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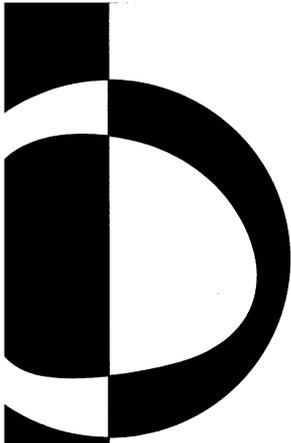
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### Abstract

Listening is often considered essential to the tutoring of writing; however, little attention has been devoted to the study of listening in writing center scholarship. This study takes up the question of how the field defines effective listening and how the field conceptualizes listening as a practice for the tutoring of writing. Based on a qualitative content analysis of eight writing center tutor guidebooks, the study's findings show that although listening is typically considered an effective strategy in addressing interpersonal aspects and writing concerns in the writing conference, it is not well defined in the field. Ultimately, the article suggests that the field may benefit from attention to rhetorical listening as a way to broaden how we define not only effective listening but also roles for tutoring and learning.

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Given the long-standing tradition of writing centers to define themselves as student-centered and to champion collaborative learning, it is unsurprising that the field generally values listening. What is surprising is how little attention listening has received in writing center scholarship, particularly as writing centers continue to work with diverse students, tutors, and curricula and as they continue to be located in diverse places and institutions. As a writing center tutor first and a writing center director later, I too gave little attention to listening. Of course, I valued listening and wanted to be a good listener—both as a tutor and director. Of course, I wanted to encourage good listening on the part of tutors, but what more was there to say? How does one learn to listen? What is effective listening for the tutoring of writing?

It was in exploring rhetorical listening—which Krista Ratcliffe (2005) describes as both “a trope for interpretive invention” and “a code for cross-cultural conduct” (p. 17)—through a research project focused on student cross-racial interactions as part of their college experience, that I was reminded that the concept or idea of listening is an undercurrent in writing center work. I suggest it is an undercurrent because of the lack of attention it has received, because the field’s focus on collaborative talk implies an attendant focus on listening and because listening is often mentioned but rarely explored in depth. It is often noted as important when good tutoring is described. For example, in discussing writing center pedagogy, Neal Lerner (2014) lists “the need for tutors/instructors to listen fully and carefully” as one important aspect of effective practice, and he argues that this practice translates to teaching writing more generally (p. 305). Listening is commonly defined as a skilled activity that tutors need to undertake. For example, active listening has been a topic in several *Writing Lab Newsletter* columns. And listening is even mentioned as a potential means to address miscommunication across differences. For example, in discussing her well-known case study of Morgan (a tutor) and Fannie (a student) working across different cultural backgrounds, Anne DiPardo (1992) makes a case for the importance of listening: “Rather than frequent urgings to ‘talk less,’ perhaps what Morgan most needed was advice to *listen more*—for the clues students like Fannie would provide, for those moments when she might best shed her teacherly persona and become once again a learner” (p. 140). Despite these mentions of listening as valuable to writing center work, scholars in the field have yet to fully address listening, particularly in attending to listening as a practice central to tutoring.

My project, then, is to understand more fully how the field currently defines listening and to consider how we might want to develop that conceptualization in future work. In order to understand how we

define listening, I have analyzed published tutor-training manuals or guidebooks, as I refer to them. I focus on guidebooks because they are currently the richest source not for only what the field tells tutors about how to conduct writing center sessions but also for how the field defines listening as a part of writing center practice. While I argue for the importance of these guidebooks as a source of information for understanding how listening is conceptualized, I also recognize that such guidebooks have been criticized for functioning to overly codify tutoring practice. For example, Anne Ellen Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, & Elizabeth H. Boquet (2007) encourage writing center directors to “move away from an over-reliance on tutoring manuals” (p. 22) in order to promote responsiveness and openness to learning in our work with tutors and students. This project explores what the guidebooks offer in terms of understanding listening as well as how the field might want to promote responsiveness in regard to listening. In particular, I explore Ratcliffe’s (2005) concept of rhetorical listening and her discussion of the interplay of identification and non-identification as a way to conceptualize listening as a praxis not only for establishing commonalities but also for acknowledging differences. Before discussing my analysis, I review the existing literature on listening within the writing center field.

### **Listening as Skill and Art: Discussions of Listening in Writing Center Literature**

As discussed above, listening is an often-noted technique in writing center practice—a technique tutors and scholars seem to agree is important, yet one that is rarely discussed in depth. Muriel Harris (1986) notes in her well-known book *Teaching One-to-One*, “Being a good listener is, obviously, an art to be rigorously cultivated, so much so that it is surprising that the field of composition offers so little theory or research to guide us” (p. 57). Echoing Harris (1986), Julie A. Bokser (2005) also remarks on the lack of attention to listening in writing center scholarship and argues that listening can be foregrounded in tutor education so that tutors become more aware of how they listen.

Attention to listening is more evident in the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, with occasional columns on both silence and listening. An early example of this work is David Taylor’s (1988) “Listening Skills for the Writing Center,” in which he defines listening in the writing conference as “unique,” because it is an “active” process “calling for sharply focused attention and sensitivity to the words and behaviors of another” (p. 1), and in which he lists five effective listening skills: paraphrasing,

perception checking, indirect and direct leading, interpreting, and summarizing. Taylor's (1988) discussion of how a tutor can employ these skills suggests that listening is an important skill for helping students with invention as the tutor paraphrases or checks the ideas students are writing about and leads students to further explore those ideas. At the same time, as Taylor (1988) notes, this skill-based, five-part approach to listening can become mechanical.

