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Collaboration Is Not Collaboration Is Not Collaboration: Writing Center Tutorials vs. Peer-Response Groups

Muriel Harris

Collaboration, a process writers engage in and teachers facilitate, is firmly entrenched in our thinking about the teaching of writing. But the term is also used as a blanket tossed over a variety of activities that are not identical, thereby blurring useful distinctions. "I don't use the Writing Lab," a composition teacher told me recently, "because I have peer-response groups in my classroom." To a degree she is correct in seeing some overlap. Both tutoring and response groups are student-centered approaches that rely on collaboration as a powerful learning tool—to promote interaction between reader and writer, to promote dialogue and negotiation, and to heighten writers' sense of audience. In addition, both move the student from the traditional passive stance of receiving knowledge from an authority to an active involvement which makes talk integral to writing. Yet tutorials and response groups, though collaborative in their approaches, also have different underlying perspectives, assumptions, and goals. Moreover, tutors, unlike peer readers, are trained to use methods that lead to results very different from the outcome of response groups. Clearly, these different forms of collaboration should not be conflated.

My purpose here is to examine the differences and, because I work in a writing center, also to help those outside the center appreciate what tutoring can offer. But first, we need to disentangle these forms of collaborative learning from what is more appropriately termed collaborative writing. Although there has been some confusion in the use of "collaboration" to refer both to collaborative writing and collaborative learning about writing, collaborative writing is now identified as writing involving two or more writers working together to produce a joint product. When writing collaboratively, each may take responsibility for a different portion of the final text, and there may be group consensus or some sort of collective responsibility for the final product. When there is shared decision-making power and responsibility for a text, Nancy Allen and her co-authors use the term "shared document collaboration." Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford describe their collaborative writing as "co-authorship," a melding

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process by which they create one text together, discovering and thinking through ideas together, talking through sections together, and writing drafts together.

Collaborative writing thus refers to products of multiple authors while collaboratively learning about writing involves interaction between writer and reader to help the writer improve her own abilities and produce her own text—though, of course, her final product is influenced by the collaboration with others. Instructors who are suspicious of writing-center tutorials because they assume tutors help write the papers fail to see the distinction between multiple authorship collaboration—where there are joint decisions—and collaboration in learning about writing—where one writer claims ownership and makes all final decisions. But more subtle are the differences between collaboration in tutorials and collaboration in response groups. Like oranges and apples, tutorial and peer-group collaboration are the same but different, and we need to know more about what to expect when we group students together in a classroom and when we refer them to the writing center. We also need to see how to prepare for each because without adequate preparation of tutors and response groups, successful collaboration isn't likely to happen spontaneously.

A Brief History of Response Groups and Writing Tutorials

Response groups, as Anne Ruggles Gere has noted in her extensive study, *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications*, have existed in various forms for over two hundred years but have recently gained new status. While Gere differentiates various forms of writing groups by the locus and degree of authority from within or outside the group, the collaborative effort of responding to writing can also be viewed as varying from informal to more formally structured or institutionalized ways. From this perspective, perhaps the least studied of the widespread uses of collaboration in writing groups is that informal network of assistance and support that goes on in residence halls, study rooms, coffee shops, libraries, and faculty offices—where peers help each other by reading each other's drafts when asked. Faculty who recognize the value of such assistance from their colleagues tend to offer credit and graceful notes of appreciation in journal articles and books. Students, however, tend to downplay public recognition of informal collaboration, fearing that it somehow diminishes the effort expected of them. Thus, while students value the help they get, they too often overlook the importance of the reader-writer interaction that has occurred. The nature of this informal collaboration among students also varies widely. When interviewing prospective tutors about their peer-group experience, I hear them describe their efforts either as editorial work ("When someone learns that I got A's in comp classes, they drop by my room before a paper is due and ask me to check for grammar and stuff") or as reader response ("My

roommate gives me his papers and I tell him what I think is clear and what isn't"). In either case, this collaboration is closer to tutoring, in that there is likely to be an implicit recognition that the reader is either as skilled or more skilled than the writer and that the focus of the collaboration is on the writer.

