2

GENERAL READERS AND CLASSROOM TUTORS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

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With the rapid expansion of writing across the curriculum (WAC) programs, many of us wrestle with understanding the differences between teaching writing in composition courses and teaching writing across the disciplines. While a lively debate has long existed over whether we can teach writing effectively in composition courses, it has gained fresh life from WAC scholars like Aviva Freedman, who "question the value of GWSI," or general writing skills instruction (1995, 122). A similar debate has also spilled over to tutoring programs, where scholars and program directors wonder whether tutors trained in GWSI can cope with the more distinct forms of writing that readers trained in special fields may assign and evaluate.

Peer tutors in WAC classrooms or in writing centers that support WAC face complex challenges when they read a range of different assignments (see Mullin 2001; Soven 2001). How will these tutors best support WAC, which stresses faculty development and writing in specialist settings, as opposed to their more traditional support for composition programs, which stress student empowerment and writing for broad audiences? Can tutors translate their generalist training to new learning environments? Can an English major cope with a lab report for a biology class or a research paper for an upper-level chemistry elective? Can a psychology major cope with an essay exploring the causes of the American Civil War? A dilemma results when we wonder whether readers trained in a generalist tradition can be reasonably expected to read and react to so many distinct assignments.

In this chapter, I will examine how content knowledge affects the success of classroom tutors in WAC programs. Adopting a perspective called writing in the course (Thaiss 2001), I will focus on the fit between general rhetorical knowledge and what naturalistic research shows that professors in content courses expect from student writing as well as how students respond to those expectations. Generally speaking, writing in the course

suggests that even within the same discipline, professors can diverge widely in their purposes for assigning writing. The goals professors may have for their students' writing evolve partly throughout the life of a course (Prior 1998) in response to the rhetorical situation of a class. Several factors could influence the situation—the quality of students' responses to an assignment, the professor's alignment with a discipline, the different resources that students draw upon during the semester, or the relative importance of the writing to the overall course design.

For these reasons, writing in the course suggests that a tutor's knowledge of content is an important but not exclusive factor determining his or her success. The quality of a tutor's relationship to the course professor or understanding of the assignment would also influence how a tutorial unfolds. From this perspective, classroom tutors—peers who participate in the ongoing life of the course—are admirably situated to bring their general strategies to bear upon a dynamic rhetorical situation where, at a given moment, content may be more or less significant. Linking tutors to courses in their majors surely enhances their work (and their confidence), and therefore is advisable whenever possible. But content knowledge is not the major precondition for success, especially in liberal arts and general education courses.

Despite the fluid differences between the rhetorical situations in WAC classes, WAC faculty do share a common ground. Within disciplines, for instance, many assign official genres that tutors can learn to recognize. Another similarity concerns how WAC faculty organize writing in their courses: many use peer group learning in their classrooms, and professors often assign research projects that involve writing as a mode of inquiry. Peer tutors from any major can act as peer group leaders in content courses, and they can also, again regardless of their majors, promote writing as a form of inquiry across the curriculum. Though classroom tutors will have to adjust to their new circumstances, they can play influential roles in promoting those aspects of writing that are common to all the disciplines and in this way contribute to WAC's overall mission: to improve undergraduate teaching.

THE GENERAL AND THE SPECIALIST TUTOR

The best illustrations of what I call the general approach to tutoring can be found in Muriel Harris's *Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference* (1986) or Emily Meyer and Louise Z. Smith's *The Practical Tutor* (1987). While the latter offers sample dialogues from courses outside English,

both texts lean heavily on conversations where tutors and students discuss essays written for English courses. Sample dialogues exemplify the peer's general strategies: careful, nonjudgmental listening; nondirective questions that apply to the global qualities of texts; and personal skills that help to establish a trusting relationship between reader and writer. In the generalist tradition, which the Rose Writing Fellows Program at Brown University has helped to popularize, a reader's specific knowledge of content is less important than the ability to engage with the writer's text and to ask questions that prompt global revision (e.g., see Soven 2001). Encouraging a richer writing process in a safe environment remains the overarching purpose of, and motivating ideal behind, generalist peer tutoring at the writing center and in curriculum-based programs.

