

1-1-2002

Review: Tutoring Writing: A Practical Guide for Conferences

Meg Carroll

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/wcj>

Recommended Citation

Carroll, Meg (2002) "Review: Tutoring Writing: A Practical Guide for Conferences," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 1, Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1558>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Review: *Tutoring Writing: A Practical Guide for Conferences*

McAndrew, Donald A., and Thomas J. Reigstad
Portsmouth, NH: Boynton-Cook/Heinemann, 2001

by Meg Carroll

As I sit down to write this review, the tutors and I have just finished week seven of our summer staff preparation course, Workshop in Writing Center Theory and Practice. As usual during the nine-week course, our discussions resonate with and create some dissonance in my thinking, which informs my reading of *Tutoring Writing* by Donald McAndrew and Thomas Reigstad. Certainly tutoring is a complex system. Therefore, it's no surprise that tutor preparation is complex and fluid as well. Since we revise our workshop from year to year, and sometimes from day to day, I find it difficult to use a standard text. However, since I knew that their 1985 monograph *Training Tutors for Writing Conferences* served more as a guide that allowed for the individual stamp of directors and tutors than a heavily scripted manual, I was intrigued by the possibilities of McAndrew and Reigstad's slender new publication, and by Wendy Bishop's nostalgic reminiscences about her writing center genealogy in her forward to the book, firmly rooted in that earlier monograph.

McAndrew and Reigstad have set for themselves the difficult, seemingly impossible, task of writing for multiple audiences—writing center directors, students in undergraduate and graduate writing courses, workplace tutors, parent tutors. Given the diverse needs of their readers, their decision to begin with an overview of relevant theory seems very wise. However, instead of giving clear and reflective theoretical contexts, the discussions are extremely brief (six pages in all) and overly simplified. It is in chapter four, "The Writing and Tutoring Processes," that I find the most potential. Here, McAndrew and Reigstad discuss the recursive nature of writing and the complexity of composing. More important, they acknowledge that "Writers and writing exist within a culture and use a language created by that culture; that is, writers and writing both produce and are a product of wider social and political realities" (23). The authors seem to complicate and enrich the notion of social constructionism by introducing a brief discussion of chaos theory and some interesting metaphors for tutoring:

About the Author

Meg Carroll has directed the Rhode Island College Writing Center for twelve years and serves on the Northeast Writing Centers Association Steering Committee as the IWCA representative.



Chaos theory asks us to replace the central metaphor of our world and its workings: the world is no longer the Newtonian clock [. . .], the machine, the computer, the robot. Chaos theory suggests metaphors that are more indeterminate, unpredictable, and random, such as turbulent rivers, weather, smoke, and demonstrate that exact prediction is impossible in complex systems. (27)

As the authors relate chaos to the unpredictability and uncertainty of tutoring, I find myself nodding in agreement. Although we might take exception to the implication that tutorial dialogue is always helpful, most of us would concur that "in tutoring there is no right or wrong answer; rather there is helpful and reasonable dialogue about the writer's piece. The tutor doesn't lay down the rules; he draws out the writer to clarify steps that might improve the student's writing process or written product. Tutoring writers is a fuzzy job about a fuzzy process" (28). Since no action, certainly no tutorial, is exactly replicable, the authors argue for adaptability:

[C]omplex systems can constantly adapt to the environment and its changes. Actions and structures emerge as a result of these adaptations as the interactions of a system's components give rise to new characteristics on the macro or global level. So it is in tutoring: A tutoring session shows emergent adaptation as the session is negotiated and defined through the conversation of tutor and writer. The interactions of writer, piece, and tutor create the overall characteristic of the session, be it dull, valuable, confused, or energetic. As the complex tutoring system operates, adaptations further its progress, create its value, and color its reality for tutor and writer. (28)

At this point, I am hopeful that subsequent chapters will amplify the discussions of the social and political realities of tutoring (discussions essential to tutors who interact with writers from all cultures, classes, and races) with some interesting insights provided by a lens new to texts on tutoring—chaos theory. I am disappointed. For the next two chapters (38 pages, the greatest weight given to any topic), the authors concentrate solely on helpful hints and strategies, with an emphasis on McAndrew and Reigstad's HOC's (Higher-Order Concerns) and LOC's (Lower-Order Concerns).

