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Rebecca Block

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Rebecca Block

Disruptive Design: An Empirical Study of Reading Aloud in the Writing Center

Abstract

A quasi-experimental study of three different reading methods across multiple writing center sessions indicates that our field's concerns with who reads writers' papers may be overstated, and that the bigger factor influencing the types of writing issues initiated by writers and tutors is the reading method itself. Specifically, having tutors read using a method dubbed "point-predict," adapted from a study of peer review methods by Barbara Sitko, appears to cause both writers and tutors to initiate far more discussions of global issues like content and organization than when either writers or tutors read papers without directions as to a reading structure. This finding indicates that our lore about who reads, how, and to what effect merits significant investigation. More broadly, this article also suggests that we can design our studies to disrupt our lore-influenced expectations by incorporating disruptive elements from the beginning, and concludes by advocating the replication of existing studies in new or larger contexts if we want to begin to build real knowledge about how our practices work, and why.

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Introduction

The recent call from writing center scholars for further research, especially empirical research, to investigate our commonly held beliefs about our work is well known (e.g. Isabelle Thompson, Alyson Whyte, David Shannon, Amanda Muse, Kristen Miller, Milla Chappell, & Abby Whigham, 2009; Rebecca Babcock & Therese Thonus, 2012; Dana Lynn Driscoll & Sherry Wynn Perdue, 2012). This call has even led to realizations that the call itself is not new, as John Nordlof (2014) points out by referencing an old, lesser known, Stephen North piece (1984) that calls for more empirical research into writing center work. This suggests that what's new is not the call, but our willingness to do something about it—the plethora of engaged workshops on the topic of RAD research in writing center work in the 2015 IWCA Collaborative is evidence of this.

Some recent pieces have added to this general call a specific advocacy for *how* we need to engage in reconsidering the work of our field. Nordlof (2014) points out that our theories often don't function as theories should—that they fail to "provide a broad explanation of the processes that underlie the surface phenomena that can be observed" (p. 48)—and suggests bringing in theories from other disciplines to help us see our work anew, especially those from educational psychology. Roberta Kjesrud (2015) advocates that in order to avoid lore bias in our empirical research, we need to "triangulate key theoretical concepts with those from other disciplines" (p. 41)[1]. Though this advice to look outside our disciplinary boundaries is a good one, it elides an equally important suggestion on how to disrupt our established narratives about writing center work: We should attend to research that has been overlooked within writing studies itself, including research that has already drawn in and applied theories and practices from other disciplines, and replicate and extend that research in new contexts.

In particular, it may prove helpful to review lesser-known research of composition classroom practices to find ideas we might fruitfully carry into writing center studies. Bringing in overlooked research can help us intentionally design studies that prompt us to compare our habitual practices with unfamiliar ones, thus helping us avoid trapping ourselves in the frame that lore places around our practices. If we deliberately create circumstances to invite data that cannot fit into existing paradigms, we will see our work in new ways.

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[1] Kjesrud also suggests we "apply exploratory rather than prescriptive lenses" (pp. 43-45), "cultivate multiple perspectives during data analysis" (pp. 45–48), and "frame research in terms of learning" "rather than practice" (pp. 48–49).

This article demonstrates the potential of that kind of research design through discussing the methods, results and implications of a study of reading methods in writing center sessions. Just as Kjesrud and Nordlof apply their principles to a well-worn and over-tired debate in our field about the directivity continuum, this research seeks to build on their work by investigating another writing center truism that is ripe for inquiry: It is generally preferable to have writers read their own work aloud in writing center sessions. The goal of this article is not to answer the question implicit in that truism—who should read?—but instead to explore how empirical research can prompt us to re-examine the assumptions that underlie truisms like this one.

Much like the directivity continuum, who, how, and why writers' papers should be read is a topic of ongoing disagreement amongst writing center professionals. Unlike the directivity continuum, however, our published literature does not reflect that debate. Tutor education manuals generally make short suggestions to have writers read in most circumstances purportedly in order to promote writer engagement and control and to decrease the likelihood that the tutor will end up focusing on primarily local concerns (e.g. Toni Caposella, 1998; Paula Gillespie & Neal Lerner, 2000; Leigh Ryan & Lisa Zimmerelli, 2010). The only published conversation on this practice is a piece by Paula Gillespie (2002) exploring the relationship of WCenter (an established writing center list-serve for professionals and tutors) and lore that, appropriately, uses a discussion of reading practices as its central example. Gillespie's examination, as well as subsequent discussions of the topic on WCenter, reveals more debate about reading practices than tutor education manuals imply. For example, in an extended discussion on the topic that occurred in 2009, some writing center professionals suggest writers should read aloud (e.g. Tamara Miles Gantt; Rebel Palm; Dana Prodoehl), some make the argument that silent reading is preferable (e.g. Michael Lapointe; Katie Levin), and some that they prefer having tutors read over writers (e.g. Barbara Biasiolli; Muriel Harris; Susan Mueller; Deborah Rankin). The reasons given by all of these participants for their stated preferences varied widely. Toward the end of the discussion, there was a call for more research into the actual effects of these different practices (Kerri Jordan; Steve Price), a call that seemingly went unanswered.

