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Rebecca Damron

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Rebecca Damron

**Review: *Talk about Writing: The Tutoring Strategies of Experienced Writing Center Tutors* by Jo Mackiewicz & Isabelle Thompson**

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Kairos—the right thing at the right time. That was my first thought about Jo Mackiewicz and Isabelle Thompson’s *Talk about Writing: The Tutoring Strategies of Experienced Writing Center Tutors*. In the midst of calls for Replicable, Aggregative and Data-Supported (RAD) Research (Driscoll & Perdue, 2012; Babcock & Thonus, 2012; Thompson, Whyte, Shannon, Muse, Miller, Chappell, & Whigham, 2009), Mackiewicz & Thompson have created a complex book that allows readers to see how a long-term research trajectory yields more questions for the field to take up, refine, and extend.

In nine chapters, Mackiewicz & Thompson follow the traditional organization of an empirical study: Introduction, Methods, Results (and Discussion) and Conclusion. They introduce their research and provide the review of literature to support their research questions and methods in chapters 1 “*Talk About Writing: An Introduction to Our Empirical Study*” and 2 “*Literature Review.*” Chapter 3 is the Methods chapter. They divide the results of this complex study into the next five chapters. Chapter 4, “The Three Conference Stages and Tutoring Strategies: The

The Writing Center Journal 35.1 | Fall/Winter 2015 183

Overall Results”, provides an overview of the results and Chapters 5, 6, and 7 unpack those results for the instruction stages they identified, as well as the cognitive and motivational scaffolding strategies they describe. Chapter 8 reports on the results of a case study based on one of the tutors who was part of the larger study. Chapter 9 is the conclusion to the study and to the book.

Two goals for the book are clearly articulated in Chapter 1 and reiterated in the concluding chapter:

Creating a Coding Scheme that is Useful to Others (p. 170): to present an analytical research tool that others outside our locality can use to examine writing center talk, specifically writing center tutor’s talk (p. 2).

Analyzing Tutor Talk in order to Facilitate Tutor Training (p. 170): to provide a close, empirical analysis of experienced tutor talk that can facilitate tutor training.

*Talk* fulfills both goals with detailed, informative analysis of the processes involved in creating the coding scheme with which to assess tutor talk.

In Chapter 1, Mackiewicz & Thompson provide their research questions, but also a justification for analyzing tutor talk. The theoretical framework for the study is a cultural, psychological, and social constructivist theory of learning. In the study, they employ two major types of analysis using quantitative and qualitative methods:

**Macrolevel analysis:** three conference stages—opening, teaching, closing.

**Microlevel analysis:** detailed analysis of three categories of tutoring strategies—instruction strategies, cognitive scaffolding strategies, and motivational scaffolding strategies, all of (?) which contain a total of 16 individual tutoring strategies.

The writers also include a case study of an experienced tutor serving as a writing fellow attached to a Business course, in order to compare the strategies that this tutor used in both situations as well as in situations with familiar and unfamiliar writers.

In the literature review, Mackiewicz & Thompson draw on writing center research, including their own work with scaffolding, motivation, politeness and questions (Thompson, 2009; Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2014; Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2013), and research from outside of writing center studies) to support their macro and micro analyses. They draw on studies about scaffolding (Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development); research from ‘closed-world domain’, i.e. math

and science tutoring; and studies in cognition, motivation and politeness to ground their research.

In addition to reporting the qualitative and quantitative methodologies used for the study, Mackiewicz & Thompson explicitly state that they include a metacommentary to assist others in doing this kind of research. The data for this study was taken from ten video recordings, which were part of a subset of fifty-one video recordings. The ten were chosen because they were evaluated by the participants in the video sessions as 'very satisfactory'. The case study data was taken from sessions recorded later than the others from a supply-chain management course in Business in which the tutor was a writing fellow. All ten tutors for the study had been judged highly competent by Thompson. In addition to the video sessions, post-session interviews were conducted with all of the tutors. Mackiewicz & Thompson provide a section about creating codes and categories in this chapter to help the reader understand the process in order to replicate the process.

Chapter 4 reports the quantitative results for the three stages of the conference session identified and the tutor strategies that emerged from the data. This chapter also contains a section in which the implications for tutor education are discussed in relation to the studies discussed in the Literature review.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 report the results of the quantitative and qualitative studies for strategies that emerged in the categories of "Instruction Strategies" (Chapter 5), "Cognitive Scaffolding Strategies" (Chapter 6), and "Motivational Scaffolding Strategies" (Chapter 7). Each chapter includes a discussion of its results in the context of tutor education.

Chapter 8, "Case Study: A Writing Center Tutor Becomes a Writing Fellow," quantitatively and qualitatively traces the instructional strategies, cognitive scaffolding and motivational scaffolding of one tutor across tutoring situations and with familiar and unfamiliar students. In this chapter, Mackiewicz & Thompson provide suggestions for tutor training and call for more research into writing fellow sessions in order to broaden and deepen the scope of what we can say about writing fellows.

Mackiewicz & Thompson have accomplished their explicitly stated goal of providing a coding scheme, with the caveat that "researchers will likely want to and need to modify" the scheme. The reader may need to spend some time with the appendix where the coding chart may be found in its entirety to understand some of the perhaps new terms generated in the coding/categorization process. They have provided

readers invested in writing center scholarship many avenues to pursue in terms of further research questions.

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## About the Author

**Rebecca Damron** is Associate Professor of English at Oklahoma State University and has directed the writing center there since 2005. Her research has been focused on interdisciplinary writing resulting in a book *How Architects Write* written collaboratively with a colleague from the Architecture Department. She is currently the President of the South Central Writing Centers Association.