The Role of Disciplinary Expertise in Shaping Writing Tutorials

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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1769

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The Role of Disciplinary Expertise in Shaping Writing Tutorials

Abstract

This study joins the debate over the effectiveness of generalist vs. specialist tutors by examining the role of disciplinary expertise in tutoring sessions. Analyses of student papers and session transcripts from tutorials with students from history and from political science classes, by faculty in the discipline as well as the authors, suggest a strong connection between a tutor’s knowledge of writing in the discipline, the quality of a session’s agenda, and a session’s overall effectiveness. In sessions in which tutors lacked disciplinary expertise, tutors were both less able and less willing to identify global issues, evaluate and challenge the writer’s point of view, ask effective questions, and draw general lessons. In sessions in which the tutor possessed disciplinary expertise, the opposite proved true. Disciplinary expertise did result in increased tutor directiveness, but this directiveness was used to facilitate rather than hinder effective collaboration. In the one session in which a tutor tried to appropriate the student’s text, the responsible...
factor was identified as expertise in the subject matter rather than general disciplinary expertise. The article concludes with a discussion of implications for hiring tutors, for more effective training of generalist tutors, and for further research.

Introduction

In writing center scholarship, the question of the value of tutor expertise has produced a hotly debated dichotomy, with generalist or specialist tutors praised or criticized. This debate has been largely theoretical, with few empirical studies examining how tutor expertise actually affects tutoring sessions. Complicating the conversation is how expertise is defined: expertise can refer to content knowledge, genre knowledge, disciplinary knowledge, or any combination of these. This question has important implications for writing center directors as they hire tutors, match those tutors with students, and prepare those tutors to work effectively in their roles, whether in writing centers or writing fellows programs.

The complexities of writing and tutoring suggest that any dichotomy necessarily oversimplifies the issue, so we decided to sidestep the debate over whether expertise is valuable and instead focus closely and objectively on how expertise affects what happens in sessions. We designed a study of tutorials with students from history and political science classes, focusing on the role of disciplinary expertise in sessions. Influenced by Michael Carter, we understand disciplinary expertise as the ways of knowing and doing that lead to particular ways of writing in a discipline ("Ways of Knowing"). To create some triangulation, we not only studied the students' papers and tapes of the tutorials ourselves but also asked three faculty members from each discipline to evaluate the effectiveness of the sessions and the role played by the tutor's disciplinary expertise. Our study suggests that in our writing center, sessions with tutors who have disciplinary expertise are often more productive than sessions with tutors who lack this expertise, in part because it allows them to be more directive in ways that enhance collaboration.
Expertise in Tutoring Sessions: A Review of the Literature

In writing center scholarship, questions about the value of tutor expertise are closely related to questions about the value of nondirective tutoring strategies. The earliest scholarship on the subject worries that disciplinary expertise leads tutors to dominate sessions. In her 1988 article, Susan Hubbuch notes that “the knowledgeable tutor is always tempted to jump to an evaluation of a proposed thesis or hypothesis in light of the tutor's knowledge of the field, inadvertently sending all sorts of negative messages to the student about her ignorance or incompetence” (27). Here Hubbuch conflates concerns about directiveness with concerns about expertise: expertise is dangerous precisely—even necessarily—because it leads tutors to take over the session, focusing more on the evolution of the paper than on the nurturing of the writer. This concern about directiveness was reinforced throughout the 1990s as much of the field embraced nondirective tutoring, with perhaps the most influential article on the subject being Jeff Brooks’s “Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work.” In “Who Holds the Pen?—The Writer, Naturally,” Theresa Ammirati adds an additional critique of directive tutoring: that it not only prevents writers from “learn[ing] to help themselves” (7), but also “has the potential to create problems with paper ownership that will directly affect concerns about academic honesty” (8).

But there have been dissenters. In 1988, the same year Hubbuch’s article appeared, Irene L. Clark argued for the usefulness of directive tutoring practices such as imitation and modeling, a position developed more fully in her article with David Healy, “Are Writing Centers Ethical?” Linda Shamoon & Deborah Burns connect this argument for directive tutoring to tutor expertise. Drawing on Kenneth Bruffee’s vision of writing centers as places where students can learn to engage in the “normal discourse” of disciplines, they argue that “directive tutoring lays bare crucial rhetorical processes that otherwise remain hidden or are delivered as tacit knowledge throughout the academy” (145). Judith Powers & Jane Nelson make a similar argument, questioning the adequacy of nondirective tutoring in sessions over discipline-specific papers: “This all-purpose, discovery approach to conferencing can clearly help writers with writing anxiety or writing process kinds of questions, but it does not help, and it may even dangerously mislead, writers with discipline-specific questions” (12). Accepting the need for some tutor expertise, Kristin Walker proposes that genre theory can help support tutors working in unfamiliar disciplines. She argues for creating a “middle ground between the poles of generalist and specialist” (28).
by introducing tutors to the cultures and textual features of writing in a variety of disciplines.