The focus in these debates was generally on who did the reading because many seem to believe "who" does the reading predicts an outcome; there were also some references to the "how" and "whether" or "when" of various reading methods, but only in the form of side-debates about whether silent reading is or is not appropriate.[2] This absence is significant, because an interesting study by Barbara Sitko (1993) on "interpretive reading" indicates *how* students read one another's work aloud can have a big influence on peer review.[3] Interpretive reading structures the review process by having readers read aloud and pause every time they come across something they think is a main point. They summarize this point in their own words and then predict what they expect will come next. Writers, meanwhile, keep notes on what readers say, where the summaries and predictions diverge from what they intended, and what questions the reading generates for them.

The following example of this practice, adapted[4] and dubbed "point-predict" here, comes from a transcript of a writing center session recorded for my study. For ease of reading, the summary and prediction elements are italicized:

> **Tutor**: [Begins reading the writer's text] "Located on a lone white wall in the [name omitted] Art Museum lays a portrait entitled 'Emma Suarez' photographed by Alberto Garcia Alix. It is a photograph that on the surface looks to be just a woman with an expressionless face against a gray background, but upon further interpretation could prove to be... the black white good versus evil aspect portrayed throughout the photograph." [Stops reading] Okay... I find this "black white good versus evil" abstract to be confusing... in the way the words are lined up?

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[2] Though the focus of this study is on the "how" of reading aloud, a broader discussion of whether/when to have anyone read aloud—or when to have anyone read *at all* (as opposed to just discussing the work with the writer)—is also needed if we want to fully explore the range of options available and the most effective context for each.

[3] For other potentially useful studies to adapt and apply to writing center research, see the collection of articles Sitko's piece is published alongside in the book *Hearing Ourselves Think*. Many of these studies use think-aloud protocols as pedagogical tools that showed very interesting preliminary results. As such, they are still very useful, even though this type of research in composition fell out of favor with the critiques of the shortcomings of think-aloud protocols as indicators of an actual view into the mind of a writer.

[4] My adaptation consisted simply of condensing the training process involved in the use of this method. In Sitko's study of peer review, all students were trained in the use of this method as both readers and writers across multiple class meetings, a process she describes in detail in her study. Due to the nature of writing center work, however, where a writer might conference only once during a text's composing/revision process, the training had to be focused solely on the tutors. Writers were informed about the method of reading that would be employed in their session when the session started through having tutors read a standardized one-paragraph script to the writer.

> **Writer**: Right
> **Tutor**: That said, *I'm interpreting what you're saying is... that the purpose of this paragraph was to locate me in the setting of the Art Museum and to show me this particular picture, Emma Suarez, and also I sense that you're kind of main subject matter is going to be the connection of the subject matter to the blackness and whiteness of the picture—*
> **Writer**: Right
> **Tutor**: *And so... my prediction here is that the following paragraph is going to be picking up with the black and white theme and kind of expanding it.* Okay. [Resumes reading writer's text].[5]

The purpose of the method is to help writers see how meaning is actually communicated to readers, giving writers specific information about where to revise their text if it failed to communicate their intentions. In Sitko's study, students who employed this method in their peer-review groups developed a stronger sense of rhetorical awareness and found the workshops, and the revision process, to be more productive than prior peer-review experiences that had not been so structured, making it a promising method to investigate in a writing center setting.

Thus, the study discussed below examines the comparative effects of three reading methods, writer-read, tutor-read, and point-predict, on the types of writing issues discussed in a tutoring session and who initiates these discussions; it finds that the reading method appeared to have a very strong effect on what types of issues were discussed within tutoring sessions, particularly on what types of issues the writers themselves brought up in those sessions. However, the goal of this article is not only to offer preliminary evidence about the actual effects of reading practices on tutoring sessions, but also to illustrate how introducing a less-familiar idea from writing studies into an empirical study of writing center practices helped to disrupt the story the data might have otherwise told, a story that would have only reinforced old truisms about engagement and global concerns.

Methods: Coded Transcripts and Surveys

Using quasi-experimental research methods (Charney, 2002), I investigated these three methods of reading aloud—writer-read, tutor-read, and point-predict—by recording and transcribing 24 tutoring sessions and gathering post-session surveys.[6] Four tutors and 24 students participated in this study; each tutor conducted two tutoring sessions in each method, and all the writer-read and tutor-read sessions occurred before tutors were trained in the point-predict method so that training wouldn't influence their practices. The tutors were all female graduate students in English; the writers included both men and women, both native and non-native English speakers, and a range of first- through fourth-year undergraduates (and potentially some graduate students; some students did not answer the question as to their year in school, and the writing center at which this study occurred sees graduate students each term).

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[5] In order to present this quote more efficiently, speech placeholders, such as "um" were removed from transcript quotes.

Session transcripts. The session transcripts were broken into topical chains. A topical chain was judged to end whenever the area of the paper being discussed was changed. So, for example, a new topic change would be marked whenever the writer and tutor switched from discussing one paragraph to another. Each topical chain was coded for the initiator (whether the tutor or writer initiated the new topic) and the number and type of writing issues discussed. A writing issue was defined as any explicit disjuncture between the paper as it was and as it might be. Topical chains with writing issues could contain up to four writing issues, though most contained fewer. Table 1 shows the seven issues discussed in this study.

