Lessons of Inscription: Tutor Training and the "Professional Conversation"

Peter Vandenberg
Lessons of Inscription: Tutor Training and the “Professional Conversation”¹

Peter Vandenberg

Because power circulates in the normalized writing practices of the institution, it cannot be challenged. As this power becomes inscribed in our teaching and learning relationships, we assume responsibility for our own subjugation.
—Nancy Grimm

If the pages of The Writing Center Journal are any kind of barometer, a dark cloud has been gathering over writing center work. Recent critical, self-reflexive WCJ articles by Terrance Riley and Stephen North, according to Lisa Ede, explore “sites of discomfort and controversy” (112), and Ede finds these essays intimately related to disciplinary development in composition studies and growing concern about its implications. The flowering of the National Writing Centers Association—and its national and regional conferences, press, and journals—suggest that to identify with writing centers is increasingly to contend with traditional disciplinary practices and academic professionalism. Removed as it must be from the day-to-day, location-bound activities of writing centers, the written “professional conversation” generalizes tutoring and writing-center administration in a wider, communal context, one recently drawn dark around the edges. While Riley warns that writing centers may face an unpromising future, Nancy Grimm implicates them already in what she calls “the regulatory power” of institutionalized writing practices (7). Writing center scholarship is beginning to question whether writing centers ever did or ever can occupy the academy’s anti-space. The last several volumes of WCJ seem to indicate the aptness of this Grimm trope for the current state of professional discourse about writing centers: “A Loss of Innocence.”

The Writing Center Journal, Volume 19, Number 2, Spring/Summer 1999
While I do not intend to predict in this essay where precisely writing centers are headed, I am interested in what lies along the horizon for writing centers as are Riley, Ede, North, and Grimm. And I am concerned that the collective "we" of our professional discourse is groping toward it without a great deal of regard for the largest contingent among us—our student tutors. My concern is that as we conceptualize directions for writing centers—the actual ones we work in and the virtual, generalized figures of our scholarship—our understanding of tutors as "students" and our interaction with them as "education" may mask the ways they sometimes serve simply and without reflection as extensions of values and desires written deeply into the institution, into us. Teaching, of course, is the act of transmitting values, and as writing teachers we implicitly grade most writing students on their ability to approximate our values—those of the institution and the dominant culture—and they often arrive and leave resistant to that project. On the other hand, we typically expect student tutors to replicate dominant institutional and literate values and to reproduce them in others as a condition of employment. Comparatively speaking, they accomplish this with little or no resistance at all; they arrive at the writing center door with commitments to academic discipline and a belief in the transformative potential of literacy, but what they often lack is an awareness of the institutional function of the "tutor position," its implication in what Grimm identifies as regulatory power. Our increasing attention to what Ede calls "sites of discomfort," then, might recommend that we vigorously promote a self-reflexive attitude among our tutors and implicate ourselves in the web of power structures that attempt to control them. This, of course, is not always "practical."

I am concerned here with formulations of "the practical" in writing center work, particularly as they relate to student tutors and their relationship to published scholarship. In this essay I consider the evolution of writing tutor pedagogies, from the job-specific training of tutorial-centered "practical" manuals (Harris; Meyer and Smith) to the professionalizing approach that establishes awareness of the specialized discourse of writing center scholarship as a standard for tutor competence (Murphy and Sherwood). By appealing to them as "professionals" (Simard) and "experts" (Clark), this new approach incorporates student tutors into our struggle for what Riley calls "academic credibility"; yet with limited potential to engage in the discourse that governs their activities and few opportunities to construct themselves within it, the "professional approach" offers student tutors much in common with their faculty counterparts who struggle under heavy teaching loads. As I will go on to show, my own experience training student tutors with the professional approach suggests that it also writes them into our most painful and factious debates—about the meanings and uses of theory and the possibilities for
personal agency through writing within institutions hierarchized by writing. In part by elaborating Writing Center Theory and Pedagogy, the course required of all student tutors at my institution, I go on to suggest that the professional approach makes explicit the complex and undeniable relationship between authority and authorship in university culture.  

From the “Practical” to the Professional in Tutor-Training Textbooks

Beginning around 1984, when Kenneth Bruffee and Stephen North wrote the first of what are now published as “landmark essays” about writing centers, business as usual in many writing centers, including the one at DePaul, was disrupted by remarkably persuasive theorizing about writing as process. When the dizzy feeling went away, many had shifted attention from text to context. Writing was no longer conceived as only a set of skills, but as a slippery and intricate set of recursive practices interdependent with readers’ reactions. What once was practical in tutor training was no longer. The standard for effective training became decidedly more complex; an activity once dependent almost exclusively on grammarians was suddenly informed by rhetoricians, critical theorists, psychologists, sociologists, and biologists.

Muriel Harris’ Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference emphasizes the shift in attention away from the written product toward the processes of its production and interpretation. Still in print more than a decade after it appeared, and widely used as a tutor-training manual, the book devotes just 15 of its 135 pages to “Grammar and Correctness.” Another influential tutor training text, Emily Meyer and Louise Z. Smith’s The Practical Tutor, which announces itself as “a practical guide to tutoring composition,” mandates the exploration of invention heuristics, critical analysis, concept formation, and the reciprocity between reading and writing. The tremendous range of theoretical constructs that inform The Practical Tutor and Harris’ Teaching One-to-One, however, can easily be harnessed to the rather conservative cultural work that many writing centers (such as the one at DePaul) were established to do, and Meyer and Smith’s title reflects how quickly a ragged theoretical landscape can be worn smooth. Together these two training manuals constitute a dominant approach to tutor training: “the newly practical.”