In her discussion of listening, Harris (1986) discusses these same five skills, referencing a 1985 presentation by Taylor (1988). Here, Harris (1986) explores listening as one aspect of the conversational activities that take place during a tutorial. In particular, Harris (1986) values listening for the way it helps tutors to "demonstrate that the conference is indeed a dialogue" (p. 56) and "to create a personal, nonthreatening, informal atmosphere for conversation that permits the student to participate actively" (p. 57). Harris (1986) figures listening in the tutorial as a way for tutors to remain open to students' writing concerns, even if tutors "have to listen more closely to hear what is being said 'behind' the words" (p. 59). She then discusses writing issues that may be conveyed implicitly rather than explicitly, such as a fear of inadequacy, a lack of interest in writing, or a mistaken notion of what a teacher wants. While Harris (1986) notes intercultural theorist Edward Hall in this section and the idea of openness, she seems more focused on openness to various writing problems than to understanding cultural conflicts or other aspects of difference within the tutorial. In addition, in using a medical metaphor of diagnosis, she links the tutor's listening to that of the medical practitioner: "Diagnosis [of writing issues] is a process that depends heavily on skilled listening and questioning" (p. 61).

Other *Writing Lab Newsletter* columns advocate for the importance of listening as a tutoring strategy, discussing its use in establishing rapport, prompting collaborative learning, providing an audience for students, and facilitating responses to written work (Morris, 1990; Fishbain, 1993; Bolander & Harrington, 1996). In addition, Anthony Edgington (2008) wrote a column focused on how tutors read and listen to student texts. Based on a small set of surveys, interviews, and observations, he suggests that tutors find it necessary to be patient listeners, especially when students are reading their texts aloud and stop to engage the tutor in conversation about the text before the tutor has a holistic sense of the work. In Edgington's (2008) work, listening is most closely associated with being an audience of the student's paper.

Most recently, Jeffrey Howard (2014) discusses the use of silence in writing conferences and describes the ways silence might be used by the tutor to show interest, appreciation, and an expectation for the

student to respond. Also, Tracy Santa (2016) explores the challenge of identifying listening in tutorials, asking “can we make listening more visible, more legible to all participants in tutorial interactions” (p. 4), in an article in *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*. Addressing this question, Santa (2016) discusses the role of videotaped tutorials in tutor preparation as a means to help tutors understand their listening behaviors with a specific focus on backchanneling (short vocal responses) and gaze (such as eye contact) and on how these behaviors are related to cultural factors. He concludes with a call for further inquiry into listening and offers tutor preparation activities designed to foreground listening.

Additional attention to listening is highlighted in Rebecca Day Babcock & Terese Thonus’s (2012) *Researching the Writing Center*, with one short section focused on listening as a component of the tutorial. Reviewing six dissertations (Seckendorf, 1986; Mclure, 1990; Boudreaux, 1998; Cardeñas, 2000; Brown, 2008; Cardeñas, 2000; Fallon, 2010), Babcock & Thonus (2012) find that tutors may not be listening carefully to students, particularly in terms of their writing concerns, and they conclude that “It cannot be stressed enough that tutors must listen carefully to tutees” (p. 120). Based on the studies reviewed, lack of listening creates issues with agenda setting (when a tutor does not listen to a student’s concerns) and with questioning (when a tutor continues asking a student questions but does not listen to the student’s answers). Babcock & Thonus (2012) note two positive examples of listening in the studies they reviewed: one in which tutors use listening to help students with invention and another where a tutor uses listening to support a student achieving her goals with her writing. In addition, they recommend that additional research be conducted on how students listen during writing center sessions.

Babcock & Thonus’s (2012) review of dissertations on listening as part of writing center tutorials indicates that both tutors and new scholars to the field find this a compelling topic. At the same time, Babcock & Thonus’s (2012) review largely relies on student research, albeit at the doctoral level, which suggests that writing center scholars have yet to fully attend to listening in our published scholarly work. One area where the field does address listening is in tutor guidebooks. These books introduce new tutors to writing center practice and also convey the field’s values. For these reasons, they are an important source for understanding how we conceptualize listening, what values or uses we associate with listening, and where we might need to more fully attend to listening.

Turning to more implicit discussions of listening, which I call an undercurrent of listening, I consider how central work in writing

center scholarship explores listening as one aspect of re-conceptualizing writing center work. A number of key scholars, such as Boquet (2002), Harry C. Denny (2010), and Nancy Maloney Grimm (1999), consider listening through theoretical inquiry in work that asks us to broaden notions of writing centers, tutors, and students. In Boquet's (2002) work, this takes the form of asking us to consider what might happen if we open ourselves and our tutors to listening to the noise of the center—not always to contain it but sometimes to amplify or even distort it, thereby disrupting institutional notions of competent student writing and competent tutoring. She argues that such work can be accomplished, in part, by approaching tutoring and tutor education not through effectiveness and content to be mastered but through exploring the chaos, or noise, of tutoring. Denny (2010) takes up this call in exploring identity politics in the writing center. In attending to listening, Denny (2010) considers gender roles and tutors' relations to listening as well as refusals of listening in sessions between L1 tutors and L2 writers, arguing that "our refusals translate into silencing, a mechanism to shutdown individuals and communities and to marginalize them; our willingness to be open testifies to genuine dialogue, to hearing and making space for the Other at the center" (p. 121).