A particularly disturbing section among these strategies is "Tutoring Different People." Here McAndrew and Reigstad review some gender studies which suggest that female tutors are likely to be supportive and to concentrate on discourse level concerns, whereas male tutors tend to be direct, assertive, and analytical and concentrate on "traditional teacherly things like paragraphing and punctuation" (95). The authors make some recommendations to writing center directors. The first is the most problematic:

Use the inherent power of gender communication stereotypes by connecting writers to male tutors when analysis, directiveness, or assertiveness seem to be what the writer's developing skills call for, and to female tutors when supportive, caring, and coopera-

tive interactions seem most productive. To do this, someone would have to decide which qualities a writer most needed in a tutor. This could be done by having a tutor, at the end of a session, recommend a gender-specific tutor assignment for the next session, or by having a senior tutor do an initial screening. (95)

Readers will then be puzzled by the very next recommendation: "Resist gender communication stereotype [sic]—they are nothing more than the expression of sexism in our culture" (95). Although this is an egregious example of an inadequately theorized position, the rest of the text also suffers from a lack of rigorous analysis and many missed opportunities.

Probably the most troubling evidence of this trend is illustrated by the authors' sample syllabus and the tutors' reflections on that pedagogy. Although there are two required texts in addition to the McAndrew-Reigstad manual (Peter Elbow's *Writing with Power* and Donald Murray's *A Writer Teaches Writing*), the emphasis seems to be on a rather scripted, superficial preparation. Grading is determined by the number of response papers and readings. Tutors, it seems, are encouraged to give written feedback because "Tutors sometimes need to tend to a piece in a writer's absence . . ." Despite the theoretical implications of this policy (issues of peerness, collaboration, dialogue, etc.), there are other concerns as well. Tutors are given thirteen guidelines for these responses, but are also given the option of using the "Rating Sheet for Responding to Drafts," which consists of nine criteria which the tutor rates 1 ("Novice"), 2 ("Apprentice"), 3 ("Proficient"), or 4 ("Distinguished"). The results of this quantitative approach are probably best illustrated by a case study written by one of the tutors in the class.

Attached is the first essay I read. One sentence contained 46 words, another 38, and within each, prepositions were the main connectors. For example, in the first sentence, a sentence of only 25 words—one of her shortest—there were 5 prepositions. That's not so bad but in the third sentence there were 8, and that's a heavy load for any sentence to carry. (139)

I am troubled here by the focus of this session and by the sarcastic tone of that third sentence. The tutor has some remedies for the writer, though. "I [. . .] suggested that she learn many of the prepositions by heart so that she'd be aware of them in her writing and might avoid them. Lastly, I offered her alternatives—other connectors like relative pronouns, conjunctions, and the semi-colon" (139). This entry saddens me. There is no sense of the human here, no engagement, no play, no sensitivity.

I realize the difficulty of writing a tutor preparation text without becoming prescriptive, but as I finished reading *Tutoring Writing*, I was reminded of something Geoffrey Sirc writes in his new book, *English Composition as a Happening*: "Robert Venturi has shown that simplified compositional programs, programs that ignore the complexity and contradiction of

everyday life, result in bland architecture”

(1). Sirc is talking about the classroom environment, but he might as well be referring to the limited space of a strategy-driven writing center program. At best, simplified programs result in a bland architecture of limited thinking. At worst, they result in the negation of the life experiences and cultural realities of the writers and tutors who inhabit that space. Such a negation ensures what Nancy Grimm calls the regulatory function of the writing center that excludes the possibility of individual and institutional change.

Had McAndrew and Reigstad extended their thinking about the implications and applicability of various theoretical positions, they would have written a book that had potential for the varied audience this one hopes to address. Had they extended their thinking about chaos theory, they might have written a very interesting, perhaps groundbreaking text. However, instead of recognizing the chaos and the possibilities of riskier tutoring and writing, the authors seem to encourage regulating that creativity, subduing difference, urging the status quo.

WORKS CITED

Grimm, Nancy Maloney. *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook-Heinemann, 1999.

Sirc, Geoffrey. *English Composition as a Happening*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2002.