A similar debate over the value of generalist vs. specialist tutors appears in the literature on writing fellows programs. Tori Haring-Smith, whose fellows program inspired many other campuses to create similar models, initially made a case for using writing fellows who are generalists. Over two decades later, Carol Severino & Mary Trachsel offer continued support for this position. Analyzing assignments and interviewing faculty in their program, they find that writing assignments at their university do not necessarily draw on disciplinary traditions, so “there may be more similarities than disciplinary differences in the undergraduate writing assignments instructors give.” Correspondingly, most of their writing fellows “preferred the generalist over the specialist position,” leading to their conclusion that generalist writing fellows may help to “restore WAC’s balance by recognizing, highlighting, and valuing discourse similarities as well as differences.”

However, other directors of writing fellows programs make a case for hiring specialized tutors whose disciplinary expertise allows them to provide more focused support for writers. Margot Soven reports in WAC for the New Millennium that

[i]n the early years of curriculum-based peer tutoring programs, most programs followed Brown [University]’s approach of assigning tutors to courses outside their major. My 1997 email follow-up survey of some of these programs indicates, however, that these programs have either become more flexible or they have completely abandoned this practice. The program directors I surveyed agree that knowledge in the discipline is an important factor when assigning tutors, but they take into account other variables as well. (211)

Mary Soliday reaches this same conclusion. After exploring the many contributions a generalist tutor can make to a WAC class when the fellow has knowledge of “writing in the course,” she still posits that “[l]inking tutors to courses in their majors surely enhances their work (and their confidence), and therefore is advisable whenever possible” (32). Similarly, Jill Gladstein, reporting on a two-year case study of writing fellows placed in an introductory biology course, concludes that “[w]riting associates can often do much as generalists to support student writers, and in many cases this is all that is needed; however, in the context of a writing fellows program we may be able to do more when we attach knowledgeable tutors to courses.”
Much of the literature on generalist vs. specialist tutors and directive vs. nondirective tutoring, no matter what the argument, draws on a philosophy informed by experience or theory rather than empirical data. Both Hubbuch and Shamoon & Burns, for example, construct their opposing views of the nature of expertise in tutoring sessions based on their personal experiences as writers and/or tutors. The few empirical studies that have been done challenge the effectiveness of generalist tutors. Jean Kiedaisch & Sue Dinitz’s study of the role of expertise in twelve tutoring sessions finds that “the only tutors who worked successfully on the global level were knowledgeable tutors” (69). Jo Mackiewicz, examining the role of expertise in four sessions over engineering papers, observes that nonexpert tutors focused inappropriately on surface features of the text, gave erroneous advice about those features, and gave that advice with certainty, while the tutor with expertise “was better able . . . to give specific and useful guidance to her tutee—even while allowing the student freedom to make his own decisions about his writing—and to build rapport with him as well” (317) by employing more nuanced politeness strategies. Similarly, Summer Smith’s study of the differences in responses to technical papers by engineers and general writing instructors concludes that readers with expertise were better able to evaluate the validity of the ideas in a given text (53).

Study Design

Hoping to add to the scholarship examining the role of disciplinary expertise in tutoring sessions, we designed an empirical study to draw on two sorts of data: tapes and transcripts of tutorial sessions in two different disciplines (history and political science), and disciplinary faculty focus groups. Collecting data in this fashion allowed us to examine the structures of sessions and the tutoring moves at work, as well as to juxtapose our own analysis of expertise with disciplinary faculty’s sense of expertise in their fields and in the sessions.

With the approval of both tutors and tutees (and the Institutional Review Board), we taped the sessions and made a copy of any drafts brought to the sessions. Students were assured of anonymity (their names were removed from the papers and tapes before anyone read or listened to them). Thus, we do not have demographic data about the students. Whether the tutor had disciplinary expertise was a matter of chance, as students making appointments at our writing center aren’t matched with tutors with expertise unless they request this.
We were confident that all tutors had at least an adequate level of general tutoring expertise. Each tutor is carefully selected by Sue Dinitz through a faculty recommendation and interview/application process. In the fall, new tutors take a three-credit English course on tutoring writing (taught by Sue) that introduces students to general best practices in tutoring, including discussions of the roles of the peer tutor, negotiating an agenda, and ways of engaging students in various aspects of the writing process (followed by a three-credit spring course that focuses on reflective practice). Beginning in the third week of the semester, tutors work for three hours each week in the writing center. By March, when taping began, all the tutors had at least one and a half semesters of tutoring and course experience and had emerged as competent tutors, with their sessions rated as successful by students in exit surveys and by Sue Dinitz in her regular review of tutors’ performance.

Seven students agreed to have their sessions taped, three working on papers for political science classes and four on papers for history classes. It turned out that in three of the sessions the tutor lacked knowledge of writing in the discipline, as evidenced by a lack of coursework in the discipline. This judgment was later confirmed by faculty from the discipline, who, with no information about the tutors beyond what they heard in the tutorial sessions, rated these tutors’ level of knowledge of writing in the discipline as 2 or 3 on a scale of 1 (“Beginning”) to 5 (“Sophisticated”). In session 1, the tutor was a double major in environmental studies and English, working with a student on a paper for an introductory course on American history. In session 2, the tutor was an English major, working with a student on a paper for a mid-level political science class. In session 3, the tutor was a sophomore global studies major working with a student on a paper for another mid-level political science class.

