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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)

*Harvey Kail*

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To write a book of pedagogy is to risk much in terms of time and professional prestige (“Oh, I see. It’s a textbook. Ahem.”). Unless you’re aiming for the Big Kahuna, the freshman English market, you’re not even likely to make much money, if any. This absence of rewards, financial or otherwise, is particularly pronounced for a textbook with a markedly narrow audience, such as the one Emily Meyer and Louise Smith aim for in *The Practical Tutor*, an audience of you and me and, relatively speaking, very few others. *The Practical Tutor* joins such books as *The Tutor Book* by Marion Arkin and Barbara Shollar, and Irene Lurkis Clark’s *Writing in the Center: Teaching in a Writing Center Setting* as specialized texts written out of sheer professional enthusiasm for what remains an astonishingly long lived “innovation”—tutoring writing.

The major focus in *The Practical Tutor*, as its title implies, is technique. How might tutors, themselves “strong writers,” pass on their tacit knowledge to those with little or at least not enough appropriate writing experience? Meyer and Smith’s answer to this question is to provide prospective tutors with clearly written and usefully contextualized summaries of relevant and mostly current research on composition teaching, and arrange this material in chapters that reflect “important aspects of composing.” By reading up on current theories of invention, problem-solving, revision, editing, etc., and by writing about composing processes—theirs and others’—tutors will be able through self-reflection to better understand and articulate their own composing process. Joined with and enriched by the

professional research, this self-knowledge will free tutors from the “party line” of the traditional composition course they may have endured. Tutors will then discover how to ask useful questions of their tutees rather than merely make corrections or additions to their texts. The effective tutor, in Meyer and Smith’s view, is one who is reflective about his or her own writing and trained and familiar with the composing process “as it is now understood.”

With these priorities clearly established or implied in the introductory “How To Use This Book,” *The Practical Tutor* gets on quickly with its business of bringing the tutor into the self-reflexive world of composition studies. The book is arranged into six sections. The first section, “Getting Acquainted: Writers and Composition,” provides two chapters on the nature—and the pitfalls—of the tutorial situation. Part Two, “Composing Processes: Generating Ideas,” presents two chapters on getting started and on critical analysis. Part Three, “Composing Processes: Shaping Ideas,” focuses three chapters on concept formation and revision, and the three chapters of Part Four, “Composing Processes: Correcting,” focus on strategies for tutoring mechanics, syntax, punctuation and “dialect.” The final two sections broaden the scope of the book by providing background and techniques for “Reading and Writing,” including chapters on writing across the curriculum, and, in the final section, “Tutors and Technology,” a useful introduction for tutors to computers and composition.

Guided by the assumption that “composition is an established field of intellectual inquiry” and one that tutors must be conversant with, each section of the text is thoroughly and even proudly researched. Take chapter three, chosen at random, for example. In the course of this chapter, “Promoting Fluency I: Getting Started,” the reader meets up with the theories and techniques of Marlene Griffith, Sondra Perl, Peter Elbow, James Britton, Linda Flower, Donald Murray, Owen Boyle, and, at considerable length, Ann Berthoff. These writers’ ideas mingle and occasionally coalesce in the course of the book with such other composition researchers and teachers as Muriel Harris, Kenneth Bruffee, Paolo Freire, Barry Kroll, Andrea Lunsford, Mina Shaughnessy, L. S. Vygotsky, Shirley Brice Heath, Sandra Schor, Toby Fulwiler, Mimi Schwartz, Nancy Sommers, Kenneth Burke, William Coles, I. A. Richards, Lil Brannon, David Bartholomae, (are you still with me?) Elaine Maimon, Charles Bazerman, Mariolina Salvatori, Stanley Fish, Joseph Williams, Lillian Bridwell, Kathleen Kiefer, William Wresch, and Cynthia Selfe, to mention only (really) a few. A careful reader of *The Practical Tutor*, even a not so careful reader, should upon completion of the book find his or her way comfortably and intelligently around the next 4C’s meeting. *The Practical Tutor* is not only a guide to tutoring writing but a rite of passage into the language, values and influential voices of mainstream composition studies. More about this later.

In addition to the basic structuring device of “the composing processes,” the pedagogical glue that holds all of this together is the “sample” tutor dialogues that are a feature of each chapter. After the various theories and techniques have been succinctly set forth and illustrated within the context of the tutoring situation, the authors provide a “dialogue” between a tutor and tutee, between a James and a Joni, a Carol and a Joe. Here, for instance, is “Gail” and “Genevieve.”

Gail: I think you have a good beginning here, but I'd really like to know more about your friend. You said she'd do anything for you. What sort of thing did you have in mind? What special things has she done to make you think so?

Genevieve: Well, um, maybe it sounds silly, but once my car died and it was winter and it was cold and I called her from the garage. She came right over and picked me up. It was late and she was probably in the middle of dinner and she had to come a long way. But she never thought about it. She just came.

Gail: Great. That helps me understand what you meant. How about writing that down and using it as an example in the paper? It makes your general idea that she would do anything for her friends a lot clearer.

