

1-1-1991

## Tutorial Role Conflict in the Writing Center

David Healy

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/wcj>

---

### Recommended Citation

Healy, David (1991) "Tutorial Role Conflict in the Writing Center," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 2, Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1234>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries.  
Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

---

---

## Tutorial Role Conflict in the Writing Center

*David Healy*

---

In many fields of human endeavor, the relationship of practice to theory is often anterior. The people in the trenches, realizing that existing practices are inadequate to meet new demands, develop an alternative approach. If the new technique works, it becomes established practice. Then, after-the-fact theoretical support is developed to account for, to justify, and to refine the procedure.

This kind of *ex post facto* theoretical conceptualization characterized the peer tutoring initiative of the 1970s, as Kenneth Bruffee reminds us. Aware that incoming students were increasingly under prepared for the academic demands of college and that attempts at supplemental assistance for these students were often unsuccessful, some faculty and administrators turned to a relatively new concept: peer tutoring. The approach worked. "More recently," says Bruffee, "we have begun to learn that much of this practical experience and the insights it yielded have a conceptual rationale, a theoretical dimension, that had escaped us earlier as we muddled through, trying to solve practical problems in practical ways" (4).

According to Rodney Simard in "Assessing a New Professional Role: The Writing Center Tutor," that after-the-fact conceptualizing has been too slow: "Professional attention to the theory and administration of writing centers . . . has been slow to catch up to the proliferation of facilities. Almost entirely absent in existing commentary is substantive discussion of the actual position and role of the tutor, on whom the burden of daily center services generally falls" (197). Simard's assessment was probably an overstatement even when he made it; certainly in recent years there have been some substantive discussions of the tutor's role, several of which I refer to below. Nevertheless, the challenge

implicit in Simard's title—to assess the tutor's role using criteria usually applied to the professions—has been unmet. Ironically, Simard himself fails to meet it.

There are two reasons why a sociologically and psychologically rigorous assessment of the tutor's role is overdue. For one thing, professionalization is an indication of an occupation's relative status in society. If we want to claim, as Simard does, that the writing center tutor is a professional, with whatever status that accrues to that designation, then we ought to subject the tutorial role to the same criteria used in studying other occupations. Also, a sociological analysis of the tutorial role will be instructive for writing center administrators. We already know, from practice and observation, that tutors' roles are variegated and complex. A theoretical explanation for some of that complexity can help us help our tutors negotiate more skillfully the sometimes tortuous track of the writing center tutorial. This article is an attempt in that direction. It applies a leading theory of role conflict to the position of peer tutor and argues that tutors' roles are more complex and problematic than those of many other occupations but that role conflict theory can be helpful in discovering constructive ways to deal with tutorial role ambiguity and conflict.

## Tutorial Roles

Several analyses of peer tutoring include some discussion of tutorial roles. Lil Brannon mentions four: facilitator, supporter, leader, and resister. The first two roles, says Brannon, are appropriate and helpful, while the last two are usually dysfunctional (106). Thom Hawkins' tutoring typology is an attempt to help tutors heighten their awareness of their own preferred tutoring style. His categories include expert, guide, scholar, mentor, academic adjunct, medic, counselor, psychologist, referee, and advocate (289-290). Muriel Harris' list falls under the heading "The Roles of the Teacher," but her categories are readily applicable to peer tutors as well. Harris enumerates five conferencing roles: coach, commentator, counselor, listener, and diagnostician (35-40). Albert DeCiccio, who suggests that the locution "peer tutor" is oxymoronic, asks whether the writing center tutor should be thought of as a peer, a mini-teacher, or "a hybrid combination of the two" (5). Marvin Garrett, using similar terms to label the poles, is more assertive: "It is necessary to maintain a delicate balance between the 'tutor' element and the 'peer' element in the development of peer-tutors' perceptions of their role" (94).

