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Tick-Tock, Next: Finding Epochal Time in the Writing Center

by Anne Ellen Geller

In this world, there are two times. There is mechanical time and there is body time. The first is as rigid and metallic as a massive pendulum of iron that swings back and forth, back and forth. The second squirms and wriggles like a bluefish in a bay. The first is unyielding, predetermined. The second makes up its mind as it goes along. —Einstein's Dreams, Alan Lightman

Every now and then in our writing center staff meetings, I pile crayons, magic markers, colored pencils and a stack of white paper in the middle of the table. For the first fifteen minutes, the graduate student tutors draw pictures. There is no prompt beyond “draw a picture of a conference you’re left thinking about from this week.” Sometimes the drawing time is silent. I watch the geographers and economists and women’s studies scholars bite at their lips and furrow their brows as they work in an unfamiliar, perhaps-forgotten medium.

When we share these drawings, we place ourselves back in one another’s conferences, but as we discuss the conferences each of us has drawn, we also prepare for future conferences. Though we know few conferences we’ll face will be exactly like those we’ve already held, or heard about, we imagine possibilities, riffing off one another’s successes, struggles and ideas. It is that interaction, that asking and suggesting and wondering together, that makes our brief hour-long meeting feel so valuable to us all.

In one of these meetings, Alice drew a picture of herself sitting at a round table saying, “Next” (see Fig. 1). A conveyor belt of student writers winds past her into infinity.

About the Author

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That week, she met with all of the students in a graduate course she was teaching; in addition, she tutored eight hours in the writing center. How could she have the energy to get through so many conferences in what little time she had that week without feeling "Henry Fordist" (Conroy, Lerner, Siska)?

In Lisa’s picture (see Fig. 2), a black-outlined clock and a huge polka-dotted question mark float prominently and weigh heavily on Lisa’s mind. A laptop is open on the table and a student talks about texts from her film class. The writing center is sunny at 1:25 in the afternoon, but the heavy clock covers most of the sun. Lisa’s mouth is crooked. She doesn’t know what to do, or say, but the clock ticks away the conference hour. "Tick-Tock" echoes in the corner of the picture. Lisa worried that time would run out before she could decide how best to help the student.

In a more minimalist picture, Jessi’s stick figure awkwardly faces the student writer’s stick figure (see Fig. 3). The student holds the text. "No," the student says. "Okay," Jessi replies. The minute hand of the red clock in the background nears the

Figure 1. Alice's picture.

Figure 2. Lisa's Picture.
end of the hour. Time is lost in negotiation, which never progresses in this image (or in this conference, according to Jessi) beyond this dead-end exchange.

Jessi smiles in another of her pictures (see Fig. 4). She intended to capture the last moments of her time with a student writer. The clock has not quite reached the hour, and Jessi felt she had successfully focused the student on one doable project they could work on together. She had just enough time to write in this student’s folder. But the student in this picture is smiling, too. She’s pointing to the clock. She’s a regular, and she knows she has been scheduled for an hour. “Hey, we have eight minutes left,” she says, “I want to do this and I want to do this and I don’t know what to do,” she says in the picture. Other projects and other due dates are still on her mind. Who controls the time in conferences? Jessi wondered. The tutor? The student? Who should? Why is this student writer still unsatisfied after fifty-two minutes of conference time? In a picture Carolyn drew (see Fig. 5), a student writer physically blocks the door even though the ticking clock reveals that the conference has already run five minutes past the end of
Figure 5. Carolyn's picture.


Clocks are everywhere in these drawings, and I began to wonder why tutors so often draw pictures that put moments of awareness, or negotiation, or confusion, or frustration, or success, in relation to time. The most obvious answer is that conferences in the Clark Writing Center are one hour in duration. The tutors are always aware that when one hour ends, the next appointment will arrive. They are always watching the clock. And they are always aware, as are most of us who teach, that there is never enough time to teach all that we want to.

But clocks are also the physical manifestation of a central tension in writing centers—the tension between fungible time and epochal time. Fungible time is measured by "units...equivalent to and interchangeable with any of the other units. Indeed, these units may take on the values of any clock or calendar interval (second, minute, hour, day, week, month, year, decade, century, etc.)" (Bluedorn 30). Epochal time is measured by events, the "time is in the events; the events do not occur in time" (31). For example, in fungible time, I call a friend and say "let's have lunch tomorrow at 12. That's my lunch hour." In epochal time I might call the same friend and say, "Let's have lunch tomorrow. I'll call you when I get hungry. Or, when I'm between projects. And we'll eat until we can eat no more." In epochal time "the event defines the time," and time is "linked to the individual's internal rhythms (e.g., the onset of hunger)" or "external social rhythms (e.g., the flow of work that day)" (Bluedorn 31).

