

TALKING IN THE MIDDLE:  
WHY WRITERS NEED  
WRITING TUTORS

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The work of a writing center is as varied as the students who stream in and out the doors. A writing center encourages and facilitates writing emphasis in courses in addition to those in an English department's composition program; it serves as a resource room for writing-related materials; it offers opportunities for faculty development through workshops and consultations; and it develops tutors' own writing, interpersonal skills, and teaching abilities. Moreover, writing centers, by offering a haven for students where individual needs are met, are also integral to retention efforts, are good recruiting tools, provide a setting for computer facilities that integrate word processing with tutoring, are rich sites for research, and by their flexibility and ability to work outside of institutionalized programs are free to spawn new services and explore new writing environments. But these aspects of the work of a writing center do not define its core, its primary responsibility—to work one-to-one with writers. In doing so, writing centers do not duplicate, usurp, or supplement writing or writing-across-the-curriculum classrooms. Writing centers do not and should not repeat the classroom experience and are not there to compensate for poor teaching, overcrowded classrooms, or lack of time for overburdened instructors to confer adequately with their students. Instead, writing centers provide another, very crucial aspect of what writers need—tutorial interaction. When meeting with tutors, writers gain kinds of knowledge about their writing and about themselves that are not possible in other institutionalized settings, and it is this uniqueness of the tutorial setting that I will focus on here.

Tutorial instruction is very different from traditional classroom learning because it introduces into the educational setting a middle person, the tutor, who

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inhabits a world somewhere between student and teacher. Because the tutor sits below the teacher on the academic ladder, the tutor can work effectively with students in ways that teachers can not. Tutors don't need to take attendance, make assignments, set deadlines, deliver negative comments, give tests, or issue grades. Students readily view a tutor as someone to help them surmount the hurdles others have set up for them, and as a result students respond differently to tutors than to teachers, a phenomenon readily noticed by tutors who end a stint of writing center tutoring and then go off to teach their own classes. Dave Healy, who both tutors and teaches, aptly describes this scenario:

In the center, writers may try to invest me with authority, but I can resist their efforts. In the classroom, I can try to resist, but as long as I'm going to be assigning my students grades, my nonauthoritative pose is simply that: a pose. In the classroom, I can't get away from making assignments, and as long as I make them, no matter how enlightened or open-ended they may be, they're still mine. I can never adopt the kind of stance in relation to one of my assignments that I can in relation to an assignment that a writer brings to the center. And increasingly that stance feels crucial to the kind of work I want to do with writers.

Most students come to writing centers because they are required to (Bishop, Clark), but even so, students leave feeling that the tutorial has been a beneficial experience. Why is this so? The relationship with a tutor is likely to begin with questions like "How can I help you?" or "What would you like to work on today?" A truly reluctant student knows that she doesn't have to do anything, won't be graded, and in a worst-case scenario, can silently count the cracks in the ceiling while the tutor talks. But the vast majority of students start on a more positive note. Here's someone who might just help them, maybe even show them what's wrong, what to fix, or what the writing assignment is about. As the conversation progresses, they begin to talk more freely and more honestly because they are not in the confines of a teacher/student relationship where there are penalties for asking what they perceive as "dumb" questions (the penalty being that the teacher will find out how little they know or how inept they are in formulating their questions). Moreover, students realize that they don't have to listen passively and accept what is "told" to them by an authoritative speaker.

