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Are Peer-to-Peer Writing Conferences Collaborative? An Evaluation of Peer Tutor-Student Discourse

—Prabin Lama

Abstract

This paper uses discourse analysis to examine peer-to-peer writing conferences in a writing center setting. With the aim of evaluating authority relationships and demonstrating the use of discourse analysis in evaluating writing center conferences, three such conferences were recorded and analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Evaluating authority relationships can shed light on whether writing centers are indeed positioned to promote inclusive practices that, according to Nancy Grimm’s postmodern theorizing of writing centers, value difference rather than erase it. The results of this study indicate that although the peer tutors maintained overall control, the conferences were more collaborative than hierarchical. The study also demonstrates that both quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis techniques can be used to evaluate authority relationships in writing center conferences.

Introduction

Some writing center scholars have suggested that peer-to-peer writing center conferences are more collaborative than classroom instruction mainly because a peer tutor is not responsible for grading student papers, has no formal evaluative authority over the student, and shares a common “peer” context with the student. For instance, Muriel Harris states that a tutor “inhabits a world somewhere between student and teacher” and “sits below the teacher on the academic ladder,” and as a result, “the tutor can work effectively with students in ways that teachers can not” (“Talking in the Middle” 27-28). Similarly, Kenneth Bruffee points out

that peer-tutoring is a “form of collaborative learning” in his 1984 essay titled “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind.’” However, John Trimbur argues that in practice, peer tutoring cannot facilitate a conversation between equals. Similarly, Andrea Lunsford suggests that collaboration in writing centers can be challenging because it “often masquerades as democracy when it in fact practices the same old authoritarian control” (3-4). These conflicting views among scholars tell us the idea that writing center tutorials facilitate collaborative learning is not conclusive and that more research is needed to understand the nature of collaboration in writing center tutorials.

While there can be different interpretations of collaborative learning, this study will draw mainly on Lunsford’s idea that a writing center based on collaboration “would place control, power, and authority not in the tutor or staff, not in the individual student, but in the negotiating group” (9). In essence, this view implies that both the student and tutor should have equal control, power, and authority to negotiate the goals, proceedings, and outcomes of a tutorial.

Furthermore, Lunsford states the goal of collaboration in writing center tutorials should be “not only in reaching consensus but in valuing dissensus and diversity” (9). This form of collaboration – in which power, authority, and control are negotiated to ensure that differences are valued and not erased – is, in my opinion, a crucial prerequisite for writing centers in addressing issues of equity, inclusion, and student empowerment that have been advocated by scholars such as Andrea Lunsford, Nancy Grimm, Nancy Welch, Okawa et al., and Sarah Blazer. Only when we know that we are indeed creating opportunities for students to participate as equals in writing tutorials, would it be possible for us to understand and make room for the diverse viewpoints, cultures, and modes of thinking that students bring with them to a writing center consultation. Therefore, understanding the nature of collaboration in writing center tutorials is important because it can have implications for addressing issues of inclusion and empowerment.

To address this need to learn more about the nature of collaboration in writing center tutorials, this study uses discourse analysis to examine authority relationships between peer tutors and students in one-on-one writing center conferences. While my primary purpose is to evaluate

authority relationships in peer-to-peer writing conferences using discourse analysis as a tool, it is also my aim to demonstrate how discourse analysis can be used to analyze writing center discourse.

Literature Review

The existing literature is not conclusive about whether writing center pedagogy actually facilitates collaborative learning. Highlighting the collaborative nature of writing center consultations, Muriel Harris suggests that unlike teacher-student interactions, students “don’t have to listen passively and accept what is ‘told’ to them by an authoritative speaker” when they interact with writing center tutors (“Talking in the Middle” 28). She further adds, “Articles on writing center theory in books and in publications ...all attest to the widely-accepted view that tutoring in writing is a collaborative effort in which the tutor listens, questions, and sometimes offers informed advice about all aspects of the student’s writing” (“Collaboration Is Not Collaboration” 371). In short, Harris is suggesting that writing center tutors work with students as collaborators and not as authoritarian figures.

In his 1984 article, Bruffee reasoned that collaborative learning provides “a context in which students can practice and master the normal discourse exercised in established knowledge communities in the academic world and in business, government, and the professions” (644). Based on this logic, he argued that peer tutoring facilitates collaborative learning by creating opportunities for students to converse with their tutors as equals and learn the discourse valued by the academic community. Bruffee’s article has played an instrumental role in establishing the role of collaborative learning in peer-to-peer writing center conferences.

