer tutors attending the conference largely rejected the label “peer tutor” and claimed for themselves the title “writing consultant.”

Yet another cause of this ambiguity and confusion is our own lack of knowledge about what tutoring really is. Stephen North's observation in 1984 that “there is not a single published study of what happens in writing

center tutorials” still holds true four years later. The “anecdotal accounts of tutorial relationships” and “snippets of (often recreated) tutorial dialogue” that North found in 1984 still exist today in our published literature. Clearly, North’s observation still accurately depicts our lack of theoretical knowledge about the tutoring process: “The fact is . . . our staple instructional method is one we know almost nothing about” (28).

In analyzing contemporary writing center practices, North highlights our theoretical confusion as well as the difficulties it creates for our tutors. Guidelines for tutor training, he remarks, fall into three main categories, each based on an assumption about the role a tutor should play in relation to his or her tutee. The first type of training program assumes that tutoring writing is like tutoring any subject; it is largely a matter of transmitting information in the role Ken Bruffee calls the “little teacher.” The second places the tutor in the role of “intervener” in the writing process in which the student is engaged. The third establishes the tutor as a “text expert” whose job is to edit and criticize the texts of tutees, passing on “critical insights in tactful, useful ways” (29). It probably isn’t too far-fetched to suggest that many tutor training programs ask tutors to function simultaneously in all three roles—as teachers, interveners, and experts. Our own theoretical confusion is often transferred to our tutors. It is no wonder, then, that tutors themselves have difficulty in defining their goals and responsibilities.

This theoretical uncertainty about tutors’ roles is also mirrored in our often fuzzy conceptions of the functions and purposes of writing centers within their institutional contexts. Should the center be a skills clinic for remedial writers? Should it be a supreme court where writers can obtain judgments or rulings on their prose? Should it be a place where writers can talk about their papers and their efforts to compose them? We have never reached a consensus. Adding to this confusion is the evolution of the modern Socratic writing center from the grammar lab of fifteen or twenty years ago and the fact that we all are in various stages of this evolution.

Despite this confusion, however, our major theorists do agree that writing centers exist primarily to further the cognitive growth of students through individualized, student-centered pedagogies. Thom Hawkins asserts that writing centers should put “control and responsibility for learning back into the hands of students” (xiv). North believes that “writing centers are an ideal setting for a pedagogy of intervention which will help us produce better writers, not [just] better writing” (“Idea” 438). Bruffee argues that writing centers provide a much-needed alternative to classroom teaching, an alternative which models the process by which knowledge is established and maintained in the world at large (“Collaborative Learning” 637-638; 646). In other words, these scholars are asserting that the writing center, by

definition, is not another classroom; rather, it is an alternative which, according to Tilly and John Warnock, commits us to “individuation rather than to mass production, to growth from within rather than to packaging from without” (16).

This responsibility to advance the cognitive growth of our tutees cannot be realized by tutors who act in the role of “shaman, guru, or mentor,” as Hawkins cautions, but rather by those who view themselves as “architects and partners of collaborative learning . . . who redesign the learning environment so that more of the responsibility and the activity of learning is shifted onto the learner” (xii). The task of tutors in the modern writing center is to help tutees “develop a critical consciousness toward their own writing” (Warnock 18). Clearly, in training tutors, writing center directors must present the kinds of tutoring methods which foster a spirit of critical inquiry, which do not cast tutors in “little teacher” or “writing consultant” roles.

Despite our goals and efforts to attain such ideals, however, tutors often find it all too easy to lapse into a “directive” mode of tutoring: silently reading students’ papers, identifying defects, and issuing tutorial “commands” usually couched in non-threatening, nurturing language, but commands nonetheless. In fact, one article in a recent issue of *Writing Lab Newsletter* even suggests, despite current theory, that this “imperative mode” of tutoring is more helpful than the “interrogative mode” which leads tutees to the sense of discovery and self-affirmation that makes them better thinkers and writers (Johnson 3). However, this directive, or imperative, approach is clearly counterproductive in light of the most recent theory and research.