In four of the sessions, the tutor did have disciplinary expertise, as evidenced by the successful completion of multiple courses in the discipline; this judgment was also confirmed by faculty listening to the tutorial sessions, who rated these tutors’ level of knowledge of writing in the disciplines as 5, Sophisticated. In session 4, the tutor was a political science major, working with a student on a paper for a different mid-level political science class. In session 5 the tutor was an anthropology major who had taken several history courses, working with a student writing a paper for a mid-level history class. In sessions 6 and 7, the tutor was a history major, working with a different student in each session on papers for mid-level history classes.

For our own analysis, we each separately coded and analyzed transcripts of the sessions for (a) structure, identifying the topics of
conversation and where those shifted; (b) who initiated each topic of discussion and the shifts in topic; and (c) the types of tutoring moves, such as asking a question to set or shift the agenda, giving direct advice, summarizing a discussion, and asking a question to push consideration of a topic further. Then we looked for relationships between these patterns and the tutor's knowledge of writing in the discipline, noting where expertise seemed evident or lacking and considering how this might be connected to the session patterns and tutoring moves we observed.

To provide additional perspectives, we recruited three faculty members from each discipline to evaluate the tapes and papers and analyze how disciplinary expertise affected the sessions. (Tutees were told that faculty from the discipline would listen to the tapes and read the papers, with identifying markers removed, and that we would involve faculty members only after the semester was over so there could be no impact on a student's grade.) In the summer, we sent audiotapes of the sessions and copies of the papers to the faculty, and they filled out two rating sheets for each session, one evaluating the effectiveness of the session in terms of its likelihood in resulting in successful revision, and a second evaluating how, in their view, an understanding of writing in the discipline played a role in the session. Following that, the faculty members met as a group (by discipline) to discuss the sessions and compare their observations. We taped these discussion sessions and facilitated the conversations.

Faculty Assessment of the Connections Between Disciplinary Expertise and Tutorial Effectiveness

Table 1 demonstrates the clear connection faculty saw between a tutor's knowledge of writing in the discipline, the quality of a session's agenda, and the likelihood that the session would help the student move forward with the writing project.

Table 1: Faculty Ratings of Tutoring Sessions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paper</th>
<th>Tutor's disciplinary expertise</th>
<th>Quality of session agenda</th>
<th>Likelihood that session results in useful action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 History</td>
<td>3, 2, 3</td>
<td>3, 3, 5</td>
<td>2, 2, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Pol. Sci.</td>
<td>2, NR, 3</td>
<td>3, 3, NR</td>
<td>2, 3, 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the first three sessions, faculty members from the discipline rated the tutor’s disciplinary knowledge as 2 or 3, somewhere between “Beginning” and “Intermediate.” In these sessions, faculty rated the agenda most often as 3, “Addressed relevant but not key issues” (with two 4s and one 5 from faculty who felt there were so many issues at the sentence level that it made sense to start there), and the likelihood that the writer left the session understanding key areas for moving forward most often as 2 or 3, somewhere between “Unlikely” and “Possible” (again, with two outlier ratings reflecting confidence that the paper would be improved at the sentence level). On the other hand, in the next four sessions, all three faculty members from the discipline rated the tutor’s disciplinary expertise as 5, “Sophisticated.” For these sessions, they rated the agenda as either 4 or 5, close to “Addressed key issues,” and rated the likelihood that the writer left the session understanding key areas for moving forward as generally 5, “Very likely” (with two of the twelve ratings as 3, “Possible,” reflecting a concern as to whether the student could implement the ideas discussed in the session).

To tease apart this strong connection faculty saw between a tutor’s disciplinary expertise and the likelihood that the session would lead to significant progress on the paper—to examine how disciplinary expertise played a role in the sessions—we turn to our own analysis of the transcripts and papers as well as the faculty comments on the sessions.

How the Absence of Disciplinary Expertise Matters

In our analysis of session patterns in the transcripts, we expected to find several different patterns, given the mix of tutors, students, classes, and
disciplines represented in our sample. We were quite surprised to find that there were only two underlying patterns—and that one pattern was shared by all the sessions with tutors who lacked disciplinary expertise, while the other was shared by all the sessions with tutors who possessed expertise. All of the sessions in which the tutor lacked disciplinary expertise had a set of common characteristics:

- The agenda focused on local rather than global issues.
- The tutor accepted the student’s statements and assessments; there was little pushback to the student’s point of view.
- The pattern of the sessions was linear: the tutor and student went through the paper addressing local issues as noticed by one or the other, worked to resolve each issue, and then moved on.
- There was little extended discussion and little recursiveness—little going back to previous topics to reconsider them.
- Moments arose when the focus could have shifted to a higher order concern—the tutor could have asked more questions, extended the discussion—but instead the tutor retreated from such moments and moved on to the next local concern.
- The tutor didn’t generalize from the particulars to provide lessons or strategies for the writer.

We can see this pattern in operation in the excerpt below from session 1, over a paper for an introductory class in American history. The tutor is a senior majoring in environmental studies and English. The assignment is to analyze if and how attitudes toward the Vietnam War changed, using a collection of letters written by soldiers during the war. The tutor and student have just finished reading through the paper aloud.

