



SOUTHERN  
DISCOURSE  
*in the* CENTER

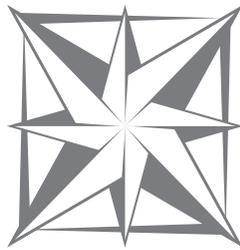
*A Journal of Multiliteracy and Innovation*

- Learning Disability and Pragmatics in the College Writing Tutorial  
*Rebecca Day Babcock*
- Evaluating Our Claims: Assessing a Student Leadership Position in the Writing Center  
*Julia Bleakney & Tenyia Lee & Jasmine Ragland Nevarez*
- Back to the Center: The Writing Center at Athens State University  
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- Consultant Insight: Tutoring for “the Rest of Us”: Learning from the Failures of an Instructor Coming from a Background in Literary Studies  
*Zack Rearick*
- Book Review: “Writing Studio Pedagogy: Space, Place, and Rhetoric in Collaborative Environments”  
*Landon Berry*

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**SOUTHERN  
DISCOURSE**  
*in the* **CENTER**  
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and Innovation*

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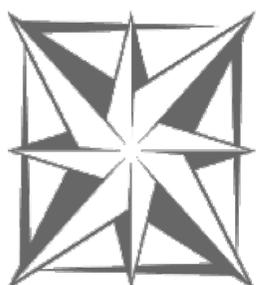
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*Southern Discourse in the Center: A Journal of Multiliteracy and Innovation* (SDC) is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal published by the Southeastern Writing Center Association (SWCA) biannually from the Georgia Institute of Technology. As a forum for practitioners in writing centers, speaking centers, digital centers, and multiliteracy centers, SDC publishes articles from administrators, consultants, and other scholars concerned with issues related to training, consulting, labor, administration, theory, and innovative practices.

Our editorial board welcomes scholarly essays on consulting, research, administration, training, technology, and theory relevant to writing centers, speaking centers, and digital/multiliteracy centers. Article submissions may be based in theoretical and critical approaches, applied practices, or empirical research (qualitative or quantitative). Submissions are evaluated by the editors, and promising articles are sent to our national editorial board for double-blind review. To honor *Southern Discourse's* historical context, future issues will include special sections that profile the work of regional associations, emerging undergraduate research, and centers across the country, providing a sustained look at regional and national concerns that centers face in the 21st century.



**SWCA**  
Southeastern Writing Center Association

## **Our Mission**

The Southeastern Writing Center Association (SWCA) was founded in 1981 to advance literacy; to further the theoretical, practical, and political concerns of writing center professionals; and to serve as a forum for the writing concerns of students, faculty, staff, and writing professionals from both academic and nonacademic communities in the Southeastern region of the United States. A member of the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA), an NCTE Assembly, the SWCA includes in its designated region North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Kentucky, Puerto Rico, and the American Virgin Islands. Membership in the SWCA is open to directors and staff of writing, speaking, and digital centers and others interested in center work from public and private secondary schools, community colleges, colleges and universities, and to individuals and institutions from beyond the Southeastern region.

## **The Journal**

*Southern Discourse in the Center: A Journal of Multiliteracy and Innovation* is the journal of the Southeastern Writing Center Association. Published twice annually, this peer-reviewed journal promotes a community of writing center scholarship within the southeast and nationally while serving as a forum for innovative work across the field. Subscribe to *SDC* by becoming a member of SWCA at <http://www.iwca-swca.org>

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*Southern Discourse in the Center: A Journal of Multiliteracy and Innovation* invites articles that engage in scholarship about writing centers, speaking centers, digital centers, and multiliteracy centers. The journal welcomes a wide variety of topics, including but not limited to theoretical perspectives in the center, administration, center training, consulting and initiatives. An essay prepared for publication in *SDC* will address a noteworthy issue related to work in the center and will join an important dialogue that focuses on improving or celebrating center work. Please submit manuscripts to [SDC@iwca-swca.org](mailto:SDC@iwca-swca.org).

## **Genre, Format, Length, Citation**

Most articles in *SDC* will be between 3,000 and 5,000 words. We ask that all articles be documented in accordance with the *MLA Style Manual, 8th Edition*. Consistent with traditional writing center practice, *SDC* promotes a feedback model. Articles will be sent out to our national board for blind review and reviewed by our editorial team. *SDC* is excited to work with you. For longer articles, please send an email inquiry.

## **“Back to the Center” Guidelines for Writers**

Alongside scholarly articles, each issue of *SDC* will include an article of roughly 1,500 words that focuses on a specific writing center, speaking center, digital center or multiliteracy center. “Back to the Center” will share a center’s successes and hopes for improvement. By incorporating visual images, “Back to the Center” should give its readers an authentic sense of the ethos of the center and of the work done there. What is working in the center? What are the areas that need improving? What are the goals for the center?

“Back to the Center” will also include a section titled “Center Insight.” In this section, we’d like to know the numbers: How many sessions are held in the center per semester? How many consultants are working in the center? How many hours a week is the center open? How does consultant recruitment occur? How long is the training process for consultants before they work in the center?

## **“Consultant Insight” Guidelines for Writers**

Consistent with the consultant-writer model of the mutual exchange of ideas, we invite consultants to provide insight into center experiences. This article of roughly 2,000 words can be research driven or can take a more narrative and personal approach that illuminates consultant experiences. *SDC* is interested in both struggles and achievements. The article may focus specifically on one aspect of consulting or it may provide a broader sense of center work.

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## From the Editor

KAREN HEAD



Greetings from the editorial offices of SDC. Our intrepid editorial staff members have been working hard to bring you this issue. Please help me welcome our new Associate Editor, Brandy Ball Blake, who had previously been serving as our Managing Editor. Thanks, too, to our outgoing Associate Editor, Peter Fontaine for his excellent service to the journal. We received a number of great submissions during this editorial cycle, and we are, as always, indebted to our reviewers for their investment of time and considerate attention to these submissions.

As a reminder, our spring issue is always an open theme, whereas our fall issue reflects the theme of the upcoming SWCA conference. For the 2018 conference, the theme is Writing Centers in Transition.

As I said, we had a number of thought-provoking submissions for this issue, and after peer-review I have selected two excellent articles. In the first, "Learning Disability and Pragmatics in the College Writing Tutorial," Rebecca Day Babcock explores the challenges of working with clients with learning disabilities arguing, that based on her study, more explicit tactics may be necessary for clients to successfully engage in a session.

In the second, "Evaluating Our Claims: Assessing a Student Leadership Position in the Writing Center," Julia Bleakney, Tenyia Lee, and Jasmine Ragland Nevarez explore the importance of collaboration between center administrators and peer tutors in the development of assessment models, in order to build consensus and create processes that reinforces leadership development for peer tutors.

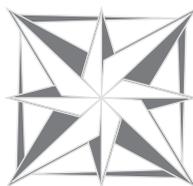
We are pleased to feature one of the newer writing centers in the country, The Writing Center at Athens State University, which was founded in 2011 as part of the university's quality enhancement plan. In this "Back to the Center" column, Joy Bracewell introduces the center and its fast-growing demand, and explains her approach to reshaping the vision of the center when she took over as director in 2015.

In our "Consultant Insight" column, "Tutoring for "the Rest of Us": Learning from the Failures of an Instructor Coming from a Background in Literary Studies," Zack Rearick discusses the difficulties and confusion he faced as a novice tutor. Rearick takes on an eye-opening journey as he describes his experiences of learning how to negotiate tutoring sessions, and argues that new tutors should not be shy about talking about their challenges during the learning process.

Landon Berry's review of Matthew Kim and Russell Carpenter's anthology, *Writing Studio Pedagogy: Space, Place, and Rhetoric in Collaborative Environments* Tutors, Berry uses a framework of games and his "spirit of play" as way of exploring this new collection.

Extra thanks to Malavika Shetty and James Howard for their editorial assistance.

Please remember to promote our journal to your colleagues. Encourage them to submit work to us. We are excited to hear about research involving centers of all types, multiliteracy, multi-modality, innovative pedagogical practices, technology and pedagogy, space design/development/redevelopment/implementation, etc.



## Learning Disability and Pragmatics in the College Writing Tutorial

REBECCA DAY BABCOCK

Some tutoring practices cause difficulty for individuals who have trouble understanding and processing pragmatic aspects of communication. In general, tutoring acts are directives: The tutor is in effect directing the tutee to provide information, but the directive can be either directly or indirectly stated. Sometimes the interlocutor may misinterpret these acts, which may cause her to misunderstand the illocutionary force (speaker's intent) of an utterance. Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner, Leigh Ryan and Lisa Zimmerelli, and Toni Capossela all mention students with learning disabilities in their tutor-training textbooks, and Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood include Julie Neff's 1994 article on tutoring students with learning disabilities in their *St. Martin's Sourcebook*. However, none of these treatments mention challenges stemming from linguistic factors such as speech acts. Susan Ervin-Tripp noted children gain the capacity to understand "indirect" directives at various ages, some still lacking the capability at age ten (178), so possibly an older adolescent with a learning disability could have trouble with these types of interpretations. Nicola Botting and Gina Conti-Ramsden note in a study about adolescents with Specific Language Impairments that these individuals also

have socio-cognitive differences, which could mean they not only misunderstand the illocutionary force of speech acts, but also miss relevant social cues. Therefore, the observer may find it hard to tell whether a student is being difficult or resistant or simply misunderstanding cultural cues, something that will become apparent in this study.

Discussions of students with learning disabilities in writing center literature date back to 1984 (Gleason) and have continued with such classic, highly anthologized, and now seminal articles as those by Shoshana Konstant and Julie Neff. However, the literature to date exhibits little observation of tutoring sessions with students with learning disabilities. One exception could be James Bell, who in "Tutoring a Provisional Student in Freshman Composition" observed a basic writer in the writing center who implied, but never actually divulged, that she had a learning disability. A score of articles in the writing center literature discuss learning disability, but only two actual research studies relate to students with learning disabilities, neither involving direct observation of tutoring sessions. In "Learning More from the Students," Jean Kiedaisch and Sue Dinitz looked at conference evaluation forms and found, of all categories of tutees, learning disabled students rated writing center conferences the lowest. In "Writing Tutors and Dyslexic Tutees," Jennifer Wewers interviewed dyslexic writers and writing tutors and offered some suggestions for tutors based on the feedback she received. Although more research is still needed in all aspects of tutoring writing, the present study focuses on one self-identified learning disabled tutee and how her communication abilities and style intersected with one tutor's practices.

### *Brief History of Non-Directive Tutoring*

The tutor in this encounter practices non-directive tutoring, the history of which began with the concept of minimalist or “hands-off” tutoring (Chappell), and was expanded by Jeff Brooks in his now-famous paper “Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work.” In this technique, the tutor attempts to draw information out of the tutee rather than providing answers or advice. Although Linda Shamoon and Deborah Burns problematize adherence to this writing center “dogma” of non-directiveness in “A Critique of Pure Tutoring” and provide examples of modeling and music master classes as alternatives to the ‘hands off’ model, popular tutor-training texts continue to advocate non-directive techniques.

