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Review: The Practical Tutor

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Review

Emily Meyer and Louise Z. Smith,
The Practical Tutor
(New York: Oxford UP, 1987)

David Chapman

Readers of *The Practical Tutor* will be immediately impressed with its thoroughness and detail. Not only is every phase of the tutorial explained, from meeting the writer to tutoring with computers, but each step is also amply illustrated with tutorial dialogue. The book is intended for classroom use and contains a variety of exercises, assignments, and activities intended to convert knowledge about tutoring into tutoring skills. Following each chapter is a helpful bibliography which indicates the authors' commitment to research and provides suggestions for further reading.

Part One, "Getting Acquainted: Writers and Compositions," discusses the social dimensions of the tutorial. In addition to advice about establishing rapport with the student and diagnosing writing problems, there is an important chapter on "Engaging in Dialogue," which explains the connection between tutorial conversation and the development of "dialogic" patterns of thought. Based upon the observations of Murray, Bruffee, Flower, and other theorists, the authors present a cogent argument for considering tutorial conversation to be a means of initiating students into analytical modes of thinking. This chapter should be required reading for anyone who views the writing center as a mere "fix-it shop" for student papers.

Parts Two, Three, and Four are based upon three composing activities: "Generating Ideas," "Shaping Ideas," and "Correcting." By focusing more on the writing process, and less on the interpersonal dimensions of tutoring,

The Practical Tutor parts company with most other guides to tutoring and conferencing. In the section on “Generating Ideas,” the authors explain how common methods of invention—brainstorming, heuristics, problem-solving techniques, etc.—can be used in a tutorial situation. Those tutors who are also classroom teachers will find a bonus in reading this section—there are better explanations of these invention techniques here than in many treatises on teaching composition.

The section on “Shaping Ideas” seems more uneven, which may be a reflection of the current state of knowledge about how writers focus and organize their writing. Surprisingly, freewriting appears in this section, as a means of forming concepts, instead of in the earlier chapters on invention. This section also includes a chapter on “Committing Oneself to a Concept,” a difficulty often encountered by inexperienced writers. Meyer and Smith suggest strategies such as glossing a rough draft in order to formulate a controlling concept, dramatizing a situation to test generalizations, and using sentence paradigms to suggest possible relationships among ideas. These ideas are provocative, but lack the clarity found in other sections of the book. The section concludes with an extremely practical discussion of how tutors can respond to teacher commentary on a student’s paper.

The section on “Correcting” is a good indication of the commitment of the authors to the principles outlined in the earlier chapter on “Engaging in Dialogue.” Even in dealing with the most routine errors in grammar and punctuation, students are never simply *told* what to do. Instead, the errors, and the means for correcting them, are discovered by the students through tutorial conversation. I found myself condemning this approach as too idealistic, and frequently the assumptions of the text are ideal—patient, unhurried tutors working with committed, responsive tutees—but clearly it is our circumstances (i.e., overcrowded and understaffed writing centers) and not these ideals which are at fault.

Part Five of the text extends the scope of the book to tutoring “Reading and Writing.” A chapter on “Reading and Writing Across the Disciplines” is quite timely, given the centrality of many tutoring programs in the writing-across-the-curriculum movement. A separate chapter is devoted to “Reading and Writing About Literature.” Meyer and Smith’s approach to this subject differs substantially from traditional formalistic methods, stressing instead the historical and cultural dimensions of literary study. The chapter on “Tutoring Spelling and Vocabulary” may seem misplaced since these subjects are frequently connected to “correcting” word choices and spelling errors. However, borrowing from Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations*, the authors show how these problems often result from a student’s unfamiliarity with the written code.

Part Six discusses “Tutors and Technology” and presents a balanced approach toward the use of computers for tutorials. There is a discussion of the nature of computer-assisted instruction and its limitations, followed by descriptions of several popular software programs.

If there is a weakness in the text, it is the previously mentioned tendency toward idealism. Tutors in writing centers can seldom count on hour-long conferences at regularly scheduled intervals by interested and informed students. Similarly, the imaginary tutorial dialogues often display student responses that are far more perceptive than those of the average student. Here is a sample of one of these imagined tutorials:

Rob: What do you think about including Gershwin?

Sabrina: Well, obviously *Porgy and Bess* is probably the best known American opera in the world. But in the course readings, historians kept calling it a “folk opera.” In my paper, I was writing about composers of serious opera like Douglas Moore, Virgil Thomson, and Roger Sessions. I deliberately excluded Gershwin in order to avoid getting mixed up in defining “folk opera.”

Rob: I can understand your strategy. Definitions can be very difficult. Now that you think it over, though, what might have made your teacher write that comment?

Sabrina: For one thing, we’ve studied Gershwin in the course. And we’ve talked quite a lot about how hard it is to distinguish “serious” from “folk” music.

Rob: That’s interesting. So what might your paper gain by including Gershwin?

Sabrina: Hmmmmm. . . . By analyzing “folk” and “serious” elements in *Porgy and Bess*, I could show how imprecise the definitions are—just by showing how one work fits into both categories. (143)

I understand the practical difficulties of trying to illustrate all the various strategies for tutoring from real tutorials, and these imagined conversations *are* helpful in demonstrating how the techniques work. But it would be unrealistic if someone imagined that an actual tutorial was likely to proceed as smoothly and efficiently as the one above.

Such idealism, however, has its compensations. In spite of what the title suggests, *The Practical Tutor* is clearly dedicated to theory and research about tutoring. Those used to “hurry up” tutorials that pass out writing advice like pain pills will find little encouragement from Meyer and Smith. This is no grab bag of tutor’s tricks, no beginner’s guide to the

“ten-minute tutorial.” In every chapter and every tutorial dialogue, we are reminded that we are striving not merely for better student papers, but better student writers.

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