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Praising Papers, Clarifying Concerns: How Writers Respond to Praise in Writing Center Tutorials

Abstract

In face-to-face writing center tutorials, tutor praise is an action that builds rapport and motivates writers (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2013). Drawing on and extending prior interactional analyses of praise, this article examines writers' responses to text-based praise across 10 tutorials, with a particular focus on interactional segments in which writers reformulate their previously mentioned concerns in response to tutor praise. Unlike more common responses that signal acceptance of the praise, such as appreciation, overt acceptance, and alignment, this responding action reflects some momentary misunderstanding between tutor and writer in the tutorial interaction. Despite this, these segments also show writers taking a more active role in critically evaluating their own papers and identifying areas for revision. In addition to surveying writers' varied responses to praise and exploring future research directions, this article also raises pedagogical implications for writing center tutoring and the one-to-one teaching of writing, specifically about how certain ways of designing and delivering praise can contribute to ambiguity and can run the risk of foreclosing or precluding opportunities for writers to articulate the kind of assistance they need with their drafts.

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In interactions within and beyond educational settings, praise is regarded as a "transparently supportive act" between interlocutors (Pillet-Shore, 2012, p. 181; see also Goffman, 1971). Giving praise is widely recommended as a practice and is central to the ethos of writing centers, which strive to support and motivate all writers. For example, praising a draft by mentioning some strength is very common after reading the entire text or some portion of it. Other research on writing center interaction has analyzed praise under the broader category of *motivational scaffolding*, or "the feedback that tutors use to build rapport and solidarity with students and to engage students and keep them engaged" (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2013, p. 47). Highlighting the benefits of this practice, Jo Mackiewicz & Isabelle Thompson (2013) explained that praising students for achievements builds their "confidence" and identifies future behaviors students should "reproduce" (p. 66).

Earlier research in *The Writing Center Journal*, however, identified a caveat about praise and its function in tutorial interaction, noting that praise can sometimes be unclear, and thus unhelpful, for writers (Bell & Youmans, 2006). Drawing on Penelope Brown & Stephen Levinson's politeness theory (1987),[1] Diana Calhoun Bell & Madeleine Youmans (2006) examined *text-based praise*, or tutors' positive assessments of the current draft, which effectively "serves as a springboard for the content of the session and initiates the collaboration to follow" (p. 37), and were interested in the confusion and misunderstanding around praise that can arise from "cross-cultural differences in politeness norms" between L1 (English as a first language) tutors and L2 (English as a second language) writers (p. 32). In particular, Bell & Youmans focused on interactional segments in which tutor praise immediately preceded criticism, as shown in Example 1. Bell & Youmans claimed both that the student's (S5's) talk in Example 1 at lines 11, 14, and 17, along with the interspersed and long pauses, indicated some misunderstanding of the tutor's *praise-then-criticize* instructional move, which unfolded across lines 01–07, and that the tutor (C5) transitioned from praise to criticism at line 05 after a three second pause indicated by *(3s)*.

1 Politeness theory, as summarized by Bell & Youmans (2006), describes *positive politeness* and *negative politeness.* Positive politeness strategies, such as "exaggerating interest/approval" or displaying "agreement," help the hearer "feel liked and approved of" (Bell & Youmans, 2006, pp. 34–35). Negative politeness strategies, such as "questioning or hedging" or "being conventionally indirect," help the hearer retain their rights to be unimpeded "in their self-determined action" (Bell & Youmans, 2006, p. 34). Both types sustain solidarity.

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Example 1

Interactional Segment in Which Tutor Praise Immediately Precedes Criticism

01 CS: *((Reading)) So , this is sort of like a persuasive argument that you have*
02 *done a good job setting up. (6s) ((Reading)) Okay, this is really great. (.) You*
03 *seem to be starting off well. You've got a good thesis and you seem to be fulfill-*
04 *ing it and obviously you're not done (.)—so—(.) but from what I've read, you*
05 *seem to be fulfilling it just fine. (3s) Um, but the phrasing here (pointing to*
06 *thesis) is hard for me to follow. You might want to think about who you are*
07 *writing to. What audience might be best for this information? (2s)*
08 S5: *Okay*
09 CS: *It seems like you are writing to some kind of elite audience, people in*
10 *charge, right? Or do you want to write to a more general audience? (4s)*
11 S5: *Hmmm, Hmmm. I'm not sure. (8s)*
12 CS: *You might want to think about who you want to address. Who has the*
13 *power to change this decision if you persuade them effectively? (4s)*
14 S5: *Okay (10s)*
15 CS: *So, what are some issues that might be important to, to officials in the gov-*
16 *ernment or the Pentagon, for example? (18s)*
17 S5: *Um, So? How I set it up?*

Note. Adapted from D. C. Bell & M. Youmans, 2006, "Politeness and Praise: Rhetorical Issues in ESL (L2) Writing Center Conferences," *Writing Center Journal*, 26(2), p. 42. Text is formatted, with italics, as it appears in Bell & Youmans (2006).

The student's turn within Example 1 at line 17 ("*How I set it up?*") seems to refer back to the tutor's earlier praise of an aspect of the argument in lines 01–03 (e.g., "*a good job setting up*"). Additionally, the student offers minimal responses to the tutor's critique about "phrasing" of the thesis statement and argument (lines 05–07) and the tutor's related questions about the suitability of that textual choice for the intended audience or readers (lines 09–10 and 12–13). Citing interactional moments like this one, Bell & Youmans (2006) illustrated how tutors' delivery of praise and criticism can be confusing for L2 writers, and they claimed that when a contrasting conjunction, such as the words "but," "although," or "however," immediately follows praise (as in "but" in line 05 above), it can leave writers wondering why the tutor is identifying a problem or recommending a change immediately after positively assessing the text. Based on their analysis, Bell & Youmans advocated for "showing students what makes that particular feature effective to us as readers rather than glossing over that positive characteristic in order to focus on the *although* which inevitably follows" (p. 45). They also recommended making tutors aware of cross-cultural differences in instruction, especially regarding politeness strategies and the *praise-then-criticize* approach, which is common in education within the United States but may not be elsewhere.