The directive/non-directive debate is still healthy and hardly dead. Peter Carino outlined some of its history in “Power and Authority in Peer Tutoring,” and Steven Corbett explains in “Tutoring Style, Tutoring Ethics: The Continuing Relevance of the Directive/Nondirective Instructional Debate” that the minimalist approach is still “the default instructional mode in one-to-one tutoring” (149)—despite elsewhere recommending that tutors balance directive and non-directive methods (“Bringing the Noise” 102). Like Carino, Irene Clark and Dave Healy in “Are Writing Centers Ethical?” suggest a nuanced version of tutoring with the flexibility to incorporate both directive and non-directive models as needed.

Drawing from the medical field, Judith Beckendorf and colleagues found that genetic counselors sometimes confuse *non-directive* counseling with *indirect* speech and feel that *direct* speech would

result in a *directive* encounter. While this is not the case, we see some of this same confusion and these same behaviors in tutoring. Important to keep in mind in this discussion is the difference between non-directive tutoring, in which the tutor attempts to draw ideas out of the student, and indirect speech acts, which are actually requests for information or behavior couched in conventionally polite language.

### *Pragmatics and Non-Mainstream Groups*

The issues of direct and indirect speech as well as directive and non-directive encounters are related to the field of linguistic pragmatics. Sometimes individuals from non-mainstream groups have difficulty with pragmatic aspects of language. Several studies discuss pragmatic production as related to special needs children (Beseler), learning disabled children (Saferstien), and work on teaching learning disabled students in the productive use of pragmatics (Speckman and Roth). Pragmatic disability, a condition that has been diagnosed in children, is characterized by failure to respond appropriately in dialogue, paying “undue attention to the literal meaning of what is said rather than its intended meaning, “being” unaware of what their listener knows and does not know,” engaging in “odd associations and reasoning,” and being “unable to detect and repair misunderstandings” (McTear and Conti-Ramsden 2). Michael Perkins (“Pragmatic”; *Pragmatic*) describes a condition known as pragmatic impairment<sup>1</sup>, which involves difficulties with pragmatic aspects of language.

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<sup>1</sup>This diagnosis is more common in Great Britain. In the DSM-5 the condition is known as “social (pragmatic) communication disorder” (“Highlights”).

### *Characteristics of Learning Disabled Students*

Learning disabled (LD) students, in general, experience stress and frustration in the learning process, and sometimes become overwhelmed with the difficulty and extra time involved in processing questions and answers. Because of the stress and frustration, they will sometimes feel helpless, give up, and say “I don’t know” in response to questions. They will sometimes look away when asked questions, and they will avoid risk-taking. Finally, LD students have a need for direct instruction (Lavoie). For example, in “Writing Tutors and Dyslexic Tutees,” Jennifer Wewers conducted a study on dyslexic tutees where she interviewed them and asked how their tutors could best help them. The tutees she interviewed indicated that they needed direct instruction and clear explanations on matters of mechanics, including spelling (236). Wewers also noted other characteristics of dyslexic tutees. They have difficulty not only with reading, but with writing at both the mechanical and discourse levels (231). They may have trouble writing paraphrases and synthesizing material, and they may have issues with organization. All these elements can produce anxiety in the writer (235-236). Time management may also be an issue, and dyslexic tutees may sometimes be late to appointments or not show up (233). Through her research, Wewers suggests that tutors “‘suspend their normal expectations’ of how a tutoring session should go” (233). For example, due to the trouble some dyslexics have with processing, having the tutee read the paper aloud may not be as effective. Wewers also suggests that tutors re-phrase questions when dyslexic tutees have trouble understanding (233).

### *Intersections of Pragmatic Difficulties and Tutoring Practices*

Since participants in tutoring sessions are purportedly engaged in mutual goal-oriented, cooperative behavior, the concept of the Cooperative Principle is relevant: “Make your conversational contribution such as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Grice 26). Since the tutoring session is not a “regular” conversation, Grice’s conversational maxims (see insert) apply in a non-conventional way. In conversational implicature (assuming we set aside specific intercultural differences in conversational norms), interlocutors understand that when

#### **Grice’s Maxims**

##### *The Maxim of Quantity:*

1. Make your contribution to the conversation as informative as necessary.
2. Do not make your contribution to the conversation more informative than necessary.

##### *The Maxim of Quality:*

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

##### *The Maxim of Relevance:*

1. Be relevant (i.e., say things related to the current topic of the conversation).

##### *The Maxim of Manner:*

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary wordiness).
4. Be orderly.

maxims are violated it's to bring about a certain result, such as the tutor being ambiguous or obscure in the name of non-directive tutoring. "Infringing" a Conversational Maxim means the speaker does not follow the maxim due to "imperfect linguistic performance" (Cutting 41), which can occur when the speaker is not mentally, physically or constitutionally able to follow the maxim, perhaps due to outside factors such as the effects of emotions, drugs and alcohol, cognitive states or ability, or other factors (Thomas). I believe infringing maxims can also happen in the case of a tutee with a disability.

According to Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson in "Universals' in Language Usage: Politeness Phenomena," conversational maxims are often violated when doing a Face Threatening Act. Face Threatening Acts by a tutor include pointing out something wrong with the student's paper and telling the student to fix it. These are almost never done "bald on record" in the tutoring session, but mitigated through indirect techniques. William Labov and David Fanshel indicate that sometimes a request can be interpreted as a challenge (64). When a tutor suggests improvements to a student's paper, or even non-directively tries to draw out a student's ideas, there is an element of implicit criticism that the paper is somehow lacking.

In conventional tutoring, the tutee must figure out why the tutor is being ambiguous or obscure, as the procedure is always

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<sup>2</sup>Wittgenstein's definition of 'language games' from the *Blue and Brown Books* includes such activities as 'giving and obeying orders; asking questions and answering them; describing an event; telling a fictitious story; telling a joke; describing an immediate experience; making conjectures about events in the physical world; making scientific hypotheses and theories; greeting someone, etc., etc.' (68) A similar list can be found in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

tacit, never explained. The tutee is usually assumed to know how to play the game. In the case of the “language game”<sup>2</sup> of the tutoring session, certain propositions are taken for granted. The tutor presupposes that the tutee knows the answer and is willing to answer. If the supposition is wrong, communication can break down. For instance, the tutee is expected to know, without being explicitly told, that the tutor’s questions are designed to elicit ideas in order to help the tutee with the paper. Requests for information about the proposed topic imply the information belongs in the paper, not that the tutor personally wants to know the information. A proof of this is that tutors do not answer tutees’ provision of information with “oh”—the typical token of acknowledgement of news (Drew and Heritage 41), as they are already aware of possible answers or not personally invested in them.

Heidi Hamilton, in explaining the relation of Grice’s maxims to conversation, argues that listeners must attend to speaker’s ‘deviations from the maxims,’ and when confronted with such an utterance, the listener must infer

*that the speaker means something other than what was actually said... [The] underlying assumption...is that the speaker, by deviating from the maxims...intended her meaning to be different from the semantic meaning, and additionally, intended her conversational partner to recognize this intention. (143)*

In the case of this particular self-identified learning disabled student, this procedure breaks down. The student misunderstands the intention of the tutor; in other words, the tutee tends to misinterpret the illocutionary force of the act, resulting in a failed speech act.

## *Methods*

While conducting a larger research project on tutoring writing, I observed tutoring sessions, conducted interviews, and made general observations of both written documents and the general context at an urban writing center in a private college focused on the arts and communications. This particular writing center was extremely large and employed 85 tutors. Tutors and tutees often worked together weekly over the semester. In the course of this research, I also observed tutoring sessions with students and their tutors. One of these students had a learning disability. While reading transcripts and doing grounded theory analysis, I noticed the exchanges with this particular student were somehow different. In a study of child language, Christine Garvey noted that when confronted with “exchanges that impress us as odd or strange in some way[, f]uture research will probably reveal that many of these are failures on the pragmatic level” (45). Noting that students with learning disabilities “may not be able to interact effectively with others because they misunderstand social cues or cannot discriminate among or interpret the subtleties of typical interpersonal associations” (Mason and Mason 63, 65), I began to think the issue with this one student had to do with pragmatics and followed that line of investigation with profitable results. The following analysis looks at the relationship between a student’s disability, pragmatics, and the tutoring practices used in some college writing centers.

The analysis is based on Squirt, a student who identified as having a learning disability, and her tutor, who preferred to call herself Newby (all participants selected their own pseudonyms). Squirt is White, of traditional college age, and Newby is African American

and older—old enough to be Squirt’s grandmother. I observed two one-hour tutorials in the month of December, and the pair had been working together weekly for the entire semester. Newby, a reflective tutor who kept notes on all her tutoring sessions in a journal, was a strict adherent to non-directive questioning and Socratic techniques due to either training or temperament. By describing these techniques, I do not advocate them or imply that they represent standard writing center practice, just that this particular tutor used them with this particular student. Newby, a published author in the field of education, had completed coursework toward her doctorate. In the course of the study, Newby mentioned that she gave a workshop on working with students with learning disabilities. She was in her second year tutoring in the writing center.

I used the analytical techniques of grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss) and discourse analysis. The data collection consisted of general observations of context, specific observations of tutoring sessions, and interviews with participants. Observations were either audio- or videotaped. I also collected copies of students’ papers whenever possible. I transcribed all tutoring sessions and read through them looking for codes, which are words or phrases that encapsulate themes in the data. In grounded theory coding, one does not impose outside categories on session transcripts, but rather lets the codes and concerns emerge out of the participants’ own words. In accordance with grounded theory practices, I kept codes in a codebook and constantly updated them as new codes and understandings emerged. After noticing the prevalence of pragmatic misunderstanding between this tutor and tutee, I did a discourse analysis in which I searched for instances of conversational mismatch and discussed them in light of speech act

theory. In the course of this analysis, I observed Newby's strongly inflexible non-directive techniques break down.

With Squirt, Newby's non-directive techniques caused the student confusion and frustration. According to the following analysis, this tutee was especially confused by the illocutionary force of speech acts; in other words, she struggled to distinguish between the surface form of an utterance and the actual intention behind it. In the course of my discussion, I will provide excerpts from their tutoring sessions demonstrating the student's frustration with the non-directive technique, her misinterpretation of the illocutionary force of speech acts, her use of questioning to get what she wants, and a successful exchange.