These books widened the theory base for tutoring writing outside of the English department’s “current-traditional” concern with surface correctness; at the same time, however, they reified or concretized unsettled and competing theories into a new conception of “the practical.” These books helped widen the focus of tutor training from text to context;
at the same time, however, they limited the concerns of tutor training to the tutorial. Neither book offers a consideration of tutoring activity within a wider social or institutional context or questions the assumptions, values, or motives that necessitate and sustain writing tutorials to begin with—whatever they are said to be. Indeed, by advertising *The Practical Tutor* in the “Introduction” as a complete course design, Meyer and Smith appear to imply that any wider context is unnecessary. The extent to which these books shape or reflect the views of most writing center directors and scholars is open to question, of course. Yet it has not been uncommon, on the listserv WCENTER and in some periodicals, to see a wide and unruly collection of constructs, “skills,” and procedures naturalized as “practical” as opposed to something distant, onerous, and unreliable labeled “theory.”

Writing center scholars have worried on behalf of tutors, though, about the limitations associated with the newly practical. As Roger Munger, Ilene Rubenstein, and Edna Barrow maintain, strong student writers come from typically uniform cultural orientations, and practical training “is often too brief to expect much-needed conversations and reflections to take place” (3). When tutor training does not encourage or demand such reflection—something that may come only from considering tutor-tutee interaction within wider institutional and cultural contexts—“academic elitism and cultural egocentricity” may be the *de facto* result (2). When tutors are trained exclusively or primarily in what Linda Bannister-Wills calls a “learning by doing environment” (132), directors risk exploiting the will to insider status and the novice’s tendency to rigidity (Simard). They risk failing to encourage in student tutors a critical awareness of their own privileged literate position in the social and institutional hierarchy. When that happens, they are simply disciplined as instruments of a system they haven’t been invited to consider.

Writing center directors are, of course, painfully aware of the friction between their responsibilities as administrators and their options as teachers. According to Munger and others, budget constraints limit most directors to “orientation-type” training programs that, out of necessity, teach the tutorial rather than the tutor. Since credit-bearing training courses are often a “luxury” (Capossela 2), some directors, who may be judged directly or indirectly on the basis of retention and classroom success (Denton), often train tutors within the narrow context of the tutorial. To satisfy short-term goals, many directors are trapped in a cold, pragmatic banking model of tutor training that violates Paulo Freire’s first principle of liberatory pedagogy; ignorant of their locations in institutional and disciplinary politics, tutors have little choice but to adapt to and support the limited view their training offers them.³ I will not dispute Lisa Ede’s agreement with Jennifer Gore: “there are no *inherently* liberating
practices or discourses" (Gore qtd. in Ede 126, my emphasis). Yet when a teacher wears a writing center director’s hat in the tutor training classroom, teaching can become a more pure form of surveillance and control. Conflict among competing discourses can become something to be managed and suppressed rather than explored. What Bobbie Silk identifies as the director’s “dual pedagogical charge”—“we must encourage growth in the tutor as well as the writer” (84)—is often overrun by the instinct to professional self-preservation.

This dual charge has typically, and not unexpectedly, centered on writing; as Bruffee has it, “tutors refine their own writing abilities as well as learn to help others develop their writing skills” (Bruffee qtd. in Bannister-Wills 132). Student tutors clearly do benefit as writers from their tutoring activity and training. I am advocating that we explicitly encourage growth in student tutors by ensuring what Tilly Warnok and John Warnock assume, that once they “develop a critical consciousness toward their own writing, they will very likely have developed such consciousness toward the context for that writing, the world they live in” (18). Fear of the “botched job or . . . disgruntled customer” (Capossela 1-2) necessitates that many directors, however unconsciously, construct tutors as employees in need of narrow, job-specific training rather than as students who deserve encouragement toward the self-examination and reflection Munger and others identify.

A bold step forward, Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood’s St. Martin’s Sourcebook for Writing Tutors appears to offer tutors the kind of situated awareness lacking in newly practical training pedagogies. Murphy and Sherwood present their edited collection of writing center scholarship as a resource “that will allow [tutors] to see tutoring as an ongoing, evolving process that they will help define” (v). The editors announce “a broad, interdisciplinary, and theoretical conversation surrounding the practice of tutoring—a conversation this sourcebook invites you to join” (2). This slim volume fully realizes Simard’s early-1980s request that tutoring be considered a “new professional role,” and Murphy and Sherwood establish tutors as professionals in the fashion one would expect within the academy. They explicitly bifurcate writing center work into “the practice of tutoring” and participation in a “conversation” that surrounds it by “inviting” students to join the latter. “Informed tutors,” they declare, are those “aware of the ongoing professional conversation that contributes to defining writing center practice” (21). Unlike the newly practical manuals, this claim clearly yokes student tutors’ competence to their awareness of published scholarship; further, it establishes a hierarchical relationship between “writing center practice” and the authoritative discourse that “contributes” to it by separating the “informed” from their opposites.
Writing center work has gained some degree of institutional legitimacy in the same fashion as the wider field of composition studies. Employing rather conventional disciplinary methods of inscription—conference papers, a press, academic journals, specialized dissertations, and training curricula—writing center scholars have constructed a written discourse and claimed its necessity to tutor effectively. Murphy and Sherwood provide the relief from which the newly practical can be viewed in all its narrowness. What “Part I” of their Sourcebook does best, however, though the editors do not acknowledge it, is illustrate the way in which academic hierarchies are constructed and maintained via the privilege of written discourses.

