

1-1-1990

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Recommended Citation

Runciman, Lex (1990) "Defining Ourselves: Do We Really Want to Use the Word Tutor?," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1, Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1220>

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Defining Ourselves: Do We Really Want to Use the Word Tutor?

Lex Runciman

In the years since its publication in 1984, Stephen North's "The Idea of a Writing Center" has become widely recognized as the most succinct and successful single-article discussion of writing centers and their functions. In his discussion, North uses copy from his own institution's writing program flyer to illustrate a primary misconception about writing centers and their clients. The quotation begins by characterizing the writing center as "a resource center for writers and teachers of writing" (433). No one would wish to quarrel with such a characterization: writing centers *are* resource centers.

The quotation then defines the writing center as "a tutorial facility for those with special problems in composition." North highlights that last prepositional phrase as particularly problematic, saying, "I don't know, quite frankly, how that copy got past me. What are these 'special problems'?" (433). His article goes on to address the still-too-frequent vision of writing centers as fix-it shops. Notice that the words "tutorial facility" do not draw any special comment; indeed, as writing center personnel we continue to use these words. But what do they mean to us? More importantly, what do they mean to students, faculty, and administrators?

In part, our notions of tutors and tutoring come from our understanding of the tutorial system of Oxford and Cambridge. We imagine dedicated and gifted students meeting their tutors in the cozy informality of "a scholar's room . . . lined with books, often with maps on the walls, with a private desk, a large table, possibly window seats and a piano, and always with easy chairs set near the fire" (Moore 15). Considered in this somewhat rosy light, tutoring takes on many

positive connotations. We imagine the best students receiving the best kind of education—an almost entirely personal one founded on critical thinking and lively exchange with renowned scholars. But this British tutorial system, also founded on privilege and exclusion, has never found wide favor in America.

Rather, most of us and most of our administrative superiors—indeed most of our students—are products of American education. And chances are that we formed our first notions of what the word *tutor* means quite early in our educational experience. I remember overhearing my third-grader talking about a fellow student who “wasn’t learning very well and had to go to a tutor.” Third graders know who uses tutors: the so-called slow learners, those needing special help. Third graders know what tutors do: tutors teach; tutors possess knowledge which students need but do not yet have. And unfortunately, third graders also tend to tease or belittle those needing such special help. This is, I submit, the reality of *tutoring* for grade schoolers.

These premises, deeply ingrained, continue to cause problems for writing center personnel. Student writers continue to assume that writing centers serve only bad writers. Faculty continue to think of writing centers only when faced with problem spellers or the grammatically ignorant. Administrators making budget decisions think of the writing center as a tutorial (i.e., remedial) facility. And even our peer “tutors” (for that is what our profession calls them) sometimes yield to the impulse to simply correct grammar and rewrite awkward phrasings—in short, to act like the most traditional of teachers.

These traditional notions about tutors and tutoring are deeply rooted in the history of American education. Lilya Wagner’s *Peer Teaching: Historical Perspectives* surveys that history and identifies two periods in which peer tutoring played a significant role. In its earliest forms (from roughly 1810-1850), peer tutoring seemed like an inexpensive way to provide some form of public education. The English educator Joseph Lancaster advocated the establishment of what he called monitorial schools. Under this scheme, a complete grade school might be “staffed” almost entirely on the basis of older students teaching younger ones. Thus the most accomplished fifth grader (there might have been only one or two fifth graders to begin with) would teach three or four fourth graders, the most accomplished fourth grader would teach the third graders, and so on. In larger schools, the ratio of students to “monitors” (as they were called) was, ideally, no more than 10 to 1.

As Wagner notes, Lancaster originally established some British monitorial schools with as many as 700 or 800 students. Such a school might have but one adult teacher, whose role would be more disciplinary than academic and whose major task would be to organize and supervise a vast system of student monitors. One can imagine the rigid, rule-bound nature that must have characterized these schools.

Lancaster traveled widely in America and monitorial schools were established in New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore as well as in Richmond, Louisville, Natchez, and several other Southern population centers. Initially acclaimed as wonderful ways to provide schooling without having to pay for the services of educated, adult teachers, monitorial schools fell out of favor fairly quickly. By 1840 most Lancasterian schools in America had added sufficient faculty to become more or less what we would recognize as the traditional early American school operated by adult teachers. These early notions about tutoring are important in two respects, for in some measure, they persist today. We should note first that the original impetus for peer tutoring was not pedagogical; it was economic—peer tutors saved money. This same factor played a significant role in the return of peer tutoring in the 1960s. Second, peer tutoring preserved the hierarchical model of education, a model which places a knowledgeable teacher on a higher level than ignorant students. Though Lancaster's monitors were students themselves, they still preserved (or attempted to preserve) this hierarchical relationship—they still tried to be teachers in the traditional fashion.