### *Results/Findings*

I present here excerpts from a single one-hour tutoring session in the month of December between Squirt and Newby. These exchanges demonstrate the difficulty a student with a learning disability had with the pragmatics of standard tutoring practices, which involve directive acts being masked as indirect questions or requests. Squirt has a specific learning disability affecting her receptive and expressive language abilities. A junior at the time of this study, she was an experienced tutee who attended tutoring sessions regularly. I learned through an interview that she had had many different tutors at the writing center and generally felt comfortable with all of them. She felt happy about the tutoring sessions, but she knew her tutor had the information that she needed and wished the tutor would more readily share that information with her. She was a bit frustrated when the tutor did not give "enough tips." The tutor, Newby, told me in an interview

that she thought Squirt is “probably kind of personally closed” and doesn’t like to write about her feelings, while Squirt told me she enjoyed writing about her feelings. Squirt told me that she felt frustrated in the tutoring sessions if the tutor did not “explain things” or “give tips,” and Squirt got “confused.” Squirt was able to articulate her desire for directives and how she got confused and frustrated by non-directive techniques. She informed me that other tutors “explain[ed] things more,” and she wished Newby would do the same.

In the semester I made my observations, Squirt was taking a class called Gay/Lesbian Literature. Her tutoring sessions focused on an analysis of *Giovanni’s Room*. Newby thought part of Squirt’s apparent resistance was a resistance to writing about gay issues, but outside of her schoolwork Squirt wrote a youth column for the local gay newspaper just for fun. Squirt also enjoyed reading for pleasure outside of her schoolwork. She told me in an interview she liked to write for school and had a good attitude about tutoring, but sometimes she just got frustrated, especially with Newby’s non-directive techniques.

As this note from her mother shows, her learning disability interfered with her understanding of the social dimensions of communication, with grammatical expression, manifesting itself in frustration. Squirt’s mother, who is an educator, wrote that Squirt

*has receptive and expressive language deficits. These impede her ability to read and express herself orally in a clear, concise, grammatically correct manner. She has difficulty decoding nuances of social language....She is certainly open to the path of least resistance which leads to frustration when required to work through*

*an assignment rather than be given the answer by the person helping her. I found this to be common with LD students in my classes. There is often a need to know that they are on the right track and lack [of] confidence in their own ability. I think this may also be somewhat true for Squirt. (email to author)<sup>3</sup>*

From this explanation, apparently Squirt's disability affected both the syntactic and semantic-pragmatic aspects of language. In addition to the pragmatic aspects discussed below, an illustration of the syntactic and semantic aspect of Squirt's disability is evident in her comment "It wasn't vague enough," when she meant "It was too vague." The focus of the discussion, however, encompasses her receptive ability and its interaction with the tutoring style of her tutor.

#### *Frustration*

In an excerpt from one of their tutoring sessions, Squirt's frustration, possibly due to her learning disability, became evident:

Newby: [the teacher] said more than add stuff, right?

Squirt: Yeah.

N: So what else did she say?

S: I don't know. She just said, 'Add more stuff.' That's all she said.

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<sup>3</sup>*One anonymous reviewer challenged my acceptance of what Squirt's mother told me about her disability. I defend my choice on several counts. Squirt identified her mother as her spokesperson on issues related to her disability. Also the information from her mother is the only information I have concerning her disability. Finally, mothers are often the best advocates for their children with disabilities (see Ginsberg and Rapp).*

N: Well, how do you know that your other stuff wasn't good?

S: I don't know.

N: Come on, Squirt.

S: I don't know. If you want to know then why don't you ask her?

N: I can't ask her.

S: Well, I don't know where she is. She just said just analyze more.

N: OK. Let's see if you've done any analyzing, OK?

S: OK. Fine. All right.

N: [reads from Squirt's paper] Why? Why do you think David lied to Joey? That's an analysis, telling me why.

S: Well, because they're not friends anymore.

N: Why are they not friends anymore?

S: Because, you know, about that incident that they had. You know, it's on the first page.

N: I know. But Squirt, Squirt, stop, stop, stop, stop. OK. We gotta get through this.

[an exchange about which draft of her paper they are discussing was eliminated here]

N: Let's see. [looks at paper] Squirt, what's the matter with you today?

S: I just don't want to do it.

N: Then why did you come?

S: I don't know, to have you do it.

Non-directive tutoring is almost always a directing act, as the goal is for the writer to make a change in the paper. Here, the tutor made a suggestion for revision ('Why do you think David lied to Joey?'), using the falling intonation that implies a directive rather than a genuine question, but Squirt didn't perceive it as such. As evidenced in her response, she misinterpreted the elicitations, which were actually directing in intent, as real requests for information. Most tutees have no problem with the directing act being masked as an eliciting act, but Squirt's learning disability possibly caused her to misunderstand the act's illocutionary force. For example, in another tutoring session in this same data set but with a different tutor and tutee, the tutee realized the tutor was asking questions not for information, but to indicate what should be in the text. For instance, when the tutor asked, "What happened after you performed it? What is it?" instead of directly answering the question, the tutee realized the illocutionary force of the utterance was a suggestion or indication to include this information in the paper, so he answered, "I explained that," indicating the information was already in the paper, so he did not need to add it. Perhaps the tutor just overlooked it.

Heidi Hamilton, in her work with an Alzheimer's patient, noted difficulties with indirectness may have to do with "taking the role of the other" (41). Squirt, like Hamilton's interlocutor, Elsie, may have "difficulty taking the perspective of her conversational partner, [and] she may not be able to figure out his or her possible

motivation(s) for using indirectness.” Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson write, “Decoding the communicative intent relies on the mutual availability of a reasonable and particular motive for being indirect” (268). In the above case, Squirt needed to know that Newby’s intent was to help her with her paper, not a desire to know what happened in the book. As Squirt attempted to follow the “path of least resistance,” she attempted to manipulate the tutor into doing the work for her when she says, “To have you do it.”

When Squirt was actually being resistant, she was very clear. For instance, when Newby directly suggested she take out a long quote: “Take out all this...”, she responded with a direct, “I’m not gonna do that.” In most tutoring sessions, when tutees resist a suggestion, they usually come right out and openly disagree with the tutor. For example, in some of the conversations that Marie Seckendorf presented in “Writing Center Conferences: An Analysis,” a tutee openly resisted a tutor’s suggestions. When the tutor tried to impose her own ideas for the paper, the tutee repeatedly answered her directly:

Tutor:...it should be in the context of women.

Tutee: Well, that’s not, see, uh, I’m not focusing just on women for example.

[and later in the tutoring session, the tutee continued to resist]

Tutor: You tell me how that paragraph has anything to do with women. You tell me how the thing about the borrowing has anything to do with women. In this paragraph, I don’t mean later on. I mean now.

Tutee: ...Well, just the extremities in character, but that's not specifically women....I don't want to, see I didn't start off writing the paper just on women.

Tutor: I understand that.

Tutee: I, I don't want to do the paper just on women.... (229-31)<sup>4</sup>

As evidenced in the above example, when a conversational partner disagrees with something, a token of "well" or "uh" or a pause is quite common to indicate a dispreferred response (Drew, "Contested Evidence" 502-503). Squirt neither pauses nor uses such markers in her responses, indicating she is not disagreeing or resisting but rather misunderstanding or misinterpreting the tutor's intent.

While their work was with children, Bonnie Brinton and Martin Fujiki found "language-disordered" children often answer questions with stock phrases like "I don't know" as a strategy to keep the conversation going. The children "recognized that a response was required, but were unable to provide the specific information requested" (60). Apparently this is also happening with Squirt, as she used her stock response of "I don't know" almost thirty times during one tutoring session. Here is another example of Squirt using the stock "I don't know" response:

Tutor: OK. Where you have 'and' here and someplace else. How would those sound if, if you took those 'ands' out and made two independent sentences?

Tutee: I don't know.

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<sup>4</sup>*Other examples of resistance in tutoring sessions appear in the works of Judith Rodby and Hansun Zhang Waring.*

Squirt could be interpreting this act as if the tutor actually wants to know how the sentence will sound, she could be using her stock response of “I don’t know,” or she could be resisting the tutor’s suggestion. A rule for indirect requests states, “if the predicate describes an action which is physically possible at the time of the utterance, treat it as a directive, otherwise regard it as an elicitation requiring a verbal response” (Coulthard 170). Squirt misapplies the rule, an illustration of how her disability affects her pragmatic competence. In reality, the tutor was directing her to fix the sentence using a non-directive construction, marked by a falling intonation. In this case it appeared to be perceived as an elicitation, or the purpose of which is misunderstood, hence the stock response.

#### *Misinterpretation of Speech Acts’ Illocutionary Force*

All utterances, whether in the tutoring context or in “real life,” contain both a locutionary and illocutionary act and can be interpreted at a discourse-meaning level and a word-meaning level (i.e., Q: “Can I go to the bathroom?” A: “I don’t know, *can* you?”). The uptake of illocutionary acts occurs when the listener recognizes the force in question, resulting in the felicity or success of the act (Levinson 80). Sometimes the force is misinterpreted, resulting in an unsuccessful exchange. In this example, the tutee misinterpreted the nature of the speech act and the communicative intent of the tutor. After asking several questions about David, the book’s protagonist, geared to help Squirt’s interpretation, Squirt responded:

Tutee: I don’t know, you gotta read the story.

Tutor: I don’t have to read the story, I have to read your paper.

Tutee: I don't remember. Ask [the teacher]. She'll tell you. I don't know.

Tutor: Come on, Squirt, let's stop that.

We see here a combination of the stock answer "I don't know" with the literal interpretation of the tutor's questions. This behavior could also be seen as a type of refusal to answer the tutor's request for information. Perhaps Squirt thought Newby already knew the answer, and her request for information was insincere. McTear and Conti-Ramsden (1992) reported language-impaired children frequently interpret indirect requests literally, something Squirt has done here. The tutor, of course, was attempting to help Squirt come up with ideas to put in her paper, while it seems as if Squirt was interpreting Newby's questions as a genuine interest in the content of the story.

The tutor, in turn, responded as if Squirt was trying to be a wise guy—a valid interpretation—but I believe what we see is an example of misunderstanding speech acts, or more likely, conversational implicature, as caused by Squirt's disability. I asked Squirt in an interview if she was being resistant in this tutoring session, and she replied she was just frustrated with Newby's tutoring techniques because she wanted direct explanations. At stake here is the difference between violating a maxim (being resistant) or infringing a maxim (really not knowing what's going on). Her "wise guy" stance could have been her way of letting Newby know her questions were not pointed enough.

Squirt's reaction to the tutor's questions could also be influenced by her understanding of the tutor's intent, as Squirt seemingly interpreted the tutor's request as a genuine need for information

rather than an attempt to elicit ideas for the paper. The tutoring procedure relies on the tutee understanding that the tutor is taking a question-asking stance, although in reality the tutor has no genuine personal stake in the answers to the questions. In other words, Newby only has an interest in what happened to David as far as it will help Squirt to write her paper. Labov and Fanshel refer to the “Rule for Indirect Requests,” which states “we must always be alert to the possibility that we are being requested to perform some type of action” (79), so the request of “Can you please pass the salt?” is not met with a simple answer of “yes” or “no” but with a subsequent action. Squirt’s lack of uptake or realization of this rule could be due to her disability or to associated sociocognitive factors (McTear and Conti-Ramsden).