Other scholars (Trimbur; Blau, Hall, & Strauss; Roswell; Lunsford; Carino), however, have suggested that Bruffee’s view that writing center tutorials takes place among “peers” may not be as straight forward as previously thought. In his 1987 article, “Peer Tutoring: A Contradiction in Terms,” Trimbur argues that peer tutoring cannot facilitate collaborative learning because peer tutors cannot take on the dual role of a “peer” and a “tutor” at the same time. He reasoned that as authorized writing center staff members, peer-tutors are bound to perceive

themselves as having institutional authority to tutor other students. This perception of institutional authority, according to Trimbur, can distort the “peer relationship” associated with peer-to-peer tutoring. Similarly, in their 1998 article, Blau, Hall, and Strauss have argued that the professionalization process of peer-tutors in recent years has moved tutors further away from their roles as peer collaborators. In a 1991 study, Roswell has also suggested that since peer-tutors have a preconceived notion of what an “ideal text” should be, they exercise authority by seeking compliance from student writers to these idealized versions of writing.

Along the same lines, Andrea Lunsford has suggested that the concept of collaboration in writing center tutorials needs to be carefully interrogated because “collaboration often masquerades as democracy” and “can be used to reproduce the status quo and the rigid hierarchy of teacher-student classrooms” where the “tutor is still the ‘seat of all authority’ but is simply pretending it isn’t so” (3-4). In “Power and Authority in Peer Tutoring” Peter Carino points out that due to the emphasis placed by writing centers on the “hands off” collaborative approach, peer tutors frequently face the dilemma of remaining non-directive even when there is a need for them to be directive and exercise authority. All of these scholars seem to be questioning the view that writing center tutorials take place between “peers.” The conflicting views of different scholars regarding the nature of writing conferences indicate more work is needed to understand how authority functions in these conferences.

Knowing how authority functions in writing center conferences can have implications for addressing issues of equity, inclusion, and student empowerment. Many writing center scholars (Lunsford; Grimm; Okawa et al.; Welch; Blazer) have argued that writing centers should be inclusive spaces where cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic differences are recognized instead of erased. For instance, Lunsford envisions writing centers based on collaboration to be “attuned to diversity” and suggests that the absence of such collaborative centers “can lead to the kind of homogeneity that squelches diversity, that waters down ideas to the lowest common denominator, that erases rather than values difference” (7). Similarly, drawing on postmodernism, Nancy Grimm suggests that “writing centers can be places where students can learn to negotiate and understand the contact and conflicts of differences.

Rather than helping the Other become more like us, the work of the writing center might instead include developing the ability to see ourselves as the Other” (13-14). Okawa et al. suggest empowering students in the writing process “has to do not only with the academic issue of text ownership but with our basic social and political assumptions about the student’s right to be writing in the academy” (5). According to them, tutors and teachers can empower students by developing “egalitarian rather than hierarchical relationships between ourselves and our students” and by finding “ways of maintaining cultural respect and encouraging the greatest development of student potential” (5). Lunsford, Grimm, and Okawa et al. are suggesting that students can be empowered when tutors learn to recognize and value diversity, question their own beliefs and assumptions, and develop egalitarian relationships with students.

Similarly, drawing on Julia Kristeva’s concept of “critical exile,” Nancy Welch suggests that writing centers can be “a space of critical exile” in which students and teachers can both “reflect on and intervene in the languages, conventions, and belief systems that constitute our texts, our sense of self, our notions of what is ‘common sense’” (71). Addressing questions about how writing center staff can be oriented to linguistic diversity, Sarah Blazer states, “To deny students opportunities to use what they already know from previous and everyday experiences – including linguistic ones – in the process of learning would be a grave mistake” (22-23). For all these ideas aimed at equity, inclusion, and student empowerment to come to fruition -- whether they be attuning tutors to recognize and value diversity, to question their own beliefs and assumptions, to developing egalitarian relationships with students, to creating conditions for students to intervene in the existing language and belief systems in meaningful ways -- an important first step is to ensure that tutors indeed listen and encourage students to engage freely in the conversation, that the conversation between the tutor and student is not dominated by the tutors. Understanding the “other” and making room for their ideas, beliefs, and voices can only be possible, if we are listening and creating conditions for them to participate. In this context where scholars have highlighted the need for writing centers to address issues of equity, inclusion, and empowerment, it is important to examine how collaboration functions in writing center conferences.

This study hopes to fill this gap by using discourse analysis to evaluate authority relationships in peer-to-peer conferences. Discourse analysis has been used in the past by some scholars to evaluate both teacher-student and writing center conferences. Some studies that have used discourse analysis to examine authority relationships in teacher-student conferences suggest that active participation and negotiation on the part of the student plays an important role in these conferences (Goldstein & Conrad), that teachers control the structure of interaction as well as the interpretation of meaning (Ulichny & Watson-Gegeo), that while successful conferences focus on evaluation of student writing and articulation of criteria for success, unsuccessful conferences exclude evaluation and is dominated by tutors (Walker & Elias), and that such conferences are shaped by participants as well as the setting and contribute positively to student learning (Sperling).

With regard to tutor-student conferences, in their 1998 study, Davis et al. used discourse analysis to evaluate if “tutor/writer conferences follow “teaching or non-teaching patterns” (30) and found that “tutors were not functioning exclusively either as peers or as teachers, but as a combination of the two” (32). Two studies discussed earlier in this review section, one by Blau, Hall, & Strauss (1998) and the other by Roswell (1991), also used discourse analysis and found that tutors exercise some form of authority during writing center consultations. In her 2006 discourse analysis study that focused on politeness and face-saving strategies, Susan Murphy found that “consultants will shift positions of power with students/writers as they seek to achieve particular goals as well as collaboratively construct self-presentations for themselves and their writing centers” (63).

