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Review: Dealing with Diversity: A Review Essay of Recent Tutor-Training Books

by James C. McDonald


The recent proliferation of books for tutor training signifies the continuing growth and importance of writing centers. Writing center directors have many options for their tutor training programs and can stock their center’s library with a substantial number of books written for tutors. These books ease the busy jobs of directors, especially those new to the field, for they save a lot of time that directors would otherwise have to spend composing materials and searching for readings, often reinventing wobblier versions of wheels that others have developed and improved over the years.

Still, as the history of composition studies tells us, textbooks regulate and standardize instruction, promoting some theories and ideologies while inhibiting the development of others (see Stewart; Welch; and Gale and Gale). If we rely too heavily on even the best tutor-training textbooks, we reduce the variety of approaches to tutoring and tutor-training that we might work out if we each developed materials for tutor training ourselves and we make it more difficult to develop training programs sensitive to a center’s local needs and conditions.

As a group, however, tutor-training textbooks tend to resist overregulating tutor training because, despite commonalities, they take different approaches to tutor

About the Author

Jim McDonald is a professor of English at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, where he directed the Writing Center for five years. He has written articles and reviews on writing centers for The Writing Center Journal, The Writing Lab Newsletter, and the WPA Journal, and he is editor of The Allyn and Bacon Sourcebook for College Writing Teachers.
training, usually work better in some settings for tutor training than others, and promote flexibility and critical thinking among tutors. The three most recent books composed for students in tutor-training programs are the second editions of Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner’s The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring and Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood’s The St. Martin’s Sourcebook for Writing Tutors and the first specialty book for tutors, ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors, edited by Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth. Each book is distinctive. The Allyn and Bacon Guide is a textbook for a tutor-training course, guiding students through several weeks of activities such as observing tutorials, being tutored themselves, conducting their first conferences, and analyzing transcripts of conferences. The St. Martin’s Sourcebook is a collection of important previously published articles on writing centers, and it remains the only such anthology edited for students new to tutoring.1 ESL Writers is a collection of new essays, written for tutors, about tutoring students for whom English is a second (or third or fourth) language.

The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring remains an excellent book for a full-term tutor-training course or an extensive tutor-preparation program. The heart of the book is a series of chapters that take students through the activities of a tutor-training course, from examining their expectations about tutoring to observing conferences, practicing tutoring with other tutors, and reflecting on their first solo tutorials. Gillespie and Lerner provide detailed guidelines and examples for composing essays and journal entries of observation, analysis, and reflection on tutorials, and, as a result, tutors’ voices dominate The Allyn and Bacon Guide more than any existing book for tutors. The new edition still includes chapters on writing and tutoring processes, helping students with reading, working with ESL writers, and conducting research in the writing center using discourse analysis methods. Gillespie and Lerner have consolidated and reorganized some of their other discussions from the first edition, incorporating discussions on note-taking and ethics into other sections to add new material on writing center history and theories and on interdisciplinary tutoring for WAC programs. As a result, despite new material, the second edition is only slightly longer than the first, with one fewer chapter.

Although students learn the basics of minimalist tutoring from The Allyn and Bacon Guide, Gillespie and Lerner ask novice tutors to take an investigative approach to tutoring. The chapter on the tutoring process structures a conference into a few general steps—“breaking the ice,” starting with a few general questions (perhaps with the help of a form), having writers read their draft aloud, focusing on higher-order concerns before dealing with “later-order concerns” and error analysis, and bringing the
conference to a productive conclusion. This chapter also establishes some principles for tutoring in discussions about conducting a conference as a conversation, treating writers ethically, and avoiding an editor's stance toward a paper. But Gillespie and Lerner treat this framework only as a general guide for tutors, not as a hard and fast method. Their approach to tutor training emphasizes observation, analysis, discussion, and reflective writing. They teach tutors to listen to the writer, analyze the situation, and respond to the individual circumstances of the writer and tutorial rather than follow a rigid script. To this end, Gillespie and Lerner discuss situations where tutors should be directive, should read the writer's paper aloud themselves, and perhaps should consider proofreading. They do not pretend to be able to lay out all the circumstances where a tutor should depart from their general guidelines for conducting a tutorial, and the tutors' writings that pervade the book reinforce the situational character of tutoring.