Wagner's findings on peer tutoring in the 20th century indicate that, for the most part, it fell out of use until the baby-boom generation of the 60s. When earlier student tutoring systems were established, they were typically designed to serve below-average or otherwise sub-standard students. Here is one such statement of purpose for a program established in a Cleveland, Ohio, high school in 1938: "Only those pupils are encouraged to be tutored who seek aid because of prolonged absence from school, tardy registration, or weakness in a specific large unit of work not readily grasped" (Wagner 217).

With the influx of large numbers of new students in the 1960s, peer tutoring reasserted itself (mostly for familiar economic reasons), and peer tutoring in the grade schools and high schools continues to increase. In the last thirty years, the literature addressing peer tutoring has tended to stress its two-sided nature. Researchers consistently note that tutoring benefits both tutor and tutee and that peer tutoring replaces student-student competition with student-student cooperation. Yet this same literature continues to assume that tutors are substitute or adjunct teachers and that their students are "slow" or otherwise in need of remedial assistance.

At the grade school and high school levels—indeed in any setting outside of a writing center—tutors are still presumed to provide remedial instruction to selected tutees. Here are but three examples. In 1973, Samuel Blumenfeld notes that "tutoring can be of great importance in saving thousands of children in distress" (11). In *Learning Together and Alone* (1975), Johnson and Johnson identify tutees as "children who do not respond well to adults," and as "slow learners" (110); their second edition (1987) retains these characterizations. And in their 1982 book *Developing a Successful Tutoring Program*, Patricia Koskinen and Robert Wilson identify three reasons for establishing tutoring pro-

grams. Such programs are needed, they argue, because “some students tend to misunderstand assignments, allow their minds to wander,” and otherwise “miss opportunities to learn”; others need tutors to help them catch up after “excessive illness and absence from school”; and still others “have missed the mastery of a subskill” (2). In all these cases, tutors are seen as providers of remedial instruction. This is what our own education has taught us about tutors, and this is what grade school and high school students continue to learn.

It is important that we acknowledge the significant role which tutoring plays in both grade school and high school settings. In addition, many college students benefit from tutoring sessions in a variety of subject areas. But to call writing center activities *tutorials* provokes a distinct set of assumptions that only occasionally work to a writing center’s benefit. For example, from an administrative viewpoint, a tutorial writing center can be seen as a relatively cheap way to improve student retention efforts. By working with marginal students (so one kind of argument might go) on a relatively low cost-per-student basis, a modest writing center is a good investment.

More often, however, the remedial and hierarchial nature of traditional tutoring works against us: it limits the number of students who seek us out, it reduces the number of students that faculty refer to us, it keeps our budgets modest at best, and, as John Trimbur has pointed out, it causes our student staff “considerable confusion about their work” (22).

So while students and administrators think of tutoring as remedial instruction, those of us in writing centers use the word tutoring to mean something quite different. When we speak of a tutoring session, we mean a wide variety of collaborative discussions; we mean a writer sitting down with a reader so that together they may discuss that writer’s work-in-progress. We mean the word *tutoring* to include activities which are not hierarchial at all—brainstorming, for example, or practical discussions of audience and of appropriate format, with the writer being the one who must finally make such decisions. In classes and in staff meetings, we spend considerable time discussing the mutuality of a writing conference. We stress that writers coming to our centers retain full responsibility for their own writing and that our responsibility lies in using consultation time wisely. And while we try to answer grammar and punctuation questions, we are quick to point out that all writers need to use handbooks, that all writers must occasionally look up the rules for, say, capitalization or for tricky subject-verb agreement.

Perhaps most importantly, we stress, over and over, that writing centers are for all writers, that even the very best, most practiced, and most accomplished writers need preliminary readers and the careful responses and questions which such readers provide. We talk about the “great writers” and about how they had sympathetic readers (often editors) who helped shape their work. We talk about professional writers—journalists and the like—who rely on editors to tell them

whether or not their material makes sense. And we talk about the collaborative nature of much business and technical writing and about how often such writing is the result of group or committee work. On a good day, we get positively evangelical in our zeal. We praise our tutors to the skies. We extoll the rewards of a tutoring session, and by using the terms *tutor* and *tutoring*, we actually undercut our own argument.

For we continue to use the words *tutor* and *tutee*. Students who listen carefully to our exhortations may realize that we mean something quite different from what they had assumed. Students who listen less attentively or more cynically figure that we are trying to repackage a boring and remedial product; they know what a tutorial is and they're not having any. And administrators who control our budgets continue to think of writing centers as tutoring centers—providers of remedial instruction. So long as they think this, they assume that the writing center is *only* for remedial students (after all, the average, normally qualified student has, by definition, little need for remediation). With such a limited clientele, so the reasoning must go, writing center budgets need not increase.