Grimm (1999) addresses the role of listening more directly in revisiting the tutoring scenario from DiPardo's (1992) case study. In response to DiPardo's (1992) urging the tutor to listen more, Grimm (1999) argues that the tutor might have had difficulty listening to the student because of the powerful cultural assumptions that were informing their work together. Indeed, Grimm (1999) argues that such assumptions inform most tutoring sessions: "in tutoring interactions, listening is often done under the pressure of time, usually with a desire to be helpful, and almost always with a notion of what is a normal academic essay" (p. 67). What such a situation works against is what Grimm (1999), drawing on Gemma Corradi Fiumara (1990), calls "authentic listening" or the ability to set aside preconceived notions in order to share an experience of listening that engages problems without solving or dismissing them (p. 69). Grimm (1999) argues the continued emphasis on the peer aspect of tutoring works against such listening in that it assumes tutors and students are equals and positions tutors to assume they can reverse perspectives, seeing from the student's viewpoint. However, "This too-ready projection closes down the potential for careful listening and attention to particular histories and perspectives" (p. 112).

Despite these undercurrents of listening in the field, my findings suggest that listening as a tutoring practice still receives little attention. In addition, the attention it does receive focuses on listening mostly

as a means of developing a tutor's understanding rather than a means for working from, with, and across differences without flattening or ignoring those differences.

## Methods

For this project, I chose content analysis, a form of discourse analysis, with a focus on a qualitative approach. Thomas Huckin (2004) defines content analysis as “the identifying, quantifying, and analyzing of specific words, phrases, concepts, or other observable semantic data in a text or body of texts with the aim of uncovering some underlying thematic or rhetorical pattern running through the texts” (p. 14). Within a qualitative approach, the researcher attends to explicit and implicit concepts and also to the context in which the concepts are used (Huckin, 2004). Content analysis is an appropriate methodological choice for this study because it is designed for systematic analysis of existing texts. Thus, using qualitative content analysis allows for understanding how the field has conceptualized listening and how listening is introduced to new tutors. At the same time, a qualitative approach allows for considering not only consistent patterns or themes in the data but also more striking instances of how the construct, in this case listening, is conceptualized. In this regard, qualitative content analysis is appealing for me as a researcher in that it allows me to draw on my perspectives as a tutor, teacher, and director to help me interpret the role of listening in writing conferences. This is what David L. Altheide & Christopher J. Schneider (2013) identify as a distinction between quantitative content analysis and qualitative, which offers a “reflexive,” “interactive” process in which the “investigator is continually central” (p. 26).

A limitation of content analysis for this project is my recognition that not all writing centers use published tutor guidebooks for tutor education. In addition, I also recognize that these texts are not static and that those tutors who are introduced to tutoring through guidebooks may question, resist, and extend the approaches being offered in the books. A limitation of content analysis in general that applies to my project is the way in which the analytical process groups texts together. While valuable as a way to gain an overview of a field's approach to a particular concept, it tends to limit the researcher's ability to focus on some of the nuances of the individual authors' discussions of that concept.

For this study, I collected a corpus of eight tutoring guidebooks with editions that were published between 2005 and 2015. I included all the tutoring books I became aware of through searching the Wcenter

listserv and tracking references from booksellers (such as Amazon) as well as noting guidebooks mentioned in scholarship in the field. A 10-year period seems representative of the field’s discussion of listening as seen in guidebooks. See Table 1 for a list of titles and publication dates. My primary aim in analyzing the corpus was to describe how listening is conceptualized across the books, including how listening was defined and valued, what benefits were associated with listening, and what advice or strategies related to listening were offered.

**Table 1. Number of Times “Listening” Was Indexed by Source**

Source	Number of Entries for “Listening”	Words Indexed
<i>Oxford Guide</i> (2016*)	4	listening active mirroring paraphrasing
<i>St. Martin’s Sourcebook</i> (2011)	No index	
<i>Bedford Guide</i> (2010)	1	listening, active
<i>ESL Writers</i> (2009)	1	listening
<i>Longman Guide</i> (2008)	7	listening
<i>What the Writing Tutor Needs to Know</i> (2006)	0	
<i>A Tutor’s Guide</i> (2005)	1	listening
<i>Essentials of Tutoring</i> (2005)	0	

\*Although the *Oxford Guide* has a publication year of 2016, it was widely available in 2015.

My secondary aim was to describe how often listening is a topic of discussion in the books. To address this aim, I analyzed the index of each book to see if and how often the topic of listening was addressed. Table 1 shows the results of this analysis. Overall, two guidebooks had frequent mentions of listening in the indexes, three guidebooks had one mention of listening, two had no mentions, and one did not have an index. While I quantified this aspect of the analysis, I took a qualitative approach overall in that this secondary aim was part of determining the

text from the corpus that I would analyze; in other words, this process was part of determining the unit of analysis related to the primary aim of the study.

For the primary aim, I located any discussions of listening using the index of each book. I then searched digital versions of each book for “listen” and other variations of this word. For those guidebooks with no available digital versions, I scanned the pages of the book, used text recognition software, and then searched the resulting pages digitally. Once I had located where “listen” or variations occurred, I selected this text and enough text surrounding it to understand the immediate context. This process is sometimes referred to as determining the unit of analysis and gathering the data (Huckin, 2004; MacNealy, 1999) within content and discourse analysis.

Next, I coded each instance of the topic, seeking to understand how listening was being defined and valued. I also coded for any advice offered about listening. These codes were inductive as I sought to develop an understanding of how listening was being conceptualized from the guidebooks. The first cycle of coding consisted of descriptive and in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2016), in which I coded all mentions of listening, both summarizing the content and creating a code to describe the concept of listening, either using a phrase directly from the data or using my own descriptive phrase. The second cycle of coding consisted of focused coding (Saldaña, 2016), in which I considered patterns in the data as well as emergent categories and themes. I first explored ways the codes could be grouped into categories and then how categories might be grouped into themes or be considered themes outright, as suggested by Sharan B. Merriam & Elizabeth J. Tisdell (2016). This cycle of coding also involved consideration of how the data was speaking to my research question and to related issues in the field as well as trying out different themes and categories. The third and final cycle of coding was conducted in response to peer review of this article and again took the form of focused coding. For this cycle of coding, I revisited themes and categories to consider what warranted a category becoming a theme. As part of this process, I revised my analysis to establish interpersonal listening as its own theme separate from tutorial listening. This allowed me to more fully account for how I was interpreting listening as an aspect of the interpersonal dynamics of tutoring and to better attend to the undercurrents of listening. Again, based on peer review, I revised my analysis to also consider how power and authority might better be understood as being concentrated with the tutor through listening than as simply being shared between the tutor and student, which was an earlier theme. I also sought to stay close to the language and terms of

the guidebooks as I reconsidered the naming of categories and themes and as I revisited how I coded data.