All these observers recognize that tutoring in general and the writing conference in particular can cast tutors and tutees in a variety of roles. Implicit in their typologies is the assumption that tutors need to be versatile and flexible, able to shift roles depending upon such considerations as the disposition and needs of the tutee, the stage of the writing process, and the nature of the

assignment. Reigstad and McAndrew, in introducing their discussion of three conferencing options, make this assumption explicit:

Although the basic structure of most tutorial sessions is the same, every encounter with a writer demands an individualized response by the tutor. The model we have described provides orderly, logical procedures, but we also encourage tutors to remain flexible within that framework and to acquire a tutoring style with which they are comfortable. . . . Students who are familiar with these [student-centered, collaborative, and teacher-centered] options can borrow from any one of the three at a given tutorial moment. (28)

Reigstad and McAndrew echo the advice of Jacobs and Karliner:

The stance of the instructor should thus be variable, depending on what the student and his [sic] paper need, anywhere from friendly authoritarian to fellow conversant to recorder. It may even change in the middle of the conference. . . . once the instructor perceives the need for the student to talk out ideas, to brainstorm, to generate a variety of thoughts including ones he may later reject. (505)

### *Role Conflict*

If tutors find themselves playing a variety of roles, and if they need to be able to shift roles to fit the demands of a particular tutoring situation, then the potential for role ambiguity and role conflict seems fairly obvious. Kahn et al., in what continues to be one of the leading models of role theory, describe *role ambiguity* as “a direct function of the discrepancy between the information available to the person and that which is required for adequate performance of his role. Subjectively it is the difference between his actual state of knowledge and that which would provide adequate satisfaction of his personal needs and values” (73). For tutors, inadequate information may be the result of various factors, including inexperience, lack of familiarity with particular content areas, insufficient communication from supervisors or tutees, or simply the inherent nature of the job—a job that demands a degree of flexibility which renders specific and detailed job descriptions problematic. *Role conflict*, according to Kahn et al., results from conflicting expectations toward an individual from members of his or her “role set,” those people in the work place he or she is directly related to. For tutors, role conflict may result when tutees’ expectations conflict with their own preferred style or with their assessment of the best role to adopt in a given tutorial session or at a given tutorial moment.

Tutorial role conflict is not limited, however, to the kinds of conference-related roles described by the writers referred to above. Besides being peer tutors, the people who work in writing centers are also students, residents (often in campus housing), athletes, consumers, etc. Thus, their relationship to the

people they work with in the lab may be supervisor-employee, co-worker, tutor-tutee, dormmate, clerk-customer, or teammate, to name only some of the possibilities.

Consider several hypothetical but by no means unlikely scenarios: A tutor arrives at the writing center to discover that her first conference is with a student who serves as a teaching assistant for her trigonometry class and to whom she has gone for extra help in completing homework problems. Another tutor is assigned to work with a student who lives in his dorm and with whom he had an argument last week about appropriate volume levels for late-hour compact disk playing. Another tutor finds herself matched with someone who is in her section of world literature and who attempts to draw her into a mutual gripe session on the instructor's deficiencies. Yet another tutor is asked to take over in the middle of a paper for a co-worker who has to leave and, when he questions a particular point of usage, is informed that "the last guy said it was okay."

The tutors in these situations may well feel some discomfort or tension. They may not, however, realize that their discomfort is a result of role conflict. Here the supervisor's role is important: to help tutors recognize role conflict when it exists and to find constructive and creative ways of dealing with it.

Among occupational sociologists, most discussions of role ambiguity and role conflict focus on managers and officials rather than on professionals. As Ritzer has observed, "Because they are in relatively high positions in an organization, managers and officials are particularly subject to conflicting expectations from significant others within the organization. Professionals are far less likely to suffer from role conflict, because by definition fellow professionals are their major significant others" (205). Furthermore, most professionals assume fairly well-defined roles that are well known by their clients, who usually approach them with expectations consistent with the services they offer. Like professionals, tutors work with clients. Unlike professionals, however, tutors' job descriptions are not always well defined—at least in the minds of their clients. In addition, tutors are employees of organizations, which means they have relationships with supervisors different from those of most professionals.<sup>1</sup>

Tutor role conflict is increased by typical demographic conditions that influence tutors' work lives. Because they often live in a fairly localized college or university community, tutors' relationships with clients tend to occur in more of a small-town than a typical urban atmosphere—even if the school is located in a large city. In a small town, professionals are more likely to know their clients than are their urban counterparts. They are thus more likely to experience role conflict, that is, conflicting expectations based on clients' and their own difficulty in separating the role played in one context from the professional role. Tutors—who may live, eat, and shop in the same area where they attend school—are likely to encounter their clients in a greater variety of settings than are most of the typical subjects of role conflict research.