It is difficult for tutors and student writers to access epochal time, especially within the strict demands of a single writing conference an hour or half-hour in duration. In
the face of short writing center appointments (constantly threatened to become ever
c shorter because of budget cuts) and rushed students with busy schedules, we risk suc-
cumbing to the pressure of fungible time, into what we think of as the necessity of effi-
ciency. On email listservs, we ask other directors how they keep their tutors from
running over time in conferences, and we reassure one another that conferences in
which we focus on just one skill are preferable. In our staff meetings, we raise the issue
of time management over and over again.

Efficiency need not always preclude meaningful interaction, but to imagine that
tutors must, most of all, be efficient in conferences means that we buy into something
like Fredrick Taylor's "efficiency engineering" and its establishment of "standard
times for each bodily motion" (Levine 70). We decide that a thesis can be generated in
a half hour, and there may simply be no time for what Taylor enthusiasts deemed
"waste" motions (Levine 71). In the case of writing centers, these waste motions might
include laughter, off-topic story-telling, or a walk outside when the conference work
becomes difficult, and student and tutor need to take a break. The more economically
vital, the more individualistic, the more capitalistic, the more populated a place is, the
faster its pace of life (Levine 9–18). When we prioritize efficiency, we allow writing
centers to take on the aura of Taylorized factories or the financial markets of major
cities. "A focus on people," psychologist Robert Levine tells us, "is often at odds with a
tempo dictated by schedules and the time on the clock" (19).

But what would happen if we searched within defined time for the space and possi-
bility of epochal time? When writing center tutors, and the student writers at their
sides, can shift their concerns from the unyielding demands of clock time to the fluid-
ity and possibility of epochal time, they create space for tutor and student alike to
think, to imagine, to experiment, to collaborate, to build a relationship, and to learn.
We know this happens in many conferences, but how often do we consciously work to
make it happen? We can think and talk about how we will never be able to do enough
work in the time we have in short conferences. Or we can accept the inevitable limita-
tions of each short conference, turning our focus instead to what is possible in the
epochal time we can harness in the conference itself. Perhaps we should remind tutors
to look at the clock less often rather than more often.

♦ ♦ ♦

Writing centers with drop-in hours are certainly more epochal than the Clark
University writing center with its strict hour-long appointment schedule. But even
drop-in hours do not ease all of the time constraints on student writers and tutors (or
directors). Students write toward deadlines, and most of them schedule their writing
center visits in relation to deadlines. I'm working on a paper that is due today. My class is
at 1pm. *My paper is due in class. I need to revise it this morning.* We have to admit it: no matter how we strive to work at the point of writers' needs, student writers' needs almost always arise within institutionalized time, the type of time that can constrain us if we let it narrow our focus more than it needs to.

At Clark, we offer student writers an hour conference a week. We ask writers to schedule appointments days ahead of time. As much as we'd like to imagine we could work with students at their points of need, whenever they needed us, for as long as they needed our help, we usually can't. It is common for me to see some version of this comment on students' evaluations of their writing center conferences: "I wish we had more time together to ____" —fill in the blank with "to talk," "to go over more of the paper," "to look at my other paper." Student writers watch the clock, too. All this makes a search for epochal time more essential. For when the work of a writing conference is grounded on speed and breadth more than on interaction and depth, students and tutors alike can become unimaginative, rigid, or worse (as the drawings reveal), pressured, paralyzed or hostile.

Epochal time is less familiar to us within writing center conferences than we might like it to be, but it is often also more comfortable, more welcome, than we might expect when we experience it. Epochal time is the time represented in the second half of Tamer's picture (see Fig. 6). As the hour begins, a large academic in a robe and mortarboard looms over student and tutor and points at the clock. It is the professor who seems to control time in this conference even though he or she is not physically present. Half an hour later, in the noticeably smaller right half of Tamer's diptych, the clock is still present; the professor is not. No one points at the clock. No one even looks at it. What defines the work, and the time it takes to do that work, is the event, the interaction between student and tutor, turned toward one another, thinking about the symbolism of rain in the Noah's Ark narrative, the text the student must analyze in
the overdue paper. Tamer and the student writer are working together. The representation reveals how much longer the first half of the conference felt to Tamer and how much more satisfying the second half felt.

Here, within Tamer’s one conference, the conflict between fungible and epochal time is, to some degree, reconciled. When we can shift any part of a conference, even an uneven half of a conference outside of institutional time, we do just what Tamer shows himself doing in this picture. We turn toward the writer, embracing all she tells us with outstretched arms. She turns towards us. Lost in the words of a writer who owns her own project, we feel, although the clock tells us we have only half a conference left, as if we have all the time in the world. We are drawn into the work, away from the limits of the time we have. The writer, drawn into the work, may even feel somewhat released from fungible time.

Perhaps it is too romantic to imagine that we could exploit epochal time in each and every conference in this way. But if we were to imagine that we could release ourselves from the pressure of the ticking clock, we might also be able to imagine—and help students imagine—a whole variety of different choices in conferences.

