"Little Teachers," Big Students: Graduate Students as Tutors and the Future of Writing Center Theory

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I spent August of 1998 thinking of a gimmick. I was writing the speech that three writing center tutors and I would eventually present to more than seventy classrooms across campus, the speech that would be our one chance to speak directly to the students, our one chance to sell them on our free services. The 1998-99 academic year would be my first and only year as the director of the Writing Center at my institution, and I wanted to build on the success of previous directors by increasing usage, return rates, and awareness of our services. I knew that this speech would have a lot to do with the Center’s success during the year. If I could convince students to make the first appointment, I was sure they would be satisfied with the results and return for more. But I didn’t just have to convince students of the value of tutoring, I also had to present our Center in a way that distinguished it from the two other tutoring centers on campus, the Learning Assistance Center and a specialist, drop-in center housed in one of the dorms. My gimmick? The Writing Center: staffed exclusively by graduate students in English.

I didn’t know exactly what this meant to the students or to myself at the time, but I tried to sell the idea that graduate students are a unique asset to our Writing Center. And it seemed to work. While it is impossible to isolate the exact factor of our success, the Writing Center was busier earlier than it had ever been. I have spent the remainder of my tenure as director of the Writing Center interrogating the implicit claim of my gimmick, and I have finally sold myself on it. Graduate student tutors are indeed an asset to writing centers not just in terms of their tutoring abilities, but also in the future support they will provide writing centers as professors in all fields, an effect we have yet to measure or appreciate.

Furthermore, despite the widespread endorsement of peer collaboration in writing center theory, many writing centers are still staffed by graduate students. Unfortunately, writing center theory and criticism
has yet to adequately reflect graduate students’ unique position and contribution. This article is intended to initiate dialogue on the discrepancy between the theoretical support of peer collaboration in writing centers and the common praxis of staffing writing centers with graduate students according to university policy. I will attempt to begin this dialogue by asking a question that seems to have been lost in the enthusiasm over peer tutoring: What exactly do graduate student tutors, their tutees, and their universities have to gain from a writing center “staffed exclusively by graduate students”?

Despite a few notable recent exceptions, writing center theory has primarily analyzed graduate students as tutees, not tutors. Nancy Welch, Judith K. Powers, Michael A. Pemberton, and John Thomas Farrell have all written about graduate students in this way. Farrell’s nebulously titled article, “Some of the Challenges to Writing Centers Posed by Graduate Students,” suggests that it might address the issues of graduate student tutors. It does not. Yet, this title says a lot about the representation of graduate students in writing center theory: they are challenging, problematic, difficult to categorize.

This idea goes back to one of the earliest writing center articles dealing specifically with graduate students as tutors, Rodney Simard’s generically titled “The Graduate Student-Tutor in the Writing Center.” Simard first acknowledges the graduate student tutor’s complex status:

The graduate student who becomes a tutor in a writing center will often find himself confronted with some unique extensions of his present status of being neither “fish nor fowl,” of being neither exactly a student nor quite yet a professional; for no matter how extensive one’s classroom experience may be, the tutorial situation poses an entirely new set of paraprofessional difficulties.

However, Simard quickly redirects his discussion to a separate issue: what a graduate student tutor ought to do when she discovers a professor’s error in a student’s work. The tutor, Simard advises, should first send “a polite note to the offending teacher,” then organize a workshop for students or a seminar for colleagues that addresses the issue incorrectly explained by the professor. In short, Simard does not interrogate the complexity of the graduate tutor’s position; he simply offers a “Miss Manners” style remedy that will not embarrass the professor nor jeopardize the graduate student tutor’s tenuous position in the professor-student-tutor triad.

But at least Simard is specific about whom he is discussing. Some recent articles do not even identify the status of the tutors they are analyzing, suggesting by their oversight that graduate and undergraduate
tutors are interchangeable, identical. But perhaps more disturbing is the pattern of self-abnegation which has emerged in writers who almost apologetically identify their writing centers as staffed by graduate student tutors, showing their reluctance to complicate the current discussion of peer collaboration theory.