Tutor: Cool. It has gotten long. We should have stopped earlier, but that’s okay. So, let’s really quickly, before we get back into this, try to just put together an outline, just to make sure that we’re going from point A to point B. So in your intro, we’ve got what you identified as your thesis, which is this guy . . . that American soldiers’ view of the war in Vietnam changed from spreading of ideology to staying alive. Cool. So what’s going on in the next paragraph? What would you say your main point is here?

Student: I mean, I think I did a decent job of planning it out, because before I wrote it I planned it out.
Tutor: Do you have an outline?
Student: Yeah . . .
Tutor: Do you feel like that transition is clearly made in this paper?
Student: This transition?
Tutor: The transition from pride to fear?
Student: Um, yeah, I tried to make it clear, do you think it’s understandable?
Tutor: I think it’s understandable. I guess maybe it’s my lack of
Student: Just knowledge?
Tutor: real knowledge of, but I wasn’t sure if, as I was reading this, I was kind of waiting for an actual event to take place. And it almost sounds like what happened here was time dragged on.
Student: Yeah, that’s what did happen, pretty much.
Tutor: And, yeah, so maybe we can figure out a way to really bring that to the forefront, because all of a sudden, you know, they were proud . . . but then they’re not. So I was like, wait did I miss a moment? . . .
Student: Uh huh.
Tutor: Okay. So, what would you, how would you like to spend the next half an hour? Pulling out the awkward sentences?
Student: Yeah, definitely changing those around, because I feel like I have good expression in what I’m trying to say, it’s just that the awkward sentences are making it hard for the reader to kind of understand it, because they’re tripping themselves, you know.
Tutor: Okay, so let’s then, instead of worrying about the structure of the paper, you seem comfortable in the structure, let’s just look at the sentences.
Student: Yeah.

In setting the agenda, the tutor asks a question about a global issue in the paper, suggesting that the paper doesn’t make clear when and how the soldiers’ feelings changed, which should be the paper’s central point. The student writer seems confident with the paper as it is—he planned the paper, he tried to make the transition clear, he feels as if he has good expression. It’s the awkward sentences that are problematic to him. The tutor accepts the student’s assessment and so moves on to consider local issues, even though it’s clear from her comment that she noted that the paper in its current form does not address the assignment. For the rest of the session, the two go through the paper, taking turns identifying awkward sentences and trying to improve them. The session ends
with the tutor affirming the lack of global issues and without the tutor highlighting any general strategies for addressing awkward sentences.

In analyzing the session's structure, we found that the session proceeds very linearly, with the tutor and student moving through the paper and picking out sentences to discuss, one by one. There is never any connection between one topic and the next; the conversation proceeds issue by issue, with each small point tidily resolved before the next sentence is taken up. In listening to the session, faculty members from history identify this same pattern. While one of the history faculty members admires the patience with which the tutor works through the paper with the student on the sentence level, the other two share a concern that the tutor addresses local issues when global issues are present. One professor explains her 3 rating for the appropriateness of the agenda ("Addressed relevant but not key issues") as follows:

Most of the session ended up focusing on awkward phrasings in the paper. Those were clearly an issue, both stylistically and in terms of obscuring the student's meaning. But there were also larger issues in the paper, that were probably more important to the overall grade of the paper, which I think should have been dealt with. One was organization . . . . Another was the attribution of general sentiments to wide swaths of population without evidence.

Similarly, another professor rates the appropriateness of the agenda as 3, explaining "There was a ton of stuff wrong with the paper, so pretty much anything would help, but the most important thing to me was that the student's evidence was not used effectively—in particular, the evidence and body of the paper did not support the thesis. That issue wasn't covered."

Both professors attribute this tutor's failure to address global issues to the same cause: the tutor accepts the writer's assessments of the paper and fails to push the writer to make needed global revisions. According to the first professor, "The tutor deferred too much to the student's judgments. When she asked if there were organizational issues and he said no, she accepted that rather than point out problems." The other professor echoes the first: "The tutor gave up/in quickly . . . The tutor let some fairly significant issues slide when she appeared to meet with a bit of resistance from the student."

As readers might imagine, we found this linear structure focused on sentence level concerns both surprising and alarming. The tutor preparation courses, readings, and staff discussions all suggest exactly
the opposite: that in many contexts tutors should consider global before local concerns, and that when addressing local concerns, tutors should look for patterns of error rather than addressing issues one by one. In their weekly session description and reflections and in conferences to discuss their sessions, all three tutors had demonstrated the ability to set an appropriate agenda, dealing effectively with global and local concerns. Why would all of these tutors follow this same pattern, doing the opposite of what their preparation and past experience suggest? Faculty directly attributed the inattention to important global concerns to the tutor’s lack of disciplinary expertise. For the session on the paper about letters from American soldiers in Vietnam, one history professor explains that

[the tutor demonstrated] a lack of awareness of how historians use evidence, and what kinds of claims you can make based on different kinds of evidence. This was evident in the fact that the tutor never talked about evidence at all, and indeed skipped over all the quotes when they were working on the paper, even when many of them were very badly integrated into the prose . . . . I’d actually say that it was pretty important that the tutor didn’t understand writing in history, as it led her to miss what would be a key aspect to the success of the paper—the use of evidence. This was to me a striking example of how a tutor can really benefit from knowing the discipline more, since this tutor—who didn’t know the discipline—missed key issues of what background context was important/necessary here, what kinds of evidence advance the thesis, and what kinds of claims can be made on the basis of that evidence.

