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Bringing Tutorials to a Close: Counseling's Termination Process and the Writing Tutorial

Michael Steven Marx

The metaphors we use to describe tutoring reveal our understanding of the tutoring process as well as our view of tutorial relationships. The metaphor of writing tutorials as psychological counseling sessions frequently occurs in composition literature (Carnicelli 116, Duke 44, Harris 69-71). In writing centers we regularly invoke the language and methods of counseling to discuss initiating tutor-writer relationships, a tutor's "intervention" in the writer's work, and the length of a tutorial partnership: "walk-in," "short term," or "long term." On college campuses, tutoring programs for writing and psychological outreach programs share similar names: Writing Center and Counseling Center. Charles Duke has suggested—and Muriel Harris and Thomas Carnicelli have seconded—that nondirective Rogerian strategies inform the one-to-one dynamics between a tutor and writer and offer "techniques which will help to make the writing conference a valuable learning experience for teachers and students" (Duke 44). The one-to-one setting, the exchange of personal thoughts and ideas during a writing conference, and the bonds formed between participants make this metaphor apt. Although Duke cautions, "too many direct parallels between the counseling session and the writing conference must not be drawn" (44-45), one direct parallel which extends the relevance of this metaphor is the process of ending long term tutoring partnerships or, in the jargon of counseling psychology, termination.¹

Most tutor training material has concentrated either on how to begin a tutoring partnership or on substantive aspects of writing but has neglected instruction on how to end tutorial relationships. Harris' *Teaching One to One: The Writing Conference* devotes four of five chapters to the dynamics of one-to-

one conferencing, including verbal and nonverbal communication, the use of questions, and defining individual roles. Emily Meyer and Louise Z. Smith's more comprehensive *The Practical Tutor* provides only sixty-eight pages on the dynamics of tutoring before turning to specific issues of writing such as shaping ideas, the writing process, correctness, and the relationship between reading and writing in the remaining 277 pages. However, as writing programs make greater use of peer tutoring in the teaching of writing and as students enter into extended working partnerships with writing tutors either at their own initiative or upon the guidance of an instructor, the unique circumstances of bringing long term tutorial relationships to a close demand attention.

Like composition, psychology also draws upon metaphor. Psychologists Judith A. Marx and Charles J. Gelso report that theorists liken termination to the process of dying (3). The metaphor of "termination as a loss experience" (4) guides Marx and Gelso's research on termination. For their study of counseling termination at college counseling centers, Marx and Gelso developed the "Termination Behavior Checklist" whose items also characterize much of the process of bringing a tutorial to a close. These items include "Summarizing the work," "Assessing how much goals had been attained," "Counselor inviting [the client] to return if [the client] feel[s] the need," and "thanking the counselor" (4-5). A sense of loss of support or friendship may occur when the partnership concludes in a tutorial, but loss may not be the paramount issue surrounding the conclusion of a long term tutoring relationship. While some students working with tutors may view their relationship as very significant, others may view the tutors simply as a means for getting through a course, thus decreasing the role of termination. However, the more important the relationship is to its participants, the more important termination is for bringing the relationship to a productive conclusion. B. W. Tuckman and M. A. C. Jensen's description of the termination process as "adjourning" (Ward 21) is more appropriate to the circumstances of tutoring as this discussion will reveal. Whether a loss or an adjourning procedure, the termination process focuses on ending a significant relationship. How the process is approached will vary among tutoring partnerships.

