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The Function of Talk in the Writing Conference: A Study of Tutorial Conversation

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Tutoring and conferencing have assumed important instructional roles as composition theory and practice have shifted from product-centered to process-centered approaches. The benefits of conferencing (Reigstad), of peer tutoring (Bruffee), of professional tutoring (Franke), and of group collaboration (Nystrand) have been presented and supported.

Research, however, has hardly begun to describe the nature of conversational interaction. Reigstad reports on an ethnographic study of conference approaches used by ten professors who regularly used conferences in their writing classes. He identifies three conferencing styles: teacher centered, in which the instructor takes control of the conference, directing focus and conversation; collaborative, in which the instructor and the student together design and negotiate the conference; and student centered, in which the teacher tries to draw the student into taking control of the conference. Reigstad is careful to point out that all three types are equally effective and accepted.

In other research, Gere and Abbott examine the language of peer writing groups to determine what group members talk about and to characterize their talk. The study indicates that most peer editing talk falls into two categories: 1) statements about content and the writing process and 2) questions about content.

In the present study, we extend Reigstad's research on conferencing styles to the writing center and compare writing center

conversation to Gere and Abbott's description of writing group conversation.

Method and Design

The study examined the oral interaction that occurred between undergraduate writers and graduate student tutors in the writing center at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Four conversations were analyzed, each involving a different student and a different tutor.

Participants

The four tutors, selected at random from the graduate tutors in the center, had different backgrounds. Karen was a non-traditional student who had recently completed an English BA and was working toward an MA; she had no teaching experience and was a first-semester tutor. Barb had ten years experience as a high school English teacher and an MA in literature; she was in her second semester as a writing center volunteer. Don had taught high school English for fifteen years and was in the second semester of a rhetoric/linguistics PhD program; he had no formal writing center training. Greg was completing an MA and had been tutoring writing for four semesters; he was extensively involved with the writing center's on-going tutor training program.

The students were also chosen at random. Doug, enrolled in an English composition section which used conferences and group techniques, had come to the writing center several times, but had not previously worked with Karen. Ken, enrolled in a group-oriented basic writing course, was required to come to the center, but he did not seem resistive. Jodi, a graduate student who saw herself as a basic writer, frequently visited the center and usually worked with the same tutor with whom she had negotiated a comfortable working arrangement. Cate, a second-semester freshman enrolled in her second course of English composition, came to the writing center for help on a specific research assignment after receiving feedback from her instructor on an early segment of the project.

Session Format

All four sessions were approximately 45 minutes long and followed a similar format, one described in the center's guidelines. The tutors began the sessions by trying to discover the nature of the assignment. They then set an agenda for the conference, attempting to draw out the writer's goals and priorities before proceeding. They began to work only after clarifying the assignment and establishing priorities.

Data Collection

We audio-taped each writing conference with the consent and knowledge of both the tutor and the writer. We used no specialized equipment, and tape quality was good, although background noise occasionally masked the conversation. Participants were aware of the equipment, but only in one case did that awareness cause any apparent hesitancy. The tapes were analyzed by pairs of listeners who collaboratively coded the characteristics of the conversations.

Development of the Coding System

To code the conversations, we selected the classroom analysis instrument devised by Fanselow ("Beyond"). Fanselow identifies four types of conversation moves: to structure (STR) the nature of the interaction; to solicit (SOL) specific responses; to respond (RES) to solicitations; to react (REA) to responses, solicitations, or other reactions. Fanselow's system was originally developed for use in ESL classrooms to compare classroom and real-world types of conversation. Although writing centers differ from ESL classrooms, we feel the principles in question are the same: is real conversation going on, or are tutors engaging in forms of teacher talk?

