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## Review: A Tutor's Guide

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## Reviews

**Rafoth, Ben, ed. *A Tutor's Guide: Helping Writers One to One*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Boynton/Cook, 2000.**

*Reviewed by Carol Severino*

While shopping for a tutor-orientation text, I came across *A Tutor's Guide*, edited by Ben Rafoth, one of the many recent works of writing center scholarship (see Jeannette Harris's review in *College English*, May, 2001). Many criteria informed my process of selecting a tutoring guide, some of which relate to my specific Writing Center situation, others of which pertain to writing centers in general. Because the new tutors in my writing center orientation course are graduate students, many with classroom teaching experience and all with writing experience, a tutoring guidebook could not be perceived as talking down to readers and could not assume an undergraduate peer tutoring scenario. In addition, although our Writing Center has started an appointment program, most of our tutoring is enrollment-based, with students attending two one-hour sessions per week; hence, a guide couldn't be solely grounded in "drop-in" interactions. Another more common criterion was that if the guide were an anthology, I preferred it not be a collection of essays about important issues in tutoring, a format more suitable to more experienced tutors and students of composition pedagogy; despite its multivocality, for an audience of new tutors, I preferred that the book be almost as unified and coherent as a single-authored guide such as Muriel Harris's or Irene Clark's. I also wanted a guide that included applications of the latest in technology, especially advice about on-line tutoring; many of our tutors and classroom teachers already respond to student papers by e-mail attachment and want to know how to improve these interactions.

Of course, I wanted a guide that incorporated the latest developments in writing and learning theories. Such a guide would need to derive its practices from these theories, but had to be more practical than theoretical in emphasis. Among new graduate student tutors, the demand for strategies is greater than the demand for theories; their other courses acquaint them with more than enough literary and cultural theories. Most important, the strategies had to be demonstrated and modeled via realistic

examples, anecdotes, and actual tutor questions and comments and tutor-student dialogues that could be generalized to other settings, not just “Here is what we do in our writing center.” Last, the demonstrated strategies had to be flexible, not dogmatic and potentially guilt-inducing, for example, “Never write on a student’s paper,” or, more abstractly, “Don’t appropriate the student’s text.” By consuming mental and emotional energy, nothing cripples new tutors more than wondering whether they have missed and violated some cardinal principle or practice of tutoring when they have attempted to respond to a writer’s needs.

I am delighted that Rafoth’s *A Tutor’s Guide* fulfills all of those demanding specific and general criteria and more. First, the *Guide* neither talks down nor talks up; it is neither patronizing nor pedantic. Although I am not new to tutoring and have directed a writing center for more than a decade, I am enlightened and impressed by the advice and wisdom of these fifteen chapters. The book addresses its readers as tutors; it does not assume that they are peer tutors nor that their fields of study are English or Education, and that therefore they are already familiar with issues and theories from Composition Studies. The new tutors in this semester’s course from other disciplines (History, Sociology, Religion, Music) feel appropriately addressed, included, and challenged by the book. They say that the tutor/authors come across as down-to-earth people they would like to meet to talk to about tutoring issues and problems.

The occupational diversity of the nineteen contributors and their different perspectives compensate for the fact that they actually represent relatively few institutions (Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Penn State, University of Michigan Sweetwater, Purdue campuses in West Lafayette and Hammond, Colorado College, University of Central Florida, and Bridgewater College). Some contributors are ex-undergraduate peer tutors (Alexis Greiner, Kara Bui, Corinne Agostinelli) whose articles grew out of presentations at the 1998 National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing. Other contributors are current or ex-graduate student tutors (Jennifer Ritter, Jennifer Staben, Sandy Eckerd) or long time or ex-Writing Center directors (the editor Ben Rafoth himself, Lea Masiello, Muriel Harris, Wendy Bishop, William Macauley, Molly Wingate, Beth Rapp Young). They discuss diverse genres and text-types (creative writing, analytical writing, technical writing, writing about research), diverse rhetorical levels (organization, style, proofreading concerns), and diverse issues (on-line tutoring, ESL tutoring) and problems (engaging reluctant writers, emotionally charged sessions). The book does not

assume a narrow clientele or curricula, for example, that most papers worked on in the Writing Center will be personal essays from Composition 101 brought in at the eleventh hour by procrastinating students, although many of the chapters do seem oriented to first-year students and composition courses. The only chapter that obviously assumes a drop-in Center situation is Chapter 1, “Setting the Agenda for the Next 30 Minutes.”