The problems associated with these terms do not reside exclusively with students and administrators. By continuing to use these terms, we confuse ourselves and make our own jobs more difficult. Think about this for a minute: We recruit students to staff our writing centers, and we call these students tutors; we call the writers they work with tutees. Then in our first training session we find ourselves obligated to very carefully spell out the roles that writing assistants play. *We find ourselves explaining why writing assistants aren't tutors and why student writers aren't really tutees.*

Here's an illustration. One of the best of the recent books discussing the dynamics of writing conferences is Beverly Lyon Clark's *Talking about Writing*. An early section carries the heading "Who Comes for Tutoring Help." Already we can expect trouble, and we find it. The section characterizes writing center clients as those who recognize their own need for remedial instruction. Thus "continuing education students, older students" come to the writing center in order to "regain confidence and fluency in writing" (4). Traditional students using the writing center "need to refine skills they already have some control over," while others "may be learning English as a second language or may be basic writers . . ." (4).

As you can see, Clark's discussion has consciously or unconsciously characterized writing center clients in terms which imply remediation and the traditional role of tutor and tutee. The very next section of the book then immediately takes up the issue of tutor/tutee roles:

Some beginning tutors and teachers—and many tutees—think that a tutor is an authority figure, someone who knows the answers and loftily corrects those who venture to come for help. But the tutor and the tutee

are partners in learning about writing. Or, better still, the tutee should be the senior partner: the tutee should do most of the work. (4-5)

See how Beverly Lyon Clark does exactly what all of us have had to do? She is explaining (or beginning to explain) the roles that tutors and tutees should assume. The trouble is, the meanings which we assign to the words *tutor* and *tutee* run directly counter to the common meanings for these terms. We find it necessary to explain ourselves because, at least in part, our own terms are misleading.

One solution to all of this is obvious. We ought to work hard to eliminate any use of any form of the word *tutor* in connection with writing centers. In place of *tutor* we can try *writing assistant* or *writing consultant* or *writing fellow*; in place of *tutoring*, we can try *discussion* or *consulting*; instead of *tutees* we can say *writers*. I am sure there are other possibilities. But the old words are deeply ingrained; they appear throughout our literature. Once conscious of these words, you will find them everywhere. One brochure I regularly give to prospective writing assistants still carries the title "Tutoring for Credit." I need to revise that brochure.

But do we really need to make such a fuss about such words? I think so. For the "fuss" is really about how we view writing and about how we define the activities of our writing centers. If we view writing as primarily a solo, rule-bound and linear activity, and if we view responding to writing as simply identifying and correcting surface errors, then writing centers ought to be identified as remedial and tutorial, with their primary business being the individualized instruction of students with those special problems. In this case, we ought to view our tutors primarily as traditional teachers who know the rules and conventions and who are charged with imparting that knowledge.

If, on the other hand, we view writing as a complicated, recursive, and social activity requiring an almost continuous shuttling between writing and rereading, requiring also a tremendous number of local decisions about content, audience, purpose, word-choice, grammar, and format—if that is at least part of our view of writing, then we need to identify writing centers as places writers go in order to discuss these issues. This does not mean abandoning a commitment to non-native speakers or to those with academically disadvantaged backgrounds. It means recognizing that all writers have needs and that all writers can benefit from writing center discussions. Sometimes these discussions may be, in part, instructional and hence resemble, in part, the traditional model associated with tutoring. But in a writing center which truly aims to serve all writers, discussions of surface correctness take their rightful place as just one of the many many different kinds of writing center discussions.

If we adopt these latter definitions of writing and of the role we want to assume, then we find ourselves out of the tutoring business (as it is understood by most students and administrators). Instead, we find ourselves in the business

of creating a setting, one which brings together writers and preliminary readers, encouraging understanding between them, and giving writers the information they need in order to make enlightened decisions about content, organization, idea development, tone, and the like. Such a collaborative environment fosters invention, and gives direction to the revising process. Grammatical rules and punctuation conventions remain important inside such a framework: the responsibility for that knowledge remains squarely where it belongs—with writers, all of us. Finally, this setting operates under the assumption that any writing can prove problematic and difficult and that all college writers can benefit from the focus and discussion of writing center consultations. In the best of circumstances, the writing center takes its rightful place as exactly what it says it is: the *center*, the locus, for campus-wide discussions of writing.

At the very least, we ought to recognize that the words *tutor*, *tutoring*, and *tutee* do not accurately portray the full range of writing center activities. These words limit both our clientele and our budgets; they make our activities appear both marginal and exclusively remedial. Furthermore, our continued use of these terms perpetuates confusions which hurt us and make our jobs more difficult. Confusion, as any writer knows, is an invitation to revise: therefore, let us do so. Let us define ourselves as accurately as we can. Let us choose our own new terms.

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