Only recently has there been a modicum of attention to the graduate student tutor presence, and that attention has come from perhaps an even less analyzed source: graduate student writing center administrators and directors. That is, in fact, what I am. My university awards its directorship to an experienced graduate student for one academic year. While, as the director, I am under the supervision of the Writing Programs Director, the daily operations of our Writing Center are placed entirely in the hands of graduate students. The two recent articles that reflect my present concerns were both written, at least in part, by persons currently or recently employed as graduate student writing center administrators. First, in their review of *The Writing Center Resource Manual* in *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, Michael Dickel and Julie Eckerle devote a whole section to their concern that this manual “does not address or even acknowledge the unique position of a graduate student who is in the writing center—not to tutor or to get help with a paper—but to direct, lead, and/or conduct research” (8). Unfortunately, this observation could be made about many recent writing center publications. There is no *Harcourt Brace Guide to Graduate Student Tutors* to celebrate, complicate, and interrogate the work of graduate student tutors as there is for peer tutors. Yet, Thomas Michael Conroy, Pamela J. Siska, and particularly Neal D. Lerner begin to address the issues related to graduate student tutors in their chapter “Graduate Students as Writing Tutors: Role Conflict and the Nature of Professionalization” in *Weaving Knowledge Together: Writing Centers and Collaboration*. They discuss the anxiety and alienation graduate student tutors feel as “experts” in a field that privileges “novices.” While it is essential to hear these personal testimonials, graduate students also need the analytical energy of more detached and less transient writing center theorists who can take time to observe the issue at a distance.

I will further this interrogation by attempting to answer the question I posed toward the beginning of this article: What exactly do graduate student tutors, their tutees, and their universities have to gain from a writing center “staffed exclusively by graduate student tutors”? First, this question implies that universities have a choice about whether or not to staff a writing center with graduate students—of course, universities without graduate students have no such choice. We might expect that peer collaboration originated in the early 1980s at universities where graduate student tutors were not an option, where faculty members had to tap their only tutoring resource. But that does not appear to be the case. In
fact, the literature indicates that peer collaboration specifically excludes graduate student tutors, whether they are available or not.

In an essay still deemed instructive enough to be the lead critical essay in the 1998 Harcourt Brace Guide to Peer Tutoring, John Trimbur clarifies Kenneth Bruffee's definition of peer tutoring, in the process slighting the tutoring style he inadvertently ascribes to graduate students. Trimbur writes,

We have, on the one hand, a model of tutor training that emphasizes the tutor component of the equation. This model regards the peer tutor as an apprentice and often designs training courses as an introduction to teaching writing. The book list for such a course may well look like ones used in a practicum for graduate teaching assistants—Tate's bibliographical essays, Research in composing, Grave's Rhetoric and Composition, and so on. The second model emphasizes the peer component. (120)

While he actually claims that a balance between the two models is ideal, Trimbur seems most fearful of students slipping toward the first model, emphasizing this danger by quoting Bruffee's admonition that if tutors are "too well trained, tutees don't perceive them as peers but as little teachers, and the collaborative effect of working together is lost" (120). Since Trimbur defines peership loosely in terms of education level (i.e., students who are or could be in the same class, or students who have roughly the same experience with the material being covered), his model implies that the graduate student tutor is automatically one of the "little teachers." In the binary model Trimbur describes, if a tutor is not a peer, as Trimbur defines peership, then the tutor seems to fall into the other category, the overbearing "little teacher" category. "Instead of imparting the professional expertise of the community of writing teachers," Trimbur advises, "tutor trainers need to tap and organize the native expertise of co-learning that is learnt in the student's own community of undergraduates" (122-23). Graduate students' "native expertise," apparently, has been tainted by overexposure to the civilizing forces of academia. Similarly, in Lunsford's "Collaboration, Control and the Idea of a Writing Center," the presence of trained graduate students seems to bar ascription to the Burkean Parlor philosophy, mandating instead the lesser Storehouse or Garret models. Graduate students seem excluded from the most touted of all learning models by their own studious dedication to composition theory.

