9 Seeing Ourselves as Experts

> I explained to [an ESL] student that there are different ways of thinking. He said, "I like the way you think in this country and I would like to think that way myself."
>
> —Diane

For this group, comprising teacher/tutors whose students display a wide array of writing problems, discussions of student writing must yield specific strategies and protocols to help those students. When all is said and done, we want to find a way to identify what problems reside in their writing and then direct them to find possible solutions. In other words, there has always been in these sessions a very practical, indeed urgent agenda: let's produce strategies for both our teaching and our tutoring that will work.

Perhaps such a goal has been impractical in itself, given the disparate expectations that all of us have within our own classrooms, our own disciplines. But the wondrous thing about our writing center, and this workshop, is that we have an opportunity and an inclination to find a common language. That has been clear from the start. The discussion surrounding our "primary traits" indicates as much. Can we now, also, find some common ground when describing what ought to happen when we tutor students who come to our writing lab? Can we agree on both our objectives and our methods as tutors?

Any discussion of our tutor protocol must begin with the problematic nature of our roles as teacher/tutors. Each of us is a classroom teacher as well as a writing lab tutor. Are our roles as teachers and tutors mutually exclusive, with nothing being transferred from one to the other? Indeed, since as teachers we are accustomed to wielding power over our students' texts through our grading, is it possible that our experience in the classroom may hinder our performance as tutors? May we not be tempted to compel students to write our own versions of papers rather than the students'? I prefer to think, following Helon Raines's view, that our teaching may benefit from our assuming the role of tutor, while our tutoring—certainly in a lab that invites writing from all of the disciplines—benefits from our experience and expertise as teachers (1994). By that I mean that, on the one hand, as teachers we benefit from playing a tutor's facilitative role—allowing students to retain ownership over their own writing, as we writing teachers say. On the other hand, as teachers we bring a disciplinary knowledge and the credibility that comes from such expertise.

Anyone who has been involved in a writing center knows the importance of credibility to its standing among faculty, students, and administrators (North 1984).

What ought to be our objectives going into a tutoring session and what kinds of behavior will most effectively allow us to satisfy those objectives? Unfortunately, early attempts to render a tutoring protocol (by another faculty team) yielded only a description of procedure: Read the students' file, ask for the assignment, determine deadlines, and so forth. What this group needs to do is examine aspects of writing pedagogy and produce a document that will help guide all of us to become effective tutors. That said, any account of how tutoring ought to occur must value the "situatedness" of each tutoring session. Just as evaluation of writing cannot be ripped out of the disciplinary context that generates it, so tutoring sessions reflect a unique set of circumstances and expectations and cannot be standardized or reduced.

Diane, who, by virtue of a leave of absence, has had the luxury of serving on two faculty teams, informs the group that the initial purpose for establishing a tutoring protocol (and a list of primary traits) was to ease the anxiety felt by faculty in departments other than English about tutoring writing in the first place. Those pioneering faculty were questioning themselves, Diane says: "Who am I? Why am I doing this? What we did was share the kinds of things that went on, so all of us felt we were on the same wavelength. We didn't feel that we had that kind of expertise." Such a protocol needed to emerge from the faculty's own stories, told, reflected upon and discussed back and forth—rather than a directive given from top (read English department) down (read all other departments). As with the traits, this had to be a joint effort in order to be credible.

In our reading from the night before, Emily Meyer and Louise Z. Smith (1987) had prompted us to think about the qualities distinguishing experienced writers from novices that we would like to promote in the students whom we tutor. Practiced writers, they tell us, develop an "inner monitor, another 'self'" that

> comments and questions as the writing self sets down ideas, and it is this voice that helps the writer specify and connect . . . ideas. [Inexperienced writers] leave out crucial information, producing prose that is elliptical or "writer-based," as opposed to prose that is directed to a reader, or "reader-based" [Flower]. (27, 28)

Drawing from Linda Flower's study of writing as a cognitive process, Meyer and Smith see experienced writers as capable of achieving critical distance from their writing—adopting the stance of the reader—while novices remain within themselves, paying little heed to what impact their words might have on another.

When I mention to the group that in our tutoring sessions we might very well serve as restraining readers and thereby promote in writers a more critical "inner voice," Peter demonstrates little patience with the idea. "Sometimes," he says, "that inner voice is so damned developed you can't write a thing." Meyer and Smith, recognizing the problem, refer to "self-censoring writers," those writers who are unable to achieve fluency because they are too self-conscious about how their writing might "play" (44). But Peter's objections go deeper, I know. They have to do with a view of writers as true to their own visions and free to work out those visions without meddling from troublesome readers. In this respect, writing ought to be, in Peter Elbow and Jennifer Clarke's phrase, "desert island discourse" (1987, 19). Sometimes, perhaps early in the drafting process, writers ought to go at it alone, freely and creatively. Only later ought they to get reader feedback. Given (our) Peter's view, so often expressed at this workshop, that writers must first of all "tell the truth," I would think that he might downplay the importance of a reader entirely and privilege the writers' "truth." And yet Peter is, at *this* session, a tutor in our writing lab and a teacher who works terribly hard to encourage students to write productively.

