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Tutoring and Teaching: Continuum, Dichotomy, or Dialectic?

Helon Howell Raines

Stories abound in writing center lore reporting strained, even hostile, relationships between the English department and/or writing program and the writing center, particularly a center that employs peer tutors. Certainly such conflicts involve many issues besides our perceptions of tutoring and teaching. Nonetheless, more productive conversation could result when teachers and tutors have clearer concepts of what each does, why, where their roles overlap, converge, or blend, and how they can more positively reinforce one another.

In this article, I will analyze the ways writing center personnel have discussed the concepts of teaching and tutoring, ways which I believe limit possibilities for creative thinking. My argument is that we need words and images to think about “tutoring” and “teaching” other than the two primary ways of visualizing those concepts we have developed so far—either as points on a continuum or as dichotomies in binary oppositions. I suggest instead we use language that creates images of a dialectical process. In this process, forces are held in tension by their oppositions, as they slowly embrace elements of the other, ultimately emerging into a new concept. With this in mind, I first summarize the dialogues in our journals about teaching and tutoring. I then consider ways a conscious use of the dialectical image may answer some of the important questions raised by writing center specialists about writing center tutoring, classroom teaching, and the language of writing center discourse. Finally, I offer specific examples of application of these concepts.

Many writing center specialists already have called for more discussion of teaching and of tutoring. For instance, Virginia Perdue and Deborah

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James challenge writing centers to document “the specific differences between teaching conferences and writing center tutorials” (8). Their article underscores Marian Arkin’s recommendation for more discussion of “important philosophical issues including how tutoring differs from teaching” (4). Indeed, many excellent articles have appeared in the last two years in *The Writing Center Journal* alone, essays which address the multiple and varied philosophical issues confronting writing centers as we try to describe more accurately what we do, how and why we do it, and on what premises we base these decisions. In fact, both the Fall 1991 and 1992 issues are devoted almost entirely to philosophical and theoretical considerations as they relate to writing center practice. Nonetheless, the writing community still needs to talk much more about teaching and tutoring.¹

I am particularly aware of this need because of my experience in developing the Casper College Writing Center, which in 1988-89 involved year-long planning by a four-member committee reading and discussing writing center literature to reach consensus about a theoretical and methodological basis for our enterprise. In fact, we complimented ourselves following the publication of Lisa Ede’s “Writing as a Social Process: A Theoretical Foundation for Writing Centers?” in which she calls for centers to ground their practice in a firm theoretical base. Indeed, the committee agreed not only on theory and methodology but also articulated our belief in writing as a social process and our center as a place for collaborative learning. What we did not do, however, was to discuss how the work of our tutors fit with practices of teachers in presentational and/or collaborative writing classes.

For many reasons, the writing center committee was aware of the need for clarity about purposes and practices of writing centers. One of these reasons was that the program would be the first on campus to serve both students at Casper College, a comprehensive two-year college, and upper-division students in one of ten degree programs at the University of Wyoming Center in Casper. In this arrangement, diverse concepts exist about the teaching and learning of writing. For instance, composition instructors in small colleges usually place great emphasis on teaching writing well. Some are concerned about the quality, even the adequacy, of the assistance peer tutors offer. Others raise questions of extended ramifications of students working with students. As one colleague said to me, “If you can train tutors to teach writing in one semester, why do we need educated and experienced composition instructors?” Others want to know how assisting writers in the center differs from student conferences in the teacher’s office. For these instructors, conferencing is part of a responsibility they do not want to share. As for the university faculty, some might expect this center to be like the writing center on the Laramie campus where almost all of the tutoring is by instructors. Others expected students to learn in a few sessions in the center what they had not absorbed in previous writing experiences.

Therefore, it wasn't enough to talk about the CC Writing Center as support for writing in all disciplines or as a complement to the classroom or even as a totally different experience from the writing course. We needed to articulate differences and similarities between teaching and tutoring and to educate both our peer and faculty assistants to do the same. We were thinking about these issues of language when we decided to call our program a "center" and not a "lab," our tutors "respondents" and "writing assistants," and those who seek writing center help "writers" or "clients." Nonetheless, because we did not have a clear image or adequate language to discuss precisely the relationships of teaching to tutoring, misunderstandings and meaningless conflicts occurred within the English department where the CC/UW Writing Center initially was housed.² Even today some campus faculty continue to see our center as a place for writing remediation through tutoring and to see tutoring as a version of "teaching" on a lower rung of the academic hierarchy. In addition, we always have students apply for entry to the writing assistant training program who want to "teach" others about writing.