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[6] Unfortunately, the study was unable to conduct analyses of writers' revisions to their papers. Writers were given the opportunity to send their revised papers, along with their answers to a post-revision survey, to the researcher for an additional $10 compensation. The goal of this option was to provide further information about the actual effects of the sessions on writer revision, to see whether different reading methods lead to a difference in revision strategies. However, since only eight writers decided to do this, and six of these eight were writers from tutor-read sessions, which essentially eliminated the ability to compare effects across session type, the revision component of the study was dropped. Ideally, future research conducted on a larger scale might be able to incorporate a study of writer revisions to further our knowledge of the effects of different reading approaches in tutoring sessions on the actual revision process of writers.

Table 1: Seven possible writing issues within topical chains

Code	*Definition*	*Examples from transcripts*
Content	Any discussion of the actual subject matter of the paper, as it is or as it might be. This includes discussions of the need for further content, such as explanation, in body paragraphs or the conclusion. Discussions of content frequently occur with discussions of other global writing issues.	Tutor: Yeah, because this last sentence, "In the end it results in a teenage pregnancy all because the parent wasn't there." That does sound like the other things you were talking about, particularly emotional unfulfillment. Maybe instead focusing [on] what they're actually not getting from the parenting. & Writer: Should I explain what that means? Tutor: Yeah, I felt like that was vague.
Evidence	Any discussions on the use of or need for support in a paper. This can include discussions on how to incorporate or change the use of research within a paper, where the writer might want more support for claims and why, or what form of evidence is needed or already in use.	Tutor: But if you have, you know, like one or two really memorable quotes, I think that might enhance it. & Writer: That was going to be touched on in the research... but the research didn't make any sense to me, so I'm having a really hard time.

Code	*Definition*	*Examples from transcripts*
Signposting	Any discussions of the use of or need for forecasting what appears later in the paper. Most commonly this involves discussion of the introduction (especially the thesis statement), topic sentences and transitions, or subheadings.	Writer: Okay, so I should maybe have a transition right there? & Tutor: I saw a few things that could be the thesis, so point out what you're going for as a thesis.
Organization/ Structure	Any discussion of the layout or order of sections that cannot be classified as signposting. Broader than signposting.	Writer: I knew this paragraph wasn't in the right spot. Yeah, this needs to go after that.
Syntax and Diction	Any discussions on the syntax or diction that is currently in the paper or that might be in the paper.	Tutor: "all in the past" sort of struck me odd... 'cause it's like you're referring to all... teachers... but "all in the past," kind of sounds like you're talking about a period in the past.
Citation Style	Discussions of the requirements of any citation style, such as MLA, APA, etc.	Writer: I know I have to fix my MLA, but I was just gonna hurry through.
Grammar, Spelling, or Punctuation	Discussions of any rules of or mistakes in spelling, grammar, or punctuation, as well as small formatting issues.	Writer: Okay, I'm gonna change that too... Tutor: Yeah, exactly, just the subject-verb agreement.

Transcript coding results were primarily examined for trends in the occurrence of different kinds of writing issues amongst the different tutors and session types. Trends in the numbers of turns and topical chains with or without writing issues were also examined, as were trends in who initiated topical chains with writing issues and what kinds of issues were initiated. These results were then analyzed for validity using chi square statistical tests, and those results with statistically significant *p* values are discussed here. Additionally, a professional in writing studies was given five full transcripts, randomly selected, to code for initiation and writing issues in order to test the reliability of the coding scheme; the inter-rater reliability of this process was 95.6%.

Surveys. At the end of all tutoring sessions, both writers and tutors completed surveys. Writer surveys, in addition to gathering demographic data, asked for the writer's evaluation of the session and what types of writing issues the writer believed received the most attention during the session. The survey also asked writers to rate and discuss the portion of their session spent reading aloud. Tutors were asked similar questions about their perceptions of their sessions.

The Likert scale responses to writers' surveys were analyzed with ANOVA statistical tests. Responses to the open-ended question "What was most helpful?" were analyzed by coding writers' responses for up to three topics. These topics were chosen based on what writers actually mentioned, and included codes such as "content," "citation style," "reading method," and "audience." All codes were checked by a secondary coder. Only topics perceived by both raters were included for analysis.

Results: Reading Methods Influenced Types of Issues Initiated by Both Tutors and Writers

Point-predict Sessions Led to a Greater Focus on Global Issues. As Table 2 and Figure 1 illustrate, the point-predict method catalyzed the greatest focus on global issues and the least focus on local ones. Almost two-thirds of the topical chains containing writing issues in point-predict sessions addressed organization or signposting, notably higher than the 40% of chains in writer-read sessions and only 15% in tutor-read sessions. A slightly less dramatic, but still similar, pattern is evident regarding discussions of content or evidence as well. Table 2 also reveals that sentence-level issues played a far smaller role in point-predict sessions than in writer-read or tutor-read sessions. In point-predict sessions, only about a quarter of topical chains addressed sentence-level issues; in writer-read sessions, over half of topical chains addressed these issues; and in tutor-read sessions, approximately three-quarters of topical chains addressed these issues. Overall, this data suggests that point-predict sessions focused greater attention on global issues than local ones and that, between the more standard methods, writer-read sessions are more balanced across local and global issues than sessions where the tutor simply reads the paper aloud without a structure like point-predict.

Table 2: Type of writing issues (as a percentage of topical chains containing writing issues) discussed in the three types of sessions.