Tamer’s visual representation of himself and the student turned toward one another offers clues of what happens in this conference. Tamer is aware of time and the limits of the hour, but he is also very aware of this student writer and all she has brought to conference. Elements of this conference were familiar to him from previous conferences. He had worked with many, many students who were overly concerned about their professors’ expectations, and he had spoken in staff meetings about how this was his least favorite type of conference. What I believe he did in this conference was pay attention to the student beside him and his relationship in conference with that student. That turn of attention, away from the looming clock, large professor and late paper, to the student, the student’s ideas and himself, allowed Tamer to vary his use of experience to meet this student’s needs and his own needs within an hour.

Perhaps he asked himself, how might this conference proceed if this student knew how to take ownership of this text? How might I work if she knew? He realized this conference did not have to turn out as past conferences like this one had, and he did not have to work as he had before, even if he worked from his experience and even if he was under the pressure of the ticking clock. Tamer’s move to embrace epochal time was a shift that allowed him to utilize his experience in new ways and allowed him to turn away from the unyielding clock and unyielding professor. Tamer’s turn toward the student writer shows that he is aware of how he and the student writer share the conference.
Near the beginning of Milan Kundera's novel, *Slowness*, the narrator sits at a traffic light. In his rearview mirror, he watches an impatient couple in the car behind him and wonders why they cannot turn toward one another and enjoy one another's presence while they are stuck at the light. "Why doesn't the man tell her something funny?" (3) the narrator asks. Why can't the female passenger capture the male driver's attention? Because, the narrator realizes, "she's at the wheel with him, and she's cursing me, too" (4)—they are not at all aware of one another; they are only aware of the goal, getting through the light and moving toward their destination. I wonder how often the pressure of time in conferences works against tutors' and students' real presence in conferences? How often does a paper's pending due date, or a ticking clock, create the pressure of that traffic light, keeping writer and tutor from engaging with one another, no matter how closely they sit next to one another?

* * *

Knowing I want to encourage my graduate tutors to find and embrace epochal time in their conferences has led me to look at their pictures and listen to their conference stories in new ways. Now I specifically look and listen for moments when I think they've shifted to work in epochal time because I want them to understand why a shift in strategies and attitude was possible even when the clock might have been telling them that change would be impossible.

Three stories stand out to me from last semester. To me, these stories reveal the necessary interrelationships between fungible time and epochal time. Tutors are well aware of the tensions between those two types of time, but I believe that when tutors shift their awareness to epochal time they can make different choices in conferences.

Two of the stories I'll tell, Jessi's and Sandy's, describe long-term relationships between tutors and student writers. Over the course of a semester, Jessi saw that the pressure of the clock could not—and should not—keep her from responding to a multilingual student's needs. She also realized that a fear of the ticking clock may make tutors take on more responsibility for students' progress than they should. Sandy found she was surprised in the middle of the semester when a student she had been working with regularly could more confidently face what had originally been an unmanageable weekly deadline. Their conferences were scheduled solely to help Laura complete her weekly writing. But when Sandy realized Laura's relationship to her own work had changed, she was able to re-imagine how they might work in their weekly conferences. The third story, Jonathan's, reveals what is possible when a tutor embraces epochal time in a single conference. Time transforms geographical space, and I'll describe how, in that conference, tutor and student moved not only through
time, but also through many geographical spaces and many possible ways of understanding not just the texts they work at but also one another.

Each of the tutors in these stories had worked in the writing center for at least a full semester before these conferences took place, and I believe this is important. They had experience working with first-year students and with non-native and native English writers from across the disciplines, and I hope to reveal, at least implicitly, how their experience may have provided the structure for their shifts. I hope, most of all, to show how these tutors turned their awareness away from a ticking clock toward the writers beside them.

First, Susie. When Jessi began working with Susie, we knew only that her graduate advisor in international development had referred her to the writing center because he was concerned by how little English he felt Susie understood. After a first conference, Jessi felt concerned, too. Susie seemed hardly able to converse in English. Jessi wondered how they would ever get to English exchanges in which they might understand one another, let alone exchanges complex enough to allow Jessi to help Susie with her written graduate work.

In that first tentative conference together, Jessi suggested they both write. With free-writing finished, they began to look at Susie’s sentences, clarifying word choice, practicing the sounds of various letters, and reorganizing the order of words in the sentences. It was slow work, and Jessi remembers the pressure of the clock. There were so many sentence-level issues to talk about; they had so little time in that one-hour conference to get through even the few sentences Susie had generated.

Jessi had suggested they write sentences so that she and Susie could communicate around writing, but it became more and more apparent that “Susie didn’t want to stay on the paper.” Jessi remembers a moment she describes as “energetic.” “I was talking about placements of words, and listening to her tentative questions, and then the question she was asking became more and more clear. She wasn’t focused, as I was, on how the sentences were structured. She wanted to know something else.”