But with the growing demands of WAC, program directors debate whether the generalist strategy is enough when peer tutors work with students on case studies for business, research papers for upper-level sociology, or critical essays for art history. In her review of curriculum-based programs, Margot Soven (2001) shows that two perspectives have framed the debate. On the one hand, students benefit from readers who don't know the content because they tend to ask questions and use strategies that push writers to consider how an educated but nontechnical audience will read their work. From her long experience with both writing centers and WAC programs, Susan Hubbuch (1988) notes that generalist tutors are less directive if they aren't familiar with the content, but sometimes assume a teacher's role if they are tutoring in their majors. Successful curriculum-based programs at liberal arts schools, as Soven notes, traditionally privilege the role of the general reader, perhaps because this stance reflects the mission of these institutions—to prepare students to communicate to well-educated, as opposed to technical, audiences. Again as Hubbuch points out, peers should become familiar with different forms across the curriculum. But she suggests that an acquaintance with rhetoric—writing for different audiences at different times and places—does not necessarily entail a specific knowledge of the content.

On the other side of the debate, program directors often consider a peer tutor's major when pairing him or her with classes because experience and some research suggest that knowledge of content plays a role in successful tutorials (see Soven's 2001 survey). For example, Jean Kiedaisch and Sue Dinitz (1993) videotaped twelve tutorials in which students brought drafts from literature courses to their writing center. The researchers asked the professors who taught these courses to rate the

tutorials' success and found that the teachers thought there was a relation-
ship between the tutor's content knowledge and the quality of the session.
Kiedaisch and Dinitz then examined the videotapes of the sessions and
found "that the 'ignorant' or generalist tutor sometimes has limitations"
(65). Only the English majors tutored at the global level—they started
with the quality of the thesis and its relationship to the assignment (69).
At the same time, as Hubbuch might predict, one of the English majors
simply edited a paper (71).

Despite the small sample of tutorials, this study persuasively indicates
that the tutors' content knowledge enhanced their confidence as read-
ers who skillfully pinpointed a global problem in a draft. As a result, the
English majors suggested fruitful revision strategies for the critical essays.
However, as the teachers only inferred from the transcripts that the
tutors' majors affected their superior diagnosis of drafts, this study also
asks us to determine further how other factors—the tutors' knowledge of
the critical essay, which cuts across disciplines, or their past experience
with professors they knew—might also influence successful outcomes.

COMPLICATING THE DEBATE: WRITING IN THE COURSE

From a theoretical perspective, the debate over the status of a general
reader reflects our beliefs about whether some qualities of writing cut
across all disciplines or whether disciplines use language in highly par-
ticularized ways. Some research indicates that the dualism might not
clearly exist in all courses. For example, Ann Johns (1995) notes from her
experience with ESL students in content courses that many faculty across
the disciplines don't introduce their students to specialized discourse but
assign the essay form. Christopher Thaiss and Terry Zawacki (1997) lent
credence to this experience when they examined portfolios containing
papers for many courses at George Mason University. They found that
faculty across the disciplines appeared to accept and even privilege quali-
ties of writing we associate with composition courses—the use of personal
experience to support arguments, the grammatical first person, and the
essay form with a thesis up front.

This lack of fit among professional discourses, content, and what fac-
ulty expect students to write further complicates a dualism between gen-
eral and specialized kinds of writing. If both specific content and general
rhetorical knowledge come into play, then the classroom tutor trained
as a general reader is well situated to interpret assignments in a variety
of courses. If several factors, such as the professor's relationship with a

student, also affect a professor's expectations, then the classroom tutor's knowledge of this rhetorical scene may be especially influential.

Writing in the course assumes that an array of rhetorical factors might further explain a tutor's success. For example, Judith Levine (1990) evaluated the role of a peer tutor, an English major, in her introductory psychology course and found that, compared to a similar course she taught that didn't employ a tutor, the papers were more likely to be handed in on time. Also, the students said they spent more time working on their papers and expressed greater satisfaction with the writing assignments. However, since the grades for the papers were similar in both courses, Levine speculates that having a tutor with a psychology major may have enhanced the papers' overall quality. On the other hand, Levine's description of her teaching reveals that her course is not fixed but evolves each semester as she continues to evaluate her success. Thus, she suggests several other factors might have influenced the tutor's work: the quality of her assignment, its relative importance to the course grade, and a revised curriculum (58).