While the research I present here does not focus exclusively on L2 writers and politeness norms, I did analyze an interactional context similar to the one Bell & Youmans (2006) examined. Drawing from a collection of 10 video-recorded writing center tutorials, I analyzed segments of interaction in which a tutor produced *text-based praise*, or positive assessments of the draft, after a writer identified some concern about their draft. Through this analysis, which was informed by some prominent concepts and principles in conversation analysis (CA), I illustrate how writers' responses to tutors' just prior praise (and talk) indicated some momentary misunderstanding or a lack of alignment in assessing the draft. These segments abided by a sequence that took the following general form:

1. The writer articulated a concern by *asking for the tutor's evaluation* or by *proposing changes to draft*.
2. The tutor responded with talk that included *praise*.
3. The writer *reformulated* or *continued* the action from the first step.

While these segments in the 10 tutorials showed participants experiencing some difficulty in achieving a shared understanding, the segments also showed writers taking a more active role in critically evaluating their own papers. That is, when writers reformulated their prior action after tutors' praise, they persisted in procuring the feedback they needed to improve their draft and to achieve a greater understanding of tutors' evaluations of their work. In line with Bell and Youman's (2006) work, these segments also raise pedagogical implications for writing center tutoring and the one-to-one teaching of writing, specifically that certain ways of designing and delivering praise can contribute to ambiguity and run the risk of foreclosing opportunities for writers to articulate the kind of assistance needed.

Throughout my analysis of these segments, I prioritized *participants' orientations* to the interaction, which is a key principle in conversation analytic work and microlevel analyses of social interaction more broadly. In other words, I paid close attention to "people's own orientation to what's going on: what they take to be relevant and to be pertinent to the interaction as it proceeds" (Antaki, 1995, p. 23). Hence, writers' responses and the next-turns writers took following praise showed what mattered to them and what they made relevant in the interaction. This analytical focus complements and extends prior research on the function and design of tutors' praise in writing center interactions (Mackiewicz, 2006; Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2013). In a study of compliments in tutorials with technical writing students, Mackiewicz (2006) suggested that "further research could systematically investigate students' responses" (p. 25). Given the detailed attention in the literature to tutors' praise as opposed to writers' responses, by writing this article, I aim to deepen our understanding

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of writers' responses and perspectives, consider pedagogical implications, and explore new avenues for research. After describing the data collection process and method in the next section, I briefly highlight the most common responses to text-based praise across the 10 sessions, and then I analyze segments in which writers reformulate or clarify concerns after tutor praise.

Data Collection and Method

The data came from two IRB-approved projects funded by grants from the Midwest Writing Centers Association and the International Writing Centers Association. From 2015 to 2018, I video-recorded a total of 10 tutorials at a large public university and a private university in the Midwestern United States. Tutors received $10 for their participation. The data collection yielded 72 cases of text-based praise. See Table 1 for a description of the tutors, writers, and drafts. All but one of the participants were L1: Specifically, the student-writer in tutorial pair 6 was L2.

Table 1
Tutors, Writers, and Drafts Across 10 Tutorials

Tutorial Pair	Tutor	Writer	Draft
1	Graduate student, male	Undergraduate student, female	An analysis of two films for a literature and performing arts class
2	Post-doctoral student, female	Graduate student, female	A statement for a research grant application
3	Graduate student, male	Undergraduate student, female	An analysis of legal & historical factors in *Brown v. Board of Education* for a history course
4	Graduate student, male	Undergraduate student, male	An independent study think piece on President Trump's business acumen
5	Undergraduate student, female	Undergraduate student, male	A news headlines writing assignment for a media writing course
6	Graduate student, female	Undergraduate student, female	A medical school personal statement
7	Graduate student, male	Undergraduate student, male	An essay, written for an English course, on a William Wordsworth poem
8	Undergraduate student, female	Graduate student, male	An essay responding to a case study for a human resources course

Tutorial Pair	Tutor	Writer	Draft
9	Graduate student, female	Undergraduate student, female	A thesis-driven essay, for a comparative literature course, on Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*
10	Undergraduate student, female	Undergraduate student, male	An essay on the television series *The Twilight Zone* for a radio and television history course

The CA-guided method I used to approach these data explicates moment-by-moment unfolding of social interactions, such as seen in Example 1. CA is prominent within applied linguistics and is increasingly employed in writing center research (e.g., Godbee, 2012; Denny, 2018). As Terese Thonus (2020) wrote in her contribution to *Theories and Methods of Writing Center Studies*, CA developed from an interest in "how metadiscursive functions (turn-taking, response, and repair) build up interpretations as conversations unfold" (p. 179). Studies of turn-taking, adjacency pairs, and interactional organization in the 1970s by Harvey Sacks, Emanuel A. Schegloff, & Gail Jefferson and in the ensuing decades by subsequent researchers established CA as a field of inquiry (e.g., Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; Lerner, 2004). My approach resonates most with *applied CA*. In her research on writing center tutorials, which draws on applied CA, Beth Godbee (2012) explained that applied CA is meant to answer a question within institutional, interventionist, or problem-oriented contexts. In adopting this approach, researchers observe recurrent patterns in audio- or video-recorded interactions through initial transcriptions, then examine those patterns more rigorously through more detailed transcription and recursive viewing of interaction. Throughout the transcription and re-viewing processes, researchers build collections of phenomena. Thus, the main question I investigated in my study was: *How do writers respond to tutors' text-based praise?* The phenomena I analyzed were text-based praise and writers' responses to it. Table 2 details the transcription markings used in this article.