When Jessi somewhat reluctantly turned her attention away from the text she felt pressured to focus on, she could hear Susie’s real questions. “How do I respond in English when someone invites me for dinner?” and “What type of responses do I offer at a dinner party?” are the questions Jessi remembers most. Susie asked these questions so pointedly, so seriously, so meaningfully, that Jessi realized Susie saw the writing center not just as a place where she could develop her written communication, but also a place where she could develop new, cultural communication skills.

Jessi remembers how tense that moment felt to her. The conference was short. The semester was short. Susie had so much to practice and to learn. She was familiar with
the writing tasks the graduate program would require Susie to complete. As Nancy Grimm notes, "in tutoring interactions, listening is often done under the pressure of time, usually with a desire to be helpful, and almost always with a notion of what is a normal academic essay" (67). But, realizing how important Susie's questions were to her, Jessi turned her attention away from the text in front of her and began what Grimm might call "authentic listening" (69). Susie either will, or won't, learn enough English to remain in this program, Jessi remembers thinking to herself, but she is asking me to help her with more immediate language issues I can't ignore. Jessi and Susie worked together once a week all semester, and every session contained what Jessi calls "blurriness" in her communication with Susie. But, in accepting that blur- riness, she and Susie could "dialogue." "Authentic listening," Grimm says, is "expe- riential" (69). How could Jessi know exactly where her conferences with Susie might lead until the two of them discovered that together?

Writing sentences and having conversations about American culture led to conver- sations about Susie's interest in studying in the United States. Conversations about the experience of studying in a different culture helped Susie clarify how she wanted to frame her written work on women's roles in international development. And though they never stopped talking off the written page about cultural questions Susie would raise, they began to turn their attention to actual papers she had begun to generate.

By the final weeks of the semester, Susie was bringing in complete drafts of final papers, work she felt proud of completing. Jessi believed she spent entire weekends creating these drafts, but Jessi could see a shift in her confidence. Jessi was also aware of a transference; the more Susie discussed her own Chinese culture in relation to American culture in conferences, the more confident she became of doing the same in her texts. Jessi, too, found she was more confident in conferences, more sure of what Susie wanted to communicate. She felt as if she could talk to Susie about her writing, but she also felt as if Susie could speak back to her comments. "Instead of just ingest- ing what I had to say, we could dialogue."

In thinking about this story, I don't want Jessi, or any of us, for that matter, to focus on the obvious success narrative. Each of our writing centers has these successes—semester-long, year-long, career-long relationships with international, non-native English writers who find a comfortable working space in the writing center. Yes, Susie is still a graduate student, and however painfully and painstakingly she completes her work with Jessi's assistance, she is completing it, and she is working toward her degree.
Instead, what is important to me in my conversations with Jessi, and what I believe should be important for all of us, is considering this story in the context of fungible and epochal time. The shift that Jessi had to make is an important one. Had Jessi continued to worry about whether she’d ever have enough time to teach Susie all the English she would need to know, she might have ignored Susie’s requests to talk off the written page. Any of us can, and probably would, say that a writing tutor listening carefully wouldn’t have ignored Susie’s questions. But even Jessi, an experienced writing tutor with a counseling background, could see how easy, and how right, it might have been to have made that choice. Here’s Jessi’s explanation:

I think when you’re thinking, here’s the hour, here’s what I know about hours and this student’s need, and here’s what I can get done, there’s never room to find out what the student’s goals really are, no matter how much you say you may be listening to hear them. But when you make that switch you give up your own responsibility, and you’re no longer clocking time in the same way. It’s toward a different goal. That seems even more pertinent with multi-lingual students because I have a hunch that no matter how open-minded we say we are, it has to do with what kind of responsibility we think we have for getting things done in conference.

When we take that responsibility off of us, we probably take it of off the student, too. My purpose felt huge, but when she claimed the work of the conference as her own, I thought to myself, okay, she knows I’m not going to teach her English, so I can release myself from that because that’s just not going to happen.

A writing center tutor worried about the clock is likely to take on too much responsibility for what happens in conference. A more balanced power dynamic was possible only because Jessi gave up some responsibility. As Susie gained confidence in what she could write, Jessi gained confidence in what she could, and couldn’t teach, in conferences. Jessi said it was as if she heard Susie tell her, “This is what I want. All that you want to teach me is good, and I need to learn that, but this is what I want to know and what I need to know right now.” When Jessi could hear that and make decisions based on that, she was working in epochal time rather than fungible time.

