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## Writing Center Orthodoxies as Damocles' Sword: An International Perspective <sup>1</sup>

*Tracy Santa*

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New tutors often enter the writing center having tutored—at least in some informal capacity. That is one reason they are there. Usually, they've had some experience working with peers or siblings on writing and have enjoyed the experience, or felt sufficiently capable, or were showered with gratitude, affection, meals, and praise such that they imagined themselves as writing center tutors. Consequently, it is with some skepticism that tutors in a first semester practicum come to understand that there are methods and theoretical perspectives for them to consider as they go about their business. What most undergraduate tutors have expected from me as a writing center director is *a* method and *a* theoretical perspective, at least in their initial semester of tutoring. In my experience, new tutors welcome concrete suggestions embedded in what Peter Vandenberg refers to as “‘practical’ manuals” (60), as this advice (“put down your pencil”) both directs practice and counters misperceptions and experiences of malpractice (“she slipped it under my door . . . wanted it fixed by 8 a.m. . . .”) which new tutors may enter the writing center harboring.

My interest here, though, is in examining what comes next, when we ask tutors to enter conversation, not just with clients, but with other writing center practitioners: “the professionalizing approach that establishes awareness of the specialized discourse of writing center scholarship as a standard for tutor competence” (Vandenberg 60). As Vandenberg notes, issues which arise as tutors move beyond the advice of practical manuals and into the professional discourse of writing centers become less a matter of pitting theory against practice than reconciling an initial version of writing center practice with an overlapping, conflicting, or superceding version informed by both the professional discourse and tutorial practice (69).

The plural nature of practice was the source of both consternation and dialogue among writing center practitioners in the Writing Center I most recently directed, where tutors attempted to reconcile “minimalist” or non-interventionist tutoring protocols with more directive, intrusive approaches

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to tutoring, issues raised pointedly in Irene Clark's and Dave Healy's "Are Writing Centers Ethical?" What enriched the discussion we engaged in was *who* we were and *where* we were—an American academic directing a staff of twelve undergraduates, all citizens of former Eastern Bloc countries, at a small, Western-styled liberal arts college in southeastern Europe, the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG). Consideration of the plurality and situatedness of practice which Vandenberg provoked among the DePaul Writing Center staff was further complicated at AUBG by the distance staff members felt when they searched for vestiges of their own experience and culture in the professional discourse of writing centers. Reflection on cultural practices as they bear on writing center practice and the practice of discourse in the writing center community is my local concern, but my sense is that questions raised and observations offered in a writing center in the Balkans are of broad concern to all writing center practitioners.

### **Minimalism?/Fine**

Our practicum at AUBG conformed to what Vandenberg terms a "new professional role" model (63), encouraging new staff members to enter as quickly as possible into the writing center discourse community. But tutors were uneasy with the conflicting theoretical perspectives offered by Jeff Brooks's "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work" and Irene Lurkis Clark's "Collaboration and Ethics in Writing Center Pedagogy." When is intervention appropriate? When is a minimalist approach apt to be the most productive posture? Tutors read Brooks' article after we had read grounding essays by Stephen North and Andrea Lunsford in *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors*, but prior to reading Clark.

Brooks' essay presents an anti-intuitive model for many tutors. As Brooks states:

A writing teacher or tutor cannot and should not expect to make student papers "better": that is neither our obligation nor is it a realistic goal. The moment we consider it our duty to improve the paper, we automatically relegate ourselves to the role of editor. (84)

The problem was not with the theory per se, that the goal of a tutor is to improve the writer rather than the paper, as tutors had digested this in North's "The Idea of a Writing Center." The problem was with the method itself, as described by Brooks, a literal hands-off approach which advo-

cates exactly what the essay's title implies—the tutee does all the work—complete with instructions on how to provoke a client into doing the work when she is passive or openly resistant.

