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Review: The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring

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Gillespie, Paula, and Neal Lerner. *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000.

Reviewed by Jason Hackworth and Cindy Johaneck

CINDY: I really like how this book starts. In contrast to *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors* (which starts with an oversimplified look at paradigms and theories) or *The Practical Tutor* (which starts with a general and distant overview of students' needs and tutorial processes), *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring* begins with a genuine enthusiasm and love for the work that writing centers do. Through stories from the authors and peer consultants in their writing centers, we hear of pleasant surprises, remedied misconceptions, and passion for learning and writing. For me, starting my fifteenth year in writing centers, this passion has been the core of my work and my philosophy, one I hope to pass on to my staff of peer tutors.

JASON: The first chapter was definitely an easy-to-read and welcoming way to enter the book, although your enthusiasm is at a much higher level than mine. I definitely wish I had this book two and a half years ago, when I started tutoring, because reading with my current experience, the tone struck me as somewhat light and the content simple. But the book understands that its audience is not the experienced tutor, but the beginner, so the chapter's goals are met, setting the basics for the book (audience, participants, and data, to name a few) in a style that is successful.

The second chapter did a good job of encapsulating the writing process and the theories that come with it. The model writing process the authors formulated with questions ("What do I know about my topic?"; "What is my purpose for writing?"; "What structure will work best for my topic?" (14-15)) worked well and the chapter as a whole is very useful to someone who is new to composition theory. It takes on the tough topic of what writing is and how we as tutors fit into it.

CINDY: Yes, the overview of "the writing process" is done as well as it can be, but when I first read it, I couldn't help but question why authors in the field keep offering that overview, which often ends up being oversimplified in a book that is meant to do a lot of other things. Perhaps I had grown weary of seeing "yet another overview" of "the" writing process. But you now remind me of something important: for someone new to composition theory, that overview is necessary. At the end of the book, in Chapters 13 ("Writing Center Ethics") and 14 ("Troubleshooting"), the authors include more specific scenarios that both new and seasoned tutors should find interesting and rich in discussion ideas. What

happens when the writer's point of view offends you? (154) What happens if you think the teacher graded too harshly? (159) What happens when the writer starts to cry during a session? (161) These scenarios help fill out any discussion of that "writing process" that we all know is individualized, but the earlier overview of that process in Chapter 2 gives us the foundation from which to later explore these specifics.

JASON: Before getting to the specifics of tutoring, the tutor needs to have a general idea, and I think that is why Gillespie and Lerner wrote Chapter 3 ("The Tutoring Process"). Personally, I am impressed with the depth and coverage in such an efficiently written thirteen pages. Opening with the discussion about the differences and similarities between the processes of editing and tutoring, the book throws the reader right into the mix, highlighting the differences between the two roles without denigrating or favoring either one. With the assumption that the reader wants to be a tutor (not an editor), the chapter moves on with an almost step-by-step approach to the general tutoring session: beginning with "Start With Questions" and "Reading Aloud," all the way through "Ending the Session," the chapter uses anecdotal evidence and suggestions in each section. It also tackles concerns like higher-order and lower-order concerns, "Error Analysis," and "What if there is no essay?" The inclusion of dialogue is a big help for beginning tutors to get a sense for how a session might feel. This is a strong chapter that should be used in the training of new tutors.

CINDY: You've mentioned (and praised) more than once the use of anecdotes in this book. A heavy reliance on anecdotes and lore reflects much of the scholarship in the field, which has come to prefer such evidence over other kinds (especially numerical or experimental evidence). Don't you find yourself wanting different kinds of evidence or research? Do you feel the anecdotal approach makes the book "complete"?

JASON: I think you make a good point, but in the context of training, I think that the anecdotes are the best form of evidence to use. In Chapter 3, the anecdotes of experienced tutors work (like "on-the-job" advice, helping the novice in transitioning into the new role of peer tutor). In the same vein as learning from your own experience, I find that it is possible to learn from the experience of others. While it is true that both writing center and composition scholarship is overrun with anecdotal evidence—and seeing a change in the journals and conference presentations of the field would be more than welcome—I feel that when it comes to training new tutors (which is this book's aim), the anecdote still serves as one of

the best ways of accomplishing that goal.

However, in subsequent chapters, the use of anecdotes, transcription of dialogue, and sample essays may become hindrances to the learning of the reader. Chapter 6 (“The Mock Tutorial”) has good intentions and good information, but the overuse of tutor responses made the chapter hard to get through. The exercise it describes is very useful, and the inclusion of the sample tutorial is justified, but the seven tutor responses bogged me down and didn’t serve as much of a purpose as the exercise itself.

Chapter 8 (“Tutoring for Real”) did a much better job of tackling something that was in essence the same: the experience of a tutoring session. The tips on self-assessment, what to look for, and why not to give up were all helpful, but the reason those tips stood out may have been that there were fewer anecdotes included. Only a few essays were needed to carry the chapter.

CINDY: My own training more than a decade ago centered on the same kinds of anecdotes and was driven, certainly, by lore. Times have changed, of course, and Chapter 12, “On-line Tutoring,” is one sure sign. In this very short chapter, the authors say some of the smartest things (cautious, yet optimistic) I’ve heard about on-line tutoring: “Don’t bleed on the cutting edge” (146) and “We’re going to follow the same guidelines, as much as possible, that we’ve laid out in this book for f2f tutoring” (142). This chapter wisely places on-line tutoring in the larger context of what we already know about f2f tutoring while honestly addressing some frustrations unique to on-line situations: students’ misinterpretations of questions (as commands), their unwillingness to let the on-line tutor have a sense of humor (even though they might joke first), and the quest for grammar checking (instead of attending to higher-order concerns) (142).

Overall, the helpful examples, the conversational tone, the enthusiasm of this text have convinced me to use it when I next teach *Composition Theory and Pedagogy*, the course designed, in part, to train our peer tutors. Of course, the *Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring* does not begin a “new” conversation. Instead, it invites new peer tutors into an ongoing conversation—one that is personal *and* social, exciting *and* frustrating, time-honored *and* rapidly changing.

JASON: My relatively short time (in comparison to, say, Mickey Harris) in the field has opened my eyes to the constant change of scholarship and how it affects everyone, from tutors to writing center directors. Still, the nature of peer tutoring is all-in-all the same and this book captures that, putting down on paper the “understood” knowledge of the field, which is widely known to those already in the field but must be included for the book’s primary audience: those newly arrived.

Jason Hackworth, a senior English-writing major at Denison University, has been a peer tutor in writing all four years of his undergraduate career and was the ECWCA 2000 Co-Tutor of the Year. Hackworth has published in the *The Writing Lab Newsletter* and presented at the NCPTW and ECWCA 2000 conference.

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