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Live And On Stage: Writing Center
Stories And Tutorial Authority

Thomas Hemmeter

"Who is this walking oxymoron called a peer tutor? How are new peer
tutors supposed to define themselves and their role in students’ learning
processes?" Appearing in a recent Tutors’ Column from the Writing Lab
Newsletter, these questions posed by Dina Fayer, a peer tutor at the University
of California-Berkeley, capture the complexity of writing center tutoring for
peer consultants. As she describes her incompletely-resolved tutoring
relationships with several students, Fayer links her tutoring struggles explic-
itly to problems of authority and to formulaic approaches to peer tutoring:
"I realized I was expected to follow a format that seemed pretty standardized.
. . . What I do feel strongly about is the necessity to let the situation dictate
the approach—the peer tutor formula contains good ideas that are, in
general, productive, but it does not provide for individual quirks and
contingencies" (13). Fayer’s comments provide a poignant reminder to
writing center professionals of the crucial link between self-concept and
training, as well as the importance of providing peer tutors a flexible, non-
formulaic model of writing conferences.

This peer tutor’s struggles illustrate the difficulty of adopting any
preconceived authoritative stance towards writing center students. While
some students accepted her advice, Fayer discovered that others challenged
her perspective on their writing and engaged her in troubling power struggles
over their tutoring relationship. Framing the issue of tutorial authority more
broadly, Andrea Lunsford analyzes writing center collaboration as an issue of
control: “The idea of a center informed by a theory of knowledge as socially
constructed, of power and control as constantly negotiated and shared, and

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of collaboration as its first principle presents quite a challenge” (9). This challenge needs to be met by a tutor training model which addresses issues of power negotiation and flexibility of peer role. One productive approach is to conceive writing tutorials as performances and to encourage tutors to analyze them in this way.

Though writing center administrators recognize the value of such dramatic exercises as role-playing in tutor training, we do not generally utilize in our training the deep connections between performance and peer tutoring. This neglect may result from our taking too literally the notion of peer tutoring as an uncomplicated relationship between equals, as suggested, for example, by William McCall’s statement that faculty associated with writing centers are able to engage our colleagues as equals in a symmetrical relationship. They feel no stigma in seeking us out, and we feel no sense of superiority in assisting them in articulating and accomplishing the goals they have set for themselves. This is essentially the same situation present with our undergraduates who work and sit in writing centers. (169)

The notion that parallel status as either colleagues or as peer students at a university creates “equals in a symmetrical relationship” is an attractive ideal but one which, as Dina Fayer discovered, distorts the reality of writing center relationships. While peer status grants provisional equality of a sort, peer tutoring also involves a dynamic performance which releases forces of power and authority, continually altering the presumed equality as the dialogue between tutor and student proceeds.

By approaching the peer relationship from a performance perspective—as something constructed, fluid, and involving power negotiations—we can create a framework for the problems beginning peer tutors experience. New tutors begin the job feeling that they are taking on an unaccustomed role, an authoritative and public one usually reserved for professionals; and a writing center’s new clients may expect them to play that role. To ease their stage fright, beginning tutors tend to hold tightly to pre-scripted parts to give them direction and control. They may direct their conversations into pre-set formulas to ease the tensions of genuine interpersonal dialogue, perhaps by choosing a conventional role or by taking a standard approach to a generic type of encounter. Accomplished tutors, however, rarely follow any script in a mechanical, undeviating way. When appropriate, they may assume the authoritative role new clients of writing centers expect them to enact; but just as often they refuse the part of “little teacher,” taking on instead the role of collaborator, listening audience, or even extra, as the student writer takes center stage.

In effective tutorials, then, script becomes performance, its static quality giving way to fluidity, dynamism, and shifting authority. While some tutors
unconsciously negotiate authority rather well, most can improve their tutoring if they are made aware of the benefits of sharing, exchanging, or even relinquishing authority in tutoring sessions. Making tutors aware of the performance nature of their writing conversations is one way to facilitate the productive tension of genuine tutorial engagement which successful writing conferences exhibit.

