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Training Tutors to Talk about Writing

Stephen M. North

Let me begin by establishing a context for what is to follow here: For six years, I have worked in one Writing Center (at SUNY Albany). During that time, I've conducted probably 2000 conferences in about 2400 tutorial hours and trained 50 other tutors: ten through pre-semester workshops and in-service training; five through independent study, and the other 35 in a semester-long course called Tutoring and Writing.

What I have to say about tutoring and tutor training, then, derives from considerable experience with both. I think the depth and range of my experience carry a good deal of weight, and I could supplement it with anecdotes, portfolios of student work, affidavits from satisfied tutees, and the universally enthusiastic response of the tutors I've trained to the kind of tutoring they learn. Still, that's not necessarily a dependable body of data for use in supporting generalizations about tutoring. The principles for tutoring and tutor training I will outline need to be tested, need to be studied. I will suggest how this might be done. But my articulation of them here is that of a presumably successful practitioner on the threshold of research—a posture not as fashionable, perhaps, as that of a researcher groping toward practice, but one with an equally honorable tradition.

Tutoring in writing is, to state it simply, intervention in the composing process. Writers come to the writing center sometime during the writing of something looking for help. Often, they don't know what kind of help is available, practicable, or sensible: "Can I leave this paper here and pick it up in an hour?"; "Do you have an outline for an economics paper?"; "I need to know grammar." They seem to think that tutoring in writing means either coming to *know* something new or getting something *done* to or for them. In fact, though, they need help *doing* something—in the quotations above, editing, generating ideas, and writing freely, respectively. A tutor training course, then, develops people who understand tutoring as intervention in the composing process and who can do something about it. Any such course ought to be founded on these three principles:

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- I. Tutorials must take their shape from where the writer “is” in the composing process. The tutor’s job is to find that place, then react accordingly.
- II. The best tutorials are those which lead/encourage/prompt the writer to engage in or reflect on composing.
- III. If you want to teach other people how to tutor, do tutoring yourself—before, during, and after the course.

Number I and II need some explanation. The reason I talk about “location” in composing instead of asking simply “What does the writer want to do?” is that the two are often not the same thing, or even at loggerheads. Writers will be trying to “make an outline” when they haven’t any items to outline. Or they’ll be editing a draft for spelling and punctuation errors when it has no clear purpose or no discernible structure. In other words, what they want to do doesn’t account for where they are. A good tutor has to bring the two—the location and the intention—closer together.

I offer my tutors the following list of kinds of tutorials to help them think about composing “locations,” with warnings that composing is not a neat linear process, and that “locations” can be pretty idiosyncratic:

- Invention/Discovery:** The writer is fishing around for ideas, or a persona, or a conception of audience, or some idea about form. May take place at any time during the composition of a piece, though academic writers work hardest at it at the beginning.
- During Writing:** The writer is actually drafting. Often a tutor has nothing to contribute. It is possible to collaborate given really solid rapport.
- Revising:** The writer and tutor agree that text is a changeable draft. Tutor’s job is to provide writer with a “view” of the text emphasizing areas the writer has specific concerns about.
- Editing:** Writer sees draft as complete except for proofreading. Tutor’s job to help writer find, record, and correct surface feature errors. *Writer must be held* progressively responsible for the work in these conferences.
- Evaluation:** Writer sees draft as complete, wants tutor’s “grade” estimate. In most writing centers, such conferences are forbidden, and steered toward meta-conferences.
- Meta-conference:** Discussion shifts to a “higher” plane, addressing the writing process in general. Often takes place in the face of an unsuccessful paper: “I don’t understand how I could get a ‘D!’” Tutor’s job is to lead the writer in reflections on the composing process, and to suggest alternatives, ways of changing.

Other models might serve as well. For example, Aviva Freedman ("Intervening During the Composing Process: Tutoring in the Writing Lab," published, revised, as "A Theoretic Context for the Writing Lab" in Muriel Harris, ed., *Tutoring Writing: A Sourcebook for Writing Labs* [Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1982]) talks about a seven-stage model for composing, including those stages she believes are beyond the tutor's reach. Linda Flower's problem-solving model might also work (*Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), especially if both tutors and writers were familiar with its general outline. The point is that a tutor's job has most to do with the writer, not the text, and the direction of any tutorial derives from the writer. (I don't want to oversimplify the process by which tutorial agendas are created. Especially in the early stages of a tutorial relationship, there is a sort of verbal and non-verbal wrestling over just how the session[s] should proceed. The wrestling diminishes with time as the tutee is, in effect, trained about what to bring to and expect from conferences.)