In evaluating another session in which the tutor lacks disciplinary expertise—session 3 over a paper analyzing to what extent France is a stable, representative, and liberal democracy—a political science professor provides further insight into how the tutor’s lack of knowledge of the discipline might explain the pattern of these sessions. He critiques the tutor for a variety of problematic moves related to lack of disciplinary expertise:

- Missing global issues: “Tutor left some issues unaddressed, such as the excessive focus on institutional specifics, and the student’s lack of concentration on themes of stability, liberalism and representation.”
• **Inaccurately assessing the paper**: “Tutor also encouraged [supported] language use that was problematic, in light of how concepts are used in the discipline.”

• **Failing to see what to include/cut**: “Tutor is not cutting ancillary information unrelated to the question—i.e. lengthy descriptions of institutional design.”

• **Asking unhelpful questions**: “Tutor does not seem to have a grasp of some basic disciplinary issues—meaning of stability. [e.g., Tutor asks:] ‘Do you want to make the point that it has lasted a long time?’ [Professor’s comment:] Of course, that’s the assignment.”

• **Giving incorrect feedback**: “Some problematic suggestions, esp. comments regarding stability and liberal democracy.”

We saw these same problematic moves in all three sessions in which the tutor lacked disciplinary expertise. Without knowledge of the conceptual framework, key terms, and disciplinary expectations for the paper—and without the confidence and authority linked to that knowledge—tutors seemed both less able and less willing to identify global issues, to evaluate the writer's statements, to challenge the writer's point of view, to formulate questions that would push the writer’s thinking and extend the conversation, and to draw general lessons. Instead, the tutors retreated to areas where they felt more confident: addressing local concerns related to grammar and usage, punctuation, documenting sources, and creating transitions.

**How Having Disciplinary Expertise Matters**

For the four sessions in which the tutor did have disciplinary expertise, our analysis of the transcripts revealed a pattern that is almost an exact counterpart to the pattern above:

• The agenda focused on global issues, not local ones.

• Rather than accepting students' input (e.g., a proposed session agenda) at face value, tutors considered it in light of their own analysis.

• Tutors pushed back when they judged students' ideas to be limited and/or limiting.

• Tutors pushed students to go further by asking questions to extend discussion.
The sessions had recursive, not linear structures. Conversation returned to the larger issues and larger goals throughout the session.

At various points, tutors drew general lessons from the session.

We see this pattern in operation in the excerpt below from session 5, over a history assignment to analyze what challenges the Enlightenment and Emancipation posed to the Jews of Western Europe. Here, the tutor pushes back against the student’s plan for her paper, a plan that reflects the student’s lack of understanding of writing in the discipline of history.

Student: What I think would be a good idea is to kind of summarize, like write a summary leading up to the nineteenth century, just a quick overlook of why they’re repressed and things like that.

Tutor: Yeah, yeah. That makes sense.

Student: Especially because he gives a lot of emphasis during the class on how Christianity had an effect on Judaism.

Tutor: Okay.

Student: So I was going to write about that, because I’m assuming that’s what he wants in there because he talks about it all the time during class, so then I was going to [describes a few more ideas]

Tutor: All right, well, I like your idea of maybe summarizing some historical stuff kind of going before the Enlightenment. But maybe, I don’t know, let me get a better look at the assignment just really quick.

Student: That’s like literally it.

Tutor: That’s like your question, yeah, sure. Alright, so: “What challenges did the Emancipation and the Enlightenment pose to the Jews of western central Europe?” Okay. And: “How did they respond through the middle—.” Okay, yeah. So, yeah, so I guess you don’t want to focus too much on that kind of summary stuff.
After they discuss the number and types of sources required, the tutor continues:

Tutor: All right, so, what you're going to want to do is draw—he says in here, and it makes sense that you don't really just want to summarize what's going on.

Student: Right.

Tutor: You need to make some sort of an argument.

Student: Yeah.

The tutor comes back to the notion of summary vs. argument repeatedly in the session. A history professor notes this recursiveness, commenting, "The tutor then keeps circling around those two things repeatedly, trying from new angles to understand possible approaches to the question, and trying to put together the different bits of information that she [the student] brought up into some coherent whole."

Indeed, our analysis shows that the session structure is recursive throughout. The conversation loops around, exploring ideas while keeping focused on the main goal of finding a way to approach the assignment. Throughout the first part of the session, tutor and student consider different options for answering the question or for finding more information, continually returning to the assignment sheet, first as they explore options for approaching the assignment and then as they search through class materials for ideas to include in the paper. Eventually they reach a point where they discuss emailing the professor with specific questions about the assignment. They then move on to work through four possible plans for the paper, each time returning to the tutor's understanding of constructing an argument for a history paper to come closer to an approach that will fulfill the assignment. The student leaves with a clearer understanding of the assignment, a plan for the paper, an intention to check this plan with the professor, and the confidence to start writing.

