8 Training Peer Tutors for the Secondary School Writing Center

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Writing center tutors must first be writers themselves, not necessarily the E. B. Whites of tomorrow, but students who share a concern for writing as the process of thinking. In addition, they must be listeners who care about the tutees and their writing problems. The tutors must be immersed in the writing process as theory and practicum; they should know strategies to help at every stage of the writing process; and they should continue to write while they tutor.

After establishing the preceding criteria for tutors and selecting forty students from the junior and senior classes, the appropriate administrators of Indian Hill School District and I decided that the training would have to occur before school started. I divided the students into two groups to attend what they have dubbed "English Camp." For twenty hours (four hours per day for five days) the students come to English Camp to train for tutoring. Once school starts, they are assigned for one period per one semester to the writing center, which is open for all students every period of every day and after school on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The tutors continue to keep journals and they fill out record sheets that are filed in the tutee's writing center folder. The record sheets contain space to record information such as a statement of the problems, a description of the tutoring, and comments by the tutor. For this work, the tutors receive one-half credit and a guaranteed "A" in the course called "Advanced Methods of Composition." The guaranteed grade is based on the assumption that, for the program to succeed, the tutors must maintain a standard of excellence or be withdrawn from the program. So far, that situation has not arisen. The number of students selected, based on a seven-period day, allows two to three tutors per period both first and second semesters. Luckily, the study halls scheduled by the computer have been evenly distributed

over the course of the day and the semesters, and scheduling has been no problem.

Since writing as process is the philosophical basis for the program, each summer day begins with the students writing for fifty minutes. At the end of the fifty minutes, we convene and converse for ten. During the second hour each day, the training continues with discussion of the required reading. Before the summer session begins, the students read Gary Provost's *Make Every Word Count* (1983). This book's primary point is that everyone can be a writer and offers "hands on" strategies for getting ideas, writing drafts, and improving expression by tightening, sharpening, deleting. Provost contends that every word must "work" for a place in the composition, and he shows students various techniques to "make every word count" (4). Also on the first day, we read and discuss "Teach Writing As Process Not Product," by Donald Murray (Graves 1983, 89–92) and "An Approach to Writing" by Peter Elbow (1981, 6–12). These two short articles emphasize the foundation for seeing writing as a process and as thinking. Both authors emphasize the necessity for being able to remove self from writing and to evaluate the written word. This second hour each day reinforces the concepts upon which the program is based by allowing for discussion of those concepts as recorded by leaders in the writing-as-process movement.

During the third hour of each day, we share what we have written during the first hour, an essential experience for the training, because, in sharing, we learn how to listen and respond to what we hear. Before beginning the process of listening, we discuss the qualities of a good listener and before we begin to respond, we talk about the kinds of comments that are most helpful to the writer. All read their pieces twice. After the first reading, the responses should be positive: "I liked the section describing your little brother's face," or "The description of our second grade teacher made her seem alive again." After the second reading, the tutors may question sections of the piece: "I don't understand how your little brother got the bat out of the tree," or "Do you think more detail about her eyes would let us see her better?" The writer makes notes and later chooses which responses to use in revising the piece. This writing and responding illuminates for the tutors the kinds of responses that mean the most to them as writers and instills in them techniques and attitudes that they need to be tutors once the school year begins. As we read more articles, the questioning and responding reflect the more extensive and diverse strategies that the authors provide (see the reference section at the end of this chapter).

At the end of each day, we spend the hour simulating possible tutoring experiences. On the first day I have tutors from the past year come to the class and re-enact situations that they had. The new tutors

can then see the diversity of the students they will tutor, the diversity of the writing problems, and the diversity of the tutors themselves in how they dealt with the problems. We discuss how the tutor could have handled the tutee or the problem differently and what acted positively for the tutee. By holding up actual sessions for reflection, the new tutors readily see that each session will be different, even if some of the strategies for help can work in many situations: they see the human element.

