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“Look Back and Say ‘So What’”: The Limitations of the Generalist Tutor

Jean Kiedaisch and Sue Dinitz

Since 1983, when Toby Fulwiler arrived at the University of Vermont and began promoting faculty interest in writing across the curriculum, our writing center has increasingly worked with students and recruited tutors from across the curriculum. Other writing centers have also moved in this direction. In the mid-1980's several articles appeared in the Writing Lab Newsletter and The Writing Center Journal encouraging writing centers to work with students and recruit tutors from across the disciplines (Haviland, Luce, Scanlon, Smith).

Initially, we were not very concerned about our tutors' ability to help students from various disciplines. We felt pretty confident that if we trained our tutors to be good facilitators, to use questioning to help students clarify their ideas, and to guide students through the writing process, they could help almost any student working on almost any paper. In an article in The Writing Center Journal, Susan Hubbuch goes so far as to suggest that the “ignorant” or generalist tutor can often be of more help than a tutor familiar with the discipline: “The ignorant tutor, by virtue of her ignorance, is just as likely—perhaps even more likely—than the expert to help the student recognize what must be stated in the text” (28).

But a few years ago our own experience teaching intermediate-level writing classes made us question this optimism. We had begun to encourage students to write the sorts of papers they might write within their disciplines. In working with these papers, we ourselves sometimes felt uncertain about what to say to students. For example, a business major wrote a market analysis divided into twenty subsections. When Sue said it seemed choppy

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and suggested transitions, the student responded that this is how market analyses are written. When Jean pointed out to an engineering student that she seemed to have similar information in her results, conclusions, and implications sections, the student responded that this is how lab reports are written. From our experience working with faculty and students in each of these disciplines, we suspected the business student was right and the engineering student was wrong. But how could we expect our peer tutors, less familiar with academic writing, to know when to accept the judgment of the “knowledgeable” student?

Wanting to look more closely at how a tutor’s knowledge of the discipline affects a tutoring session, we videotaped twelve sessions over papers written in literature courses designed for majors, assuming that these papers would be expected to follow disciplinary conventions. At the end of each session, we had the tutor and student fill out a questionnaire so that we could determine whether they saw any connection between the quality of their session and the tutor’s knowledge of the discipline. They did not. All of the students rated their sessions highly and credited their tutors with a good understanding of how to write literature papers. The tutors also rated their sessions highly, and none of them expressed concern over their level of knowledge of the discipline.

Thinking a teacher in the discipline might assess the help a student got differently from the student or the tutor, we asked three English teachers to view eight of the tapes and fill out a similar questionnaire. They did not find the sessions so uniformly good. All agreed that two of the sessions were excellent, two were good, and four were weak. And they did see a correlation between the tutor’s knowledge of the discipline and the quality of the session: the disciplinary knowledge of the tutors in the excellent sessions was rated as high, while that of the tutors in the weak sessions was rated as low.

This preliminary work made us want to identify more precisely how the tutor’s knowledge of the discipline affected each session. So we turned to analyzing the transcripts of the videotapes. What we saw led us to conclude that the “ignorant” or generalist tutor sometimes has limitations.

Anna, a senior English major, comes into the writing center with a paper for her Shakespeare course. The tutor on duty is David, a business major who had come to us highly recommended by two writing teachers. Anna’s draft begins,

Othello is a play that depicts the essence of deception. In the play, each character, except Iago, is deceived and in return they deceive. Iago is the master of deception and seeks out to deceive Othello who will in return eventually deceive his love, Desdemona. Iago is successful in his search for revenge upon Othello and he accomplishes his goal and that is to destroy the lives of the newly-

married couple, Othello and Desdemona. Iago plants the seed of suspicion and then waits as Othello brings destruction to the life of Desdemona as well as himself.

The rest of the draft falls into three sections, each of which opens with a Roman numeral and heading:

- I. Why does Iago want to deceive Othello?
- II. How does Iago go about deceiving Othello?
- III. Othello deceives Desdemona

The last few sentences of the introduction and the outline both suggest that the draft moves quickly into a retelling of the plot. In a journal entry written for his tutor training class, David shows he recognizes that the paper needs to be more analytical: “She did a lot of plot summary, there is too much. It doesn’t analyze the story.”