While these studies have made valuable contributions that shed light on authority relationships in writing tutorials through discourse analysis, Pemberton suggests that “the number and frequency of such studies are too far and too few between” (quoted in Mackiewicz and Thompson 1). In *Talk About Writing: The Tutoring Strategies of Experienced Writing Center Tutors*, Mackiewicz and Thompson agree with Pemberton’s view and add that “writing center researchers have barely begun the much-needed systematic, empirical analysis of the ways writing center tutors talk to student writers during writing conferences” (1). Furthermore, they

suggest that considering “writing center practice critically hinges on one-to-one talk,” very few studies “employing quantitative analysis” have been published (1). As a response to this need, Mackiewicz and Thompson present a coding scheme to help writing center researchers examine the discourse of writing center conferences. Their coding scheme includes three broad categories: 1) instruction, 2) cognitive scaffolding, and 3) motivational scaffolding. They define instruction as “the directive aspects of teaching and tutoring - supplying solutions or options, rather than supporting or making room for student writers to generate solutions themselves” and subcategorize it into three codes: telling, suggesting, and explaining (5). They define cognitive scaffolding as “a range of strategies that prod students to think and then help them to push their thinking further” and code eight such strategies: pumping questions, reading aloud, responding as a reader or a listener, referring to a previous topic, forcing a choice, prompting, hinting, and demonstrating (5). Finally, they define motivational scaffolding as tutoring strategies that “focus on student writers’ affect” and code five such strategies: showing concern, praising, reinforcing student writers’ ownership and control, being optimistic or using humor, and giving sympathy or empathy (5). Their book highlights the potential for discourse analysis to be used as a valuable research tool by writing center scholars.

My study responds to the calls made by Pemberton and Mackiewicz and Thompson for more systematic, empirical studies of writing center discourse. In addition, I also use one of the motivational scaffolding codes developed by Mackiewicz and Thompson – “praising” – in the qualitative analysis section of my study (see the methods section below). Furthermore, my study is also informed by Susan Murphy’s suggestion that discourse analysis can be used to corroborate writing center theory with actual practice and to examine the interplay of language, power and other socio-cultural aspects. According to Murphy, “Changes to consultant and administrator practice, encouraging reflection, and building knowledge of actual writing center practice and how it does or does not enact writing center theory are possible results of performing a discourse analysis in a writing center” (80). She further adds that tutors can be aware “of the ways in which power is enacted by language in conjunction with other social/cultural realities: gender, age, education, class, etc.” when they are “given opportunities to grow and learn more sophisticated and refined, theoretically grounded means of viewing

discourse” (79). I intend to use discourse analysis toward similar ends in my study. More specifically, my study will use discourse analysis to evaluate authority relationships in peer-to-peer conferences to address two goals: 1) to examine the extent to which writing center tutorials are collaborative; 2) to demonstrate how discourse analysis can be applied to examine authority relationships in writing center conferences.

Methodology

The primary data for my study was made up of audio recordings of three peer-to-peer writing center conferences. The recordings were made at a large public university’s writing center, and a random sampling method was used to select participants for the recordings. The participants included two female peer-tutors, one male peer-tutor, and three female students. A peer tutor is defined for the purposes of this study as either a graduate student or undergraduate student working as a tutor at this university’s writing center.

I have evaluated the recordings both quantitatively and qualitatively. For the quantitative analysis I adapted the method used in Melanie Sperling’s 1990 study titled “I Want to Talk to Each of You: Collaboration and the Teacher-Student Writing Conference,” which examined authority relationships in teacher-student writing conferences at the high-school level. I chose Sperling’s methodology because it focuses on discourse categories that can provide valuable insights into authority relationships between a tutor and student. For instance, it allows us to examine and quantify discourse categories such as topic initiation, topic ownership, and syntagmatic units to draw inferences about the nature of authority relationships between the tutor and student. Her sample included six focal students and one teacher, and her primary data included recordings of 34 teacher-student conferences. Sperling adapted the following discourse categories to code and analyze her data: topic initiation, topic ownership, types of syntagmatic units, initiation of syntagmatic units, and completion of syntagmatic units. Each of these categories is explained below.

Topic Initiation: refers to topics initiated by either participant (tutor or student) during a conference. A topic can be initiated by either raising a

new issue or by changing the subject under discussion. Whoever initiates more topics can be viewed as controlling the conversation.

Topic Ownership: while either tutor or student can initiate a topic, each topic initiated can be motivated or *owned* by either a tutor or student. For instance, a student can initiate a topic that was originally introduced (or owned) by the tutor and vice-versa. Topic ownership also determines the level of control and collaboration in a conference - whoever owns more topics controls the conversation.