To help tutors overcome their own performance anxiety in the face of the shifting roles they must play and to teach them to anticipate students’ reluctance to get on the writing center stage, I have found it valuable to make storytelling an important part of tutor training. The lived experience of tutoring, a real engagement with students, makes it difficult for tutors to analyze the process and roles of peer tutoring: issues of power, authority, and identity are caught up in webs of living relationships, with no external textual perspective allowing deliberative analysis. To a degree this is as it should be. The tutor as performer unself-consciously enacting her conversations is a role highly compatible with the fluid process of writing. But tutorial performance is also a crafted act, one improved through training tutors to be more aware of their performances. In narrating their conference experiences, with the writing center staff as audience, tutors reenact tutorials in metatexts which permit critical perspective. To help tutors construct a tutorial identity and develop their narrative powers for conference performances, I use training meetings as a rehearsal stage, allowing them to recreate themselves as narrator and/or narratee of past conferences.

In these meetings tutors tell their stories informally, relating their experiences with students: successful conferences, unsuccessful conferences, cooperative and uncooperative partners, occasions when they felt powerful or powerless, etc. Sometimes an entire meeting consists of a story-telling session. In the follow-up discussion of a tale we can engage issues such as the complex role of peer tutoring in institutional settings, about which tutors not infrequently have the oversimplified notion that they should have a teacher’s control in a conference—or that they have no control whatsoever. By performing stories about themselves and their tutorials, tutors learn the valuable lesson of narrative authority: that greater control comes through negotiating power issues with one’s audience. Other tutors regularly interrupt, edit, or disagree with the story teller, and even within these tales students often refuse to cooperate with the tutors’ narrative of events. Giving tutors feedback to stories helps expose the storyteller’s “myth of possession and control” (Maclean 33), as other tutors and I bring out the storyteller’s often divided, ambivalent feelings about a student’s request, e.g., about the degree of help to give; we also suggest alternative stories by speculating on the student’s likely conflicts.

Telling tales of their experiences moves tutors to recognize their doubled and multiplied identity within the elaborate performances demanded by
writing center tutorials. To play well the role of peer consultant, tutors must understand the source of their narrative authority: a social contract always under negotiation. Playing a variety of narrative roles, writing center tutors find themselves involved in a dynamic performance in which rules and roles shift: sometimes they play the sympathetic listener, sometimes the enthusiastic teller, sometimes the puzzled questioner, sometimes the competent respondent. Thinking about their tutoring as a narrative performance not only conveys the value of a flexible, multiple identity in working with writers, it helps tutors keep personal antipathies at a distance. When difficulties arise with students, they can protect their personal feelings while enacting an appropriate tutorial role—even if only to act as a sounding board for a frustrated writer.

In creating narrative space for tutors to tell and retell their conferences, writing center meetings provide a valuable opportunity for reflection on tutoring practices. These narratives about conference experiences raise questions about the very nature of peer tutoring, helping tutors clarify their roles, engage issues of power, and construct their tutorial personae. In analyzing a few tape-recorded tales, not as static texts but as dramatic interchanges, I hope to show how story telling helps tutors negotiate issues of authority and identity. Ultimately I hope to show (in the Theoretical Implications section of this essay) that a performance perspective on writing center tutoring provides a way of understanding the dynamic nature of peer collaboration.

**Narrative Performance As Power Sharing**

Though peer tutors do not exercise direct power over students as do teachers, writing center conferences nevertheless engage tutors in power relationships. Not infrequently tutors resist or evade power issues. In a recent essay Michael A. Joyner observed, “In the writing center conference, to treat a text objectively and as the product of a centered self is to mislead students into thinking that their texts do not participate in a struggle for power, that we as tutors do not participate in this struggle” (84). As tutors are tempted to reduce the uncertainties in peer relationships by treating student papers as static, they similarly try to minimize power issues in tutoring relationships, sometimes by asserting too much authority and other times by asserting too little.