#### *Tutee Posing Questions*

No overt instances of repair<sup>5</sup> in individual adjacency pairs appear in this particular discourse, but when Squirt began to ask questions, she began to “repair” the entire exchange. By posing her own questions, she overtly showed she understood the intent of tutor’s indirect utterances but not how to carry them out. For instance, when Newby told her, “You’re not making it clear,” Squirt got the uptake that she was supposed to, in turn, make “it” clear. Since in this case she understands the illocutionary force but does not know how to do the action implied, she asks the tutor, “Well, then how can I make it clear?”

Later in the tutoring session Squirt continued this practice of questioning, and began to ask the tutor directly what she needed

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<sup>5</sup>For a discussion of repair, see Hutchby and Wooffitt.

to do, in order to get the more directive help she needed:

Tutor: But, see, your job is not to tell me the story. And you said [reading] WHEN DAVID GOT OLDER HE MOVED TO PARIS. HE MET GIOVANNI IN A BAR AND GIOVANNI LOVED DAVID. COMING OUT FOR HIM WAS DIFFICULT, AND GIOVANNI LOVED DAVID.

Tutee: So, how should I change it?

Tutor: OK. The incidents that happened and you talk about, that you tell about, the purpose of telling me is to analyze it.

Tutee: So how can I analyze it?

Tutor: You're asking what's going on, why it's happening, perhaps, you know, how the characters are interacting, how they're feeling. What they're thinking, what it means, how it affects the relationship, and really their lives after that. You want to ask, you know, [writing] what and why.

Squirt wanted directive help, and by asking questions she got the tutor to give her an explanation. Squirt echoed the tutor's words in her second question by turning the tutor's statement into a question. While this "echolalia" could be considered a communication problem, here it served as a way for Squirt to direct the conversation toward some useful advice for her paper. Squirt told me in an interview that she asked the tutor a lot of questions because she wanted to learn. I don't think the explanation is, as one reviewer commented, that Squirt waits for the tutor to tire and break down and give her the directiveness she wants. This is because the successful part of the tutoring session came toward the middle, and the student achieved success by

turning it around and asking the tutor questions to get directive help.

*Metacommentary*

At several points in the tutoring session, Squirt indicated what was happening and what she needed, and she also indicated she understood both her role and the tutor's role:

Tutee: So, tell me what to take out, and just tell me what to do and I'll do it.

Tutor: But you've got to figure out yourself what to do.

Tutee: I know. I know.

Then later on she explicitly explained how she was feeling:

Tutee: I can't do that.

Tutor: Why?

Tutee: Because I can't. Because I need some help.

[some discussion of whether the camera and observation are bothering her]

Tutee: No, it's not bothering me.

Tutor: Well, stop being difficult.

Tutee: I don't know. It's just frustrating.

Everything Squirt told me in the interview, that she wanted more direct help and that it frustrated for her to engage in non-directive conferencing, she had told the tutor during this conference.

### *Collaboration*

About two-thirds of the way through the tutoring session, they started to work out their interaction so Squirt could get the help she needed. At one point Squirt said, "I don't wanna write," and then paused and said, "OK. Fine," at which point they agreed to work together, and for the first time she began to answer the tutor's questions and work toward revising her paper.

Tutor: You don't normally sit down and write a paper from beginning to end. You've gotta do these prewriting activities, so, OK.

Tutee: OK.

Tutor: So, you're going to tell me about David.

Tutee: MmmHmmm

Tutor: Well, what about him?

Tutee: He's confused.

Although we see even here that the tutor stated Squirt had agreed to tell her about the book in order to generate ideas for the paper, Squirt still literally answered whether or not she was going to tell the tutor anything ("MmmHmm") rather than just going ahead and beginning her analysis. Newby has flouted a maxim here by telling Squirt something she already knew. The implicature is for her to go ahead and start telling (indirect request), but in this case, the tutor needed to further prompt her to answer ("Well, what about him?"). The tutor then continued to ask Squirt simple questions about her knowledge of the book and then asked clarifying questions as needed, and they proceeded slowly with short turns as Squirt took notes on her ideas. Newby

started to explicitly tell Squirt the reasons for the questions, using an Illocutionary Force Indicating Device<sup>6</sup> (Thonus), and Squirt seemed to accept this and so agreed to participate.

### *Discussion*

With learning-disabled students like Squirt, tutors should be aware the student may misinterpret the tutor's directing act. In tutoring, the directing act is masked as an eliciting act. The tutor wants the student to act—to change the text in some way—but in this case the non-directive directing question was interpreted as a real request for information. With learning disabled students, it may be more productive for the tutor to be more direct. In matters of grammar, the tutor could provide a word the student doesn't know or a more idiomatic one, or she can work with whatever word the tutee gives. In matters of idea generation, the tutor should make it clear the ideas being generated should serve to improve the text, and the tutor is not asking what happened in the book simply because she is curious. It's important to keep in mind that directive/nondirective and direct/indirect form two different continua. It's possible to be directive in an indirect way ("How would it sound if you took out the 'and'?"), and also to be nondirective in a direct way ("Tell me what your paper is about."), so this discussion should not be seen as an evaluation in any way of either directive or nondirective tutoring styles, but rather as an analysis of the interpretability of the speech acts involved.

In her dissertation research, Alison Stachera looked at the concept of nondirective questions in tutoring and found that what appear to be nondirective questions are actually leading questions for

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<sup>6</sup>These are phrases and sentences that literally describe the speaker's intent. For example: "I'm just joking" or "I am only making a suggestion."

which the tutor has an answer. True questions were infrequent in her study data. Stachera concluded that “withholding information or playing linguistic games” with tutees was neither fair nor honest, nor did it help students become better writers or gain agency over their writing (193). Furthermore, she wrote, there is potential to do harm to writers using what we think is a method that intends to liberate them and make them stronger writers. What seems to happen is that writers get very good at guessing what we mean because we don’t tell them outright, and if we do, we apologize for it. (194)

Some students, like Squirt, do not “get” the guessing game, so it can be even more harmful and frustrating for them. In an important but under-influential article, “Reevaluation of the Question as a Teaching Tool,” JoAnn Johnson suggests imperatives function more effectively than questions in getting students to talk. Leone Scanlon noted the non-directive approach used with most writers does not seem as effective with dyslexic tutees. The dyslexic students in Wewers’ study recommended the tutors meet their problems head on—but with tact. These suggestions would benefit Squirt and other tutees who need tutors to explicitly name the illocutionary force of an act through an Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID), such as “I’m only kidding,” or “I’m trying to help you come up with ideas here,” or “That’s just a suggestion” (Thonus 274).

### *Conclusion*

Pragmatics has been a tacit concern in tutoring, and it may be profitable to make tutors aware of it in training. In this case, it seems Newby interpreted Squirt’s reactions as resistant or

manipulative, as reluctant to write about gay issues, or in relation to the observation (“You haven’t been this difficult to work with. Do you think it’s because of the camera?”), rather than interpreting the difficulty, confusion, and frustration Squirt exhibited as being the direct result of her disability, which according to Squirt’s family involves “difficulty decoding nuances of social language.” Not all tutors will know the exact diagnosis or details of the disabilities of the students they work with, but they should have a general awareness of the communication difficulties involved.

Although this case shows extreme occasions of pragmatic misunderstanding based on disability, tutors will likely benefit from the study of pragmatics and the implications of procedures such as non-directiveness in their training. Of course pragmatics differs by culture, and pragmatic impairment is associated with various conditions, of which learning disability is only one (Perkins “Pragmatic Ability” 367). Squirt displayed specific issues related to pragmatic disability in particular such as “failure to use context in comprehension” (McTear and Conti-Ramsden 187), which means an indirect speech act was taken literally, and as the inclusion of “too little information” in her paper, which the tutor attempted to elicit.

### *Implications for Practice*

The question remains if the tutoring session is a complicated “language game” then how are tutees, who may come to tutoring only once, to learn the rules of this game if not explicitly taught? While it may be useful for tutors to teach tutees about speech acts during the tutorial so they can have a meta-awareness of the pragmatic aspects in tutoring, there probably isn’t time, and other

concerns may be more pressing. Still, educating tutors about speech acts and pragmatics seems not only feasible, but advisable. Tutors can also use explicit Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices when working with tutees that don't seem to "pick up" on the nature of the indirect speech acts used in tutoring. For instance, if a tutor asks a tutee about the book she's read and the tutee responds as if the tutor is curious about the book, the tutor could respond, "I'm trying to help you get ideas about what to put in your paper." Newby came close to this when she told Squirt, "I don't have to read the book; I have to read your paper." Since "what we do in our language game always rests on a tacit presupposition" (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical* 413), then it might be a good idea to try to make those presuppositions explicit in the case of learning disabled tutees or others who process language games differently due to socio-cultural, mental, emotional, or physical differences.

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# Evaluating Our Claims: Assessing a Student Leadership Position in the Writing Center

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Writing Centers are important sites of development for student leaders. Student leadership experiences in the Writing Center craft students' skills in various areas, including public speaking, planning and leading discussions or learning experiences for peers, liaising between different constituents, and working "behind the scenes" with administrators. We know Writing Centers create these opportunities for our student employees, but how do we assess their value or effectiveness? In this article, we discuss how we assessed the perceived value of a student leadership program in our writing center by interviewing tutors and administrators who regularly interact with the student leaders. A hallmark of writing center assessment is its often context-specific (relevant to the center and the institution), inclusive (involving many stakeholders), and collaborative (involving stakeholders at all stages) approach. (See for example Ellen Schendel and William J. Macauley, *Building*

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<sup>1</sup>A note on authorship: Although the Writing Center Director wrote this piece for publication, two Peer Tutor Coordinators reviewed and made suggestions on an earlier draft. The three researchers also presented an early version of the study at the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing in Miami, Florida.

*Writing Center Assessments That Matter*.) As we reflect on the design and results of our local assessment plan, we learned the importance of this approach for assessing a student leadership program and for all the work we do in the Writing Center that impacts tutor development.

In a writing center at a private research university on the West Coast, the peer writing tutor coordinator position offers a competitive student leadership opportunity. Peer Tutor Coordinators (“PTCs”) are undergraduate students chosen through an application and interview process from a pool of approximately 40 peer writing tutors. They work—as their title suggests—to coordinate communication between the large and dispersed undergraduate tutor population and the administrative staff in the Center. Two PTCs assist in the hiring of new undergraduate writing tutors, plan and facilitate tutor staff meetings, and prepare the schedule for peer writing tutoring at the beginning of each academic term. Unlike most other student leadership opportunities on campus, PTCs are challenged to run meetings that are not only informational and motivational but are pedagogically effective; thus they need preparation in how to design effective team-building and run learning opportunities for their peers.