In another, very different, long-term relationship, Sandy worked with Laura, a first-semester freshman writing for a seminar on the AIDS pandemic. What Sandy remembers most about the first four or five weeks of conferences with Laura is that the routine of their work together seemed clear almost from the start of their relationship. They met once a week, every Monday, to go over a one-page response to the week’s readings. The readings were filled with scientific terms related to AIDS, terms Sandy
lumps together as "dyoxyzocorplasmastuff" and "gooeyribonucleaicgunk" (see Fig. 7). The professor seemed to want a regurgitation of the week’s highly philosophical and scientific readings, but the regurgitation was to be as concise as possible. Laura struggled to revise her prose so that it would be concise enough. So Laura and Sandy’s early conferences settled into a pattern: rush to look over the previous week’s returned response and work to figure out “what the heck” this professor wanted for the response due the next day. Even with that routine, it seemed to Sandy as if they never had enough time in conference to get all the way through revisions of Laura’s one-page responses, especially when Laura was challenged by the course readings. Bored by a full hour of "dyoxyzocorplasmastuff" and "gooeyribonucleaicgunk" each week, Sandy longed for the hour to be over even as she tried to help Laura understand her readings and write a tight response.

Halfway through the semester, though, Laura’s responses were improving, becoming tighter and more concise, just as her professor had hoped they would. She was receiving higher grades on them and gaining confidence. Laura’s growing confidence in her own writing began to affect the time she and Sandy spent together in conferences. More and more often, Laura took ownership over how they would use the hour and articulated aloud how she might use a strategy from an earlier response, or an earlier conference, and apply it to the response she was in the midst of writing and revising. Sandy hadn’t immediately recognized how much less Laura needed her help to shape a concise one-page response, and she hadn’t immediately recognized that Laura

**Figure 7.** Sandy’s picture.

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was now asking questions that had more to do with style and word choice and finding ways to add her own voice to the one-page responses.

Weekly conferences, once carefully timed to help Laura prepare a single page of writing to be handed in to her demanding professor, were no longer stressful races to meet the impending due date. Instead, conferences became conversations about stylistic and analytical choices Laura was making. The battle was no longer over how it could be possible to make the writing concise enough for the audience. Conversations were instead about where to make the writing more concise and why. Sandy realized she no longer needed to feel pressured to try to understand the scientific jargon so unfamiliar to her. Instead, she turned her attention to what she knew how to do—"helping a young writer learn more about how to gain a confident and comfortable academic voice"—and she allowed Laura, now deeply immersed in the content of the course and familiar with the type of texts she was reading, to drive any discussion of content. Sandy realized she might have missed this shift had she remained more focused on the professor’s goals and Laura’s rush to finish each week’s response than on Laura’s awareness of her own progress. As Sandy prepared less and less for what she would do in conference and worked from cues Laura offered, she enjoyed their time together more and more. Laura sometimes left before the hour was over, and it became Sandy who wished she had more time with Laura, instead of Laura wishing for more time from her tutor.

Laurel Johnson Black tells us "both students and teachers agree that while successful conferences may involve teaching, they always involve learning of some sort, and in the best conferences, there is active, mutual learning" (162). Though most of the conferences Black considers are student-teacher conferences, it is worth noting that her research reveals that students, too, realize how powerful the effect can be when teachers, or tutors, learn in conference and take that learning beyond the borders of conferences. For the second half of the semester, Sandy was able to value what Laura was teaching her about teaching writing because both she and Laura became aware of how their conference relationship was "mutually responsive, active, supportive, and symmetrical" (Black 161). These conferences were no longer just about what Sandy could give in the designated time they had together or how Sandy could help Laura meet her deadlines successfully.

It is that question of what is possible in the designated time of a conference that so often constrains what can or can’t happen during an actual conference. Jonathan, who held the third conference I think of from last semester, has noted that when he feels most able to step out of the time confines of a conference, it is usually when he is working with a writer he has conferenced with before. Then, just as Sandy and Jessi
described, he and a student share some history—either in their relationship, or in their knowledge of the text they’re looking at—and they have a foundation, a past, to work from. But there was a time when Jonathan experienced a noticeable shift in time—and space—in a single conference with a writer. That writer, Yuki, an international student whose first language is Japanese, is not an English major, and as soon as she sat down at the writing center table, she told Jonathan she was struggling to complete an assignment for an English literature class. She needed to analyze an Ezra Pound poem and write about her analysis. After thinking and thinking, she hadn’t been able to come up with an analysis, and she didn’t know how she would come up with one. She didn’t know what to write.

Jonathan asked her to tell him about the poem. As she did, he realized the Ezra Pound poem was actually an Ezra Pound translation of a Chinese poem written by Li Bai. It was a poem he, too, had read, when he was an undergraduate at Oberlin College. As they talked, he found out Yuki had also read the Li Bai version when she was a student in high school in Japan.