Fanselow's research indicates that most classroom settings follow similar conversational patterns, patterns which are different from those in non-teaching settings. In classroom patterns, the teacher (T) tends to structure the conversation, solicit the student's (S) knowledge, and react to the student's answers. Thus a basic classroom move pattern is T-STR, T-SOL, S-RES, T-REA. In non-teaching settings, the number of reactions—relatively equal exchanges—

increases greatly because the two speakers remain at the same level, neither assuming superiority over the other; a basic pattern of the speakers systematically reacting to each other (REA/REA) continues throughout the conversation. Neither speaker assumes control of the conversation. Since tutoring attempts to move away from teacher-centered talk to natural conversation, Fanselow's taxonomy applies well to the writing center tutorial.

By comparing our codings of the tutor/writer conferences with Fanselow's codings of teaching and non-teaching conversations, we hoped to discover if tutor/writer conferences follow teaching or non-teaching patterns.

We made one modification in Fanselow's coding system, adding two codes for interruptions: 1+ for interruptions in which the interrupter assumed control, transforming the conversation into one of Fanselow's purposes; and 1- for interruptions which were overruled by the original speaker. In one session in particular, Karen and Doug seemed to compete for speaking rights, frequently interrupting each other. We decided it was necessary to distinguish between interruptions which continued and those which did not.

The teacher/writer ratio of structuring, soliciting, responding, reacting, and interrupting remarks remained remarkably consistent throughout all four conferences.

Table 1 summarizes the numbers of moves.

Table 1: Number of each move type in each session

| | Session 1 Karen (T)/Doug (W) | Session 2 Barb (T)/Ken (W) | Session 3 Don (T)/Jodi (W) | Session 4 Greg (T)/Kate (W) |
|--------------|--|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| STR | 12/2 | 8/0 | 24/1 | 8/1 |
| SOL | 52/12 | 37/3 | 38/20 | 19/9 |
| RES | 10/46 | 1/37 | 20/49 | 10/21 |
| REA | 83/67 | 63/42 | 74/60 | 52/47 |
| 1 + | 3/3 | 0/1 | 11/4 | 1/2 |
| 1 - | 2/9 | 4/0 | 2/0 | 0/0 |
| Total | 162/139 | 113/83 | 169/134 | 90/80 |

Session 3 stands out because it shows several differences from the others: Don made twice as many structuring remarks as any other tutor; the number of sustained interruptions was considerably more than in other groups, particularly the number made by Don;

Jodi made twice as many soliciting remarks as other students. The increased structuring, sustained interruptions, and student soliciting might be explained by the relationship between the tutor and the writer: they had worked together several times, were familiar with each other, and had apparently negotiated this mutually satisfactory working arrangement.

In the other groups, however, differences were more isolated. Greg, for example, solicited only half as much as the other tutors, but these solicitations represented only a slightly smaller percentage of the total moves (17% for Greg, 21% average for all groups). Session 4 had fewer but longer exchanges. Only Karen repeatedly ignored student interruptions; all other students were allowed to continue their interruptive remarks. Karen, apparently, was trying to maintain control of the session by overruling Doug's attempts to establish direction. However, the percentages of move types within each group are representative of the overall percentages shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Percentage of each move type

| | STR | SOL | RES | REA |
|-----------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Session 1 | 5% | 22% | 20% | 53% |
| Session 2 | 4% | 21% | 20% | 55% |
| Session 3 | 9% | 20% | 24% | 47% |
| Session 4 | 5% | 17% | 19% | 59% |
| Mean | 6% | 21% | 21% | 52% |

Fanselow ("Breaking") analyzed the percentages of each purpose of communication for eleven teaching settings and five non-teaching settings. He found that teaching settings relied more heavily on structuring and reacting purposes (155). Table 3 shows the percentages of each purpose. Fanselow discovered in each setting as well as the percentage of purposes we discovered in tutoring settings.