Yet, this diversity comes uniquely packaged in a unified format, with each chapter structured in the same manner with the same sub-headings: Introduction, Some Background, What to Do, Complicating Matters, Further Reading, and Works Cited. This format prevents the anthology from being another, albeit useful, collection of explorations of writing center issues by major writing center voices. “What to Do” is the most helpful section for new tutors because it instructs by modeling strategies that address the issue, for example, helping students paraphrase. Our new tutors testified that the “What to Do” sections grounded them and gave them a place to start. “Complicating Matters” anticipates readers’ counter-arguments and “yes-but’s” and prevents the instruction and advice in “What to Do” from simplistically coming across like panaceas, but without seriously undermining or undoing What to Do’s advice, thus leaving new tutors in a quandary, their heads spinning.

An example of how well this structure works is Rafoth’s own chapter. “Helping Writers to Write Analytically” is especially helpful to tutors as well as teachers in our new controversies-based first-year Rhetoric curriculum, in which most of the assignments demand rhetorical analysis of positions and arguments in controversies. In “What to Do,” Rafoth instructs tutors to:

- (1) Examine perspective: ask students to imagine how changing perspective, say, from one cultural or demographic group to another will change their ideas and point of view, for example, on a controversial initiation ritual of a particular culture;
- (2) Add complexity to the issue (similar to the role of “Complicating Matters” in this book): Prompt students to **define and explain** problems rather than **solve** them with pat answers, which he demonstrates with contrasting thesis statements about teen violence and crime;
- (3) Use outside sources as “back-up singers” for the author’s

voice, a metaphor which some of our new tutors say they will adopt in their classroom and Writing Center work. Rafoth illustrates how the writer can control his sources (rather than vice versa) through a tutor-student dialogue that encourages the student to integrate ideas from an assigned reading about crime in traditional and modern societies, rather than merely “plucking” quotes from the readings and dropping them into her paper.

In “Complicating Matters,” Rafoth asks how much subject matter knowledge one needs in order to help students write analytically, a perennial writing center theme he cross-references to Alexis Greiner’s chapter in the same book. (This cross-referencing among chapters, and between the chapters and the Topics for Discussion at the end of the book, is another helpful feature.) The second “yes-but” is that experience tells us many students would rather their ideas be **supported** than **complicated** by the tutor. Rather than stranding the reader in the middle of a debate wondering which side to take, Rafoth answers this counter-argument by pointing out that the supportive tutor is a constructive critic as well as a cheerleader, and that it is better to be criticized by the tutor before the paper is handed in than by the teacher after it is handed in.

Two chapters that also stand out because of the up-to-date and illuminating theories applied to issues were “Protocols and Process in Online Tutoring” by George Cooper, Kara Bui, and Linda Riker, and Jennifer Ritter’s “Recent Developments in Assisting ESL Writers.” Cooper, Bui, and Riker address the issue that because of the lack of face-to-face real-time exchange and knowledge-building, on-line tutoring seems to challenge theories of collaboration in writing. However, by including the tutor’s e-mail feedback (the students’ responses were unfortunately missing), they model strategies of negotiation that simulate the stages of a face-to-face session, starting with relationship-and trust-building, followed by negotiating, praising, questioning, and suggesting. The pedagogy of on-line tutoring does not then seem to conflict with that of in-person tutoring. Moreover, the author shows how on-line tutoring can promote the writer’s independence more than face-to-face tutoring because the writer feels less constrained in rejecting the tutor’s suggestions. Unfortunately, Morton, the student writer in their example, became upset and angry about his paper grade, complaining that the classroom teacher’s feedback did not correspond enough to the feedback he received (but also ignored) from three on-line tutors. (Here is a real-world outcome

which certainly qualifies as a “complicating matter.”) The authors’ resolution is to praise Morton for being an independent writer who knows what he wants (feedback, not help) and the on-line tutoring program for providing the incentive for him to continue sending his drafts for feedback. However, readers may wonder about the human and monetary costs of so many tutors so skillfully supplying this one student with so much feedback, most of which is disregarded. Perhaps a less controversial student and less problematic interaction could have been chosen for this case study example. That way, the messy outcome wouldn’t distract as much from the central issue of whether on-line tutoring is collaborative and productive.