As she describes it, Levine's assignment is not tightly aligned with a professional conception of the discipline of psychology. She required students to write a series of short anecdotes based on personal experience and to analyze them using psychological concepts. While knowledge of these concepts would be a plus for a tutor, understanding how narrative works—how the writer must analyze or interpret, not just retell, a personal experience—would be helpful to a reader in this situation. The analysis of anecdotes, of course, is a skill often taught in composition classes. I have frequently seen versions of this assignment in anthropology and psychology classes at my institution, perhaps because it contains features typical of the case study. Nevertheless, this assignment has not achieved the status of an official form such as the lab report. What may really help a tutor in Levine's course is to know what she expects with an assignment whose local origins define it as a classroom, not a disciplinary, genre.

Our experience at the City College of New York with classroom tutors in content courses further underscores how more than one factor affects their success. For instance, in 1999, we attached peer tutors, from both English and psychology, to introductory and upper-level psychology courses taught by the same professor. In these courses, the professor was also collaborating with a writing fellow, one of six Ph.D students from the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center who work on my campus to implement a WAC program. This fellow (from English) worked

with the professor to integrate writing into both courses and to develop discipline-specific assignments. For example, they created sequenced assignments that reflect writing as a process, explicit descriptions of the lab report, and rubrics for students to use in peer review groups and to assess their own progress (see *Innovative Teaching at City College* or www.ccny.cuny.edu/wac). In addition to conferences with peer tutors in class, students were required to make an appointment at the writing center. At the end of both courses, the professor surveyed students about what they had learned about writing, and she also asked explicit questions about the peer tutors.

When we read the students' evaluations of the writing assignments, we saw that the writing fellow involvement had been highly successful from the students' point of view. Their responses echoed those found in other institutional assessments of WAC: students spoke specifically about the purpose that writing plays in their discipline and described particular generic features they had learned; they thought that writing helped them to learn the content; and they felt that their writing had improved.

On the role of the tutors, students gave mixed reviews in both classes, focusing their criticism on two factors. One strand of criticism concerned the tutors' specialized knowledge of disciplinary style and content. Students indicated that tutors who didn't know about writing in the social sciences tended to focus on language issues. While for many of the ESL students this was helpful, others dismissed that role and asked for tutors in their majors. Several wrote comments like "My tutor could not answer my questions on APA style. The tutors should represent the student population in majors." Or: "I liked the fact that they helped me correct my grammatical errors but in terms of helping me with my research paper for psychology, it was only beneficial if you had a tutor who was actually a psychology major." Another student remarked, "The writing tutor who came to help was actually no help. He said he was used to working with students taking ESL courses." Not all the students reacted negatively, of course; many thought that tutors had helped them to understand assignments and to revise their work, particularly the literature review section.

Another equally significant strand of criticism in the surveys involved students' complaints about scheduling problems at the writing center. This emphasis on institutional problems alerted us to the possibility of alternative interpretations of the factors most responsible for the tutors' success in these classrooms. In our earlier study of peer tutoring in English classes (Soliday 1995), we found that when students and tutors

complained about scheduling, this institutional factor correlated with the tutor's lack of an authoritative role in the classroom. In this case, the writing fellows wondered whether the required appointments at the center and the mandatory time limits for in-class tutorials might have affected outcomes, especially the comfort level of the English major who was used to a different role at the writing center. Again, the 1995 study suggested that the tutors' success is deeply influenced by the authoritative role they are able to assume—their relationship to the professor helps to shape their relationship with students. For instance, a professor could grant the tutor who is a major in the field a more legitimate status. In any case, a naturalistic study focusing on the professor's relationship with the tutors and their level of comfort in a new environment could explain how institutional tensions affect success.