More recent writing center theory may not be actively hostile toward graduate student tutors, but neither has it revised the image implicit in Trimbur's model. Grave and Tate simply do not represent my graduate instruction in composition. I suspect that graduate students of the 1990s
are more likely to hail Peter Elbow, Donald Murray, Andrea Lunsford, and other advocates of process and collaborative learning as the exemplars of their education in composition. Whether or not they ascribe to these theories, they are at least aware of the consequences of becoming too much the "little teacher." And that awareness can be maddening. Ironically, many graduate students study the advantages of peer tutoring as required reading for courses qualifying them to be tutors. If they are reading well, they realize that they are not capable of being Bruffee’s "status equals" (8) or Trimbur’s "co-learners" (121). The very act of reading, of thinking from an instructor’s perspective, of professionalizing, distances them from the equality requisite for peer collaboration.

Writing center staffing policies, frequently dictated by English department policy, can even encourage graduate students not to view themselves as peer tutors. By requiring or "strongly recommending" that graduate students tutor as a prerequisite to classroom teaching, English departments generate a perception of tutoring as a graduate student’s "preparation" for classroom teaching. Whether or not they initially view tutoring as a valuable experience, graduate students can be negatively influenced by an English department that presents tutoring as an unavoidable "prerequisite" to the real business of classroom teaching. Tutoring, then, is a primary step in the reward system that signifies satisfactory institutional advancement. To return to tutoring after teaching in the classroom might seem regressive in such a system. Excellent graduate student tutors with positive attitudes and enthusiasm about tutoring are nonetheless produced because of and in spite of this system.

We cannot, however, underestimate how much a hierarchical policy system can influence a graduate student’s perception of tutoring. Graduate student tutors may actually perpetuate the distance between tutor and tutee that peer collaboration theory seeks to erase by embracing and emphasizing their burgeoning alignment with institutional authority. In writing centers that emphasize equality and peership, a graduate student tutor is in the unique position of trying to bridge the gap between student and professor even while she may be trying to reinscribe that gap between the tutee and herself, the tutor, as a way of achieving or mimicking the sign of professionalization that originally separated the tutee from his professor.

A graduate student tutor’s casual appearance or mannerisms should not necessarily be taken as a sign of her desire to be on perfectly equal terms with the undergraduate tutee. Graduate students may want to be considered friendly tutors, even "cool" tutors, or definitely knowledgeable and helpful tutors. However, they do not necessarily want to be considered "peer" tutors. One of the pleasures many graduate students enjoy is retaining a casual "undergraduate" demeanor, while hailing their institutional alliance when the authority that signifies their professional status is questioned. When a graduate student is not given the deference,
often termed “respect,” that he considers his right, then he is likely to pull back from the peerlike demeanor that seems to have caused his students to take advantage of him. This dynamic is played out in Sibylle Gruber’s description of Michael, a graduate student tutor, in her article “Coming to Terms with Contradictions: Online Materials, Plagiarism, and the Writing Center.” Michael is torn between his responsibilities to his tutee and his profession when confronted with a tutee’s confessed plagiarism. Ultimately, his professional allegiance takes precedence even over the writing center’s policy of confidentiality. Michael begins a professional correspondence with the tutee’s professor, working with the professor to determine an appropriate response. Michael discovers that the professor sympathizes with his values and priorities more than the undergraduate tutee who saw nothing wrong with trying to pass off others’ words for his own, even when Michael confronted him with the issue. It seems that whether graduate student tutors are motivated by a forced sense of obligation to or a genuine sense of admiration of the academy that rewards them financially and professionally, they often align themselves with institutional authorities when pressed to do so. Graduate students’ recent nationwide efforts to unionize further demonstrate their complicated position in the university. While these efforts signify a potentially oppositional force to institutional authority, they are at the same time a replication of that authority system within that authority system. They are, in a sense, an effort to become more like university faculty and staff, if only to gain the financial, health, and political rewards of that status. One of the goals of the graduate student coalition on our campus, for example, is to be considered “employees” by the university in order to attain better health care coverage. But this act of renaming, of reclassifying, is secondary to the psychological disavowal of the “student” status that must be antecedent to this process. No matter how well graduate students can identify with undergraduates as they both write papers, take tests, and receive grades for their work, graduate students’ role in the university is complicated by the other rewards they can receive from the university, through both financial and professional assistance.