In addition to student attitudes toward tutors, another powerful component of the tutorial has to do with how tutors acquire needed information. Whereas teachers get information about students from conferences and from students' contributions to classroom interaction, much of what's needed comes from the written products students turn in. And those products are often analyzed when teachers are sitting alone at their desks, away from the students. By contrast, in the interaction between tutor and student, the tutor picks up clues from watching and listening to the student. Tutors' questions can lead students to offer information they didn't know was needed and to clarify their answers through further

questioning. Students can also offer other useful information they would be less willing to give teachers. Sitting with a student for a half-hour or an hour, a tutor is able to work primarily with the writer as a person, even when the paper is there on the table between them. Tutors use talk and questioning and all the cues they can pick up in the face-to-face interaction. The conversation is free to roam in whatever direction the student and tutor see as useful. That is, the tutor can ask about writing habits and processes, can listen to the student's responses to various questions, and can use them as cues for further questions; and the student can express concerns not visible in the product. Moreover, either one is free to bring up some potentially relevant concern that takes them off in a different, more fruitful direction. The flexibility and interaction of a tutorial permits a close look at the individual student, something that Jim, a peer tutor in our Writing Lab, has noted. Jim spends one day a week in the classroom and then works with those students every week in tutorials. He notes that in the classroom his students are a sea of "hands, faces, and comments," but when these same students come to the Writing Lab, they become very different individuals with distinct personalities, needs, and ways of learning. Linda Flower views teachers' "product-based inferences" as a limitation that may radically underestimate students' knowledge, problem-solving efforts, and unresolved dilemmas. When that happens, notes Flower, teachers "may be trying to diagnose and teach a thinking process in the dark" ("Studying Cognition" 21). The face-to-face interaction of tutor and student permits some light to enter.

The power of the tutor's position outside the evaluative setting is also apparent in student evaluations that acknowledge tutors' expertise. There are always impressively high ratings, positive comments, and effusive notes of appreciation, far beyond what any of us who also teach in classrooms will get when we switch to wearing our grade-giving-instructor hats. As tutors we are there to help reduce the stress, to overcome the hurdles set up by others, and to know more about writing than a roommate or friend, maybe even as much as their teachers. Students may not have come willingly and may (as is often the case) have come with inappropriate expectations that the tutor will fix the paper or show them what to do. Accordingly, they may initially be irritated or unhappy that the tutor's role is not to proofread the paper for them or tell them how to get a higher grade. But given a few minutes of tutorial conversation, students begin to see that the tutor can help them learn how to proofread or how to fix their papers. Every tutor has tales of students who turn sullen, morose, or even hostile when they learn that the tutor isn't a free editor, but who eventually calm down and join in the conversation about strategies they can use. At the end of such a tutorial, as they are packing up, such students are apt to offer a "Hey, thanks a lot. That helped." Just as frequently, students who come in nervous, apprehensive, defeated, or eager to get any help they can emerge from their sessions feeling more positive,

more in control of their own writing. The enormous power of these positive responses to tutors cannot be overemphasized. Students may ignore the existence of the center until required to come in, they may come with all the wrong expectations, and their attitudes toward writing may vary from anger to anxiety about grades to eagerness to produce the best paper they are capable of, but the vast majority emerge feeling that the experience was positive. A number of useful consequences account for how tutors and students can work together and why tutorial collaboration is different in kind from the way students interact with their teachers.

To illustrate this collaboration as well as to shine some light on what goes on in a tutorial, I will use not only language we are familiar with as teachers and scholars but also the language of students—who constitute a different though not entirely separate discourse community. The student comments are typical of the hundreds made each semester on evaluation forms that students attending our Writing Lab are asked to fill out anonymously.

#### ENCOURAGING INDEPENDENCE IN COLLABORATIVE TALK

- *I felt very comfortable with Pam. She helped me by making me do the work. She let me think my problems through instead of telling me what to do to correct my problems.*
- *Richard is a great tutor. He helps you understand more what you're doing by having you do it yourself.*
- *He let me decide everything instead of telling me what to change or do.*
- *He made me think and realize more than in our class without telling me exactly how to write.*
- *These people know their stuff! But she didn't just give me answers. She got me thinking.*
- *Colleen's tutorial style challenges you to think and re-think your material.*
- *He made me teach myself. He didn't tell me anything.*
- *She knows how to help without giving answers. She makes me think.*
- *The help at the Writing Lab allows you to think on your own. He did not critique my paper, but he asked me questions that made me see how to critique and think about my own paper.*
- *I like how she wanted answers from me. She didn't just tell me what to do to make something right.*