Principle II argues that the best tutorials lead/encourage/prompt the writer to engage in composing, or, in the meta-conference, to reflect on it. Success in tutoring, then, will not necessarily be found in immediate improvement of particular texts. Tutors—and writers—need to be trained to see individual pieces of writing as points on a continuum. The tutor's *primary* responsibility is to influence the process that generates each piece of writing on that continuum. As often as not, such influence will produce improvements in individual texts, but this need not be the case. Growth in writing, we all seem to acknowledge, requires risk taking and failure; changes in composing habits or processes—the use of freewriting, say, or of sentences long enough to include semi-colons—are bound to produce awkwardness before grace.

The training regimen that grows out of these principles follows two slowly merging lines of inquiry. Prospective tutors learn, on the one hand, to deal with the social situation of tutoring: how to behave in this very distinctive face-to-face interaction. At the same time, they learn about the composing process—through introspection at first, and then from the theoretical and practical accounts of other writers, teachers, and researchers. As the course progresses, these two lines combine to produce a well-versed novice tutor who has twenty or more hours of practice in tutoring along with about twenty hours of real tutoring. Such people are then ready for full-time (up to ten hours per week) positions in the writing center.

There is no need here for me to fill in all the details of this course, but I would like to highlight a few of its essential features. I rely most heavily on five tactics to introduce the tutorial situation: demonstration role playing (where I play the tutee and the tutors play themselves); tutor role playing (where the tutors take turns playing the tutee, usually with preparations made before class); videotapes of other people in tutorial situations (and, later in the course, tapes of the tutors themselves); observation of live tuto-

rials; and my anecdotal accounts of tutoring experiences. Of the five, the demonstration role playing, though seemingly simple, is the most powerful. One class member volunteers to be the tutor; the rest observe and take notes. I leave the room to “become” a student with a writing situation, often making some minor wardrobe change (donning a T-shirt, removing coat and tie) to enhance the illusion, then return for a fifteen-minute session. This procedure evokes the feel as well as the idea of tutoring: the sweaty palms, the dry mouth, the halting verbal explorations. It also offers me, as “tutee,” some control over the range of situations the class is exposed to as we repeat the procedure 30 or more times over the term. This is the kind of teaching that prompts me to include Principle #3 above: it requires a knowledge of tutoring and tutee behavior that comes only with hundreds of tutorial hours.

To set my prospective tutors exploring the composing process, I ask them to write two papers before I allow them to read anything: “My History as a Writer” and “How I Write.” Later they will read in a number of sources (see the sample bibliography at the end of this essay), but these two papers are crucial: they provide a vivid, humbling sense of the complexity of writing. To make sure that the humility sinks in and lasts, these papers get shared in class, so everyone hears things like this:

Writing is not a normal activity for me. My behavior changes when I write. I sweat. I build up intense energy which makes me unpleasant to be around. An experience that is similar is when I played an oboe in high school. In order to support a good tone an oboe player needs to have a large reserve of air which never gets used. I always had to exhale before I brought in more air to continue playing. This describes my energy level when I write. I have so much which I never use, but it has to be there. Sometimes I almost get speedy. When my mind gets exhausted and I can't write anymore all that energy will still be there. Then I have to drink alcohol, or do yoga, or run, or take an aspirin to be able to relax.

Without these papers, frankly, the later readings would be quite useless. As I tell my students (who accuse me of thinking in bumper stickers), we are who we are as writers—and tutors of writing—because of who we have been; and the conceptual and emotional baggage of 15 or 20 or 30 years of schooling won't be changed by a dozen hours in the Reserve Room of the library.

The crux of the course is bringing these two lines of inquiry together to form tutoring strategies and techniques. By the end of fifteen weeks, tutors will have hashed over at least 50 different conferences: real, pretend, live, taped, imaginary. We'll have looked at everything—who sits where, who holds the paper and pencil, what kinds of questions get asked, what sorts of answers given, when to be silent, for how long, etc.—even counting and timing tutorial events to see what quantifying can add to our understanding. But the greatest bugbear of the novice tutor doesn't go away with classroom treatment: what is most difficult to master in tutoring is an appropriate sense of control, an ability to identify and promote direction without taking over

from the writer. *Appropriate* is the key word, since control of a dictatorial kind is fairly easy to exert. Two circumstances exacerbate the novice tutor's difficulties. The first is what one tutor calls "the immediacy of the situation . . . you have to do something right then and there, with little or no advance preparation." The temptations, she suggests, are three: to comfort; to do the work for the writer; to deal with the problem abstractly (seeing individual problems as "types" and offering general rules as solutions). The kind of control required to combat these temptations—control which leaves the writer to do the work—comes mostly with experience and confidence.