Termination is a process itself as well as a part of the larger process of counseling. Donald E. Ward conceives of termination as a three-part process: assessment of goal completion and learning; closure of affective and relationship issues; and preparation for post-counseling self-reliance and transfer of learning.² Ward explains,

First is the function of assessing the client readiness for the end of counseling and consolidating learning. A second major purpose includes both resolving remaining affective issues and bringing about appropriate closure of the significant and often intense relationship between the client and the counselor. Effective termination also seeks to maximize transfer of learning and to

increase the client's self-reliance and confidence in his or her ability to maintain change after counseling. (22)

Just as the writing process is recursive, so too is termination. Ward concludes that the emphasis given to each of these three major functions depends upon the client's needs and the nature of the counseling situation. Given that a fundamental purpose of a writing tutorial "is to help writers gain the confidence and skill necessary for them to write well independently" (Meyer and Smith 3), all three functions of termination are valuable in setting a student on the road to becoming an active and critical writer.³

Assessing Progress

The first function of evaluating the progress and changes the client has made is also essential to the termination of tutoring relationships. Such evaluation was foremost on the minds of students working with tutors in the developmental writing course at Skidmore as they completed an informal survey on their tutoring experiences at the end of the semester. One student hoped that her tutor would tell her "where I have improved (what areas)" and describe the "progress seen in participation during sessions." Also embracing this broader perspective, another student expressed the desire to know "whether or not I have come a long way, i.e. my writing skills—have they improved." Such assessment is precisely the kind of information tutors want to impart at the close of their meetings.

In a corresponding survey of tutors at Skidmore's writing center, a tutor with one semester's work explained, "I would like to point out first the improvement in [the student's] writing and her level of thought." However, Ward stresses that in counseling situations, such evaluative information should not come from the counselor. He contends, "It is especially important that . . . the client assume primary responsibility for this process during termination, because the counselor will not be present to remind the client of significant gains after the counseling ends" (23).

This advice is equally true for the writing tutorial. Much of the growth and success of tutoring comes from the development of confidence within the writer. If that confidence is to be lasting, the writer must be able to articulate the progress and changes that he or she has undergone as a writer. However, a student's abilities as a writer are constantly evolving during a tutorial; the student's memory of him- or herself as a writer may be associated only with the most recently written paper. The writer forgets his or her beginning status. Such myopia robs the student of the opportunity to see real change and progress in writing. Counselors confront similar situations, and Ward suggests that a counselor and client review a session recorded earlier from their meetings to recover perspective. This approach is equally applicable in writing tutorials.

Rather than describing progress, tutors may better serve their students by asking them to review one of their earlier papers and juxtapose it to a recent composition. While revisiting an earlier essay may first provoke feelings of embarrassment and disbelief (“Was that me?” “Did I write that?”), it will also provide writers with a concrete measure against which to assess—and more importantly to see—change and improvement. In the cases where the tutorial has fostered little growth or unfortunately resulted in the deterioration of the writing, such an exercise also sets the stage for “looking ahead,” a technique commonly used in counseling (Marx and Gelso 7), and for a discussion of additional work the writer must do and further tutorial assistance the writer may seek.

Closing Relationship Issues

The degree of loss experienced by the termination of a relationship between the tutor and student may be less than that felt from the conclusion of counseling. Similarly, the importance of the function of closing affective and relationship issues may have a reduced role in the termination of a writing tutorial. Nonetheless, the purpose of this aspect of termination is important to bringing a tutorial session to a productive close. In this dimension of termination, the aim is “to lead toward the expression of an appropriate and meaningful goodbye at the actual conclusion of counseling” (Ward 23). Role confusion may cloud the actual counselor-client relationship in the client’s eyes; similar circumstances often arise in tutoring. Working on a regular, informal, and close basis, students often confuse the role of the tutor as para-professional with friendship or sexual attraction. Reflecting on her tutorial experience, one female tutor recounts, “Sometimes I was uncomfortable because I think [my male tutee] ‘liked’ me more than a friend and tutor.” Reinforcing and clarifying how the tutoring relationship has functioned throughout the semester along with defining how the relationship may or may not continue is vital to this stage of the termination process.