Table 2

Transcription Markings and Meanings

Markings	Meaning in Transcript
-> (arrow)	important lines in analysis
(1.0)	pause measured in seconds
word	(underlining) stress or emphasis
((word))	transcriptionist's description of events

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(syllable)	uncertain hearing/unintelligible talk
[words] [words]	(aligned brackets) start and end of overlapping speech
= (equal signs)	continuous speech with no break
heh/.hh	laughter/hearable aspiration
:: (colons)	stretching of prior sound
. (period)	falling intonation
, (comma)	continuing intonation
? (question mark)	rising intonation
- (hyphen)	cut off

Two key concepts in CA informed my analysis of the data: 1. *action* and 2. *participants' orientations.* Action refers to the main job that a turn-at-talk (or sequence of turns) is performing. For example, when a writer performs the action of *asking* via a question, this action is designed to elicit a tutor's *answer* as a responding action (Sidnell, 2012). Praise is a kind of *supportive action* accomplished through talk; through praise, tutors offer support or approval to writers. Because it is an expression and offer of approval, praise is meant to be accepted by recipients (Pillet-Shore, 2015).

By grounding claims in "participants' orientations" to the preceding interaction (Sidnell, 2012, p. 123), CA is attuned to how participants respond to one another's prior turns because those responses show how participants understand one another. In other words, CA "treats participants' own understandings as having primacy relative to analysts' understandings," and this methodological orientation "shows through most plainly in the CA 'proof procedure'" (Heritage & Stivers, 2012, p. 665). The *next-turn proof procedure* involves the analyst looking closely at the *next-turn,* or the "recipient's response" to prior turns (Sidnell, 2012, p. 79). More recent work in CA has posited a more general *next-action proof procedure,* which considers both "responsive verbal actions," such as agreement (e.g., "yes") and "embodied responsive actions," such as pointing (Mondada, 2016, p. 361). This proof procedure informed my analysis of how talk, which is hearable as praise, was understood by writers as reflected in their talk and embodied conduct (e.g., gestures, head nods). These two concepts—*action* and *participants' orientations*—guided my approach to understanding and analyzing how praise mattered to writers in these tutorials.

To illustrate how these concepts operate, especially in relation to the action of praising someone and responding to that action, I provide Example 2, which uses data from a study of teachers praising elementary and middle students in parent-teacher conferences. Example 2 shows how parents navigated the two constraints that operate when responding to praise: 1. agreeing with or

accepting praise and 2. avoiding self-praise (Pillet-Shore, 2012). In Example 2, the teacher (T) praises the student (lines 01–03) and then gives credit to Mom (line 07). Parents, as Mom did here, tend to avoid the appearance of self-praise by regularly uttering continuers ("hhm") and laughter (line 06) as opposed to something "semantically fitted" to the praise (Pillet-Shore, 2012, p. 201). In Example 2, a turn from Mom, such as "she's the biggest sweetheart," would be *semantically fitted* and would agree with the teacher's positive assessment, but it could also give the impression that Mom was praising herself. So instead, parents laugh (line 06) and show appreciation ("thanks") as Mom did here (line 08). This parent's responding actions, along with others in the study, show how parents orient to the praise as something to accept in a way that avoids the appearance of self-praise.

Example 2

Transcript to Illustrate Approach to Transcription and Analysis

```
01 T:   Ana: is: such a sweetheart. Like she:'s just. She's
02      one a those kids that just knows what to do and does
03      it and=
04 Mom: hhm
05 T:   stays quiet and follows dir[ections and everything.
06 Mom:                            [pt! hhh huh huh
07 T:   so your doin' a very good job. heh he[h
08 Mom:                                      [Thanks.
```

Note. Adapted from D. Pillet-Shore, 2012, "The Problems with Praise in Parent-Teacher Interaction," *Communication Monographs*, 79(2), p. 190.

Readers unfamiliar with ways of explicating social interaction may be wondering how this approach addresses and accounts for various identities and constructs, such as gender, which may be influencing how an interaction unfolds. For example, if one imagines a moment when Jack (a tutor) starts his turn before Jill (a writer) is done speaking and overlaps with her, one might interpret this moment by invoking gender difference. In fact, such an interpretation is supported by empirical research that men more frequently interrupt women (Zimmerman & West, 1975).[2] Indeed, gender does become relevant for participants, as CA researchers such as Elizabeth Stokoe (2012) have shown. However, an analyst's interpretation that gender is relevant to how an interaction unfolds might not hold for *the participants themselves* in a given moment. For example, participants often overlap each other's turns to engage in collaborative completion, also known as completing each other's sentences (King, 2018; Schegloff, 2000). Much research has shown how these comple-

2 Zimmerman & West's (1975) conclusions supported the *dominance model*, a perspective proposed by linguists who believed men and women speak differently. Later research, however, challenged both Zimmerman & West's research and the dominance model (Murray & Covelli, 1988; Cameron, 2007).

