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## A Method for Observing and Evaluating Writing Lab Tutorials

Bonnie Devet

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Besides organizing a writing lab and being in charge of its day-to-day operations, writing lab directors must, of course, encourage and train their tutors who, along with the clients, form the core of a writing lab [1]. Only in helping their staff to grow and develop can directors hope to maintain high standards in tutorials. In order to develop tutors' skills, it is often helpful for writing lab directors to observe and evaluate tutorials. Of course, being an "eavesdropping observer," a term Muriel Harris used in a different context ("The View" 14), means administrators must give up some time and make some effort. But in so doing, they learn more about their tutors than they can by merely walking through the tutorial room. They also learn more about how the tutor-student relationship differs from that of the teacher-student. Perhaps they may even come away with a reaffirmation of how valuable tutorials are. Such reassurance is well worth the effort demanded by the observation process.

Of course, an evaluation of tutors could focus just on the tutors themselves. In *Talking about Writing a Guide for Tutor and Teacher Conferences*, Beverly Lyon Clark provides a "Personal Checklist of Tutoring Skills" whereby tutors can judge their own tutorials by considering how they have listened and how they have explained their ideas to clients (157-160). Naturally, tutors play a vital role in a tutorial; however, such a procedure stresses the tutors too much while it deemphasizes the very heart of a tutorial, namely, the important interaction between client and tutor.

Another method for evaluating tutors is found in Thomas J. Reigstad and Donald A. McAndrew's *Training Tutors for Writing Conferences*. Although their "Tutor Option Worksheet" calls for an observation of both clients

and tutors rather than just tutors, this worksheet's five questions center primarily on the tutor, with only one question focusing on the client (32).

Writing lab directors who wish to emphasize that a writing center is a place where there is dialogue about writing need to look elsewhere for help with observing and evaluating tutorials. As is so often true, academic fields cross-fertilize one another. In searching for a form to use for direct observation of tutorials, I found that a tool widely used and well-known in educational research could be modified for the special needs of observing tutorials [2]. Ned Flanders' *Analyzing Teaching Behavior* describes a categorical system called "Flanders' Interaction Analysis Categories" (FIAC), whereby verbal behavior is directly observed (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh 186). Flanders designed his system for use in a classroom so that an observer could evaluate the teacher-student relationship. Of course, the tutorial is not like a classroom experience (and never should be). But Flanders' method can be altered so that it becomes an effective, evaluative tool to guide tutors and administrators as they define tutors' roles.

Let's examine Flanders' system to see how it works and then how it can be modified. Using the original FIAC, the observer watches both teachers and students. To describe the teacher, the encoder assigns numbers to the teachers' actions, actions called "teacher talk." When encoding the teachers' actions, an observer looks for seven features, as described by Flanders:

- accepts feeling
- praises or encourages
- accepts or uses ideas of pupils
- asks questions
- lectur[es]
- giv[es] directions
- criticiz[es] or justifi[es] authority. (Flanders 34)

When encoding the pupils' reactions, an observer is interested in two features: "pupil-talk response" and "pupil-talk initiation" (Flanders 34). An observer also notes when "silence or confusion" occurs, that is, when "pauses, short periods of silence and periods of confusion [occur] in which communication cannot be understood by the observer" (Flanders 34). By encoding "at a constant rate," the observer derives a series of percentages showing how much classroom time is spent in "teacher talk," "pupil talk," and "silence."

Since the teacher-pupil relationship varies from that of the tutor-client, the FIAC cannot be used as it is for evaluating writing center tutorials. However, the FIAC can be modified. First, an observer should avoid trying to derive percentages because tutors may put undue emphasis on the

numbers, which seem so real and absolute. Using numbers also places the administrator in the untenable position of explaining why a tutorial in which 60% of the time was devoted to questions was less beneficial than one in which questions comprise only 50%. Instead of percentages, a director should look for general indicators like “almost always,” “frequently,” “sometimes,” and “almost never.” Such labels allow room for variation among tutors without causing rancor when one tutorial scores 60% and another 50%.

The FIAC form can be adjusted in other ways to fit the tutorial experience.

## Tutor-Client Observation and Evaluation

### The tutor:

- |    |  |   |
|----|--|---|
| 1. | accepts the feelings of the client       | almost/sometimes/frequently/always<br>never |
| 2. | praises or encourages the client         | almost/sometimes/frequently/always<br>never |
| 3. | accepts or uses ideas of the client      | almost/sometimes/frequently/always<br>never |
| 4. | asks questions                           | almost/sometimes/frequently/always<br>never |
| 5. | lectures                                 | almost/sometimes/frequently/always<br>never |
| 6. | gives directions                         | almost/sometimes/frequently/always<br>never |
| 7. | explains the rationale behind the advice | almost/sometimes/frequently/always<br>never |

### The client:

- |     |   |   |
|-----|---|---|
| 8.  | responds to a tutor's statements or questions                                     | almost/sometimes/frequently/always<br>never |
| 9.  | expands or relates experiences  | almost/sometimes/frequently/always<br>never |
| 10. | has freedom to express opinions and develop a line of thought by asking questions | almost/sometimes/frequently/always<br>never |

Having adjusted the FIAC, an observer can now consider what the ideal responses should be for each of the ten categories. The first three—"the tutor accepts the feelings of the client," "the tutor praises or encourages the client," and "the tutor accepts or uses the ideas of the client"—are vital to a productive tutorial. Stephen North contends that in the ideal writing center the tutors' goal is "to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction" (438). These three categories represent that particular benefit; hence, each should be rated as "frequently" or "almost always."