At this point in the required reading, Beverly Clark's *Talking about Writing* (1985) proves invaluable. In chapter seven, "Coach or Director?", she presents several tutoring sessions as scripts; we read them aloud and discuss the merits of each. In chapter eight, "Getting Started," much of what we have already discussed or experienced as writers and listeners comes to focus on us as tutors: how to assess the tutee's attitudes and needs, how to listen to the tutee's problems and paper, how to respond positively to the paper, how to elicit response from the tutee about how to improve the paper. And also at this point in the reading, I introduce firsthand experiences from directors and tutors who have written to *The Writing Lab Newsletter.* My students realize that we have progressed from reading about the theory of writing, the strategies of writing, the role of the tutor, to the actual experiences of the tutor. One article by William O. Shakespeare, a student tutor from Brigham Young University, presents the various kinds of students who come to the center: the apathetic, the rebellious, the copycat, and gives advice on how to deal with them. Elray L. Pedersen, another student tutor, also of Brigham Young, addresses kinds of responses to use. And yet another tutor, Anne Mattison, of the College of St. Benedict, reviews her experience as a tutor by explaining how important thinking is to tutoring and writing. Even though these institutions are colleges, the problems and solutions faced by their tutors and tutees have much in common with those in the secondary schools.

Chapter nine of Beverly Clark's book gets "Down to Business." She presents various techniques: being silent, mirroring, confirming, recording, asking questions, modeling, reading aloud, agreeing on an assignment, deferring to the student, using appropriate body language, marking progress, and ending. Again, this chapter reinforces the ideas and the strategies that we have read and discussed. We further discuss the application of these responses to situations that we role-play. And the students see that, while no one procedure works all the time, the choices they have before them can be molded to just about any situation: if having a difficulty with logic, recording what has been said may make that student aware of a digression; reading a paper aloud may help a student who has many mechanical errors; asking

questions may help a student who cannot think of a topic, and so on. The tutors are quick to recognize the value of the diverse approaches we have discussed and enacted.

At this point in the training, we also concentrate on helping each other with specific kinds of problems that usually receive attention during the revision of a paper. We discuss "tightening," "sharpening," and "showing not telling," and actually work with the writing we have done each morning to revise for better sentences and papers. We "tighten" such sentences as "All I wish is that the administration would be more consistent when they deal out punishments that are for different offenses," or "The thing that makes me the maddest is to have something biting me inside my shirt collar." We all rewrite the sentences and then compare and discuss the twenty different versions to decide which one may be most effective.

We also talk about "sharpening" prose and rewrite sentences that use too many "to be" constructions, "it," and "there." Shakespeare, for instance, in *Macbeth,* could have said, "This tyrant whose sole name IS a blister on our tongues, was once thought honest." He chose, instead to say "This tyrant whose sole name BLISTERS our tongues, was once thought honest." The tutors are quick to see the difference. Macrorie, in *Writing To Be Read* (1984), says, however, that "Sharpening writing is not as black and white a matter as this . . . suggests. Many of the changes dictated . . . are debatable, and only a person considering the total context of a word or phrase can see whether or not it should be retained" (67). The discussion leads us to audience, purpose, and context. And the students are learning yet another avenue in writing as process, yet another avenue to pursue in eliciting from themselves and from their tutees more forceful, effective writing by "making every word count." Most tutors at this point see the dovetailing of the writing, the reading, the discussing, the role-playing that we have done.

We spend at least one hour discussing "showing writing," moving from generalities to specifics, because this is a predominent problem for the tutees who come to the center. I have adapted my material from Provost (1983, 34–35). The objectives in the plan are to recognize the differences between "telling" writing and "showing" writing, to reinforce the use of concrete details in place of or in support of generalities, and to apply the differences between "telling" writing and "showing" writing to the revision process. Examples abound, and although the following two passages concern a scene at a bus stop, the passages illustrate the difference:

> Each morning I ride the bus to school. I wait along with the other people who ride my bus. Sometimes the bus is late and we get

angry. Some guys start fights and stuff just to have something to do. I'm always glad when the bus finally comes. (a seventh-grade student)

A bus arrived. It discharged its passengers, closed its doors with a hiss and disappeared over the crest of a hIll. Not one of the people waiting at the bus stop had attempted to board. One woman wore a sweater that was too small, a long skirt, white sweater socks, and house slippers. One man was in his undershirt. Another man wore shoes with the toes cut out. There was something wrong with these people. They made faces. A mouth smiled at nothing and unsmiled, smiled and unsmiled. A head shook in vehement denial. Most of them carried brown paper bags rolled tight against their stomachs. (Doctorow 1971, 15)

We discuss the obvious differences in the two passages, and the students quickly understand the difference in "showing" and "telling." They also quickly note that Doctorow wisely uses "there" and a "to be" construction and the effect that the construction has taken in context. We then propose questions to ask the seventh grader which would lead that student to "showing" writing: Does any one person come to mind when you picture yourself waiting? How is the person dressed? How do you know the others are angry? Exactly how do they look? What do they say? How do you show you are glad when the bus arrives?