When I discussed these points with the writing center advisory committee, a chemistry instructor informed me that the matter of "teaching" and "tutoring" was "only semantics," a point with which I heartily agree, but not in the sense he meant. However, this professor takes a traditional view, and a reasonable one at that, which says if the writing center is accomplishing its purpose to help people with writing, then clearly some learning should be taking place. If learning is occurring, then so is teaching. Do distinctions of language really matter?

I believe they do. A growing body of literature emphasizes the relationship of writing center theory and methodology and the language of writing center discourse. Both Thomas Hemmeter (1990) and Lex Runciman (1990) articulate the view that we shape ourselves by shaping our discourse. In fact, Hemmeter argues that a writing center is more than a place or a theory or a practice; it is "an idea—in language" (44).

In the words we use to define writing centers as well as in the language others use to define our work, we continue to construct or reconstruct the relationship of teaching to tutoring and the classroom to the writing center. In writing center literature, several ways of thinking about this relationship are named by abstract words that nonetheless also may create pictures in our minds. One of the ways we have talked about teaching and tutoring is as points on a continuum with directive teachers at one end and responsive listeners at the other. Others discuss writing centers and classrooms as dichotomies with teaching and tutoring in oppositional positions. While the words *continuum* and *dichotomy* stand for concepts that do not exist in any physical manifestation, for many they do carry images. For instance, when I hear *continuum*, I see something like a monopoly board with discrete stops or stages along a forward progression moving toward the more valuable properties located adjacent to "Go." However, when I read or hear

dichotomy, I see two parallel lines which eventually move so close together that room no longer exists for both. This image resembles a battlefield because forces behind the two lines move toward one another in conflict, one hoping to obliterate the other. The victorious line marches forward until some different force stakes out a new set of oppositions. In this situation, conflicts are not actually resolved or transcended, but one is defeated and the other prevails.

As an alternative image, I propose a dialectical view, more specifically the Hegelian dialectical process, in which opposing forces conflict, but in their meeting they also mix, each altering the other until ultimately both transcend the interaction to become something new. To me *dialectic* not only creates a concept which is compatible to my way of thinking about teaching and tutoring, it also creates an image, something like Yeats' gyre where opposing forces do come together swirling one inside the other, often indistinguishable, but at some point reforming into different configurations from the previous oppositions.

I believe that this concept of a dialectic with an accompanying image such as the gyre or the spiral could assist us to think about and to articulate the relationship of theory and method in the writing classroom and theory and method in the writing center program, as well as assist us to create new concepts of helping students improve their composing and writing abilities. A dialectical process avoids stasis and values a tension between traditional and radical pedagogies. I suggest that such tensions and their resulting resolutions could help us to avoid the pitfalls Hemmeter sees in setting up dualities which privilege one or the other when teacher and classroom become polar opposites to tutor and writing center.

Images of the Issue as Continuum or Dichotomy

But where have we talked about writing center method as either continuum or dichotomy? For an example of the image of teaching and tutoring as points on a continuum, we can turn to an article by four Rivier College tutors. They propose three chronological stages in tutoring. In the first stage the tutor is a "guide . . . who shows the way by directing" (Edmunds et al. 11). In the second, the student and tutor know one another so the tutor is a "counselor . . . a knowledgeable person" who "advises" (11). In the ideal progression to stage three, the tutor becomes "mentor . . . one who encourages or promotes" (12). Even though the authors describe this model as recursive (the tutor moving among roles), the model seems linear (the tutor beginning as director and ending as resource).