Clark's "Collaboration and Ethics in Writing Center Pedagogy" offered tutors a very different perspective, pointing out that the sort of collaboration frowned on in writing center theory and practice is precisely the variety of editorial advice we, as faculty, expect to receive from colleagues. When we ask a colleague to read work in progress, it is generally direction and pointed suggestions that we seek. But as Clark states, in writing centers, "overconcern with issues of ethics often results in a withholding and a rigidity which inhibits the creation of a writing community and is antithetical to the flexibility which ought to characterize a collaborative environment" (91). Clark argues that a degree of modeling and imitation is characteristic and appropriate in most learning between a skilled and less skilled practitioner, that prohibitions against directive tutoring in the writing center are based on misperceptions about the nature of collaborative learning and a tutor's role in that process in the writing center.

Despite the fact that Brooks seems to contradict common sense ("you help by, uh . . . *helping*, right?"), his position attracted advocates among new AUBG tutors, many of whom recalled "tutoring" sessions with friends and acquaintances where they were expected to simply edit the work. Thus, AUBG tutors were preinclined to be receptive to Brooks' advice. Part of Brooks' appeal is simplicity and safety; he takes the tutor off the hook. It is something of a relief for a tutor to know that she "cannot and should not expect to make student papers 'better'" (this proclamation offers less relief to the client, I imagine). But embracing Brooks is rarely an exclusively self-serving choice. I heard enthusiasm in many tutors' initial advocacy of Brooks; his advice may be "tough love," but it is at heart an idealistic vision, and few new tutors entered our Writing Center without at least some degree of idealism about writing center work. As a staff, we agreed that Brooks overstated his case a bit for polemic reasons, but that it is right and good that a student writer do his or her "own work," even in a tutorial.

## Second Thoughts

After our initial semester practicum, however, ongoing staff meeting discussion frequently involved revisiting the idea of minimalist tutoring. We could not—or would not—let it go. If the idea had been "just a theory," it would have been easy enough to dismiss. But staff members, "professionalized" into writing center discourse in their initial semester of tutoring, now felt compelled to address the impact which Brooks' theory

was having on their ability to engage in professional practice. Rado, a Bulgarian student tutoring for a second semester, noted that when the focus of an ESL tutorial is style or mechanics, minimalist tactics are rarely effective. It is frustrating for both parties when a tutor repeatedly tries to “bring knowledge out” of his tutee, yet the vessel turns out to be empty.

Professionalizing our conversation in Blagoevgrad had led our staff to the discomfoting realization *that theory is not a way out of practice, but a means by which to complicate practice*. While tutors were well aware they had to actualize theory into practice the next time they sat down with a client, fashioning a merely practical solution, devoid of theoretical underpinning, seemed an unsatisfying move. So post-practicum, we dug as a staff into Irene Clark’s and Dave Healy’s “Are Writing Centers Ethical?” While Clark’s earlier essay took an expedient stance, arguing that intervention is preferable because it is practical, and that things get done by intervening, Clark and Healy critique minimalist approaches to tutoring from a broader base in their 1996 essay:

a noninterventionalist policy as an absolute must ultimately be judged ethically suspect, increasing the center’s marginality, diminishing its influence, and compromising its ability to serve writers. Writing centers need a new ethic that acknowledges the theoretical, pedagogical, and political facts of life. (32)

Clark’s and Healy’s essay proved a catalyst to our ongoing professional discussion of practice. Practice provoked the AUBG Writing Center staff to claim that an unadulterated minimalist approach rarely worked in tutorials, but it was the reading of Clark and Healy which elicited the response of Ramona, a Romanian tutor:

Writing centers are in danger of neglecting their duties due to fear of criticism and accusations of being unethical. Learning is not unethical. It *is* unethical, however, to be able to promote learning and not do so.

And Andra, also Romanian, and soon to leave for graduate study in English in the US, noted:

Every time a student walks into the Writing Center asking me for assistance, it seems like a thousand bells ring all at once, reminding me of the “do nots” of my temporary profession as a writing tutor.