What is the observer looking for in each of these three vital categories? For the first category "the tutor accepts the feelings of the client," an observer should note how the tutor shows that he understands the client's attitude toward the entire process of writing as well as the particular piece of discourse which the client is working on during that session. To do so, the tutor could employ Carl Rogers' rhetoric of identification and restate in a non-threatening manner the client's feelings. If a client, for example, expresses his dislike and fear of comma splices, the tutor should acknowledge this fear with a sentence, such as "Comma splices can be hard to spot and certainly do mar the paper's ideas."

The second category "the tutor praises or encourages" is equally vital. A tutor who is not praising with "good," "right," or "exactly" (when appropriate, of course) is losing the rapport so necessary to a successful tutorial. Then the tutor will not be able to effect change in the writer.

The third category "the tutor accepts or uses the ideas of the client" is also central to a tutoring session. A cardinal principle in any writing lab is that the tutor does not tell the client what to write. If necessary, the tutor provides tools so that the client can generate his or her own material. If, for instance, a client is having trouble explicating a poem, the tutor can pull from the lab's reference shelf textbooks that explain how to read and write about a piece of literature, like Edgar V. Robert's *Writing Themes about Literature* or Kelly Griffith's *Writing Essays about Literature*. With the books providing a step-by-step guide, the client learns to think for himself, an important goal of the writing lab tutorial.

Another category "the tutor asks questions" is also quintessential to a writing center's purpose. As North writes,

maybe in a perfect world, all writers would have their own ready auditor—a teacher, a classmate, a roommate, an editor—who would not only listen but draw them out, ask them questions they would not think to ask themselves. A writing center is an institutional response to this need. . . . Writing centers are simply one manifestation—polished and highly visible—of a dialogue about writing that is central to higher education. (440)

And if a writing center is to be the spot for such Socratic dialogue, then ideally “almost always” should be circled for Category 4. The observer should listen for a tutor asking such questions as “What did you like about the paragraph?” or “How will the paper lead the readers into the second point of the essay?” Questions that are focused on the paper and its effect help the clients grow as writers.

The opposite of “the tutor asks questions” is “the tutor lectures,” which is the fifth category on the observation and evaluation form. Such a category can be defined by using Flanders’ definition for this activity: “[the tutor is] giving facts or opinions about content or procedures; expressing *his own* ideas, giving *his own* explanation, or citing an authority other than a pupil” (34). If this category is being marked as “frequently” or “almost always,” then a tutor is conducting a tutor-centered tutorial, an undesirable situation, as Paulette Scott explains in her article “Tutor-Student Conferences”:

. . . the tutor could end up doing the writing for the student. Moreover, if the student sits passively and doesn’t contribute to the conference, he is less likely to make significant revisions later in his drafts. The student who waits for the tutor to solve his problems does not learn to reflect on his writing and to ask the tutor meaningful questions. (9)

Instead of being marked “frequently” or “almost always,” the fifth category, “the tutor lectures,” should be marked as “sometimes,” depending on the type of client. For example, although advanced international students benefit from a dialogue with tutors in which they can practice their English skills, other less fluent international clients may learn more from a “lecture.” However, for a native speaker, tutors should lecture as little as possible.

Category 6, “the tutor give directions,” is adapted from the FIAC category that states “[the tutor] gives directions, commands, or orders to which a pupil is expected to comply” (Flanders 34). For this category, the tutors should rate a “sometimes” but not a “frequently” or “almost always.” Although too much “ordering” can give a tutor an authoritative tone, sometimes directions are needed in a tutorial. For example, when a tutor and client are reviewing the editing process for commas, the client may need specific directions on how to analyze sentence structure in order to decide whether to use a comma. Guiding the client step-by-step helps the student break a sentence into its constituent parts, and by such “directing,” the writer learns how to conduct the process himself.

Of course, Category 7, “the tutor explains the rationale behind his advice” should receive a ranking of “frequently” or “almost always.” Clients learn best when tutors place their advice in a larger context and explain why clients can choose among different rhetorical options. If clients

do not learn the rhetorical effect of their word choices, for instance, they cannot learn the relationships among audience and subject and writer in their discourse. The tutor will have failed, too, for he or she will be stressing the text and not the growth of the writer.

The clients are just as important as the tutors, so the clients' reactions are also represented on the evaluation and observation form. Three categories (8, 9, 10) focus on the clients, and, of course, these categories elicit different rankings, depending on the type of clients.