A modification of this stage view of tutor conferencing is found in the report of a study conducted by Willa Wolcott who observed the tutoring styles of seven experienced graduate student/teachers. She states that the "complexities" of writing center conferencing make "a far different experience from that of conferencing in a classroom" partly because tutors are

“middlemen” working between teacher and student (16). As part of her study, Wolcott applied the criteria developed by Thomas Reigstad after he studied ten professional writer-teachers. The models he designated are “the teacher-student model—the teacher is the expert and does most of the talking and the work; the collaborative model—the teacher and student work together to solve the writing problems; and the student-centered model—the student determines the direction of the conference and does most of the work (reported by Wolcott 17). Furthermore, in her study of the teacher-tutors at the University of Florida, Wolcott concluded that the “conference dynamics typically reflect the teacher-centered model . . . although the tutors and students tend to collaborate more as each conference progresses” (25). Both Reigstad’s models and Wolcott’s examination of these suggest a continuum or set of elements in which a second element is present although movement toward the third element, here the student-centered conference, is desirable.

While the continuum, moving from directive authority through moderating coach to responsive audience, is discussed in writing center discourse, far more common is the oppositional dichotomy of a directive, evaluative teacher versus a responsive, nonjudgmental tutor. A summary of the most frequently articulated differences in teaching and tutoring could begin with Stephen North’s 1984 *College English* essay, “The Idea of a Writing Center.” North says the teacher makes the assignments and requires the conference which, driven by time constraints, allows little composing during the conference. In polar opposition to all aspects of this model is the tutorial.

Citing North and others, Hemmeter concludes that a continuing focus on differences between tutoring and teaching will work against writing centers’ best interests. For instance, he argues that on the one hand the “discourse . . . articulated in dualities . . . sets up writing centers in a secondary role” (37). His examples include pairs of oppositions in which the second term gives status to the classroom as in “grammar instruction vs. instruction in rhetoric . . . nontraditional students versus mainstream students; basic writing versus comprehensive program” (37). Yet this thinking also can “invert the hierarchy to claim superiority over the classroom” (38). In writing centers the

students take initiative, have open time, work . . . in small groups . . . in a warm setting . . . on writing in progress . . . without fear of judgment. . . . In classes students are passive, have time limits, work in large groups in impersonal settings . . . and approach writing as a product to be judged. (38)

Hemmeter’s concerns about this discourse are multiple, but the one that is instructive to my argument is that neither of these oppositions is true or at least not the only or the complete truth, for the reality in most cases is between these extremes. As Dave Healy points out in a 1991 CCC paper, the

differences articulated by some writing center theorists may be an “overdramatization,” since the atmosphere in the center “is not significantly different from that of many composition classrooms” which employ collaborative methodology (4).

To locate the perspective of writing assistants who were both newly and actively engaged in tutoring in 1991, I invited seven Casper College writing assistants to discuss similarities and differences between teaching and tutoring. Part of this involved role-playing in which they demonstrated the teacher/student conference and the student/peer assistant conference. An example of the way two writing assistants constructed the dialogue of a teacher/student conference follows.

Student: Can you help me with our next paper?

Teacher: I’ll try, but (looking at watch) I do have an appointment in fifteen minutes. What seems to be the problem?

Student: That’s just it; I don’t know. I just want you to check it and see if it’s right.

Teacher: Okay, let me read it (which she does). Well, this basically is fine except you need to get a better statement of your main point and make it clearer how the material in the body of the paper supports that point. What do you think your main idea is?

The student responds and the conference continues with the teacher directing both the conference and the revision of the paper, but with no writing occurring during the conference.

In the student/peer assistant conference constructed by the writing assistants, the dialogue was less directive.

Student: I need help with my English paper.

Tutor: Okay, sit down and I’ll get us some coffee while you get out the assignment sheet.

Student: Great. I’ll take mine black.

Tutor (returning): Oh, yes, I’ve seen this assignment before. What particular area do you want to work on in the 30 minutes we have?

Student: I’m not really sure. It just doesn’t sound right, like you know, it doesn’t “flow.”

Tutor: Okay, let's read it aloud a couple of times and we'll each make notes when we hear or see something odd.

Student: Well, you read it first. I'm too embarrassed.

Tutor: Sure but you shouldn't be embarrassed. You've written a lot already—that's good.

Student: It is?

Tutor: Definitely.

After they read and compare notes, the tutor asks the student to revise problem areas. Although the peer tutor may or may not be able to suggest other word choices, she models strategies such as brainstorming or using reference books to show the student how to find other possibilities. Likewise, the tutor, instructed not to write on the paper, may "assist" by recording for the writer what he is constructing orally. In this way the tutor avoids the student simply copying her words.