A number of common threads tie these comments together. Students insist that they prefer to do their own work, come to their own conclusions, write what was in their own heads: these students do not want to be told what to do. Cynics and new tutors-in-training may assume that most writers, when faced with turning in a paper, would probably be happiest if given directions for action. But this is not the case, as studies by Allen and by Walker and Elias have shown. Students were asked to rate how satisfied they were with tutorials in which the tutor either assumed control and explained what had to be done or used questioning that

permitted the student to think through the process and reach her own conclusions. From the students' perspectives, the more highly satisfactory tutorials were those in which the students were active participants in finding their own criteria and solutions. Among the hundreds of completed forms that I read every semester, I can remember only one student complaint about this approach: "All she did was ask me questions." Given the student perception of a tutor as other than a teacher, we can see why students feel free from the classroom constraint of having to listen to the teacher and to do as they are told. Even non-directive, student-centered teachers who see their advice and suggestions as open-ended possibilities their students can freely reject should recognize that such suggestions are often not taken precisely as they are intended. Students feel freer to develop their own ideas in settings other than teacher/student conversations (and, of course, teacher comments on papers) and welcome the opportunity to have someone help them sort through and formulate conceptual frameworks for drafts of their papers. Peer response groups may help, but a tutor who is trained to ask probing questions and who focuses her attention on the writer offers a more effective environment for the writer during the generative stages of writing (Harris, "Collaboration"). It appears that writers both need and want discussion that engages them actively with their ideas through talk and permits them to stay in control.

A second strand in these comments, the reiteration of the word "think," indicates that tutorial conversation differs from classroom discussion. As Douglas Barnes explains, tutorial or "exploratory" talk encourages thinking and discovery:

Exploratory talk often occurs when peers collaborate in a task, when they wish to talk it over in a tentative manner, considering and rearranging their ideas. The talk is often but not always hesitant, containing uncompleted or inexplicit utterances as the students try to formulate new understandings; exploratory talk enables students to represent to themselves what they currently understand and then if necessary to criticize and change it. . . . Presentational talk performs a different and more public role. When students are called on in class, when they feel to be under *evaluation*, they seldom risk exploration, but prefer to provide an acceptable performance, a "right" answer. (50)

I have italicized the word "evaluation" because it highlights the limitations of classroom discussion and teacher-student conferences. When talking with a teacher, most students will feel pressure to perform, to look as if they're knowledgeable—in other words, to use presentational talk. Tossing around ideas to see how they play out is more easily accomplished in a tutorial than in a teacher's conference, and as Cynthia Onore points out, exploratory language, though less controlled and controlling, has more power to generate confident assertions and make connections than does presentational language. Tutors adept at the kind of collaboration that encourages useful exploratory talk may guide the conversation, but they do not inhibit the student. In students' perceptions, the person sitting

next to them is merely a tutor, someone to “help you bring out your ideas.” In light of current theories of collaboration and social construction of knowledge—that, as Kenneth Bruffee states, “knowledge is an artifact created by a community of knowledgeable peers and that learning is a social process not an individual one” (11)—we are less inclined to see the resulting paper as containing only the student’s ideas, but that is not the issue here. Getting the student engaged—truly and actively engaged—is. Long before “empowerment” became a coin of the composition realm, tutors basked in the glow of hearing students leave a tutorial saying, “OK, so now I know what I want to write. It was there in my head, but I just couldn’t get it out.”