Similarly, The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors describes tutoring as an "informed" and "reflective" practice (7) and not as a universal method for improving writers. Murphy and Sherwood emphasize that their book is a sourcebook and not "a how-to book of procedures and tactics," for "a simple technique-driven approach would be inadequate for operating in the fluid, unpredictable, give-and-take atmosphere of the tutorial" (2). Many training programs probably use the sourcebook to encourage tutors to analyze, contextualize, and discuss their practices and experiences, and the book certainly does encourage readers not to become dependent on a single approach to tutoring. The second edition largely follows the organization of the first edition, with a brief section on "The Tutoring Process" and a very brief section on print, on-line, and organizational resources for tutors that bookend the readings. The selections themselves are organized around themes such as "Theoretical Constructs," "Interpersonal Dynamics," "Responding to Texts," and "Affirming Diversity." Murphy and Sherwood replaced only four articles from the first edition while including fourteen new selections, including several more readings on theory, politics, and power that expose tutors to more of the theories, debates, and self-questioning in recent writing center scholarship. In doubling the length of the first edition, Murphy and Sherwood have made The St. Martin's Sourcebook a more extensive, up-to-date, and flexible resource for tutors and tutor-training programs. The second edition has added discussions of on-line tutoring in both the opening section and a new section of readings, along with another new section of readings on "Ethical Dimensions." With new selections like Marilyn Cooper's "Really Useful Knowledge: A Cultural Studies Agenda for Writing Centers," Meg Woolbright's "The Politics of Tutoring: Feminism within the
Patriarchy," Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski's "Postcolonialism and the Idea of a Writing Center," Julie Bokser's "Peer Tutoring and Gorgias: Acknowledging Aggression in the Writing Center," and Sherwood's "Censoring Students, Censoring Ourselves: Constraining Conversations in the Writing Center" along with holdovers by Murphy, Stephen North, Andrea Lunsford, and Anne DiPardo, The St. Martin's Sourcebook represents the writing center field as more contentious than the 1995 edition. Murphy and Sherwood state explicitly that they meant the new edition to reflect how our "understanding of writing center work" has changed since 1995, as the rise of post-colonial and post-process theories of writing instruction, arguments about power and oppression in higher education and writing centers, and the growth of OWLs have complicated earlier conceptions and practices of writing center work without displacing them. As a group the readings give tutors choices of practices and theories to draw from as they consider their assumptions about writing and tutoring and work with writers from many different backgrounds on many different kinds of papers.

The St. Martin's Sourcebook, however, is still driven by the editors' conception of tutoring as "contextual," "collaborative," "interpersonal," and "individualized." And like The Allyn and Bacon Guide, it describes a basic structure for a tutorial that later readings deepen, complicate, and interrogate. Murphy and Sherwood describe a simple but flexible three-part tutorial structure consisting of a pretextual stage, where "tutor and student begin the process of developing the interpersonal relationship that will guide their collaborations" (8); a textual stage, where each student presents the tutor with various "textual problems" with a writing project as the tutor tries "to assist students in making long-term improvements in their writing" (17); and a post-textual stage, which should give "a sense of closure for the tutorial" and provide the writer with "a template, or model, for future learning experiences" (20).

Both The St. Martin's Sourcebook and The Allyn and Bacon Guide treat ESL students as a back-of-the-book concern, a common problem among existing tutor-training manuals. The last chapters and appendices of guides and sourcebooks often turn from the paradigm of the face-to-face tutorial to discuss situations (such as OWLs and students with learning disabilities) that challenge tutors' assumptions about how tutorials should proceed. The back-of-the-book sections tend to betray more complicated assumptions about writers' individuality and commonalities and how we classify writers than we sometimes express in our theories. It is difficult not to view some students as more "normal" than others, difficult to always follow our desires not to make presumptions as we greet a new student who walks into the writing center, especially if the
student’s differences challenge our often tacit general assumptions about students’ writing and behavior and do not respond well to how we normally conduct tutorials. To help tutors work with students and situations that create problems for our paradigms, most textbooks separate some students and situations from others and discuss strategies for coping with their differences while also assuring tutors that most writers share the same general concerns about their writing and warning them to avoid stereotyping as they develop strategies to work with students and circumstances unfamiliar to them.

But a single chapter on ESL students, students with learning disabilities, or on-line tutoring is hard pressed to do more than scratch the surface of the challenges involved in meeting writers’ needs. Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth's *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors* breaks this pattern by devoting an entire book to tutoring a specific class of students, and it should be seen as a landmark among tutor-training books. Any writing center that serves even a small number of ESL students should have this book in its library. *ESL Writers* makes readers aware of the rich range of cultures and languages of ESL students, showing tutors that no assumption about a “typical ESL writer” can account for all the cultures, languages, rhetorics, needs, and anxieties of ESL students. Yet the book leaves tutors with much more than a vague generalization that all ESL students are individuals. The readings help tutors begin to develop a repertoire of knowledge about writers from different cultures and of cues and questions to consider that they can use to try to understand the various ESL writers with whom they work.