In light of these factors, it's no wonder that the definitive role content plays in determining a tutor's success remains unsettled. For while we know that specialized knowledge does play a role in successful tutoring, we also can see how content is entangled in other factors typical of writing in the course: an assignment's local or disciplinary features; the professor's alignment with a discipline; the quality of assignments and their weight in a particular course; the professor's relationship with the tutor and the tutor's consequent status in the classroom. While Margot Soven concludes that content knowledge is a crucial component of tutoring, especially in advanced courses, she too wonders whether "we have exaggerated the influence of knowledge in the major as the factor most responsible for shaping the role of the peer tutor and determining his success" (2001, 215).

Writing in the course is a useful concept that also helps us to see why a generalist tutoring strategy remains a flexible option in WAC programs. Writing in the course highlights how professors in the same discipline (even those teaching the same course) do not necessarily share the same expectations for writing. In part, this is because professors align themselves more or less tightly with disciplinary norms—some promote generalist goals and purposes for writing, while others stress specialized forms and audiences. For instance, the professor of psychology whose classes I described above had a distinct disciplinary purpose in assigning writing for both the advanced and introductory courses. Like some of the teachers described in Barbara Walvoord and Lucille McCarthy's case studies (1990), the professor at City College saw her students as professionals in training. A well-known scholar, she hoped to prepare students

to write like future researchers, especially in the advanced course, and a tutor in her class had to be familiar with the lab report to be successful. In Judith Levine's psychology course as she describes it, the assignment calls for a classroom genre with which many composition students might be familiar. For the professor at City College, the writing weighed heavily in the final course grade, while Levine indicates that she did not weight the writing assignments as seriously. A classroom tutor in both these courses would need to assess the teacher's expectations because not all of them are universally typical of psychology classes.

PEER LEARNING IN WAC PROGRAMS

Writing in the course suggests that when readers assess a piece of writing, they rely on both their special knowledge of course content and a more general rhetorical sensitivity. In our writing fellows program, we have examined peer reading groups in different content courses to ascertain the success of a pedagogy that WAC programs widely recommend to faculty overburdened with paper grading. What kinds of knowledge do students bring to their reading, and how might tutors intervene in reading groups?

So far, we have found that during peer reading sessions, students use different types of knowledge typical of writing in the course to evaluate drafts or finished papers. For instance, the writing fellows audiotaped peer reading groups in a large introductory lecture course in the art department. The groups participated in a demonstration workshop organized and then led by a team of writing fellows and peer undergraduate tutors from the writing center. In demonstration workshops, writing fellows and peer undergraduate tutors visit classes to structure and then help to lead writing workshops. In class, fellows and tutors usually demonstrate some aspect of writing, such as developing a works cited page, and then invite students to come to the writing center for individual or group conferences on their drafts.

In the art class, writing fellows and peer tutors gave a demonstration workshop on an assignment that required students to go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, take notes on two paintings, and then compare and contrast their visual descriptions in a short analytical essay. The writing fellows met with the professor and obtained models of introductions that they presented to the students in the class to read and discuss. With the help of peer tutors, they broke students in this large class into groups to read and analyze four model introductions of varying length and overall quality.

Here is a sample of a group's discussion of two model introductions that is typical of all the conversations the fellows audiotaped and then excerpted for our faculty handbook, *Innovative Teaching at City College*.

Student 4:   I like this [model] better than the other one. Because it was like he said—it was like an introduction to what the entire paper is about. He set it up so that he can do one painting, talk about that, go onto the next one, compare them and contrast them, and then his conclusion would sum this up.

Student 1:   What do you think of the size of this one compared to the size of what we read here? [referencing the two introductions]

Student 4:   I don't always think more is better. But I don't know. This one wasn't so descriptive, detailed of the work. . . .

Student 3:   Because an introduction has to be broad. It doesn't have to be detailed like in the first.

Student 4:   The body has to be detailed.

Student 1:   What did you write?

Student 2:   He set it up in a way that you want to continue reading it. He has a problem in the beginning. Here he says when comparing two pieces of work on the same subject, both of them are like different subjects. One of them was a Gerard David painting— it's like religious leaders, like a religious painting, you know.