Graduate students’ increased visibility as they publicize their efforts to unionize may in fact raise undergraduates’ consciousness of the status differential among undergraduates, graduates, and professors. Undergraduates can view graduate students as being more aligned with professors—it may not take a case of plagiarism to open tutees’ eyes to graduate students’ divided allegiances. Ironically, this undergraduate-graduate student relationship is undergoing critical changes at the very moment writing center theorists are finally attempting to define that relationship.

Trimbur notes that undergraduate tutors often feel a level of “cognitive dissonance as a conflict of loyalties” when they are invested
with the “institutional authority” of their position (119). Graduate students are far more invested with this authority than undergraduates—they generally have been, are, or will be university-level instructors. They have chosen a path that ultimately aligns them with university authority. A writing center staffed by graduate students does not just “support the teacher and the institution” (11), as Nancy Grimm suggests. It is the teacher and the institution. A graduate student tutor cannot disguise her institutional alignment from her tutee by donning denim and striking up a few conversations about “The Dave Matthews Band.” Graduate students are generally more knowledgeable and fluent in composition discourse than undergraduates, whether they have had official training or not. But statements like the following must be researched: “graduate TAs are in many ways more like colleagues than students, so much of what can (and should) be done with peer tutors does not translate” (Dickel and Eckerle 9).

By recognizing the complications that make graduate student tutors different from undergraduates, we are free to see how graduate student tutors can still achieve many of the intended goals of writing center pedagogy. For example, although it is impossible to generalize the mission of writing centers, it may be safe to say that the current trend in writing center theory is to empower tutees to take an active role in the learning process. One reason for supporting peer collaboration in writing centers is to provide students with a type of learning they might not be receiving enough of in the often teacher-centered, hierarchical classroom setting. Peer tutoring offers a comfortable balance in which both tutor and tutee confidently learn together. Muriel Harris explains that

it is stressful for [students] to talk about their writing with someone whom they perceive as having some institutional authority over them. Such students view themselves as being treated as inferiors, talked down to, demeaned in some way when talking with teachers, but not with tutors. The collaborative atmosphere of the tutorial, the sense of being with someone who does not assume any authoritative posture, seems to relieve that strain or eliminate the fear. (35-6)

But what Harris does not explain is whether or not the tutors she is describing are undergraduate or graduate. The ambiguity is enlightening. The specter of institutional authority does not appear to be inherent in a person’s status in Harris’s description of the ideal tutoring relationship. The words Harris uses to describe authority are performative, not essentialist. In Harris’s description, authority is a “posture” either performed by a person or projected onto them, “perceived,” by someone else. Even the term “atmosphere” implies something that is created, not something
immutable. While the classroom instructor who would like to change the authoritative atmosphere of his classroom might have difficulty changing his students' projected perceptions, undergraduates probably have fewer projected expectations of the graduate student tutor which might cause interference with the tutor's egalitarian goals. There is potential, then, for graduate students, no matter how closely they feel aligned with institutional authority, to avoid that perception in their tutees if they adopt a posture of collaboration and equality. The anxiety and stress caused by that "little teacher" voice might be mitigated for the proactive graduate student tutor.

I began to develop this paradigm of performativity as I was analyzing the results of a survey I conducted in our Writing Center (Appendix). I used the survey to begin the process of determining how students themselves perceive what writing center theorists have referred to as the power differential, cognitive dissonance, or authoritative voice of the graduate student tutor. The results of this survey show a complex relationship between graduate student tutor and tutee. This survey skirts and in some ways simplifies the complicated issue of peership. It does not allow tutees to use gender, age, or life experience as factors in their impression of a tutor's aura of peership. Of course, these factors all influence relations of power and authority, which is what peer collaboration is intended to diffuse. Yet, the interpretation of the phrase "collaboration" in writing center theory seems to be strictly related to education level, and this is, in part, what I hope to complicate by showing that, in fact, there are feelings of peership that extend beyond the boundaries of education level.