Table 2 shows the codes, categories, and themes that resulted from data analysis. Overall, data analysis relied on approaches to content analysis as well as more general approaches to qualitative data analysis, in which the analysis is grounded in the data and focused on the researcher seeking to understand how the data can be collapsed in order to answer the research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### Findings

I established four themes and what I call a thematic undercurrent through my analysis. An overview of these findings can be seen in Table 2. The first theme focused on the definitions of listening offered in the guidebooks. The second and third themes focused on the roles and strategies related to listening by tutors with the second theme covering interpersonal aspects of tutoring and the third theme covering the tutoring of writing. The fourth theme looked at the writer

**Table 2. Themes, Categories, and Codes**

Theme	Category	Codes/Instances
	Types of listening described	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• active listening</li> <li>• social listening</li> <li>• therapeutic listening</li> </ul>
	Ways listening is classified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• resource</li> <li>• skill</li> <li>• strategy</li> <li>• tool</li> </ul>
	Tutor roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• friendly, helpful</li> <li>• empathetic</li> <li>• interested or respectful</li> <li>• responsible</li> </ul>
	Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• motivate</li> <li>• engage</li> <li>• create dynamic session</li> <li>• encourage student to explain concerns</li> <li>• respond to antagonism</li> </ul>

Theme	Category	Codes/Instances
	Tutor roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• audience</li> <li>• scribe</li> <li>• practice listening as skill</li> </ul>
	Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• gain insight/info on writing</li> <li>• gain insight/info about writer</li> <li>• decide approach</li> <li>• determine problem in writing</li> <li>• clarify writer's meaning</li> <li>• attend to structure of writing</li> <li>• balance amount of help</li> <li>• read aloud</li> <li>• challenge</li> </ul>
	Effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• encourage participation</li> <li>• help feel confident</li> <li>• help revise</li> <li>• help identify weaknesses</li> </ul>
	Non listening (i.e., when a student doesn't listen to tutor)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• disrupt tutor expectation</li> <li>• show confidence, empowerment</li> <li>• offer visual cues</li> </ul>

as a listener and considers the effects of listening as well as non-listening. The thematic undercurrent focuses on listening, authority, and identity in the writing conference. (For the findings, I use the initials of the guidebook titles and pages numbers to refer to the source for quotations because my focus was on the guidebooks as a collection rather than on individual authors.)

**Definitions of listening for writing center work.** The first theme focused on how listening is defined in tutor guidebooks. Listening was classified as a “tool” for tutoring as well as a “skill.” It was also classified as a “resource” and a “strategy.” Often these classifications of listening were discussed in terms of tutors being “friendly,” “helpful,” and “patient,” and listening was described as a tutoring responsibility and expertise. One type of listening that was described was active listening, with two guidebooks using this term. In one guidebook, active listening was described as the use of strategies to indicate that the tutor is listening to the student. These strategies included paraphrasing what the student said, using questions to encourage a student to extend their thinking, and using *I* statements to place the burden of understanding on the tutor. This guidebook noted that active listening is often shown through body

language such as attentive posture and eye contact. Another guidebook also described tutor listening as active listening and noted that active listening entails paraphrasing and mirroring as well as verbal and visual confirmations, such as saying “yeah” and nodding as the student speaks.

Another type of listening was described in a third guidebook. Here “therapeutic listening” as opposed to “social listening” was recommended for use with students who speak about something that is worrying them. In the discussion, the two types of listening were defined as follows: social listening “is often largely a matter of not interrupting, maybe nodding from time to time or thinking of what you’re going to say next,” and therapeutic listening is when the listener “attends closely, really hears what the client is saying and both processes cognitively what the client is saying while empathizing with what is being said” (*A Tutor’s Guide*, 2005, p. 28–29).

**Interpersonal listening.** Listening as a way to address interpersonal aspects of the writing conference was one of the most common ways listening was described in the guidebooks, with approximately 22 instances coded within this second theme. In particular, listening was presented as useful for interpersonal tutoring relationships as a way to define the roles of the tutor and as a strategy to address interpersonal aspects of tutoring.

In terms of the tutor’s role, listening was seen as a responsibility of the tutor, which this guidebook quoted from Babcock and Thonus: “‘It cannot be stressed enough that tutors must **listen** to tutees’ (Babcock and Thonus 120)” (*Oxford Guide*, 2016, p. 63). Listening was also a skill associated with the role of a friendly, helpful tutor:

- “You probably already know how to interact with others, to help put people at ease if they seem to be feeling unsure . . . to give them space or time if they need it, to **listen**. All those qualities that go into making you a friendly, helpful person will be an important skill set for this job” (*Oxford Guide*, 2016, p. 53).
- “If you sense the student is quiet because he is overcome by anxiety or fears of some kind related to meeting you and talking about his writing, try to establish an atmosphere of trust, perhaps by being friendly, by explaining that you’re not a teacher and that your job is to help and to **listen**” (*A Tutor’s Guide*, 2005, p. 28).