Table 3: Comparison of percentages of move types in different settings (teaching and non-teaching settings are from Fanselow's study)

| | STR | SOL | RES | REA |
|--------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Teaching | 7% | 35% | 33% | 25% |
| Non-Teaching | 11% | 11% | 12% | 66% |
| Tutoring | 6% | 21% | 21% | 52% |

Communication purposes in tutoring settings fall between the purposes Fanselow found in teaching and non-teaching settings, as the numbers in Table 3 indicate. Apparently, then, tutoring settings represent unique situations which resemble both teaching and non-teaching situations, but which also differ from them. According to our findings, tutors occasionally act as teachers, structuring the conversation and waiting for the writer to respond; at other times, however, they act as participants in a conversation.

Discussion

Our findings compare in interesting ways to Fanselow's study. Tutoring talk appears to have qualities of both teaching and non-teaching talk. The tutors do a certain amount of teacher-patterned talk (T-SOL, S-RES, T-REA), but they also enter into lengthy sections of peer discussion, during which writers and tutors exchange reactions to each other and to the text at hand. In our samples, tutors were not functioning exclusively either as peers or as teachers, but as a combination of the two.

While Fanselow saw classroom talk as primarily following one distinct pattern, Reigstad delineated three distinct types of teacher-student conferences. However, we found much more gray area than Reigstad did. All four conferences we examined were clearly tutor controlled for most of the sessions, but in three of them the direction of control was arrived at through collaborative negotiation. Only in Group 1 did the tutor tend to reject writer input and dictate conference direction and focus. The other three sessions saw the writer grasping control on occasion. However, even though the writer took some control and negotiated direction, the tutor clearly was in charge in all sessions, controlling the pace and the focus of the conference.

It is interesting to note that Tutor 1, who appeared to be the most directive, had the least teaching/tutoring experience. Perhaps the more experienced tutors had developed a personally comfortable style while Tutor 1 was acting as she thought tutors should act; however, our study cannot confirm this hypothesis.

The tutors in this study were not currently classroom teachers

and did not hold the same authority as did the teachers in Reigstad's study. Perhaps, since the tutors were both older and more experienced than the writers, yet not complete authorities in the writers' minds, the tutors tended to negotiate positions of control rather than seize them.

Although the tutors were not teachers, they also were not peers. Just as these tutor-writer sessions differ from Reigstad's teacher-student sessions, they also differ from Gere and Abbott's peer response groups in both position and discussion. Gere and Abbott found that peers, when focusing on the writing, primarily made reactions, and only occasionally asked questions (62% reactions to 8% questions). The graduate-student tutors in this study, however, asked proportionately more questions (52% reactions to 21% questions). Although we did not code the subjects of the questions, they appeared to be fairly evenly distributed between questions of content, questions of process, and questions of intent.

Although our study answered several of our initial questions, it introduced several more which might serve as the basis for further research. First, we discovered that tutor/writer talk has characteristics of both classroom talk and non-classroom talk, as described by Fanselow. But the coding system did not distinguish between positive and negative, or neutral and opinionated reactions, and it ignored time dominance by speakers. A conversation which appears to be tutor dominated because of the number of moves might, in fact, be writer dominated if length as well as number is considered. Future studies might consider the intent as well as the type of speech and the length of exchanges as well as the number.

Second, we discovered that tutor/writer conferences seem less clearly oriented than the teacher/student conferences Reigstad described. But the difference in orientation might be caused by the nature of the participants. Of the sessions we examined, only Group 3 had worked together previously. Their session was marked by several differences, including increased structuring, and more soliciting by the writer. The clear delineation of roles might become clear as conferees grow accustomed to one another. Future studies might focus on the changes which occur over time as tutors and writers grow accustomed to one another.

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Third, we discovered that tutor/writer talk is oriented differently from peer group talk as it was described by Gere and Abbott. We did not, however, seek to discover if that difference was largely because of age, gender, role, cultural, or authority differences. Same-age peer tutors and writers might converse as Gere and Abbott's peer groups rather than as our graduate-tutors/undergraduate-writers. Future studies might examine the source of this difference.

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