Kahn et al. point out five types of role conflict: intra-sender, inter-sender, inter-role, person-role, and role overload (18-21). *Intra-sender conflict* occurs when different expectations from a single member of the role set are incompatible as, for example, when a tutee asks a tutor to assume an editing role and then insists upon retaining the original wording in a passage the tutor has challenged. Or the tutee might feel that her biggest problem is inefficient use of time spent on writing tasks and thus may expect the tutor to help her decrease the amount of time she spends on assignments. However, she may also expect the tutor to help her generate more ideas for her writing, a process which may be perceived as time-consuming.

*Inter-sender conflict* occurs when “pressures from one role sender oppose pressures from one or more other senders” (20). For instance, a tutor’s supervisor may want him to limit walk-in conferences to twenty minutes so that more students can be served, while his tutees may want longer sessions so that their writing projects can be discussed in greater detail. Inter-sender conflict would also occur when a referred student’s teacher wanted her merely to clean up a paper’s mechanical errors, but the tutor had been taught to address higher-order concerns before dealing with lower-order ones.

*Inter-role conflict* is the result of expectations attached to an individual in one role clashing or interfering with those of the same person in another role. The examples offered above, where tutors meet tutees who have encountered them in other contexts, are instances of inter-role conflict. In the case of the tutor whose tutee is her math teaching assistant, for example, the teaching assistant may expect the tutor to be tentative and insecure in her role as writing tutor, based on her behavior as a student in trigonometry. Consider also the tutor in her roles as supervisee and student. She may feel pressure from a supervisor to spend slack time working on center-related business but may also feel pressure from her instructors to spend any odd moments studying.

Kahn et al. describe the foregoing three types as “sent role conflict,” i.e., the pressures originate from the outside—from expectations generated among other members of the role set. Other types of conflict develop when sent or outside pressures combine with internal forces. In *person-role conflict*, role requirements violate particular values or needs of an individual, or the individual’s needs and aspirations result in actions which antagonize other members of the role set (20). One can imagine, for example, a female tutor whose history of physical abuse at the hands of a father or older brother makes it difficult for her to work with older males. The center’s philosophy, however, is likely to be egalitarian and to discourage selectivity on the part of tutors. Another tutor may find herself working with a student whose militant pro-choice position paper conflicts with her own deeply held convictions about abortion.

*Role overload* occurs when an individual is confronted with more expectations than can be fulfilled within existing time constraints. Tutors tend to be

successful, engaged students. They are subject to many demands on their time and energy such as studies and extracurricular activities. The same qualities that make them attractive as employees—academic aptitude, wide-ranging interests, interpersonal skills—predict success in other ventures as well, with the result that they can be pulled in many different directions. Additionally, on the job, tutors often must, in twenty to sixty minutes, deal with individual pieces of writing that could profitably engage them and their tutees for hours. And in a given conference, they may be asked to play several different roles at once.

## Responses to Role Conflict

Even a brief consideration of these five categories in reference to tutoring makes it clear that tutors are subject to considerable role conflict. Conflict can and should be *managed*. As supervisors, therefore, we have a responsibility to help our tutors manage role conflict constructively.

One of the most common responses to role conflict is avoidance. As Kahn et al. note, avoidance strategies such as withdrawal, rejection, and evasion are effective in the short run: they do reduce some of the stress associated with role conflict. However, “[w]ithdrawal as a mechanism may generate more intensely the very conditions one tries to avoid. The short-range success of avoidance tends to be coupled with a long-range failure” (222).

Coping mechanisms vary according to what Kahn et al. call a “flexibility-rigidity dimension.” Rigid individuals tend to appeal more quickly to authority figures, rules, or regulations (304). Confronted with an instance of intra- or inter-sender conflict, the rigid tutor is likely to appeal to a higher authority or to the established procedure: “I’m sorry, but your twenty minutes is up.” “That’s not how we do things here.” “Your teacher is the one who will grade your paper, and she wants it done this way.” Rigid people are also more likely to engage in denial. If the orderliness or controllability of their environment is threatened, they may attempt to deny the threatening messages or senders. The rigid tutor, for example, having diagnosed a tutee’s main problem as organization, may refuse to acknowledge the tutee’s attempts to focus the conference on punctuation problems. Or when a tutee begins to reveal personal problems, thus suggesting more of a counselor role for the tutor, the rigid tutor may simply ignore those signals.

