

1-1-1989

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Recommended Citation

Johnstone, Anne (1989) "The Writing Tutorial as Ecology: A Case Study," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 2, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1179>

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The Writing Tutorial as Ecology: A Case Study

Anne Johnstone

In “The Ecology of Writing,” Marilyn Cooper argues that writers work, not as solitary “meaning makers” who construct their audiences, but as communicators who use in writing what they know about their readers as “real social beings” (372). In Cooper’s view, writers and their readers influence one another’s styles, purposes and ideas in a process of interaction that she compares to a biological ecology. As in an ecosystem, when agricultural and climatic patterns develop in response to each other, in groups of readers and writers, the forms and purposes of communications and the ideologies informing them develop interactively.

The metaphor of an ecology suggests a dynamic and holistic way of seeing writing tutorials. I would like to use it here to describe the interactions, as revealed in a series of writing assignments, between Colleen, an undergraduate writing tutor and participant in a writing workshop, and Linda, who was tutored by Colleen. The writing Colleen did for the workshop and the writing Linda did for Colleen influenced and were influenced by the roles they took in responding to each other, by the ideas they wanted to communicate, and by the purposes of the tutoring program where they met each other.

When we look at these interactions with the idea of an ecology in mind, we see that in the overlapping social systems of writing workshop and tutorial, the forms and purposes of texts and the roles and expectations of writers and readers developed in a dialectic pattern of response: an initial position expressed or implied by writing workshop or writing tutor precipitated resistance that prompted revision of the original position, which then prompted a new response. In this paper, I would like to show how

this happened and, in doing so, show how an ecological model of social interaction can guide the study of writing produced in connection with tutoring.

In 1984, when I collected the writing to which I will refer, our required course for writing tutors at the University of Northern Iowa relied on an assumption that writing about personal experience aids the development of academic and “transactional” writing. The writing workshop part of our tutoring course was designed to help tutors develop as writers by writing essays that explored their memories and values. We wanted to produce models for tutors to use in helping tutees develop self-sponsored writing, and, in discussing the essays, we wanted to model how writers as tutors talk to their tutees.

The first essay assignment for the workshop, due the third week of the fall semester, was to describe and reflect on a place associated with childhood. Colleen, a junior English major, gave us a three-page draft of an essay about her grandmother’s attic. Here is the first paragraph of Colleen’s essay:

There is an interesting phenomenon in relation to memory trips; in all but a few cases, time has produced a translucent curtain that somewhat distorts what really was or what really happened. This is, of course, a type of conscious memory trip, so this remembrance may or may not be reality. Since I am in no position to see clearly through this curtain, I will allow you to choose; is this reality—is it fantasy—or does this exist in the parchment grey area between the two certainties of black and white? [9/12/84]

This passage makes an interesting statement about memory, but its narrator doesn’t go on to express what the memory of her grandmother’s attic meant to her. Instead, the writer seems to distance herself from this memory; items in the attic are idealized in the form of clichés. As we discussed this paper in the writing workshop, several of us wondered aloud how much of this description was “true” and how much was fictionalized. Colleen’s essay showed us that as readers of autobiographical writing, we needed to perceive a persona we could identify with the author of the writing.

After reading Colleen’s essay, we needed to re-think what we expected of her writing. After her first meeting with Linda, Colleen needed, as we had, to assess her expectations of Linda’s work. Linda hadn’t declared a major, and she was very discouraged about her ability to get acceptable grades on writing assignments. She had failed the writing competency exam, a university graduation requirement. Colleen decided to draw Linda’s attention to her personal experience. But Linda, schooled to produce impersonal writing for her teachers, was resistant. Here is Colleen’s written account of their meeting.

After discussing a recent essay test she took in Humanities, we did a free-writing on weather (selected by Linda). I had tossed out a few alternative topics (e.g.: favorite memory) and she requested that we stick to the weather. I really don't have a clue as to how to get her to go beyond the surface. Not only does her writing lack depth, but it seems Linda is really hesitant to reveal *anything* through her writing. For next time I asked her to take her free-writing and develop it into a short essay. I specifically asked for as many details as possible—kind of a sensory awareness exercise. She seemed relieved that she didn't have to disclose anything about herself. [9/18/84]

Colleen's aim in this conference, like ours in discussing her first essay in the workshop, was, as she put it, to "get [her tutee] to go beyond the surface." Colleen reported that she didn't know how to do this, but she made an assignment intended to elicit details of the kind of personal response, or "sensory awareness," that she wanted Linda to express.

In responding to this assignment, Linda attempted to satisfy Colleen's expectations in a specific and literal way: she brought her a page of writing titled "An Ideal Fall Day":

An ideal Fall day to me is when you can go outside and look at all the colorful leaves. They are red, yellow, orange, etc. I really like to hear the leaves rustle, like when someone rustles a newspaper. I like to go outside on a fall day and barbecue. The air is so clean and crisp. [9/25/84]

Much as "An Ideal Fall Day" shows Linda trying to produce an appropriate response to her reader's expectations, Colleen's second essay for the workshop shows her effort to communicate to us the kind of persona that she may have thought we wanted. This essay was about Colleen's memories of visiting a lake with her grandfather when she was a child. The essay begins:

The hot July sun beat down upon the gleaming water. Iridescent sparkles flitted across the waves, creating a natural light show. . . . The lake was my "very favoritest" place in the whole wide world. My grandfather would pick me up at home and off we would go. The lake was our retreat, our Walden, our own little corner of the world. [9/26/84]

The description goes on in this fashion, suggesting a sunny and tensionless fantasy. This essay showed us that we wanted the autobiographical persona not only to be identified with her author, but also to be the locus of some kind of tension. Our questions for Colleen reflected our interest in discovering the kind of conflict that we hoped would inform her next essay.

