

1-1-2010

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### Recommended Citation

Pemberton, Michael A. (2010) "Introduction to "The Function of Talk in the Writing Conference: A Study of Tutorial Conversation";" *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 30 : Iss. 1, Article 5.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1650>

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## Introduction to "The Function of Talk in the Writing Conference: A Study of Tutorial Conversation"

by Michael A. Pemberton

As hard as it may be for some of us to remember, in the early 1980's, research in rhetoric and composition was all about talking, transcription, and coding.

Though the detailed examination of verbal transcripts and composing-aloud protocols did not originate with Linda Flower and John Hayes ("Dynamics," "Problem")—they owed that research tradition, in part, to cognitive psychologists and linguists such as Newell and Simon, Nisbett and Wilson, and Labov and Fanshel—their studies of writers' composing processes were revolutionary for the time, dominating composition scholarship and setting the field's research agenda for nearly a half dozen years. Their work helped us to look at writing and writing processes through a new lens; we investigated student writing competencies and problems using new analytical tools and produced a wide array of descriptive models that helped us to understand, to some degree, how writers planned their texts, constructed a sense of audience, and made rhetorical decisions as they composed.

Interestingly, though, the cognitive process revolution in rhetoric and composition had relatively little impact on writing center studies. Muriel Harris ("Strategies," "Simultaneous") produced a few pieces that described students' writing difficulties in cognitive terms, and Geoffrey Chase wrote a short piece for *The Writing Center Journal* on "Problem-solving in the Writing Center," but for the most part, writing center scholars seemed content to ignore or overlook the thrust of this important work, preferring instead to focus on

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the sociocultural dimensions of tutor conferencing and to design research studies that employed qualitative rather than quantitative methodologies.

One of the things that strikes me about this piece by Davis, Hayward, Hunter, and Wallace, then, is how different it looks in comparison to other writing center research being published at the time, even in the same issue of *The Writing Center Journal*. It tends to follow the standard format of conventional scientific research articles (Method, Participants, Data Collection, Discussion), which is somewhat unusual in itself, but more significantly, its methodology—analyzing verbal conversations in terms of a theoretically-grounded coding scheme—is closely tied to a cognitive paradigm that had pretty much fallen out of favor in the rest of the field by 1988. In the years since this study was published, a few other writing center researchers (Blau, et al.; Black; Gilewicz and Thonus; Murphy) have analyzed transcripts of tutor-student conversations to study such things as self-presentation styles, gender conflicts, power relationships, and affective response, but the number and frequency of such studies are too few and too far between, I believe. If talk, conversation, and teaching are at the center of a writing center’s praxis and pedagogy, then it only makes sense that we should continue using every technique in our methodological tool kit to study and understand them.

Unfortunately, few researchers now seem willing to adopt this “lost” methodology, partly because they have never been trained to use it, partly because they mistrust—sometimes for very good reasons—any attempts to study or describe writing in quantifiable terms, and partly because the dominant research paradigm in writing studies now valorizes other tools for data collection and analysis. The authors of this article feel the sense of loss quite keenly. In a recent email, David Wallace lamented that “our discipline has moved away from close analysis of actual observed data...I think we’ve forgotten that data can surprise us and that careful reflection about data can help us to see things that get lost in the rush of the actual interaction.” Kevin Davis, too, feels that “We have a tendency . . . to either ignore our narratives completely (as much of comp/rhet research does) or to simply tell our stories (as many WC people love to do) without

seeing the narratives through analytic filters as valuable pieces of understanding (as our article attempted to do).”

“The Function of Talk in the Writing Conference: A Study of Tutorial Conversation” is, I think, an excellent example of what a well-designed analytical study of conversational narratives can reveal. We have long made the claim—*anecdotally*, for the most part—that writing center tutors occupy a liminal space between teacher and peer. This article works to define that space, describe its features, observe its operations in an authentic environment, and provide some concrete evidence to demonstrate the truth of that claim. Using a classroom analysis instrument constructed by John Fanselow, the authors examine four transcribed tutorial conversations, coding them in terms of six possible conversational moves: to structure (STR), to solicit specific responses (SOL), to respond to solicitations (RES), to react to responses (REA), to interrupt and assume control of the conversation (I+), or to interrupt but be overruled by the original speaker (I-). By comparing the features of tutorial conversations to typical teaching and non-teaching conversational patterns, Davis et al. are able to conclude that “tutors were not functioning exclusively either as peers or as teachers, but as a combination of the two” (32). That’s a valuable piece of information to know, and it’s all the more valuable in these days of “objective” measurement and assessment to have some empirical evidence to back it up.

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