To help Anna make the paper more analytical, David first tries to get her to narrow her focus:

David: What are three things you’re trying to tell the reader?

Anna: Show how Iago is obsessed with deceiving Othello . . . To show why he deceives Othello. And how he does it. And then show how Othello is deceived. And how Othello in return deceives someone else.

David’s journal entry shows he’s satisfied with this list: “She needed to cut her focus down to smaller pieces. I got her to list three or four main points she wanted. They overlapped a bit, but at least I got her down to fewer points to be made.” David doesn’t seem to realize that the new list actually matches the Roman numeral headings that organize Anna’s draft.

For the rest of the hour-long session, David and Anna read through the paper paragraph by paragraph. After each few paragraphs, David stops and asks her the point of that section, explaining:

The best questions to try and answer I’ve always found are “so what” and “why.” When you’re trying to make a point after a few paragraphs, look back and say “so what.” That will bring out of the summary your voice. That’s what you definitely want, those two questions.

Does this general advice help Anna make the paper more analytical? Throughout the session, in response to David’s questions, she re-describes that particular section of Othello, adding even more details about the plot and characters, as in the following example:

Anna: It’s not really deception that he’s doing at first He’s getting ready to plant the seed of suspicion, so to get ready to do that you have to make sure that the person you’re going to

deceive . . . that they're going to trust you . . . and that they're going to be manipulated by this game.

David: OK, answer why.

Anna: Why? Because if Iago . . . doesn't have Othello's trust, it's not going to work, so he has to be sure he has Othello's trust . . . One of the ways he knows he can do this is by saying that he's mad at Roderigo for doing this to Brabantio . . . [She continues to explain how Iago gains Othello's trust.] He can't really go on with his plan till he knows for a fact that Othello's going to trust him.

David: [pause] Um, can you answer "so what" to that?

Anna: I guess I see it as really important because if I was in Iago's shoes, I would never go about a plan, until I knew I had that person's loyalty and trust. . . .

David: That's the kind of stuff you need in this as opposed to plot summary.

David doesn't seem to realize that in answering his questions Anna just keeps repeating her original point.

There's no evidence in the session that using the "so what" question helps Anna think more analytically. Even though they spend an hour going through the paper, the two never come up with any insights that will make the paper more analytical. Anna leaves the session saying, "So I just need to go through and after each paragraph add in a sentence saying why or so what." David responds, "Yeah, yeah."

This session made us question a generalist tutor's ability to help when a paper is discipline-specific. David seems unable to see that Anna's answers to his general questions about focus and the point of each section remain on the level of plot summary. Or perhaps he does see this but doesn't know what to do. Indeed, he seems uncomfortable during much of the session, stopping often to look at his watch, pausing often to think about what to do next, even asking, in seeming desperation, "Are you going to be seeing your professor before turning this in?" David doesn't seem to know what to do to move Anna beyond plot summary; he can't use her answers to generate even more questions and get a process going which will help Anna make her paper more analytical.

Cory, who is taking the sophomore-level introductory survey required of English majors, comes into the writing center with a paper that goes beyond plot summary to include several insights into Hawthorne's "The Birthmark." He is writing in response to the following assignment:

Both the scientists in "The Birthmark" and "Rappaccini's Daughter" could be described as mad or fatally flawed. But critics have also associated these scientists with artists. What do Aylmer, Rappaccini and Baglioni have in common with artists? Could Hawthorne be expressing his anxiety about art as well as science? Discuss how Hawthorne connects art and science in one of these stories and what it means for him to do so.

This assignment asks the student to come up with two insights: one into how art and science are connected, and another into the meaning of this connection. Cory's paper begins,

In Hawthorne's, "The Birthmark," Aylmer tries everything in his earthly power to improve upon a being that is as close to earthly perfection as possible. It is this relentless pursuit of perfection that ultimately leads to the destruction of Georgiana. The tension premising the story is the rivalry between Aylmer's two loves—the love he has for his wife, Georgiana, and the equal, if not superior love he has for science.