*ESL Writers* follows the same general plan of Rafoth’s *A Tutor’s Guide: Helping Writers One to One* in combining features of a guide and a sourcebook, each chapter written by a different author. All the chapters, however, work together to guide students through a series of tutoring concerns. This approach provides readers with multiple perspectives but stresses the common priorities among the writers’ approaches more than their divisions. Some of the authors are ESL writers themselves, providing different insider perspectives with their explanations of pedagogy. The native English speakers among the authors sometimes also bring their experiences working with ESL writers into their discussions. But the authors often make a point of connecting their discussions to ideas in another essay. Because of the complicated contextual nature of tutoring ESL students, Bruce and Rafoth suggest that tutors read selections from *ESL Writers*, not like a manual, but to inform their thinking about incident such as

- a difficult or interesting tutoring session
- an article or book you have read or discussed in a college class
- a discussion topic in a staff meeting or tutor training course. (xiv)
Although the authors provide tutors with a number of specific practices that they can use with ESL students, *ESL Writers* does not give tutors an overarching method for working with ESL students but tries instead to help them develop a more informed and situational approach to working with these writers.

*ESL Writers* organizes its readings into three sections. Part I, "Cultural Contexts," consists of two essays, "Insights into Cultural Divides" by Nancy Hayward, who discusses differences in culture and ways of thinking that an ESL writer (and his or her tutor) may be grappling with in discussing a paper, and "Theoretical Perspectives on Learning a Second Language," by Theresa Jiinling Tsen, who explains central theories and research into second-language learning. Part II, "The ESL Tutoring Session," makes up the bulk of the collection, with ten essays on familiar topics about conducting conferences, such as beginning a conference, reading and analyzing a paper, avoiding taking over a paper from the writer, helping writers clarify their meanings, balancing higher- and lower-order concerns, editing, dealing with plagiarism issues, and online tutoring. The essays move back and forth between assuring tutors of ESL writers' similarities with native English-speaking writers and helping tutors to recognize and address problems unique to a tutorial with an ESL student. For example, in "Is This My Job?" Paula Gillespie discusses questions about services tutors should offer ESL writers who need help but want to avoid looking foolish as they struggle with writing and living in a culture with an unfamiliar language and social conventions. Simple questions about proofreading, session length, and students' behavior can become complicated ethical matters with an ESL writer in need, and Gillespie argues that tutors and directors need to examine their policies and decisions with a knowledge of the services available to ESL students on campus and a willingness to understand a problem from the student's perspective. Part III, "A Broader View," helps tutors understand learning English from an ESL student perspective, with a description of writing instruction outside the U.S. by Gerd Bräuer, a brief explanation of English linguistics by Radoth, and an essay by Bruce in which several ESL students discuss their writing center experiences.

What is interesting about *The Allyn and Bacon Guide*, *The St. Martin's Sourcebook*, and *ESL Writers* is the extent to which they resist the normalizing influence of textbooks. All appear to be grappling with the problem that Elizabeth Boquet discusses in *Noise from the Writing Center* as she observes Meg Carroll's tutor-training course: with our growing awareness of the biases and limitations of process pedagogies and nondirective tutoring, what should we teach tutors about writing and tutoring? What approaches should we teach, and how should we guide tutors to be effectively flexible, to analyze
each situation that writers present and decide on the best course of action to help each client become a better writer? Gillespie and Lerner approach this question by teaching tutors to see themselves as researchers, closely observing and analyzing what happens in tutorials so that they develop a repertoire of knowledge and strategies to draw on and a fluid, analytical approach to each tutorial. Murphy and Sherwood expose tutors to the disagreements and problems that writing center scholars are addressing in order to engage tutors in discussions about practices, theories, power, and subjectivities meant to inform their practices, assumptions, and decisions in their conferences. ESL Writers emphasizes the need for a flexibility based on an understanding of students and their cultures. All three books instruct readers in minimalist tutoring practices, but this model is now treated more as a starting point and a point of departure for analyzing how to work with different students and problems. Because of its subject, ESL Writers in particular makes it difficult to entertain notions of a generic conference for long. The selections often ask tutors to be careful about any assumptions they make about ESL students and their writing and behavior. They call on tutors to analyze carefully what the situation calls for rather than follow uncritically a procedure for tutoring. Several essays, for example, discuss situations where a writer needs a tutor’s insider knowledge of the English language or of American academic discourse, where the tutor should act as a resource, not just as a facilitator. Several authors also discuss guidelines for balancing higher-order concerns with sentence-level concerns, arguing that sometimes one can help a writer with a higher-order challenge by addressing a critical sentence-level problem.