Jonathan drew a picture of this conference in staff meeting (see Fig. 8). When he and I looked at it together, he remembered how strongly he felt himself respond to the poem. He said, “This conference touched some almost nostalgic memories for me of poetry, emotionally based memories that went back to Oberlin.” The poem also brought out Jonathan’s sense of himself as someone who lives within at least two cultures, for he is an American who has studied to become a fluent Chinese speaker and writer.

Running through his geometric drawing is what he calls the ”red arrow of time.” The red arrow connects different boxes, which, as he says, represent ”space or time, a
nexus of occurrences that are happening.” One box, which seems to reverberate forward into all others is labeled “language.” A circle, which sits behind a box labeled “Japanese High School,” has a question mark because Jonathan said he didn’t know anything about Yuki’s life, besides her presence in the writing center and her high school experience of reading the poem. ”Ezra Pound” labels a box in the center and represents the text at the center of the conference. That box is framed by other boxes, labeled, in the order that they surround one another, ”Writing Center,” and ”Clark University” and ”geography” (Jonathan’s discipline). Pointing at black boxes in the picture’s foreground that seem to come toward us, Jonathan said, ”These frames lower down are frames in the future, which are not yet set, but we can see where they might be because of the past and present.”

To me, it feels as if the conference went to many different spaces and times. Because Jonathan was aware of how he and the student were taken backwards and forward, something very different could happen in conference than might have happened had Jonathan disconnected from his emotional reaction to the text, and said to himself, I have an hour, how should I work at this poem with this student who must write an analysis? Jonathan embraced the relationship they could share in the present because of what they both knew about the text in the past. But he also did more than say, I’ve read this poem before, and I have some ideas for you. He let the poem carry the student writer and himself back in time. Each of them talked about their previous understandings of the Li Bai poem even as they worked at Yuki’s present day analysis of the Pound translation.

As Jonathan and I sat together looking at his picture of the conference, the empty boxes extending forward from the box representing the conference became more and more prominent to me. What did it mean, I asked him, to be so aware of many future directions in a conference that had grounded him so powerfully in his past? Why and how was he aware that there were so many directions their work together in conference could go, so many different directions that her essay could go, even though he had such specific experience with the exact poem she was considering? Why didn’t this become the model of an efficient conference, one in which he could quickly use what he knew to help Yuki meet the requirement she was facing? Jonathan pointed to all of the intersecting lines in his picture and noted the ways his past and Yuki’s past informed the blank boxes in the future of his picture. ”The past has a flow, too,” he said. ”The past is a structure because it is, as we know, unchangeable. The past determines the limits and boundaries of where something can go in the future. But our knowledge of the past, our understanding of the past, is always changing, if we let it.”
The next time the Clark tutors are frustrated at seeing the third or fourth or seventh paper from the same class, I want to bring up what Jonathan told me about how our experience of the past can change, if we let it. Sure, you've seen that assignment already, I'll say, and you've already seen one draft that answers the question well, so you know exactly how you can use the time you have in conference. But what if you tried to understand the assignment—and your experience with it—in a new way? What if you make certain to understand the experience each new student sitting beside you is having with the assignment? What if you allow your experience to change when you sit down in each conference even as you rely on what you know? What then? Time in conference may move entirely differently, even if you think you know exactly how you could use the hour you have.9

In Noise from the Writing Center, Elizabeth Boquet wonders if we might try to "recast our understanding of the nature of experience so that we might think of it, in terms of training, not as something someone 'gets'...but instead as something which is continually constructed and reconstructed" (80–81). She asks us to try to develop a model of staff education that "encourages tutors to 'voyage out,'" (80) to investigate new possibilities they might not have previously thought of just as we do as writers when we voyage out in Peter Elbow's loop writing exercise.

However, to encourage tutors to construct and reconstruct experience as she hopes we will, and to encourage tutors to "voyage out," we may also need to learn to talk about time and help tutors understand how to have the future available to them in the present of a conference. Boquet says she loves "the suggestion that two people make decisions about whether and how to invest themselves in what may appear to be sheer chaos and that those decisions, those investments, create an opportunity for a future, for a new relationship, for new ways of being together" (142). But she points out that tutors often have difficulty identifying moments when these decisions happen. No wonder, really, because we encourage our tutors to become better and better at conferencing through experience and repetition. As Donald Schon notes, it is only when we know how to do something really well that we "can execute smooth sequences of activity, recognition, decision and adjustment without having, as we say, 'to think about it'" (26). The third, or fourth, or seventh conference on the same paper assignment, for example, leaves us smoothly on auto-pilot for an hour.10

But, every now and then, we find ourselves faced with what Schon calls a "problem" of practice. As he says, a "familiar" strategy may create "an unexpected result; an error stubbornly resists correction; or, although the usual actions produce the usual outcomes, we find something odd about them because, for some reason, we have begun to look at them in a new way" (Schon 26). A student writer says no, or interrupts us with
questions that surprise us because they don't seem related to the written work, or reveals that she has been learning the whole time even though we might not have realized it. That disruption makes us more present in conference and aware of all that is in our presence. However brief or extended, these moments when student or tutor takes the work of the conference out of fungible time and into epochal time are obvious to us.