He goes on to offer several insights into the story, as is evident from the lead sentences to the six paragraphs that make up the body of the paper:

- (1) Like an artist has passion for his art, Aylmer has passionate [sic] for both his love of his wife and his love of science.
- (2) Nature is a reoccurring theme throughout the story. As an artist wishes to capture Nature, to mimic it, Aylmer wished to go a step further—to exercise "control over Nature."
- (3) As a poet is inspired by his muse, Aylmer is inspired by Georgiana.
- (4) Like an artist, Aylmer sought to create something that will live on eternally, something that would bare his mark, something that would prove that he had once inhabited this earth.
- (5) Perhaps Hawthorne was using science as a metaphor for art.
- (6) Perhaps, in some way, Aylmer was Hawthorne. Hawthorne may have been venting his frustrations at not being widely published.

These insights do go beyond plot summary. And they seem to match the two parts of the assignment: one through four are insights into how Hawthorne connects art and science and five and six are insights into what it means for him to do so. But there is no controlling insight. The ideas seem to be randomly ordered and taken together don't lead to an answer to the two main questions posed by the assignment.

But this does not seem to concern the tutor. Michelle, a political science major and one of our brightest and most sought-after tutors, comments, "I just think in each of these [paragraphs] it needs to be expanded a little bit." The two then go through the paper paragraph by paragraph discussing the points she thinks need to be expanded, such as what sort of passion Aylmer has for Georgiana, how an artist seeks to live on through his art, and whether Aylmer's failure results from his not being objective. In several paragraphs, she wants more detail about the artist in general, explaining, "I don't think we have a grip of what an artist is, in order to be able to compare a scientist to an artist." Even when Cory offers Michelle an opportunity to comment on more global concerns, she reassures him that he only needs to expand:

Cory: Take into account this is a first draft and all I did was write down ideas.

Michelle: It still is a good paper You're a good writer Your ideas, they flow and everything, they all make sense. I just think that they can be explained more.

Both David and Michelle failed to address global problems in their students' papers, but both were working with students who lacked knowledge of how to go about writing literature papers. Was a generalist tutor of more help to a knowledgeable student? Carl, another sophomore in the survey course for English majors, was writing in response to the following assignment: "Going beyond what was said in lecture, discuss androgyny in *The Sun Also Rises*." His paper begins,

The Hemingway man, on the whole, has a preoccupation with death. Once one is dead, one is dead. Therefore, the man must enjoy as many sensual pleasures as possible in his fleeting time on earth. It is this preoccupation that causes him to live life to the fullest. The Hemingway man is an avid lover, drinker, and eater. He enjoys and respects sport for the pure thrill, excitement, and for its intricacies; not necessarily because he is good at it. Where the typical Hemingway man is self-reliant and independent, the woman is passive and vulnerable—a pawn to be manipulated by her environment. She is the antithesis of the male. In *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway creates characters whose genders don't necessarily reflect their sex.

In *TSAR* the ideal man is Pedro Romero. Of all the characters, Romero exemplifies what Hemingway sees as the quintessential man—both inside the ring and out.

The paper goes on to discuss the male and female characteristics of all the main characters, beginning with Pedro Romero, the "quintessential man,"

followed by Brett and Jake, who exemplify both male and female characteristics, and ending with Robert Cohn, the "least masculine by Hemingway's standards."

Going beyond plot summary, Carl has classified the characters by the degree to which they're androgynous. He does have a controlling insight, which is supported in an organized and coherent essay. So this draft seems further along than Anna's or Cory's. What help can the generalist tutor provide here?

Jill, a psychology major, notices the lack of coherence between the last sentence of the first paragraph, which states that characters' genders don't reflect their sex, and the second paragraph, which discusses a character whose gender does reflect his sex. To solve this problem, Jill suggests reversing the order of the paragraphs so that Carl discusses the most feminine character (who happens to be a man) first. Carl suggests an even simpler solution: inserting the words "a spectrum" to alert the reader to how he's organized the paper. Carl changes the last sentence of the first paragraph to read: "In *The Sun Also Rises* Hemingway creates a spectrum of characters whose genders don't necessarily reflect their sex."

Jill and Carl continue to work on the paragraph and sentence levels, addressing such concerns as what aspects of Brett's nature are feminine, whether the paper "flows between characters well," what should be in the conclusion, whether more quotations are needed, and what "vague places" need work on the sentence level. But they ignore the possibility of making more global improvements. Carl's paper shows that there is androgyny in the novel, but this is stated in the assignment. We think most English teachers would expect students to go further, connecting descriptions of technique (the use of androgynous characters) to the meaning, effect, or context of the text. Again, a generalist tutor focused on local rather than global concerns.