Syntagmatic Relationships of Conversational Turns: Participants in a conversation construct discourse through conversational turns made up of syntagmatic units such as question-answer sequences, request-compliance sequences and the like. Sperling designated three types of syntagmatic pairs or units: 1) question-answer (QA), 2) offer-acceptance (OA), and 3) request-compliance (RC). She considered most assertions to be “offers - offers of information, ideas, or advice” and directives to be requests such as “when the teacher requests that the student re-write a sentence” (293). While the presence of OA syntagmatic pairs will indicate a collaborative tutor-student relationship, the presence of tutor initiated RC pairs will indicate a more authoritative position taken up by the tutor. Similarly, QA syntagmatic units will indicate whether a conference is collaborative or authoritative depending on who initiates most of these units.

Initiation of Syntagmatic Unit: Syntagmatic units must be initiated by either one of the interlocutors in a conversation. For instance, either the tutor or student has to initiate a QA unit by asking a question or an OA unit by making an offer. According to Sperling, “If it is always the teacher who asks the question, makes the request, extends the offer, waiting for the student to respond, then the conversation is inclined toward the teacher” (293). On the other hand, if the student also initiates such units then the control of the teacher can be reduced. Therefore, initiation of syntagmatic units can function as an important indicator of authority relationships in tutor-student conferences too.

Completion of Syntagmatic Unit: All initiated syntagmatic units may not be completed. For instance, a question may be left unanswered or a request left unattended. Sperling states that the completion rate of

syntagmatic units “points toward ways in which teacher and student mutually participate in structuring the discourse” (294). Thus, a higher completion rate of syntagmatic units indicates a higher level of participation between tutor and student in the structuring of discourse, which in turn indicates a higher level of collaboration between them.

Furthermore, I added a new category - *approval seeking questions* (ASQs) used by students in the conferences. ASQs can be described as questions that students put forward not so much as to get a real answer but to get the approval of the tutor. Therefore, ASQs show that students perceive the tutor as an expert who can judge and determine whether their work is acceptable or not. If students initiate a higher number of ASQs, then it could indicate that they are, in a way, submitting to the expertise and judgment of the tutor.

In addition to the quantitative analysis, I analyzed one of the three conference transcripts qualitatively. While the quantitative analysis demonstrates how certain aspects of conference discourse can be quantified and interpreted, the qualitative analysis demonstrates how conference transcripts can be analyzed and interpreted focusing on certain elements of discourse, such as overlapping dialogues, connected dialogues, rhetorical questions, and compliments, among others. In the qualitative analysis, I evaluated the effects of overlapping dialogues and tutor compliments on tutor-student authority relationships.

My analysis of overlapping dialogue is informed by Gilewicz and Thonus’s concept of vertical transcriptions of tutorials that take into account discourse features such as “hesitations, repetitions, timed pauses, backchannels, overlaps and paralinguistic features” (46). They explain that employing vertical transcriptions can provide “more defined criteria for the analysis of tutorials, which in turn will help us operationalize such categories as collaboration, facilitation of response...to reveal how and how effectively they are constructed in tutorial conversation (46). Defining overlap as “any simultaneous speech in which a conversational participant takes the floor before the first speaker has relinquished it” they identify three types of overlap from the literature on discourse analysis: interruption, joint production, and main channel overlap (35). According to them, interruption is “the initiation of a contribution by a second party before the first has finished” and as a result, “[f]loors are

taken and relinquished with each utterance” (35). Main channel overlap takes place when “the person overlapping does not take or is not permitted to take the floor” (36). They explain that main channel overlaps are associated with “uncooperative attempts to seize the floor.” On the other hand, joint production takes place when “speakers complete each other’s utterances” (36). They also point out that “joint productions, more than interruptions or main channel overlaps, represent a movement toward greater solidarity and collaboration (36). In my analysis, I draw on these concepts and definitions to demonstrate how an evaluation of overlapping dialogue can provide insights into the nature of collaboration between a tutor and student in a writing conference.

My analysis of compliments is informed by Mackiewicz and Thompson’s concept of motivational scaffolding strategies. As mentioned in the above literature review section, they defined these scaffolding strategies as tutoring strategies that “focus on student writers’ affect” and coded five such strategies: showing concern, praising, reinforcing student writers’ ownership and control, being optimistic or using humor, and giving sympathy or empathy (5). Furthermore, they claim that “motivational scaffolding can speed up the rate with which two people build up a connection and a sense of goodwill” (121). My analysis of compliments will examine how one of their motivational scaffolding codes – praise – functions to build a sense of goodwill between the tutor and student. In their coding scheme, Mackiewicz and Thompson define praise as instances when “[t]utors pointed to student writers’ successes with positive feedback and verbal rewards”(43). Finally, in my qualitative analysis, I also follow Steven Corbett’s suggestion of providing as much contextual information about the conference as possible, in addition to my analysis of overlapping dialogue and compliments, so that readers are in a position to “readily and freely draw some of their own interpretations and conclusions as well” (58-59).