Student 1:   But they both had the mother and the child.

Student 3:   The same subject is the mother and child.

Student 2:   Oh, he meant the mother and the child.

The writing fellows concluded that the students in this peer review session did not rely exclusively on content knowledge to read the models. This conversation and others reveal that students also depended upon their familiarity with the class assignment and general approaches to writing when they assessed the text. The students in this art class leaned on both types of knowledge: the rhetorical situation of the particular course and that of writing papers for humanities classes more generally. The students knew about David's paintings and they knew what the professor meant by "the same subject" as a basis for comparison. Their talk also focuses on the qualities of introductions that any well-trained tutor can join and expand: the scope of a thesis and its relationship to the body of a paper, how to focus an opening, or what constitutes the basis of a good comparison.

Because the professor of this course is a practicing artist—his alignment with an academic discipline is loose—students were required to

show that they had learned to "think visually," rather than to produce a particular academic form. Again, then, the unique rhetorical situation of this class forms a powerful context for writing that a classroom tutor is well situated to interpret and understand. It is the context of the course rather than that of an academic discipline that shaped the assignment and guided the professor's responses to student writing.

The transcripts from this workshop also highlight the powerful role tutors can play as organizers or leaders of peer reading sessions, regardless of their backgrounds. As the number of writing assignments increases in content courses, students call for more feedback from their professors (Hilgers et al 1995). While they prefer their teachers' responses, students also rank peer comments very highly (Beason and Darrow 1997). But often when content faculty import peer learning into their classrooms, they experience some of the problems that Laurie Grobman describes in her review of the scholarship in chapter 3 of this volume. For example, students stray from the task, focus on local as opposed to global issues, or hesitate to provide constructive criticism. Similarly, we've found through survey and naturalistic research in two biology classes that peer review was not successful for all these reasons. In a third biology class, however, we compared students' comments to the professor's on a set of drafts for a lab report and found a close match in the focus and quality of peer and faculty response to the writing. In all three biology classes and the art class, students were given clear, specific instructions to perform group work, and they had rubrics to use for peer review. But the successful biology class and the art class had something the other two classes lacked: peer tutors who were present to help structure the workshop (art) or to lead the review sessions in small groups (biology).

Peer tutors, as Grobman shows, can focus discussions in reading groups and help students elaborate their comments on drafts. For instance, in the art class, most students were used to working in groups because they were enrolled that semester in a block program, or learning community, that featured English courses that had a peer tutor attached to them. Our 1995 study suggests that the tutors' satisfaction with the 1999 project meant they played active roles in the English classes. Possibly, the peer group sessions in English helped to prepare students to work seriously on their drafts in another class like art. Particularly when peer tutors have an explicit rubric to follow, as they did in the successful biology class, they can help to focus group readings, and they gain confidence that they might otherwise lack if they are working with an unfamiliar content.

Guided peer reading during class remains a common tool for learning that faculty across the disciplines can share.

WRITING AS A MODE OF INQUIRY IN WAC PROGRAMS

Along with peer learning, WAC programs promote using writing as a mode of inquiry across the disciplines. From any major, classroom tutors can be especially effective in helping students to use writing as a form of discovery and to understand how writing fits into the flow of a course. In writing for the course, the writing process takes distinct shapes. For instance, in some WAC courses, students are required to produce low-stakes assignments that do not require revision. In other WAC courses, professors often expect that students will use writing to conduct research—even when faculty don't call the task research. Tutors can help students (and faculty) distinguish between low- and high-stakes writing assignments and learn to use writing as a mode of inquiry when that's appropriate.

WAC professors sometimes assign formal research papers, but at other times, they require students to perform research without calling the task by that name. WAC faculty may assume students will use writing at the earliest stages of a research task—or, just as often, they may not have clarified for themselves their tacit assumption that writing is integral to inquiry in their fields. Yet a successful final paper may depend upon the healthy use of writing at the earliest stages of invention. Barbara Walvoord and Lucille McCarthy (1990) asked students in four disciplines to keep logs and protocols to document their actual writing processes. They found that the less successful students did not have a rich invention process—they didn't use writing as a mode of inquiry at the earliest stage of a research project, for instance. Some of these students tended to rely upon the concept of "the thesis statement" they had learned from English. Their problem was that they tended to adopt a thesis prematurely before clarifying their purpose or gathering solid data.