#### ASSISTING WITH ACQUISITION OF STRATEGIC KNOWLEDGE

- *She made me think, didn’t tell me what to do, just how to do it.*
- *She helped me look at my paper from a different point of view. That helped a lot, and I know how to do that now.*
- *I learned how to bring out ideas by asking questions and what to do to develop them.*
- *The Writing Lab helped me see how to solve a problem instead of just telling me what’s wrong.*
- *I learned how to organize my paper. It was hard to see how to do that with all the notes I collected from my library searching.*
- *I learned to discuss what I want to say and how to go about doing that.*
- *I explained my organizational problems, and she was able to help me revise my paper without doing it for me, giving me skills to connect with other papers I may write.*
- *This makes me focus on how I write.*
- *I wanted to structure my paper but I didn’t get exactly how I could do this. She helped me see how, and now I know I can write the paper I am capable of writing.*
- *I didn’t see how I was causing myself problems with my writing. She really helped me see how to do it better for the way that I write.*

Writers need several types of knowledge, some more easily gained in the classroom and others more appropriately acquired in the one-to-one setting of a tutorial. If Barnes shows us *why* tutorial talk encourages knowing, Louise Phelps tells us *what* kinds of knowledge are needed: propositional and procedural. One kind of knowledge, that which she identifies as propositional knowledge, is theoretical. It consists of knowing about a set of possibilities for action but does not help us know *how* to act, for as Phelps says, “theory can never tell people directly what to do” because theoretical knowledge does not embed within itself rules for how to apply it (863). Such knowledge is general and not tied to the individual. Phelps explains that much of what is given in textbooks and lectures is formal knowledge in which knowing is learning to name concepts and to articulate their relationships (870). By contrast, practical knowing—the knowl-

edge of the practitioner—arises out of the individual's recognition of a set of possibilities for actions, internalized images, descriptions, and prescriptions. Textbooks and classroom discussions can build this kind of practical knowledge but not the second kind of practical knowledge that Phelps identifies. This second kind of practical knowledge is knowing from personal experience *how* to act, in the sense of possessing a habit or skill for performing an activity. For example, students may think they know how to brainstorm an idea or argument, but only when sitting with a student can a tutor help the student see *how* it feels to turn off that internal editor, which rejects avenues of thought before they are fully explored, or *how* to take brainstorming notes before an idea evaporates from memory or *how* to let threads of an argument or analogy continue to play themselves out in various directions. A student who began a tutorial complaining that he doesn't know what else to add to a paper that's too short is likely to progress from answering a tutor's questions to offering some suggestions to grabbing a sheet of paper and forgetting that there is a tutor sitting next to him as he works through a more extended reason for supporting (or rejecting) election campaign reform. The student begins to learn "how it feels" to do this. An even more concrete example is the student who learns how to proofread for spelling, missing words, or typos. Such a student may have come to the writing center knowing in some general sense what proofreading is but not knowing what it feels like to pace oneself very slowly or to focus on words one by one.

Helping students get the "feel" of some aspects of writing is part of what a tutor can do as she sits next to the student, talking, modeling, and offering suggestions, even though writing is a more sophisticated activity than any of these. Tutors can help students learn *how* to proofread, *how* to let go and brainstorm, *how* to capture a flood of ideas in the planning stage, *how* to take all those scraps of paper and note cards and organize them, *how* to insert revisions into a text, *how* to draw back and figure out if the organizational structure is appropriate, or *how* to check on paragraph development. If needed, a tutor can model a process or can watch the student as she goes through a process herself (Harris, "Modeling"), looking for what is working appropriately and what might be done more effectively in a different way. Or a tutor can suggest a few possible strategies, any one of which might be more appropriate for this particular writer who writes in his or her particular way. This may seem obvious because it is what tutors often do in a tutorial, but it can startle a student as he suddenly "sees" what he's supposed to do in order to achieve whatever it was he was trying to achieve.