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tions work to indicate understanding and display agreement or alignment with (or "going along with") an interlocutor (see King, 2018, pp. 10–11). To this point, Schegloff (2000) explained, "If the initial and subsequent speakers end up talking at once, this is generally (though not invariably…) treated by them as noncompetitive and non-problematic" (p. 6). If, however, in our hypothetical example, after Jack overlaps Jill's sentence, she were to say, "Just let me finish," there would be more grounds to build an analysis that interruption, and its connection to gender, is at play for the participants. The key point is that interpretations emerge from a disciplined attachment to the data and participants' displays. This is *not* to say that gender, for example, only shapes the interaction when participants refer to it in their talk. Certainly, though participants might not say it, their interpretations and conduct in the interaction are likely shaped by lived experiences and social identities (e.g., gender, race, language background). However, my approach—guided by CA concepts—aims to elucidate how participants show their evolving understandings of each other's actions, as opposed to the analyst explaining what happens in the interaction as a reflection of some predefined concept, participant identity, or top-down application of that concept (e.g., gender dynamics).

Results and Discussion

In this section, I describe the main trends in the data across the 10 tutorials examined in order to provide a full picture of these interactions. In the majority of instances, writers accepted the praise either explicitly, through appreciation (e.g., "thanks") or overt acceptance (e.g., "okay cool"), or implicitly through alignment, which is achieved through continuers (e.g., "mhm") or silence. After acceptance, both tutor and writer usually moved on to another or next action, such as advice-giving, identifying another problematic aspect of the paper, or asking a question related to the writer's draft or the writing process, among other actions. Table 3 shows how often these types of response occurred in the 10 tutorials examined. In these particular tutorials, writers tended to be passive recipients of praise in the sense that the writers said little in response and appeared content to move on to other topics. After illustrating the more common responses in the subsection that follows, I provide an analysis of a subset of the "reformulating" segments and then explain the pedagogical implications of my analysis.

Table 3

Types of Responses to Praise

Type of Response	# of Cases (n = 72)
Next course of action	

Appreciation and next course of action	12
Overt acceptance and next course of action	23
Alignment and next course of action	30
Reformulating prior actions	
Reformulating or continuing a prior action	7

Common Responses to Praise: What Typically Occured in Subsequent Turns?

Across the 72 responses to text-based praise, writers 1. expressed appreciation of the praise (e.g., "thanks"); 2. accepted the praise by other lexical means (e.g., "okay"); 3. only produced continuers[3] (e.g., "mmhm") that align or "go along with" the praise and that pass up the opportunity to display overt acceptance; or 4. reformulated or continued their prior action, such as criticizing a part of the draft or proposing a change to it. For cases that fell into the first and second types, it was common for writers to produce continuers (e.g., "mmhm," "uh huh"), which signaled writers' understanding that the tutors' talk and praise were in-progress and unfinished. That is, writers allowed the praise to develop and eventually displayed appreciation or overt acceptance before moving on to something else. I look at each of these types of responses in more detail next.

Appreciation and Next Course of Action

In 12 of 72 cases of text-based praise, writers responded with appreciation that was followed by tutor and writer transitioning to a new action or activity (e.g., reading); this was the first type of response. These cases repeatedly accumulated in a few distinct parts of the tutorial, including 1. after reading aloud all, or a portion, of the text and 2. in tutorial closings. Prior research has found that compliments are rather common in closings and that compliments often "counterbalance" tutors' final "restatement of their most important advice and evaluations" (Mackiewicz, 2006, p. 21).

Example 3, which is taken from tutorial 10, illustrates a moment that came after the tutor's advice about merging a shorter paragraph with a preceding paragraph. The tutor (T) praised the writer's (W) "strong content," and the writer appreciated the praise (see arrow at line 05) before qualifying or downgrading responsibility for the praiseworthy content by claiming that the "*Twilight Zone* [the material the paper was based on] made it easy" (line 07). W then expressed satisfaction with his decision to write about this show.

3 Continuers like "mmhm" or "uh huh" are not full turns, but they increase the opportunity to take a turn.

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Example 3

Appreciation Response From Tutorial 10

```
01 T:     but otherwise I think you have like a lot of really
02        strong content um
03        (2.0)
04 T:     I think your overall paper is like really strong
05 W: ->  thank you.
06 T:     so
07 W:     I— I think The Twilight Zone made it easy. I'm glad
08        I picked it
```

Overt Acceptance and Next Course of Action

In 23 instances, writers overtly signaled acceptance of the praise by responding with acknowledgment tokens such as "okay" or assessments such as "cool" before moving on to something else; this was the second type of response, illustrated in Example 4. The segment shown in Example 4 began just after W accepted some advice about "splitting up" a passage describing an important metaphor in her statement for a research grant application. Starting at line 01, T positively assessed W's metaphor (lines 01–03; 05–06). After W accepted the praise with "okay," T briefly repeated her positive stance toward the metaphor before moving on to something else—identifying a problem with a word ("being").

Example 4

Overt Acceptance Response From Tutorial Two

```
01 T:     yeah cuz I— I do think it's a cool metaphor too:
02        like uh it's a really good visual, and anything like
03        that that's unique and will hook your readers,
04 W:     mmhm
05 T:     is a great thing to have in an application cuz it
06        makes you stand out.
07 W: ->  okay
08 T:     so yeah I really like that. is like- I was gonna say
09        though being ((pointing to draft on table))
10 W:     being ((makes change in draft))
```

Alignment and Next Course of Action

With the third type of response, alignment followed by next course of action, writers either produced continuers (e.g, "mmhm," "uh huh") that passed up the opportunity to display overt acceptance, or they did not utter anything from the start to the completion of the praise. A silence sometimes followed the praise, and tutors or writers moved on to the next action after it. In other words, participants aligned with, or went along with, the praise and next action. In the transcribed talk shown in Example 5, the tutor praised a passage of the personal statement draft after pausing to re-read those sentences at the writer's request. The writer produced a continuer (line 03), and after T reiterated the positive assessment (line 04), there was a second of silence in

the interaction. Following the silence, W initiated a new action—requesting advice from T about a different aspect of her personal statement draft. W made this request by displaying some uncertainty about potential readers situated in "American culture" (line 06).