Integral to the role of a friendly tutor, listening was described as a way for a tutor to convey empathy and respect:

- “Human beings need to hear that they are being **listened** to and understood; taking a few minutes to empathize will establish a degree of trust” (*A Tutor’s Guide*, 2005, p. 36).
- “Ultimately, reading is an act of communication—the act of **listening** to what the writer has to say. When we **listen**—truly **listen**—we treat ESL [English as a second language] writers with the respect they deserve, regarding them as peers rather than as uniformed learners of the English language and the U.S. culture” (*ESL Writers*, 2009, p. 49).

As a strategy related to the interpersonal dynamics of tutoring, listening was seen as helping tutors to engage students:

Just as probably everyone likes praise, it’s likely that most people want to be heard. And by **listening**, a tutor creates another opportunity for the writer to engage in the session because it can demonstrate to the writer that she can literally have a say in the direction of the conversation. (*Oxford Guide*, 2016, p. 63)

Several guidebooks also discussed listening as a way for tutors to encourage students to express their concerns with writing:

- “What Kristen demonstrates in this scenario is **active listening**, a skill that takes energy and concentration. Instead of dismissing Dwight’s concerns, Kristen grants them validity with statements like, ‘What I’m hearing you say is . . . ,’” (*Bedford Guide*, 2010, p. 23).
- “The tutor sees that a writer is quite distressed with a professor, for example, so the tutor decides to **listen**, even sharing experiences with similar teachers” (*A Tutor’s Guide*, 2005, p. 11).

At the same time, listening to student concerns was described as a potential problem if it led to the tutor listening more to personal concerns than to writing concerns or if the student became overly dependent on the tutor:

- “Having crossed into unproductivity, tutors can get themselves back on track. First they must stop whatever it is that has made the session unproductive. Quit talking, **listening**, doing or suggesting in the way that is problematic” (*A Tutor’s Guide*, 2005, p. 12).
- “You begin to suspect that some of her visits to the center are mainly to talk with you as a comforting **listening** ear or to have you look over the paper because she has come to depend on you to approve every paper before handing it in” (*A Tutor’s Guide*, 2005, pp. 30–31).

One additional use of listening as an interpersonal strategy stood out from one guidebook because it focused on the tutor discussing their inability to listen as a way to respond to an aggressive writer:

If writers become verbally aggressive, politely tell them that you are not willing to accept such behavior, but do so using an *I* statement. You might say, “When you yell at me that way, I find it difficult [impossible] to **listen**.” (*Bedford Guide*, 2010, p. 101)

**Tutorial listening.** The third theme focused on uses of listening related to the tutoring of writing and was also one of the most common ways listening was described, with approximately 24 instances. In this theme, the role of the tutor focused on acting as an audience for the writer, acting as a scribe, and practicing listening:

- “When the writer reads the paper, he accomplishes several things, in addition to keeping in control. As you **listen**, you make a mental note not to interrupt, except to ask him to repeat something you didn’t catch, and you listen to the whole paper. **Listening** to the whole thing from the start to finish and taking notes puts you in the role of learner and the writer in the role of expert” (*Longman Guide*, 2008, p. 30).
- “Tara **listens** and when [the student] finishes, she brings his attention back to the assignment. . . . Acting as a scribe, she writes what he said on a piece of paper” (*ESL Writers*, 2009, p. 100).
- “**Listening** practice and asking theoretical questions are good classroom or training session activities . . .” (*Longman Guide*, 2008, p. 82).

As a strategy related to the tutoring of writing, listening was frequently seen as helping tutors to gain insight or information about the writer and their writing and thereby helping the tutor decide on an approach to take in the conference and to balance the amount of help given:

- “Encourage the writer to tell what he or she wants the two of you to look and **listen** for” (*What the Writing Tutor*, 2006, p. 46).
- “Instead, Kiedaisch and Dinitz suggest adding the following questions to your repertoire because they ‘give every student the opportunity to share, and tutors to **listen** for, information that will help the tutor decide what approaches and strategies might work best for that individual’—and without requiring either of you to ‘directly use the language of identity or difference’” (*Oxford Guide*, 2016, p. 116).
- “Finding the balance between too much help and too little help is a delicate process—which depends on reading,

**listening**, and speaking skills distinct from those required when tutoring traditional, international, or recent immigrant students—but the overlap between these categories makes development of these skills valuable for almost any tutoring session” (*ESL Writers*, 2009, p. 103).

Tutorial listening was also seen as a strategy that could help the tutor clarify a writer’s meaning, connection of ideas, and structure.

- “**Listen** to what writers are trying to say on paper and help them make sense of it” (*Bedford Guide*, 2010, p. 66).
- “In the ensuing conversation, Victor bounces around a few ideas while Tara **listens** and attempts to connect those ideas to his writing” (*ESL Writers*, 2009, p. 100).
- “Read aloud. **Listen** to the shape and selection. You can both hear what is going on. Then articulate it so it can go on again in the next text, helping your writer to concentrate by internalizing skills” (*A Tutor’s Guide*, 2005, p. 79).

Reading aloud was closely related to tutorial listening, where the student would read a paper aloud and the tutor would listen, acting as the audience as noted above. At the same time as this aspect of listening was valued, it was also seen as potentially problematic if the tutor did not listen patiently enough or if there were problems with the writing that could only be seen and not heard.

- “But you do have to be an expert in some things, each of which we’ll explain in more detail in this chapter: knowing how to set a good tone for the conference and making the writer feel comfortable; knowing which kinds of issues to address first; being patient and **listening** to the entire paper, since it’s easy to get hung up on an early section when the real challenge might come later . . .” (*Longman Guide*, 2008, p. 26).
- “A tutor who **listens** to a student read a text aloud and does not look at the text might not be able to detect certain types of formal errors that may affect meaning” (*St. Martin’s Sourcebook*, 2011, p. 20).