This recognition of possible strategies is part of what Linda Flower includes in the kinds of knowledge writers need. Such knowledge, she explains, "involves reading a situation and setting appropriate *goals*, having the *knowledge* and *strategies* to meet one's own goals, and finally, having the metaknowledge of *awareness*

to reflect on both goals and strategies. Strategic knowledge is a contextualized form of knowing; it develops over time and out of experience” (“Studying Cognition” 23). Similarly, Alred and Thelen recognize the need for strategic knowledge: “We know intuitively that teaching students to write requires much more than teaching a canon of rules; it requires that we enable students to rehearse a variety of strategies” (471). The rehearsal by some students may go well on their own, but it may not for others. That rehearsal enacted with a tutor watching and offering feedback and advice is a particularly effective tutorial practice. Strategies are easy to learn in an environment where the person next to the writer can answer questions as the writer proceeds and can offer some midstream correction or encouragement when something is not going well. Flower’s strategic knowledge is that form of procedural knowledge, or knowing *how*, that Phelps describes, and Flower also notes that writers should have optional strategies in their repertoire for different tasks and different purposes (“Negotiating Academic Discourse” 245). When knowing-in-action, as Phelps calls it (873), bogs down and doesn’t work, the writer needs what Phelps calls “reflection-in-action” and what Flower points to when she insists on the writer’s need for metacognitive awareness of the acts of setting goals and invoking strategies (“Negotiating Academic Discourse” 222). Learning how to view what has been done, gaining the high ground, is yet another task the tutor can assist with. In the tutorial conversation the tutor helps the student recognize what’s going on and how to talk about it as well as how to act. Although tutors often help with propositional knowledge—for example, knowledge of various academic genres of writing, knowledge of rhetorical structures, or knowledge of cultural variations in rhetorical values that perplex international students—the art of the tutor is to collaborate with students as they acquire the practical knowledge they need.

#### ASSISTING WITH AFFECTIVE CONCERNS

- *I learned my paper wasn’t as bad as I thought it was. It’s easier to do a good job when you don’t think your writing’s terrible.*
- *I like the atmosphere. I can ask my questions here, and I learned some techniques to overcome writing anxiety.*
- *They treat you as equals. It is not like teachers helping students. This makes the student feel more at ease.*
- *If you have a block, as I did on how to write a paper, the tutor will help you remember what you have learned in the past.*
- *She talked to me with an accepting attitude even though my paper was shaky. She worked with me, and not like she was over me.*
- *I’m trying to overcome my fear of writing, and this is the place to be.*
- *He helped me sort through my lack of confidence.*



- *I am less stressed about my paper because I actually know what I am trying to say now.*
- *She was easy to talk to. I could ask questions without feeling stupid.*
- *She was patient and gave me confidence. I needed to be convinced that I was approaching my paper correctly.*

No one doubts that student writers too often lack confidence in their skills or that they find writing to be an anxiety-producing task, but the classroom teacher cannot attend to the variety of worries that inhibit some student writers. Those fears range from evaluation anxiety to long-standing reluctance to have a teacher “bleed all over” their papers, from writing blocks of various levels of intensity to defeatist convictions that they are not good writers. In tutorials students often unburden themselves and find a sympathetic ear as well as some suggestions for getting past their affective concerns. As I read evaluations every semester, it appears that tutorial assistance gives students confidence about themselves and their writing. The word “confidence” repeats itself so often that I have asked students to talk about why they feel more confident after talking with a tutor. Typically the response is that a student initially feels unsure that a paper meets an assignment or is well written. When a tutor helps the writer set up criteria to use for her own assessment, the writer gains confidence in deciding whether the paper is ready to be turned in. Or the tutor can give the writer some reader response that helps her see what needs more clarification. Tutors can also help when students worry that their mental representation of what they wanted to write does not sufficiently overlap the product that actually appears on paper. Helping writers match intention or plan with the written result is often a useful exercise, particularly since tutors often find that the writer’s mental representation is far richer than the less impressive draft. Asking the writer some questions or requesting more details often results in the writer’s seeing what else he should have included or where (or how) the paper drifted away from the intended goal. After such sessions, students talk about “feeling better” about their papers or knowing what else they want to do when they revise. It appears from some evaluations that their newly found confidence also results in stronger motivation. While the role of motivation in language learning has not been a major topic of composition research, tutors recognize that dealing with affective concerns and offering encouragement result in increased motivation to continue expending effort on a paper.