What explains this very different session pattern? In their evaluation of the session, the professors connect the pattern directly to the tutor's understanding of writing in the discipline. One rates "the extent to which the tutor's understanding of writing in the discipline was important to the session" as 5, "Very important," because it facilitated the tutor's "pushing her [the writer] to have an argument and not just a summary paper" and to see "the importance of putting in historical context." While in the session over the history paper about the Vietnam War, faculty noted how lack of disciplinary expertise resulted in a variety of problematic tutor moves, in this session, their
comments reveal how that expertise facilitated successful moves that ultimately allow the student to address the paper’s global issues. Because of the tutor’s understanding of writing in history, the professors noted that he could:

- **Provide information and guidance about writing in the discipline:** “I thought this [the tutor’s understanding of writing in the discipline] was pretty important . . . in offering helpful reminders of what the expectations for a paper would be, how to structure her argument, etc.”
- **Ask good questions:** “The tutor did a fantastic job pulling the question apart, trying to get the student focused on change over time, and talking about essay structure. He also asked good questions about the expectations/directions for the assignment . . . [H]e asked the right questions to get the student to tease out the argument.”
- **Assess the student’s ideas and when the student isn’t correct, push back rather than defer to the student:** One faculty member applauds the tutor for “pushing her to have an argument and not just a summary paper” (what the student had proposed). Similarly, another applauds the tutor for “steering her away from a pro or con argument about Emancipation [again, what the student proposed] to instead analyze a major change . . . and how that produced certain reactions.”

While in this session the student demonstrated a lack of disciplinary expertise, we identified an almost identical pattern in another session in which the student demonstrated that she possessed disciplinary expertise. But here, the “push-back” move required by the tutor became a “push-forward” move, pushing the student to go further in her thinking and improve her paper. The excerpt below is from session 6 over a history paper analyzing how a nineteenth-century political cartoon portrays evolving notions of civilization in the American sphere of influence.

They have just finished reading through the introduction of the paper:

Tutor: Okay, that’s good. You’ve laid out, I mean, you’ve addressed the question that Dr. Phelps is giving you in the form of a thesis, and you’ve kind of laid out where you’re going to go, so I like it.

Student: So this one’s fine?

Tutor: Yeah.

Student: [reads more]
Tutor: Okay, that’s good too. One thing that I’ve been trying to stress in all of these sessions is this idea of what is civilization. Because, let’s see, you say “the argument is Uncle Sam who represents the American government, is teaching the class the art of civilization.” So, where in the cartoon does it kind of lay out what civilization is, according to America in this period?

Here the tutor makes what prove to be two signature moves. He first praises the student’s work, and then pushes the student to do more: to clarify and expand on the concept of “civilization” and to look more carefully at the evidence for her ideas. Throughout the session, this pattern repeats. After offering a favorable assessment of the student’s text, the tutor asks the student for more evidence, more text analysis, and more complex and precise presentation of the concept of “civilization.” In each segment, the tutor asks questions, such as, “That’s kind of a key question: ‘Who is and who isn’t civilized?’” and “Who belongs in white civilization and who doesn’t?” Toward the end of the session the student asks, “I’ve read the whole thing, but does it seem like I’m supporting the argument, in that you don’t have any questions about, like—’Well she said she was going to do this and where is it?” At this point, the tutor offers his own assessment but then suggests and models a strategy that will allow the student to check this for herself: “Why don’t we go back to your thesis really quick and just make sure that it’s all addressed kind of thing for thing.” And that’s what they proceed to do, a process that results in very dense and detailed conversation because both tutor and student have a great store of expertise to draw on.

As in the other sessions in which the tutor had disciplinary expertise, faculty connect the success of this session to the tutor’s disciplinary expertise. A historian summarizes her overall evaluation of the session as “a great session, in which tutor and student were both well aware of the expectations of the discipline, and worked clearly to help rework the paper to fit those expectations more directly.” Faculty note how expertise allows the tutor to accurately assess the draft, ask good questions, assess the ideas proposed by the student during the session, push the student to go further, and provide key knowledge about writing in the discipline that the student is lacking and needs in order to move forward with the paper.

The Issue of Tutor Directiveness

As we noted in our review of the literature, tutor directiveness, viewed as a quality that leads tutors to appropriate writers’ ideas and texts, has

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Published by Purdue e-Pubs, 2022
been the chief concern of scholars who argue that disciplinary expertise can be a danger. Our faculty participants and our own analysis of the sessions suggest just the opposite: the ineffectiveness of the sessions in which the tutors lacked disciplinary expertise comes in part from the tutors' failure to be directive enough. The effectiveness of sessions in which the tutor had disciplinary expertise comes in part from the tutor's ability to push back and push forward. However, the concerns about directiveness expressed by scholars such as Hubbuch and Ammirati did emerge in the faculty evaluations of one session.

In session 7, the assignment was to explore the challenges faced by the Allies as they began the occupation of Germany in the spring of 1945. Although the tutor is the same one who worked so effectively with the student on the paper about evolving notions of civilization in session 6, here two of the three faculty members wonder whether in this session, the tutor might have been too directive. One professor at first applauds the tutor for focusing on global issues, but she writes in her notes:

- "[Tutor's] sense of impatience a concern?"
- "Student understands what is needed: thesis—3 or 4 points to develop; able to clearly discuss material and ideas—does not need to be constantly 're-questioned.'"
- "Student concerned about addressing 'allies'; tutor keeps pushing U.S.-U.S.S.R.: Big Concern re this: is this the flip side of having some knowledge in field?"