In fact, we learn that in Peter's writing classes students read their writing aloud to the whole class for peer comments. In these sessions, students read their papers completely through before eliciting comments. When commentary begins, Peter demonstrates a response, especially early on in the course, by framing questions—questions that bring out what works and doesn't work about a piece of writing. Eventually, the students themselves will produce useful questions and comments. Writers pay heed to what their peers say because, as Peter puts it, "They care more about what their friends think than what the teacher will give them."

Even for Peter, then, writing can indeed be seen as a social process, a "conversation" between writers and readers. That process might be particularly appropriate for our students at the community college, too many of whom are isolated from one another, from their teachers, and from the institution. In part the reason for this may lie in the kinds of lives our students lead, shuttling between work and school. They simply don't have the time to stick around. Another reason may rest with the diversity of our students—differences of age, but also of culture, language, and ethnicity. Diane tells a story that reminds us how complicated our students are. A student came to the lab for advice on a piece of writing for an ESL class. Seeing potential in the writing, Diane suggested that he share his work with other students, family, and friends. The student then implied that he didn't feel comfortable doing so. For him, in fact, it was important not to share his writing with other ESL students especially. "I like the way you think in this country," he told Diane, "and I would like to think

that way myself." Sharing his writing was difficult enough, but sharing his work with others of like experience seemed beside the point. He wanted to be assimilated quickly into the ways of the academy.

If there is a single lesson from Diane's story, it might be that effective tutoring sessions have to acknowledge the complex web of intentions behind a piece of writing. We need, in our protocol, to allow opportunity for writers to provide that context. Obviously we ought not to compel writers to accept our purposes as theirs. Our comments need to open up rather than close out conversation.

It occurs to me, as I reflect further on Diane's story, that it offers other lessons as well, going beyond tutoring concerns to raise broader issues of power and identity. The student who came to the lab for help with his writing was obviously coming for much more: he desired the means by which he could not only achieve assimilation within the dominant culture of school but also the power that he saw inevitably accompanying that assimilation. For all our politically correct desire to respect the differences that our students bring to our classes and our writing lab, we need to recognize indeed where power lies in those classes and in that writing lab: with teachers and tutors. Consequently, the aim to "become like" those teachers and tutors can be seen as both pragmatic and shrewd.

While our role is in part to help transform the composing process into a conversation (in effect to get writers to learn to talk to themselves as well as to readers about the writing), we are also demonstrating a critical stance ourselves in order to facilitate the very kind of assimilation that Diane's student devoutly wished. In other words, just as Peter feels comfortable demonstrating a critical response during peer student review, so we as tutors must acknowledge and use our own authority as expert readers (and teachers) within a given tutoring session. Essentially, that was what the ESL student was saying to Diane: You are an expert and I want to learn how you do it.

The student assumes, of course, that all of us who work in the lab have a justifiable claim as experts (as native English speakers but also as tutors of writing and experts in our particular specialties) and that all of us are comfortable in that role. He would be surprised, I think, by how ill at ease those of who work at two-year colleges are made to feel by that "expert" role. As has often been noted in this workshop, we prefer to see ourselves as generalists, suited by temperament and commitment to casting our nets wide rather than digging deep within a discipline. I have often been reminded of that uneasiness when the subject of our disciplinary expertise has come up in these sessions. Kathy's comments in particular seem to strike a note of defensiveness for me: "Maybe because I don't have a department. . . . I don't think as departmentally as you guys do." Thinking "departmentally" is in fact rarely done at our college, where depart-

ment meetings offer little opportunity to discuss the content of what it is those departments actually do. Moreover, our relatively low status (and low pay) as teaching faculty (in sharp contrast with the profile and pay of our privileged colleagues at research institutions) has marked us off as nonspecialists and nonexperts. Our specialty, if that is what it can be called, is in the delivery of knowledge, not in knowledge itself.

I believe that what we do at the two-year college allows us to lay real claim to an expertise that goes beyond thinking "departmentally" and that transcends equally our roles as experts in instruction only. What might that expertise be?

I suspect that our expertise as two-year college faculty may best be brought out in settings such as writing centers and writing-in-the-disciplines projects (as opposed to writing-across-the curriculum projects, which have tended to gloss over important differences in the way disciplines write and think). In such settings, we two-year college faculty may engage in transdisciplinary conversations without feeling as if we have betrayed departmental or disciplinary affiliations. Two-year college writing centers staffed by full-time faculty from a variety of academic areas may be valuable sites for disciplinary research. As I have often written, we are predisposed to cross borders.

That said, we too rarely have an opportunity to reflect on the nature of expert knowledge and ways of knowing that we bring to such conversations. In that sense, we are like our students, not sufficiently practiced in "thinking about thinking."