In fact, we ourselves may be most at fault: we may unintentionally encourage such lecture-type, fix-it modes of tutoring in the ways that we interact with our tutors. Time pressures, administrative tasks, tutor and director burn-out—whatever the reason—we may encourage tutors to use directive approaches by unconsciously using directive methods in training them. In doing so, we encourage tutors to lose sight of the tutorial session as a vehicle for promoting cognitive development in a non-traditional setting. We may be losing sight of our own objectives in training tutors and, ultimately, of the crucial function writing centers perform.

Bruffee sees the job tutors must perform as one of engaging in a conversation. “The first steps to learning to think better,” he says, “are to learn to converse better” (“Peer Tutoring” 6). Even though the tutor and tutee brainstorm, write, and edit together, what is most important is that they “converse.” It is the fact of *conversation* that spurs intellectual growth. Bruffee’s theoretical rationale for peer tutoring, and for collaborative learning in general, emphasizes that conversation is essential to learning:

Writing always has its roots deep in the acquired ability to carry on the social symbolic exchange we call conversation . . . Our task must involve engaging students in conversation at as many points in the writing process as possible and . . . we should contrive to ensure that that conversation is similar in as many ways as possible to the way we would like them eventually to write. (“Peer Tutoring” 7)

Bruffee’s comment suggests a productive methodology for encouraging students to take responsibility for themselves and their own writing processes; it also suggests implicitly a relationship between the writing process of the tutee and the *tutoring process* of the tutor. If, as Bruffee suggests, tutor talk should resemble the way we want our students to approach the writing process, then we must ensure that our tutors talk in open-ended, exploratory ways and not in directive, imperative, restrictive modes. In other words, the way a tutor interacts with a tutee should reflect the open-ended nature of the writing process. Just as the act of composing initiates an exploration of the self and a subject in relation to a given writing assignment, the act of tutoring should initiate an exploration of the tutor’s self in relation to the situation at hand and the tutorial options it presents. Taken one step further, this analogy also suggests that our “director talk” should take the form of the kind of talk tutors should engage in. That is, to extend Bruffee’s model of collaborative learning to the director-tutor relationship, we must engage tutors in conversation at as many points in the training process as possible and ensure that that conversation is similar in as many ways as possible to the way we would eventually like them to tutor.

If tutors, like writers, must be encouraged to evaluate their rhetorical situations and to explore and discover their options, then we, as directors, must guide tutors through this process. Our task is to show tutors how they can, through a process of self-inquiry, generate the kinds of questions which will help their tutees make writing decisions. What I am suggesting here is that, rather than prescribing “remedies” to “cure” tutors’ tutoring “problems,” we should offer them strategies that allow them to discover appropriate responses. Brannon and Knoblauch caution us against “appropriating” students’ texts (40); let’s not appropriate tutors’ sessions either. We should not approach tutors’ methodologies from the perspective of an Ideal Way. Instead, we should help them develop heuristic abilities to assess their own rhetorical (tutorial) situations and devise appropriate tutorial strategies. Tutors must learn to ask themselves the right kinds of questions about how to tutor so that they can help students ask the right kinds of questions about their own papers.

Of course, training tutors to master this kind of tutorial dialogue is not easy, especially when they have assimilated the directive approaches often found in the classroom. The problem is that it is difficult to translate such goals into the process of tutoring. Contemporary composition theory and

pedagogy provide a generative methodology that enables tutors to engage effectively in Socratic dialogue, in the conversation essential to productive tutoring sessions.

Perhaps the most useful generative “thinking” approach is the heuristic, because it can help tutors generate questions to guide rather than direct tutees. While most published heuristics help writers generate subject matter for their papers, a heuristic can generate information for any intellectual endeavor. The heuristic I am presenting here will help tutors generate the *kinds* of questions they can ask their tutees; it is *not* a set of questions to ask the student. Nor is it meant to be a rigid, closed procedure or a crutch for tutors. Experienced tutors have already internalized such questions; eventually, the new tutor will internalize them as well.

Inexperienced tutors will find that the heuristic offers them a framework for exploring various tutorial options. Advanced tutors may discover areas of self-inquiry they hadn’t considered. The primary value of this heuristic, however, is that it encourages tutors to develop a critical awareness of their own tutoring methods so that they can discover and develop their own tutorial strategies. Moreover, it removes from tutor training the kind of prescriptive approach we want tutors themselves to avoid in their tutoring. In other words, it allows us, as directors, to implement tutor training in a non-prescriptive, non-directive way—one which will help tutors take an active role in their own training and cognitive development.