Quantitative Analysis Findings

Topic Initiation. Table 1 shows the percentage of topics initiated by tutors and students in their respective conferences. The distribution of topic initiation between tutors and students seems to be almost balanced. While the percentage of student-initiated topics is slightly less than tutor-initiated topics in conference one, the percentage is higher for the student

than the tutor in conference three. Conference two, on the other hand, has an equal number of topic initiations between tutor and student. While these results indicate variation across the three conferences in terms of topic initiation, the fact that the percentage difference of tutor-initiated and student-initiated topics is minimal in all three conferences suggests that these conferences were more or less collaborative in terms of topic initiation.

Table 1: Percentage of Tutor-Initiated and Student-Initiated Topics

	Conference One (n=29)	Conference Two (n=4)	Conference Three (n=17)
Tutor Initiated	58.6	50	47.1
Student Initiated	41.4	50	52.9

Topic Ownership. Table 2 shows the percentage of topics owned by tutors and students during their respective conferences. While the tutor owned most of the topics in conference two and three, the student owned more topics in conference one. This finding indicates that in terms of topic ownership, the tutors had more control over the session. However, considering that the student owned 68.9% of the topics in conference one, and the student in conference three was quite close to the tutor with 41.2% topic ownership, we can rationalize that the students also played quite a significant role in owning topics or introducing their concerns.

Table 2: Percentage of Tutor-Owned and Student-Owned Topics

	Conference One (n=29)	Conference Two (n=4)	Conference Three (n=17)
Tutor Owned Topics	31.1	75	58.8
Student Owned Topics	68.9	25	41.2

Types of Syntagmatic Units. Table 3 shows the percentage breakdown of the syntagmatic units – QA, OA, RA - for each of the three student conferences. It shows, for example, that there were 68 syntagmatic units in conference one, 50% of which was made up of QA units, 42.6% of OA units, and 7.4% of RC units. Table 3 illustrates that while conference one and two have higher QA units, conference three has higher OA units. We can also see that the percentage of RC units is lowest for all three conferences. Because RC units represent directives or instructions and their compliance, the low percentage of such units show that these conferences were more collaborative than instructional.

Table 3: Percentage of Question-Answer, Request-Compliance, and Offer-Acceptance Units

	Conference One (n=68)	Conference Two (n=10)	Conference Three (n=34)
Question-Answer	50	50	47.1
Offer-Acceptance	42.6	30	50
Request-Compliance	7.4	20	2.9

Initiation of Syntagmatic Units. Table 4 shows the percentage of syntagmatic units (QA, RC, and OA) initiated by the tutors and students as well as the breakdown of the types of units initiated by them. In other words, out of the total syntagmatic units for conference one (i.e., 68), 58.8% was initiated by the tutor and 41.2 % by the student. In addition, the table also shows that of the 58.8% units initiated by the tutor, 42.5% were QA units, 45% OA units, and 12.5% RC units. Table 4 reveals tutors initiated more syntagmatic units than students in all three conferences. This finding indicates that in terms of initiation of syntagmatic units, the tutors played a dominant role. However, Table 4 also shows all three tutors initiated OA units the most. This suggests that

even though the tutors dominated the initiation of syntagmatic units, the nature of these conferences were more collaborative than instructional because OA units signify a collaborative relationship. Further, Table 4 reveals that RC units were initiated only by the tutors, but the percentage of RC units introduced was the lowest for all three tutors compared to the other units initiated by them. Since RC units represent the issuance of instructions/directives and their compliance, the low percentage of RC units for all three tutors suggests that although there was some type of instruction going on, the conferences were not dominated by instructional talk alone.

Another notable observation from Table 4 is that while all tutors initiated OA units more often than students, all the students initiated QA units more often than tutors. This trend in the data can mean that the tutors were involved mostly in offering advice, information, and suggestions in response to the questions put forth by the students. Therefore, this trend suggests that these conferences were participatory and collaborative since the students participated by raising questions and tutors responded by offering advice and suggestions.

Table 4: Percentage of Tutor-Initiated and Student-Initiated Syntagmatic Units

	Conference One (n=68)		Conference Two (n=10)		Conference Three (n=34)	
Tutor-Initiated Units	58.8	QA 42.5	70	QA 28.6	73.5	QA 36
		OA 45		OA 42.8		OA 60
		RC 12.5		RC 28.6		RC 4
Student-Initiated Units	41.2	QA 60.7	30	QA 100	26.5	QA 77.9
		OA 39.3		OA 0		OA 22.1
		RC 0		RC 0		RC 0

Initiation of Approval Seeking Questions. Table 5 shows the percentage of approval seeking questions (ASQs) initiated by students. For instance, Table 5 shows that ASQs made up 52.9% of the 17 QA units introduced by the student in conference one. According to Table 5, more than 50% of the student-initiated QA units in conference one and three were ASQs, while in conference two ASQs made up 33.33% of the QA units introduced by the student. ASQs are questions that seek reassurance and as such signify that the student is submitting to or relying on the expert approval of the tutor. The rather high percentage of ASQs in Table 5 for two of the three students suggests that these students perceived their tutors as experts and readily submitted to their tutors' expertise. However, it is also possible that students initiated ASQs because of the fact they were comfortable in seeking the reassurance of the tutor.