Category 8, "the client responds to tutor's statements or questions," means the student responds verbally (e.g., by saying "yes") or nonverbally (e.g., by nodding his head). For Category 9, "the client expands or relates his experiences," the writer should elaborate on his responses, explaining why he has used a comma and not a semi-colon, or talk about himself and his writing, for example, explaining how he feels about composing under pressure during a class session. The last category, "the client has freedom to express his opinions and develop a line of thought by asking questions" is, of course, seminal to a tutorial session. If the client feels encumbered or if he feels that he cannot explore his thoughts by seeing how his ideas can be expanded, then the tutor has failed to help in the client's process of development. Thus, for categories 8, 9, and 10, the ideal evaluation would be "frequently" or "almost always," indicating that the tutorial is a dialogue between tutor and client.

Tutorials involving non-native speakers are, of course, an exception. Sometimes, international students are less willing to "respond to a tutor's statements or questions" (Category 8), "expand or relate [their] experiences" (Category 9), or express [their] opinions . . ." (Category 10), especially if they are insecure about speaking English. Although tutors should try to engage international students in a dialogue so these students can increase their fluency, tutors should be aware that some of them may not want to "expose" themselves. So, observers should expect that for such sessions they may mark "sometimes" (a less desirable evaluation) for categories 8, 9, and 10.

After the categories are ranked, the organization of the form has to be considered. For this form to be convenient, space should be left under each of the ten points in order for the observer to write in comments. In this way, one sheet holds everything tutors need to know about their sessions, and administrators have detailed notes to use later when they write letters of recommendation.

Administrators may wonder if tutors should be told when observers will sit in on their tutorials. If the observation is threatening to tutors, they will certainly perform less well, and administrators will not get a reasonable

sense of the tutors' skills. The best course for administrators is to ask if they may sit in on a specific tutorial. If the tutors are given the privilege of selecting the tutorial to be observed, administrators and tutors become partners, not foes, in the evaluation.

Similarly, administrators must decide if clients should be told the session will be watched. This question entails consideration of both the clients' feelings and the lab's arrangement. At the large state university where this form was used, the clients were not told since tutors, not clients, were to be evaluated. The layout of the tutorial room itself also should be considered. If observers can sit off to the side or at another table separate from where tutorials occur, then, once again, clients need not be told. And with observers off to the side, incognito as it were, the tutors will be more relaxed as well.

Immediately after the tutorial session is the best time for administrators to go over the evaluation form with tutors. As might be expected, tutors are relieved that the observation is over, and this relief usually spills over into open, frank discussions about what worked and what did not work during the tutorial. Hence, one of the most valuable results of the Tutor-Client Form is that it generates talk between the administrator and the tutor.

During this "close-out conference," when administrators and tutors go over the completed form, tutors learn from the observation. At the very least, they have a piece of paper that lets them see how they performed in one tutorial. In fact, one tutor was so thrilled by his evaluation that he decided to include it in his job application file along with his resume and letters of recommendation.

Besides helping tutors obtain positions, the evaluation emphasizes to them the philosophy of tutoring itself. Observing tutorials reveals the key differences between the tutor-client conference and the teacher-student session. While teachers sometimes lecture for an entire class period, tutors act as prompters and enter into the "talk" only as they are needed to give advice, to cite examples, and to underscore various writing principles. In effect, the tutors try to have students do most of the talking. As Harris explains, "Tutors collaborate with writers in ways that facilitate the process of writers' finding their own answers" ("Writing Centers" no pag.). The teacher-pupil session differs from the tutor-client tutorial in that there is less collaboration; students listen, try to follow directions, and hope for "good" grades. But at the heart of a tutorial is the sense that there are two writers sitting side-by-side discussing a problem. They are working together and assisting each other: "Removed from the evaluative setting of a classroom, writers are free to engage in trial runs of ideas and approaches, to fail and move on to another attempt, and to receive encouragement for their

efforts,” (Harris, “Writing Centers” no pag.). In effect, the tutor and client are partners.

Administrators also benefit from using the Tutor-Client Observation and Evaluation Form. Of course, directors of writing labs have limited time, and conducting observations takes time. However, with an evaluative tool for guidance, administrators can generate talk and discussion with their tutors, get a “reading” of their tutors’ skills, and develop a better sense of the tutor-client relationship. In this way, a writing lab helps itself, and, more important, it helps its clients to be the writers they want to be.

## Notes

[1] Special thanks should be extended to Bonnie Sunstein (University of New Hampshire) and Dr. D. Dean Shackelford (Concord College). Their comments on this article were invaluable.

[2] I first used the “Tutor-Client Observation and Evaluation Form” while I was the assistant director of the Writing Center at the University of South Carolina. The files of this writing center span twelve years and contain a variation on the FIAC but without any acknowledgment of the tutor(s) who devised this form. Since there was no author, I decided to redo the form, using FIAC’s original version as described in Flanders’ *Analyzing Teaching Behavior* (34 and following).

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