After listening to these demonstrations and the discussion on differences between conferencing as a teacher and as a tutor, I asked them to write about these roles. In their writings, they frequently echoed the language of opposition found in the literature, particularly concerning atmosphere and authority. The writing center is "warm, inviting, safe" while in classes, students experience anxiety (Brown). Furthermore, in the center "there is no authority; it's just a sharing of information" (Katsimanis). "Teaching is more prescriptive" (Glendenning) and "directive" while "as a tutor I feel like a compatriot" (Mendoza). "Teachers lecture, instruct, and evaluate while peer respondents dialogue." (Robinson). A peer tutor's "job is responding in such a way to help our fellow students, not to teach them" (Grant). Summing up these responses, the writing center lead assistant wrote, "teaching is imparting information; whereas peer tutoring is a process of mutual discovery" (Schukman).

A more integrated view is offered by one of the participating faculty assistants who wrote, "As a teacher who tutors, I initially saw only surface differences, but on reflection I find significant variations in both attitude and activity. When teaching I am an active agent with the student playing a passive role. I do most of the talking. When tutoring writers, I am less directive and serve more as a thought reflector. I listen and respond more and wait more. The key is attitude. Teaching makes the activity mine. Tutoring focuses on the writer" (Stedillie).³

Advantages of a Dialectical View

I suggest that it is not only in the tension of these views but also in the interaction of different attitudes and activities implied in this teacher/tutor's

analysis that we begin to see the possibilities of the dialectical concept and its accompanying image. This way of envisioning the relationship between tutoring and teaching seems to me to be closer to the realities in many classrooms and of many tutoring sessions. A dialectical image also reflects a desirable process that avoids privileging any particular position except in the situational context. The expectation of interplay between the activities should encourage difference without seeking domination. Furthermore, the dialectical process with its image of a spiraling gyre encourages the richness of paradox where two apparently contradictory elements can both be true. Thus, we can posit individualization of one-to-one conferencing within a theory of the social construction of knowledge as practiced in collaborative learning. We can view competing ways of knowing as Eric H. Hobson does. In “Walking the Tightrope of Competing Epistemologies,” he argues that writing centers do not subscribe to only one of the three epistemologies but instead are involved in all three (74). His tightrope image suggesting tension is good, but it does not picture the concept he actually describes, which is dialectical, with multiple epistemologies continuing to push and pull against each other, temporarily residing in one and then the other, depending on the activity and the people involved.

Many writing center specialists continue to recommend avoiding rigid concepts of tutoring which may occur when we insist on differences from classroom theory and method. Irene Clark contends that writing centers should continue to value chaos, which she defines as a “willingness to entertain multiple perspectives on critical issues, an ability to tolerate contradictions and contraries, in short, not to become so . . . sure that we know how to do it ‘right’ that we stop growing and developing” (81). Judith Summerfield also questions “institutionalizing” and popularizing terms such as “workshop approach” and “process approach” because the unreflective use of our language can interfere with the flexibility such terms symbolize and “make static a fluid act” (qtd in Clark 82). Clark reminds us that Peter Elbow encourages the teaching profession to encompass what seem to be contradictory positions, attempting for instance to be both demanding and nurturing. Clark warns against establishing a reductive methodology where “rules” about tutor intervention undermine true dialogic exchange in total abdication to the student.

Mark Waldo deemphasizes differences even more. He states that the two should share theory and pedagogy to form an ideal symbiotic relationship in order to make writing centers central to the academic mission rather than peripheral (75). While it is reasonable that writing centers and writing programs share complementary goals, I believe it is problematic to seek a mutual pedagogy and theory. The benefits of an organic whole may be appealing, but such unity probably is impractical and furthermore ultimately detrimental to the process of the dialectic where we become more than either may be as we presently exist.

Practicing a Dialectical View

To draw my analysis to a close, I turn to Carol Singley and Holly Boucher who, in arguing for dialogue in tutor training, invoke Paulo Freire. They remind us that “learning is born out of paradox . . . [for] creative response to conflict requires the freedom to change—learning depends on the freedom to play” (11). In their interpretation of Freire, interlocutors “converse (turn together) so that neither is convinced (defeated) but both are changed or moved” (11). They continue, “This productive paradox . . . involves two aspects which we assume are opposites, but which actually create fruitful interplay” (12). In fact, they encourage us to expand our language and our thinking when they conclude that “education involves neither teachers nor tutors, but participants” (14). The image of Yeats’ gyres, cones moving one within the other, complements the idea of participants interacting with other participants, whether as writers, readers, teachers, or tutors. Therefore, I propose that we apply the dialectic of learning to the dialectic of teaching and tutoring in order to keep the two in tension as processes that are recursive, interactive, and changing. Such a process means that we continue to question, to reflect, to experiment, to be open to difference while remembering similarities.