Example 5

Alignment Response From Tutorial Six

```
01 T:     I— I think it um it's. it gives you a nice like starting
02        and ending point. they tie together nicely what you're=
03 W: ->  mmhm
04 T:     =doing in this paragraph. yeah I like tha:t
05        (1.0)
06 W:     and then also I don't know how like American culture is,
```

Though the writer initiated the next action here, most cases in this category involved tutors initiating criticism, advice, or some offer about what to discuss next without any turn-at-talk from writers. Altogether, these three more common responses to text-based praise might reflect a general understanding held by writers that the purpose of a tutorial is to focus on and talk more about areas for improvement and less about strengths or praiseworthy aspects of their written work.

Writers Reformulating and Clarifying Concerns

The fourth type of response to praise involved writers reformulating or continuing their prior *action*, such as criticizing a part of the draft or proposing a change to it, through their subsequent talk. In contrast to the first three types of response to praise, these segments, involving two different writers, are particularly important because the segments in the fourth type demonstrate writers' more active participation and critical engagement following praise. By going beyond merely accepting praise, writers productively "pushed back," so to speak, with interactional moves to meet their needs to improve their draft and achieve fuller understandings of the tutors' evaluations. I identified seven such segments across the 10 sessions, and I analyze four representative examples here. Three of those four examples—shown in Example 6a, Example 6b, Example 7, and Example 8—show the tutor and writer ultimately deciding that further discussion of some aspect of the paper was needed and exploring some possible revisions. In other words, these three segments led participants to actively reconsider ideas and language choices after the writer reformulated their earlier action. In contrast, Example 9 shows the tutor justifying or accounting for their earlier praise and the writer then accepting it—a pattern also observed in three more segments I omitted. I chose to leave those three segments out not because they were unimportant but because they seemed to culminate in less critical engagement and extended deliberation about the draft.

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Example 6a, Example 6b, and Example 7 came from the middle of tutorial nine, which focused on the writer's thesis-driven essay about the novel *The Reader.* (The novel addresses, through the perspective of Michael Berg, how post-war German generations grappled with the atrocities of the Holocaust; in the book, Berg, a German teenager in the late 1950s, starts a relationship with Hanna, an older woman who was a guard at Auschwitz.) The interactional segments shown in Example 6a, Example 6b, and Example 7 lasted about two minutes altogether. I broke the sixth segment into two parts, shown in Example 6a and Example 6b, because the segment was long and complex.

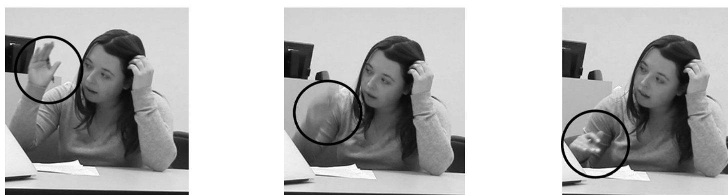
In Example 6a, the writer began by asking a question about her paper, specifically an evaluation of the paper's "flow." In her question, the writer indicated she thought something "other than" what the writer and tutor have talked about so far is wrong, or not "okay," with the draft. As W produced the question, T's talk overlapped with W's, and T confirmed that the "flow" of the literary analysis paper was what W wanted evaluated. Note W's hand gesture or movement (see Figure 1). The hand gesture coincided with her uttering "flow" and is relevant to how she clarified her concern later in the interaction (see Example 6b). In response to W's implication that something may have been wrong with the flow, T produced a strong denial at line 05 ("no no no"). This strong denial is an example of what conversation analyst Tanya Stivers (2004) described as speakers using multiple sayings, such as "no no no," to "communicate their [speakers'] stance that the prior speaker has persisted unnecessarily in the prior course of action and should properly halt course of action" (p. 260). By offering a strong denial and subsequent positive assessments of the draft, T showed she understood W's turns about "flow" as both a question and criticism of her own draft. Instead of being a problem for T, the "flow" was a strength, an opinion which T supported by explaining her positive "thinking" as she listened to W read aloud earlier in the tutorial (lines 11–13, 15, 17, and 19). After W accepted and assessed this initial praise at line 20, T then positively assessed W's work again (lines 21–22 and 24). After saying "yeah" at the end of 6a (line 25), W's subsequent turns in 6b showed that T's praise in 6a did not seem to fully address, or fit with, her expressed concern about flow at lines 01–02.

Example 6a

Reformulating Response From Tutorial Nine

```
01  W: -> other than that is it okay like with. ((gesture in figure 1))
02        [flow
```

Figure 1
"Flow" Gesture



```
03 T:   [in terms of flow,
04 W:   ye[ah
05 T:     [yeah no no [no
06 W:                 [okay
07 T:   um I think it's a beautiful sequencing [of ideas,
08 W:                                          [okay
09 T:   and it was actually really amazing=
10 W:   mmhm
11 T:   =to hear you rea:d, because in my head I was kind of
12      thinking, oh I wonder like I think we're gonna go
13      to this ((smiling))=
14 W:   yeah yeah
15 T:   =question next. I hope she brings up
16 W:   [yeah
17 T:   [family and kinship and like
18 W:   yeah
19 T:   you did,
20 W:   okay cool
21 T:   um so. so that just sho:ws um how you've organized
22      this in a way tha:t kind of structures um
23 W:   mmhm
24 T:   the reader's experience,
25 W:   yeah
```

Note. Adapted from M. Haen, 2019, "Reported Thought in Writing Center Talk: A Resource of Doing Support and Socialization," *Studies in Applied Linguistics & TESOL*, 19(1), 17–34; https://doi.org/10.7916/salt.v19i1.1404.