We write our own "showing" paragraphs on such topics as "The dog was mean," "The child was incredibly filthy," "The room was a mess," "The pizza was fantastic." We use the reading-responding-reading-responding process for each selection written, and the students become involved in one of the most critical experiences that they will have as tutors: how to "show" not "tell." The paragraphs that they write on the same topic prove the necessity of using details to create intended meaning.

Whenever possible, the tutor takes the tutee through the process of writing a paper from the prewriting stage through the final draft. In suggesting how to structure these ongoing conferences, I give them Garrison's (1981) cardinal rule—"Only one objective is considered during a conference, and conferences are focused in this sequence" (101):

Prewriting:	tutor praises whatever specific details and facts the student already has and elicits more by asking questions or by asking for examples.
Organization:	tutor helps student find answers to these questions—What do these facts say? What do I want to say about these facts? Do these facts add up to anything? How will I organize these facts?

Rough Draft:	tutor reads for organization and focus on controlling idea.
Correctness:	tutor has student read aloud portions with run-on sentences, incorrect usage, etc., so student can hear errors; student is referred to materials covering specific problems in mechanics.
Word Choice/ Spelling:	tutor calls attention to especially vivid, apt diction and helps student to find more colorful expressions; student must correct misspelled words.

Dawe and Dornan (1981) also promote this process of conferencing:

> If first reading reveals that a paper has too little content or insufficient detail, we point out the problem and ask the writer to rewrite. As we work down the list in successive conferences, we find that solving one problem tends to help resolve others. Once a student has added specifics, for instance, organization and coherence tend to improve. (76)

Each afternoon when we role-play, I give the students hypothetical situations and they alternate playing tutee and tutor. The situations that we find most typical involve prewriting, organization, and using specific detail: A freshman has been asked by his teacher to compare two characters from two different short stories. Not having read either story, the tutor asks the freshman to talk about the characters. The tutor asks such questions as "What did you first notice about the character? Why does the author intend you to notice that? What does the detail tell you about the character? And so on. The tutee writes down responses and begins to map-cluster them. The tutor uses the same procedure for the next character; the tutee begins to draw lines from cluster to cluster to show relationships. The tutee goes to another table to write, and returns when something has been put down on paper. The conferencing continues.

A senior comes in with a college application essay topic which asks that the student write about the most meaningful high school experience. The student tells the tutor, "Nothing I've done is more meaningful than anything else." The tutor asks the student to list all activities and classes that come to mind, and then asks if the student can number or list them according to the kinds of experiences that occurred in those instances. As it turns out, the student groups all music experiences near the top because, "By myself I'm not creative, but with the musical groups I feel we create something impressive." Obviously, the student now has an essay topic.

The journals that the students keep during the summer provide them with ideas for assignments all year. But just as important to the

training, the tutors must continue to keep the journals during the semester that they are tutoring. What they write keeps them in touch with themselves as writers and as tutors, and what they write can provide two-way communication between the writing center director and each tutor. I collect the twenty journals on Friday, read them during my writing center period, and return them to their mailboxes in the center on Monday. I find this procedure to be an invaluable way of keeping in touch with what is going on in the writing center. I teach five classes per day and am assigned to the writing center for one period (as is every other English teacher in lieu of study hall, cafeteria duty, and so forth).

In making their entries, the students often write about a particular tutoring session in which they felt either success or failure or frustration; I respond as helpfully as I can. They may have particular problems (for example, ESL students, one tutee with special revision blocks, and others) and the journal communication allows me to refer them to specific articles and handbooks in the writing center (see the reference list at the end of this chapter). They may simply free write and ask for my response before they revise. But this continuing involvement further trains them to be even more responsive to their own thinking and writing and, therefore, more responsive to the tutees they will meet. Again, and most important, the journals allow me a vicarious experience in the center, and they allow me to keep in touch with tutors that I no longer have in class.

The tutors' responses to the training and the tutoring give substance to the experience. One of the best tutors wrote in her journal, "I always thought that my math ability indicated a business/computer career. But now that I've learned how much I love crawling around in someone else's head and seeing how people think, I want to teach them how to do it better. I want to teach." Another wrote, "I never realized that being in touch with my own thinking could show me how to help others get in touch with theirs." Still another noted, "I had always been told not to *ever* use any form of the verb 'to be,' 'it,' or 'there.' Talk about writing block! I now know to eliminate with thought and prudence. *There are* no absolutes in writing. *It would be silly if there were.*" I particularly liked the last summer entry of one student: "Thank you to all of us."

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