Tutorial collaboration in writing centers has a more recent history than writing groups, though it too has evolved from earlier conceptions, in this case conceptions of what tutors should and could do. When the literacy-crisis awareness of the 1970s coincided with great waves of open admissions, teachers and administrators sensed the need for tutorial assistance, in the traditional sense of the more knowledgeable helping the less knowledgeable. Emphasis on competency testing and formalist approaches that stressed surface-error correctness in written products reinforced the notion of establishing centers where students could learn how to correct the fragments and comma splices that littered their pages. But despite those limited notions of what writing tutors should do and because composition theory and practice were making the great shift to a process orientation, it quickly became evident that tutors were offering their students a great deal more than a place to review apostrophe rules.

Articles on writing center theory in books and in publications such as the *Writing Center Journal* and the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, training manuals for tutors, and those hundreds of reports writing center directors write every year for administrators 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 in order to help the writer become a better writer, not to fix whatever particular paper the student has brought to the center. Thus, even though a specific paper may be the subject of discussion, the tutor is always cautioned to work more broadly toward strengthening the writer's skills in ways that will carry over to future writing. The tutor's role ranges among a variety of tasks: offering reader response, leading the student toward finding her own answers, suggesting strategies to try, diagnosing possible underlying problems, listening while the student articulates her message, and offering needed support during the composing struggle. To do all this, tutors must be selected and trained and, in the process, become a hybrid creation—neither a teacher nor a peer. The tutor's job is to help writers move beyond requests for someone to "proofread" or "fix" their papers.

Determining the Goals

Like tutoring, peer response has well-articulated goals. Anne Ruggles Gere and Robert Abbott, reviewing published statements on peer response, list its effectiveness in improving critical thinking, organization, and appropriateness of writing; improving usage; increasing the amount of revision; and reducing

apprehension. Gere and Abbott also note that teachers endorse peer response because it develops a better sense of audience, reduces paper grading, exposes students to a variety of writing styles, motivates them to revise, and develops a sense of community. In addition, Carol Berkenkotter's list of the benefits of peer response includes the experience of writing and revising for less threatening audiences than the teacher, of learning to discriminate between useful and non-useful feedback, and of learning to use awareness of anticipated audience responses as writers revise. Adding to this list, Richard Gebhardt notes the ability of peers to offer each other needed emotional support. And Karen Spear notes that peers offer each other feedback which contributes to the evolution of ideas, that peer response makes the audience real, and that sharing drafts helps to shape and test thought, to extend the invention process. At the very least, says Spear, students should "become responsible for editing, proofreading, and correcting their peers' texts" (5).

The kind of editorial work that Spear mentions can be valuable for students, in that it helps them learn the difficult art of proofreading their own papers, but there is an underlying assumption here that helping someone name or locate an error ("I think you need a comma before that word" or "You ought to have a transition there") is sufficient. Sometimes this is the case, and such peer response alerts writers to more careful proofreading as well as to considerations they need to keep in mind. But we have to leave to the tutorial any instructional assistance in learning why there is an error, how it should be corrected, and what the student needs to know for the future. The goal of a tutorial might be to help the student identify a few of the most commonly recurring problems and to set up some sequence of meetings that would aim at helping the student generalize the concept for future writing.

Peer responders, on the other hand, are not normally asked to move into the questioning and explaining stage as tutors are. Instead, peer readers critique a draft of an assignment that all members of the group are working on. This keeps the discussion focused on specific drafts, though one of the larger goals is still to improve the skill of critical response by this kind of repetition. The assumption is that the more the student reads and responds, the more her critical skills improve. The more the writer hears reader response, the stronger his sense of audience will be. While these kinds of skill building by repetition happen in peer response groups, tutorials do not normally aim at providing the student with practice in critical reading of texts composed by other writers. (Tutors, of course, get a great deal of practice in critical reading of texts of others, though that is not the tutor's purpose for working with the student.) Instead, as Stephen North reminds us, the paper the student brings in to the writing center is only the medium for discussion because, as North explains to his tutors, "our job is to produce better writers, not just better writing" (439). This, notes Jeff Brooks, is the central difficulty tutors must confront, because "we sit down with imperfect papers, but our job is to improve their writers" (2). The struggle, as any

tutor can confirm, is that we have to squelch our editorial urge to tinker with that paper and our human urge to help that writer sitting next to us turn in a better product. Instead, the tutor must focus on general writing skills. To do so, tutorial conversation may also deal with the writer's anxiety, poor motivation, cultural confusions, ineffective or dysfunctional composing strategies, lack of knowledge, or inability to follow assignment directions. Tutors can also achieve their goals by touching upon the specific paper very minimally; the peer responder, however, would be remiss if he offered only minimal response to the paper.