Interestingly, when we analyzed the session structure, we found that it followed the same pattern as the other "expert tutor" sessions but became a parody of it. The tutor addresses global issues, evaluates, then pushes back (and forward) on the student's agenda and ideas, and returns to key issues, creating a recursive structure. In this case, however, the recursiveness is more like a tug of war between the tutor's and student's agendas and ideas, and little progress is made in the second half of the session; the student doesn't achieve a broader understanding as the issues are discussed in layers of increasing depth. What happened?

The student comes to the session with a clear agenda: to identify three points for the body of his paper. As they begin, the student discusses his first point: differences between the democratic approach of the United States and Britain and the communist approach of the Russians to the occupation of Germany in early 1945. But here, the tutor's background knowledge in history allows him to quickly envision this as a possible framework for the entire paper rather than as...
just the first point. He proposes this framework using the plural we, thus obfuscating the source of the framework and appropriating the paper as a collaborative project: “already we're starting to get a framework here. So, we can formulate our paper ... as talking about two different sides.” In the next portion of the session, they do identify three subpoints for the thesis, but the tutor keeps returning to his own idea for a thesis based on the student's first point only. A second professor expresses concern about this tutor’s directiveness but suggests that it's knowledge of the specific content area rather than disciplinary expertise that leads the tutor to be too directive. However, she also sees some benefits to this content knowledge: “It seemed like the knowledge of WWII history almost got in the way here, leading the tutor to interpose his own ideas and interpretations when the student was flailing around a bit. On the other hand, that knowledge also kept the student on track, preventing him from straying off the topic of the assignment to include issues from a later time period.”

Interestingly, this same professor makes a similar observation about the Jewish Emancipation session, but in the contrasting situation of the tutor having disciplinary expertise but lacking content knowledge. Here she notes how the tutor's lack of content knowledge, combined with his disciplinary expertise, contributes to the session:

I actually thought that this was one of those places where the tutor's lack of knowledge . . . worked to his advantage. He said repeatedly at the beginning of the session that he really didn't know anything about this topic . . . . What that did here, in my hearing of it, was force the student to try to articulate both the concepts (Emancipation, Enlightenment, etc.) and the context (what happened in the 18th and 19th centuries) more directly than she might have had to do otherwise, had the tutor been more versed in European history. That said, I thought that the tutor was pretty clear about what a good history paper would need: evidence, a thesis (not just a list), a direct response to the paper assignment, and historical context. So, even though he didn't know this specific period/topic in history, he seemed pretty well familiar with what the key components of a good [history] paper would be.

These sessions leave us revisiting concerns about disciplinary expertise. Directiveness can indeed be a problem in tutorial sessions. It's certainly possible that some tutors with expertise may appropriate a student’s ideas or text and do the work for the student. But in light of
the sessions we've studied, we see the potential problems resulting not so much from *disciplinary* expertise as from *specific content* knowledge.

In our analyses of the sessions, disciplinary expertise did result in increased tutor directiveness, but this directiveness was generally used to facilitate rather than hinder effective collaboration. Expertise allowed tutors to more accurately analyze students' ideas, drafts, and input throughout the sessions, and then to push back when the students' analyses were based on a faulty understanding of writing in the discipline. With expertise, tutors were able to implement the core lessons from their tutor training. The push-back move did not take the form of telling writers what to do but rather of redirecting their focus and then engaging them in discussions and activities that led the writers to see how to move forward with their papers. The faculty analysis of the sessions dovetails with our own. The faculty also saw disciplinary expertise as facilitating a type of tutor directiveness that did not impose ideas and choices on the student, that was not only helpful but allowed a collaboration that was crucial to the success of these sessions.

In our small sample, content knowledge seems to be a complicating factor. When the tutor above who possessed disciplinary expertise in history was in a session where he lacked content-specific expertise (the session engaging the topic of evolving notions of civilization), he was immensely helpful, asking questions that helped the student push her own ideas further. It was only in the session where he also had content-specific expertise (session 7, engaging the topic of the Allies' occupation of Germany), that he crossed a line and developed a vision for the paper that he then had difficulty seeing beyond. Our analysis of these sessions suggests that different components of expertise in tutoring might be teased apart so we can help tutors use their expertise most productively.

**Conclusions and Implications**

This close study of seven sessions raises interesting questions for further research. The consistency of what we saw in all seven sessions suggests that within our local context, a tutor's disciplinary expertise does matter. The faculty members' perspectives matched our own analyses: for sessions centered on assignments that were intended to help students learn how to write—and think—in the discipline, the tutor's disciplinary expertise shaped sessions in key ways:

- It enabled tutors to accurately assess student papers and opinions/remarks.
• It equipped tutors to set an appropriate agenda when there were global issues.
• It enabled tutors to ask good questions that helped students to identify and address key issues.
• It allowed tutors to extend discussions by providing relevant information and asking follow-up questions.
• It gave tutors the confidence to bring the writer back to central issues, looping back around and through core issues as the tutor continually reinforced the session agenda.
• It empowered tutors to push back against student misunderstandings about the assignment or material or attempts to gloss over faculty expectations.
• It empowered tutors to push even knowledgeable students to higher levels of understanding and writing ability.