Finally, tutorial listening was also described as a challenging skill that can be difficult to practice when a tutor is tired.

- “Just **listening** to writers read papers can be a challenge if you’re not used to it” (*Longman Guide*, 2008, p. 73).
- “And some days you start off eager to help, and by the end of your assigned time, you really are exhausted and can’t **listen** as closely as you know you want to” (*A Tutor’s Guide*, 2005, p. 31).

**Writer listening.** The third theme focused on the writer's listening. Implied in many of the descriptions of listening was the idea that the writer would listen to the tutor while the tutor could decide how and when to listen. Writer listening was described less frequently than tutor listening, with approximately 10 instances coded. The effect of this listening focused on encouraging the writer's participation in and confidence about the writing conference and on using writer listening as a strategy for revising and editing.

- “Such a process could encourage the writer's participation (she can **listen** and read along) and give her a sense of when the writing makes the reader stumble or proceed smoothly and easily” (*Oxford Guide*, 2016, p. 72).
- “Have writers read their papers aloud or into a digital tape recorder. **Listening** to themselves can help writers identify weaknesses in development, coherence, and sentence structure” (*Bedford Guide*, 2010, p. 64).
- “And our anecdotal evidence is pretty good that the reader is **listening**, too, to the way the draft is working. Sometimes he'll pause and make a mark in the margin. Sometimes he'll say, ‘Oh that sounds bad,’ and you can say, ‘Put a checkmark next to it and we'll come back to it.’ But he's giving his draft a critical reading in ways that will help him revise” (*Longman Guide*, 2008, p. 30).

What was perhaps most striking about this theme were the few instances of a writer *not* listening being described. Such instances were striking because they indicated the authority typically associated with the tutor, who can assume the writer is listening and who is surprised by the writer who does not readily listen. In addition, one instance suggests that refusing to listen on the part of the student indicates that the student is asserting authority in relation to the tutor:

- “Sally expected first-time visitors, such as Portia, to **listen** attentively to her spiel. But Portia's take-charge attitude and preprepared tutoring agenda caught Sally off guard” (*A Tutor's Guide*, 2005, p. 21).
- “His confidence ‘about what he had to say’ may have inured him against really **listening** (in this case, reading) closely to what his tutors were telling him. But this is not unique to tutoring, online or in person. Plenty of suggestions are not heard in face-to-face tutoring and plenty of connections are nodded to but not really made. The refusal of a suggestion is perhaps the most significant form of empowerment that a student can make” (*A Tutor's Guide*, 2005, pp. 136–137).

**Thematic undercurrent: Listening, authority, and identity.**

In order to deepen my analysis as well as to consider how authority and identity might affect listening, I conducted a third round of coding to focus more fully on these issues, as noted above. What had been an awareness of issues circulating became more concrete as I revisited the data, seeking to understand the undercurrents of listening for writing center work. Here, then, I present a thematic undercurrent to the way listening is depicted in the guidebooks.

Listening as a strategy used by the tutor positions the tutor as an authority who chooses whether to listen or to speak, who easily uses listening to gain information about the writer and their writing, and who is in the position to be friendly and set the writer at ease. This can be seen in a number of ways. Related to listening as an interpersonal strategy, when listening is described in the guidebooks as a whole, it often carries the idea of an imagined norm tutor who is friendly and helpful, with implications that the tutor is likely a white, monolingual writer. This can be seen in the descriptions of good listening as a role which good tutors occupy and in the idea that listening comes naturally to most tutors, who are friendly and good at writing. This is juxtaposed with the idea that when a writer's listening was discussed, it was often a writer who was described as an ESL student or as a basic writer. In addition, listening was sometimes seen as a means for tutors to work with students who were somehow marked by a difference of identity or a difference in physical or learning abilities. The advice offered here was that tutors need not ask direct questions using the "language of difference" but could ask general questions and then decide how the writing conference should proceed. While this militates against tutors stereotyping students or making assumptions about students' identities or abilities, it also suggests listening as a white, middle-class norm of politeness and indirectness on the part of tutors.

Listening also appeared to be closely related to the idea that the tutor controls the conference from a position of power. As noted above, through listening a tutor could gain insight about a writer (knowing the writer's concerns or knowing about the writer's abilities and identities) and about their writing (determining what problems the writing had and which should be worked on in the conference). Tutors could disavow a teacherly role by choosing to listen to a student rather than talking, which is seen as the behavior of a teacher, and tutors could point to a difficulty in their ability to listen as a way to address an aggressive writer. Such suggestions imply that the tutor is largely in control of listening and subsequently is the authority in the writing conference. While listening was often couched in terms that might appear to be

a way to share authority, such as through listening “[the tutor] grants [the student’s concerns] validity” or “can demonstrate to the writer that she can literally have a say in the direction of the conversation,” these descriptions of the role of the tutor and the tutor’s authority show that conceptions of listening in tutor guidebooks tend to depict power as concentrated in the norm of the imagined tutor who decides when and what to listen to and does not appear to struggle with language, identity, or personal problems. Indeed, in one guidebook, tutor listening leads to paraphrasing which is described as “giving the gift of understanding” (*Oxford Guide*, 2016, p. 63) to the student.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

In summary, my analysis of discussions of listening in tutor guidebooks focused on four themes along with exploring a thematic undercurrent: definitions of listening, interpersonal listening, tutorial listening, and writer listening. Listening as a tool for tutors to use seems to reflect one of the agreed upon strategies for effective tutoring in the guidebooks. And it is not surprising that it receives the most frequent mention as a practice for tutoring, given the focus on talk within the more general practice of writing centers. While I also value listening as an important practice in tutoring, and in teaching more generally, the way in which it appears to be codified as a tool for tutoring suggests that listening may be understood less as an active practice and more as a reification of how tutoring should work. This recalls Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, & Boquet’s (2007) caution against the way guidebooks function to reify practice when such books begin to codify that practice. In addition, the first theme—which identifies only a few definitions of listening and shows that those definitions are largely borrowed from counseling rather than developed out of work on writing and rhetoric— and the thematic undercurrent suggest that listening as currently conceptualized is not sufficiently robust to account for the diversity of writing center tutors and students.

