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Review: Tutoring and Teaching Academic Writing: Proceedings of the Second Conference of the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW)

by Gerd Bräuer

I must admit, I was rather proud when I handed over the CD, which I am going to review here, to my team of writing center tutors in Freiburg (Germany). After all, as a then-board member of the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW), I was part of the organizing team of the conference on tutoring and teaching academic writing in Budapest, Hungary, June 23-25, 2003. I felt that this second conference was an important step in the emergence of a new, but highly important aspect of European higher education. This conference demonstrated, in my view, the role teaching and tutoring academic writing will have to play in order to safeguard the so-called Bologna process of restructuring higher education toward internationally compatible BA and MA degree programs. The active participation of writing experts from the Anglo-Saxon regions of the world (where the BA and MA structure has been already in place for many years) was especially challenging for many of us who still struggle with letting go of the traditional role of writing as a sole means of documenting and presenting knowledge. The other important aspect of writing—the focus more on the process nature of instruction and learning—seems for many still rather unfamiliar.

The Freiburg Writing Center is, in a way, no exception to this redefinition of writing. During the weekly team meetings where we regularly discuss the effect of tutoring strategies, we often catch each other fantasizing about the “ideal writer” working her

About the Author

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way through an "ideal writing process." Most of us at the writing center, having our academic background from *Germanistik* (German Studies), where a rather traditional understanding of writing still dominates, forget the very specific demands of other disciplines with regard to genre, the writing process, and the writer. We slip back into this rather comfortable *believing game* (Elbow) about occupying the truth at the writing center and about how to deal with texts and writers.

With this context in mind, I suggested to my writing tutors that we explore the proudly presented CD for new insights on tutoring writing. A week later, when we met to discuss the outcome of the reading, a tutor opened, to my surprise, our conversation with this remark: "Even digital conference proceedings should mention the editors' names and offer an introduction to those who weren't able to participate in the conference." I was struck by so much sensibility for the reader.

As an excited participant of the 2003 EATAW conference, I hadn't noticed that there was something missing on the CD. Maybe I was too happy to see just a mouse-click away some of the papers from sessions I wasn't able to attend. As it is probably true for many of my colleagues in higher education, my experience with the slow and dreadful process of academic print publishing has been too painful not to be thankful for a more efficient way of sharing the news in my discipline. Nevertheless, I remembered, I too wondered about how the articles were selected when I searched unsuccessfully for a substantial number of my favorite presentations that I had underlined, in the sweltering heat of Budapest, in my personal copy of the conference program.

Now that I started thinking, the tutor's opening remark raised another question for me. What was the intention of the CD if it wasn't really a *proceeding* in the original meaning of this genre? My search for an answer got interrupted by another tutor's question about the focus of the EATAW conference. Pointing at the title of the CD cover, she voiced her expectation to find "lots of stuff on peer tutoring in at least fifty percent of the CD material." I scratched my head and glanced over the notes I had scribbled down on paper while reading the proceedings at home on the screen.

All I could find on the subject of peer tutoring was the chapter by Paula Gillespie (Marquette University) and Harvey Kail (University of Maine). Based on their rich experience and theoretical background on the topic, they provide deep insight into the cross-cultural difficulties when adapting peer tutoring approaches made in USA to educational settings elsewhere in the world.

Directly following Gillespie/Kail I discovered notes to John Harbord's article on minimalist tutoring as an (im)possibility for the European educational context. "Not that one," one of the writing tutors exclaimed. "This article isn't about peer tutoring

but on writing coaches. At Central European University [the university John Harbord is referring to in his paper] all the tutoring is done by instructors. Minimalist tutoring needs peers!" I wanted to know why. The opinions that started to shoot across the writing center can be summarized quickly here: Minimalist tutoring is all about an emphatically listening tutor who is genuinely interested in understanding what the writer wants to say but who is leaving the responsibility for the text with the writer. This role seems trustworthy *only*, my students emphasized, with peers, at least in an educational system that is dominated by an extreme teacher-student hierarchy.

At this point, I raised my voice and lowered my eyes, reading out loud the names of other contributors to the tutoring aspect of the conference proceedings. What about the article by Lucy Rai from the Open University (UK) who did a qualitative study on affective responses to feedback on student writing? "Wow!" one student exclaimed, "This article caught me by surprise! I never realized how much impact my peer tutoring can have on the writer. What if I too am inconsistent or ambiguous in my feedback? How do I know what is expected by the writer of a certain academic discipline? Which reminds me of something we never quite finished discussing: Should we at the writing center start training discipline-specific writing tutors who then really know their stuff?"

I raised my voice again, pointing with my finger at another name on my scribbled list on the peer tutoring topic: What did you think about Barbara Kolan's article on collaborative writing at Bar Ilan University in Israel? "Yes, very interesting! I definitely want to try out her strategies on collaborative structuring in my workshop for ESL students!"

Another student added, "How did you find out about the ESL stuff? This list of content needed some structure and subtitles pointing out the main topics of the submissions! I simply didn't have the time to sift through all the articles for information on tutoring ESL writing. Who can help me out?"

We started to collect a list of topics discussed in the proceedings and sorted out the contributing authors: ESL writing, online writing, writing in specific disciplines and genres, freshman composition, collaborative writing, peer tutoring, student-teacher writing conferences, methods of teaching writing, strategies of creative writing for academic writing, writing center work. We all stared at the extensive list. "You did all this in three days?" someone asked me, I hadn't noticed the broad spectrum of topics in 2003 in Budapest. I was just focused on *my* topic, peer tutoring. I knew what to look for. I was able to identify the sign posts. Most of my students didn't. They are new to the field. Nevertheless, the confusion that arose by facing the incredible complexity of writing in higher education challenged their understanding of the subject of their

tutoring. This is, at least, what I read in their faces.

At the end of our team meeting, my students had dampened my initial excitement about the CD significantly. While listening to their needs and expectations as writing tutors at a university, I realized that the proceedings of the 2003 EATAW conference, despite a stunning international menu delivered on CD, wasn't a satisfying meal for them. Not that they didn't get enough to eat. No. It felt more like having over-eaten but not with the right food.

And what about me as a writing teacher? Did the CD satisfy my hunger for fresh food for thought on the art of writing instruction? Well, sort of. Kind of. At least initially, I thought so. Hmm. I must admit, all those papers sounded much better, convincing, more inspiring, being presented at the conference, while I was mingling with all those colleagues who

seemed as excited as I was about changing the world of academic training with the help of a new kind of writing.

Having looked at my tutors one last time before we departed, a murky feeling inside of me grew that we probably need another kind of buffet if we *really* want to open up the small circle of academic writing specialists in Europe in order to spread the word about the importance of a changing role of writing in European higher education.

Note: This collection is available online at <http://www.ceu.hu/eataw/CDpurchase.htm> or through Byron Stay, IWCA Press, 16300 Old Emmitsburg Road, Emmitsburg, MD 21727, stay@msmary.edu (\$15 + \$2 postage).

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