A narrative perspective on writing can help to move tutors past a static model of writing center tutoring. In arguing for a narrative performance perspective on literary fiction as a means of escaping the static, text-centered readings of narratology, Marie Maclean describes the power relationships in literary storytelling in words which help us recognize the complex power relationships in peer tutoring:

Narrative performance thus involves an intimate relationship which,
like all such relationships, is at once a co-operation and a contest, an 
exercise in harmony and a mutual display of power. It is both “act” 
and interaction, and implies a contract, a recognition of obligation 
and expectation, thus acknowledging the rules which govern the 
interplay. (xii-xiii)

These complex interpersonal dynamics operate in successful tutorial 
conferences. To help tutors recognize that effective tutoring involves 
negotiating difficult power relationships with students, I have them tell 
stories about their conference experiences in writing center meetings. The 
listening staff creates a dramatic context, a knowledgeable and critical 
audience whom the story teller must convince. Often the dramatic material 
of the tales, with the story teller doubling as actor in the tale about a 
conference with a student, raises explicitly issues of authority and power.

This narrative perspective on writing conferences can reveal dramatic 
efforts by both tutors and students to gain narrative control. For example, 
tutors should be aware that telling stories of their own writing experiences can 
be a means of gaining authority in the relationship. One source of power as 
peer consultants derives from their peer status as struggling writers. But this 
narrative position may yield precisely the opposite result, undercutting their 
authority with students who expect the tutor will be older or an “A” student 
who has mastered the system. The following story told in a writing center 
meeting reveals a tutor negotiating just such an authority problem:

Jennifer: Well, I guess I had a problem with confidence because this 
was the first semester that I had done this, and the second person that 
came in to have her paper read was a continuing-ed student, and she 
confronted me and said, “Are you the consultant?” And I said “Well, 
yeah” and she was, like, “You’re a student!” She was a little upset that 
I was this young person, and I think she kind of questioned my 
abilities, so that little bit frustrated me because again my confidence 
was not up because I had never done that before except maybe one 
other person. And when she asked me that I sort of had to tell her, 
“Well, we’ve had training” and make sure that she was comfortable 
having me read her paper. But I think she was taken aback that I was 
just a young student and not a professor or something—I don’t 
think she understood what the writing center was about. But it 
worked out. We talked about other things first rather than her paper 
first, and then we got into the paper, so we were talking about her 
personal life and she sort of trusted me a little bit better—that she’s 
studying and how she feels about being a continuing-ed student. I 
had asked her if she had other continuing-ed students in her class to 
break down that issue to get through the barriers that were up when 
she walked through the door.
Jennifer’s story is a common one: the ritual testing of a new tutor whose lack of experience creates the narrative stance of the beginner without confidence. In the conference Jennifer has no convincing story to tell about herself. To the narratee’s challenge, she can only lamely respond with the story of her training, which she hopes qualifies her to tell this older student something about writing. To regain authority, she shifts the role of narration onto the narratee, encouraging the continuing education student to tell her own story of classroom and personal experiences.

This tutor’s flexible response to a student’s challenge illustrates the value of having tutors tell stories about their conference experiences and helping them to recognize the performance element in writing tutorials, whether they explicitly involve narrative or not. A performed narrative establishes a fluid relationship between teller and listener. Performance theory distinguishes between the passive listener as narratee, whose cooperation may be scripted, and the active listener as audience member who may or may not accept the storyteller’s authority (Maclean 1-3). This distinction helps explain the need for tutors to move past a one-dimensional perspective on students as passive listeners to their stories or on themselves as passive listeners (mere sounding boards) to students’ tales. Jennifer’s maneuver is double: (1) in shifting the storytelling role to the student, Jennifer frees herself to take up an active listener role, helping her tutee understand and narrate her experiences as an older, frustrated continuing-education student in classes dominated by traditional-age students; (2) after enacting the listener role to the student’s narrator, Jennifer has the student take on an active listener role as Jennifer takes the narrator’s part and shifts the conversation to the paper.