Schon describes those moments as moments when we identify a "problem." And when we notice a "problem," we name it for ourselves and "frame" it. "Through complementary acts of naming and framing" we select what we will pay attention to, and we are likely to change the way we are working "guided by an appreciation of the situation that gives it coherence and sets a direction for action" (Schon 4). If the tutors in the three stories I told had not named and framed problems in their conferences, had not stopped to appreciate the situation at hand, they would not have allowed themselves to voyage out from their familiar routines. I'm interested in these conferences because none of them became, or remained, rote. These were conferences with moments that surprised tutors, conferences in which tutors realized they faced what Schon would call "problems," and in the face of those "problems," tutors had made decisions that expanded their work. That Tamer and Jessi and Sandy and Jonathan invested themselves in the present of their conferences, that they committed to "making something" (Schon 31) of the conferences was what allowed them to do more, much more, than they could have ever believed they had time for. Schon writes that this "making" of something happens when a person "carries out his own evolving role in the collective performance, 'listens' to the surprises...that result from earlier moves, and responds" (31). He compares the process to "Edmund Carpenter's description of the Eskimo sculptor patiently carving a reindeer bone, examining the gradually emerging shape, and finally exclaiming, 'Ah, seal!'" (31). A writing center pedagogy that relies on clock-watching may not allow for such gradual and satisfying discoveries and may not allow for us to be surprised by the ways conferences change and develop before our eyes.

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When I think of the types of interactions we can have that make short bits of fungible time feel like endlessly satisfyingly learning experiences, I can not help but think of Norton Juster's The Phantom Tollbooth. Here's how The Phantom Tollbooth begins. Walking home from school one day, elementary school student Milo thinks to himself, "It seems to me that almost everything is a waste of time" (9). He "can't see the point in learning to solve useless problems, or subtracting turnips from turnips, or knowing where Ethiopia is or how to spell February" (9).

In his bedroom he finds a surprise package—a turnpike tollbooth, complete with tokens, a map, a book of rules and regulations and (my favorite accessory) three
precautionary signs, "to be used in a precautionary fashion" (12). Perhaps the guarantee in the box, one all of us in writing centers wish we could make, is what convinces him: "Results are not guaranteed, but if not perfectly satisfied, your wasted time will be refunded" (13). He closes his eyes, pokes his finger to the map and sets out in his toy car on a journey to Dictionopolis.

It doesn’t take long, even with a map, for Milo to find himself lost in the Doldrums, where his car slows and "it is unlawful, illegal and unethical to think, think of thinking, surmise, presume, reason, meditate or speculate" (24). The Doldrums, a resident tells him, "is where nothing ever happens and nothing ever changes" (23). In the Doldrums, Tock, the barking watchdog, races down the road toward Milo. The book’s illustrations reveal Tock is a dog like any other, except for the fact that he just happens to have a "loudly ticking alarm clock" embedded in his side, and he is "always sniffing around to see that no one wastes time" (28–29). Tock is an interesting and paradoxical traveling partner. He is ever vigilant of fungible time because of the clock embedded in his side (his alarm even goes off every now and again), but his clock also reminds him, and us, that we should seize time and value it.

I hate to ruin the ending of The Phantom Tollbooth for those who haven’t read it, but it is important to know that when Milo returns home after a book’s worth of travels and adventures with Tock (and the Humbug), he finds out he has been gone only an hour. He’d "never realized how much he could do in so short a time" (254), even with—or partly because of—the ever-vigilant Tock ticking away at his side.

The battery-powered clocks that hang in the Clark Writing Center tick-tock loudly, ever present reminders of time passing, inside and outside of conferences. Student papers will be due (and overdue). I will still mourn the two hours a day I lose to my commute to and from campus. But I want the tutors I work with to see what is possible even as the clock tick-tocks. I want them, whenever they can, for as many minutes or as few minutes as they can take, to look away from the clock, the due date, the mathematical tabulations in their minds of how much there is to do in the hours they have. I want them, instead, to find moments of exchange, or connection, or possibility, with students and savor these. I want them to use exchange, connection and ever present possibility to both structure and open up their conference hours.