### Offcentering Practice

Linda Shamoon and Deborah Burns, in “A Critique of Pure Tutoring,” characterize assembled tutoring guides and frequently referenced *WCJ* and *WLN* articles as a “writing center ‘bible’” (135). They go on to state that “[t]his bible contains . . . codes of behavior and statements of value that sanction tutors as a certain kind of professional” (135). The danger of buying too deeply into this orthodoxy is a concern voiced by Angela Petit in “The Writing Center as ‘Purified Space’: Competing Discourses and the Dangers of Definition,” who fears the perception that writing centers are “purified spaces,” places where only one discourse is sanctioned (111). AUBG staff members struggled within the prescriptive parameters established by Brooks, not as an act of resistance, but as professionals acutely and simultaneously attuned to writing center discourse and a practice situated both in the writing center and in cultural circumstances where the hegemony of Western academic practice holds less currency than is customary in US post-secondary institutions. Elton, an Albanian staff member with several years of tutoring experience, stated:

I felt I was violating the rules of the institution that was employing me. I wanted to find some way to resolve the tension between what I felt worked in many situations in our culture and what the minimalist ethics of writing centers claimed. I sometimes told my friends to meet me outside the Writing Center where we could take a look at the text and make the necessary changes.

While AUBG tutors had internalized the ethics and codes of behavior sanctioned in the Writing Center, this “purified space” failed to accommodate a primary educational and cultural practice, in this case unbridled collaboration and intervention, largely at odds with what Elton terms minimalist ethics. When confronted with the desires (if not needs) of clients, AUBG tutors struggled with the very notion of *where* to conduct writing center work, physically distancing themselves from the Writing Center in order to circumvent orthodox mandates dictating acceptable writing center practice. Prescriptive theory had so successfully purified our space that it could not bear the load of some transactions; some conversations simply took place outside of the box. AUBG tutors could articulate their situatedness, between writing center culture and a more primary educational culture, but they struggled with their position. And as Petit states, “discourses presented to tutors seem as impermeable as the walls of the center itself” (114).

Elton's dilemma offers a different way to eavesdrop on the "supposedly foreign tones of the current-traditional tutor 'intruding' on [a] session" (Petit 115). Current-traditional tutorial practice (i.e., simply correcting grammatical error) has been sufficiently demonized among writing center theorists that any writing center tutor worthy of his or her training has until recently acknowledged that directive impulses, regardless of justification or circumstance, are ethical transgressions and dysfunctional manifestations of the tutoring process. But consider Rado's observation:

Students come to the Writing Center unsure of their diction. They experience a lack of knowledge and they need someone to fill that gap. They do not know something. That's why they come to the Writing Center.

Rado engages in what Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski identify as postmodern, postcolonial work in the writing center. His remarks do nothing less than "examine the axioms upon which academic structures are formed—what assumptions lie behind the limits we impose on rhetorical inventions" (Bawarshi and Pelkowski 54). A current-traditional rhetoric was the only mode of instruction which my tutors and virtually every student enrolled at AUBG had ever experienced before enrolling in this Western-style post-secondary, and some might claim, neo-colonial experiment. Rado failed to believe he was acting ethically in spending a majority of his time changing the constructed expectations of writers with whom he worked. Might there be another best use of time that would meet students' need to learn, and their expectations of authoritative intervention, and still support the constructed writing center philosophy that tutors should encourage strong writers by stepping back and not forward? As Bawarshi and Pelkowski state:

Perhaps this examining of discursive conventions and standards [of academic discourse] also means that we might do well to give back to grammar *some* of the prominence it enjoyed in the "fix-it shop"-writing center, as another way of discussing "surface" changes to a student's writing and how those affect the student's subjectivity as well as a springboard to discussing other types of academic standards. (55)

Our aversion as compositionists to current-traditional modes of instruction and as writing center practitioners to direct editing of student writing in

the writing center merely obscures the fact that these aversions are not natural law but are themselves socially constructed. As Clark and Healy call for writing centers which “acknowledge the theoretical, pedagogical, and political facts of life” (32), we might consider the political and pedagogical facts of Rado’s life: *They do not know something. That’s why they come to the Writing Center.*

Elton offered the following, articulating another culturally embedded conflict which rose closer to the surface as we continued to interrogate Clark’s and Healy’s concern with writing centers and ethics:

AUBG students face a direct paradigm shift while making the transition from a Soviet-style education in their high schools to the American education system. Here everyone learns the First Commandment of Academic Writing: THOU SHALT NOT PLAGIARIZE! But some fail to put it in practice. This happens partly because students may not fully understand what plagiarism is, but usually because they don’t find it unethical to do so when they do not fear being caught. I say this not to justify plagiarism, but to note the limitations of this Western ethical tool applied in a non-Western context.