Hierarchy and authority in the academy are inscribed, written. Just as “theorists” and “practitioners” are stratified by writing (Vandenberg), so are newly professionalized tutors and the students they work with. Along with Irene Clark, who suggests that effective “writing conferences do not simply ‘happen’[,] . . . they occur because tutors have become experts in the field” (qtd. in Munger and others 3), Murphy and Sherwood effectively erase the romantic possibilities of tutor-student interaction as status-equal “collaborative peers” (Bruffee; Kail and Trimbur), a matter on which I will elaborate in this essay’s final section. Constructed as professionals in the conventional academic sense, tutors are implicitly identified as authorities separated from clients by their awareness of and participation in a specialized discourse that helps shape appropriate (professional) interaction with clients. While the professional approach clarifies the hierarchized difference between tutors and tutees based on familiarity with a specialized discourse, tutors remain oddly suspended in this economy of production as the informed rather than as informers.

Murphy and Sherwood’s invitation is a truncated one; they implicitly call out to student tutors as readers of the professional discourse, as obedient clients of the cadre of writers who authorize it. Unable to negotiate the specialized discourse with any degree of proficiency, student tutors, particularly undergraduate student tutors, as I will go on to show, have little hope of doing more than “listening” to the conversation. As in the wider field of composition studies, the activity of producing a professional, authoritative discourse escapes definition as a practice itself, and the result is a perceived opposition between “theory” and “practice,” “research” and “teaching.” The professional approach declares student tutors “experts,” but with no capacity to produce the capital of expertise, tutors fall to the degraded pole of the research/teaching opposition. Like many writing faculty and the “basic writers” with whom they typically meet, newly professionalized student tutors are oppressed by literacy standards they are prevented from attaining.4

The professional approach to tutor training explodes the narrow
focus of tutorial-based training, but in so doing it merely foregrounds tutors as manipulable, agency-free objects in what Grimm calls the “regulatory function” of writing centers. As I attempt to elaborate in the remainder of this article, as it does to those constructed as “practitioners” across the academy, the professional approach offers student tutors just one opportunity to escape their subjugated role. They must write their way out, and they must do it in and on the terms they have been given—this means an unavoidable encounter with theory.

Breaking Down Theory

In “Writing Centers and the Politics of Location,” Lisa Ede engages the most distressing dilemma for directors who introduce student tutors to the professional discourse, the “theory-practice” opposition. By refiguring “what has often been termed a theory-practice conflict to be a practice-practice conflict,” Ede demonstrates her awareness of the “discursive and material practices of those constructed as theorists over those constructed as practitioners” (114). As Ede implies here, the negative differential between these two constructs is enforced by the academic reward structure that frames academics’ workplace activities. Those who engage primarily in publishing theory about writing (or writing centers) are rewarded more favorably than those who primarily theorize about writing with students in the context of the classroom or the writing center. This arrangement diminishes the work of teaching and tutoring, and assumes a professional-client relationship between those who primarily publish and those who primarily teach.

Ede loses this “practice-practice” distinction almost immediately, however, when she conflates “those constructed as theorists” with “theory”: “I have learned,” she writes, “to be suspicious of the claims that theory often makes for itself” (114). Instead of renegotiating the dilemma by differentiating practical activities, Ede reinscribes it, despite her awareness that the problem is one of inequitably rewarding people engaged in different, yet important, activities—the “practice-practice” conflict. Ede inadvertently strengthens the imbalance by making “theory” itself the marker of privilege rather than “discursive and material practices,” such as writing books, articles, and conference papers, that are favored over teaching in a pattern of reward. This move throws her into contradiction; she is suspicious of “a reliance upon binaries and the construction of taxonomies” (114), yet cannot “reconceive the relationship of theory and practice” without relying on them. As Susan Jarratt suggests, to imagine the escape from binary thinking is to imagine transcendence. Ede’s analysis inevitably demonstrates, as she allows, that
she cannot escape the "theoretical strategies" she resists; further, "theory" remains something opposed to, different from, and privileged over "practice." In this formulation, "theory" is both the oppressor and the only route out of oppression—those who have no privilege are said to lack the very thing that Ede demonstrates they need: "theory."

Any published attempt to reconceive "the nature and relationship of theory and practice in the academy" (Ede 127) in terms of the opposition is destined to maintain it, and inadvertently privilege one over another. Sticking with Ede's initial move—to retheorize the theory-practice conflict as a practice-practice conflict—offers a more promising opportunity to rethink the ways practices are acknowledged, rewarded, and motivated. It demands that we see any institutionalized hierarchy of practices as an imposed order rather than a natural one. Until we are able to dismantle inequitable and unethical hierarchies of practice, we must take care not to blame the processes of constructing concepts (theory), but the power structures that disproportionately reward different modes of constructing or disseminating theory—publication, say, over teaching and tutoring. Until we find ways to transcend the binary thinking that worries Ede, our best effort to counter its hegemonic potential is to explore the possibility that two constructs can be "opposed" only if they are already interrelated. And if we do not actively encourage tutors to investigate "theory," we can hardly expect them to understand or consciously shape their practice.

If theorizing is something like examining the relationships among concepts, definitions, and propositions for the purpose of explaining or predicting, one can hardly walk across the street without theorizing, let alone conceptualize a practice-practice conflict or tutor self-critically. Examining relationships among concepts for the purpose of explaining or predicting appears to be what Andrea Lunsford means by theory when she contends that an effective monitoring of any "collaborative environment" such as a writing center "calls on each person involved in the collaboration to build a theory of collaboration" (39). It appears to be what Hey and Nahrwold mean by theory when they argue in The Writing Lab Newsletter that "only theory makes higher order concerns (HOCs) visible and discussible" (4). When defined this way, the relationship of theory to tutoring is obvious. It is by way of theory that we determine the "practical."