The flexible person, on the other hand, “attempts to adjust to environmental pressures by bending with the wind. He [sic] generally acquiesces to role pressures and promises compliance to requests others make of him” (306). Unfortunately, the “other-directed openness of the flexible person makes him extremely vulnerable to problems of role conflict” (294). The flexible tutor, for instance, when working with a tutee whose orientation is decidedly toward lower-order concerns, would probably attempt to pay sufficient attention to

punctuation to fulfill the tutee's expectations while also stressing enough higher-order concerns to satisfy her supervisor's tutorial standards. In trying to be a people pleaser, though, the flexible tutor may simply perpetuate the problem of role conflict.

Because of the connotations of the terms *rigid* and *flexible*, one might assume that flexible coping strategies are inherently and necessarily superior to rigid ones. But in the tutorial context, rigidity may at times be advantageous. Rigid tutors are more likely to stay on task than flexible tutors and less likely to be drawn into inappropriate or unproductive roles, such as Brannon's leader role. Furthermore, rigidity may evidence a keener recognition of institutional reality: teachers *do* give grades; following the rules *does* predict success. Flexible tutors, for their part, in an attempt to be all things to all people, may end up being nothing to anyone.

Douglas Hall presents a model of coping with role conflict which distinguishes three kinds of coping mechanisms:

1. *Structural role redefinition* is an attempt to change the externally imposed definitions and expectations of others that give rise to role conflict. This is a pro-active response, one that "involves dealing directly with environmental transmitters of the structurally imposed demands, . . . with the objective reality of the situation rather than with the person's perceptions or feelings about it" (474). For tutors, structural role redefinition may involve re-educating tutees or instructors about the proper function of the tutorial. This approach places a premium on communicating and negotiating skills. It demands objectivity, assertiveness, and self-confidence. As such, it requires administrative leadership and support; supervisors ought to model those qualities, and tutors must sense a director's support of their efforts. Structural role redefinition may also result in greater specialization, a narrowing of the range of activities within which an individual tutor feels comfortable and competent.
2. *Personal role redefinition* involves "changing one's attitude toward and perceptions of one's role expectations, as opposed to changing the expectations themselves" (474). Tutors who adopt this coping response re-educate themselves rather than their constituents. According to Hall, such a strategy may entail separating roles, overlooking some role demands, or rotating attention among roles. Here, too, supervisors can assist by helping tutors see their options more clearly.
3. *Reactive role behavior* is a mostly passive response to role conflict in which one attempts "to improve the quality of role performance so that one can better satisfy all of the demands of one's role senders" (474). These tutors try to work harder and better, to accomplish more within a given tutorial, to provide greater satisfaction to the various role senders competing for their attention and allegiance.



## Additional Implications for Supervisors

Role conflict theory provides helpful insights into the complex and demanding job of tutoring. Although institutions do not deliberately attempt to create stress for their employees, some measure of role ambiguity and conflict is inevitable in any organization, especially those, such as writing centers, that are largely defined by social interaction. Indeed, conditions under which human agency and interaction are completely defined and circumscribed are neither possible nor desirable:

To attempt the creation of a complete organizational blueprint, in which every task would be specified, every method prescribed, and every contingency foreseen would be a self-defeating effort. It would be impossibly costly; it would be constantly upset by changes in the organizational environment. Moreover, it would be most unwelcome; to work under conditions of absolute and unrelieved specificity does not suit the human organism. (Kahn et al. 387)

David Taylor describes the tutor as being “caught between two worlds” (2). As we have seen, there may be *many* worlds within which tutors are obliged to live and move and have their being. The question facing those of us who hire, train, and supervise tutors is, “How can we help them function most effectively and healthfully in the world of the writing center?”

We can begin with hiring by seeking an aptitude for dealing with role ambiguity and conflict. When interviewing prospective tutors, one might introduce scenarios, such as those described above, that illustrate intra-sender, inter-sender, inter-role, or person-role conflict and ask interviewees how they would respond. It may also be instructive to find out what other academic, social, and work-related commitments prospective tutors have and how they plan to apportion their time and energy.

In training, we should acknowledge role ambiguity when and where it needs to exist and prepare tutors for the role conflicts they will inevitably face. We can help minimize both role ambiguity and role conflict by stating our own expectations clearly and by trying to (re)educate teachers and tutees about the nature of the tutorial enterprise.

In supervising, we need to encourage assertive and effective coping strategies. We should model good communication with our superiors so that tutors will be willing and able to approach us or other teachers about role-related problems in the center. As supervisors, we must be sensitive to instances of role conflict among our tutors and open to discussions of the subject with them.