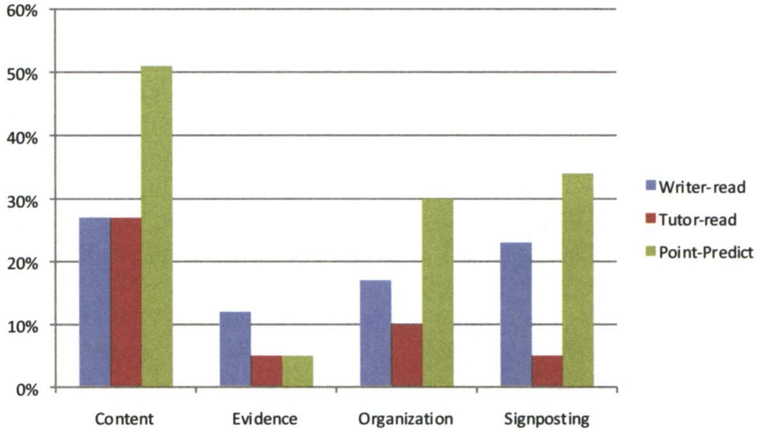
Condition	*Sentence level or formatting*	*Content or evidence*	*Organization or signposting*	*Other (including unclear)*
Writer-read	58% (n=111)	40% (n= 77)	40% (n= 77)	27% (n=51)
Tutor-read	76% (n=117)	32% (n= 49)	15% (n= 23)	21% (n=32)
Point-predict	28% (n= 51)	56% (n=103)	63% (n=116)	19% (n=34)

Note: Because a topical chain could have more than one writing issue, percentages add up to more than 100%

Figure 1 illustrates the trends surrounding the discussion of global issues across session type in more detail, showing that point-predict sessions addressed issues of content, signposting, and organization substantially more often than the other two session types. Particularly striking is the difference in signposting. Figure 1 indicates that signposting, a hallmark of successful academic writing, came up as a topic of discussion in about a third of the topical chains containing writing issues in point predict sessions, whereas it was only discussed in about a fourth of these topical chains in writer-read sessions and in a mere five percent of these topical chains in tutor-read sessions. The prevalence of this topic in point-predict sessions is perhaps unsurprising, since the focus of the method is on the reader's ability to summarize what has been discussed and predict what will be discussed next, and signposting is a crucial way of allowing readers to do this well.

Perhaps more surprising, then, is how Figure 1 reveals that discussions of content were about twice as common in point-predict sessions than either other reading approach, given that the point-predict method doesn't appear to focus on content as obviously as it does organizational and structural issues. However, an analysis of the transcripts indicates that this is likely the result of writers and tutors identifying confusing or insufficient content as a source of difficulty in summarizing points or making predictions, thus leading to discussions on revising that content.

Figure 1: Percentage of topical chains containing writing issues that discussed concerns with content, evidence, organization, and signposting across the three session types.



Note: Because a topical chain could have more than one writing issue, percentages add up to more than 100%

The following exchanges illustrate how point-predict methods can lead to discussions of a paper's content. The first exchange occurs after the tutor, Clarissa[7], finishes reading and summarizing the main point of one of the body paragraphs in the writer's paper:

> **Tutor**: One thing I was a little bit unclear about, since your last sentence says 'this is one of the first documented accounts of Christian persecution,' how exactly is it that this story illustrates Christian persecution?
>
> **Writer**: I guess 'cause—I guess I didn't really make it that clear because it was clear to me, but I didn't just write it out, but like where I had he was in prison for, like, protesting how the legal

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[7] All names have been changed to protect participants' anonymity.

> union of the marriage so that like because of his Christian beliefs he was in prison and like because Herodias didn't believe in those Christian views she wanted him beheaded.
>
> **Tutor**: Ok. So I think you could add something—
> **Writer**: More about that? (Transcript 9, turns 50–53)

As this excerpt illustrates, Clarissa pointed out confusion with the connection between what the writer indicated was her main point and what her content actually seemed to express. In doing so, she initiated the discussion of how to revise the content of that paragraph. In another point-predict session, the tutor, Kathleen, comments on how a mix of both unexpected content and varying structure across the last few paragraphs is confusing her.

> **Tutor**: Ok, so we have kind of a repeat of the structure of the first paragraph, with kind of a visual analysis of an element of the painting and then a thematic element drawn from that. Whereas the thematic of the last paragraph was, you know, everyone's life is not going to be perfect, the thematic of this paragraph was that good will triumph over evil. *So, I'm wishing that these different, um, analyses of the visual elements worked together for one thematic—*
> **Writer**: right
> **Tutor**: *—so I'm not able to really make a prediction of what you're going to do next, because you seem to be doing something different in each one.*
> **Writer**: And I see that now, since you pointed it out. (Transcript 14, turns 101–104, emphasis added)

Kathleen directly connects her inability to make a prediction with the confusing changes in the content (and the variance in the structure). Exchanges like these two were common in point-predict sessions, and they support the conclusion that the nature of the point-predict method elicits a stronger focus on the content of writers' papers as part of the way to address concerns with the overall organization, structure, and clarity of the text.

Writers initiate different kinds of issues depending on the reading style employed in the session. While the transcripts showed that the total number of writer-initiated topical changes did not vary significantly across the three reading methods (writers initiated between 34–38% of topical chains containing writing issues across all session types), Table 3 illustrates that the *types* of issues initiated by writers *was* significantly influenced by session type, showing an even more significant difference in how the point-predict method varied from both writer-read and tutor-read in influencing writers' tendencies to initiate discussions of global writing issues.