In negotiating her position with the student, Jennifer in effect transforms a story of failure into a modified success story: “It worked out.” Our subsequent discussion of Jennifer’s story in the staff meeting, including other tutors’ stories about confidence problems, recast her narrative of flagging confidence in several ways, helping the group to articulate the necessary risks of being “just a student” when acting as a peer tutor. Confidence became the theme of several stories, not only helping Jennifer realize that she was not alone in occasionally feeling inadequate, but moving the entire staff to realize that there are options and alternatives when confronted by a student challenging one’s authority. One option is narrative: in a sense Jennifer tells herself out of her crisis of confidence; several parallel stories in the staff meeting retold her story and provided alternative conclusions to this story.

Many writing center stories told in staff meetings concern difficulties with uncooperative students. In having tutors retell their experiences, I help students model this resistance from a performance perspective as a natural part of storytelling (as well as any dialogue), in which various kinds of “noise” can interfere with communication (Fiske). In the following passage the first tutor resents being put in a counselor role by a student who wants narrative
control over the tutorial; the second tutor bursts in, dramatically shifting the terms of the narration and giving a much more successful response to a student who wants a passive listener:

Brenda: It's kind of like a therapy session—like you'll say, “How ya doin’” like when they walk through the door to break the ice, and then they'll tell you and you don't really want to know.

Pat: This girl was like really upset one day and she had a million things going on that day, and I could see the tears were forming in her eyes. She slapped the paper down, and I asked her how she was doing; then she sort of calmed down and let me look at her paper afterwards. We talked about the problem and then we talked about how she could fix the problem—it was a problem with a professor and doing poorly—and it was in that class with that paper, so then I could give her something nice and she felt better about having me look at her paper. She said she came there and the paper was a disaster, and the professor had told her so-and-so, and she was feeling sorry about it. Plus everything else that was bothering her—she couldn't concentrate on working on the paper because of the rest of her day. That was okay because I could talk about my problems too and say, “yeah, I know what you mean,” and I felt better. I said, “I have the same problem” because I had been having the same problem.

In response to Brenda’s generalized tale of being forced into an unwanted listener role, Pat spontaneously breaks into a story about welcoming such a role and turning it into narrative power. To overcome such student resistance to a conference, one method is to shift the topic of narration from paper problems to personal experiences, in effect getting the student to assume a narrative role and thereby investing the tutor with some power as a listener. After listening cooperatively to the student’s personal stories, Pat reverses roles and narrates her similar story as a struggling writer. Her successful performance illustrates a basic truth of tutorial narrative: “Narrative [needs to] be seen not as a matter of ownership but of negotiation,” and storytellers need to “concentrate on the interplay between telling and hearing” (Maclean 19). Tutorials are dramatic performances with two roles to be played—teller and listener—and the choice of roles is a matter of negotiation with the person or persons engaged in the performance.

Having tutors telling stories of their tutoring experiences in writing center meetings is one way to convey the necessity of sharing power with students (their primary audience). As they recreate in narrative form their conferences, tutors enjoy as immediate listeners the rest of the staff (a secondary audience), whose critical but empathetic responses create a theater encouraging self-consciousness of tutorial roles. Brenda’s rejection of the
sympathetic narratee’s role (she doesn’t want to listen to students’ tales of woe) draws a response from Pat, who accepts her listener’s role easily. Brenda learns something in hearing how Pat gives power to her student in order to get it back later when the student, after having vented her problems, feels better about having Pat look at her “disaster” of a paper. Pat clearly understands that performance grants power both to teller and to hearer, an important sharing on which to base the peer-tutoring model of the conference, and she conveys this to Brenda in a response story. Pat’s story opens up Brenda’s closed narrative, its different response to a student’s desire to tell a personal narrative creating an alternative ending to Brenda’s tale. In weaving several types of narratives—remembered conference stories told by tutors and students both, stories of success and failure—these writing center sessions create an intertextual fabric permitting tutors to examine what they did in their conferences and to consider alternative narrative structures.