Despite the many virtues of these three resources, they share several shortcomings. One tendency of all three books is to encourage a kind of self-effacement on the part of tutors. I’m not critical of this. The books rightfully encourage a student-centered approach to tutoring that encourages tutors not to impose their visions for a paper on writers but to help writers to work out their own ideas and voices for papers. Much of the work of these books is to decrease readers’ ethnocentrism, the tendency to view our cultures’ ways of thinking and behavior as the right ways and to be blind and insensitive to the assumptions, values, and rules of conversation and behavior that students from other cultures bring to their papers and to their conversations in the writing center. As a result, however, the cultures and ethnicities of tutors are usually mentioned only as problems, as in Anne DiPardo’s “Whisperings of Coming and Going: Lessons from Fannie” in The St. Martin’s Sourcebook, where the tutor Morgan makes too many false assumptions about Fannie based on Morgan’s perceived commonalities with Fannie. The same attitude about the cultural perspectives of tutors appears in The Allyn
and Bacon Guide, despite how much the book values tutors’ voices. The cultures that tutors come from are seldom presented as assets in their work. This attitude is understandable—tutors are often hired because they have strong personalities, and we all continually need to grapple with problems of authority, cultural sensitivity, and mistaken assumptions to be effective and ethical in our work with student writers. It is difficult for a textbook to generalize about how tutors can draw effectively from their own cultures in a conference. And textbooks can voice only part of what needs voicing in tutor training while writing center directors often work hard to take advantage of what each tutor brings to the center. But as writing center manuals have given increased attention to the gender, race, ethnicity, class, and culture of writers, they also leave an impression that tutors usually need to suppress their views and ways of seeing the world in order not to squelch or misunderstand the writer.

Next, the back-of-the-book treatment of on-line tutoring in all three guides suggests that we’re still searching for ways to integrate this tutoring into tutor-training programs. OWLs are too new and too various perhaps, the technology, the Internet, and our ideas about what they offer for writing instruction changing too quickly for textbooks to address them effectively. But one or two chapters about on-line tutoring do not seem enough to help new tutors with the complexities of working in an OWL, despite authors’ declarations that the same principles that apply to face-to-face tutoring can be adapted on line. If that were true, I think textbooks would integrate discussions and examples of on-line tutoring throughout. Instead, all three books acknowledge the growing importance of OWLs but treat on-line tutoring as departures from the face-to-face paradigm. If ESL Writers demonstrates a market for books for tutors on more specialized tutoring situations, I suspect we’ll get books written for tutors about online tutoring well before general tutor-training books effectively weave instruction for on-line tutoring into their discussions of tutoring in general.

On a positive note, all three textbooks assume that tutor training should introduce students to the field of writing center theory and research. The expanded St. Martin’s Sourcebook makes a nice companion collection to Murphy and Joe Law’s Landmark Essays on Writing Centers for anyone wanting an introduction to the history, theories, and debates of writing centers. Gillespie and Lerner have included a new chapter explaining the history of writing centers and recent debates about writing centers’ theory, practices, and ideology and revised their chapters on conducting writing center research using discourse analysis. Perhaps because it would not normally be the central text of a tutor-training program, introducing students to the field of writing center research is not an explicit agenda of ESL Writers, but the collection still provides
much background on ESL theories and research, contrastive rhetoric, writing instruction in Europe, and writing center scholarship on ESL matters. In their conscious introduction of students to our discipline, writing center textbooks are becoming more like introductory textbooks in the physical and social sciences and less like composition textbooks and readers. Our textbooks envision being hired as a tutor in a writing center as entering into an academic field. This seems like a new development to me.

Perhaps this development goes hand in hand with our more complicated conceptions of tutoring. All three books expect tutors to discuss their readings and put significant time into training. Because these books tend to problematize tutoring, they presume a tutor-training program that can provide tutors with a lot of support and opportunities for discussion, whether in a semester-long course or in ongoing staff meetings. *ESL Writers* and *The St. Martin’s Sourcebook*, for example, can easily be organized into a reasonable schedule of short readings for discussion at weekly meetings with tutors even if there is little time for orientation. But all three books present tutoring as a complex activity that requires tutors to analyze the student and situation and adjust their approaches, not as a single, easy-to-teach method. These are demanding books to use in tutor training as directors balance the need to nurture confidence in new tutors against the problems of preparing tutors to develop flexibility to deal effectively with different students and their needs. Directors need to decide when to introduce potential problems with the tutoring methods that students are just learning and when discussing questions about an approach may evoke more anxiety in tutors than critical thinking. It’s wise of Gillespie and Lerner to use tutors’ writings about their experiences to introduce discussions in *The Allyn and Bacon Guide* of how the emotions and anxieties of new tutors are affecting their work and training and to model how they can describe and analyze their feelings as part of reflections and observations.

All three books, however, will reward the work that tutors and directors put into them. *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring*, *The St. Martin’s Sourcebook for Writing Tutors*, and *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors* are three of the most intelligent and useful resources available for tutor training.
NOTES

1 Toni-Lee Capossela's Harcourt Brace Guide to Peer Tutoring is half manual and half anthology of previously published texts.

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