Tutors need theory in the sense that Hey and Nahrwold use the term, as a way of explaining and predicting; but to assume an informed, critical stance to their location in the disciplinary and institutional web that defines writing centers, tutors need theory as Ede implicitly defines it, as a privileged discourse we sometimes call Theory, the ownership of which defines teachers' and tutors' expertise in institutional terms. Tutors need theory (to explain or predict), then, to understand the Theory (as privileged
discourse) they need. Without an awareness of theorizing as an active way of making sense of what they hear and read, student tutors are likely to engage the professional discourse as a confusing and unfinished quest for a final Truth rather than as the "conversation" that Murphy and Sherwood promote. As skeptical of the "strategies of theory" as Ede rightfully suggests we all ought to be, it seems to me we cannot in good conscience avoid foregrounding and exploring them with the student tutors we ask to engage in any sort of "practice."

In his College Composition and Communication article, "Composition Theory in the 1980s," Richard Fulkerson offers a taxonomy of theory; he breaks Theory down into related yet discrete categories of concepts, definitions, and propositions. Some aspects of Fulkerson's article were not popular with poststructural critics for obvious reasons. Further, no taxonomy can be a lens without a binder. However, Fulkerson's categories will seem particularly attractive to those who train tutors because they are born of misgivings similar to those Ede expresses. Fulkerson is not a champion of theory for Theory's sake; the chief value of his taxonomy is that it can help student tutors begin to untangle and diagram the often contradictory and confused theoretical syntax of writing center Theory as they struggle to make it relevant to their tutorial practice.

Fulkerson begins with the problem that dogs use of the term theory almost wherever it appears; when used "to refer to any general propositions about writing and its teaching," the term obscures more than it explains (410). He goes on to suggest that such general propositions typically arise out of four categories of theory, and that by observing and acting along this taxonomy one can both detect and evade overt theoretical contradiction:

- **Theories of Value:** "what we want student writers to achieve as a result of effective teaching" (Fulkerson 411). A writing teacher or tutor's primary theory of value is typically a conception of what constitutes good writing, but it may have little to do with writing. Jacqueline Glasgow, for example, contends in The Writing Lab Newsletter that the "bottom line" in her tutor training is this: "how you treat people is more important than what you know" (2). A teacher might value self-esteem, multicultural awareness, competent participation, or even his own popularity over some conception of writing. For Eric Hobson, it might be "to help students understand the systems of power in which they function" (4). In any case, as Fulkerson suggests, a theory of value represents the standard by which progress may be judged.

- **Theories of Knowledge:** "teaching writing involves teaching epistemology" (Fulkerson 411), the study of what knowledge is
and how it is "made." Teaching or tutoring writing depends on assumptions about how we know what we know. Knowledge might be conceived of as the result of social interaction, the product of solitary genius, the gift of a benevolent god, and so on.

- **Theories of Procedure:** A writing teacher needs a working theory of how people do, or as Fulkerson suggests "should," go about creating texts. "That is," a teacher or tutor must also theorize about "the means by which writers can reach the ends" specified by her theory of value. By foregrounding a conception of procedure as theory, Fulkerson reminds us that "the writing process" is not an objective fact, but a cover term for a diverse set of theories relating to procedure that has been fixed or hardened through repetition and acceptance like a dead metaphor (411).

- **Theories of Pedagogy:** "Some perspective about classroom procedures and curricular designs suitable for enabling students to achieve" what is valued. Pedagogical theory "also concerns means, but the teacher's means rather than the writer's" (411).

When I ask my tutors to "enter the theoretical conversation surrounding the practice of tutoring," it is not with the unquestioned assumption that having read the professional discourse will necessarily make them better tutors. I am asking them to contends with theories of value, knowledge, procedure, and pedagogy as a way of "developing an informed practice" (Murphy and Sherwood 2, 4). Moreover, I'm asking them to recognize that their practical activities are suspended in a web of practical activities—such as publishing Theory, administering institutions, and conforming to socially accepted standards for literacy and its teaching. Fulkerson's taxonomy of theory supports this effort in two important and related ways.

It breaks down Theory to reveal the work of theories. New tutors asked to understand Fulkerson's taxonomy are less likely to think of theory exclusively as a set of oppressive, exclusive discursive practices than as a set of interrelated concepts we all use to develop, explain and, most important, change ways we act in the world. Fulkerson implies a method for interrogating Theory; it provides tutors with the capacity to recognize and explore the diversity of values, procedures, epistemologies and pedagogies at work in writing center scholarship. More important, it allows them to map and explain their confusion when the theorists they read confuse one category of theory and its concerns with another, or uncritically oppose "theory" to "practice." As a reading strategy, Fulkerson's taxonomy allows even undergraduate tutors to quickly offer meaningful answers to Eric Hobson's question: "Writing Center Practice
Often Counts Its Theory. So What?” Further, by classifying theories of pedagogy, value, and procedure alongside theories of knowledge, Fulkerson implicitly invites students to recognize and critique the preoccupation with epistemology at work in the professional scholarship.

Fulkerson’s taxonomy enables tutors’ agency as readers and as composers—of both Theory and of tutoring praxis. It encourages them to make conscious their assumptions about tutoring writing by providing them with a heuristic, a vocabulary with which they can develop answers, and a framework for testing the coherence of their own combinations of value, procedure, epistemology, and pedagogy. Upon understanding how and why publishing authors use theory to promote change through their own practices, student tutors are more likely to take active responsibility for developing and defending their own tutorial practice. Moreover, they are more likely to understand the differential between authoring Theory and enacting pedagogy as a “practice-practice” split rather than as a division between “theory” and “practice.”