Most relationships established in college writing tutorials continue, as one tutor noted, but on a different level. An overwhelming majority of first-time tutors reported that they hoped to continue seeing their students either in academic or social situations. While tutors may take this for granted, such invitations need to be expressed. One student who rated her tutorial an excellent experience wanted to see her tutor but added, “I would not want to impose on her.” More importantly, the status of future interactions needs to be clarified, especially because tutors graduate, study abroad for a year, or discontinue work in the writing center. Such knowledge can be reassuring to the student who might otherwise come to the writing center, not find her or his tutor listed among the staff, and fear their tutorial caused the tutor to abandon tutoring. At this time in the termination of a tutorial, it would be appropriate

for the departing tutor to introduce the student writer to another tutor who will be available to assist the student. A tutor who has been in the writing center during their tutorial meetings and is a familiar presence to the student may be a particularly good selection.

Understanding each other's roles is an important step toward finding an appropriate way for terminating a tutorial. One tutor with a year and a half of experience noted the awkwardness of "saying goodbye" at the end of a tutorial, explaining that most of her students "didn't seem to know how they should act. They were casual about it, which was the easiest way to handle it, I think." Another tutor has relied upon "handshakes, 'thank you's,' and 'good luck's'" to close his tutorials. In contrast, a tutor with three years experience recounted that "my first tutee . . . gave me chocolates; I usually get a hug from everyone; they all say thank you and I thank them for being great!"

Transfer of Learning

Bringing a tutorial to a warm and successful conclusion depends in part upon fulfilling the third component of the termination process: post-counseling self-reliance and learning. Ward explains that in this part of termination, attention is devoted "toward the client's expectations for and transfer of learning to life after counseling has ended" (23). Even though areas for continued work and resources for further assistance may have been addressed by the first two functions of the termination process, this aspect of termination is most overtly oriented toward the future. The focus is on the individual client and how he or she will operate in the post-counseling world. Like the assessment of goal completion and learning, this stage allows the counselor and client to review important strides that have been taken in counseling and to reinforce new strategies learned through counseling.

In addition to more immediate improvements, the effects of a writing tutorial on the student's writing should be lasting. Devoting attention to post-tutoring self-reliance and learning is particularly valuable when ending an extended tutorial relationship. Although tutors may wonder whether any of the information they cover in a session remains with students when they leave the writing center, the aim of tutorials is for learning from the one-to-one partnerships to carry into the student's future writing tasks.

Just as the counselor and client will review and reinforce new strategies the client has acquired during counseling, the writing tutor and student can review the important new writing strategies and procedures that the student has adopted—or been exposed to—during the tutorial. Ward suggests imagery as an effective approach for realizing the goals of this part of termination. He explains, "Projecting the future using imagery can be applied in a number of ways, such as imagining oneself applying new learning in a variety of situations and imaging

how life will be in one month, six months, one year, and at any point in the client's future" (23). Imagery can also be applied effectively during the concluding sessions of a writing tutorial. For students who have struggled during the tutorial with discovering information to write about, tutors may ask that they imagine themselves receiving the first assignment in next term's writing class, and then have the students discuss how they could apply the heuristic approaches learned in the tutorial to this writing situation. If students have worked on outlining techniques to strengthen organization, the tutor may have the students describe the writing process they would use when they begin to write or take an essay examination. Imagining how to allocate adequate time for writing papers at a particularly busy mid-term or finals period may prove beneficial for students who have wrestled with time management.

Imagery allows students not only to review procedures learned in tutoring but, more importantly, to project themselves into future writing situations and discover that they can approach these assignments with confidence and achieve some degree of success. Discussion of post-tutorial self-reliance and learning extends the benefits of the tutorial beyond the immediate needs that initially brought the student to the writing center. It allows students to see how writing and the learning from the tutorial integrates into their larger educational experience.