Unfortunately, the other circumstance is the one that makes gaining tutorial experience so painful—the absence of immediate feedback:

Another disadvantage, and perhaps one you don't anticipate, is that often, more often than not I'd say, you get no feedback. You don't see the final draft or even the rough draft, you don't find out if their grades have improved or if they got into graduate school, and, most importantly, you don't know how their composing process has been affected. Such is to be expected of one-time only drop-ins. It's more frustrating when you have spent a good deal of time with a student only to have her suddenly drop out of sight.

The problem for this tutor, as for most others, is that she is looking for signs of her success in the wrong places. What she needed to learn—what tutors who survive learn—was to measure her effectiveness against different and more accessible criteria: the amount of writer talk they prompt; the level of engagement with the writing task that they promote; the ability they develop in a tutee to articulate a new strategy. The less immediate responses help, of course. We all need return visitors, the occasional vast or dramatic improvement, or the C writer who stops by to report a hard-earned B. But these are not sustenance enough for the long haul.

Improvement for these tutors in training, then, comes hard and unevenly. There are observable areas where everyone *must* improve (to pass the course): establishing proper seating arrangements; keeping paper and pencil under the writer's control; learning to ask questions rather than making assumptions or judgments. The better learners show more advanced abilities: they can determine the writer's location and initiate a tutorial strategy inside five minutes; they can tolerate useful silences up to three minutes; they reduce their share of the conference talk close to the 50% ideal I set for them. They are still novices, but they have been properly conditioned.

This is not to say, of course, that the world is entirely ready for them. They are, in a sense, converts, and like all converts will face a world of the unconverted, the heathen—in this case, tutees and faculty members who think of tutoring the wrong way: as an orderly, tutor-directed, content-based teaching/learning experience that will get rid of spelling errors and comma splices. These people will assume that writing center tutors have been drilled in the "rules" of writing: usage, mechanics, documentation, outlining—or, as

most of them will put it, “grammar.” Maybe the word “tutoring” is to blame, conjuring up, in the American mind, images of after-school drills on fractions and Civil War battles, the pig-tailed girl in horn-rimmed glasses prepping the football player for the midterm.

Whatever its sources, this misconception is insidious, especially since it is one most of the tutors shared at the beginning of the course. Hence all the emphasis during the term on writers and composing, and the lack of emphasis on training in the study of flawed texts: identifying breakdowns, learning a terminology for naming and a “remedial” system for dealing with textual errors. Expertise of this latter kind can be a nice thing; I won’t pretend that a tutor can never be a useful resource. And all the tutors are fluent enough readers to locate where they get lost in a text, and have enough background to struggle, with the writer, towards new formulations.

But writing tutors are *not* text editors whose job is to “repair” writing; they are listeners and readers trained to offer responses that keep writers moving. I offer them another “bumper sticker,” a kind of incantation to hold on to in the face of temptation: our job is to produce better writers, not just better writing. It means what it says. At the end of a tutorial session, it is the *writer* who should be changed, who has a new way of seeing what has been written, or of thinking about audience, or of feeling about the hard work of writing. If the *writing* improves, so much the better. But it’s the writer we work on; the text is essentially a medium.

Expertise in tutoring, then, means knowing how to talk about writing. It means knowing how to take writers seriously, how to establish rapport. It means treating tutees as writers at work; finding out, one way or another, what they are trying to do. It means letting the writers do the work—asking “How are you going to get from here to here?” instead of saying “Here’s how you get from here to here.” And it means being willing to at least begin at the writer’s level of concern; comma splices and dangling modifiers can be put off a long time for the writer who wants to know if you understand what she means.

How is it possible to evaluate my three principles and the tutoring course founded upon them? As things stand, there is no way of knowing for certain if (a) I am as successful a tutor as I think I am; (b) if the principles I claim to have derived from my experience really connect with what I do; (c) if the course I teach really fosters the behaviors I intend it to; or (d) if what I’m measuring in my tutors’ development are the right things (i.e., things that will make them tutor the way I do). I think the place to begin research is with (a): Am I really as successful a tutor as I think? Let me dull the evaluate edge of that question: what happens when Steve North tutors in that place called the Writing Center? I think research on tutoring ought to begin by focusing descriptively on the work of people reputed to be good tutors.