I see this conceptual deficiency particularly in the juxtaposition of tutors with teachers and the alignment of listening with tutoring and talking with teaching. Such a juxtaposition might be a useful way to help tutors conceptualize their role as distinct from teachers and to help them value the ways they might listen to students as peers; however, it also limits the kind of work tutors might do with students, particularly the kind of scaffolding that has become increasingly recognized as important in writing center practice (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2015; Thompson, 2009). This is because such work requires the ability to

approach a writing center conference from a more fluid, less codified position—one in which tutors and students might occupy different roles throughout the session and from session to session—in this case as both listeners and as speakers. For example, in the guidebook discussions of listening, the default position for the tutor seems to be that of a native English speaker who can not only listen to and hear what might be missing in a student’s text, sometimes presumed to be written by a non-native English speaker, but also validate that student’s right to be heard. In addition, the idea that the tutor will share their authority through listening assumes a student is eager to take on a speaking role, an assumption that will not apply to all students, especially students from various cultural backgrounds where listening and speaking roles may be understood in ways not commonly recognized or valued by the educational institutions in which they are enrolled. As Jackie Grutsch McKinney (2013) has noted, “the guides are making outlandish assumptions about their readers, the tutors. The assumption is that the tutors will not have a learning disability or have a first language other than English [. . . and] also that the tutor *and* student will likely be white, of high ability, young, and American” (p. 71).

When I think about the various discussions of listening across these guidebooks, I am struck by the assumptions that emerge: listening as an easy means to understanding and tutors as good listeners who therefore will work effectively with all student writers. On the surface, such assumptions seem useful for writing centers as we champion the peer tutoring of writing. However, such assumptions rely on a limited concept of not only listening but also writing center tutors and students. None of the guidebooks ask tutors to consider different orientations to listening or various purposes for listening. For example, there is little discussion of how listening might help tutors to recognize not only what they do or do not understand about a person or their writing but also the limits of one individual’s perspective, especially when we recognize the diversity of tutors and students—a diversity that seems absent from tutoring guidebooks in general as noted by Grutsch McKinney (2013). I worry not only about our neglect of listening but also our promise to tutors that listening will lead almost always to understanding and, sometimes, to tutors empathizing with and even empowering writers. As Boquet (2002) notes, “we do our tutors a disservice when we ‘train’ them in ways that suggest we are more concerned with their being competent than with their being truly exceptional—which will involve some horrible moments, no doubt” (p. 81). If listening is only conceived as an easy means to understanding, there is little room for tutors to be

confused and listen more or to use listening to take risks and experiment in the writing conference.

Turning to rhetorical concepts of listening is one way the field might expand not only our understanding of listening but also work toward exceptional, or at least flexible, tutoring based in praxis as opposed to reified practices such as codified steps for active listening. One aspect of this shift includes conceptualizing tutoring sessions as sites for rhetorical listening, drawing on Ratcliffe's (2005) work. In particular, writing centers might benefit from Ratcliffe's (2005) approach to listening as a code of cross-cultural conduct in which "we are invited to consciously locate our identifications in places of commonalities *and* differences" (p. 32) and in which we "*hear* things we cannot *see*," by listening for those excesses that exceed any one discourse or perspective (p. 25) with the aim of listening not based on a "desire for mastery" but on a "self-conscious desire for receptivity" (p. 29).

A focus on listening for receptivity rather than mastery suggests that tutors might use listening as a means to invent flexible understandings of the students they work with and of themselves as tutors—ones that don't rely solely on recognizing commonalities or negotiating away differences. Such an approach might mean that a tutor uses listening not only to create an identification with a student but also to recognize and work from instances in which the tutor or the student becomes aware of disidentification and non-identification; that is, instances in which a tutor might recognize, given differences of experience or discursive conflicts, that they might not be able to identify with a student but that they can still listen to and work with that student.

In defining rhetorical listening, Ratcliffe's (2005) project is to expand Kenneth Burke's notion of identification to include "troubled identifications," because Burke's notion "does not adequately address the coercive force of common ground that haunts cross-cultural communication" (p. 47). In order to expand this notion of identification, Ratcliffe (2005) draws from postmodern theory, through attention to Diana Fuss's work, and postcolonial theory, through attention to Trinh T. Minh-ha's work, to argue for the inclusion of concepts such as disidentification and non-identification. Her work questions the common ground intended to be a space for bridging differences in a similar way to Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, & Boquet's (2007) questioning of the space of the writing center as one of comfort: "we may be wrong in assuming a shared understanding of comfort" (p. 35) between student and tutor. Through attention to rhetorical listening, writing centers may be able to take up the work of "learning to unlearn, learning to be flexible in the face of newness, and learning deep listening that is

hard” (p. 21). And we may more fully recognize when and why tutoring fails or is not easy, particularly as we make room for listening to and reflecting on differences along with commonalities.