Write On! Layering “The Conversation”

My use of Fulkerson’s taxonomy when introducing student tutors to Theory reflects my adherence to a social epistemology—I find the conception of knowledge as a consequence of social interaction to be powerfully persuasive. Who and what we are, what we are likely to “invent” or “discover” is intricately tied to what we’ve agreed to accept by using language with others. I do not promote a social epistemology as fact, therefore, but as a belief, and it has a powerful impact on what I value for my students, what I ask them to do, and how I encourage them to do it. My belief in a social epistemology leads me to align my own theorizing about values, pedagogy, and procedure.

To introduce new tutors to professional discourse—that of writing center scholars or the wider field of rhetoric and composition—is not necessarily to introduce students to the possibility of constructing their own theory. Asking tutors to read articles by faceless scholars and talk about them in the classroom may satisfy my understanding of knowledge production as an intertextual transaction; however, new tutors are hard pressed to relate their literal interpretation of conversation to reading and writing. Tutors new to epistemological theory are likely to interpret conversation as C. J. Singley and H. W. Boucher do—“the form of communication we use for tutoring sessions.” And they are likely to assume, as Singley and Boucher do, that it “should structure all aspects of a peer tutoring program” (11). The value of conversation as a trope for the authorization of knowledge through literate scholarly activity does not
come as readily to new student tutors as it does to practiced scholars. As Simard argues, tutors tend to “define their new role rigidly and can become inflexible in both their stance and attitude” (198). By contrast, their perception of published scholarship as dense, fixed, and distant can make it seem irreconcilable with the immediacy of the talk-based tutorials they are intensely motivated to manage. Without a pedagogy that actively encourages the role of literate activity in the social construction of knowledge, directors who ask students to read the professional discourse may be simply underscoring a perception of the “theory/practice” division most students bring with them to tutor training.

A truncated social epistemology centered on talk may not encourage tutors to develop values for their tutees centered on writing, and it may do little to promote awareness of the tutor’s institutional and social roles. Training pedagogy that complements “talk” with intensely interactive reading and writing widens the context of training beyond the tutorial to the textual “conversation” that informs it, and the social and institutional attitudes and expectations for literacy that necessitate the tutorial to begin with. A pedagogy consistent with a Western social epistemology ought to model and encourage procedures by which students come to recognize the production and interpretation of text as central to the process of authorizing knowledge. E-mail listservs offer such an opportunity.

The use of electronic fora in composition courses is well documented, yet its possibilities for tutor training have been elaborated only recently. In the “Special Issue” of Computers and Composition dedicated to writing centers and electronic technology, Virginia Chappell and Ellen Strenski each explain the integration of E-mail listservs in tutor training programs. My own reasons for establishing a course listserv parallel theirs in many ways. Like Strenski, I hoped that the listserv, WriteOn, would become more than another channel for the top-down distribution of “information,” a community-building apparatus that encouraged boundary-crossing participation. Like Chappell, I wanted to promote movement beyond the isolated, student-teacher transaction of most course-based writing and give students the opportunity to see each other’s writing and the immediate impact of their rhetorical choices. Mostly, though, like Chappell, I’d hoped that a listserv would make “real” the relationship between published Theory and tutors’ situated experiences, and allow them to recognize the role of literate transactions in constructing authoritative knowledge.

Such understanding is not a de facto result of asking students to read excerpts from the professional discourse. Photocopied articles and essay collections appear to student tutors as static or frozen icons of their teachers’ authority rather than tentative and contingent propositions in an ongoing “conversation.” When presented with published scholarship, but not the opportunity to contend with it and each other, “students have the
option of accepting or rejecting that authority but are not likely to take on
the responsibility of scrutinizing or modifying it" (Chappell 230). In an
institutional context that literally equates authority with authorship,
student tutors must be authorized to author; in an institutional context that
depends on written debate to modify ideas and ultimately confer accept-
tance or rejection, student tutors must become response-able.

Ironically, perhaps, the most effective way to encourage stu-
dents' capacity to author is for the teacher to author less. Like Chappell,
I wanted to set the listserv in place, periodically stress its relationship to
the professional discourse and, then, “move myself out of the way” (229).
Unlike Strenski, however, it did not occur to me that “the director can
participate in the conversation as a listserv member rather than as the
director” (252). Well aware that students would detect my presence as
both the “overall orchestrator of class activity” (Chappell 230) and a
committed “lurker,” I developed a protocol statement for WriteOn, and
structured my expectations in line with the values that motivated me
toward the listserv: I wanted students to form whatever electronic associa-
tion they would by cooperatively engaging the published professional
discourse.

Fearful that too many lengthy posts, and my stipulation that the
list was required reading, would turn WriteOn into an unwanted obliga-
tion, I asked students to be direct, and limit their posts to 300 words. In my
second “question” of the term, I asked contributors to “compare and
contrast” a couple of readings for the week. This was more direction than
they wanted, and in the following class they let me know it. They realized
what I did not: WriteOn was in danger of becoming just another way of
turning in assignments. After that, I handed over the process of posting
discussion starters to student tutors, maintaining the “professional ap-
proach” implicitly by stipulating only that “questions” encourage consid-
eration of published scholarship. Students were left to contend with
Theory and each others’ theories in an evolving and unsettled dialectic.