If we accept that conferences have unyielding, pre-determined beginnings and ends but can still allow tutors and students to make up their minds as conference hours evolve, it may be that no time need ever really feel wasted. For if we embrace the notion of epochal time, we can also embrace the notion that conferences are defined by much more than the time that it takes to hold them.11
NOTES

1 Time was never intended to be the focus of any of these drawings. Though they were drawn in more than one staff meeting, the prompt continued to be *Draw a picture of a conference you’re left thinking about from this week.*

2 Thanks to the anonymous reviewer who pointed out *the shared sense—on the part of teachers worldwide and probably in perpetuum—that there is never enough time to do what needs to be done.*

3 Allen Bluedorn’s “fungible time” (27) is what Alan Lightman calls “mechanical time” (23). Epochal time is what Lightman calls “body time” (23). Asking “which type is the true time?” (35), Bluedorn can only quote Lightman: “Each time is true, but the truths are not the same” (qtd. in Bluedorn 35).

4 According to Robert Levine, who cites research done by Harry Triandis, a social psychologist at the University of Illinois specializing in individualism-collectivism, “individualistic cultures, compared to collectivist ones, put more emphasis on achievement than on affiliation” and this “time-is-money mindset...results in an urgency to make every moment count” (18). In “cultures where social relationships take precedence, however, there is a more relaxed attitude toward time” (Levine 18). It does not seem as if it would be a stretch to wonder if a writing center that stresses efficiency might be uncomfortable for student writers or tutors who identify as members of collectivist cultures.

5 Tamer had already tutored in the writing center for more than two years when he had this conference and drew this picture. The more experienced tutors become, the more they seem to be able to consciously and explicitly balance the epochal time of a conference with the fungible time of a conference.

6 In *Noise from the Writing Center*, Elizabeth Boquet tells us that “improvisation,” being willing to try something new on the spot in conference, “is largely about repetition, repetition, repetition” (76). The ability to improvise is “a consequence of expertise, of mastery and of risk” (76). In other words, having well-founded confidence, developed over the course of many, many previous writing center conferences (some successful and some unsuccessful), and having strategies that have already been road-tested in those conferences, may be what allows more experienced tutors to make new choices, choices that may seem, or even be, riskier choices.

7 Any of us who have tutored in a writing center could name off a number of regular, recurring conference scenarios. Thus, even when a new student writer presents new challenges—as every new student writer inevitably does—experienced tutors have strategies at hand, tricks saved in a “bag ‘o tricks.” An experienced tutor also knows what it would feel like to be surprised or uncomfortable or unsure, and thus when it happens, she doesn’t feel as if she uses as much time processing those feelings. She can acknowledge the feeling and move more fluidly and instinctively to a response.

This is just what graduate writing tutors described to me when they talked about the value of experience (Geller). They said once they learned to bring repetition to their conferences they gained confidence. Every choice they made in conference did not have to be an entirely new choice.

8 Direct quotations in this section come from interviews. Once I knew I wanted to think about tutors’ experiences of time, I began looking back through the pictures and thinking about stories tutors had told about their work with student writers. I asked three graduate tutors if they would talk with me in one-on-one interviews (Kvale, Seidman). In those interviews, which I audio-taped, I asked Jessi, Sandy and Jonathan to tell me about their work with particular student writers, at first with no emphasis on time. Then, in follow-up questions, I asked each to think about the relationship between the conferences and time.

Jessi never drew a picture of her work with Susie, but Sandy and Jonathan had drawn pictures of their work with Laura and Yuki. In my interviews with them, we also looked at and talked about their pictures. Finally, I asked each tutor to read the section of this text describing her/his conferences (see Seidman 54 for a description of this reviewing process). Consultants’ names are their own; student writers’ names have been changed to pseudonyms.

9 Jack Petranker wonders if “a different approach to being in time” might “make different knowledge” and “different experience available” to us (1). *Being in* local time, “the time of action and the time of experience, each informing the other” (3), means we must pay careful attention to our present, but we must also imagine the future as “always arriving.” Here is how Petranker describes it: “If we think of the
future as what has not yet happened, or as what will happen later, we will miss the dynamic that the future makes available... To recover the future and access the present, we must start with the presence of the future, with its 'always arriving'... It arrives as I tell stories, act out desires, form intentions, interact with others; it arrives no matter what I do. The future flows. Improvisation engages this flow" (6). As Petranker sees it, "The structures of the past must be integrated with the presence of the future" (6). A tutor must use past experiences to structure the present of conferences, but must also have an imaginative hold on the future in order to improvise. Petranker's theory suggests tutors must have a sense of how to integrate past, present and future and must have a desire to strive for this integration.

When our actions are "predicated on the idea that what will arise in the future can be determined and accounted for in advance," (3) we are working in what Jack Petranker terms "global time." So, if I respond "to the situation [I] find myself in," (4), as I might if I were to follow a pre-dictated tutoring script that told me how to act and respond in a certain kind of conference, I am in "global time." When we "act and respond to what's happening" (4)—when a tutor, for example, responds to all of the details of the conference she is in, as Jessi did with Susie, she is in "local time" (4). For Petranker, local time "is the time of action and the time of experience, each informing the other"; local time "starts with what is present and invites presence" (3), even as units of fungible time tick away.

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WORKS CITED


