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A Review of *When Tutor Meets Student*

Anne DiPardo

Martha Maxwell, ed. *When Tutor Meets Student* (2nd. ed.) Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

We've recently seen a wave of interest in story-telling as a mode of knowing, stimulated in large part by Jerome Bruner's insistence that the narrative impulse is a universal gesture of meaning-making, a way we create sense out of the raw stuff of daily life. Especially where such stories are written down, they're rendered available for continuing review and reflection, grist for the integrative process by which each new story is interpreted and understood in light of all the other stories we've told or known.

Educational researcher Kathy Carter has argued that we can think of teacher knowledge in similar terms; that is, we learn to teach in a dialectical fashion, understanding each new experience in light of all that have gone before, even as these new experiences enlarge and influence the system by which we categorize and interpret our ongoing work. According to Carter, the problem confronting novice educators can therefore be seen anew: as a problem of not enough stories.

Martha Maxwell's collection of tutor-authored stories, *When Tutor Meets Student*, takes a giant step toward remedying this problem. The founding Director of UC Berkeley's Student Learning Center in 1973, Maxwell helped establish a writing tutorial program as part of the SLC that would serve an increasingly diverse population, students struggling in richly varied ways with the demands of writing in what one tutor describes as an "overbearing intellectual climate," a place where it's easy to believe "you're not smart enough" (103). Over the past twenty years, Berkeley's SLC has

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moved from the headwaters into the mainstream of the writing center movement, both reflecting and influencing the evolution of theory and practice.

Eager to educate the wider community about the work of Berkeley's tutors and students, Maxwell first asked full-time staff to write case studies, an invitation that elicited "recipes, or lab reports, or sugary testimonials" (vii). Thus was born the M. Maxwell Contest for Writing Tutors, which for several years provided cash awards for UC Berkeley student tutors' written accounts of their experiences at the Learning Center. In this book "by tutors for tutors" (viii) we have fifty-four of those essays, a swirling mix of stories that render the many complexities of the tutoring experience, by turns echoing and contradicting one another, offering strategies and counter-strategies for dealing with a host of dilemmas. We see beginning tutors struggling with first-week anxieties, wondering if a prolonged silence bodes good or ill, trying to maintain rapport while resisting the temptation to take over. Even as these tutors work to increase their students' confidence, they sometimes grapple with doubts about their own competence, several worrying that their eagerness to be helpful has eroded their professionalism, another that in boosting a student's sagging confidence, he's created an overconfident "monster" (104).

Although there's a special section devoted to issues of cultural diversity, given Berkeley's richly varied demographics, these issues tend to infuse the book as a whole. Many of the essays give a fresh spin to such concerns, especially several reflective pieces by tutors of color, and a piece exploring the ethnocentrism of an economically privileged Anglo tutee.

While we get a number of stories about tutors feeling their way into an experiential grasp of the maxims they'd heard in training sessions ("collaborate, don't evaluate," avoid "tutor co-dependency," etc.), here also are stories about encounters that are a bit harder to anticipate—a learning-disabled student with severe motor problems, a student who touches her tutor a good bit more often than he'd like, a student dealing with the sudden tragedy of her sister's murder. If a few of the vignettes suggest particular approaches or tips, many simply point out the need to expect the unexpected. As one tutor writes, "All sessions can't sound like the plucky little conversations in the tutor handbook" (193). Each time you think you see rules emerging here, there's a counterexample that points out the shifting circumstances and unexpected demands of tutoring. Beginning tutors reading this book will get plenty of advice, but it never talks down, never minimizes the broad range of issues and challenges the writing tutor confronts.

As Maxwell points out, "this book is not intended to be a how-to-tutor manual" (x), and its admonitions are far from glossy. Indeed, these stories often show tutors dealing with similar situations in quite different ways, and where they fail, the reasons (as in daily life) aren't always readily apparent.

Neither is the writing particularly artful or polished. Many of these short essays are written by tutors just coming off their first semester of tutoring, and while we occasionally glimpse a tutor changing her approach over time or reflecting back on an earlier tactic, these vignettes tend to read as hot-off-the-press dispatches from the field. Since the pieces are short and there are lots of them, the volume can seem a bit scattered at times, and even Maxwell admits that the scheme by which these pieces are categorized is less than leak-proof. But to my eyes, these rough edges are also strengths. I like the way the book honors the messiness and uncertainty of the teaching-learning process, I like the immediacy of these sometimes rough-around-the-edges portraits, and I can easily envision a first-semester tutor eagerly scanning the book for relevant moments, reading here and there, not cover-to-cover, for vignettes that speak to a present concern.

While I see great value in this book, I had several small misgivings. First, I'd have liked more actual writing and talk about writing in these pieces, which sometimes tend to tell rather than show. I also had occasional qualms about the discussion questions provided after some of the tutors' essays; while these questions seemed useful on occasion, more often I came away feeling that readers of the book could raise their own questions to better effect. Finally, I suspect that some readers would long, as I did, for a more thorough treatment of the delicacies attending the tutor-student-instructor triad. Since tutors are privy to so much of the nitty-gritty of teaching and learning, it's almost inevitable that they'll occasionally bear witness to the negative effects of certain classroom practices; while a few of the essays address such delicacies, in almost every instance any tension in the student's or tutor's relationship to a course instructor was successfully resolved. Although the advice implied in these vignettes is sound (go have a frank but diplomatic talk with the instructor), I can't help wondering about scenarios where a faculty member isn't so willing to listen and adjust.

These caveats aside, there's plenty to like about *When Tutor Meets Student*. I especially enjoyed the diversity of voices in the volume—those of tutors who vary across a host of dimensions (gender, ethnicity, age, etc.), and those of tutor supervisors, who interject periodic comments on the tutors' essays. By weaving a dense and colorful tapestry, the book reminds us of how richly situated all writing is in a mesh of competing voices and perspectives. Here are tutors whose trust in their own support network has moved them to a searching honesty, toward stories that raise issues; and as readers turn back to their own work, they may well find these stories segueing into useful arguments, moving them to consider their own stories anew. I can think of no better company for new tutors, and I find much here to stimulate thought and conversation among the more seasoned as well.

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