As this segment continued, as shown in Example 6b, W reformulated what she meant by "flow" as well as her request for evaluation. She began with her utterance "I just wanna," which is a common form (*I want X*) for making requests in writing tutorials (Park, 2015). Before articulating the request in more detail, she accounted for the request by explaining a problem with a past paper (lines 29, 31, and 33). She then used the *I want X*-form again to clarify the kind of evaluation she was requesting from T (line 37). Though W did not use the word "flow," she requested that T evaluate how W was "answering" or "explaining [her] thesis throughout" the paper. As displayed in Figure 2, W produced this talk in conjunction with a horizontal hand gesture or movement that echoed her vertical gesture from Example 6a (line 01; Figure 1). In other words, the writer seems to be requesting an evaluation of the draft's "flow" that

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is slightly different than the kind of "flow" that the tutor just *praised* earlier in Example 6a.

Example 6b

Continuation of Reformulating Response From Tutorial Nine

```
26 T:      uh[hm
27 W: ->     [I just wanna make sure that,
28 T:      mmhmm
29 W:      cuz I know from my last paper it wa:s
30 T:      mhmm
31 W      a little bit confusing
32 T:      mmhm
33 W:      like with my thesis and like answering tha:t,
34 T:      okay.
35 W:      and I know that I made the question,
36 T:      yeah
37 W: ->  so I wanna make sure that I'm like really like
38 T:      yeah
39 W: ->  for sure answering ((sweeping, horizontal gesture in Figure 2))
40 T:      mmhm
41 W: ->  the heh my thesis.
```

Figure 2

The "answering… my thesis" Gesture

```
42 T:      yeah
43 W: ->  or like explaining my thesis throughout. so like
44 T:      mmhmm
45 W:      when I talk about . . .
```

Note. Adapted from M. Haen, 2019, "Reported Thought in Writing Center Talk: A Resource of Doing Support and Socialization, *Studies in Applied Linguistics & TESOL*, 19(1), 17–34; https://doi.org/10.7916/salt.v19i1.1404. Copyright 2019 by M. Haen. Used with permission.

After specifying what she wanted evaluated and what she apparently meant by "flow," W raised a question about a certain passage and its organization that may have been problematic for the "flow" (lines 43, 45). In sum, though the tutor's initial praise (as shown in Example 6a) did not fit exactly with the writer's "flow" concern, the writer used talk and gesture to clarify the

issue she wanted to address in her draft and to specify the kind of help and evaluation she needed from the tutor.

Example 7 includes text-based praise, which was embedded near the start and end of the tutor's response to the writer's proposal about changing the central question of her essay (the proposal is at line 03). In the opening lines of this example, which continues from the end of 6b, T commended W for asking the question about her 'flow.' T then uttered "I'm wondering if," which often prefaces advice. At line 03, W appeared to anticipate this advice about revision and proposed a change to her essay's central question guiding her thesis and argument. In response to W's proposal, T seemed to agree by saying "yeah" before starting to talk about W's "more interesting" answer to her question (lines 04–05, 07, 09). T's talk at this point might be interpreted as a positive assessment, or endorsement, of W's answer. Across lines 11 to 19, T seemed to allude to W's central question and offer an alternative for the second part of the question. Her essay's question in the draft read, "What is the nature of the moral tension that Michael experiences and how does this tension reveal the second generation's complicity[4] in the Holocaust?" Essentially, T seemed to be suggesting that W change the question to "What is the nature of the moral tension that Michael experiences and *how does it help us understand the moral dilemma placed on the second generation*?" After this suggestion, T linked what she had just said to a concept that W had included and written about in her draft, the concept of shame, which T positively assessed as "really cool." At lines 21 and 23, T produced this assessment while smiling. Then, at line 27, W reformulated the action she did at line 03.

Example 7

Another Reformulating Response From Tutorial Nine

```
01 T:     I'm glad you went back to this question cuz I'm wondering
02        if um
03 W: ->  like I can change the question I just ( ) [yeah
04 T:                                              [yeah I think
05        I think the answer that you have is actually more interesting,
06 W:     mmhm
07 T:     so you've already kind of named and explained this=
08 W:     yeah
09 T:     =tension
10 W:     mmhm
11 T:     I think what's interesting for you is that um, it's how this
12        tension helps us to, not maybe understand their compliancy
13 W:     mmhm
14 T:     but understand the kind of moral dilemma
```

4 Though the tutor said "compliancy" in Example 7 instead of "complicity," which the writer used in her written question, the essay draft as well as the interaction to this point suggested that the tutor just used the wrong word when referring to the writer's question. The word "compliancy" did not appear in the writer's draft and it had not been mentioned in the interaction to this point.