Dialogues such as this are at the intellectual center of *The Practical Tutor*. Perhaps their presence throughout the book reflects current fascination with the ethnographic and dramaturgical scripts of tutorial conversation. In any event, Meyer and Smith use “sample” dialogues for a couple of purposes. Pedagogically they are presented as object lessons, scenes from the life, as it were, to be explicated and interpreted for the reader's benefit. In the above example, for instance, the authors applaud “Gail's” questioning technique that elicits from “Genevieve” useful information about what makes for friendship. In a previous sample dialogue, “Gail” had made the mistake of speaking in abstract terms such as “development.” “You know,” she told Genevieve, “give more details.” In the “adjusted strategy” of asking questions in accessible language, quoted above in its entirety, the tutor is better able to establish “genuine dialogue.” By contrasting alternative tutorial conversations or by citing how tutors might successfully negotiate the tricky harbors of tutorial conversation, the authors hope, I presume, to present tutoring strategies and techniques in a language tutors might actually use.

In addition to serving as a pedagogical prop, the sample dialogues symbolize the authors' commitment to the dialogical process: “The tutorial conference is an ideal format . . . because it is truly dialogical, consisting of two speakers, unlike a class, where the writer is not the sole respondent (28).” Presumably, it is in the tutorial situation that all or at least many of the numerous composing and pedagogical strategies so carefully elaborated upon throughout the book may be most effectively used because the practical tutor can pick and choose among his or her repertoire of teaching

techniques—an immense repertoire by the end of the book—to best suit the sole respondent in their dialogue, the writer. And not only does the tutorial focus its energies entirely on the individual writer, it also models the internal dialogue that mature writers engage in as they move back and forth from writer-based to reader-based composing processes. The student who is repeatedly tutored will supposedly internalize the conversations he or she has had with her tutor thus enhancing the dialogical thinking necessary to mature writing.

In some ways, Meyer and Smith's use of sample dialogues is a brilliant strategy, an efficient, coherent and flexible vehicle to carry the heavy and diverse load of the text's scholarship. Yet there are some things about the dialogues—and through them to other aspects of the book—that make me uneasy. For one thing, it is hard to tell where these conversations come from, that is, who speaks them. We are told in the introduction that the book is aimed at both graduate assistants and undergraduate tutors—"anyone planning a teaching career." Yet the institutional status of the tutors in the dialogues and their career ambitions are never mentioned. In one dialogue "Linda" does assure "Rog" that, hey, we're both students and "in the same boat." But for the most part, there are no distinctions made in the dialogues or, for that matter, throughout the book, between undergraduate and graduate tutors or even professional tutors. The crisis of authority that is endemic to undergraduates officially tutoring each other is domesticated or ignored in *The Practical Tutor* by the creation of generic "tutors" who are all "strong writers" themselves and who all want, it would appear, to become junior partners in CCCC. They don't ever doubt their abilities as writers or tutors; they know exactly what to say and when to say it, except when they are made to say the wrong things for purposes of providing a cautionary example. They never say, "You got me!"

Then there is the issue of where the dialogues come from. We are told in the introduction simply that they are being "included." The first dialogue we encounter was, we are told, reconstructed from the notes of Chuck Anastas, a graduate of the University of Massachusetts, Boston. The other dialogues are undocumented and are presumably made up for the occasion, a sort of mixture or combination of ethnographic material and fiction driven by pedagogical priorities. As a result, they often appear contrived and easily parodied: "Sally Makes a Referral" or "Manuel Leads Phil Through an Heuristic." More important, the personas of the speakers in the dialogues, instead of appearing either as genuine fictional characters (in which case they would at least be believable) or as actual tutors and tutees in case studies, are obscured instead by a kind of idealized Tutorhood. Joni and Manuel and Ros and Walt and Tammy and Senta and all the other names that appear in front of dialogues in *The Practical Tutor* are merely functions

of their role and the theory or strategy to be elaborated at that point; they are idealized talkers of ideal tutor talk in an abstract, generic reality. The “students” that they talk tutor talk to emerge as allegorical illustrations of specific problems—the linear writer, the angry student, the confused thinker—who are nuanced (almost instantaneously!) by the dialogue into eager matrix makers, concept formers, and problem solvers.

My obvious unease with all of this is because it patronizes the very dialogical process that Meyer and Smith want, in fact, to celebrate. Ironically, instead of genuine dialogue in the spirit of Freire, whom they cite as a source, or even the somewhat more sanitized version of dialogue found in the work of Ann Berthoff, who has obviously and deeply influenced this book, the dialogues Meyer and Smith “include” in *The Practical Tutor* tend to promote unproblematic, apolitical, technocratic solutions to the complex issues of contemporary literacy.

In spite of my misgivings about the generic, idealized image of the tutor that emerges from this book, I must also emphasize that there is much to be learned from *The Practical Tutor*, learned by tutors and by teachers who teach tutors. The thoughtful and thorough selections of composition theory and practice brought into play and the clarity with which they are summarized are useful to anyone interested in teaching writing. The intense and valuable experience that the authors have had with tutors and with tutoring resonates throughout the book. Even though I might disagree with some of its basic assumptions about tutoring, and particularly peer tutoring, I think it would be silly, indeed, not to have *The Practical Tutor* close by on the shelf or, better yet, in tutors’ hands.

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