Originally proposed by a group of students seeking leadership roles in the Writing Center, the Peer Tutor Coordinator position at this writing center has existed since 2001, almost as long as the Center itself. This study emerged as the Writing Center Director was reviewing the Peer Tutor Coordinator job description to see how much it adequately reflected the work the PTCs had been doing and to identify what we wished to accomplish for the year. In that description, she found a long and minutely detailed list of tasks, a

legacy of continual updates and additions over the years. At some point in the process of adding in even more tasks to the description, she took a step back and wondered: “Is this multi-page document the right approach? Does the list of tasks belie the amorphous work they do to bring tutors together? Does it give the student leaders the opportunity to develop professional independence and flexibility?” Reflecting on the tasks listed and the position’s conceptual purpose led us to query what is most valuable about the PTC position and to whom.

This essay presents the attempts of the Director along with two Peer Tutor Coordinators to answer those questions. We developed an assessment plan rooted in a “practitioner inquiry” approach to writing center scholarship, which Alice Gillam describes in her introduction to *Writing Center Research: Extending the Conversation* as “situated descriptions of practice that lead to critiques or limited recommendations that make no pretense to guaranteeing success when applied in different contexts” (xx). This definition allowed us to better understand the importance of the PTCs to our tutor and administrator groups as well as to explore context-specific changes based on the results of this inquiry. Gillam’s definition reminds us to be cautious of suggesting that our recommendations automatically apply to other writing centers.

Acknowledging the local and context-specific aspect of our study, we nevertheless argue for its usefulness to other writing centers that wish to develop a method of reflective practitioner inquiry to assess the perceived value and impact of writing center programs or initiatives on and to tutors. Considering the usefulness of what he terms “local qualitative research,” Neal Lerner suggests this method “offers the opportunity to create disciplinary knowledge that is

‘self-serving’ in the best sense” (Lerner, “Insider as Outsider” 67). This type of research is highly “reflective,” Lerner proposes with reference to Ann Berthoff, highlighting the process of “think[ing] about the information we [already] have” (Berthoff 30; Lerner 67). This approach—offering a situated description of practice, looking carefully at what we already know, and developing limited recommendations—provides us with a framework for assessing student leadership and, in turn, any writing center initiative or program.

Our study also contributes to the growing conversation on writing centers and leadership. While many writing center directors intentionally develop students’ leadership skills by encouraging them to lead meetings, run training sessions or workshops, undertake writing center research, or participate in decision-making, much of the literature on leadership is focused on directors as leaders (from Jeanne Simpson’s “What Lies Ahead for Writing Centers” [1985] to Shanti Bruce’s, Kevin Dvorak’s, and Claire Luktkwitté’s “Leadership and Writing Programs” [2013] to name two examples) or on graduate students as leaders (as an example of the field’s attention to this topic, see the International Writing Centers Association Position Statement on Graduate Student Writing Center Administration or Karen Rowan’s bibliography of scholarship on graduate student administration published on the IWCA website). While there is general research on student leadership (for instance, the *New Directions for Student Leadership* journal or James Kouzes’s and Barry Posner’s *Student Leadership Challenge*), the role of student leaders in writing center contexts warrants special attention because their work uniquely combines administration, research, and leading learning experiences for their peers.

Our findings show that developing an assessment model for a student leadership program requires administrators and tutors to collaborate at all levels. While the importance of collaboration to any writing center initiative seems obvious, our data show that it is particularly important in the context of student leadership to align the values of the writing center, what administrators and tutors say they value, the work that student leaders are asked to do, how that work is assessed, and how that assessment connects back to writing center values. We argue that our study of the perceived value of a writing center program is a testament to the importance of communication, collaboration, and reflection in the continuous cycle of ongoing assessment.

### **Study Methods**

A team of three – the Writing Center Director and two Peer Tutor Coordinators – conducted our small-scale study using interviews, which we determined would help us learn more about the perspectives of the two main groups that work with the PTCs: undergraduate peer tutors and writing center administrators. The job describes the PTC duties in tangible ways. But this detailed document failed to answer our “why” questions: why the position was created, why it is valuable and to whom, and why it is worthwhile to keep and nurture. We wanted to ensure that we had compelling evidence from those who interact most closely with the PTCs for continuing the position or for any revisions we wanted to propose.

We considered an interview instrument over other possibilities such as surveys or focus groups. However, we believed these methods would be limiting. For the PTCs to be effective in opening lines of communication between peer tutors and administrators, both groups need to believe that the PTCs are able to fulfill that role: tutors need

to know that their concerns will be heard by the PTCs and, in turn, by administrators; administrators need to know that PTCs will share tutors' concerns with them. Thus, open-ended and confidential interviews offered the best way for us to capture the candid perspectives of the individuals who most frequently interact with the PTCs. At the same time, we initially planned to cycle what we learned through the interview process back into a revised job description that would reflect what those groups most value about the PTCs' work—which would, we hoped, “close the loop” on the evaluation cycle. (As discussed later, while we did develop insights into the job description, we did not revise it.)

After receiving Institutional Review Board exemption, we interviewed new and experienced peer tutors, current and former administrative staff and directors, and a recently-graduated PTC—a total of eight participants. We asked everyone the same questions:

- What do Peer Tutor Coordinators do? What is the role of the PTCs?
- What do you think is the most important part of their job?
- Would it work as well if there was a staff member doing the same work?
- Do PTCs have a role or function that no one else in the Writing Center has?
- If PTCs didn't exist, whom would you go to with your questions?
- How would you like to see the model change or continue?
- Why is this position a good one for our institution and our Writing Center?

Once we transcribed the interviews, we met to develop a coding scheme to assign sentence-level statements into “categories of value”—the term we use, employing the participants’ own words, to describe the different ways our participants explained the value of the student leadership program. For example, in response to the question, “Do Peer Tutor Coordinators have a role or function that no one else in the Writing Center has?,” an administrator responded: “I think so in the sense that because they are students they are more connected to their peers.” We coded this as “connection,” and then looked for other statements that expressed similar concepts about the connection between student leaders and peer tutors. We used a consensus coding approach, reaching agreement by “collaborative discussion rather than independent corroboration” (the process Peter Smagorinsky discusses in “Methods Section as Conceptual Epicenter,” [401]). We reached consensus over completeness, agreeing that the categories we identified covered everything that was discussed in the interviews, and we reached consensus over the meaning of each “category of value”: vision, connection, sensitivity, leadership, relatability, and community-building. For instance, we coded the following statements from two different tutors into the “relatability” category:

- “[We] know what tutoring locations will work because we know where people study and what tutors will be willing to do because we know what midterms are like”;
- “I think to me having someone that I see all the time, that I see in the dining hall, that I see in classes, that sort of thing, that’s what makes it casual.”

Although we aimed for consistent coding, our process was collaborative and organic as we sought to capture authentically the

intent of the interview responses.

After coding, we divided the interview respondents into two groups, administrators and tutors, because we noted differences in their responses due to their institutional status, orientation to the Writing Center, and relationship to the tutors. For example, the Writing Program Director, who was present around the time that the Writing Center was founded, had a different view than the undergraduate tutor who had worked in the Center for two years. We found that administrators believed the Peer Tutor Coordinators contribute most in terms of vision, connection, and sensitivity; tutors, on the other hand, believe PTCs are most important in terms of their leadership, relatability, and community-building. In this next section, we briefly summarize our findings in each of these categories and provide sample evidence from the interviews to illustrate the findings.

## **Findings**

***Vision:*** Several administrators emphasize how PTCs help them “think through what’s best for students.” In the early days of the Center, the Tutor Coordinators were particularly important in helping administrators figure out how the peer tutor program could best serve students at our institution. More recently, when our Center added on residential tutoring (peer tutors living and working in dorms) and tutoring programs in “satellite” locations across campus (such as community centers or cafes), the PTCs helped administrators think about how these programs would work best to suit students’ needs, especially in terms of locations, tutor availability, and marketing. One administrator reflected on the early days of the tutoring program: “We hoped they would provide leadership; we hoped they would craft a vision of what

a peer tutor program should be”; another commented on how the PTC model aligned with the writing program’s “core principle that students needed to be involved as administrators.”

**Connection:** Administrators also value the PTCs’ ability to stay connected to tutors, especially those in satellite locations and residence halls. At times during the academic term, administrators have little interaction with these off-site tutors, who come to the Center to attend staff meetings just a few times per term. Between meetings, PTCs check in with these tutors by emailing or visiting them during their tutoring hours or by hosting dining hall lunches to help tutors troubleshoot difficult tutoring sessions and share successes. As one administrator highlights, these check-ins help “ensure that the peer tutors in remote locations do their jobs” by reminding them to advertise and keep their hours and to use the online scheduling system. Administrators recognize the special credibility that PTCs have with the peer tutors “because they’re experienced tutors and because they’ve been selected by administrators in the Center for the position.” That credibility enables them to move from casually checking in with a peer tutor to more firmly reminding them to hold their hours at the advertised time.

**Sensitivity:** As students themselves, PTCs are uniquely sensitive to their peers’ needs, which—as all the administrators pointed out—becomes most important when they prepare the tutoring schedule each term. At the time of the study, scheduling involved preparing three separate schedules based on each peer tutor’s availability: one for peer tutoring in the main location, one for residence-based tutoring, and one for tutoring in satellite locations—and all with a turnaround time of one or two days. To do this task with sensitivity, one administrator notes, PTCs need to be attuned both to the needs

of student writers around campus (when and where they work and study) and to the complicated schedules of the tutors, which are often very fluid during the first few weeks of the term as they shop for classes. The PTCs also have to work with administrators to interpret usage data from previous terms in order to understand where on campus more or less tutoring is needed so that the schedule can evolve to meet student needs.

In this set of interviews, we found administrators respected PTCs' ideas and solutions, trusted their ability to hold other tutors accountable for their work, and understood the unique contribution that PTCs as students can offer the Center and the peer tutor body. Administrators appeared to recognize that there is work PTCs do that they—as older adults, as faculty or staff—cannot do. In interviewing peer tutors, we found similar appreciation for PTCs as students but also differences in terms of how the tutors described what they most valued.

**Leadership:** One of the tutors we interviewed emphasized how important it was for her that the PTCs function as leaders. She looks to the PTCs to “provid[e] structure, like [the schedule] and accountability” believing that “we [tutors] are accountable to you to keep our hours, our duty.” The same tutor also mentioned that, from her perspective, “having a student in a leadership position in [the Writing Center] is fundamentally important because you are more in tune with the university community in a certain sense as a student than teachers are.” This new tutor wants the PTCs to provide direction to the tutors and to give administrators insight to the student experience.

**Relatability:** All tutors, new and experienced, value the fact that an administrative position in the Center is held by a student: someone

who shares the tutors' same general schedule, lifestyle, and stresses. Fellow peer tutors value the "casual voice you can reach out to" and "the informality" of the PTCs, something that at least one current tutor believes is "the most important part" of their positions. One tutor highlights that the PTCs "relate to us—only you could understand how much work 23 units is," an understanding that becomes important if a tutor has little flexibility in their schedule or needs to scale back on the number of hours they tutor in a term. One peer tutor notes that the PTC has shared a similar experience to her own and the students she tutors: "[g]oing through the [university] experience we are in these classes and [have students] coming to us from these classes. I can't think of anyone who is better able to provide that guidance and context."

