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## Review: The Harcourt Brace Guide to Peer Tutoring

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**Capossela, Toni-Lee.** *The Harcourt Brace Guide to Peer Tutoring.* Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1998. 252 pages, \$13.50 (ISBN: 0-155-08159-4).

*Reviewed by Molly Wingate*

I wondered, when I picked up Toni-Lee Capossela's *Harcourt Brace Guide to Peer Tutoring*, what possibly could be new in the world of how-to-tutor books; now I know. This book is a welcome addition to the library of books for undergraduate tutor training. It adds reflective essays written by students who work in a writing center, and it takes the time to teach the process of writing as well as how to tutor the process. After training a few hundred tutors at small, private, four year, liberal arts schools like Capossela's Stonehill College, I am happy to have found some fresh material.

The most exciting addition this text provides is the voices of peer tutors. Among the twenty-two essay readings included in the second part of the book are half a dozen short pieces written by students working in a writing center. These voices echo the ones we hear in staff meetings, in *The Writing Lab Newsletter's* "Tutor Column," and in presentations at the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing. They are smart, clear, personal, and sharply focused on what it means to be an undergraduate who works with other undergraduates. The tutors' essays help solve two perennial problems in training courses—they make writing center work real, and they help explain why you have to learn so much to get ready to tutor.

Elizabeth Foote, in "An Experience to Remember," ends her description of observing a tutorial session with the comment, "My first session certainly was not typical . . . I learned that not every session is going to be easy and end like a fairy tale so that everyone lives happily ever after" (168). Jeannine Broadwell's essay, "Rehabilitating the Writing Center Junkie," shows the importance of training when she details the appointments she had after the first two weeks of her training course: "At that point, I had learned little more than that tutors should ask writers questions to stimulate thought instead of telling them what to fix . . . We hadn't really gotten into specifics in my class, yet, so I didn't realize we were asking for trouble" (139). She goes on to describe how her misapprehensions that her job was to fix the paper and that she had unlimited time led to a writer becoming dependent on her. She remarks, "Although my inexperience caused these problems, it allowed me the opportunity to learn from my mistakes" (140). These essays and the others by students make points that all training courses try to make. However, the words and experiences of peers bring these points home to a new staff.

Another addition Capossela provides is the time and room to teach the stages of writing as well as how to tutor them. While respecting the intelligence of her audience, Capossela fills in the blanks in their experience and knowledge of process and tutoring theory. She counters the view that smart students already understand the writing process, and when given a few good guidelines, they will catch on to how to work with writers. In Chapters 3 through 8, the book takes up different stages of writing a paper: “Getting Started,” “Analyzing an Assignment,” “Finding a Focus,” and so on. These chapters reveal the insight, knowledge, and bag of tricks accumulated by a hand practiced at working with writers and training others to do the same. Each begins with a lesson on what a writer should and could be doing at a particular stage and then moves on to effective approaches to writing center sessions with these students.

During the course of each chapter in the first part of the book, Capossela refers to the essays in the second part. In addition to student essays, the second part of the book includes some of the big names in composition and writing center scholarship. The exercises at the end of each chapter challenge the students to tangle with these big names: critique Nancy Sommers, dig into Bruffee and Elbow, find the shortcomings in Richard Lanham, get to know Mina Shaughnessy. The exercises even herald the return of writing dialogic notebooks to prepare for writing assignments. These exercises give tutors-in-training lots of material to use in their own practice tutoring sessions while helping them to remember how hard it is to complete the thinking much less the writing of such critical work. The real and sometimes humbling experience of trying to do topnotch academic writing helps us all remember to empathize with, not judge, writing center clients.

Capossela also includes a chapter and a reading on the new challenges presented by tutoring on-line. This, of course, is an area that is mushrooming as you read this very sentence. Nonetheless, Capossela’s comments and those in Dave Coogan’s essay, “Towards a Rhetoric of On-line Consulting,” effectively introduce the philosophical and ethical questions on-line work has elicited, even if their technical comments seem a bit dated: What does it mean to be invisible to the writer? What happens when all we have is the text? How do you talk about conceptual issues?

For all of its thoroughness, I would still have liked a bit more discussion of difference in *The Harcourt Brace Guide to Peer Tutoring*. The book gives appropriate attention to writers who present different kinds of writing problems. Chapter 11, “Specific Kinds of Writers,” discusses issues that arise when working with ESL students, BEV speakers, and learning disabled writers. As is this book’s forte, it helps the reader understand the issues and to deal with them in the writing center. In Chapter Two, Capossela provides guidelines for approaching sessions in general and includes comments about respecting cultural or personal

differences. She gives examples of differences in attitude toward eye contact and personal space. In this section, a comment or two about working with older, “non-traditional” students would have been a good idea. However, I am concerned about difference in the sense of the race, class, gender role, and ethnic backgrounds of the writers and the tutors. After analyzing the lexical problem of what to call an undergraduate who works in a writing center—tutor (as the title of the book and several of the essays suggest) or consultant (the term Capossela prefers and uses throughout the first part of the book)—the text goes on to suggest that once they have a name, consultants are all the same. They aren’t. They bring their own cultural, class, gender role, and ethnic backgrounds with them into the writing center and into every session. Nowhere does the book discuss how one’s own background influences writing center sessions, nor does it give guidance about how to minimize the potential ill effects while capitalizing on the good effects. Maybe that is a topic for the next generation of tutor training books.

Nonetheless, this book passes one of its own editing tests: If you were paying twenty-five dollars a word, what would you cut? And the comics sprinkled throughout are funny. This book is longer and more thorough than most training books, and it is sharply focused on undergraduates as its audience. Its expanded content, exercises, and essays are very useful—so useful that I may adopt it this coming year. A major selling point is the cost of the book —\$13.50 is more than a fair price for a college text these days.

**Molly Wingate** is the Writing Center Director at Colorado College where she tutors, teaches classes, and trains peer tutors. She writes about theory, practice, and administration of writing centers.