Although role conflict may be a necessary feature of organizational life, it stresses “are not equally damaging to all who experience them. The extent to which role conflict produces symptoms of strain is mediated by the personality

of the individual in conflict and by the nature of his relations with his co-workers" (Kahn et al. 337). As administrators and supervisors, we have little control over our tutors' personalities. We can, however, have a significant influence on the climate within which they work.

Writing center tutors are not unique in being exposed to role ambiguity and conflict. However, because, like professionals, they work with clients and exercise some autonomy, and because, like members of the business world, they work for an organization and have supervisors and co-workers, tutors represent a distinct and sociologically interesting occupational group. It is a group worthy of further empirical investigation.

Subsequent research in this area might attempt to isolate the contributing factors to role ambiguity and conflict among tutors and to determine whether these problems are more prevalent within certain kinds of writing centers or institutions. For example, are tutors in a small college setting, who see tutees often outside the center, more likely to experience role conflict than their counterparts at a large university? Further research might also test tutors on Kahn et al.'s flexibility-rigidity scale and analyze their coping strategies. Parts of Hall's study, which focused on college-educated women, could perhaps be replicated with tutors.

If Rodney Simard is right that the writing center tutor represents a new professional role, then we need to subject that role to the kind of analysis that other professions have profited from. As writing centers have become institutionalized on campuses, the role of tutors has been formalized and stabilized as well. One indication of tutors' ongoing occupational status will be the seriousness and thoroughness with which their professional roles are analyzed. This article represents a small step in that direction. Other steps are needed.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>Traditionally, professionals have enjoyed varying degrees of what Ritzer calls a "norm of authority . . . the idea that they should be free of external control" (50). Implicit in this notion is the conviction that only fellow members of the profession are qualified to judge a professional's work.

## Works Cited

- Brannon, Lil. "On Becoming a More Effective Tutor." *Tutoring Writing: A Sourcebook for Writing Labs*. Ed. Muriel Harris. Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1982. 105-110.
- Bruffee, Kenneth A. "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind.'" *Writing Theory and Administration*. Ed. Gary A. Olson. Urbana: NCTE, 1984. 3-15.
- DeCiccio, Albert C. "The Writing Center and Peer Tutoring: Some Observations." "Writing Lab Newsletter" Jan. 1988: 3-5.

- Garrett, Marvin P. "Toward a Delicate Balance: The Importance of Role Playing and Peer Criticism in Peer-Tutor Training." *Tutoring Writing: A Sourcebook for Writing Labs*. Ed. Muriel Harris. Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1982. 94-100.
- Hall, Douglas T. "A Model of Coping with Role Conflict: The Role Behavior of College Educated Women." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 17 (1972): 471-86.
- Harris, Muriel. *Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference*. Urbana: NCTE, 1986.
- Hawkins, Thom. "Tutoring Typology." *Tutoring Writing: A Sourcebook for Writing Labs*. Ed. Muriel Harris. Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1982. 289-90.
- Jacobs, Suzanne E. and Adela B. Karliner. "Helping Writers to Think: The Effect of Speech Roles in Individual Conferences on the Quality of Thought in Student Writing." *College English* 38 (1977): 489-505.
- Kahn, Robert L. et al. *Organizational Stress: Studies in Role Conflict and Ambiguity*. New York: Wiley, 1964.
- Reigstad, Thomas J. and Donald A. McAndrew. *Training Tutors for Writing Conferences*. Urbana: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills and NCTE, 1984.
- Ritzer, George. *Working: Conflict and Change*. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1977.
- Simard, Rodney. "Assessing a New Professional Role: The Writing Center Tutor." *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*. Ed. Gary A. Olson. Urbana: NCTE, 1984. 197-205.
- Taylor, David. "Peer Tutoring's Hidden World: The Emotional and Social Issues." *Writing Lab Newsletter* Jan. 1989: 1-4.

---

**David Healy** currently serves as Coordinator of the General College Reading and Writing Center at the University of Minnesota, where he is in his fourth year. General College is the open admissions unit of the University. Their mission is to accept academically underprepared students who would not otherwise be admissible to the University and to prepare them for transfer to other admitting units. Healy supervises a staff of three GTAs and 12 undergraduate peer tutors. In addition to overseeing the Center, he teaches two courses a year in General College.