Promoting writing as a tool for discovery is a special talent of the peer tutor, who more than any other person can help students to think about what they want to say before establishing a thesis statement. Developing a writing process—especially good invention strategies—remains central to students' struggles with writing across the curriculum, as Walvoord and McCarthy show in business, psychology, history, and biology courses. In a business class they describe, students had to go to fast-food restaurants and observe their management; if they hadn't collected good data from the start, no amount of content knowledge would help them. Similarly,

in the art class I described, if students had not taken good notes at the museum, no amount of content knowledge or revision strategies would have improved their papers. In both cases, the professors are asking students to gather primary data, and students are most successful when they use writing at the scene to record their observations. And in both cases, professors expect students to use writing to perform research even when they don't give the task this name and even when they don't explicitly organize their assignments around writing at the invention stage.

As our writing fellows have discovered in chemistry, anthropology, sociology, literature, and architecture classes, research projects involve using writing as a tool for inquiry in the earliest stages of the process. Since scientists, social scientists, humanists, and faculty in professional schools alike use writing in this way, we can infer that peer tutors with any major can play a central role in showing both students and faculty where the actual writing begins—at the moment of reading or gathering data, not afterward. Using writing as a mode of inquiry remains a common ground many of us share regardless of our discipline.

FUTURE ORIENTATIONS

While I want to end by reaffirming the role of the general tutor in WAC programs, tutors must orient themselves to classrooms that may constitute foreign territory for them. Tutor training must address the demands of writing-intensive courses: the rhetorical situation will now have to include those curricular and institutional aspects of WAC that differ from the traditional writing course. We will have to expose tutors to a robust notion of genre: as an official set of expectations that exists before a course begins (like the lab report) and as a set of expectations more distinct to particular classrooms (like Judith Levine's anecdote assignment). Similarly, tutors will have to learn to distinguish writing to learn or low-stakes assignments from more formal high-stakes assignments that often involve writing as a mode of inquiry. As Susan Hubbuch (1988) recommends, we will have to introduce tutors to conventional forms that differ subtly from one another: a thesis and a hypothesis, a conclusion in an essay and a discussion section in a lab report. Above all, we need to stress that these forms take on life within the rhetorical context established by a course. Classroom tutors who are present at the rhetorical scene are very well suited to read and help decipher assignments and their fit into the flow of the semester.

To understand how general readers can work effectively in content courses, we need also to continue to research the interplay between

different kinds of knowledge when readers encounter various assignments. Margot Soven (2001) recommends audiotaping tutorials, following the Kiedaisch and Dinitz study (1993) I described earlier; Laurie Grobman in chapter 3 offers a model for studying the dynamics of peer group learning. This semester at CCNY, we are planning exit interviews with students enrolled in a writing-intensive biology course focusing on understanding how the students interpret the professor's assignments and how they draw upon their general knowledge of writing to complete their tasks in a science course. If we use naturalistic research methods to contextualize peer tutorials, surveys, or interviews, and if we adopt writing in the course as a theoretical lens, we can deepen our understanding of the extent to which different factors shape the overall success of classroom tutors.

Many professors join WAC programs not only because they want to improve students' writing, but also because they share a common desire to improve undergraduate teaching. These programs attempt to improve writing, but WAC began originally with the mission of reforming undergraduate teaching. Over the years, some of my most pleasurable teaching experiences involved classes in which I worked alongside a peer undergraduate tutor. Peer tutors enhance WAC because they can energize teachers and help to put into practice techniques, such as peer group learning, that faculty hear about in workshops and seminars. The widespread success at CUNY of the writing fellows program owes in part to our faculty's willingness to form classroom partnerships with outsiders—the basic tenet of curriculum-based tutoring. Similarly, when they are given the proper room to do what they do best, peer tutors can enhance the life of any classroom, regardless of the discipline.