Table 5: Percentage of Student-Initiated Approval Seeking Questions (ASQs)

	Conference One (n=17)	Conference Two (n=3)	Conference Three (n=7)
Student-Initiated ASQs	52.9	33.33	57.14

Completion of Syntagmatic Units. Table 6 shows the percentage of syntagmatic units completed by the students and tutors. It shows the tutors completed all the units initiated by the students in conference two and three, and 97.5% of the units in conference one. On the other hand, while the student completed all the units initiated by the tutor in conference three, students in conference one and two completed 97.5% and 85.7% of tutor-initiated units respectively. This trend in the data means that while the completion rates of the tutors were better than the students, the students were not too far behind. Completion rates indicate mutual participation in structuring a discourse. Therefore, the overall high completion rates for both tutors and students indicate that both participated in structuring the discourse of the conference. Higher rates for tutors indicate that they played a more active role in responding to students' questions and concerns.

Table 6: Percentage of Tutor-Initiated Units Completed by the Student and Student-Initiated Units Completed by the Tutor

	Conference One	Conference Two	Conference Three
Tutor-Initiated Units	(n=40)	(n=7)	(n=25)
% Completed by Student	97.5	85.7	100
Student-Initiated Units	(n=28)	(n=3)	(n=9)
% Completed by Tutor	97.5	100	100

Qualitative Analysis Findings

This qualitative analysis seeks to demonstrate how conference transcripts can be analyzed to draw inferences about the nature of writing center tutorials. I analyzed the transcript of *Conference One* to examine the impact of compliments as well as connected and overlapping dialogue on collaboration between the tutor and student. While the first transcript analysis examines the function of compliments, the second analysis examines the function of connected and overlapping dialogue.

In *Conference One*, the student was working with the tutor on a personal statement for an academic program for occupational therapists in response to this prompt: Please compose a one-page essay, no more than 600 words, that focuses on your unique qualities and life experiences, aside from your academic record, that will contribute to the next generation of occupational therapists. In this fifty-minute conference, the student brought in a 520-word draft and expressed concerns about finding the right words to talk about herself and explain how she could add value to the program. She also expressed concerns about incorporating relevant examples into the statement to support her claims. After discussing her concerns, the student read the paper aloud.

The first exchange evaluated below took place around five minutes into the session. At this point, the tutor and student were discussing the student's reactions to the draft after she had finished reading it aloud.

Just before this exchange, the student had expressed concern of not being sure what type of “value” the committee was looking for in her personal statement. In response, the tutor was trying to explain how the student might focus on what she valued personally rather than try to second-guess the committee. The tutor then proceeded to compliment the student, explaining that the student had done a good job highlighting her personal value in the current draft.

Evaluating the function of compliments

In the exchange below we can see how the tutor compliments the student’s work and thus establishes a friendly, positive, and supportive environment.

T: Umm but, so what that means is that, what’s important is what you personally value. And I think that you’ve done that throughout. Don’t you think?=
 S: = Yeah=
 T: =And I feel like you are pulling the pieces, like (1) you know, (1) you really talked about umm (2) you really talked about the places that you didn’t like or the places that were bad and the places that were good, and you were really doing that. And so there were several places that I really really, there were different, like, statements and stuff that you made in here that I really really liked. Like for example (1) this last statement (1) it makes me really happy – “my experiences are my own but they will add value to those around me in the classroom, and to my future clients as I help to enrich their lives and aim for better futures.”
 Like this is a really (1) yeah (1) makes me really happy =
 S: = {student laughs}=¹

We can see the tutor using praise, one of Mackiewicz and Thompson’s motivational scaffolding codes, by pointing to the student’s “successes

¹ Transcription Key:

- = no pause between dialogues but no overlap
- () length of pause in seconds
- [] overlap between speakers
- { } contextual detail added by transcriber

with positive feedback and verbal rewards” (43). The tutor praises the student by emphasizing how she “really really liked” certain ideas and sentences in the paper. By using “really” twice the tutor seems to be amplifying her compliment. Similarly, by pointing out to the student’s last statement and saying that it “makes me really happy,” the tutor seems to be suggesting that she is invested in and cares about the student’s work. The effect this has on the student is also clear - as soon as the tutor finishes her compliment, the student chuckles in satisfaction. In this particular instance, the tutor’s compliment seems to be functioning, as suggested by Mackiewicz and Thompson, to build a friendly, supportive, and caring relationship between the tutor and student. This analysis demonstrates how insight into the nature of tutor-student relationships can be gained by analyzing tutor compliments.