As one student tutor who took the course, Kathryn Giglio,
explained to the National Writing Centers Association conference in Park
City, Utah, the evolution of this electronic community and its relationship
to the professional, published discourse was elastic and uncertain, pre-
cisely the kind of “ongoing theorizing” (233) that Chappell reports.
Slowly, writing emerged as both the object of the student-tutors’ study and
the agent that simultaneously held them together and threatened to pull
them apart. Giglio’s essay demonstrates that via WriteOn student tutors
did not simply mimic via e-mail the published discourse they read, they
constructed a hybrid particular to their circumstances, one capable of
“helping itself,” of “re-center[ing] institutional writing center knowledge
as something personal, social, and cultural” (9).
Yet Giglio demonstrates that the course listserv also functioned as a location for the virtual inscription and maintenance of conventional academic hierarchies grounded in what she calls “theoretical literacies”:

Although tempted to immediately embrace the surfaces of cyber-rebellion, it became clear to me that no discourse, not even that of writing consultants, can exist outside the ideological constructs of institutional power and control. It can be argued that while online technologies demonstrate the power of peer collaboration, collaborative efforts are too easily broken apart on the precarious landscape of language and power. (5)

In a close reading of the WriteOn archives, Giglio shows the ways that a field’s knowledge—its professional “conversation”—functions as institutional authority, and how “collaborative activity” among tutors effectively constructs tutors “as guardians of this knowledge” (6):

Not all [threads] were communally inclusive, nor were they communally productive. One thread focused on the term “ideology,” but only four, second-year graduate students actually “collaborated” about the word’s implications. As one of the guilty co-creators of the thread, I never once stopped to define the term for others, nor attempted to apply it directly to the common ground of writing center theory. Users of this term formed an exclusive sub-group, and, not meaning to, pushed the postings of our undergraduate and first-year graduate classmates to the margins. The “specialized” talk that we had learned in the academy threatened to divide the discussion. (7-8)

Interrupting the “Conversation”

Perhaps in spite of the messaging protocol I established initially, and the listserv’s implicit location in the performance-evaluation schema written into every credit-bearing course, WriteOn became the fluid mechanism Giglio describes, a forum for students to at once try on and actively resist published scholarship’s disciplining voice of mastery. Situated as a kind of middle ground between their “private” discourses and circulated Theory, the listserv compelled student tutors to contend with each other and with the professional scholarship of writing center studies. Bound less by the sometimes rigid expectations for form, style, and textual evidence that typify published scholarship, listserv discourse can be “a round-about-way of adopting and adapting to conventions” (Welch 18).
As the description implies, though, *WriteOn* and its participants existed in a space removed from yet dependent on the professional discourse. Student tutors raised fascinating questions, offered considered responses, and engaged in lively critique, yet this discursive interaction had no influence upon writing center studies writ large. *WriteOn* presented the possibility that tutors could engage outside the tutorial in another, different writing center *practice*, but it had no way to sustain that possibility beyond the boundaries of the class.

In the second ten-week quarter of the course, then, during which student tutors met every other week, I encouraged them to interrupt the "conversation" and introduce themselves. I asked them to pick one of two brief (500-1500 words) "discussion papers" they had written during the first ten weeks, and develop it into a form appropriate to a specific audience of writing center practitioner-theorists. Undergraduates, for example, might write a paper to be read at an undergraduate conference or to be published in *The Dangling Modifier* [published nationally for undergraduate tutors at Penn State University] or *The Writing Lab Newsletter*. Graduate students might write for a graduate-student or professional conference, or a professional journal that includes longer arguments written from sources.

Students divided themselves into groups of four, and each group devised its own draft-due schedule. In the second-term syllabus, under the heading "What You'll Do This Quarter," I offered (or imposed upon) them a loom on which to weave their collaborative activity:

At the beginning of each class meeting, one member of your group will present a copy of her paper to each group member. Ideally, she will include a "cover sheet" explaining her paper's rhetorical situation—whom she has written for (a particular journal audience, a particular conference audience); what limitations she is under (length, documentation styles, etc); any specific rhetorical choices she has made in anticipation of her audience (for example, she might explain that she assumes her audience is familiar with a given text or idea). This informal cover sheet might also explain, briefly, any specific issues or points within the paper that the author would like members of the group to consider. Your group should take 10-15 minutes to read and discuss this cover sheet to assure that a context for critique (the paper's rhetorical situation) has been established.

I asked members of each group to e-mail each author a commentary that would "reflect a careful reading of the paper's argument, a consideration of the appropriateness of the author's rhetorical choices to her audience, and specific, useful suggestions for revision that are
oriented to the author's purpose and audience." Further, I asked each
group to set its own agenda for workshopping the papers at the following
meeting. Depending on the draft they were reviewing, and what kind of
work they thought it needed, students planned a range of workshop
activities from research to editing.

By the standards of Fulkerson's taxonomy, this seemed to me
coherent praxis. My pedagogy reflected the values I had for my students,
in Fulkerson's terms what "students are to achieve as a result of effective
teaching" (411): I wanted them to be active participants in their own
learning and explore the ways tutoring situated them within the larger
institution. The practice remained consistent with a social epistemology,
and encouraged a procedure whereby students could realize the values I
promoted on their behalf—by "collaborating" with each other and with
the scholarly field that claims to inform their practice.

Independent of class requirements, but not without my encour-
agement, many of the twenty-five students authored proposals developed
from these papers, and eleven have been accepted to speak at confer-
ences—from student meetings in Pittsburgh and New Orleans to the
NWCA convention in Park City to the CCCC in Chicago. This level of
"success" suggests that they learned a great deal about crossing from the
discursive middle ground of WriteOn to the professional expectations for
the conference abstract. However, what exposure to the written "profes-
sional conversation" taught some students best, the capacity of a power
discourse to index participants along its literacy standard, was learned at
some cost. One of writing center scholarship's most hallowed ideals, the
possibility of a hierarchy-free "collaboration" of equal peers, crumbled as
they came to grips with the inviolable relationship between authority and
authorship in the academy.

