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Review of *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors* and *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*

Bobbie Silk

Leigh Ryan. *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors.* Boston: Bedford, 1994.

Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood. *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors.* New York: St. Martin's, 1995.

When W. B. Yeats was writing and producing verse plays for the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, he longed for actors who could adequately express the essence of passion in his plays without interference from the histrionic acting style of the day and without the “whims” of mere individual personality and ego. He became quite enthusiastic about scenic designer Gordon Craig’s idea for an *übermarionette*—an actor released from human weakness, “a body in trance.” In my weak moments as a writing center professional, when I question the effectiveness of the training I am giving our writing center tutors, I, too, yearn for *übermarionettes*.

Writing centers fulfill practical needs, but they do so based on a mystery inside a paradox. The mystery is writing itself. Like the particle/wave perplexity of quantum physics, writing—in terms of how it is accomplished and how it is valued—is both an object and an action, both literal and ineffable. It is a practical, functional activity that completes a task and produces a product. It is also a manifestation of consciousness, and thus an act that identifies our humanity. It is the product of the interplay of cultural discourses—or perhaps the tangible evidence of an individual soul. Writing is a job application letter, a loving tribute to a parent, a freshman essay on

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ozone depletion, an exploration of personal philosophy, and a chemistry lab report.

Whatever writing is, the literal and practical goal of a writing center is to aid writers in producing it, preferably for the long term. The paradox of the writing center is how we must fulfill this mission. That is, the professionals charged with this mission must help writers learn by teaching tutors how to coach. Therefore, the writing center has a dual pedagogical function that can complicate the day-to-day challenge of meeting the needs of tutors and writers. We might better meet this challenge by using either or both of the two fine training manuals put out by St. Martin's Press and its subsidiary Bedford Books. Both are slim, unintimidating volumes that convey a great deal of information.

From the perspective of the tutor trainer, Ryan's practical methodology in the *Bedford Guide* has the potential to place a new tutor into the writing center structure very quickly—perhaps creating an ideal, an *übermarionette* of writing center philosophy. To a new tutor facing the unknown, Ryan's book could be a form of salvation, since it addresses the immediate fundamentals of tutoring writing with friendly language, practical advice, and brief, effective examples. If something like Ryan's book had been available to me on my first day of college teaching as a graduate assistant, I wouldn't have felt like I had shown up for swimming lessons only to be thrown into the deep end of the pool and told, as I was madly treading water, "Oh yeah, and now that you're in the water, you're also the lifeguard!"

In the "Preface for Writing Center Directors," Ryan effectively describes what she achieves in the *Bedford Guide*. "While I wasn't trying to make composition teachers out of engineering or psychology or dance majors, I did want the tutors to acquire some knowledge of the writing process and some strategies they could use as they worked with students" (v). Ryan accomplishes this in part through her voice in the guide, which is straightforward and personal without being chummy, cute, or coy. The first three chapters establish a solid foundation for the practice of tutoring. Chapter One of the book is a brief, practical listing and explanation of the basic behaviors all writing center personnel ideally should practice. It includes ethical cautions about writing parts of the paper for the client, criticizing professors, misleading the client about a possible grade, and violating the confidentiality of the tutorial. The second chapter quickly summarizes the process revolution in writing instruction and lays out the gestalt psychology-inspired description of process with the now-common caveat about the process being nonlinear. This chapter is also extremely effective in explaining the concepts of global and sentence-level revision. Through the optional exercises, it encourages awareness of other features of tutorial and composition discourse, including common terms which may have become transparent to the trainer but which are opaque to neophyte tutors and therefore cause misunderstanding or plain

lack of comprehension.

Chapter Three takes a businesslike approach to the tutoring session, describing the roles a tutor might play and breaking down the tutoring approach into “Three Effective, Powerful Tools”—active listening, facilitating “by responding as a reader,” and what might be termed active silence. The fourth chapter walks the tutor through helping writers understand the writing process. Two of the remaining three chapters concern problems or challenging situations tutors will encounter. One chapter reviews (perhaps too briefly) types of writing tutors encounter, including lab reports, scientific papers, argument papers, papers on literature, reviews, resumes, cover letters, and essays of application. The checklists in this chapter may be useful as review for the tutor, but their reductiveness may be more confusing than helpful to the tutor who has no experience with good examples of these types of writing. Appendices B and C (“Tutors Ask” and “Tutors Talk: Judging What They Say”) offer provocative topics and examples for training sessions or staff meetings.