Points of Convergence and Divergence between Counseling and Tutoring

Even with these direct parallels, caution must be taken over making the parallels between termination in counseling and writing tutorials too exact. The relationship between counselor and client exists solely on a professional level. The principles of therapy prevent a conscious transformation of counseling relationships into friendship or other personal non-work relationships. Counseling research focuses primarily on the client during the termination process. Although R.K. Goodyear emphasizes counselors "should not overlook but should work through their own feelings about the ending of counseling relationships, he qualifies that the counselor's actions must be guided by the best interests of the client" (Ward 23). In contrast, the collaborative learning of tutoring—and peer tutoring in particular—makes the process of terminating a tutorial relationship more reciprocal. The participants in a peer tutoring relationship are partners in learning. Although the balance shifts throughout the relationship, both parties learn from each other socially and intellectually as well as academically.⁵ Most of the students surveyed in one section of developmental writing wanted to know "how I have improved." Similarly, beginning tutors at Skidmore's writing center reported that they were also hoping to receive feedback from their students. One tutor conveyed that she wanted to know "how much I helped [my student], and what he thinks of me."

However, tutors generally have resources beyond their final tutorial meetings, such as writing center evaluation forms, to receive this information. Students, on the other hand, rarely have access to insights from one person with whom they have worked intimately over an extended period of time. Although termination may serve both parties in tutorial settings, the primary focus of termination—as in counseling—should remain on the “client,” the student writer.

The structure of a tutorial reveals a second important difference between the dynamics of therapy and tutoring which influences their respective termination procedures. Although time-limited counseling explicitly defines the time period of counseling, most counseling is open-ended: termination dates are not predetermined by either party. Therefore, the appropriate time to end counseling requires special attention. In contrast, the time boundaries in a writing tutorial are pre-established, which may lessen some of the anxiety surrounding the anticipation of ending the tutorial relationship. Both the tutor and the student are aware of the end-date and can prepare for it. But since the end of a tutorial is often linked to other endings (e.g., the finish of the semester, the completion of a course, or the taking of an exit examination or a standardized test such as the SAT, LSAT, or MCAT), the intensified atmosphere of endings suggests that devoting more attention to the conclusion of the tutorial may be worthwhile for the psychological and academic well-being of the student.

A client's attitude further distinguishes therapy from tutoring. Counseling is usually initiated on a voluntary basis or at the referral of a friend, physician, or other professional. The very idea of mandatory counseling could defeat its purpose. If clients do not enter the process willingly, they may be less receptive to the self-exploration and discovery that is the essence of counseling methodologies. Tutoring, on the other hand, may be either voluntary or mandatory. Since mandatory tutoring has a clear beginning and ending, students may expect and desire some form of culminating activity analogous to a course review or final comments from a writing instructor. The fact that some students enter writing tutorials unwillingly also increases the value of a thorough termination process. Such activities allow the tutor and student to measure the student's changes in attitude toward writing and collaborative learning. A termination process allows the tutor and student to reflect upon the social as well as intellectual maturation that occurred over the tutorial.

The finality of closure itself differentiates therapy and tutoring but also reinforces the relevance of termination in each activity. The word “termination” connotes absoluteness. If a relationship has been terminated, it will not continue. However, the definitiveness of termination is not so exact for either counseling or tutoring. Ward suggests that “follow-up letters, as long as five years after the end of therapy” (24) are appropriate. As indicated on the “Termination Behavior Checklist,” counseling typically concludes with counselors inviting clients to return when they feel the need (Marx and Gelso 5).

The counselor and client's seeing each other on a regular basis has, however, come to a close.

Because of the campus setting, the termination of the tutorial relationship may not even be recognized or acknowledged as a closure by either tutor or student. One first-semester tutor explained that she did "not consider it an end. I suppose I will always be around for [my student] to call upon for help since I will be working in the Writing Center." This expectation is realistic. Tutors and students often take the same classes; many have known each other prior to the tutorial and expect to continue seeing each other despite the end of formal tutoring. One graduating tutor noted that she does see the students she has tutored around the campus, and "when we do see each other we stop briefly and chat about how things are going." Asked whether she had given any thought to how to conclude her tutoring, one first-semester tutor explained, "I honestly haven't given any thought to this simply because it is not a factor in my tutorialship. It is not like [my student] and I did not know each other before this relationship, and furthermore, we are not ending this relationship but continuing it on a different level."