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```
15 W:     okay
16 T:     that's placed upon them
17 W:     yeah
18 T:     um, right and what that moral dilemma like motivated
19        them to do and that's=
20 W:     okay
21 T:     =when you get into the concept of shame ((smiling))
22 W:     mhmm ((writing notes on paper and keeps writing until line 27))
23 T:     which is like really coo:l.
24 W:     [yeah
25 T:     [and um
26        ((4.0; W writing notes))
27 W: ->  so should I just keep the question I guess or?
28 T:     uh it seems like you're you're answer-
29 W:     mmhm
30 T:     it seems like you're answering a little different question
31 W:     okay
32 T:     so I think we need to change the question=
33 W:     okay
34 T:     =a little bit to reflect that work.
```

The way W designed her turn in line 27 ("so should I just keep the question . . .") suggests that she is less committed to her earlier proposal of changing her essay's central question. Moreover, the turn suggests that she might have interpreted T's prior talk and positive assessments as a possible endorsement of her question as it was currently written in her draft. W did include "or," which allows for the possibility that her understanding is incorrect. In lines 28, 30, and 32, T agreed with W's initial proposal and her concern about her question (line 03). In sum, it seems that W did not interpret T's initial "yeah" and subsequent talk, which included praise, as an entirely clear response or answer to her earlier proposal. Here again, the tutor's talk and praise led the writer to rearticulate her concern about her paper's question—whether to keep it in its current form or change it.

Example 8 and Example 9 also illustrate how a writer clarifies earlier concerns after tutor praise. These examples are from tutorial six in which an L1 tutor and L2 writer worked on a medical school personal statement. At lines 01, 03, 05, W asked a question that indicated a problem with a part of the personal statement and requested an evaluation from T. T answered with disagreement three times at lines 02, 04, and 07 before producing another "no" and an accompanying explanation for the answer ("because you go . . ."). At lines 13–14, T then praised the way W moved from one point to the next in the draft. In response to T's praise, W clarified what "ideas" she was referring to with her earlier question about "jumping from ideas."

Example 8

Clarifying Response From Tutorial Six

```
01 W: ->  mmh am I jumping from
02 T:     uh uh ((shaking head))
03 W: ->  ideas or
04 T:     no
05 W: ->  or like between this story
```

```
06          (1.0)
07 T:       no
08 W:       okay
09 T:       no because you go from talking about Mexico City and then
10          to Illinois, moving to two countries that are. that speak
11          languages that=
12 W:       mmhm
13 T:       =are not Portuguese. so you move really nicely
14          into the next point
15 W: ->    but like between the McHappy day idea and then
16          like moving to another place,
17          (1.0)
18 W:       this place or I don't know. I talk about ((points to paper))
19 T:       oh yeah. so ((reading aloud)) um
20          (1.0)
21 T:       yeah so there needs to be a connection there
```

To help T understand what she wanted evaluated in her paper, W also pointed to the passage in the paper in front of them. Having clarified and specified the issue, T agreed with W that there "needs to be a connection" between the ideas (lines 19, 21). After line 21, T and W started brainstorming this connection. In this segment, the problem of "jumping" between ideas without a connection remained for W after the praise at lines 13–14, so she reformulated what she did earlier with verbal and embodied resources (e.g., pointing to the draft). As in Example 6a and Example 6b, this moment shows how writers can clarify their concerns with more than just verbal resources by also deploying different kinds of gestures—a potentially interesting area for further research that could expand prior research on embodied resources in writing center interaction (see Thompson, 2009).

In the final example, Example 9, which came about a minute earlier in the same session, tutorial six, W asked T about the correct form of a noun in the personal statement ("selves" vs. "self"). After stating a preference for the plural form of the noun, T added "it's a gray area" and deferred to W ("whatever you're more comfortable with"). As T continued to talk, she positively assessed the draft at lines 09–11. Specifically, her response was supported with the extreme case formulation (ECF) "anyone" (Pomerantz, 1986) when T claimed "anyone reading this would understand" (line 09). ECFs, such as the words "always," "forever," "everybody," and "anyone," help justify a description or assessment (Pomerantz, 1986). T's reference to "anyone reading this" justified her stance and conveyed hearable praise of W's draft and its clarity. With her response, W's "okay" foreshadowed the closing of the sequence. However, T elaborated and expanded the sequence across lines 13–14 and 16–17 before offering a positive assessment at line 19. In the following turn (line 20), W asked for confirmation by overlapping with the end of T's positive statement ("I like that"), signaling that W was competing for the floor to confirm her tentative understanding of T's talk and to solicit an answer from T about the correct noun form.

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Example 9

Another Clarifying Response From Tutorial Six

