

1-1-1995

Letters (2)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/wcj>

Recommended Citation

(1995) "Letters (2)," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1, Article 9.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1368>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries.
Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

"A Critique of Pure Tutoring"

In response to Linda Shamoon and Deborah Burns' essay (Spring 1995), let me offer the following critique of "A Critique." This essay provides a critique of the dominant writing center pedagogy, a challenge from "experience" and faculty in other disciplines, an alternative mode of practice, and a set of concluding implications for this alternative model for writing centers. Let me say right off that I am not one to dig in my heels when it comes to dominant anything. In fact, most of my writing center research centers on ways to resist domination, appropriation, and stagnation. But the alternative suggested by these authors leaves me puzzled and, frankly, concerned.

I am puzzled because throughout their critique of process-centered writing pedagogy and nondirective tutoring they employ a religious metaphor to cast the current paradigm as orthodoxy, the practitioners as a kind of priesthood of the orthodoxy, and the "codes of behavior" as "articles of faith" (135). Much of their language not only denigrates current and successful writing center pedagogical theory, it denigrates religion itself (a hidden agenda that seems irrelevant to their topic). For example, Shamoon and Burns label a tutor's e-mail post as a "confession" that could be interpreted as "obviating the sin of appropriating [a] student's paper" (136). Drawing from recent (and some not-so-recent) scholarship, they point out that a directive tutor is the shaman, guru, or mentor and the student is the disciple. Basically, they object to the current paradigm as a kind of "writing center 'bible'" based not upon "research or examined practice" but upon "articles of faith that serve to validate a tutoring approach which 'feels right'" (135). In short, they cast the current paradigm as an "ideological formation rather than a product of research" (136).

Here is my concern. It strikes me as odd that they think research is not also itself an "ideological formation." Haven't Jim Berlin, John Trimbur, and others shown us that ideology permeates the rhetoric of any discipline and pedagogy? It also strikes me as odd that they would choose to cast this paradigm in religious metaphors when they end up simply exchanging one master/slave relationship for another in their advocacy of music and art education models of learning. They call upon their own (and other faculty from WAC meetings) experience in graduate school as evidence that learning can occur when professors take over students' theses and rewrite them or appropriate them in other ways. They then admit these "informally gathered stories" do not "carry the same weight as research data" (139), but proceed to use that as authority to make comparisons with tutoring, which carries little of the same authoritative relationship as that between professor and graduate student. There is a big difference between the master/slave relationship between a tutor and student and a professor and student. Issues of power seem ignored here.

So, it seems doubly odd to move into discussion of “Master” classes in music as a viable model for the “handing down” of knowledge (141). Granted, they disclaim slightly when they say such practices can “run amok,” but they suggest that if writing centers know enough about these practices, they can “prevent abusive application” (142). To say that it is all right for an art studio instructor to “[dab] some pigment on the student’s canvas and [transform] the impact of the picture” sounds like a strange way to characterize the interaction between tutor and student writer (143). Shamoan and Burns assume that the transference of that experts’ “domain-specific repertoire” (143) will insure some kind of “cognitive shift” necessary for emulation and learning (143). Thus, I think that when they shift to using Muriel Harris’ experience with a novice writer—i.e., her modeling and reversing roles strategy—they are making false comparisons. Professor Harris’ modeling invention as *she* does it is very different than dabbing paint on a student’s canvas.

All in all, though they conclude by claiming writing centers need *both* nondirective and directive tutoring, the models they choose do not make that a strong argument for me.

Cynthia Haynes
University of Texas-Dallas

Linda Shamoan and Deborah Burns Respond

We would like to respond to several points raised by Cynthia Haynes-Burton in her letter about our article, “A Critique of Pure Tutoring.”

Haynes-Burton begins her letter by objecting to our description of current tutoring practices as rooted in “orthodoxy” and based on “codes of behavior” that are “accepted as articles of faith.” She suggests that our language “not only denigrates current and successful writing center pedagogical theory, it denigrates religion itself.” We are a little amused by her reading of our text. We used the religious references metaphorically to illustrate that many writing centers adhere to a set of tutoring practices out of ideological zeal rather than out of critical practice. That ideology is rooted in process-centered pedagogy and takes little account of disciplinary contexts or current work in social and new rhetorical theory. We have problems with the faith many current practitioners place in the process paradigm, with its universalizing tendencies and treatment of texts as monuments to individualism. Faith is an integral part of religion, but it has little place in teaching and tutoring. So, to faithfully follow the process paradigm without considering alternatives that would expand writing center tutoring seems to be an