In conclusion, I give a couple of examples of applications of my argument and a brief description of my revised training program for writing assistants at Casper College. The faculty assistant I quoted earlier expresses the transformative nature of radical pedagogy working against more traditional methodology when she says, “The experience as a tutor has altered the ways I approach the teacher/student conference and also the ways in which I respond to student writing” (Stedillie). She concludes, “My style of responding has been greatly improved.” As an illustration, she speaks specifically about asking questions rather than giving directions in both the conference and in written comments.

In my personal experience, my tutoring also improves my teaching. On the other hand, my teaching improves my tutoring. For instance, I have greater confidence than my writing assistants about my responsibility to intervene, to be at least an equal participant, even in some contexts to be directive. In a conference in the writing center, if several questions fail to elicit useful student response, I may turn to a teacher-tutor/student model. Once I determine the student doesn’t have adequate knowledge to be responsive on this particular point, I may stop and give a mini-lesson. For instance, if a paper is close to final editing but has several sentence fragments, I may point those out, show why they are confusing to a reader, and suggest ways to fix some of them. Then I identify other fragments, but this time the student must rewrite them. Finally I ask the student to find and correct any remaining fragment(s).⁴ This is much the same process I would use if the student were in my class and came to my office for assistance.

If we have a basic theoretical position directing our methodology in both the writing center and the classroom, training activities should decrease misunderstanding about what each role entails and the ways in which writing center and classroom are both similar to and different from the other. As teachers who also tutor, we should be able to adopt the role that is most appropriate to the writer and to the situation. We also must train writing assistants to enable them to make decisions about what role(s) to play in conference, based on their understanding of various methods.

I suggest that we continue to recreate an oppositional perspective before any one perspective dominates and controls the paradigm. Using the concepts and the images of the Hegelian dialectic may be helpful in our thinking and talking about both writing center and classroom methodology. In our discourse, however, let us always remind ourselves that words are not fixed, nor do they reflect the “ultimate truth” (Singley 12). Words are not the things themselves; they are symbols which we infuse with meaning(s) that radiate and resonate. The symbolic nature of language allows us to modify, alter, change. If the words *respondent* or *assistant* best express the emphasis in writing center work, then let us use that language as oppositional to *teaching* in order to change the classroom that is controlled by the monologic teacher. On the other hand, we should not lose, to use Andrea Lunsford’s terms, either dialogic or hierarchical collaboration of writing center methodology by abdicating all speech and action to the student or by retaining it all in the respondent. The same should be true in our collaborative classrooms. Our goal is for the best of teaching to enter the tutorial and the best of tutoring to imbue teaching with new practice, collapsing both at some point into a new perspective in the dialectical process. From this perspective, perhaps we will devise better visions of the future of writing instruction and also be better able to transform these visions into realities.

Notes

¹Eric Hobson does discuss the differences between “the tenets on which a writing lab and a writing center are founded” (66). While his discussion is applicable in many ways to the differences between tenets of the writing classroom and the writing center, in this article I broaden the issue to the differences (and similarities) between teaching and tutoring.

²Casper College has a very busy English lab which is primarily the “storehouse” model of writing assistance described by Lunsford in “Conflict, etc.” Therefore, the Writing Center Planning Committee consciously chose to create a separate program from the English lab. Furthermore, when the writing center became the home for writing-across-the-curriculum, the CC and UW Administration agreed with the WC Advisory Committee to make the center a separate program directly under the Dean of Instruction, a

change which makes it less subject to conflict with any one department.

³I want to thank the writing center assistants for our discussions which have helped me to articulate the views I present in this article.

⁴Muriel Harris and Tony Silva discuss a related point in the December 1993 issue of *College Composition and Communication*. She considers working with ESL students from whom it is difficult to draw responses when they have little base from which to respond.

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