Another affective concern reflected in student comments is that it is stressful for them to talk about their writing with someone whom they perceive as having some institutional authority over them. Such students view themselves as being treated as inferiors, talked down to, demeaned in some way when talking with teachers, but not with tutors. The collaborative atmosphere of the tutorial, the sense of being with someone who does not assume any authoritative posture,

seems to relieve that strain or eliminate the fear. It is undoubtedly true that some teachers do reinforce the stereotypical authoritarian stance or aren't as adept as they might be in using language that their students understand. But it would be worth investigating whether students' perceptions of teachers' roles in some way create in some students the belief that they have been reduced to an inferior stance or treated as a lower form of life. Though teachers may well seek the same collegial tone as tutors, some students cannot see the similarity because they expect their teachers to perceive them as inferiors. The power structure of academia may remain intact in part because some students perpetuate it in their own minds. There may also be a language issue here, the issue of different discourse communities, as discussed below.

#### INTERPRETING THE MEANING OF ACADEMIC LANGUAGE

- *He helped me understand my prof's meaning.*
- *She explained what needed to be done in language that I understood.*
- *I got in-depth explanations of handouts given in class. I didn't understand in class with just the teacher's explanations.*
- *You do a fantastic job with helping students understand what to do with an assignment. I had interpreted it in a way that was not correct.*
- *Now I know how to write an expressive paper. I was off course before.*
- *I was having a problem seeing what continuity was.*
- *We worked on what is a letter to an editor. This is not something I learned to do in my country.*
- *Thanks. You helped me see what my teacher wants me to do when I revise.*
- *She answered all my questions about what response writing is. I got the help I needed.*
- *The prof couldn't explain what I needed to know, but thanks to Linda, I understand now.*

A cursory reading of these student comments would be that they are praising tutors for being able to explain better than teachers, but a more appropriate analysis might be that these students are reporting that the tutor interpreted teacher language by translating it into their language, that is, gave meaning to terms they had heard and read and not understood. Just as Phelps points out that practitioner teachers cannot easily translate their problems into the critical discourse of theory (863), student writers cannot easily translate their problems into the discourse of composition or make meaning of the language about writing. When students recognize problems, they normally do not have the metaknowledge that Flower says is needed or the necessary metalanguage to locate the appropriate section of a textbook, ask a teacher, or tell a tutor. Students coming to a writing center do not—most often cannot—say they want to work on invention strategies or sharpen their focus or improve the coherence of a paper.

They come in saying that they “need help” or that the paper “doesn’t flow.” It is even more likely that they give the paper to the tutor, hoping the tutor can give names to their internal sense that something is needed. Student language is not the language we use. Mary Louise Pratt observes that students and teachers inhabit separate communities, though she acknowledges that there is hardly total homogeneity in either the teacher community or student community. Pratt’s interest is in getting us to move away from viewing groups as existing separately, a view that gives rise to a linguistics that seeks to capture the identity but not the relationality of social differentiation. But, she explains, dominant and dominated groups are not comprehensible apart from each other, for their speech practices are organized to enact these differences and their hierarchy. Any dominated group is required simultaneously to identify with and disassociate itself from the dominant group.

Students’ discourse consequently is both distinct from and permeated by that of teachers, the dominant group. Pratt offers the interesting suggestion that there be a “linguistics of contact” (60), which studies the operation of language across lines of differentiation, focusing on the nodes and zones of contact between groups. Since tutors live in this contact zone somewhere between teachers and students, tutorial talk may be a particularly fruitful area in which to research what those nodes and zones are.