There are plenty of precedents for such studies. The hitch, of course, is that they must be designed to get beyond what tutors will *tell* us they do.

Very often, it seems to me, successful practitioners either oversimplify or overcomplicate their accounts of what they do, depending upon who wants to know. I offer myself as a case in point. In my efforts not to intimidate my training tutors, I try to make what I do seem simple, natural (as indeed it is, to me). But the class raises questions about sub-skills or “tricks” that I gloss over or take for granted: How can I concentrate on tutoring with people around, or noise, or without time to read a paper two or three times? How can I seem to carry on a conversation and read at the same time? Why do I treat different tutees with such markedly different manners—abrupt, gentle, warm, sarcastic—and how do I decide which manner to choose? In short, my account of what I do is not necessarily reliable. As we’ve learned from countless interviews with professional writers, the best way to find out how a good practitioner works may not be to just ask. (For an interesting example of research that moves beyond just asking, and that tests a set of long-held assumptions that guided the training of new practitioners, see *Medical Problem Solving: An Analysis of Clinical Reasoning*, by Arthur Elstein, Lee Shulman, and Sarah Sprafka [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978].)

The simplest and most effective way to begin such research would be to design and carry out tutorial case studies. These would have to be, obviously, more extensive than conventional writing case studies, accounting not only for the writer’s behavior, but for the tutor’s as well, and for the interaction of tutor and writer. The central feature of such studies would be a trained observer sitting in on each meeting. Other data-gathering procedures might include inviting composing-aloud protocols; making video- and audio-tapes of sessions (with selected transcripts); making tapes and transcripts of stimulated recall sessions for both tutors and writers (where subjects review the tapes of tutorials with a researcher, trying to remember what they were thinking at the time); conducting pre- and post-tutorial interviews with tutors and writers; administering questionnaires; encouraging tutors to monitor their own activities (either in journal entries or on a carefully-constructed log sheet); and assembling portfolios containing all the written work associated with the tutorial. This kind of study would begin to answer the question of what happens: What does the tutor do? What does the writer do? How do they respond to one another? Does the writer seem to be influenced by what happens in the tutorials? Does the written product change? Do such changes seem to be traceable to specific tutorial strategies?

Such studies would not, of course, lead to an immutable definition of “success” in tutoring; the infinite variability of tutorials is what makes the case study the most appropriate research model to begin with. But we might be able to establish certain trends, certain patterns of behavior that seem to differentiate successful from less successful tutorials, and successful from less successful tutors: kinds of questioning, for example, or ratios of speaking to listening. We might then devise more pointed studies to help refine our understanding. Suppose (to borrow from *Medical Problem Solving*) we devise, on

the basis of real tutorials, five “standardized” tutoring situations. For each situation we would train an actor or actress to play the part of the tutee. We would then invite five reputedly “good” tutors and five “less good” tutors to take a crack at all five situations before the cameras, perhaps supplementing the sessions with some of the other data-gathering procedures mentioned above. How would the tutors’ techniques vary? What do “good” tutors do that the “less good” tutors do not do? Were all the tutors consistent in their behavior across tutorial situations? In what ways? Was there enough consistency to identify something we could call a tutorial style? This kind of standardized study would help us to understand the kind of thinking that guides tutorial work; and it would offer a context for training tutors which, if not abused, could provide a far better sense of what it means to develop as a tutor—which skills come with experience and which can be taught directly.

Writing centers and tutoring in writing are widely enough misunderstood (and are even being written off—see Maxine Hairston, “The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing” *CCC*, 33 [February, 1982], 82) that their very existence is in jeopardy. Research—careful, ideally legitimizing research—seems to be the only possible response.

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NOTE: Books or collections useful for tutor training courses are slowly beginning to emerge. See, for example, *Tutoring Writing: A Sourcebook for Writing Labs*, ed. Muriel Harris (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1982). There is also *One to One: Resources for Conference-Centered Writing*, by Charles Dawe and Edward Dornan (Boston: Little, Brown, 1981). For reviews of both, see *The Writing Center Journal*, 2 (Spring/Summer, 1982), 36-42.