Ramona added that the AUBG Writing Center not only deals exclusively with ESL students, but the staff is 100% Eastern European. The obstinate character of writing center ethics does not necessarily apply to this working environment. This does not mean that ethics is a strange concept for us, or that we are proof of Balkan inability to do things right. Andra continued:

Always being on the lookout for unethical behavior felt like having Damocles’ sword dangling above my head. I am not referring to the fear of being fired. I am referring to the fear of not being able to keep in tune with people’s expectations of me as a writing center tutor. I am referring to the fear of not doing the right thing.

While ethics and writing center practice in a broad sense were clearly on the minds of Andra, Ramona, and Elton in their eloquent response to Clark and Healy, what AUBG tutors most sharply focused on was the situational nature and cultural context of both orthodox writing center ethics and Clark’s and Healy’s discussion of ethics, bounded as it was by assumptions girding Western academic practice. These concerns voiced



by AUBG tutors are precisely those of Bawarshi's and Pelkowski's postcolonial writing center, an engagement in a "critical literacy [which] will teach students how to analyze the discourses of their culture" (55). But in the case of tutors at AUBG, not just discourse but culture is profoundly plural. How can we best address this circumstance in moving toward an international writing center community?

### **Weighing In/[A]Waying Out**

Steve Sherwood's "Ethics and Improvisation" offers insight into an ethical writing center practice which may more readily accommodate non-Western cultures. Given the circumstances of writing center tutoring, in Sherwood's terms "more improvisational art than science" (2), the appropriate ethical stance is an improvisational one, based on intuition, accrued experience, a sense of propriety, and guiding *principles*, rather than prescriptive *rules*. Drawing on Donald Schon's *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, Sherwood suggests that a tutorial is a performance akin to jazz, where listening carefully to both oneself and those around one and reacting spontaneously and appropriately (and that reaction—as in improvisational music—may just as well be silence as utterance) is the essence of competence and professionalism. While this variety of improvisation may seem to ask a lot of budding writing center instrumentalists, consider the statements I have offered from alleged neophytes. Taken as a whole, they exhibit a *need* to improvise which is at the heart of all effective writing center practice, to deviate from prescriptive practice when recommended practice fails to accommodate competing educational principles and goals in a multinational environment.

There is no real grace period for new writing center practitioners; as soon as one begins tutoring and actually listening to the real concerns of clients, one is *immediately* faced with ethical dilemmas in the writing center. The safe bet, and initial impulse of tutors newly exposed to the orthodoxies of writing center practice, is to fall back on the tenets of those orthodoxies, such as the minimalist practice of Brooks. But as evidenced in the response of AUBG tutors, the shelf life of an approved solution in writing center practice expires very shortly after that practice commences. As Elton states:

We have the responsibility to critique models that do not conform to reality, and be flexible enough to allow for differ-

ent approaches to tutoring. Making room for collaboration and even direct intervention in some of our tutorials is a cultural necessity.

Ramona adds:

I think there is no such thing as the Ethical Writing Center. There are tutorials, conducted ethically.

The point of reflecting on writing center practice as envisioned in Brooks is not, needless to say, wholesale rejection of a minimalist approach. There is no need to jettison the value we have traditionally placed on a light, non-intrusive touch, on respecting the personal and intellectual autonomy of clients, of focusing on improving the writer *with* the paper—these are values which have served practitioners well and they are values many of us have drawn from “Minimalist Tutoring.” But contemplating the challenges of an international writing center is just one more reason to (in Elbow’s terms) “embrace contraries” in tutor training, to play off, against, and with the theoretical and experiential knowledge tutors accrue, the confusion they confront, and the fresh, lucid insight they offer as writing center practice becomes a global phenomenon. If we are serious about fashioning ethical tutor training which acknowledges the fact that we are now an international community of writing center practitioners, we need to consider a dialogic approach which not only invites writing center tutors and their disparate cultures into the professional conversation on local levels, but authorizes their voices, globally.

## Note

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