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Letters

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Letters

“A Critique of Pure Tutoring”

Linda Shamon and Deborah Burns’s “critique” of the non-directive approach to tutoring was of considerable interest to me, not only because I applaud their challenge to established writing center pedagogy, but also because my own work, particularly a few sections in my book, *Writing in the Center*, was cited as an exemplar of the student-centered, non-interventionist policy that the article questioned. Admittedly, *Writing in the Center* does caution new tutors against assuming too much control in a tutorial. Nevertheless, I must also point out that in published articles and conference presentations, I have been similarly critical of entrenched and pedagogically restrictive writing center policies. My article, “Maintaining Chaos in the Writing Center: A Critical Perspective on Writing Center Dogma,” refers to such precepts as “Writing Center dogma.”

Of course, to be associated with a non-directive approach to tutoring is not something to be ashamed of, as it situates me firmly in the camp of the “good guys”—those who advocate a “student-centered,” “collaborative” approach to writing pedagogy, as opposed to the Gradgrinds of the university who obsess over standards and grades. However, since I train many tutors each year using what I believe to be a “balanced” approach to tutoring, I thought it would be worthwhile to assess my own tutors’ reactions to the controversy addressed in the critique. Accordingly, I assigned the thirty new graduate student tutors I had trained several months ago, who are currently enrolled in a composition pedagogy class, to write a response to the Shamon/Burns article based on the training they had received and the tutoring experience they have had over the past three months. Below is a

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representative selection of some of their insightful and thought-provoking comments:

1. The analogies used in the article do not support its major claim because writing is not performance based.

Despite the bulk of evidence demonstrating the value of directive instruction in master classes, the authors fail to negotiate a primary crucial step: never is it suggested that the act of writing is analogous to painting, chess, playing the violin, or nursing. In fact, most of the master classes discussed relate to fields that are mainly performance based, that exist in the moment. As a dancer, I don't mind watching a master perform one of my steps because I know that I will be the one performing the dance before the audience. The physical act of writing, I would suggest, is significantly different because putting pencil to paper creates a lasting artifact, unlike performance art or medical triage. While there may be some value in Shamoan and Burns's illustrations, I think they made a false assumption in equating these significantly different forms of practice (Jason Bostick).

2. Writing center tutoring is not really non-directive anyway.

I find it difficult to view the Socratic, question-based tutoring that I have been doing in the Writing Center as "non-directive." The questions that I, as a tutor, ask do lead the students I have been working with in one direction or another. Even when I do stick to asking the questions and allowing the students to do the answering, there is no guarantee that the students will attribute their success to their own efforts and abilities rather than to the skill of the tutor. One young woman with whom I have worked last week thanked me and asked about the training I had received. She then proceeded to tell me that she never would have been able to ask herself the questions that I had asked her about her subject (Jennifer Bowyer).

Perhaps, then, we need to come up with a different definition of "directive." The directive approach that Shamoan and Burns advocate is the approach I take when tutoring, both in the Writing Center and in conferences with my own students. Obviously, I do not take over a student's essay and rewrite or edit it. But I do give very specific directions as to what steps that student can take to improve the essay—to make it more clear, reasoned, or convincing. I know that they still are the ones who must do the writing. But the writing process can be so overwhelming that I don't believe the skills to make an essay better should be hidden. Show them how to do it; then they will eventually learn to do it for themselves (Alicia Tao).

3. Different stages of the writing process require different approaches.

My experience suggests that students have most difficulty examining ideas critically, and my approach has been to use directive questioning, hopefully not too directive, based on my own instinct about where the

student seems to be going in a paper. Often the student has a hunch of an idea, but the transition to broader claims and more refined argument may seem miles away. I think modeling the transition to more refined critical thought is both valid and necessary, particularly if a student has no sense of what evaluation really is. But it is also important to pose more than one alternative as the culmination of this process, in order to prevent students from feeling railroaded into ideas. By pushing a student a bit closer to a point, a tutor is not actually writing the paper, but sometimes providing the motivation necessary to get over the overwhelming writer's block that many students face on a regular basis (Elizabeth Durst).

4. The approach to tutoring should be determined by the particular needs of individual students.

Much of the article bases its assertions on approaches used in graduate courses, and this type of student differs from the students I see in the Writing Center. Most of the students in the Expository Writing Program do not really have the motivation or interest in their subject that graduate students have (or should have). As a result, I feel that an overly directive approach would work too much as an escape for students, a way for someone else to do their writing, a way to receive a better grade. I have encountered students that do not have enough ideas in their paper, and when told this, they expect the tutors to produce them. A directive approach can often become a one-sided "giving," especially when the student is only looking to finish a paper. Directive tutoring seems most effective when the student wants to achieve the level of the teacher. Not many of my Writing Center appointments seem incredibly concerned with becoming better writers; they just want better papers (Ken Evans).

5. A non-directive approach makes students feel more comfortable.

After two weeks of training, I feel my personal teaching style, which emphasizes a non-hierarchical approach for all student/teacher encounters—in the belief that a relaxed and comfortable environment is the most conducive for learning—works well with students who are the most concerned about their writing abilities. I believe these students, particularly the nonnative speakers, feel comfortable with me, appreciate that I will help them as much as I can, and consequently feel motivated and encouraged that their writing will improve. On the other hand, my approach seems to have the opposite effect on the higher-level students, particularly those whose previous writing experiences have led them to believe—accurately or not—that they are already masters of the writing universe. I believe these students interpret my eschewing of authoritative signifiers as proof that I am not an expert composition teacher or writer (Jennifer Morrow).

6. A directive approach to tutoring is more suitable for novice writers.

Borrowing from the Situational Leadership model taught in some business settings, I can describe my philosophy of tutoring as grounded in the evolving needs of the students. In the early phase, some “do-it-this-way” tutoring is appropriate and necessary: students need direction. This is true even for those who have relevant prior learning because some recourse to direction is important when a new environment is encountered. A second phase involves more student-centered writing, but with the tutor’s direction shifting to coaching—that is, explaining why certain changes to the student product will result in improvement and motivating the student to engage in making those changes. The third phase is more collaborative, although there is still an expert role being played by the tutor. The tutoring style is more “participative,” with both student and tutor reacting to the student’s product and discussing together the various ways in which strengths can be built upon and weaknesses mitigated. In a fourth and final phase, the student is no longer viewed as an apprentice, but simply as a fellow writer, someone expected to handle writing independently and who collaborates and consults with other writers as colleagues (Glenn Libby).

7. A directive approach to tutoring is more suitable for advanced writers.

My experiences as both a writer and tutor were well-reflected in the “Pure Tutoring” essay. I consistently learn the most about writing and thinking from professors who very actively edit my work. I am wondering, however, about the relationship between editing and teaching the writing process to novices (Anon.).

8. It is important to achieve a balance between directive and non-directive tutoring.

To my mind, there is a time for directive tutoring and a time for Socratic. And I suspect that, in general, most tutoring sessions need to have a little bit of both (Mark Masterson).

Despite these qualifications to the “critique,” all of my tutors praised the article for its questioning of received wisdom in writing center consultation. I am sure that my tutors will approach their writing center sessions with greater thoughtfulness as a result of having read and responded to this article.

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Many thanks to Dr. Betty Bamberg, director of the Expository Writing Program at U.S.C., who initially summarized these responses.