That teachers view themselves as set apart and different from their students is apparent from Cheryl Towns’s study of how members of the composition profession refer to students when writing articles in the pages of *College Composition and Communication*. In the nineteen articles she analyzed, Towns found that students were referred to often, over 345 times, with the highest frequency characterizing them as “mere fledglings,” new and inexperienced, novices, learners. Much of the language was about relationships between teachers and students, and the most prevalent category was “teacher as teacher” and “student as student,” despite comments in the same articles which deplored this traditional relationship. The metaphors used were often of seeing, getting students “to see,” “to observe,” and teachers were perceived as givers with students as receivers or teachers as leaders and students as followers. Towns concluded that “though we may be beginning to see the need to move beyond the traditional power structure of the classroom, we are still deeply entrenched in it” (97).

Tutors are thus other than teachers in that they inhabit a middle ground where their role is that of translator or interpreter, turning teacher language into student language. “Focus,” “coherence,” and “development” are not terms as readily understood by students as teachers think. As a result, a common tutorial task is helping the student understand the comments a teacher has made on a paper, thus confirming the results of a study by Mary Hayes and Donald Daiker which vividly demonstrates how little of what teachers write in the margins of

papers is understood in any useful way. Similarly, Jill Burkland and Nancy Grimm note: “Through our experiences as tutors in our university’s Writing Center and through years in the composition classroom, we were aware that teachers’ intentions are often unrealized, that written communication on papers is often misunderstood or misinterpreted by students” (237–38). Other studies report similar conclusions in tones of defeat and discouragement. As Knoblauch and Brannon note, “The depressing trouble is, we have scarcely a shred of empirical evidence to show that students typically even comprehend our responses to their writing, let alone use them purposefully to modify their practice” (1). Similarly, in a large-scale study that looked at teacher comments, Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford found a portrait of teachers having little time and less faith that their comments would be understood.

Students’ difficulties in understanding teacher comments are partly this difference in vocabulary, but there is also the problem of students’ perception of teacher intent behind the comments. When a paper is returned with numerous teacher responses, some students may read the marginalia and end comments; most don’t. They skip down to the grade and wander into the writing center assuming that the teacher didn’t like their writing. For too many students, the intent of a teacher’s comments is “to rip my writing,” “to bleed all over my paper,” or “to cut me to shreds.” Suggestions, notes of encouragement, and even praise are not always noted by student writers. A large number of comments “means” (from the student’s perception) that the teacher didn’t like the paper, and so another tutorial task is to help students read and interpret teacher response in a different light, not entirely as criticism but as including well-meaning suggestions. For example, a student who came to our Writing Lab had a paper with the following comment: “What is the thread of connection here to your explanation on page 7—that such cultural practices provoke interfamily rivalry?” While the teacher was suggesting some potentially interesting connections for the writer to explore, the writer read that as a comment on her failure to see the connection herself. She needed a tutor to help interpret the intent of that message just as other students need tutors to help them understand the meaning of other kinds of teacher language. It is certainly not the case that all written response fails or that all students draw a complete blank when seeking to comprehend the import of those comments. Some response gets through, but instead of beating our breasts and assuming guilt by failure or taking such findings as indictments of teachers, we need to recognize the reality of language users in different groups straining across chasms to hear each other. If we accept differences in language communities as realities, then we can view the writing center as the institutionalized mechanism to facilitate the flow of otherwise impeded communication.

It follows from this problem of different languages that students often don’t understand their assignments (which are, after all, written by teachers, not stu-