Unlike the “how to” Ryan has written, Murphy and Sherwood have put together a “why to” in *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors* that includes significant essays by theorists and researchers as well as their own analyses of writing center practice. In the preface the authors express the hope that “this book will fill a niche between manuals that teach beginners simple tutoring techniques and philosophical treatises that too often divorce theory from practice” (v). The *Sourcebook* proposes that tutors develop their own philosophy of tutoring and thus the flexibility to deal with unpredictable situations that might baffle a script-bound *übermarionette*.

The tone, style, and intent of the Murphy/Sherwood book is more scholarly than Ryan's guide. Where Ryan concentrates on the immediate methodological needs of the new tutor (albeit in the context of writing center philosophy and practice), Murphy and Sherwood assume some tutor understanding of methodology and concentrate instead on the theories and research that motivate it. If I were going to use the two books in sequence (first Ryan, then Murphy/Sherwood), I might link them by asking the tutors to apply what they learn about theory and rationales in the Murphy/Sherwood book to describe the methodologies they learned from Ryan's.

Murphy and Sherwood begin their book with four defining as well as guiding principles: tutoring is contextual, collaborative, interpersonal and individualized. The authors then describe the three predominant paradigms of writing pedagogy: “current traditional rhetoric, expressivism (also sometimes called expressionism), and social constructionism” (2). In discussing social constructionism and including Andrea Lunsford's essay “Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center,” Murphy and Sherwood introduce a self-awareness that should help tutors develop “an informed practice.” The book asserts that “successful tutors are willing to modify their

views and procedures as new insights emerge.” This process in the tutor identifies “one of the most significant means for improving writing skills,” which is “the capacity for reconceptualizing” (4). Developing this capacity in the writer is a primary goal of tutoring.

The stages of the tutorial are identified as the Pretextual, in which tutor and student develop “the interpersonal relationship that will guide their collaborations” (5); the Textual, in which the text at hand becomes the medium for making “long-term improvements” (12); and the Posttextual, which “provides a sense of closure for the tutorial” and “offers a *template*, or model, for future learning experiences” (14). The narrative examples the authors use in discussing these stages generally concentrate less on what the tutor does to help a client and more on what a client has done that demonstrates or confirms theory. Although the clients are making great strides, in most of these examples the implied learner is the tutor. Some tutors may feel subtly put down by this, even though the goal of the *Sourcebook* is to clip the strings on the *übermarionettes*. This focus on the tutor as learner rather than the tutor as practitioner is consistent with the “sourcebook” concept and what we might call the intellectualization of tutoring in the Murphy/Sherwood book.

The readings selected by Murphy and Sherwood are divided into four categories. The first is “Theoretical Constructs,” which includes Stephen North’s “The Idea of a Writing Center” and the Lunsford article mentioned earlier. In spite of his recent near-apostasy (“Revising ‘The Idea of a Writing Center,’” *WCJ*, Fall 1994), the use here of North’s earlier essay is valuable in establishing a foundation on which the other essays build or against which they react. The section on “Interpersonal Dynamics” includes essays by Murphy, Sherwood, and Anne DiPardo. In the section “Responding to Texts,” we find essays that contrast the modeling and “minimalist” tutoring methodologies. The final section of readings, “Affirming Diversity,” encourages tutor awareness of differences in client needs and perceptions—from cultural and social differences to learning-style differences.

Both Ryan’s *Guide* and the Murphy/Sherwood *Sourcebook* contain information about resources for further investigation and professional development. Neither of these books appears to be intended as the only training that a tutor should or will receive. For one thing, as we well know, the tutor is formed, not only by the hands of the trainer (or by the training manual), but by experience with writers. Given the dual pedagogical charge of the writing center, we must encourage growth in the tutor as well as the writer. Fortunately, neither the *Guide* nor the *Sourcebook* is likely to produce the sort of “tutor” referred to in this gardening catalog description Paula Gillespie shared with me recently: “Visitors to Monet’s restored garden at Giverny won’t soon forget *tuteurs*. Literally ‘tutors,’ these steel structures train growth of climbing plants in the traditional French way.” This concept of the tutor

as rigid and controlling tests false in the writing center. Understanding the constant variability of the dynamic between tutors and clients, writing center directors know that tutor rigidity can be obstructive. Directors must decide how much or for how long a tutor should be an *übermarionette*. Ultimately, the tutor must be confident enough to be patient and strong—and knowledgeable enough to be flexible. Each in its own way, *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* and *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors* can serve to develop the strength, confidence, and necessary flexibility of the writing center tutor.

Bobbie Silk is Writing Center Coordinator at Illinois Wesleyan University, where she also teaches first-year writing and dramatic literature. She holds a master's degree in creative writing from Illinois State University and is completing a Ph.D. in literature at the University of Illinois. A former news reporter, she continues to do freelance writing and publicity.