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Review of *When Tutor Meets Student: Experiences in Collaborative Learning*

Bradley T. Hughes

Martha Maxwell, ed., *When Tutor Meets Student: Experiences in Collaborative Learning* (Kensington, MD: MM Associates, 1990). 97 pp. \$10.00.

In this anthology, Martha Maxwell, founder of the Berkeley Student Learning Center, has collected nineteen “vignettes” (as they are called in the book) written by undergraduate writing tutors at Berkeley between 1987 and 1989. At first glance, *When Tutor Meets Student* seems informal: published by Maxwell herself, it is spiral bound, more like a copy-shop course packet than a book. But as a whole it is an impressive collection of stories about writing center students and tutors, and among its entries are some real gems—compelling and personal stories, stories narrated in the tutors’ fresh and candid voices.

The nineteen authors—unfortunately too many to mention here—were all first-time tutors participating in a tutoring course, so they offer the valuable perspective of the newly experienced; their vignettes, which range in genre from narratives to more analytical essays, summarize and reflect on the tutors’ recent work with one or two students. Averaging three-to-five pages long, the pieces focus not on techniques for tutoring writing (which several recent books have already done so well) but instead on the attitudes tutors bring to their work, on the personal dimensions of tutoring, and on students’ development over time. In what could serve as an epigraph for the anthology, Susanna Spiro declares that for her, “There was no ignoring the social and personal aspects of a tutoring session” (75). Some of the entries do include

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valuable illustrations of effective tutoring techniques, but the emphasis is clearly on the social and personal.

The students described in this book are almost exclusively first-year students working on papers for writing courses, and the tutoring is regular and ongoing; thus excluded are portraits of other students who come to writing centers—more advanced students, ones who come for work on only one paper, ones writing in other disciplines. Despite this limited view of writing centers, the book's stories explore a wide range of tutoring challenges, ones common to all writing centers: coping with the anxiety of being a new tutor; drawing out quiet students; developing rapport with students, especially with those whose backgrounds, interests, and approaches to learning differ from their tutors'; learning to be patient with students whose progress is painfully slow; encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning; and negotiating a collaborative relationship.

These abstractions and tutoring challenges come alive in this anthology. Among the students being tutored, there is Arthur who has cerebral palsy and who through great persistence succeeds despite the doubts of his course instructor and his tutor; Kristi who is bubbly and gregarious but, as her tutor discovers at the eighth week of the term, has yet to submit a single paper; and Lisa and Roberto and others who refuse, some initially, others perpetually, to do the hard work necessary for progress. Several of the authors capture this conflict over expectations and responsibilities wryly and succinctly. Tammy Medress recalls, "[Jesse] expected someone to give him the answers to all of his writing problems, preferably in ten words or less, and make his papers perfect. Instead, he got me" (67). And Karen Castellucci laments:

I wanted to be this great resource for my freshman tutees to seek out whenever they were struggling with anything related to their new college life. Leanne wanted someone to proofread her papers. I wanted to discuss challenging questions with her and help her express herself with literary prowess. Leanne wanted a proofreader. (83)

And the tutors, too, have names and faces. In the first entry, for example, Lynn M. Schuette explores the doubts she had as she prepared to tutor for the first time (the same doubts I remember having) and explains the rewards she found:

The day that my tutoring application was accepted I *really* started to doubt my writing; that's the first benefit of tutoring: HUMILITY. It was like Dickens' *Christmas Carol*, Berkeley-English major style; the ghosts of bad-papers-past floated before my eyes. (2)

To prepare herself, she not only read about collaborative learning but rehearsed leading questions. “So . . . what do you . . . like about this paper?’ ‘So . . . WHAT do YOU . . . like about this paper?’” she whispered in front of a mirror, only to have her grandmother walk past her room and answer, “the funnies” (2). As anticipation gave way to experience, humility was followed by reflection on her own writing and how to teach others, then by patience, and finally by pride and self-confidence in her accomplishments as a tutor.

Eduardo Munoz’s contribution—an introspective, sensitive, and well-told story—explores the relationship between a minority tutor and a minority student. When he began tutoring, Munoz expected to maintain a professional distance from his students. As he helped a Chicano student enrolled in a Chicano studies course, he discovered that tutoring was both more complex and more rewarding: he had an opportunity to deepen and clarify his student’s understanding of what he was studying and what he was experiencing. Watching his student struggle to write about the difficult political and personal issues inevitably raised in such a course, Munoz identified closely with him: “I couldn’t help but empathize with Alex’s confusion and inner strife, and feel ambivalence about the wheel of cultural self-consciousness that I had helped to accelerate” (65). In this account Munoz reveals how special the bond can be between tutor and student and explains how he learned to “place a high value on [his] personal experiences as a minority” (66).

Too many of the stories in *When Tutor Meets Student* may seem to be unqualified successes, somewhat predictable in their pattern, moving from inevitable complications to easy resolutions. But such an anthology should not be faulted for spotlighting successes. New tutors reading this book need the encouragement it offers. And for those of us skeptics who know that tutoring does not always succeed, there are several vignettes that confront tensions and conflicts between tutors and students; some end in ostensible failure with students never returning for further tutoring and some dropping out of school. Where the book does lapse is in the way a few of the entries gloss over complex issues and allow easy generalizations and tidy morals to substitute for careful analysis (for example, quick explanations of thesis sentences miraculously change students’ organizing abilities; nothing more specific than patience and persistence seem necessary to help some students). Of course, the form of a vignette does not allow for extended development, but in some cases the authors did not adequately focus their topic given the restrictions of the form.

The point of these stories, though, is not to provide an exhaustive or scholarly treatment of tutoring issues or a close analysis of the language of writing conferences, but rather to do just what this anthology does so well: to provide multiple glimpses (its varied perspectives are an asset) into the complexities and rewards of being a writing tutor, to illustrate common problems, and to share solutions. This book deserves not only to be read by writing center directors but to be used in tutor training as a supplement to other readings and direct observations of tutorials. The best pieces in this anthology will illustrate for new tutors a genuine respect for students and a commitment to tutoring and will serve as a springboard for lively discussion. I know that I will use selections from it as part of my own tutor training, even with graduate-level tutors. Perhaps most important of all, *When Tutor Meets Student* can inspire other writing centers to do just as Berkeley's has done—to sponsor, celebrate, and share their own good writing about tutoring.

(For ordering information, write MM Associates, P.O. Box 2857, White Flint, Kensington, MD, 20891, or call Maxwell at 301-530-5078.)

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