***Community-Building:*** Finally, peer tutors look to the PTCs to foster a peer tutor community in the center. Tutors see the PTCs as responsible for bringing tutors together to share their challenges and experiences; one tutor believes PTCs need to facilitate this connection because it is "really important for new tutors to . . . be a part of a tutor community where we value writing." All peer tutors interviewed see this community-building as important when it is tied to professional development. Thus, even though they each tutor just a few hours per week and have a number of other commitments both on and off campus, many of the tutors interviewed feel that it is a necessary part of their responsibilities to participate in a tutor community and that it is the responsibility of the PTCs to make this happen.

Even though we separate out the administrators' responses from those of the tutors, we found that sometimes both groups used different terms to describe similar ideas. For example,

administrators value how the Peer Tutor Coordinators can connect tutors working in scattered locations back to the Writing Center hub, and peer tutors appreciate that PTCs are relatable because as students they are all around campus and in the residence halls, where administrators are not available. Put differently, connection and relatability both convey the idea of the non-hierarchical relationship between PTCs and peer tutors fostered by the availability of the PTCs in and outside the Center. In addition, sensitivity to tutor needs and schedules, which administrators mention, and relatability to the student experience, which tutors mention, both emphasize empathy for the challenges of being a student.

We found one key difference between the administrators' and the tutors' perceptions of the PTCs' role. We noted that administrators emphasized vision and the ways in which PTCs might help the Center advance and improve. The tutors talked, instead, of how PTCs can build and support a tutor community on campus. This difference suggests that administrators are more focused on the Center's reach across campus and tutors are more focused on their own experiences as members of a student community—one group looking outwards, the other looking inwards. Despite this difference, both groups would agree that the writing center mission and tutor development mutually reinforce each other. Yet because there are differences, one of the PTCs' most important roles is to translate values and ideas between the tutor cohort and the administrators so that everyone in the Writing Center understands the shared goals and priorities. And administrators need to be attuned to the language used by tutors so they can understand when communication aligns and when miscommunication occurs.

## Conclusions

Through our analysis of the interview responses and reflection on our process, we see a need for alignment between how administrators and tutors talk about what they value in the Writing Center, how student leaders' work is defined and supported, and how the value or impact of their work is measured.

The job description is an important site where the connection between articulated values and assessment plays out. The original purpose of our study was to confirm or reimagine the Peer Tutor Coordinator's job description by using what the stakeholders felt was the most important aspects of the job. What we learned through the interviews, however, was the importance of the position's amorphous aspects that are difficult to quantify and measure, making it hard to develop a comprehensive or static description of their work. These hard-to-quantify aspects also make it difficult to prepare and train new PTCs for the nuances of the job. An additional challenge is that undergraduate tutors may or may not come into the role with previous professional or leadership experience. This means that for the program to be successful and rewarding for new PTCs as they come on board, the job description has to be tailored to draw on their existing strengths, and new training has to be developed to help them grow in new professional areas. In other words, this assessment project helps identify the need for a fluid job description with broad categories of value and outcomes, rather than a task-oriented description; ideally, this description would be revised in collaboration with tutors, aligned with the priorities of the Writing Center, and tailored to the skills of that year's student leaders.

Our study highlights the importance of collaboratively developing assessment models that have buy-in from various stakeholders in

the Writing Center. One staff member suggested that tutors valued the PTCs because they've been put into this position by the Center's administration, thereby giving them credibility. However, a peer tutor pushed against this view; he valued the PTCs "not because the administrator has said, 'this person will be your casual contact.' [Instead, it's] because, no, it's actually someone with whom I have an informal, casual relationship." The challenge here is complex. The example shows, as we've stated, that administrators need to listen for the ways that tutors articulate the perceived value of their student leader—that being a "casual contact" means being available, relatable, and sensitive to other tutors' needs. The example also shows not only that administrators and tutors should agree on the meaning of each category of value but also that both groups need to generate and agree on the categories themselves. In the example we provide, we might argue that only a tutor would be able to see "informal, casual relationship" as a category of value for a writing center's mission. Administrators would say that they appreciate this aspect of a student leader's role precisely because it can only be achieved by a student; but this is work that is likely to go unseen by administrators, especially because it intentionally excludes them and is hard to measure. In a collaborative process, administrators could intentionally seek ways to honor and make visible the authority of tutors to identify categories of value that are important to the tutor cohort and could also coach student leaders to cultivate credibility through their actions rather than have it be assigned by administrators.

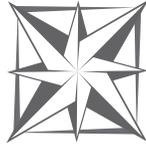
As administrators and student leaders in the Writing Center plan assessment for their programs and initiatives, we recommend a collaborative, inclusive process to align an understanding of (i) writing center values; (ii) the language used to communicate between and among stakeholders about those values; and (iii) the

methods for measuring the perceived value or impact of the program being assessed, especially the parts that are particularly difficult to quantify. In our context, our study helped us achieve (i) and (ii). The next stage would be to move toward (iii), the specific ways to assess the program's impact and effectiveness. While we did not get to this stage in this study, inclusive assessment would ask various stakeholders to agree on flexible but measurable outcomes for overlapping categories of value (like "sensitivity"), to prioritize or compromise on categories that are more important to one group than another (like "vision" and "community building"), and to consider how to prepare student leaders' to work toward these goals in any given year.

An inclusive, collaborative approach would help align language and values, which in turn would help assess impact, but we recognize the challenges involved. One challenge is the investment of time needed to undertake a process like this, one that might happen annually as new student leaders come on board. Another consideration is whether the successful completion of an inclusive, collaborative process is a priority of the Writing Center and the institution, especially if the Director's work is assessed on their ability to direct mission and delegate duties to staff or student employees. Yet spending time and making the case for a consensus-based, inclusive assessment process is worthwhile if the university is committed to developing independent and flexible student leaders, which a process like this will surely facilitate.

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## *Back to the Center*

### The Writing Center at Athens State University

JOY BRACEWELL

The Writing Center at Athens State University began in 2011 as part of a QEP for “Building Success through Writing.” Like many small centers with a one-person or small full-time staff, the Director collaborates with Peer Consultants to provide tutoring, workshops, online materials, and marketing to students and faculty at our university, so our work covers a range of activities. As a recent alumna of the Brittain Fellowship at Georgia Tech and an administrator in its Communication Center, I value the pedagogical opportunities afforded by having students use multiple modes in the composition process, as well as training tutors to work with students on such projects. Therefore, when I was hired as Director in May 2015, I reshaped the vision of the center after the conclusion of the QEP to include multimodality.

#### *A Unique Institution*

Athens State University is an anomaly of sorts: a two-year junior-senior institution. Billing itself as providing the lowest-cost tuition rate in the state of Alabama, Athens State serves online students and northern Alabama residents who may need to earn



an undergraduate education after starting at a community college or after a gap of many years. Composed of three colleges—Arts and Sciences, Business, and Education—Athens State graduates many of the secondary school teachers hired to work in the state and also networks with government and industry employers in the greater Huntsville area. According to the 2014 Fact Book, only a quarter of all campus courses at Athens State are held in a traditional, face-to-face format. The unique mixture of non-traditional students and online education here creates opportunities for the Writing Center to provide a sense of connection and community for students who use our services. Yet finding systematic methods to reach out to students and inform them about our resources is also one of our ongoing challenges.

### *Continued Growth*

Growing from only five sessions in Fall 2011 to nearly 300 in Fall 2012, the Writing Center continues to serve more students every

year. Data from the 2015-2016 year displayed this kind of positive momentum, with a 66% increase in tutoring sessions from 2014-2015 and new student registrations up 70%. Moreover, students from all three colleges are regularly represented in our tutoring sessions, including majors such as Art, Accounting, and Early Childhood Education.

### *Partnerships through Tutor Training*

Besides fostering the sense of community and ownership essential for Peer Consultants within a vibrant Writing Center, instituting a weekly training meeting also created a ready-made vehicle for my goal of pursuing campus and community partnerships. Having representatives from Counseling Services, the Career Development Center, and the Student Success Center interact with our consultants during these meetings emphasizes to the Writing Center staff our integral position within a network of other campus resources. Such visits also produce professional development opportunities for the consultants who may wish to pursue a career in these fields or related areas. Interdisciplinary collaboration has also been helpful to

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## CENTER *in*SIGHT

*Athens State University currently enrolls more than 4,300 students, of whom about 7% use the Writing Center. We certainly have room for growth.*

- Director: Joy Bracewell, Ph.D. (since 2015)
  - Peer Tutors: 4-6
  - Hours Open Per Week: 38
  - Number of Consultants Working Per Shift: 1
  - Average Number of Sessions Per Semester: 250
-



familiarize consultants with the concepts that inform their practice and to help consultants understand the writers they tutor. For example, a sociology professor spoke about institutional racism and sexism, and another campus visitor from biology discussed the scientific method, science writing, and creating figures at meetings. Not only do these collaborations help consultants by raising their awareness about important student populations and about tutoring best practices, they also help the Writing Center streamline processes and work more smoothly with other student services. For instance, a visit from a librarian about research led to a discussion among the librarians and me about the consultants' role in helping students with the research process. Negotiating the content and purpose of these meetings has given me the opportunity to explain to our collaborators across campus what Writing Center work entails and establish how our staff can work together with other units to support students.

### *Creating Visibility on Campus*

The center was moved to the Library Learning Commons in 2011 to provide students with access to information literacy, technological assistance, and writing support. Although the center was well-placed at the time, the space of the Writing Center was undifferentiated from

the rest of the library. In Fall 2016, a glass storefront was installed to create a boundary from the rest of the building and an entrance into the center. More support from Academic Affairs in Spring 2016 allowed for the construction of a room within this space equipped with cameras, a computer and projector, and a group workstation. These successes were possible because I continued to raise awareness about writing process and praxis, initially the work of the QEP, by creating partnerships on campus and increasing the visibility of the Writing Center to students, faculty, administration, and community stakeholders. In addition, a Writing Advisory Committee that was formed from very invested members of the QEP representing each college at the university helped rebrand the center using students' input. We solicited this feedback through a contest in which entrants wrote a mission statement and tagline and designed a logo. After many excellent submissions, we now proudly pronounce that we are "improving the writer in all of us." This partnership led to a successful bid to increase funding by 35% in 2015-2016 and provided compelling evidence for the value of more support for the center





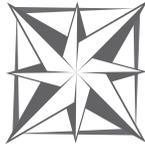
during a summary of accomplishments to the Board of Trustees in Spring 2016. Presenting at this forum enabled me to gain resources from Academic Affairs to create a space within the Writing Center to support multimodal tutoring by obtaining equipment for recording presentations and creating graphics to tutor students working in multiple modes. Going forward, the Writing Center is poised to help students through every stage of the writing process, including the senior capstone project and presentation required by many departments for graduation.