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We can make the argument that when students become tutors of their peers' writing, they, too, must acknowledge the expertise that they bring to the "exchange," and visualize their own behavior as demonstrating a critical response for inexperienced writers. This view of peer response in some ways answers Marlene's concern. She worries that students simply don't know how to critique writing—their own or others'—effectively. It is, of course, one thing to hear this view from a faculty tutor; it's quite another to hear it echoed by one of our peer tutors. Deb, a student who tutors in our lab, does exactly that when she says: "You need someone you could really trust. Who will dig deep enough but not rip totally apart. I don't think you can find this in a classroom [that is, in fellow students]. You get no critique whatsoever." The fact is that when students acquire the experience and training to assist less experienced student writers, they have distinguished themselves from their peers. Moreover, Kenneth Bruffee, who has eloquently defended the notion that knowledge is made, and shared, among peers, has himself recognized that there are those who

are inside knowledge communities and those who are outside, and that those on the outside rely on the "linguistic improvisation" of specially gifted translators. Although Bruffee does not refer specifically to peer tutors (but only to the traditional "teachers" and "students") we can reasonably infer that what he says applies to trained student tutors as well as to teachers:

> Teachers have to be able to translate at the community boundaries that they belong to and uncountable numbers of nonacademic, nonprofessional communities that their students belong to. . . .
>   Mastering the linguistic improvisation involved in this third kind of nonstandard discourse—negotiation between knowledge communities and outsiders who want to join them—distinguishes a knowledge community's teachers from its ordinary members. (1993, 64, 65)

Although tutors in a given writing lab may not be faculty, they are invested with a certain authority and bring a certain expertise to tutoring sessions with students. Moreover, peer tutors too may find themselves in the role of translators—of teachers' comments and instructions—for students not yet initiated in the ways of a particular discipline or of the academy generally.

Bruffee's use of the phrase "third kind of nonstandard discourse" is reminiscent of what Meyer and Smith mention in our reading: that tutors need to find an effective language by which to inform students of academic and disciplinary conventions, and which holds currency for those students. Meyer and Smith reduce the language issue to the difference between asking "How can you illustrate your topic sentence?" and "Why do you think this?" (1987, 30). Aside from the need to ask open-ended questions (preventing a co-opting of students' writing), they recommend that tutors use "everyday language" in discussing writing with students. The issue is not that simple, of course. Even "everyday language" may take on considerable complexity, depending on the context. Consider an exchange that the members of our group have about what constitutes "persuasive" evidence:

> *Howard:* Isn't all good writing persuasive?
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> *Kathy:* That's a loaded term, though.
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> *Diane:* Even that experience of Peter's student is persuasive [referring to the student narrative discussed earlier]. He was trying to persuade us that he had had an experience that was profoundly affecting and he persuaded the reader that that was so.
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> *Kathy:* But a lot of rhetoric books use that term to mean argument.
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> *Peter:* Why not say the purpose of narrative writing is to move? Of argumentative writing to persuade?
>
> *Kathy:* Could we say something about anecdote as support?

Peter's attempt to negotiate our different readings of the word "persuade" seems to be successful (and will wind up in our new version of the traits). Nevertheless, Kathy is attempting here to complicate our sense of both "persuade" and "evidence." Might these terms not include the validation that derives from personal observation and experience?

The issue of what kind of language to use in tutoring sessions, then, is an important and complex one. As tutors we need to use language that bridges the gulf between the discourse communities which students aim to enter and the community or communities to which they already belong. Perhaps our own struggles to cross the disciplinary borders that separate us have been good preparation for aiding our students' journeys of translation.

Our discussion of a tutoring protocol, then, yields the following principles that we believe should underlie the tutoring done at the lab, together with tutoring behaviors that emerge from those principles:

Tutor Protocol

All writing is prompted by, and takes meaning from, a specific situation or task.

> Always ask students to produce their teachers' instructions and/or guidelines.
> Discuss teachers' comments, if any, about the writing.
> Serve as mediator between teachers' stated or unstated expectations and students' understanding of those expectations.

The overall goal of tutoring writing is to promote in our students a reader's perspective on their work.

> Have students read their writing aloud.
> Fashion questions and comments that are reader-based, offering writers a critical perspective on their work.

Students need to play prominent and active roles in the revision of their writing (to maintain their roles as authors of that writing).

> Ask students to explain in their own words what the prompt is asking and what they want to get out of the tutoring session.
> Ask open-ended questions that facilitate rather than co-opt student revision.

Tutors need to adopt a contextualized and yet accessible language in responding to students' writing.

> Use clear and jargon-free language when discussing students' writing.
> When responding, take your cue from the writing prompt.
> Always situate commentary in the writing itself, rather than "rubber-stamping" the same responses from paper to paper.

No tutor protocol ought to be prescriptive, demanding that tutors follow these strategies slavishly. Indeed, just as writing acquires meaning from the writing scene or situation, so tutoring writing must be similarly contextualized and situated. No two tutoring sessions are alike. However, as a group, we feel strongly that the broad principles that underlie the practice have a special currency regardless of the tutoring moment.