Peer response also tends to have a different time frame than tutorials. In one or two sessions, all the members of the response group usually have their turns at hearing the responses of their peers. Then they are done until convened again for the next assignment. Often, tutors also meet with students in a cyclical fashion tied to the completion of specific assignments, but with the student's cooperation or assent (or the teacher's urging), the tutor can propose a sequence of several sessions to tackle a specific topic. Or the tutor and student can meet for weeks to work on mastering one or more higher-level skills. For example, Matthew Livesey, a peer tutor, describes his work with one student as an ongoing effort to have her learn how to anticipate her readers' questions. While the goal of the tutor and the members of the peer-response group is the same, in that all are working toward more effective writing abilities and heightened awareness of general writing concerns, tutors are free to roam through the seemingly infinite variety of problems that every less-than-perfect writer might have and to choose a specific goal that is different for every writer. Hence, writing tutorials are highly individualized since each student can ask whatever questions are on her mind, talk about whatever possibilities she is considering, or linger over problems she sees; and tutors can explore a variety of sources to tap for solutions and strategies that will help that particular student.

The emphasis on general skills in response groups rather than individualized concerns in tutorials also explains why the collaboration is different in each setting. In the response group, there is back-and-forth conversation intended to offer mutual help as writing groups work together in a give-and-take relationship. Generally, all are expected to benefit both from the responses they receive about their writing and from the practice they get as critical readers of the discourse of other writers. In tutorial collaboration, however, students are asked only to respond to their own texts. That is, a tutor might initially ask questions such as the following: "What did you like most about the paper? What do you think needs revision? What would you like to work on in this paper?" If the student has no suggestions to offer, then the tutor is the primary critical reader of the text. The focus of the effort and attention of both people is solely on the writer. The intense amount of personalizing that takes place in tutorials occurs only because there is an overt recognition that the writer's concerns will dominate the interaction.

Setting the Agenda for Collaboration

The agenda for tutorial interaction is set differently than in response groups. In Peter Elbow's teacherless classrooms, groups set their own agendas for what will be accomplished. Classrooms with teachers operate a bit differently, for as Harvey Weiner notes, the teacher's role is to structure the setting, assign the task, and then disappear. And the students' responsibility is to help each other and to use whatever they have learned to improve their own papers. While there is variation in the degree to which teachers or groups structure the setting and the specific tasks, response groups generally move forward after achieving consensus about what they will do together. The goals negotiated in the student-tutor session may also be a result of consensus, but more often there are multiple goals reached through several levels of compromise. In a tutorial, tension exists when the writer wants to improve the paper she brought in or successfully complete the assignment she has been given and the tutor wants to improve the writer. Thus, the student may want feedback on all aspects of the paper ("Is the conclusion OK?" or "Are my sentences too choppy?"), while the tutor wants to focus on one or two topics and deal with them until the student is more confident in that area. In such cases, tutors and their students have to negotiate some middle ground in which the discussion can proceed, but tutors too often feel—and strain against—the tug of the student's desire to get this particular paper finished and handed in. Or students come to tutorials with goals that are too limited because they are firmly convinced that the paper will be acceptable if the spelling is checked or the introductory paragraph begins with a snappy sentence or if they can stretch the length by another fifty to one hundred words.

Tutorial negotiation becomes even more complex when the tutor and student also include the teacher's suggestions in the agenda-setting conversation. Tutors are expected to include the teacher's preferences for the agenda, even when the teacher's list doesn't overlap very much with the tutor's or the student's goals. For example, a student may come to the writing center with the teacher's recommendation that he needs to learn how to define a focus for his essays. But the student has a draft in hand and wants to know if it meets the assignment (not how well it achieves its purpose, but a basic need to know, for instance, if the paper is an expressive essay) or if it "flows"—two very frequent student requests—and the tutor may hear in the initial conversation with the student so much hostility, indifference, or anxiety that the tutor needs to backtrack and deal with that. Because consensus is unlikely to occur in such a situation, the collaborative effort becomes one of either working on several matters simultaneously ("multi-tasking," in the argot of the world of computers), or agreeing to tackle some matters first and delay others, perhaps to later meetings.