Evaluating the function of connected and overlapping dialogue

The second exchange from *Conference One*, presented below, takes place at around the eleven-minute mark. After the first exchange, the tutor and student proceeded to review and color code each sentence in the draft - yellow for sentences that need some revision and pink for sentences that looked good. They followed this approach throughout the session from this point onward. In line 1 below, the student was referring to this sentence: “I have been fortunate enough to be visiting nursing homes from a young age.” The student had already identified a few choppy sentences before this exchange, so she categorized this sentence as being like one of those earlier short ones. After this second exchange, the student deleted this sentence from its original place and integrated parts of it into another sentence in the draft, as described in lines 4 and 6 below.

Conference One had many instances of connected and overlapping dialogue occurring between the tutor and student. Connected dialogue (denoted by “=”) occurs when there is no pause between dialogues. Overlapping dialogue (denoted by “[]”) occurs when two speakers speak simultaneously. In terms of the three types of overlaps – joint production, interruption, and main channel overlap – described by Gilewicz and Thonus, connected dialogue in the transcript below (=) can be interpreted as constituting joint production when “speakers complete each other’s utterances.” Overlapping dialogue in the transcript below ([]) could be

made up of either joint production, interruption, or main channel overlap. In the exchange below we can observe multiple instances of connected dialogue as well as some instances of overlapping dialogue.

- 1) S: {after reading another sentence} That's again one of the (1.5) [like short ones]
- 2) T: [yeah, yellow]
- 3) T: I think that sentence may say something different than you want it to=
- 4) S: =yeah (4) it maybe one of the ones we can just (1) cut out and (1) like (2) put it down here=
- 5) T: = [okay]
- 6) S: [with] I started with visiting family and progressive volunteering and observing so like (1.5) maybe I could say I started visiting family at a young age=
- 7) T: =yeah=

The student and tutor's words overlap toward the end of the student's first statement (lines 1 & 2). Here, the tutor seems to understand that the student was talking about a concern related to short sentences even before the student completes her statement. This is an instance of joint production because the tutor and student are completing each other's utterances. This interpretation seems likely because they had discussed the student's concern about short sentences earlier on in the session. The tutor's response, "yeah yellow," means that the student should mark that sentence yellow, a color code indicating that the sentence needs to be revised. In this instance, the presence of overlapping speech suggests that the tutor and student understand each other well. They are not using interruption or main channel overlap to cut out the other person; instead, they are using joint production to move toward "greater solidarity and collaboration," as suggested by Gilewicz and Thonus. Even in the case of the second overlapping dialogue in lines 5 and 6, the student and tutor are not cutting out each other. Instead, the student is continuing her explanation while the tutor is simultaneously affirming the student's suggestions. In other words, they are using joint production to create solidarity.

Furthermore, the student is able to promptly process the tutor's observation in line 3 and come up with a solution in line 4. The use of

connected dialogue in this instance shows, again, that the tutor and student are using joint production by completing each other's utterances, which indicates that the tutor and student share a collaborative relationship. The tutor's affirmations in line 5 and 7, which are both connected to the student's preceding statements in line 4 and 6 respectively, provide further evidence of this collaborative relationship.

What we can see happening within these inter-connected and overlapping dialogues is that the tutor and student are collaborating closely to revise a sentence. The impetus for the revision comes from the tutor's observation. This impetus is sustained by the student's acknowledgement and positive response to the tutor's observation, which is followed through by the tutor's affirmations. In all of these exchanges, the tutor and student connect, overlap, and complete each other's utterances. This type of interactive conversation shows that the tutor and tutee share a collaborative relationship. Furthermore, this analysis suggests that by evaluating connected and overlapping dialogue, we can gain insights into the nature of collaboration between a tutor and client.

Discussion

Overall, my quantitative findings suggest that even though peer tutors maintained overall control in the three writing center conferences examined in this study, these conferences took place in a collaborative environment. Tutors maintained control in terms of owning more topics and initiating more syntagmatic units than students. Furthermore, the high percentage of ASQs initiated by the students, which suggests they viewed the tutors as experts, potentially contributed to the tutor's control of the sessions. Since the students viewed the tutors as experts, it is possible that they relied on the tutors to determine topics and initiate syntagmatic units. As a result, the tutors were able to maintain overall control over the session. These observations align with the views of Trimbur and Blau, Hall, and Strauss, who suggest that it is difficult for peer tutors and students to maintain a peer relationship in writing center conferences due to the institutional "tutor" designation given to tutors.

At the same time, the quantitative findings also reveal many collaborative qualities in these conferences. For instance, the lower RC units for tutors compared to the higher OA units initiated by them in all

three conferences suggest that these conferences were more collaborative than instructional. Since RC units represent directives and instructions and OA units represent suggestions and advice, the lower RC and higher OA percentages in the data indicate that the tutors offered suggestions and advice instead of issuing directiveness or instructions to students. Furthermore, the high percentage of student-initiated QA units and balanced topic initiation between tutors and students suggest that the students played an active role in raising questions and discussing the topics originally introduced by tutors. In addition, the relatively higher completion rates across all three types of syntagmatic units also tell us that both tutors and students played an active role in structuring the discourse (i.e., by responding to the questions, offers, and requests initiated by each party) in their conferences. Therefore, we can infer that even though the tutors maintained control by owning more topics and initiating more syntagmatic units, the students participated actively in the tutorial conversation.