For example, in their article "Exploring the Tutor/Client Conversation: A Linguistic Analysis," Susan R. Blau, John Hall, and Tracy Strauss do an excellent job of identifying tutor and tutee's status in their case studies. They describe one tutorial session as follows:

This tutorial occurred between two graduate students, the tutor a male graduate student and the client a male ESL graduate student. The session was extremely collaborative. Both graduate students, they spoke as peers. The tutor had the greater knowledge about English and the writing process, and the client had the greater knowledge about content, Hegel's philosophy. (23)

This accurate labeling of the participants' status might, in fact, contradict the conclusion of Blau, Hall, and Strauss that "they spoke as peers" because they were both graduate students. As this example suggests, peer collaboration theory seems to dictate that education level be prioritized above any of the other factors that contribute to a sense of peership.

When asked if their graduate student tutors interact with their
writing more like undergraduate peers or professors, tutees divided evenly. The undergraduate tutees who considered graduate students closer to undergraduates in their approach to advising generally explained that their graduate tutors are more relaxed than their professors in demeanor and language. In turn, they felt more relaxed. The tutees suggested that they could "relate" to their tutors in a way they couldn't with their professors, in a way that sounds remarkably similar to the language we use to describe peer tutoring. One tutee claimed that our tutors are more like undergraduates, saying "and that's good because they can help by coming to the level of English that we have." Another student explained that graduate tutors are more like undergraduates because "they are more calm whereas a professor might hound you and make you nervous." Another student concurred, saying that "grads are more mellow than full-time profs because they can relate to undergrads. I also think that undergrads are more comfortable talking to grads than profs." Although this student does not elaborate on the factors contributing to his/her feeling of "comfort," these comments suggest that for this student the education level status difference between tutor and tutee did not cause stress but actually reduced it.

The tutees who thought graduate students resembled their professors reached this conclusion based on the graduate students' demonstration of expertise, not their aura of authority. The tutees' definition of expertise incorporates both knowledge of writing skills and an ability to communicate clearly and efficiently. For example, one student wrote, "They act like professors because I find them giving me comments very similar to those of my instructors." Another student defended their resemblance to professors, writing: "They act/work in a more professional level [than undergraduate peers]. They are very critical (like professors) but that is good, because if you are not willing to take criticism you shouldn't waste your time coming." Another student demonstrated the difference, displaying his/her experience and frustration with peer collaboration: "Undergrads say, 'This sentence sounds wrong but I don't know why,' while grads tell you why the sentence is wrong and give you examples on how to make it right." Although these tutees placed graduate students in alignment with their professors, absent is any sense of the overbearing authoritativeness that students often come to the Writing Center to avoid. While these comments indicate a power differential, it is not a differential that causes stress or anxiety in the tutees. The relationship is collaborative in the sense that both tutee and tutor are working together on a project. Furthermore, there is no indication that the tutor's expertise in writing takes precedence over the tutee's expertise on the subject matter (at least in comparison to the tutor who, not being a peer, may not be familiar with the topic).

Finally, another group of students found elements of both peers
and professors in their graduate student tutors. One of these students explained the dual identity this way: "They are friendly and are more intimate, but they really know what they are talking about." Another student echoed those sentiments almost exactly: "[Graduate student tutors] know a lot more [than undergraduate tutors]; they can understand the kind of bind undergrads are in because they’ve been through it." These tutees believe graduate student tutors have the experience of undergraduates and the expertise of professors. To them, graduate student tutors are more like big students than little teachers.