Notable also is Pat’s reason for accepting the passive listener role: “That was okay because I could talk about my problems too and say, ‘Yeah, I know what you mean,’ and I felt better. I said, ‘I have the same problem’ because I had been having the same problem.” Her fluid acceptance is directly connected to her sense of tutoring identity. She feels empowered to accept a listener’s role because she is a peer, a student who herself has frustrations she wants to share. But she also self-consciously uses this role to move the conference talk in the direction she thinks it needs to go. Her story reflects the complex role of needing authority in order to give authority to the student; now hanging back to listen, now aggressively demanding to be heard; now applauding a student’s performance, now refusing to applaud when a student adopts a negative stance.

Pat’s response to her student illustrates the complex truth that negotiations for power animate the peer relationship. Though she feels comfortable in adopting a temporary passive role because she feels a kinship with her student, this peer feeling does not exclude power and authority from the tutoring relationship. In her exploration of the “interpersonal dynamics between so-called peers” (54), Carol Severino advocates the use of rhetorical analysis to explore issues of power, hoping to increase the chances for “more equal exchange” (62). Where Severino’s analysis leads her to question the peer relationship while still seeking balanced exchanges between equals, performance analysis conceives the tutoring dynamic as radically infused by shifting power relationships, an approach which redefines peer equivalence as a fluid, dynamic relationship negotiated by peers.

**Narrative Authority And Peer Tutor Identity**

Many writing instructors have recognized the value of personal narrative in the classroom to help students towards self-discovery, to “encourage us to make sense of our lives, better understand who we are” (Steinberg 4).
Narrative performance theory provides insight as to why this is so—and why storytelling is important in constructing a peer tutor's identity. In writing center tutoring there is a dual act of identity formation: as tutors help students identify themselves as writers, the process of tutoring also helps tutors identify themselves as tutors. Narrative can play a crucial role in constructing these social selves: “Story making is also self making and as a text is created, so is the teller” (Pickering and Attridge 427-28). In telling a student about her own writing struggles, as in telling the writing center staff about conferences, a tutor narrates herself into being.

Grace: I guess it was when I first started—this wasn’t this year but last year when I started—it kind of scared me because it was this continuing-ed student. She was older. She handed me her paper, and not only was she a continuing ed student, but English was her second language. And the paper was about when she met her husband during World War 2; it was in this bar in the Philippines. And she had a few problems here and there, and I helped her with her grammar; and the story flowed very nicely and there weren’t any problems with that. But I was so intimidated because here I am—I was nineteen at the time—and this woman is a grandmother and has gone through all these wonderful things and has had this really incredible life, and here I am telling her how to fix her grammar. It just seemed so stupid to even bother mentioning her grammar. Who am I to tell her anything? This lady was very kind to me—really wanted to know what I thought—and she treated me with this respect which in any other situation I would have felt that somebody else at that age would be telling me what to do. But she came to me and asked me for my help and treated me with respect that I had the knowledge to help her with her paper, and so that kind of put things at a different level. Even with being in a class with continuing-ed students, you know, normally I would have looked at them as being more experienced, so when you’re in a class with them or in the writing center with them you’re on the same level, whereas I never really had the experience of being on the same level with people who are older than me. She didn’t do anything to intimidate me—it was just all me. I have lived this sheltered little existence and she was talking about this bar in the Philippines during the war. Any confidence I had in my ability to tell anybody anything was shot down right there.

Grace’s story illuminates the power of narrative to shape identity. She seems at first totally dominated by her student partner’s narrative, transformed into a passive narratee by the power of the autobiographical paper. As she reads and listens to the older student’s life tale, she feels a clear threat
to her identity: “Who am I to tell her anything?” Though her partner, a skilled narrator, gives her listener Grace a role and allows Grace to take on some conventional narrative responsibilities in telling her about writing papers, Grace clearly remains within the power of her student’s life story. Playing the responsive audience captivated by her partner’s performance, Grace casts herself as the young and inexperienced person spellbound by the life tale of the older student.