Conversely, without knowledge of the discipline, tutors often deferred too quickly to students’ inaccurate assessments and opinions, even when the tutor sensed a more productive direction for the session. Tutors too readily got involved in addressing lower-order concerns when higher-order concerns were present, too readily agreed to go through a paper sentence by sentence rather than thinking holistically, and too readily moved on to a new concern rather than returning to a central concern until the student understood the issue and how to move forward with their paper—the same pattern partially observed in past empirical studies of generalist and expert tutors by Kiedaisch & Dinitz, Mackiewicz, and Soliday.

Disciplinary expertise seemed to permit interplay between general tutoring strategies and disciplinary discourse, leading to more effective sessions. This fits with Carter’s review of the role of general and local expertise in problem solving. In “The Idea of Expertise: An Exploration of Cognitive and Social Dimensions of Writing,” he suggests that both general and local expertise play key roles in learning and describes the value to writers of both general knowledge of writing and local (including discipline-specific) knowledge of writing. We do provide tutors with extensive theory about and practice with general knowledge of tutoring through our training course and subsequent staff meetings. However, in sessions where our tutors lacked disciplinary expertise, they seemed to “forget” their general knowledge about effective tutoring practices. Our study suggests that it was perhaps the lack of expert intuition—the lack of disciplinary knowledge—that prevented tutors from accessing the full range of tutoring strategies they had at their disposal.
Moreover, this presence or absence of expert intuition was linked to tutor directiveness, which emerged as a key to effective tutoring in these sessions. Many of the limitations we noted in sessions related to directiveness, with the tutor's lack of disciplinary expertise causing them not to be directive enough or the tutor's content knowledge leading them to be too directive. One key connection between directiveness and disciplinary expertise seemed to be tutor confidence: tutors without disciplinary expertise often had inklings that the paper and session needed to move in a different direction but seemed to lack the confidence to push back on students' ideas, assessments of their work, and goals for the session. While tutors with disciplinary expertise exhibited rich and creative ways to deal with moments of possible conflict, tutors without expertise retreated very quickly to areas with which they were more comfortable, often sentence-level concerns. As the tutor in session #2 explained in reflecting on her session, “If I could do this again, I would have paid much more attention to the way the content in the middle portion of the paper was directly relating to the central question. Economics, for me, is not an area of expertise, so I might have overlooked some sentences because I didn't completely understand them . . . . While I feel like some knowledge of politics has helped me in political science sessions before, in this one I felt much less helpful because it was more focused on economics, which I have never known much about.”

Can these insights into how our tutors' disciplinary expertise played a role in their tutoring sessions provide any guidance as we try to make the most effective use of our talented tutors? In our local context, we see many practical implications. Since our writing fellows program is designed to support students in advanced courses learning to write in the discipline, it makes sense to continue using tutors with some disciplinary expertise in this role. This is especially true because, unlike in some writing fellows programs, we do not have the resources to pay mentors to attend the class except occasionally. (In other settings, generalist tutors who attend classes might be able to attain course-specific knowledge that could partly address limitations resulting from not being in the discipline.) Even as we continue to use specialist tutors in our WID Mentor Program, our study suggests we need to add an additional element to our mentor preparation. Since such tutors are more likely to encounter situations where they possess some content knowledge, discussion and role playing about the temptations that come with content knowledge—to be too directive, to impose ideas on the session, writer, and paper—seem especially important.
In our writing center, on the other hand, trying to regularly match students with tutors in their discipline would bring on a logistical nightmare. Fortunately, our study suggests these sessions can often be effective even without this matching. We were reassured that some of the problematic moves of the tutors lacking disciplinary expertise could perhaps be mitigated through targeted tutor training. For example, we could help tutors become more aware of how their implementation of general tutoring strategies may be affected by their disciplinary expertise. Tutors could learn to use their general tutoring knowledge to begin imagining ways to be helpful even when they lack disciplinary expertise. And with this fuller awareness and some practice, tutors might gain the confidence to be more assertive in these sessions rather than so quickly abdicating responsibility to the tutee. A unit on methods of conflict resolution could help them resist feeling intimidated when a tutee working on such a paper presents views that conflict with their own. It could also provide them with a repertoire of possible responses, including the polite and sophisticated push-back techniques we observed being used by our tutors with disciplinary expertise.

Finally, we hope this research project will inspire other writing center and writing program directors to engage in similar empirical studies, as the role of disciplinary expertise seems fundamental to our understanding of what happens in many tutoring sessions. Additional local studies could shed light on the contextual factors affecting disciplinary expertise and tutoring, such as what other factors in tutor and student experiences interact with the tutor’s disciplinary expertise in shaping tutoring sessions. Despite the long history of debate on the issue of generalist vs. specialist tutors, because of the hugely varying contexts in which writing centers are located and the strong influence of that local context on what happens in and what works best for any one writing center, our understanding of this topic will remain limited until additional empirical studies can inform our theoretical positions and frameworks.

*We are grateful to the faculty members who made this study possible through their thoughtful analysis and evaluation of the sessions and their participation in the focus group discussions, including, from history, Jacqueline Carr, Abby McGowan, and Nicole Phelps, and from political science, Ellen Andersen and Alec Ewald.*
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