Authority and Authorship

In summarizing the "Critical Debate Over Collaborative Learn-
ing," Alice Gillam demonstrates that writing center scholarship in large
measure has unfolded around questions of authority. The word's root
suggests its critical significance to the study of writing, and "virtually
every segment of composition studies" is inscribed within competing
definitions of the term (Clough 22). To introduce new student tutors to the
professional "conversation" is to embrace "the challenge" for those
engaged in tutor training: to help "tutors negotiate the paradoxes of
authority" (Chappell 229). Authority is destined to remain paradoxical in
writing center studies precisely because our most impassioned attempts to
dismiss or destroy it are themselves products of it. Efforts to theorize
authority out of the picture—by declaring it "voluntary social interaction"
in “semi-autonomous space” (Kail and Trimbur 206-207) or a concept made moot by peership (Bruffee)—depend on a conceptual sleight-of-hand that leaves institutionalized, “functional categories” of authority right in front of us even as it appears to blind us to them.

Writing centers are sites of authority as expertise. Directors are chosen, most often, because they are deemed experts along local standards. Such standards for writing center expertise might range from scholarly reputation in the field to some conception of “experience.” Students are chosen to tutor, typically, because as writers they have met a standard of expertise recognized by their directors. The key here is that while we can theorize authority in multiple ways with multiple effects, directors and tutors are always themselves products of institutional authority. They do not author themselves, their positions, or their workspace—whether they work in a center, the pages of the field’s professional literature, or both. While they may well challenge “the traditional reward system, with its emphasis on individual performance and competition among students for grades and faculty esteem” (Kail and Trimbur 207), they are themselves always already the result of this system, and their best efforts to change it maddeningly demonstrate its capacity for appropriation. The system ultimately authorizes and absorbs its own critique.

By no means am I suggesting that change cannot or does not occur; however, the possibilities for change outside institutionally determined standards of authority—whatever they may be—have yet to be articulated. Student tutors who read, say, Kail and Trimbur, on the direction of a teacher dedicated to “lead students to substitute idealized versions of authority for the real forms of power that dominate their lives” have hardly “removed themselves from official structures” or achieved “detachment from the influence of authority” (208-209). They have simply traded one conception of authority for another, the new perhaps all the more authoritative because it comes packaged under the title, Landmark Essays. Tutors, directors, and publishing scholars are not “free” to divest themselves of power through functional categories of authority—tutoring, directing, publishing.

Peter Mortensen and Gesa Kirsch maintain that “authority can finally only be defined and negotiated according to the circumstances in which it occurs” (567). Here Mortensen and Kirsch remind us that collaboration never begins like a game of Monopoly, with all the participants lined up at “Go” following an equal distribution of means. And, further, that individual agents are always preceded by the institutional contexts in which they interact; while change is inevitable, it is never authorized independent of a given context’s conventions of authority.

The experiences of one member of my class, Gretchen Woertendyke-Rohde, demonstrate that student tutors arrive for tutor
training already authorized along a standard of authorship, and they are motivated by institutional reward to maintain and increase that authority. In a paper also delivered at the NWCA Conference in Park City, entitled “When Tutors are Peers: Authority as a Prerequisite to Collaboration,” Woertendyke-Rohde chronicles the process of unlearning a “naive” belief in “Bruffee’s notion of collaborative learning . . . [in which] each participant brings ‘separate but equal’ knowledge to the group’s collaborative efforts” (1). As her title suggests, Woertendyke-Rohde now believes that “institutional authority may be a prerequisite to collaborative learning in small group settings” (2). She begins by pointing out that collaboration—in my class and in her writing center tutoring—is never “voluntary” but always part of a pre-existing script, and that each “collaborative” context is already layered with institutional authority. Unlike a writing center tutorial, however, where levels of authority are implied by the setting and therefore imperceptible and seemingly inoperative, collaboration among student tutors in this mixed graduate-undergraduate classroom setting was, for a junior English major like Woertendyke-Rohde, a persistent deference to authority defined outside the context of the collaboration:

The written responses [to my draft], while negative in tone, were immensely helpful. I took them as important critical viewpoints, even if my ego was wounded . . . The classroom workshopping of my paper, however, fell far short of my expectations for peer collaboration . . . . While I did receive suggestions of where to locate appropriate sources for my research, I was left feeling more irrelevant than helped. The suggestions came at the end of too many questions about my paper, and not enough of an attempt to determine what I was trying to say. When my groupmates collaborated on my paper, I felt little attempt on their part to contribute to the final product, little investment in my project.

As Woertendyke-Rohde argues, the primary effect of the collaboration was to confirm the strata of authority in place at the beginning of the process:

The varying degrees by which each of us could employ the conventions of academic writing reflected our variable institutional status; we were realistic collaborators because we were unequal, but we were hardly the idealized, equal collaborators we’d read about.

Further, she argues that if the end result of collaboration is, as she takes Bruffee to imply, Rorty’s definition of normal discourse—when “every-
one agrees on the "set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as a question, what counts as having a good argument for that answer or a good criticism of it" (92)—then collaboration toward this end must begin with the following:

an implicit inequality between students; while some are already a part of the "knowledge community," others are accepted into it only after they have mastered the "normal discourse," the conventions of the field. This concept of collaboration is vastly different from Lunsford's notion that "collaborative environments and tasks must demand collaboration. Students, tutors, teachers must really need one another to carry out common goals" (111). Lunsford's assertion led me to ask myself if my group members really needed me to carry out their goals? The answer, of course, is no. However, I desperately needed them to learn the normal discourse and gain admittance into this knowledge community.