Reflection upon this tale reveals how Grace is using this story to construct a tutoring self. For one thing, Grace’s tale was told near the end of the term, one of those tense periods of the semester which promotes feelings of self-doubt in student-tutors. This tension reveals one facet of tutorial identity: the insecurities of living writers working as collaborators with other students in the pressure-filled environment of higher education. More relevant to performed narrative, in confessing her early (and continuing) feelings of inadequacy, Grace self-consciously constructs herself as this naive, insecure figure in her narrative; but at the same time she holds sway over her audience—her fellow tutors—as teller of a powerful tale, touching sympathetic nerves in her listeners. She of course receives understanding and empathetic responses from her audience, the writing center staff, who encourage her to feel that she had played a valuable role for her partner as a listener giving important feedback to an insecure returning student. In effect they reconstruct Grace’s story to create an alternative tale in which Grace did accomplish a great deal merely by listening sympathetically to the student.

The tale reveals a therapeutic exaggeration as well: Grace is using the writing center meeting to try on this role, which has important meanings for her but no longer describes her actual tutoring life. As one tutor later said, “When she started, she always said, ‘I’m not helping anyone,’ even though she never let it show; now she doesn’t say that any more.” The protective frame of narrative allows Grace to perform part of her complex tutorial identity, in rehearsal as it were, transforming feelings of inadequacy into a powerful, moving expression of what it means to perform as a peer tutor. As narratee within her tale, Grace suffers an identity crisis; as narrator in the writing center meeting, she exerts control over her identity, using her narratee role to fashion that humble, insecure part of her tutoring self.

As storytellers in writing center meetings, peer tutors are external and internal to their tales at the same time. This doubled and multiplied identity as narrators, narratees, and members of the writing center audience helps tutors explore the doubled and multiplied roles they must play in tutoring: listeners, responders, collaborators, teachers, etc. In performing the narration of conference stories, the tutor releases the power of the multiple voices of narration (a feature of narrative language Bakhtin has analyzed in literary language). The tutor is an omniscient voice with broad authority; the tutor is a performer in the present of the meeting, with an intimate voice; and the
tutor takes on voices of the dramatis personae of her tale. Sometimes writing center stories reveal a tutor almost listening to herself, as in the following tale whose multiple-voiced narrator makes clear that stories do not convey a fixed dichotomy of teller and listener, but a narrative relationship of strength and possibilities (Alpers 29):

Marie: I have a lot of people that come into the writing center and just want to talk about whatever is happening, and a lot of them are in my classes or they see me around campus and they know I work there. And a lot of them come in and want to talk about what I want to talk about, which is classes and school stuff. But this one girl came in and she was in my Intro to Psych. class last semester. And she is one of the sweetest people I have ever met, and she is one of those people that is always happy, always bubbly, always full of energy. So she sits down in front of me and says, “I have another philosophy paper and I can’t stand this course anymore.” And I said, “Don’t tell me you have Harris,” and she said “No, I have Mitchell,” and I said “Okay.” And she asked me, “Can you just read this and see if it sucks or if it’s okay?” So as I am reading it, it is talking about this person that constantly makes lists and constantly scratches things off. And I was totally enthralled by this person because I cannot make a list and stick by it—it’s like impossible—I can make one but I won’t ever look at it. And I said, “Is this you in this paper?” And she’s like, “Yeah, I just work day to day.” And she brings out the list and says, “I’m on the second thing.” She just kept talking about what she had to do that day and what she had to do tomorrow and what she had to do the next day—and she knew all these things right off the top of her head. And it thoroughly impressed me, what she had to say. But after we read the paper—Mitchell is the type of person that if you say something, he’ll say “so what?” so you have to support everything you say—so we went through the whole paper, and I kept saying “so what?” after each sentence. And that helped her to put more in. And she said that she was doing really well, and then she got one bad grade and that totally threw her off the track because she thought she was doing so well. And that messes everyone up, especially before they have to hand in their last paper, so that was why she was there. She was one of those people that I was . . . “like, if I had half of your energy and half of your organization. . . .”