### *Exploring Multimodality/Maintaining the Momentum*

The installation of a multimodal space in the Writing Center has afforded exciting ways to increase outreach across campus. Through a co-teaching collaboration with an English professor and librarian, I shaped a nineteenth-century British studies course to test various multimodal assignments and observe how Peer Consultants adapted their methods to tutor students who were constructing these projects.



Along with the Writing Center and Library, the campus-wide Learning Resources Committee has hosted guest speakers on information literacy and multimodality, as well as a multimodal symposium, which offered the faculty time and space to explore methods of incorporating assignments using different modes into their own courses. Additionally, the Peer Consultants have extended their experiences using multimodality in the center to increase their engagement in the Writing Center community at large, presenting at the Alabama state symposium and submitting work for presentation at SWCA. Though small, the Writing Center at Athens State continues to grow. Incremental development has allowed us to build the quality of our services while also sustaining and increasing our outreach across campus. Multimodal tutoring affords us many means by which we can support students throughout their academic careers as they pursue online and face-to-face learning opportunities at Athens State and beyond.



## *Consultant Insight*

# Tutoring for “the Rest of Us”: Learning from the Failures of an Instructor Coming from a Background in Literary Studies

ZACK REARICK

As a PhD student in Literary Studies, I have often found my role as a writing tutor difficult and confusing. I was hired by Georgia State University in 2012 as a Composition instructor and Writing Studio tutor. At the time, I had no experience doing either. I had never been in a Composition classroom (having tested out of the subject as an undergraduate), and more to the point, I had never been in a Writing Studio of any kind. I had always been a “good” writer--I got good grades, my teachers loved my papers, and I also found success in writing that wasn’t intended for the classroom. It had not really occurred to me, as I had never been given reason to reflect on it, that “good writing” was not something that came naturally to everyone. The idea that someone could teach someone else how to write wasn’t necessarily foreign to me, but I had never given it serious thought. I had certainly never entertained the idea that I would occupy the role of teacher.

When I was given a writing tutor job at Georgia State, I was lost. Unfamiliar with Writing Center studies of any kind (and with

Composition Theory in general), I found myself responsible on a weekly basis for the writing practices of tutees who would have a hard time knowing whether or not I was doing a good job, much less addressing any of my failures. There was a sizeable disconnect between what I had been trained to do in my work in the field of Literary Studies and what I was actually being paid to do. I struggled mightily my first semester, vacillating between feelings of panic (“What if I can’t do this?”), disheartenment (“I definitely can’t do this”), and indignant condescension (“This isn’t *English!* Why should I have to do this?”). Interacting with my colleagues who were studying Composition and Writing Center Theory made me feel inadequate and almost recklessly ill prepared for my current job. And yet, with a full teaching workload, my tutoring job, and my own schoolwork, I had little time to train myself in an entirely new field. The question that I was ultimately forced to answer for myself was this: How can a “Literature person” equip himself or herself to be a competent writing tutor without the language and theoretical background necessary for such a task? I haven’t found the answer yet (for there likely is no single answer), but I think a frank discussion of mistakes and missteps, even if it is limited to just my own, would be beneficial for other tutors in my position.

My first semester as a tutor was the most productive in my career because it was the one in which I struggled the most. When I gave a variation of this paper at the 2014 Southeastern Writing Center Conference, I joked that being forced to occupy the role of a writing tutor with no experience had been like a “tutoring boot camp.” At Georgia State, we have twenty-five minute sessions (with a five minute break in between the next session),

and I worked twice a week, meaning that I had four sessions in a row two days out of every week. At the time, it seemed like an impossible task. I was not yet comfortable with my role as a Composition instructor, so these short sessions with tutees, ranging from a wide variety of fields and skill levels, were a nightmare. How could anyone jump into tutees' work with no grounding in the class that they were taking, knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses as a writer, or solid ideas of the expectations of the assignment and be expected to help them improve their work in under thirty minutes? It felt like it was barely enough time to even read some of what they had written, let alone synthesize it and offer meaningful commentary. But there they were, tutee after tutee, session after session, all expecting something from me, all considering me a professional writing tutor who had been well-trained and was capably equipped with the tools to make them better writers. Struggling to make progress with my own students, with whom I was trying to form real relationships, the fast-paced nature of the twenty-five minute session was hard for me.

Looking back, I realize that the task seemed so impossible because I was approaching it in the wrong way. I was working under a variety of false assumptions about what my job as a writing tutor entailed. The way I conducted my sessions seems laughable now, but without the time to sit down with my tutoring mentor or the time to do research on my own, I had created my own idea of what I was supposed to be doing with my tutees. I always began by asking the tutee what he or she was hoping to achieve in the session, presuming that each one of them knew exactly what they wanted to accomplish and could articulate their goals. Invariably,

they asked for help with “grammar” and for me to make sure “the paper flowed right.” I know now that most tutees have not been given the language to express what they actually want to improve about their paper and that even those who do, who simply want their tutors to check their comma usage, are better served by a more global discussion of their paper. As tutors, it is our responsibility to give tutees what they need, which is often not what they believe that they need and is even more often not what they say that they need. But, at the time, I figured that I was something like a writing mechanic: tutees would come in with papers that didn’t work and an idea of what the problem might be, and I would fix it for them. If I happened to notice that the tires needed rotating, I would throw it in for free if I had time. But my primary concern was fixing the problem they asked me to fix, which meant that I spent my first semester almost exclusively copy-editing. I was good at it, and of course my tutees, who got exactly what they asked for, were very appreciative of my services.

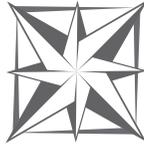
It was sometime around the end of my first semester as a tutor, during one of the Studio’s mandatory tutoring observations, that I began to see how different my approach was than those of the Studio’s veteran tutors, ones who studied Writing Center Theory. I was amazed at how effortlessly they guided their tutees in the direction that made the most sense for their papers. Topics I never addressed in my session, like clarity, having a strong thesis statement, and proper incorporation of sources, were the focus of many of these sessions. I began to realize that, by forcing my tutees to tell me what they wanted me to fix, I was robbing them of one of the most valuable skills I possessed as a writing tutor:

the ability to identify areas of weakness in their work that they were unable to see. Certainly there were times when tutees came in with a solid understanding of what their papers were lacking. But, most of the time, they would have benefitted much more if I had provided them with the kind of revisions (and revision strategies) that I used when working on my own writing. Many tutees did not see that their papers contained unclear thesis statements, faulty logic, or genuinely uninterpretable passages. Those tutees I had been working with had all left without seeing these problems because I had not known to identify them.

I progressed as a tutor over the next three years, but the problem I was initially confronted with has always been at the back of my mind. How can we prepare tutors from my field, tutors with no experience tutoring and no background in Writing Center Theory, to be successful out of the gate? Ideally, of course, we would prepare them individually, giving them experience by allowing them to shadow veteran tutors and providing them with the time and resources to understand the theoretical implications of the tutoring process. This would be the most responsible approach. But it is, in most cases, unfeasible. Most new tutors are only provided with a group orientation, which is typically all the preparation the average Writing Studio has the ability to give. If these tutors are also students or teachers themselves (or, in many cases, both), that may be the only instruction in how to become a successful tutor that they will have time for. What can be done about this? How would I have changed the process if I could go back and do so?

I do not, unfortunately, have the answer to this question. I worked

with what I had. Eventually, I learned how my approach was preventing my tutees from getting the kind of global writing help that they would be most likely to benefit from. Because my tutees were all receiving the help that *they* believed their papers needed, I could have gone on copy-editing for the rest of my tutoring career if I hadn't been monitored and given assistance by my superiors. I was lucky enough to be part of a fantastic Writing Studio, and so I felt comfortable admitting that my tutoring approach had been flawed. Many tutors with backgrounds similar to mine who do not receive this kind of support likely do remain copy-editors. Ultimately, my hope is to give voice to those unspoken Literature-bred composition tutors who have been, as I was at first, too scared to admit that they don't know what they're doing in an academic setting in which that sort of confession seems like a sign of unpreparedness. I am speaking out for myself, and if I speak out, perhaps others will feel comfortable doing so as well.



## *Book Review*

# Writing Studio Pedagogy: Space, Place, and Rhetoric in Collaborative Environments

LONDON BERRY

Review:

Kim, Matthew, and Russell Carpenter, editors. *Writing Studio Pedagogy: Space, Place, and Rhetoric in Collaborative Environments*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

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### **Introduction**

As students, teachers, employees, learners, etc., we often find ourselves occupying spaces that do not reflect the critical and creative practices that are valuable to us or that could best support us as we work toward personal or shared goals. In fact, as Matthew Kim illustrates in the preface to this collection when he discusses being placed in elementary and middle school resource rooms because of his perceived learning disability, we

are often placed in spaces either without our consent or without any suggestion (or forethought) as to how those spaces will affect our learning, composing, or living. While space design has been gaining momentum in writing and multiliteracy center studies, the digital humanities, and computers and writing (Berry and Dieterle; Gierdowski; Inman; Lee, Alfano, and Carpenter), many administrators, teachers, and students in academia are left wondering about the budgetary constraints in their own institutions and how creating these spaces might be feasible. Kim and Carpenter's edited collection, *Writing Studio Pedagogy: Space, Place, and Rhetoric in Collaborative Environments*, adds to these conversations by proposing a writing studio pedagogy (WSP), an "attention to space and place in the development of rhetorical acts by focusing on the ways in which they enhance pedagogy" (1). In other words, WSPs provide logic behind both space design and space management that promotes equity, flexibility, and collaboration for all learners. For readers of *Southern Discourse*, this collection will be vitally important, as each chapter explores unique positions to space, including K-12 classrooms, music studios, and online communication centers, and argues for best practices with which to approach spaces in an effort to promote collaboration, invention, and equity. While at times the collection leans toward an idolization of specific spaces (an antithesis to the collection's main argument), the overall message is clear: the conscious design and use of any space can be leveraged in a way that promotes inclusivity, equity, collaboration, and learning for all. Whether *SDC* readers find themselves working in writing or multiliteracy centers, the classroom, or even in an industry profession, the perspectives on writing studio pedagogy contained in this collection will provide valuable insight into how one might

instantiate a WSP in their own practices and what benefits it holds for teachers, students, and employees alike.

## Play

One of the major themes throughout the collection is an emphasis on play. Through play, Kim and Carpenter argue, students are encouraged to undermine traditional writing practices by “writing collaboratively, divergently, playfully, spatially, and even messily” (18). Given that assertion, and that the authors encourage alternative readings of this text (by theme instead of chronologically), I chose to read this book with the idea of play in mind. It was somewhat serendipitous, then, that while reading this collection I was presenting at the annual Pop Culture Association / American Culture Association (PCA / ACA) conference. There I attended a panel on game studies that featured a presentation on agency and what the author referred to as “glitch horror” (Brey)<sup>1</sup>. When we play games, we do so with the knowledge that we have a certain degree of agency. Glitch horror, however, tampers with our perception of agency. During her talk, Brey posed the question: “How do you play a game that doesn’t want to be played?” That question stuck with me so much that it created a frame through which I navigated this collection. Playing off of her question, I developed four guiding questions about learning spaces: How do you play in a space that doesn’t invite play? What do you do in a space that wasn’t designed for you? How do you navigate a non-

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<sup>1</sup>*Glitch horror is a genre of game that seeks to impose the narrative world of the game on the player’s out-of-game world. For example, one of the games discussed involved the game sending her an email late at night (hours after she had been playing) saying that it was “watching her.” This type of behavior from a game is typically unprecedented.*

linear (game) space? How do you continue in a game when you've run out of lives? Through the remainder of my review, I will discuss select chapters in an attempt to answer these questions.