Table 3: Percentage of writer-initiated topical chains containing writing issues that addressed varying writing issues across all three session types.

Condition	*Writer-initiated topical chains addressing organization or signposting issues*	*Writer-initiated topical chains addressing content or evidence issues*	*Writer-initiated topical chains addressing sentence-level or formatting issues*
Writer-read	23% (n=17)	30% (n=22)	59% (n=43)
Tutor-read	19% (n=11)	34% (n=20)	54% (n=32)
Point-predict	63% (n=40)	54% (n=34)	24% (n=15)

A look at the transcripts illustrates a variety of ways in which this trend took shape. For example, sometimes writers would interrupt the reading, seemingly prompted by a summary or prediction made by the tutor, to ask a question or offer an idea about how they might revise to improve the organization or content of their paper, such as in the following example.

> **Tutor**: [finishes reading one paragraph] Okay, it seems like right now the main point of this paragraph is saying that TV is not always right, because there are a lot of money considerations that don't go into it.
> **Writer**: Mm-hmm.
> **Tutor**: Okay. [Begins reading new paragraph]. "Another reason why teenagers do not see teenage pregnancy as a negative thing is because they want to grow up faster."—
> **Writer**: Should I maybe include in there [initial paragraph] "looking up." I don't know if I said that or not. Like they look up to her [Jamie Lynn Spears, who was discussed in the initial paragraph] because I know a lot of kids did... 'cause she had a Nickelodeon show. And the parents—
> **Tutor**: Yeah, I think that would be interesting.
> **Writer**: —were mad because, you know, she's supposed to be an idol to their kids, and now she's pregnant. (Transcript 18, turns

> 134–141)

Writers initiating ideas about how to revise their content, as happens in the above example, were not uncommon in point-predict sessions. At other times, writers would initiate discussions of these kinds of issues once the point-predict reading had been completed. What follows are several illustrative examples of this tendency from a variety of writers:

> Do you think that my conclusion goes with the thesis? Because I don't know if I should refer back specifically to the painting or if I should, like, some people—like before with other papers I've referred back to the quote that I've used... I don't know if I should do that, and add more about—I guess I don't know, I feel like I rushed through the conclusion. (Transcript 9, turns 89–91)

> I think I probably need to look at a more developed conclusion... with more transitioning here... you know, with all this, maybe this is too much information. (Transcript 16, turns 237–241)

> What I'm trying to do here is explain how... education will rise up. But you have this major rift between urban and rural, and like here, at the start, I'm just trying to give a background of which way it was going and then lead into this is how education is looked at... and then here are the many things that deal with education. But I don't want people to look—because their education is a little different than ours—but all in all I didn't want people to look at it and say—like here [in the U.S.] we look at education as this [traditional schooling] is education—and I didn't want it to look like that. (Transcript 17, turns 96–100)

Again, these examples show that writers initiating discussions of how to re-evaluate their content was far more common in point-predict sessions.

Finally, some of the transcripts seem to indicate the possibility that the point-predict method itself helps writers and tutors notice the same global issues, thus allowing writers to initiate discussions that, in a different kind of session, tutors would be initiating. In other words, if the tutor is the only one to notice the issue, she has to initiate the discussion of it to explain a concern the writer doesn't yet see. For example, in the following excerpt the tutor, after finishing a point-predict reading of the writer's paper, reads a note from the professor about which the writer had previously expressed confusion and frustration.

> **Tutor**: "You have a good interpretation, pretty well supported. The lack of a clear thesis statement, and a poor structure to the paper, don't bring out the interpretation very well, however." ... What do you think after hearing me read this [the paper and the note] aloud?
> **Writer**: I think I can see where I messed up with the structure. *It's like with your predicting what's going to come next and then it's completely off... So, yeah, I see what I could do better to it.* (Transcript 14, turns 147–152, emphasis added)

Here, the writer explains how hearing the tutor summarize points and offer predictions helped her see why her structure wasn't working, when she had begun the session by saying she was baffled by her professor's note. The writer reiterates the significance of the point-predict method to her again about 30 turns later.

> **Writer**: I have one quick question. I really wanted to write down, you know how you were predicting what was coming? ... Can we go through, like you know you'd go to a paragraph and predict and then it was completely different ... I wanted to ... go through and ... get some kind of order to the paper? (Transcript 14, turns 188–194).

The writer found the tutor's predictions a clear way of conveying why her "structure" was not supporting her "good interpretation." Furthermore, her initiation of this topic makes it unnecessary for the tutor to try to go into explaining what the writer's professor might have been referring to and why it's an issue: The writer now understands the issue and is ready to tackle a discussion of how to revise for it.

Surveys reinforced transcript results. Table 4 indicates how writers' perception matches trends in the transcripts in terms of the attention to organization found in point-predict sessions and attention to sentence-level issues in tutor-read sessions. In general, writers felt that point-predict sessions focused more heavily on organization than other session types, and that tutor-read sessions focused far more on issues like grammar and spelling, all of which confirms the trends found in the transcripts. Tutor survey results indicated similar results.

Table 4: Average writer response across session type to the survey question "This consultation addressed ways I could revise for:" out of a 1–5 Likert scale, where 1 represented "Focused on a little" and 5 represented "Focused on a lot."