Our responses to Colleen's writing for the workshop now seemed to be affecting Colleen's responses to Linda. Dissatisfied with Linda's "An Ideal Fall Day," Colleen had decided, after their September 25th meeting, to discontinue the "sensory awareness" work, and she asked Linda, for their next meeting, to write about a memorable experience. "Linda's own choice," Colleen reported, was to write about why college was important to her.

Colleen's records of her next meeting with Linda, on October 9th, show her asking of Linda's work questions like those which we had asked of her workshop essay on the lake. Linda had written two short paragraphs titled "Why I Came Back to School": "I came back to school," she wrote, "because I couldn't find a job. I feel that I was forced into coming back to school. My husband didn't want me to be just sitting at home." The second paragraph alluded to Linda's fear of tests and her difficulty with writing.

Colleen's record of her conversation with Linda about this writing shows that, as we had in the workshop, she, too, wanted to see Linda develop the conflict that was, at this point, more evident in Linda's work than in her own. Colleen reported that "Linda's first paragraph was a pretty good intro. However, the rest simply went on to state problems she's had [with school]." Colleen asked Linda to "detail" in writing the feelings about returning to school that she had expressed in their conversation. Linda responded to Colleen's request with a two and-a-half page account of circumstances in which she began college work. It began this way:

I had never planned on going to college, but that idea sure changed. I came back to school because I couldn't find a job. I looked for a job for six months. . . . At first I felt that I had been forced into coming back to college because my husband had given me an ultimatum. Sometimes I still feel that way, but it's not as strong now. I was angry at my husband for quite awhile for giving me an ultimatum. I don't feel that it was the right thing for him to do. It should have been my decision. [10/9/84]

The writing goes on to describe difficulties Linda had as a student. This piece, as Colleen put it in her written account, was "sparsely developed," but Colleen was encouraged to see that Linda was "beginning to open up a little," and to "express anger and frustration." Linda's writing had begun to structure a kind of therapeutic interaction which shaped Colleen's roles as Linda's tutor and reader and Linda's role as Colleen's tutee.

Within a week of this meeting with Linda, in mid-October, Colleen drafted an essay for the tutor training workshop that narrated an experience which was a source of profound anger for her. This essay was quite different in subject and tone from any of Colleen's earlier writing for the workshop. It is about a rape and the responses of police and counselors. It begins this way:

All that is left inside now is rage. Gone is the crippling fear and the self-pity. At least I think they're gone. No, I hope they're gone. It's the burning rage that sustains me. At times I can tap this energy. . . . Yet, at other times, I am reduced to violent trembling. If I can keep this rage as a positive force, it will help me, empower me. Even when it is not positive, I am afraid to water down the hot coals. Maybe I am frightened of what will be there to take its place. [10/15/84]

This essay is written from a clear and consistent point of view. It goes on to tell what happened and to elaborate on what this experience meant for the

narrator. This essay convinced us that its persona was authentic. It set a new standard for what we expected of writing produced in this group, and it altered our understanding of the consequences of autobiographical writing. We now had a kind of evidence for the therapeutic use of writing that affected the way we read and responded to writing about personal experiences.

When we use an ecological metaphor to guide us in exploring the social and ideological contexts of writing, we see that these “contexts” are not given, but they are created by individual acts of writing. In groups of writers and readers, the forms and purposes of texts and the ideas informing them develop interactively. In Colleen’s and Linda’s cases, initial positions expressed or implied by workshop and tutor precipitated resistance that prompted revision of the original position, which then prompted a new response. In her second essay, for example, Colleen’s misreading of our expectations of an autobiographical persona forced us to reconsider them; they were again altered by her third essay. Like Linda’s writing for her, Colleen’s writing for us structured a kind of therapy in which her role as our student, our role as her teacher, and our ideology of tutoring-writing all developed.

In a similar process, Linda initially resisted Colleen’s agenda, forcing Colleen to drop the “sensory awareness” exercise and take another approach to the sources of Linda’s feelings. Linda’s response to this approach then not only altered Colleen’s expectations of Linda’s work, but thereafter altered Linda’s purposes in writing for Colleen, the forms in which she expressed those purposes, and her relationship with Colleen. Like ripples in a pool, the effects of their writing reached through and beyond our tutoring program. Linda, for example, withdrew from UNI, and she is now the mother of a two-year old child; Colleen worked for a period as a rape crisis counselor and is now an English teacher.

Patterns of interaction and change among writers and readers are not always clear. As Marilyn Cooper points out, institutional politics create status and power differences which keep writers and readers from affecting each other. To be workable, composition research guided by an open-ended theory of interaction patterns needs to focus on the activities of writers and readers who are able to affect each other.

Writing tutorials are a good place for study of social ecologies because they are small, visible groups and because the people who make them up learn from one another, whatever their ideas and purposes may be. In her writing for Colleen, Linda discovered that her husband, not she, had wanted her to go to college; in her writing for the workshop, Colleen developed enough trust in us as her readers to reveal some of the pain in her personal

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experience. In their work together, Linda and Colleen learned to encourage each other in identities that would later take shape as mother and English teacher.

Works Cited

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