By comparison, the agenda of the students in a response group is usually to read and respond to each other's writing—the response taking various forms, as determined by the teacher. One widely-used approach employs structured response sheets, though some teachers oppose such sheets because they inhibit

response (Benesch, Grimm). Another approach is to have each reader write down a response to each paper, though Joan Wauters counsels against structured response as too confrontational. Behind such differences, the underlying similarity in peer-group work is an assumption that in the give-and-take of discussing specific drafts, writers can offer each other evaluative responses or suggestions for revision while sharpening their own critical reading skills. While Karen Spear's book on peer-response groups does suggest ways to take groups through generating ideas, much peer-response work focuses on drafts. When Anne Ruggles Gere and Ralph S. Stevens studied peer-response groups to see what they actually do, they found that "students in writing groups tell authors what they think the language [in their drafts] says, they ask questions about the places which confuse them, and they suggest ways for the writing to do its job better" (97).

Writers working with tutors also come in for revision help, but it is equally common for writers to come in at other stages of composing (e.g., searching for a topic, trying to narrow it, doing some verbal planning, attempting to organize wads of notes into longer papers, or finishing a draft by working out an introduction or conclusion). While writing groups usually focus on whole papers, tutors are often asked by students to focus only on specific sections or parts that seem weak or underdeveloped. Despite the seemingly paper-specific tasks that may dominate a tutorial, the tutor's task is still primarily to help the student with the larger abilities involved. Thus a discussion about a weak or non-existent introduction in a specific paper should also be about the broader subject of how to write introductions.

Methods

Because the tutor is expected to individualize, the tutor needs the time and the appropriate methods to find out what a particular writer's needs and interests are. Here the tutor has an advantage over the teacher who most often works alone at her desk using clues on the page—a product-oriented method—to identify the writer's strengths and weaknesses. The tutor, with the student sitting next to her, can ask questions, engage in conversation, listen, ask more questions, offer support, and ask a few more questions. Tutors can rely on questions as much or more than evidence in the paper. Thus, successful question-asking and listening are skills that are heavily stressed in manuals for writing tutors (Arkin and Shollar; B. Clark; I. Clark; Harris, *Teaching*; Meyer and Smith). I've found one of the tutor's best questions to be "Why did you do that?" because, when students answer, they so often help tutors see what is needed or lacking. For example, when a student says that a particular type of support for an argument is there because that's all she could think of, the tutor hears something useful about the need for work on invention. Another powerful question in the tutorial is "How did you write this paper?" Tutors hear about

some of the student's *writing methods and strategies*, and this information can help them decide where the conversation should go next.

Tutors are likely to get both honest answers and honest questions from students (usually preceded by "I know this is a dumb question, but . . .") because the tutor has the unique advantage of being both a nonjudgmental, non-evaluative helper—a collaborator in whom the writer can confide—and a skilled colleague, one whom the writer trusts as someone reasonably knowledgeable. As such, the tutor can encourage open discussion about a variety of problems that may be affecting the writer's writing. It might take almost a semester to find that a writer is making no progress because she has become defeated by her teacher's responses to her papers (see Weller), or 15 minutes to discover that the writer has only vague ideas about how to tackle an essay on cultural criticism or that she thinks she has to have her topic sentence in mind before writing a draft. I often find the real problem is that the writer just doesn't understand the assignment and is wallowing in confusion. Tutors must also be skilled enough to notice text features that are inappropriate; uncover student assumptions that prevent further learning (Harris, "Contradictory"; Rose); recognize the need to work with different learning styles; deal with the different discourse communities for which students write (e.g., the various academic disciplines); recognize the difficulties of writers coming from cultures with discourse conventions different than the ones they are writing for; and help with attitudinal problems, emotional difficulties, writing anxiety, lack of confidence, and other affective concerns. Tutors trained in a variety of diagnostic procedures can, in addition to questioning and listening, try methods such as observing writers as they write or taking writing protocols (Harris, "Diagnosing") or using personality preference tests, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (Jensen and DiTiberio; Maid et al.).