dents). Misunderstanding the assignment happens with such astonishing regularity that we ought more properly to view it as part of the educational process—learning the language of academic communities, learning how to understand that language, and learning how to act on that understanding. John Ackerman, using restraint in reporting on the findings of an extensive research project, notes that “in many cases the assignment given by an instructor and the assignment taken by a student are not a reciprocal fit” (96). Because students often need help in learning how to interpret these writing assignments, it is a frequent topic of tutorial collaboration. An assignment to “interpret” a passage in a literary work is as confusing to some students as an assignment to “interpret” readings in current health care economics is to other students. Other students are overwhelmed by “analyze and compare” assignments or unable to figure out how to respond to what Louise Z. Smith calls a “bewildering array of heuristics” in complex assignments with multiple prompts (465). In composition courses as well as writing-across-the-curriculum courses, students may be unable to plunge in, stymied by an inability to figure out what the assignment is asking for. “We worked on improving his understanding of the assignment” is perhaps one of the most common summaries of tutorial sessions in writing centers. Some students recognize their difficulties with this and come to the center asking that the tutor read the paper to see if it meets the assignment; others come with a draft asking, “Am I on the right track?” Such students are neither stupid nor lazy—they are being honest in acknowledging that they don’t have a clear idea of what the assignment is or whether they have managed to write a paper that lands somewhere in the right ballpark. The tutor’s task is to help the student see how her long, impassioned narrative of the emotional stresses and strains on her family during a divorce does not meet the assignment to “take a stance on a current societal issue and defend it.” Flower sees the frequent tendency to misunderstand or misinterpret assignments in terms of the individual differences students bring to the classroom:

Students hold some significantly different, tacit representations of supposedly common academic tasks. Because these multifaceted mental representations are constructed from prior experience, from inferences about the social and rhetorical context, and from writers’ own values and desires, students may approach a common reading-to-write assignment with meaningfully different sets of goals, strategies, and criteria. . . . These differences can cause problems. Because these representations are often tacit, students and teachers may be in unspoken disagreement about what constitutes an “appropriate” representation. (“Studying Cognition” 21)

Yet despite these differences, says Flower, classroom syllabi assume a homogeneity that doesn’t exist, a “one size fits all” situation (“Studying Cognition” 22). Individual differences as well as language confusions must have an appropriate

setting in which they can be tended to when the need arises, and the writing center is that place.

To compound the problem of the need for individualized attention to differences in student representations of task assignments, we have to be aware that students are also not always well versed in the shifting conventions in various kinds of academic discourse. An engineering student may need help in understanding why his nuclear engineering report was graded down (“lacks conciseness”) for having the kind of extended introductory paragraph that earned A’s in his freshman composition course. The student who wrote objective problem statements in her research reports for computer science classes doesn’t understand the need for some subjectivity in writing the problem identification section of a research report on a controversial environmental policy in which she has to defend or refute an issue. One instructor may view a nursing student’s clinical knowledge as acceptable support; another may require the writer to support that knowledge by citing published research. In the writing center this means helping the writer articulate what the problem is. The tutor may assist in identifying which conventions and rules the writer is working with and when the writer has to return to the content teacher for clarification. Occasionally students appear with personal sets of half-understood suggestions that have become rigid and inappropriate rules (Harris, “Contradictory Perceptions”; Rose); at other times, as Terese Thonus has shown us, students learning English as a second language need particular help threading their way through the multiple messages, different criteria, and differing standards they encounter in academia.

When Gerald Alred and Erik Thelen note that writing “is bound up with creativity, cognition, language formation, personality, and social interaction” (471), their list nicely captures the sense of a mix of internal variations among writers as well as the outside forces that play upon writers and their texts. Situated as they are to work one-to-one with each writer and his or her needs, tutors can attend to individual differences. Equally important, as students repeatedly tell us in their evaluation comments, tutors work with them in ways that enable and encourage independent thinking and that help them see how to put their theoretical knowledge into practice as they write. Moreover, tutorial interaction helps writers gain confidence in themselves as writers by attending to their affective concerns and assists them in learning what academic language about writing means. Writing centers may still have to contend with a diminishing minority who view them as unnecessary frills, sucking up funds, space, and personnel to duplicate what goes on in the classroom or to coddle remedial students who shouldn’t have been admitted in the first place, but as we turn our attention to the work of the tutor, we become increasingly aware that writing instruction without a writing center is only a partial program, lacking essential activities students need in order to grow and mature as writers.

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