In this story Marie creates a dramatic relationship between two facets of herself: the competent tutor and the struggling student. She understands her tutee’s psychology: insecure after having received a low grade on an earlier paper, the student finds herself unable to complete a philosophy paper. Marie acts the interested narratee as the student tells her what happened, but
in the process Marie also finds herself fascinated and impressed by the student’s work habits. Marie’s story ends with a direct address to the student, wishing that she had this person’s energy and organization. This last line exemplifies the tutor performing in the present time of the telling, an intimate voice which also carries echoes of the dramatic exchange with her student.

This tale reveals a tutor exploiting the multiple dramatic possibilities in telling stories about writing center tutorials, giving and receiving strength from a student and sharing this complex relationship with the writing center staff. Her story is alive with multiple voices of an experienced tutor playing out apparently conflicting roles: the old hand experienced in shooting the breeze with acquaintances; the insecure peer reflecting on her own writing practices even while examining a student’s paper; the competent paper analyst moving surely to a working method with the student; the self-conscious performer reviewing these various selves for fellow tutors in a narrative. A story like this reveals the multiple identities of a college peer tutor, an individual able to move among these identities in playing the multiple roles peer tutoring demands.

In discussing Marie’s story, the writing center staff brought to light the many different narratives she had told and the complex relationships among them. They noted the distinction between the generalized, repeated story of Marie’s relationships to campus friends and her exceptional, unique story with this one student. They speculated that Marie remembered this story because of the embedded autobiographical story of her own inability to keep lists. Marie helped the student with her paper—its telling the story of a fictional student who kept lists—by (1) bringing the student’s autobiographical methods to light, and (2) using Marie’s previous experiences in this particular class to create a narrative and pedagogical response to her difficulties. The discussion of Marie’s conference story helped the writing center staff realize how many different stories are interwoven in tutoring relationships, how these narratives connect student and tutoring lives, and how self-conscious telling can help produce better writing, studying, and peer conferences.

Theoretical Implications

Stephen North argues that the oral exchange of information—what he calls practitioner knowledge—is a primary mode of discourse in composition studies. This narrative discourse is not impressionistic or free-form, however; it proceeds according to rules (e.g., Labov). Writing center stories follow the rules of narrative in presenting dramatic situations, complications, and resolutions. More important, writing center stories are not just told: they are told to a living audience; the teller experiences the telling even while recounting something that has been experienced in the past; the listener’s
response (or lack thereof) is a vital part of the narrative experience. In other words, writing center stories can be seen as dramatic, creating in their narratives a dynamic, theatrical set of relationships, with teller and listener(s) enacting—and at times exchanging—roles of actor and audience.

When approached as performance, writing center talk (whether tutorial dialogue or conversations in training meetings) escapes generalized (and idealized) accounts of the relationship between tutor and client. For example, in training tutors not to assert dominant, decision-making authority and to avoid playing the teacher role in conferences, I regularly dispense the wisdom that a writing center should conform to a learner-centered model in which tutors follow the students’ lead, encouraging students to take the authority to make decisions. In effect, I attempt to impose a single narrative account on the changing, dynamic roles which tutors and tutees play. Listening to the actual stories tutors tell, however, it is clear that such a static model does not capture the shifting roles tutors enact, both in conferences and in meetings. From a performance perspective on narrative, this shifting quality is to be expected in writing center stories because the telling creates a dramatic, energetic relationship. Tellers attempt to control listeners’ responses while listeners judge tellers (and may refuse responses), and both may move to renegotiate the relationship.

Looking at writing center stories as an energetic play of narrative forces has led me to revise static tales of fixed relationships between tutors and tutees. In a similar reaction against rigid prewriting activities, Thomas Nash advocates playful invention in the writing center, with a full awareness that such play exploits the elements of dramatic performance (including risk) present in writing center tutoring (184, 188). Nash’s insight can be extended beyond particular tutorial pedagogies to the nature of peer tutoring itself. When tutors recognize in their storytelling that the narrative stance does not confer a stable, controlled position from which to manipulate listeners, they can conceptualize their tutoring in a playful, open-ended, dramatic way. This approach offers a more flexible tutoring model than the “step-by-step guide” of the otherwise invaluable tutoring model offered by Reigstad and McAndrew, whose recognition of the need for flexibility leads only to a subdivision of this model into three static options (26-33).