In general, the tutees value the tutors’ ability to share their expertise while maintaining a relaxed environment of mutual respect, quite the opposite of the stressful environment Trimbur’s model predicts. One tutee seems to offer the key word in the following statements: “The graduates offer more professional comments. I trust their opinion more than a peer’s.” The word “trust” does not imply the hegemonic authority of “little teachers” that collaboration theorists justifiably dread. It implies an open and safe learning environment, exactly what collaboration, not just “peer” collaboration, is intended to foster. While the overwhelmingly positive comments of this survey may suggest that students who prefer to work with undergraduates are already doing that elsewhere on campus, the results also show that many undergraduates do value graduate students’ experiences and they do consider this tutoring relationship an important supplement to the writing relationships available in the classroom.

Yet, it is interesting that these tutees seem unable to concur on a definition of this lauded relationship. The liminal position of the graduate students invokes distinctly different interpretations in the undergraduate tutees who assess their work. In fact, undergraduates’ impression of graduate students’ indeterminate status seems to enable them to project their own image of the ideal onto the tutor. And that projection does not go unnoticed by skilled graduate student tutors. Their classroom experience, in addition to their familiarity with writing center and composition theory, offers them more than just one approach to tutoring, as might be the case in some undergraduates. Graduate students of the 1990s have read enough case studies (Bartholmae and Elbow, Fulwiler and Murray) to know that students learn in many different ways, and, therefore, as teachers, they need a wide repertoire of approaches to reach them. As a result of reading and practice, they are in a more advantageous position to read tutees’ needs and adjust their tutoring strategies accordingly in order to satisfy tutees’ expectations of the right balance between peer and professor. In The Writing Center Journal article by Blau, Hall, and Strauss cited earlier, the authors transcribe several graduate student tutoring sessions, clearly displaying this process of morphing and mimicry in action. The theatrical terms often pejoratively ascribed to graduate student
tutors—role playing, acting, posturing—might, then, actually be complimentary. If a graduate student tutor is self-aware enough to assess a tutee’s needs and “act” accordingly by practicing what theory has taught her, if she can react in a way that produces the best possible learning environment for that particular tutee, then her difference (as opposed to the homogeneity assumed present between peers in class) from the tutee should not be considered artificial or alienating. The graduate student tutor’s consciousness of her own difference—and the factors that contribute to that difference—might, in fact, be her greatest strength as a tutor.

Another fundamental implication of peer tutoring deserves closer scrutiny: the concept of co-learning. The emphasis on peer collaboration’s ability to provide an atmosphere of mutual development implies that if tutor and tutee are not peers, then only one person in the partnership will be doing the learning in the session. The tutor in a non-peer relationship will act as a catalyst for the learning of the tutee, offering prompts and advice, gaining little in return. This is not an accurate picture of the learning potential for a graduate student tutor. To extend Jay Jacoby’s medical model in “The Use of Force: Medical Ethics and Center Practice,” the experience tutors gain in writing centers compares easily to the experience of working in an ER simply because both challenge their staff to diagnose and respond to such a variety of needs in such a short span of time. Tutors are quickly exposed to tutees’ wide range in learning abilities and styles. They begin to see firsthand the patterns of difficulty students have with writing. They realize how difficult and rewarding it can be to establish a personal relationship with students. They also have the unique opportunity to view instructors from the students’ point of view. How do instructors manage to connect or distance themselves from students? What types of writing assignments are they giving students? Which assignments succeed with students, which don’t? How do instructors handle the delicate process of referring students to the writing center? In addition, graduate students are challenged to deal with difficult issues such as plagiarism on a professional level, just as Gruber describes of Michael’s experience in the article I discussed earlier. Tutor and tutee may not be learning the same material in a graduate-undergraduate tutoring session, but both have much to learn in this process. The graduate student tutor is learning how to be a better tutor and a better classroom instructor, and the ones I have spoken with consider this an extremely valuable and applicable component of their training for classroom teaching.

And graduate student tutors are effecting immediate change from the top down as well. A tutor came to me early in the semester to share her disappointment with her teaching mentor’s policy of actively discouraging students from attending the Writing Center. She was reluctant to approach her mentor at first, but after reviewing the students’ work she felt strongly that many could use our assistance. She approached her
mentor, giving him the complete speech on our policies, speaking with conviction from her personal experience at the Writing Center, and even suggesting that his students could make their appointments with her. The mentor vaguely explained that he had a negative experience with the Writing Center some years ago, but was willing to give us a try again. The mentor recanted his prohibition in class, and his students quickly came filing into the Writing Center for appointments. The mentor, I understand, has been pleased with the results. In this case, the graduate student’s connection or collegial access to authorities in the institution proved beneficial to the undergraduate students. She was truly bridging the gap.