Ratcliffe (2005), drawing on Fuss, defines disidentification as an identification that is disavowed, a process in which the initial identification as it is imagined, possibly based on stereotypes, is rejected. What adding the concept of disidentification allows for is “a place of differences where rhetorical exchanges, such as cross-cultural communication, may occur, that is, a place where these exchanges may result in genuine understanding, not patronizing acceptance or silent resistance” (p. 63). In the writing center, a tutor might engage in a process of disidentification in hearing a student ask for proofreading and then 1. assume the student is asking for the tutor to correct their paper; 2. declare that the tutor does not edit student writing; and 3. thereby reject the identification the tutor assumes or imagines is being made. As Ratcliffe (2005), referencing Judith Butler, explains, “disidentification renders the object of a person’s disidentification ‘object’” (p. 62). Here, the rejected identification, the paper and the student in need of correction, become object. Rather than a play between disidentification and identification, this example offers a rejection of identification and of rhetorical listening, as the tutor disavows editing as a degrading rather than an important aspect of writing.

In contrast, Ratcliffe (2005) defines non-identification as a place for rhetorical listening in that it allows individuals to listen for what they might not know while holding off on identifying or disidentifying with that unknown. Ratcliffe (2005), drawing on Trinh, figures non-identification as a “place to assert personal agency” and a place where “people may *act* in a variety of ways” (p. 75) as they navigate identifications and disidentifications. In the example of the tutor disidentifying as a proofreader, the tutor may turn to rhetorical listening as non-identification to spend more time exploring what they do not know about the student’s request for help with editing, including what might be cultural forces or discourses informing that student’s request as well as their refusal of the request. The result may be that the tutor and student then engage the work of editing the student’s paper or that they negotiate a different agenda for the session—hopefully after arriving at a better understanding of how each is positioned with regard to the particular writing assignment. Depending on the tutor and how the tutor is situated in “a dominant cultural position,” this process of rhetorical listening compels them to “choose to engage discursive fields other than [their] own” and/or for those in “less-dominant cultural

positions to foster an involvement in, along with a healthy suspicion of, the dominant's group choosing" (p. 76).

Returning to the example from DiPardo's (1992) case study of Morgan (the tutor) and Fannie (the student), we can read this tutoring session through an approach to listening from a rhetorical perspective. While DiPardo (1992) calls for Morgan to listen more, Bokser (2005) points out that this is ineffective advice when listening is taught as a skill. Bokser (2005) instead argues that "when tutor preparation highlights the rhetoric of listening, students quickly learn what else they might listen for and appreciate how complicated this can be" (p. 47). Bokser (2005) also offers an effective way to introduce rhetorical listening into tutor education. However, rhetorical listening can also inform understandings of the tutoring session itself. In the case of Fannie and Morgan, it appears that Morgan was listening to Fannie in a way that would allow her to develop mastery as a tutor and thereby help Fannie write her essay. However, had Morgan been introduced to listening not only as a means of mastery (that is, of the tutor gaining a better understanding of the student) but also as a means of receptivity (that is, the tutor understanding some of the perspectives and discourses informing the student's position and the tutor's position), she may have been able to better work with Fannie. For example, Fannie tells Morgan that she wants to talk about the land in her paper, and Morgan seems to see this as a point of identification—that both Morgan and Fannie see the land of America as one of natural resources that has been exploited. However, Fannie seems to be working to articulate a sense of the land that is outside this framework, as DiPardo (1992) notes a possible deep connection with the land based on Fannie's Navajo perspective, a connection that positions Fannie in a position of disidentification with the framework Morgan proposes. As Fannie states to Morgan, "I think I know what you're trying to say. And I can kind of relate it at times to what I'm trying to say" (p. 136). Here, then, Fannie listens to Morgan and attempts to connect to what Morgan is saying while still making room for her own understanding of what she will write in her essay. In this sense, Fannie engages in a process of non-identification in which she recognizes what Morgan is saying but also works to assert a different perspective into the discussion. The difficult work then for Morgan would be to practice a form of listening that she has not been introduced to and that calls for learning on her part, as a tutor, just as much as the student's part as a writer. In particular, Morgan would engage the difficult work of helping Fannie articulate a position that Morgan is not herself aware of or at least not experienced with.

While it might seem that I am asking too much of tutors such as Morgan, I hope that in introducing richer concepts of listening, such as rhetorical listening, we might open up more space for tutors to negotiate their work. In particular, I hope that a concept of listening would help tutors such as Morgan feel less like they have to control a tutoring session and more like they can negotiate sessions in ways that support their approach to writing and the approaches of students they work with.

In reflecting on how rhetorical listening offers a rich way to explore writing conferences such as Morgan and Fannie's, I also recall Boquet's (2002) story of Kristen, a tutor who struggles with the discourses informing her work with a student in a writing conference. In this story, Kristen seems to use rhetorical listening to play with both identification and disidentification as she (dis)identifies a professor's outline for a student paper and seeks to help the student create a new outline, focused on what the student, not the professor, wants to write. That is, Kristen appears to have created a space for non-identification in which the student renegotiates her argument not by accepting the professor's incorrect version of it but instead by revising her version. I also recall how Boquet (2002) describes Kristen's experience as a "real loss of innocence" as Kristen contemplates how a teacher could so fully misdirect a student. At the same time, Boquet (2002) acknowledges that she did not listen to Kristen, and if she had, she would have chosen a different role in advising her. Here, then, Boquet's (2002) story shows not only how tutors might benefit from rhetorical listening but directors, too.

While much of my discussion is focused on how tutoring and tutors might change with attention to rhetorical listening, perhaps an equally fundamental shift will be with writing center directors and staff who might learn to listen to and for tutors differently—attending not only to those moments of comfort or the confusion we can easily resolve but also dwelling in the conflicts of writing, teaching, and learning in a diverse society. We, too, might proceed with less certainty and expertise but perhaps with more hope and openness to recognizing what we have in common, what our differences may be, and where we go from there.

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