The tutoring heuristic is divided into four groups, each with a different emphasis. “Establishing Rapport” suggests questions tutors may ask themselves in order to create a positive, productive atmosphere for a tutoring session. “Exploring Potential” helps the tutor and tutee find a focus for their dialogue. “Discovering Strategies” provides a framework for helping the tutor and student find specific approaches to specific problems. The “On-Going Self-Review” presents questions tutors should ask themselves throughout a session, questions designed to keep them constantly aware of the nature of the dialogue in which they are participating. Even though the questions are arranged sequentially, tutors should not feel compelled to follow a strict sequence as they talk with tutees. Rather, tutors should remain flexible and responsive to tutees’ needs, however and whenever they are presented.

Writing center directors can adapt this heuristic for use in their own centers, adding or deleting questions if necessary. Tutors will need some initial guidance in using this heuristic. Perhaps it is best to introduce the heuristic to tutors during the semester’s orientation workshop. The director will want to illustrate how the questions can help beginning tutors determine strategies for individual tutoring sessions, perhaps by staging mock

tutorials. Finally, it is important that tutors understand that they need not laboriously read and answer each question each time they tutor a student; rather, they should become familiar with the general makeup and intent of the heuristic so that they can begin to internalize its overall approach.

A Heuristic for Tutors

Directions:

This heuristic will help you generate the kinds of questions that you can ask a student during a tutoring session. It is meant to help you and the student carry on a productive, focused dialogue. Use it as a quick reference sheet, but don't feel compelled to answer every question or to follow its sequence strictly.

Establishing Rapport

- 1) What are the student's actions telling me about his or her attitude? Is the student comfortable? Apprehensive? Eager to learn? Hostile? Insecure?
- 2) How do I feel toward the student? Friendly? Superior? Sympathetic? Condescending?
- 3) How is the student perceiving me? What kinds of messages am I unconsciously sending? Are they the messages I *want* to send?
- 4) How can I put the student at ease? Establish rapport? Set the stage for this session?
- 5) Should I try to boost the student's confidence? Take extra care to be supportive?

Exploring Potential

- 6) How does the student feel about writing in general? How does the student perceive himself or herself as a writer? How can I help the student examine his or her writing habits or processes?
- 7) What does the student want to accomplish in this session?
- 8) What do I want to accomplish? Is there a gap between these two goals?
- 9) What questions can I ask to help us establish the best focus for this session? Should we focus on prewriting? Problem-solving? Finishing a draft? Revising? Editing for mechanics and style?
- 10) How does the student feel about this writing assignment?
- 11) What writing activities has the student engaged in so far for this assignment? How does the student feel about his or her work so far?

- 12) What does the student want to achieve in this paper? What is its rhetorical situation: purpose, audience, main point? What is the assignment?
- 13) What questions can I ask to guide the student to discover the area of the paper which most needs work?

Discovering Strategies

- 14) Now that we have a focus and an area to work on, how can I encourage the *student* to suggest strategies?
- 15) What other strategies will help the student? Should I suggest them, or should I guide the student in exploring and discovering them?
- 16) As we proceed through the session, what questions can I ask to help the student discover and solve each writing problem?
- 17) What questions can I ask to help the student restate and expand on the ideas we are discussing?
- 18) How can I help the student see that the strategies we are using are relevant to future writings?

On-going Self-Review

- 19) How is the student reacting to this session? To me as a tutor? Am I talking too much? Am I focusing on the student's paper or on the student as a writer?
- 20) Am I really helping the student or just trying to get the session over with?
- 21) Am I remaining open to new developments that could shift the focus of the session in a more profitable direction?
- 22) Am I encouraging the student to take responsibility or am I telling the student what to do?
- 23) Am I asking open-ended questions or simply asking the student to agree with me?
- 24) How can I leave the student with a positive impression of himself or herself as a writer? With a willingness to continue to improve the paper?
- 25) What are the strengths of this session? The weaknesses? How can I improve my tutoring?

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