The very nature of writing center consultations tempts tutors to forget how dramatic their conversations with students really are. In observing tutorials, I have noticed repeated references to the students’ roommates or to friends also working on the assignment, to parents and their ideas, to teachers and their clarification of the assignment, to librarians, to previous writing center tutorials, and to books on writing. In a recent conference I observed, the tutor kept referring to a previous tutorial with the same student, telling the student what they had agreed upon, and at one point showing the student what a textbook says about the writing issue. Just then the student recalled
this point having been reviewed with another tutor in an earlier conference and told the tutor about this conference. The student also narrated several pieces of information from a conference he had had with the teacher. Though most of the discourse in this conference I observed was explanatory and analytical, the narrative discourse in particular served to underline (and help create) a web of writing relationships among tutors, teacher, textbook writer, and student writer.

It is natural for tutors to seek to simplify this complex tutoring world. After all, writing center conferences partner them within a hierarchical institution of higher learning. Students are working to create written texts, leaving both tutor and student bound to a degree by rules of grammar and paper construction. It is no wonder that tutors want to structure their conferences into formulaic responses to students, as though there were a written script to follow. Kenneth Bruffee's theory is useful for its conception that in a tutoring pair there is always a third party to the dialogue, always social relationships and community values involved; indeed, he argues that peer tutoring works primarily because it is a resocialization of an individual writer within a community of knowledgeable peers (13). Though Bruffee's focus on collaborative conversation is central to any model of viable peer tutoring, the abstract quality of his conception has repeatedly been questioned. As Eric Hobson notes, "Both Harvey Kail and John Trimbur . . . have attempted to demonstrate how impossible it is for Bruffee's idealized conception of peer tutoring to exist within writing centers" (70).

A narrative performance perspective on tutoring offers one way to preserve Bruffee's conception of peer tutoring while capturing as well the lived reality of actual writing center conferences in the academic community. In the world of writing tutorials which tutors' stories portray, this community of knowledgeable peers is troubled, divided, unstable, and contentious. Students bring a good deal of resistance to the notion of community as a source of authority, or else they abdicate any role themselves in this community; and tutors themselves can lose the sense that they represent community values.

In narrative performance theory, such conflict is an expected part of the dramatic relationship between storyteller and listener: "Narrative may be seen as a delicate interplay of power in which the narratee submits to the control of a narrator, while the narrator must scheme to overcome the power of the narratee. Each experiences an invasion of his or her territory by the other" (Maclean 17-18). In this web of living relationships, the tutor, student, and community exist in a shifting, dynamic relationship. Making storytelling a part of tutor training helps tutors understand that their connections to the broader community, or audience, are a matter of negotiation through performance. Authority is not pre-scripted for tutors to be accepted as "knowledgeable peers"; this authority is earned through
Kenneth Bruffee founds writing center consultation in the dialogic conversation of mankind. I agree but shift the emphasis from conversations of mankind to conversations enacted between and among living, complex students. Rather than abstract, dialogic consultations, I theorize writing center talk as interactive, polylogic performances. Tutors better understand their multiple roles in writing center conferencing when they hear and tell stories about their experiences: “People do not organize knowledge of self and others as would-be scientists, but as would-be novelists” (Gregg 196). In authoring themselves through performed stories, tutors narrate the real meaning and authority of peer consultations in writing centers.

Looking at writing center discourse as performance reveals the phenomenological basis of writing conferences: tutorials are living relationships; conversational exchanges reveal conversants reacting to each other instead of proceeding according to a script; and writing tutorials engage tutor and student in identity construction as they play out their roles. Central to an understanding of peer tutoring is this experiential reality of tutor and student performing a conference; they each must live and act out roles. Narratives not only provide such roles (whether listener or speaker, narratee or narrator), they also reveal the lived quality of writing center talk.

Works Cited


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