Condition	*Organization*	*Grammar/Spelling*
Writer-read	3.25	1.38
Tutor-read	2.75	3.75
Point-predict	4.38	2.00

Session-type heavily influenced what writers found most helpful. The type of session a writer experienced made a big difference in how they responded to the post-session survey's open-ended question about what the most helpful portion of their session was. As Table 5 shows, half of the eight writers in point-predict sessions noted without prompting that developing an awareness of their audience was one of the most helpful elements of their sessions. Meanwhile, none of the writers in the tutor-read or writer-read sessions referenced their audience when asked what was most helpful about their session.[8] What follows are a couple of illustrative excerpts from writer responses to point-predict sessions when asked what was most helpful about their session:

> Her opinion on the message I was trying to express [because] *now I know how others see what I'm saying.* (Session 9, emphasis added)
> After every paragraph I was getting feedback...it helped me to understand what *other people* are getting from my paper and things I could change. (Session 18, emphasis added)

These responses would suggest that writers in point-predict sessions not only became more aware of their writing as an object intended for an audience, but that they specifically valued this awareness over other things that occurred in the session.

Table 5 also indicates that more writers in point-predict sessions saw the reading method itself as most helpful than did writers in writer-read or tutor-read sessions. Five point-predict writers, again without prompting from the survey, referenced the reading as part of what was most helpful about the session, whereas only one tutor-read and two writer-read writers did this. Some of these comments from point-predict sessions tied the benefit of the reading method specifically to increased audience awareness, as indicated by the examples in the previous paragraph, and some tied it to other things, as the following example illustrates:

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[8] It should be noted, however, that a few of the writers from these more traditional sessions did mention audience when specifically asked for their thoughts about the portion of the session spent reading aloud later in the survey (one, or 13%, from the writer-read group and three, or 38%, from the tutor-read group)

> The reading aloud, you definitely see the flaws in the paper [because] when I read the paper to myself, I didn't find the issues with the thesis. (Session 15)

In contrast, references to the reading made by writers in writer-read or tutor-read sessions in response to the "most helpful " question were more likely to be either very vague or refer to the reading as useful at helping them find "mistakes" or "errors."

Table 5: Writer responses to the question of what was most helpful to them about the session

Condition	*Audience*	*Reading*	*Content*	*Sentence*
Writer-read	0	25% (2)	38% (3)	25% (2)
Tutor-read	0	13% (1)	0	75% (6)
Point-predict	50% (4)	63% (5)	50% (4)	*13% (1)*

Note: Percentages add up to over 100% because survey responses were coded for multiple topics.

Half of the writers of point-predict sessions also referenced issues of content when asked what was most helpful about their session. Interestingly, the responses of point-predict writers often tied the method of reading to this helpful focus on content, whereas those who referenced it from writer-read sessions did not. Two of the point-predict examples above (from sessions 9 and 18) exemplify this, as does this answer from another point-predict writer:

> Going over my paper and *breaking down each individual paragraph* [because] it *helped me* fix my errors and *improve my interpretation.* (Session 14, emphasis added)

In contrast, all three of the writer-read references to content did not connect this focus to the reading method employed in the session. Their responses to what was most helpful about the session were:

> Organizing, expounding on ideas. (Session 20)
> Telling me to expand on ideas. (Session 21)
> Helping to expand ideas. (Session 22)

Most striking, however, is the fact that none of the writers from tutor-read sessions referenced a content issue as part of what was most useful about their session, when half of the writers of point-predict sessions did. This further substantiates the results of the transcript coding that showed the most attention was given to content in point-predict sessions and the least in tutor-read sessions.

In keeping with the differences already discussed, writers' responses to what was most helpful about tutor-read sessions were more likely to focus on sentence level issues. As Table 5 shows, half of the writers in tutor-read sessions named some issue of grammar, punctuation, or citation style issue as part of what was most helpful about their sessions. In contrast, only one writer (13%) in a point-predict session and two writers (25%) in writer-read sessions referenced these issues. Given the heavy focus tutor-read sessions placed on these kinds of issues, it is unsurprising that writers found this to be part of what was most helpful about their sessions. Generally, this result adds further support to previously discussed data in indicating that sessions where the tutor simply read the writer's paper aloud without any specific structure guiding their reading were far more likely to focus heavily on sentence-level concerns than other session types.

Discussion: Reading Methods Matter, and We Need to Investigate Them Further

Before entering into a discussion of the findings of this study, it is worth sounding a general note of caution. It would be easy, in light of our historic tendency to want to avoid being a fix-it shop, to view the results shared above as indicative that point-predict is a wonderful tutoring method because it elicits such a high focus on global issues. The binary positions surrounding the higher-order/lower-order debate in our field is as lore-riddled and ready for inquiry as the directivity continuum Nordloff so effectively turns on its head in his study. Like Nordlof, I agree that our focus should be on scaffolding our methods to the learning needs of the writer at the time, and thus the kind of work done in a session should vary depending on where the student is in their learning process, not a value system that says one kind of issue is more important than another.

In order to be able to scaffold effectively, however, we need to better understand what methods lead to what results, so that we can make informed decisions about when to use the methods we use, and why. Thus, the results above, and the discussion of those results that follows, should be understood as addressing our assumptions about *what* generates a focus on global issues, not as a reification of the superiority of a focus on global issues in all tutoring situations. Sometimes, it is appropriate to prompt a greater focus on global issues, and sometimes it is not. It would take a different study entirely to examine how to determine what should be the focus of any given session. These results and discussion, then, seek to examine how the reading methods we use affect the writing issues that arise so that we are able to make (and prompt tutors to make) more informed decisions, rather than having sessions unfold by happenstance.