```
01 W: -> do I say selves=
02 T:    yeah
03 W: -> =or self?
04 T:    yeah that would be.
05 W:    [plural?
06 T:    [I- I like selves. um it’s kind of a gray area
07 W:    mhmm
08 T:    so it’s whatever you’re more comfortable with. but
09       I think anyone reading this would understand that you
10       mean like I was this self and then I was this self
11       and they’re different,
12 W:    okay
13 T:    a:nd it’s even just because you’ve lived in different
14       places they were different selves right?
15 W:    ((nodding))
16 T:    you had to learn different languages to acclimatize to
17       those different places=
18 W:    mkay
19 T:    =so yeah I think that’s cool. I [like that
20 W: ->                                 [so two, I mean like plural
21       is fine,
22 T:    yes absolutely cuz it’s two different selves.
23 W:    okay
24 T:    mhmm
25 W:    uhm
26       (2.0)
27 W:    also
```

After T confirmed W’s understanding, T and W agreed to move on after line 27 to revising some lengthy sentences.

In responding to tutors’ prior talk, which included praise, writers in Example 6a, Example 6b, Example 7, Example 8, and Example 9 reformulated or continued with a prior action (e.g., soliciting the correct noun form), using verbal as well as embodied resources in attempts to achieve shared understanding. In these moments, writers became more active participants as they critically evaluated their papers and sought clarification from tutors. With their responses, these two writers in tutorials six and nine went beyond merely accepting praise: In Example 6a, Example 6b, and Example 8 especially, the writers pushed back productively to get their needs met. They made interactional moves—after tutors’ praise—that pursued the kind of feedback they needed to improve their drafts and understand tutors’ evaluations.

Yet a key difference between participants in sessions six and nine should be addressed before I conclude. Though Example 6a, Example 6b, and Example 7 came from a session in which the writer was L1 and Example 8 and Example 9 came from a session in which the writer was L2, it is possible, but difficult, to know for certain that those backgrounds influenced how the interaction unfolded. In Example 9, it might have been that the writer’s language background and proficiency contributed to her struggle to follow the L1 tutor’s expanded answer to the writer’s question that presented two options (“do I say selves or

self?"). The L1 writer in Example 7 had similar difficulty following the tutor's lengthy response to the writer's proposal about changing the essay's central question. Ultimately, while Bell & Youmans's study provided some answers related to a particular instructional move and interaction context, there is more to learn about the degree to which language background might shape writers' interpretations and responses to praise.

Conclusion

The role of a writing tutor is to help writers improve their work *and* bolster their confidence, as confidence helps students achieve better outcomes (see Dweck, 2002, for an introduction to this idea). Praise can contribute greatly to confidence building. Informed by prior interactional research on praise in writing center scholarship (Thonus, 2002; Bell & Youmans, 2006; Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2014), my article shows how two writers *reformulated* or *continued a prior course of action* initiated before the tutors' praise. These writers' responses demonstrate that the tutors' prior talk did not completely address initial concerns, which were articulated seconds earlier by the writers. Though the tutor praise and talk I analyzed created momentary misunderstanding between participants, or a lack of agreement in assessing particular elements of the draft, writers also displayed more active participation and engagement in evaluating their own drafts in these segments. Based on this exploratory study, I offer two important implications for writing center pedagogy and the one-to-one teaching of writing. One implication concerns certain ways of designing praise that can contribute to ambiguity, and the second implication relates to how particular ways of delivering praise can run the risk of foreclosing or precluding opportunities for writers to articulate the kind of assistance writers need with drafts.

Example 7 and Example 9 show the importance of tutors carefully evaluating drafts when responding to writers' questions and proposals about revision so as not to engender ambiguity and potential misunderstanding. In Example 7, the tutor seems to have agreed with the writer's initial proposal to "change the question," but this was apparently not understood by the writer (e.g., "so should I keep the question I guess"). The tutor's positive assessment of the writer's answer and the "shame concept" in the draft might have contributed to this misunderstanding. In Example 9, the tutor did not clearly commit to either of the noun forms proposed by the writer (line 06). The tutor positively evaluated the written draft by pointing out that "anyone reading" the draft would understand before reiterating that she "likes" the plural form of the noun that the writer used in the draft. However, things seem to have remained at least somewhat unclear for the writer, who still solicited confirmation and an answer about the correct noun form, which the tutor provided again. The

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pedagogical takeaway is that tutors may be eager to reinforce the good things they see in student writing, but on some occasions, such an instructional move can create ambiguity and misunderstanding for students who might be seeking straightforward answers to questions and proposals.

Additionally, Example 6a, Example 6b, and Example 8 suggest that tutors may want to invite or ask writers to expand on initial criticisms and concerns instead of dismissing those concerns and subsequently praising the draft. Though disagreeing with writers' own critiques and praising the text may be a way to build a supportive environment, such an action can foreclose opportunities for writers to articulate a full and precise description of the problems they need help addressing in the tutorial. Tutors could still express their favorable or positive stance towards the draft but could follow their praise by asking writers to talk about past experiences that inform concerns (as in Example 6b) or by inviting writers to point tutors to specific areas of the draft (as in Example 8). Moreover, some writers may not be as insistent about their concerns as the ones featured in these segments, so tutors' praise may actually shut down any further discussion about the issue and about possibilities for revision. Both these implications could be taken up in tutor education and staff professional development activities that involve viewing and discussing moments of praise within tutorials.

I can envision two future research directions that would attend closely to writers' actions and contributions in writing center tutorials. First, while my analysis, like that of Bell & Youmans (2006), touched on some potential problems with praise in L1 to L2 tutorial interaction (see Example 8 and Example 9), more comprehensive discourse-analytic or corpus-based studies[5] of praise and writers' responses might map notable variation (if any) in how these moments unfold when tutors and writers work across demographic and identity differences. Second, future research ought to more closely and systematically investigate how writers' responses to praise are shaped (if at all) by the design of the praise itself. For example, a more comprehensive study could examine whether writers' responses to tutors' praise or compliments differ depending on whether the tutors' talk takes the form of a *formulaic compliment*—broad, non-specific praise, such as "it's good" and "lovely sentence"—or a *nonformulaic compliment* that, for example, would involve the tutor describing specific positive thoughts they had while the writer read aloud (see Mackiewicz, 2006, pp. 13–14). In addition to the design of praise, the actions surrounding the praise and the larger activities unfolding in the talk may shape writers' uptake and responses.

5 See Mackiewicz (2016) for an accessible model of a discourse analytic and corpus-based approach to writing center talk.

In investigating tutor actions like praise, my purpose is not to arrive at some foolproof formula for delivering the best or most effective praise. Rather, investigating praise can help tutors develop a flexible repertoire for praising papers and sustaining writers' active participation in every tutorial.

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