... collaboration, in practice, was a lesson in conforming to the expected language and conventions of academic writing in the field of composition. ... In our group workshop, once I accepted and began to incorporate normal discourse, our status as co-learners began, allowing collaboration on my paper to take place. This happened only after the rules, the conventions, were enforced by the graduate students, and I accepted them. In discussing the role of tutors in the writing center, Bruffee points out that as peer tutors, "our task must involve engaging students in conversation at as many points in the writing process as possible and that we should contrive to ensure that that conversation is similar in as many ways as possible to the way we would like them eventually to write" (my emphasis, 91). Bruffee's proposal that we "contrive to ensure"—that is, that we understand the conversation or collaborative process well enough to control it and encourage a specific outcome—destabilizes collaborative learning as dependent upon both parties being equal peers, and questions the assumption that knowledge is a product of status-equal or "voluntary" collaboration. On the whole, Bruffee's statements—and my own group workshop experience—suggest that established authority is a prerequisite to collaborative learning.

How much Woertendyke-Rohde learned "collaboratively" about the professional discourse of writing center studies was ultimately judged by the profession itself. Abstracts of both papers that she wrote for this class—the one workshoped by her group and the critique of that experience excerpted here—were accepted for reading at a national conference.
The ultimate implication of the professional approach's invitation to "join the conversation" is to harden the relationship between authority and authorship, to ask student tutors to produce "submissions" and submit them(selves) to authorities who will authorize them. As Giglio and Woertendyke-Rohde demonstrate, the professional approach to tutor training does nothing quite so well as normalize for student tutors the stratification of institutional work into a competitive, exclusionary, and sometimes violent hierarchy of discursive practices. Through the professional approach, the dominant practices associated with writing centers—pedagogy and scholarship—are unified in what Grimm calls "a regulatory function."

Lessons of Inscription

The students we train as tutors are so enjoyable to work with because they come to us free of the resistance to writing that marks so many of our students. Our student tutors are "good writers" not only because they write with fewer errors than their fellow students but because their ideals already approximate ours. They come to us predisposed to academic discipline, typically in our own field, structured in the pattern of reward that aligns authority with authorship. Yet often they arrive innocent of how they are situated in a culture and institution that uses literacy, in a variety of conceptions, as a yardstick for competence; full of the passion, romance, and transformative potential of the written word, they are idealized (and much younger) versions of ourselves.

As writing center scholars continue to question the innocence and unrealized idealism of our "landmark" essays, readers will be less and less satisfied with agendas of all stripes that exploit tutors as a compliant, multipurpose work force. As tutor trainers grow increasingly uncomfortable with scholarship that denies the implication of hierarchy in writing center practices, we will continue to interrogate the ethical dimensions of token professionalism and training models that construct tutors as the practically mute. A return to the "newly practical," tutorial-centered approach that can "blind" tutors to the ways they are "enmeshed in a system or systems" (North 12) may not be an option. And as faculty grow less and less accepting of a professional "career template" that insures the failure of those engaged primarily in teaching rather than publication (Sosnoski), we will become more and more reflective about the implications of ensnaring student tutors within that same model.

We may not be free to liberate ourselves or our student tutors from the institutional structures that both unify and stratify, and yet remain a collective that "we" would recognize. "We" are already in-
scribed within the institutional discourse that calls out to us as a community. Those who develop training pedagogies can, however, “invite” student tutors to consciously explore their implication in an intensely competitive economy of literacy that both distributes rewards and exacts costs. We might make explicit the lessons of inscription. The alternative is to encourage tutors, those who often strive most to be like us, to replicate our worst self-image.

Notes

1 I want to acknowledge the 1996-97 students of Writing Center Theory and Pedagogy—a twenty-week, two-quarter seminar required of all graduate and undergraduate student tutors—who struggled with and against my attempts to professionalize them: Derek Boczkowski, Beth Ann Bryant-Richards, Honor Cline, Patricia Trimmell Doss, Elana Waugh Fitch, Kate Giglio, Nellie Greely, Richard Harper, Mark King, Karen Kopelson, Theresa Lesh, Jennifer Marie Marcus, Michele Mohr, Margaret O’Brien, John Pendell, Debbie Pinkston, Elisa Ridley, Riki Robson, Gretchen Woertendyke-Rohde, Tim Sheehan, Katie Smolik, Cedric Stines, Diane Strezlecki, Todd Zuniga.

2 The course syllabus and assignments, and access to the course listserv archives, are available at: http://www.depaul.edu/~pvandenb/wctp.html.

3 See Pedagogy of the Oppressed, especially Chapter 2.

4 See James Sosnoski’s description of the “token professional” in literary studies and my exploration of the “ideology of research” in “Composing Composition Studies.”

5 John Pendell interprets Lunsford’s claim as a call for tutors to discuss the purposes and importance of theory with student writers.

6 Understanding theory in the two senses I have proposed here might be developed best by considering the range of meanings the term has been used to signify, both in the wider culture (see Williams) and the field of composition studies (see Heilker and Vandenberg).
Works Cited


Lessons of Inscription


Peter Vandenberg is assistant professor of English and past director of the University Writing Centers at DePaul University in Chicago, where he teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in rhetoric and composition. He is the editor of Composition Studies/Freshman English News and, with Paul Heilker, is co-editor of Keywords in Composition Studies (Heinemann-Boynton/Cook).