This potential that graduate students have to support writing centers in general is exponential. They are at the beginning of their careers, and if what is happening at my institution is happening at other universities, then they promise to be one of writing centers’ greatest allies long after their tutoring tenure is finished. Instead of producing instructors whose insecurity forces them to create insular classrooms closed off from outside observation, the writing center creates new (graduate student) instructors who have experienced the benefits of opening up their classrooms, of collaboration, of diffusing authority. I imagine that they will continue to feel this way as they advance in their careers. If we agree with Lester Faigley and Patricia Lambert Stock that, in Faigley’s words, “writing centers should and must take a leadership role [in the future of the university]—should for the good of the institution and must for their own continuing development” (16), then we ought to recognize that graduate student tutors are already leading the way. While they may be in a tentative, alienating, and liminal position right now, if all goes well, they will be the tenured professors of the new millennium.

Graduate student tutors offer opportunities for legitimizing and strengthening writing centers that undergraduates cannot offer. Undergraduate tutors are certainly capable of assisting their peers and themselves through collaboration in writing centers, but romantically privileging that relationship as the preservation of a pure and therefore preferred form of discourse does a disservice to a different but equally effective form of tutoring between graduate student tutors and undergraduate tutees. While Bruffee claims tutors—and, by extension, graduate students—who are knowledgeable of writing skills and techniques can act as “little teachers,” I would encourage writing center theorists to embrace these little teachers/big students. By affirming the importance of graduate students’ work in writing centers and by helping them do the best job they can there, we can create powerful writing centers and supporters for the future.

The key to writing center survival, I believe, lies not in any particular pedagogy but in writing centers’ ability to respond quickly to changing educational needs when classroom pedagogy is constricted by
group dynamics and institutional tradition. In his seminal essay "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind'," Bruffee explains that peer collaborative learning gained support in the United States in the 1970s because students needed an "alternative to traditional classroom teaching" (396). Maintenance of an alternative pedagogy has proven to be writing centers' strength. In the 1990s, peer collaboration is no longer inherently radical, uncommon, or "alternative." In the new millennium, an alternative to this alternative may be necessary. Whether or not graduate student tutors can be this stimulus in the future depends upon the future of classroom pedagogy, the referent by which writing center theory must continually redefine itself.
APPENDIX

Writing Center Survey

1. Did you know that the Writing Center is staffed exclusively by graduate students in English, not undergraduates?

If so, how did you find out?

2. Have you worked with other undergraduates on your writing?

If so, in what way (in class peer editing, having friends look at your writing, with undergraduate tutors at other official tutoring centers on campus)?

3. What are the advantages of working with a graduate student?

4. What are the disadvantages of working with a graduate student?

5. Is there a difference between the kinds of comments you get from graduates and undergraduates on your writing?

If so, what is the difference? Do they look at different issues in your writing, speak to you in a different way, and so forth?

6. Do graduate students interact with your writing more like undergraduates or full-time professors? Why?
Notes

1 See Muriel Harris’s seminal essay, “Talking in the Middle; Why Writers Need Writing Tutors.”

2 Michael Dickel and Julie Eckerle claim that “Graduate TAs might as well be unusual in writing centers” (9), and they also refer to graduate student administrators as “unusual” (8) and “not common” (9).

3 Of course, as I discussed earlier, the increasing awareness of graduate students’ status might cause a change in undergraduates’ expectations of them; they might, in fact, expect someone who sounds as authoritative as the persons campaigning for graduate students’ rights.

4 Lisa Johnson-Shull suggests some of the benefits in her article “Tutors’ Column: Teaching Assistants Learn Teaching Tips by Tutoring.”

Works Cited


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