Re-examining our reading-related beliefs. As shown, this study found that the type of reading method greatly influenced session content. Most notably, point-predict sessions focused far less on sentence-level issues and more on issues of content, organization, and signposting than sessions begun with more traditional reading methods. Additionally, writers initiated approximately the same percentage of topical chains across all session types. However, in point-predict sessions, the topical chains initiated by writers were about three times as likely to cover issues of organization or signposting, and almost twice as likely to cover issues of content or evidence, compared to writer-initiated discussions in tutor-read or writer-read sessions. Both writers' and tutors' survey responses support these trends.

The drastic difference between point-predict and tutor-read sessions is particularly striking, since our lore might lead us to believe that the *who* matters more than the *how* when predicting the effects of reading methods on tutoring sessions. This contrast illustrates both why the consideration of how we read in tutoring sessions is so essential *and* why studies that seek to understand the effects of our tutoring practices benefit from including research and frameworks from outside our field. Had this study only compared standard tutor-read and writer-read sessions, it would have simply confirmed the beliefs expressed by many in our field that when tutors read, sessions end up more focused on sentence-level issues. The introduction of the point-predict method, however, forces us to unsettle assumptions about the underlying causes, since how texts were read had an even greater effect on the kinds of issues discussed than who did the reading.

To examine the implications of these findings, then, it may help to compare them with the assumptions about tutor-read sessions as expressed in writing center literature and on the WCenter archives. This study's results may support concerns that tutor-read sessions are more likely to focus on sentence-level issues because tutors will get caught up on these issues while reading (e.g. Gillespie, 2002; Palm, 2010). Additionally, it may indicate that the hypothesis offered by other practitioners (e.g. Gillespie, 2002; Levin, 2010)—that having tutors read deprives them of time needed to think about how to approach more global issues—could be an interesting line of inquiry when trying to understand the dramatic difference in results between tutor-read and point-predict sessions. One of the differences between a standard tutor-read session and a point-predict session is that, in the latter, tutors pause and express their reactions to the text globally as they read, rather than holding everything in check until the end.

What this study appears to undermine, however, is a third common argument against having tutors read: that writers have less agency in tutor-read sessions simply because it is the tutor who is reading and thus "in control" of the paper (e.g. Caposella, 1998; Gillespie & Lerner, 2000; Palm, 2010). There is virtually no difference in the frequency of writer initiations in the three conditions, indicating that having tutors read does not seem to cause writers to be less involved in the sessions. Though initiation is not the only indicator of agency, this finding shows that the assumption that writer-read methods are superior to tutor-read methods is ripe for further inquiry. Additionally, the fact that the kinds of topics writers initiated in point-predict sessions were more globally focused indicates one potential hypothesis for future research to explore. Perhaps hearing statements from readers about how they are understanding a text's content and structure prompts dissonance that writers then seek to resolve through discussion of global writing issues.[9]

Reading structure may affect writers' goals and understanding of their papers. The fact that the writers themselves were so enthusiastic over the point-predict reading method in their surveys is also interesting. Many of the writers from point-predict sessions enthused, unprompted, over their better developed sense of audience when asked what was most useful about their session; some of these same writers came in saying they were most concerned about issues like grammar and sentence structure. While undoubtedly some students only want the writing center to work as a "fix-it shop," this may indicate that a change in reading methods could make a difference in some writers' interests and goals for their tutoring sessions. One hypothesis future research might pursue is whether, by reading the text differently, tutors are indirectly helping students learn a broader range of ways the writing center can support their writing.

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[9] This would be in keeping with JoAnn Johnson's (1993) argument for reevaluating the use of questioning in writing center sessions, where she advocates that "paraphrasing by the tutor is excellent because it forces the student to consider deep structures, highlighting the success or failure of various sections of the written piece" (p. 39), which might prompt interesting avenues for future research.

On a separate note, the striking differences between point-predict and tutor-read sessions also indicates a potentially promising area for future research into what kinds of reading methods *writers* might engage in while reading their texts out loud and how those methods might shape the session. Spontaneously, one of the tutors in this study happened to do something like that in one of her writer-read sessions: She directed the writer to take notes as she read aloud about what content each paragraph covered and whether there had been adequate sign-posting for that content in the introduction. Interestingly, the focus on global issues within this altered writer-read session was far higher than it was in this tutor's more traditional writer-read session, and more closely resembled the results of her point-predict sessions. Though this is only one case study, it supports the hypothesis that reading methods that incorporate guided tasks and reactions to a text during the reading of it may be better suited at eliciting a global focus than those which lean more towards reading a text straight through with minimal or unguided reactions during the reading. This and other alternative reading practices warrant further study.[10]

Implications for Future Research

In addition to serving as a potential foundation for future inquiries into our reading practices, this study can also serve as an example of how to design research to disrupt existing narratives about our practices. In light of our field's recent conversations about *how* to go about studying what we do, we can productively disrupt our research by bringing in outside disciplinary lenses, by purposefully examining practices that disrupt our usual ways of operating. This study's adaptation of Sitko's study can be used as one model for how to do this kind of research.