Indeed the only tutors who worked successfully on the global level were knowledgeable tutors, as illustrated in the following session between Margaret, a sophomore working on the same Hawthorne assignment as Cory, and Tammi, a senior English major. Margaret's paper begins,

During the period of american renaissance [sic] the issue of science and art were a constant issue of ethics, still present today. It was a period of change and breaking from the norm. Today we try and use science as a way of altering or "fixing" nature, those who believe that medicine should prolong the lives of those incapable of sustaining their own lives. Hawthorne, as depicted in *The Birthmark* connects the meaning of art and science, and expresses his anxiety towards these new ideas and his conflict of whether in order for one to succeed the other must fail.

Rather than working with Margaret's draft, Tammi sets the paper aside after reading a few pages and talks with her about the assignment and the story. Over and over, Tammi brings Margaret back to the two key questions in the assignment, as in the following examples:

- So, if you're choosing "The Birthmark," how does he do it, connect issues of art and science, how does he do it?
- Ok, so the question here is "How does Hawthorne connect art and science in one of these stories?"
- Now if I ask you a question like "How does Hawthorne connect art and science in the story?" Ok, then, what does it mean for him to do it that way?
- So what does it mean then for him to have Aylmer as an artist and as a scientist?

In the following excerpt, Tammi uses questioning and repetition to help Margaret talk through her ideas to the point where she sees that one of her original answers can't be supported by the text:

Tammi: So what does it mean then for him to have Aylmer as an artist and as a scientist?

Margaret: That the two in his personality don't work together.

Tammi: How so?

Margaret: Because they conflict each other.

Tammi: How?

Margaret: Because in order for one to succeed.

Tammi: OK, for the scientist to succeed and to make.

Margaret: For him to be a good scientist.

Tammi: To be a good scientist, yes.

Margaret: The art part has to fail and to be bad.

Tammi: Why?

Margaret: Because, because what he created failed, it died.

Tammi: Oh, so for him to create the scientific purity, Georgiana without the birthmark.

Margaret: Right, he created her.

Tammi: He finishes his scientific project, he's made her.

Margaret: Perfect in his eyes.

Tammi: Perfect in his eyes.

Margaret: Then he ends up failing anyway because now he doesn't have her anymore.

Tammi: Ok so now we've discussed his role as scientist. How is that.

Margaret: I guess he doesn't fail as an artist.

By responding to Tammi's questions, Margaret ends up completely changing her answers to the assignment questions. Rather than saying Hawthorne connects art and science through nature, she concludes they're connected in the person of Aylmer. And rather than saying for one (art or science) to succeed, the other must fail, she concludes that Aylmer succeeds as both an artist and as a scientist, but at the cost of life itself.

Tammi, an English major, is able to assess how well Margaret's insights are supported, is confident enough to put Margaret's paper aside and turn to looking at the text with her, and knows what questions to ask to help Margaret reach new insights that can be supported using evidence from the text. Tammi knows not only what the disciplinary conventions are but also what process produces a paper that follows them. This is the process Margaret needs to learn to write other English papers. It makes sense for Tammi and Margaret to work on these higher-level thinking skills before turning to the other problems evident in her introduction, such as word choice and sentence structure.

We found, however, that the tutor's familiarity with the conventions of the discipline doesn't guarantee a good session. When Sandy, who is working on a Yeats paper for the survey class, meets with Joanne, an English major who has taken the same course with the same teachers, it leads to just what Susan Hubbuch is concerned about: the knowledgeable tutor taking an "authoritative stance" (26), thinking of "writing in terms of the final product" (29), and so, in Joanne's case, focusing on correcting the student's paper in order to help her get a better grade. Joanne begins by reading through the paper and making corrections. Within the first few minutes she adds some quotation marks, changes "onto" to "unto," underlines some repeated words, and corrects some spelling errors. She notes a sentence fragment and rewords to correct it. At one point Sandy asks the tutor to please use pencil rather than pen in case she decides not to make the changes.

