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Whatever happened to...Jeff Brooks?

In this occasional series, we don our fedoras and take to the streets, seeking the whereabouts of significant figures who made their marks in the writing center world but who have seemingly vanished from sight. In this inaugural piece, we present the whereabouts and thoughts of Jeff Brooks.

In 1991, a lead article in The Writing Lab Newsletter introduced readers to a concept that would prove to have substantial staying power. In "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work," Jeff Brooks urged WLN readers to adopt a stance toward tutoring that eschewed red pens, assertion of authority, and tutor dominance. Instead, tutors should adhere to the following advice:

The less we do to the paper, the better. Our primary object in the writing session is not the paper, but the student. Fixing flawed papers is easy; showing the students how to fix their own papers is complex and difficult. Ideally, the student should be the only active agent in improving the paper. The tutor's activity should focus on the student. If, at the end of the session, a paper is improved, it should be because the student did all the work. (4)

Brooks struck the proverbial chord, providing concrete strategies for tutors to put into practice Stephen North's notion that in writing centers "[o]ur job is to produce better writers, not better writing" (438). Brooks' article is reprinted in nearly every collection of writing center readings, and WLN editor Muriel Harris reports that Brooks' article is the most-often requested reprint over the 25 plus years that the WLN has been in print.

Brooks wrote his article while working in the writing center at the University of Delaware, where he was a graduate student. In what follows Brooks catches WCJ readers up on his current position and his views toward the power and possibility of "minimalist tutoring."

On his career path after "Minimalist Tutoring" appeared:

At the time of that particular printing, I was an adjunct at Seattle Pacific University, in the Music Department. About the time I finished my degree (MA) at Delaware, I realized two things: I didn't want to stay in academia, and I wanted to live in the Northwest. So I moved to Seattle and cobbled together a living as a freelance writer, freelance musician, and music teacher. Freelance writing got me into the agency world, where I still am, serving mainly nonprofits.

On his present line of work and the place of "minimalist" tutoring in that role:

I'm now a creative director at an ad agency in Seattle. I still work with writers all the time, [but now they are] professional writers in an advertising agency, and I find hands-off, minimalist-type techniques still work. At the agency, our product is the writing, not the writer; I sometimes have no choice but to wrest the work away from a writer and fix it. But when time and circumstance allow, I've found it's far better to let the writer do the fixing. You often end up with better solutions to the problems in the writing. You also have a writer who has learned something. As you do in the writing center, I have an interest in making a long-term investment in the writer.

On the popularity of his "Minimalist Tutoring" article:

I think the article has been popular because it's about the counterintuitive duty most tutors struggle with almost every time a student brings in a paper: The student wants the paper to be better. The student's professor wants the paper to be better. The whole university community and all of society want the paper to be better. You too — being someone who cares about writing and about your students — you want the paper to be better. And there you sit, pen in hand, knowing exactly how to make the paper better.

But that's not your job! In fact, the more efficiently you work to make the paper better, the further you stray from your call to teach.

It took me a long time to figure this out. I hope "Minimalist Tutoring" helps other tutors understand this tough issue so they can grapple with it effectively.

I suppose it helps that the whole concept has a name. That makes it easier to talk about and think about. If you think about it, "minimalist" is a funny label for something that's so much more work than the other kind of tutoring.

WORKS CITED

Brooks, Jeff. "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work." *The Writing Lab Newsletter* 15.6 (1991): 1-4.

North, Stephen M. "The Idea of a Writing Center." *College English* 46 (1984): 433-46.