Another chapter author who incorporates recent theory is Jennifer Ritter who uses interaction theory from her field of Second Language Acquisition to discuss negotiations of form and meaning by tutor and student. This process of “nonprescriptive negotiated tutoring” not only improves the student’s second language proficiency, but resolves in compromise fashion a perennial writing center dilemma in relation to non-native speakers of English: tutor as collaborator vs. informant. Ritter’s modeling and examples of in-person and on-line negotiation of typical ungrammatical (“evacuating drill”) and ambiguous (“students had to leave at the school”) phrasing are helpful to new and veteran tutors alike.

Other chapters that stand out not only because of their practicality and usefulness but because of the excitement and energy they generate are Sandra Eckerd and Jennifer Staben’s “Becoming a Resource” and Wendy Bishop’s “Is There a Creative Writer in the House?” I assigned “Becoming a Resource” before new tutors had to decide whether to do a case study or resource report for the course; if they decided on the latter, this stimulating chapter provided a wealth of print and electronic resources from which to choose, everything from books on writing from spiritual and non-western perspectives to grammar exercises and sentence-combining. Bishop’s fast-paced, high-energy chapter brims with creative suggestions for invention and revision, for example, “revising in” and “revising out.” New and experienced tutors should read and re-read these two chapters when they need inspiration, renewal, and reminders of the multiple rewards of writing center work. Also helpful was Beth Rapp Young’s “Can You Proofread This?” which, like the on-line chapter, views a controversial issue of proofreading from a new, more positive and generous perspective. Young shows that proofreading is not an activity that tutors as professed lovers of ideas and rhetoric should avoid address-

ing as beneath them; instead, proofreading is shown to be a necessary part of writing and manuscript preparation with which students need assistance and strategies.

Only slightly less helpful are chapters which used metaphors problematically or were too obviously constrained by the chapters' format and brevity to address the issue adequately. The extended metaphor of "crossing the line" with its negative interpersonal connotations in "What Line? I Didn't See Any Line" may induce unnecessary guilt in new tutors, the reason I assigned it later in the semester. The metaphor of the journey with a map in "Setting the Agenda for the Next Thirty Minutes" was so extended that it almost interfered with the message. However, the bottom-line advice in both of these chapters for avoiding tutor take-overs and making session plans is indispensable, especially for drop-in or appointment (vs. twice a week enrollment) sessions. "Tutoring in Unfamiliar Subjects" presents helpful strategies for those times when students bring in their rocket science papers for our feedback, but raises too many contradictions that can't possibly be addressed in only six pages, even with cross-referencing to other chapters. Readers are left with the nagging question: How can tutors possibly be confident in their abilities when the content of a paper is totally opaque to them?

The Topics for Discussion following the chapters (Doing something about Bad Assignments, Due Process for Plagiarism, The Idea of a Radial Writing Center, Would an Experienced Writing Tutor Do This?, Know Thy Self, Ignore Your Audience) encourage students to consider tutoring in relation to the policies and missions of their departments and institutions. These topics provide good ideas for our new tutors' final course projects, as does the short annotated list of Further Readings at the end of every chapter.

The *Guide* is a first edition; in accordance with the phases of writing process, subsequent versions can be revised to address some of the very few problems I mentioned. All in all, our new tutors praise *A Tutor's Guide* as practical and useful, not heady and overwhelming. It is just what they needed to begin their new roles and jobs. Because it more than fulfills my criteria for a guide, I will order it for our next group of new tutors.

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