In addition to editing the paper, Joanne insists on some specific changes in the ideas. As she reads along, she comes to the idea that “Yeats turns to religion and everlasting art.” She stops and suggests a different relationship between the two ideas: “Or does he turn to everlasting art as a religion?” Sandy responds, “I thought that but then [I noticed] how he made the reference to God.” Joanne continues to defend her interpretation concluding, “I think that the interconnection of art there with religion—sort of that God has to do with the creation of eternal art, that whole idea—I think you can safely connect those. . . . You can say he turns to everlasting art as a religion.”

Is Joanne tempted to do too much because she knows so much? While making her corrections on Sandy’s paper, Joanne explains, “I took this course, and I can’t overemphasize the importance of a clean copy.” We don’t believe Joanne typically took an authoritative stance: there were no red flags in her journal, her lognotes, or her mock tutoring sessions to suggest she did.

We know we can’t reach conclusions based on this small number of cases, but in the sessions we looked at, the tutor’s knowledge of how to think and write in the discipline did seem important. Good tutoring strategies alone were not enough. All of these tutors were trained to address global before local concerns, to use questioning to draw out a student’s ideas, to refrain from appropriating the student’s paper. All of them had had numerous sessions with students in introductory writing courses in which they had successfully demonstrated these strategies. But David, Michelle, and Jill seem unable to apply them when working with students on assignments that require knowledge of a discipline other than their own. And Joanne, in her eagerness to use her knowledge, seems to forget her general tutoring strategies.

We began this project knowing that conventions differ from discipline to discipline and wondering whether tutors need to know these conventions to tutor effectively. Looking closely at these sessions suggested that tutors who don’t know how to go through the process of writing a paper in a discipline may be limited in what they can accomplish, and that tutors who do know this process may be tempted to appropriate the student’s paper. If more research supports these conclusions, what would be the implications for writing centers?

The most significant implication would be that students writing papers for upper-level courses would be best served by carefully trained tutors with knowledge of the discipline. If this is true, should writing centers try to provide such tutors? One method would be to match upper-level students with trained tutors from the discipline. But matching in a drop-in lab seems unwieldy, though it might be possible for special projects involving entire classes. Another method would be to turn our generalist tutors into knowledgeable tutors through a series of training sessions on writing across

the curriculum, as suggested by Leone Scanlon. But would brief training sessions enable more sessions like Tammi's to occur? Tammi's work with Margaret makes us question this assumption. We could perhaps describe some of the disciplinary conventions in an hour or two but would this enable tutors to help students write papers that follow them? In the case of literature papers, wouldn't students outside the discipline need to go through the process themselves, need to learn how to ask questions, analyze, and interpret a text? Doing this for several disciplines would be impossible in a one-semester course. Still, it remains a possibility when a writing center knows a group of students will be coming from a certain discipline. For example, because we have so many students working on literature papers, we now not only have English professors come talk to the tutors about their expectations for such papers but also have all of the tutors write a critical analysis of a text, so that they go through the process of thinking in the discipline.

If we can't ensure that students writing for upper-level courses can meet with a knowledgeable tutor, should we be alarmed about relying on generalist tutors? We think not. First of all, in many of our sessions the tutors don't need to be more than generalists. About 70 percent of our sessions are over papers for composition classes, papers usually written to a general audience. And some upper-level students are sent to the writing center with papers written for a lay audience, such as an engineer's position paper on an environmental issue.

Second, it's hard to be alarmed when students leave pleased with their experience and enthusiastic about working further on their papers. All of the above students rated their session 5 on a scale of 1 to 5 (1=not successful, 5=very successful), all answered "very satisfied" to the question concerning the choices made about what to work on in the session, and all said they left with a clear idea of what to work on next. We feel that if students leave satisfied and motivated, they have benefited. A session that is less than it could be is not by definition a bad session.

Third, it doesn't seem fair to place on our tutors' shoulders the responsibility for showing students how to think and write in the disciplines. It doesn't even seem fair to place learning this on the student writers' shoulders. Isn't this the responsibility of the departments? Indeed, when we see many students lacking knowledge of the process for writing within a discipline (though the students and tutors might not be aware of this lack), perhaps as directors we should go back to the department. In our case, we could share with our English faculty what we've learned about the difficulties some of their students are having, which might lead to a discussion of how writing in the discipline is being taught. Thus we have an opportunity to take up the charge given to writing centers by Nancy Grimm in her talk at the 1992 Conference on College Composition and Communication: to take

what we have learned from working with students back to the academy.

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