### **How Do You Play in a Space That Doesn't Invite Play?**

One of the first moves *Writing Studio Pedagogy* makes is to position students as stakeholders in their education. Emily Hensley, Rachel Winter, and Shane Richardson, in Ch. 3 "Using Writing Studio Pedagogy to Transcend Teaching Spaces," argue for adopting a WSP in K-12 education in an effort to position elementary, middle, and high school students as stakeholders in their learning. The main challenge, they identify, is arranging a physical space that can best support this type of pedagogy. K-12 classrooms often impose a very rigid structure—one that does not invite play—so manipulating these spaces can be challenging. However, by adopting a WSP, teachers can be thoughtful about their use of classroom spaces and technologies in a way that promotes critical and creative thinking.

One of my critiques of *Writing Studio Pedagogy* is that it contains moments where discussions of certain spaces move beyond highlighting them as examples to idolizing them. This chapter contains a few of those moments by comparing typical K-12 classrooms to established, collaborative spaces that feature a variety of technologies for student use, such as the Noel Studio for Academic Creativity at Eastern Kentucky University. Because spaces are rhetorical by nature, it is critical that teachers consider the work that they want to do and the work that they're asking students to do and then consider how their classroom spaces can support those endeavors. To truly be rhetorical, teachers

must identify what their specific goals are and think critically about space design in a way that will support learning in that specific space. In other words, while certain spaces may contain affordances that a teacher may find useful, to simply copy that space would be to ignore (or at least not fully engage with) the space they currently work in and what affordances and challenges it offers.

However, the authors do offer some best practices that can help teachers avoid this type of quagmire. For example, one guiding practice is promoting active learning among students. Even if a particular classroom is burdened by stationary desks, creating activities that take students away from their desks, ask them to get up and move around, and encourage them to work collaboratively with each other can promote active learning and can support the learning needs of a variety of students. A second practice they suggest is crafting lessons and projects that place technologies into the hands of students. If a room is only afforded one computer and that computer is fixed by the teacher's desk, give students the time and opportunity to work at that computer and share work with their peers via that computer. *SDC* readers should recognize that, while the authors tend to associate the word "technology" with computer technology (50, 59, 60), teachers can benefit from and create an equitable environment with technologies such as post-it notes and scrap pieces of paper, which can be highly influential in granting students agency over their space and their learning by allowing them to easily manipulate notes, drawings, and other written work by moving them around, sticking them to walls, and sharing them with peers (Lee, Alfano, & Carpenter 52). Ultimately for the authors, adopting a WSP can support equity of learning and—even if rearranging a classroom space is not an

option—can help teachers to think critically about how they can promote play, critical and creative thinking, and equitable learning in whatever space they find themselves.

### **What Do You Do in a Space That Wasn't Designed For You?**

One pillar of WSP that *Writing Studio Pedagogy* presents is positioning the instructor as a facilitator and co-learner, thereby breaking down traditional power structures that often inhibit student agency and creativity. In Ch. 5 “Enacting Writing Studio Pedagogy in the Music Studio,” JongHun Kim argues that the music studio invites a facilitator and co-learner role inherently because musical performance necessitates that every individual take an active role in leading and shaping the overall performance. By disrupting this traditional power structure, students are invited to become leaders and teachers in their own right. Practice and play go hand-in-hand in the music studio. Play is feedback, is leading a “jam session,” is practice, is learning.

However, not all students are ready and able to take on leadership roles. Kim, therefore, discusses a rhythm game designed for music students that is equitable in how it supports learning across a variety of modes. This game is especially important for students with dyspraxia, a brain-based condition that affects motor learning, in that it provides opportunities to engage with learning in visual, verbal, nonverbal, and written modes. By shaping learning around playful activities such as these, all students in a music studio are able to engage with their performance in one or more modes that encourage their participation and learning. This chapter is important, therefore, because it acknowledges that even though a space may inherently encourage active learning

and the breaking down of traditional power relations, it still may not be designed for all learners. The benefit of adopting a WSP is that, regardless of the space, an instructor can be conscious about creating equitable and inclusive opportunities for every student.

### **How Do You Navigate a Non-Linear (Game) Space?**

Flexibility is a recurring theme in *Writing Studio Pedagogy*. In Ch. 9 “The Flexible Writing Classroom as a Site for Pedagogical Reflection,” Dana C. Gierdowski begins by exploring the history of the classroom. In particular, she pinpoints the current classroom (what many refer to as the *traditional* model with its rows and columns of desks facing an authority figure) as originating from the industrial revolution, where order and mass production were of high value. She then discusses the results of a qualitative study that examined “the experiences and perceptions of first-year writing instructors teaching in a newly designed ‘flexible’ classroom” (156), a space that can easily be rearranged and reshaped by instructors or students in ways that facilitate a variety of learning activities. By voluntarily holding class in the flexible space, teachers were encouraged to reflect on their own practices and consequently made active changes to their teaching strategies both through careful planning and through improvisational or on-the-fly choices. Perhaps most important is the evidence of teachers taking their newly-developed strategies into other spaces. Many of the teachers who taught multiple sections of their first-year writing course in different classrooms reported thinking critically about their lessons and their classroom space in the non-flexible, traditional classroom. In other words, their experiences in the flexible space played a role in the shaping of their teaching practices outside of that space. A WSP then is neither separate nor

independent from spaces that were perhaps designed with it in mind. It is, however, deeply connected to a sense of space and place as well as rhetorical purpose.

One other important takeaway from this chapter is that while many of the teachers involved in the study believed that the inherent flexibility of the classroom would encourage students to take agency over the space and actively rearrange it at will, the students often did not feel a sense of empowerment and instead slipped into traditional student-teacher power dynamics by either waiting for cues from the teacher to reshape the room or expressing hesitancy to do so at all. As Gierdowski stated, “These findings suggest then, ironically, that if students are to become agents of their own learning, then we, as teachers, must also be more actively engaged in guiding them through this process if we are inhabiting nontraditional educational spaces” (170). This assertion reiterates the crux of this collection: a WSP, while deeply connected to a sense of space, is first and foremost a logic behind conscientious space design. Only by first thinking rhetorically about teacherly practices and goals will instructors be able to successfully leverage a flexible space for student learning. This, as Gierdowski points out, takes active engagement on the part of the teacher.

Teachers of any level will benefit from this chapter, as it invites them to explore flexible spaces in their community and think rhetorically about how those spaces might facilitate collaborative and equitable teaching practices. Just as we learned from JongHun Kim’s chapter, on-campus spaces such as a music studio can provide valuable insight as to how collaborative and de-centralized learning can take place. The important thing to

remember is that a WSP can function anywhere. A WSP is a logic that can transcend spaces, while at the same time encouraging institutions to develop spaces that can facilitate learning in more cooperative, equitable, and creative ways.

### **How Do You Continue in a Game When You've Run Out of Lives?**

While current conversations on space design often focus on the planning and building processes involved, space sustainability is sometimes neglected. *Writing Studio Pedagogy* identifies the importance of developing sustainable spaces in an effort to continually support learning, composing, and critiquing. In Ch. 6 "The Flexible Center: Embracing Technology, Open Spaces, and Online Pedagogy," Shawn Apostel and Kristi Apostel advocate for flexible centers and provide several recommendations for how institutions can leverage flexibility to support student learning and create sustainable studio environments. Similar to a WSP, Apostel and Apostel discuss the logic behind flexible centers and not a specific space, though they do place great emphasis on the immediate feedback that open and visible spaces provide, such as the Fishbowl at Bellarmine University. Specifically, Apostel and Apostel argue that institutions should value online texts over print texts so that they can support students as they continue to grow and work with online and mobile technologies. Moreover, they argue that open and flexible spaces not only serve to advertise to other constituents what work goes on in specific centers, but they also invite passersby to enter and work in them, as well as to rearrange the spaces so that they best meet their needs.

Sustainability is of vital importance to teachers, administrators, students, and industry professionals alike. Apostel and Apostel

make the claim that “[e]ven as technology is changing the way students create communication products as well as the range of multimedia projects they produce, writing studio pedagogy, applicable to both onsite and online consultations, must consistently evolve as well” (93). In other words, even though a space may boast the latest and most rhetorically-significant technologies that support student learning in the present date, the reality is that the ways in which we think about and use technologies will continue to change, as will the technologies themselves. One way to practice a WSP, then, is to constantly evaluate how the technologies a space employs (as well as the space itself) supports learners in ways that are rhetorically situated, collaborative, and equitable. If a WSP is the logic that supports inclusive and rhetorical space design and function, then it goes without saying that evolving with the rhetorical contexts of the learners involved will always be of the utmost importance.

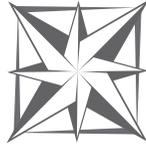
## Conclusion

In the spirit of play that guided my reading and reviewing of Kim and Carpenter’s *Writing Studio Pedagogy: Space, Place, and Rhetoric in Collaborative Environments*, I am drawn to a blog from James Paul Gee entitled “Conjugal Games.” In this blog Gee poses the question: “What makes a good game good? Answer: The loving marriage of game mechanics (how you do what you do in a game) and content (how you solve interesting problems in the game).” While Kim and Carpenter, as well as the contributing authors in *Writing Studio Pedagogy*, all understand and implement WSPs from a variety of perspectives, to me it all boils down to a loving marriage between space mechanics (how you do what you do in a space) and content (how you solve interesting problems

in the space). Through this collection of varying perspectives and exigencies, *Writing Studio Pedagogy* gives the reader not a schematic for the perfect space, but rather a logic that can guide the design of learning spaces that support this loving marriage. By focusing first and foremost on issues of inclusivity, equity, agency, flexibility, and collaboration, a WSP can support any institution that fosters learning in some way. The readership of *Southern Discourse*—made up of writing or multiliteracy center admins and consultants, teachers, students, and industry professionals—will benefit from engaging with, critiquing, and playing with this collection. At its core *Writing Studio Pedagogy* challenges its readers to think rhetorically and inclusively. These two ideas, the authors argue, will promote sustainable and equitable learning for all.

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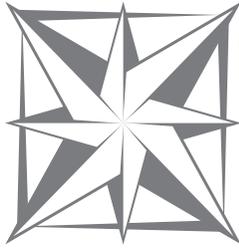
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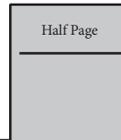
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