Although these explanations have some legitimacy, the failure of tutors to perceive the end of tutoring as an important closure of a specific type of relationship attests to the need to include discussions of termination in tutor training programs. This tutor is in correct is assuming that she is not "ending" her relationship with her student just because they will no longer be tutor and tutee. Ironically, when she notes that the relationship will continue "on a different level," she has conceded that an ending will, in fact, occur. Tutors and students can expect to see each other in social and academic settings after the close of a tutorial, yet the distinct roles of tutor and student that have defined the tutorial relationship will no longer exist.

The attitude of students in a tutorial may also affect the opportunities for a complete termination process. Half of the students in a class of twelve developmental writers reported they hadn't given any thought to how they would like their tutorials to end. Immersed in the end-of-the-semester commotion, they noted that they were "too busy with finals" to think about tutoring. In contrast, one student consciously chose not to think about the ending because her tutorial "has been too rewarding and I really don't want it to end." Denial of termination can become as counter-productive—if not more so—than neglecting termination. Some of the students who reported not thinking about the end of their tutorials may be among those who do not define a tutoring partnership as "a significant relationship." However, students who deny the impending end but clearly deem tutoring a significant relationship deserve, if not require, the benefits of a full termination process.

Lakoff and Johnson have shown that metaphors are a powerful part of language, shaping our perceptions of the world and how we live in the world.

The metaphor of tutoring as counseling offers us insight for how to perceive the tutoring process, especially ending the relationship. Employing the counseling metaphor throughout tutor training programs offers new opportunities to strengthen students' sensitivity and success in their roles as writing tutors. Conducted thoughtfully and with attention to the student writer, termination is not simply an ending. Ironically, termination becomes the first step in a new beginning for the student as a writer. To paraphrase Brutus' words to Cassius, "If we do meet again, why, we shall smile . . . this parting was well made" (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, V.i. 117-118).

Notes

¹An incident from a developmental writing class at Skidmore College illustrates the dependence students form on tutoring and thus the importance for a thorough and successful termination process. Developmental writers are allowed to preregister for their next writing seminar before other students. When one professor asked her students to hand in the section numbers for which they wished to enroll, she found to her chagrin that many of her students had been unable to choose a class because the course times conflicted with their tutorial meetings, which they believed would continue throughout the academic year.

²More colloquially, Marx and Gelso similarly explain termination in terms of three major themes: "looking back (reviewing counseling and goal attainment), looking ahead (setting an ending date and discussing future plans and possible additional counseling), and saying goodbye (client's expressing thanks and client and counselor's sharing feelings about ending)" (7). Because the language is less jargon laden, their terms may be more appropriate and more effective in tutor training programs.

³To suggest that student writers become independent does not mean that they should become isolated writers. This would contradict our understanding of the explicitly and implicitly collaborative nature of the writing process. Therefore, the purpose of a writing tutorial is not to make a writer's need for a tutor—or the writing tutor him- or herself—obsolete. Rather, as writers develop, the emphasis in the work of the tutor also changes from instruction to serving as an informed reader and respondent to student's papers.

⁴Many writing centers videotape or audio record tutoring sessions as part of their tutor training and staff development. These records can benefit the writing student as well. Replaying a videotape of an early tutoring session—or listening to a recording of one—gives writers the opportunity to revisit not only an earlier paper and their composing practices but also how they understood and talked about writing. These technologies give students additional forums in which to measure their progress and changes as writers.

⁵For a taxonomy of learning partnerships in peer tutoring, see Michael Steven Marx et al., "Learning in Peer Tutoring: Ap-PEER-ing or Disap-PEER-ing?" presented at the Sixth National Peer Tutoring in Writing Conference, Youngstown Ohio, November 1989.

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