The results of my study align with Muriel Harris's observation that peer tutors are a "hybrid creation - neither a teacher nor a peer" ("Collaboration is Not Collaboration" 371). They also align with Davis et al.'s finding that tutors do not function "exclusively either as peers or as teachers, but as a combination of the two" (32). My findings show that tutors acted as teachers in terms of topic ownership (i.e., introducing topics to be discussed) and initiating syntagmatic units (i.e., initiating the conversation). However, as discussed above, the tutors also created ample room for students to participate in the conversation. The students participated actively by asking questions, discussing topics originally introduced by the tutors, and by completing the syntagmatic units introduced by tutors. The results of my qualitative analysis further substantiate the collaborative nature of these conferences. They show that the tutor used compliments to establish a friendly and supportive working environment, as suggested by Mackiewicz and Thomson. Similarly, the tutor and student used overlapping dialogue as "joint production" to create "solidarity and collaboration," as suggested by Gilewicz and Thonus. Together, my quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that even while the tutors controlled the session in some ways, these conferences were still more collaborative than hierarchical.

While it is important for tutors to occasionally take on a teacherly role to guide and instruct students, it is equally important that they also create opportunities for students to participate as peers in the conversation. At a time when many writing center scholars (Lunsford; Grimm; Okawa et al.; Welch; Blazer) have been highlighting the need to address issues of equity, inclusion, and student empowerment, it is important that we understand how collaboration functions in writing center conferences. We need to ensure that our tutors are building collaborative relationships with students, creating spaces for students to be heard, and not dominating the sessions. Only then can we be confident in our ability to acknowledge and value difference (Lunsford), to step into the shoes of the “other” (Grimm), to provide “a space of critical exile” where students can intervene and question established conventions and beliefs (Welch), and to empower students by building egalitarian rather than hierarchical relationships (Okawa et al.). In other words, an important first step toward creating inclusive and empowering spaces is to ensure our tutors participate as peers in their conversations with students. The three conferences evaluated in my study look promising in this regard. However, considering the small sample size of my study and the important implications that collaboration can have for writing centers in addressing issues of equity and inclusion, it would be worthwhile to have more studies that examine collaboration in writing center conferences. If we can determine that we are creating spaces where students are heard, then we will know that we are creating conditions necessary for inclusive practices aimed at empowering students.

My quantitative and qualitative analyses also demonstrate the value of discourse analysis in understanding the nature of collaboration in writing center conferences. My qualitative analysis demonstrates how overlapping dialogue and compliments can provide insights into the relationship shared by a tutor and student in a writing conference. It shows that overlapping dialogue showed up in places where the tutor and student were affirming or reinforcing each other’s statements instead of cutting each other out, suggesting that the tutor and student shared a strong collaborative relationship. My qualitative analysis also shows that a tutor’s compliments and positive feedback can strengthen the tutor-student relationship by establishing a friendly and supportive working environment. The data from this study suggest that a detailed qualitative analysis of a tutor’s compliments and positive feedback can provide

valuable insights into the nature of tutor-student relationships. Similarly, my quantitative analysis demonstrates how certain discourse categories, such as topic initiation, topic ownership, syntagmatic units, and approval seeking questions, can be quantified to draw conclusions about the nature of authority relationships in peer-to-peer writing center conferences. While my study points to the valuable role of discourse analysis in evaluating collaboration in writing center conferences, considering the limited sample size of my study, the limited number of discourse analysis studies focused on writing centers in the past (Mackiewicz and Thompson; Pemberton), the attestation by scholars regarding the value of discourse analysis in evaluating collaboration (Murphy; Pemberton; Mackiewicz and Thomson; Gilewicz and Thonus), and the implications of collaboration on inclusive practices in writing centers, more studies that examine the discourse of writing center conferences would be a valuable contribution.

Conclusion

Lunsford states that when democracy masquerades as power, existing hierarchies are reinforced. I believe that for writing centers to practice Nancy Grimm's postmodern theorization that asks us to interrogate our own beliefs, to put ourselves in the shoes of the "other," and to acknowledge difference rather than erase it, it is important for us to ensure that traditional hierarchies are not enacted in writing centers in the name of collaboration, as suggested by Lunsford. Examining the nature of collaboration in writing center conferences, therefore, becomes an important goal in our effort to provide an inclusive and empowering space for students. Discourse analysis, as demonstrated in this study, can be a useful method for writing center scholars to tune into the conversations taking place in writing centers and understand whether we are creating opportunities for students to collaborate in writing center conferences. If we can determine that we are indeed moving toward Andrea Lunsford's conceptualization of collaboration – in which power, control, and authority rest with the negotiating group, not with the tutor or the student - then we can be confident in our ability to create spaces where differences are acknowledged instead of being erased.

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