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[10] For example, Ryan and Zimmerelli's (2010) manual offers a few brief ideas of other reading strategies to try when tutors don't want to go with the suggested writer-read default, such as reading the paper as a "naïve reader, and indicat[ing] those places where it needs more details" (p.47). Engaging tutors in studies of methods like these could prove fruitful. A word of caution, however: In later interviews, tutors expressed a wish for more training and practice in the point-predict method when they had already received a great deal more information than what is provided in training manuals. These brief descriptions are likely insufficient for many tutors, making the seemingly easier task of simply reading straight through look more appealing.

Another implication of this study for future research is that, in designing research schemes that allow us to explore what is happening in sessions, we may need to continue to question ourselves about what we might be overlooking that could have far more of an effect on the sessions in front of us than we realize. In the same way that Kjesrud discovered that not accounting for the range of different kinds of questions that both tutors and writers can ask constrains what she could see in data from those sessions, not recognizing that something as seemingly small as reading structures can have dramatic effects on how a session proceeds could cause us to miss out on a lot that our data is trying to tell us.

There are limitations in this study that also open up questions for future research, the most significant of which is in the size of the study; since this was a preliminary study, only four tutors were studied. More research is needed to determine what kinds of texts point-predict is best suited for, and at what stages in the writing process; studies that examined the same writers across multiple session types might help address these questions. Moreover, we don't know if the sessions actually led to student learning or student revision, since we were unable to get copies of revised papers from most participants. Examining a larger group would serve several purposes: 1. It would allow for more revisions to be collected, hopefully making a study of the effects on revision of different reading methods feasible; and, 2. it would allow for more transcript data to analyze, to see if the trends found here truly hold up on a larger scale. The importance of studying revisions cannot be overemphasized. It would be easy to assume that a greater focus on global issues during a session lead to a greater focus on these issues when revising, but that assumption could easily prove false, and if our goal is to help writers improve we need some way of evaluating the changes they actually make, not just what gets discussed in tutoring sessions, to be able to actually understand the effects of our methods.

Additionally, the selection of tutors for this study was fairly homogenous: All were white female graduate students in English who were interested in reflecting on their tutoring practices. This was the result of a combination of factors: The writing center under study only employed graduate students with teaching assistantships in English, and it happened to only be white females who volunteered to participate from among this already limited group. Thus, it is conceivable that future research conducted with participants with different backgrounds may yield different results, and studying the effects of these methods on a greater variety of tutors is essential.

I do not point out these limitations and research needs casually, or to merely meet the academic expectation for that kind of rhetorical move at the end of an empirical study. Analyzing and acknowledging the limitations of RAD research is crucial if we are to use it to disrupt our un(der)examined stories about what we do and why we do it, crucial to resisting the urge to leap into prescription before we actually understand what is happening (Kjesrud, 2015). I understand the source of Kjesrud's concern: When I have presented these results in conferences and casual conversations with my peers, resultant conversations have generally focused on how to teach tutors to employ point-predict in their tutoring sessions. Not that such training is a bad idea—it's a very useful tool to have in one's toolbox—but the focus of these conversations causes me to worry that I may inadvertently be giving the impression that this study has found "the answer" to the question of how to read papers in writing center sessions. Instead, this study is just a starting point for future research into reading in the writing center, especially into other practices not examined within the scope of this study, such as reading in advance, silent reading or more detailed structures for writer reading.

In other words, though this study indicates promising potential uses for reading structures like point-predict, I want to emphasize that this study is the start of that conversation, not a conclusion. There are two ways we can follow Kjesrud's (2015) injunction not to jump too readily to prescription: Avoid over-generalizing the results of studies like this one, and seek to replicate research in new or larger contexts. This study indicates point-predict shows interesting promise, but this does not mean it should unthinkingly be used as the new normal in writing center sessions: Instead, we need more research that replicates this study and that tries to assess in what contexts point-predict is useful. We need to discover what kinds of texts, writers, tutors, and rhetorical situations it works best with. We also need research that examines other aspects of our lore about reading practices and their relationship to control, global issues, learning and engagement.

More broadly, we need to welcome studies that replicate and extend the work done by others within our field. The background most of us share in the humanities may cause us to privilege originality at the expense of building knowledge. This may predispose us to prefer publication of only those articles that add something radically new to our field's literature, to set aside studies that "merely" duplicate the studies of others in new contexts and offer similar findings. Without research that actually replicates and aggregates, we will never move beyond the need to explore our hypotheses in preliminary ways—it will never, in other words, be possible to become "knowledge-maker[s]" (Eodice, Jordan, & Price, 2014, p.12) or to actually be able to make reasonable claims about "what really works, and why" (Kjesrud, 2015, p. 41). If we want to be able to address these calls, then we need to not only value highly original research like Nordlof's or Kjesrud's, but also support the replication and aggregation aspects of RAD research by welcoming the studies that offer more modest contributions to our field's knowledge. Otherwise, we will be stuck perpetually either jumping too fast into prescriptive claims from preliminary studies, or only ever dipping our toes into new areas of descriptive research without ever being able to fully substantiate our practices.

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About the Author:

Rebecca Block was a Professor and Writing Center Director at Daytona State College at the writing of this article, and is now Vice President of Research and Evaluation at The Future Project, an educational non-profit. She is interested in empirical methodology, writing centers, WAC/WID programs, and K-12 education. More specifically, her work examines the role of feedback and collaborative discovery in writing, professional development and educational practices