The methods tutors use for uncovering writing problems or incompletely-articulated questions aren't generally suggested for peer-response groups because individualizing is not a major goal of peer response. Instead, peer response is intended to build a generally-heightened awareness of readers and critical reading skills. Teachers who structure response sheets may vary the sheets somewhat according to the assignment, but generally groups become more proficient at their tasks by doing them over and over, learning not only how to respond as they practice response but also how to function as a group. In one study of what response groups actually do, Anne Ruggles Gere and Robert Abbott observed that peer response proceeds primarily by directive comments. The most frequent idea units were expressed in comments about the content of a writing (e.g., "This part doesn't fit in because there is nothing about it earlier in the story") or about writing processes (e.g., "Okay, write one more sentence"). Other studies of what occurs during peer response are similar in that they report categories of comments. For example, Marion Crowhurst notes that the responses of the fifth-graders she studied generally fell into three categories: encouraging comments ("I like the part where . . ."), comments on content

("Some places don't seem realistic"), and suggestions for improvement ("Maybe you could add more at the end . . ."). Francine Davis's analysis of peer-response groups indicated four kinds of verbal activity: asking questions, proposing suggestions for revision, agreeing or disagreeing with the recommendations of peers, and explaining intentions about stylistic choices.

These categories of response-group comments also help to differentiate group work from tutorials, in that tutors are discouraged from making such directive comments. Training manuals consistently emphasize the tutor's role in helping the writer to find her own answers, in guiding the student by questioning rather than by telling or explaining. For example, here is the first instructional guideline in Arkin and Shollar's *The Tutor Book*:

Guide your tutee toward doing his or her own work. Get the student as actively involved in the learning process as possible. Do not do the work for the student (for example, write a paper, solve a problem). (17)

Similarly, Beverly Lyon Clark cautions that the tutor "should not make corrections but help the tutee to correct and improve herself" (110). Meyer and Smith also advise tutors about their nondirective role: "You can help a writer elaborate and refine ideas by asking thoughtful, specific questions. This practice is preferable to supplying answers, offering evaluations, or giving general advice, because it encourages the writer to do the thinking" (37). The emphasis on helping the writer to do her own work is, says Stephen North, a matter of asking " 'How are you going to get from here to there?' instead of 'Here's how you get from here to there'" (439). Unlike peer response then, which emphasizes informing, tutorials emphasize the student's own discovery.

A tutor who frequently tells students what to do is not a particularly effective or appropriate tutor, but a writing group member offering "try this/try that" comments is developing the ability to find revising solutions for a draft in progress at the same time that the writer is developing the ability to weigh possibilities. Response-group work is closer to the joint authorship that goes on in collaborative writing. And, since real-world writing is often collaborative writing, peer-response groups are also closer to what writers may find themselves doing in their jobs.

Some Cautionary Reminders

When considering the potential benefits of peer-response groups and tutoring, we also need to look at the problems that seem to trail along with them. Peer response, having been the subject of numerous studies, has a track record of conflicting results. While Ronnie Carter's study showed no noticeable effects on student writing, there have been reports that peer evaluation is as effective as teacher evaluation (Beaven); that peer response results in a better sense of audience (Glassner; Kantor); that there are measurably better gains in writing proficiency when students work in response groups (Clifford; Karegianes et al.);

and that, although students tend to make little use of comments in their revisions in the early stages, they do learn over time how to interact and how to be good critics (Ziv). But Karen Spear also notes the gap between the theory, with its powerful potential for having students share thoughts and drafts, and the practice, in which teachers “often regard group work with anything from mild reservation to outright frustration” (v). Carol Berkenkotter’s three case studies remind us that students who write for peer readers as well as teachers “might not necessarily reap the advantages we’d like to imagine” (318); one student in Berkenkotter’s study was unable to respond positively to feedback he received and was unable to give constructive suggestions, another student gained no help from her peers, and the third student experienced some loss of confidence because of peer comments before she finally regained control of her writing. Other studies also remind us that students may not be immediately ready to be competent critics. For example, the students in Elizabeth Flynn’s study seemed unable to recognize the substantive but less blatant problems in the essays they read, looking instead for surface errors or minor problems. Flynn emphasizes the need for training:

The reading histories of most of our students make it unlikely that they will suddenly and automatically become good readers of their classmates’ essays. They must be trained to recognize incoherence, and the training must be rigorous enough to counter their conditioned expectations about the nature of written texts. (127)

Similarly, Diana George observed that her peer-response groups had trouble reading each other’s essays helpfully. Moreover, in George’s study there was evidence that some groups failed to interact successfully and that much of what was said was lost because writers failed to assimilate suggestions. Some of this failure to interact may result from lack of training in group skills, but peer pressure can cause students to withhold negative comments, a case of what Jane Brown aptly calls the “unwritten code based on mutual protection [which] will inhibit honest, productive evaluation” (48). I hear echoes of these research studies when I talk with students in tutorials or interview applicants for peer tutoring. Some students dismiss peer responses because they question the skills of the person offering the advice, because the group never gets beyond the level of “The paper’s OK” or “You misspelled a word,” or because they too feel the peer pressure not to embarrass each other. On the other hand, some writers come to our Writing Lab determined to work on the group’s suggestions or apply to be tutors because their peer-group work has gotten them excited about talking about writing.

Since it takes time for students’ skills in critiquing to mature, no one should expect immediate successes with peer groups. But Thomas Newkirk also raises another problem, for a study of his showed that students and instructors frequently use different criteria for judging student work. “For this reason,” Newkirk points out, “the two groups might profitably be viewed as distinct

evaluative communities” (309). If students evaluate writing with one set of standards and teachers evaluate with another, as Newkirk’s study suggests, then students may likely be reinforcing each other’s abilities to write discourse for their peers, not for the academy—a sticky problem indeed, especially when teachers suggest that an appropriate audience for a particular paper might be the class itself.

Even stickier is a related problem in tutoring. Tutors are supposed to be trained to be better acquainted with the conventions of academic discourse than students in peer-response groups, but the more skilled tutors are, the further they are from being peers in a collaborative relationship. Students who see the tutor as a knowledgeable insider (i.e., someone who can tell them what to do) want answers from the tutor, and a common problem tutors face is straining against telling students what to do. Students ask questions that seek specific answers (for example, “What should I put here?”—a question every tutor hears frequently), and students can become frustrated, even angry, when their questions are met with more questions, not answers. The collaborative relationship that the tutor has attempted to establish may easily break down in this situation. Jeff Brooks’s answer is to move to what he describes as “minimalist tutoring” in order to shift the responsibility back to the student. Though the tutor may be successful in helping the student find her own answers, a problem that persists in all writing centers is that too many students continue to come in for the wrong reasons, because they recognize that tutors are more than merely peers. “Can someone fix my paper?” is a request that reverberates against the walls of every writing center, every semester, despite constant attempts by writing center directors to educate students in what to expect in the center. It is a conflict writing centers are likely to be forever saddled with: tutors must be skilled to perform their work, and students know that skilled readers can give them the answers they want. After all, that’s why they came to the writing center in the first place—to get expert help. Maintaining a stance of collaboration rather than co-authorship in the tutorial is a constant struggle—and it can disappoint the student. On an evaluation form a student filled out after a tutorial session with me, he rated me as “not very effective” because, he explained, “she just sat there while I had to find my own answers.”

A different problem is that inadequately trained tutors have a number of counterproductive tendencies. As Mary Dossin describes them, such tutors are prone to tackling the obvious kinds of surface errors instead of more substantive issues (a tendency similarly noted by Flynn in some peer-response groups); they tend to talk too much and overwhelm the writer; and they are likely to “act like detectives assigned to ferret out all the errors they can spot” (11), thereby hindering the writer from taking control of her own writing. So a tutor must be trained to be more than a peer who happens to be sitting in the writing center. But the tutor cannot move too far toward the position of a teacher because, as Mary Broglie vividly illustrates, tutors are not teachers who have shifted their

chairs to the writing center. Broglie argues that the tutor, unlike the teacher, is neither the authority in charge who gives directions and determines what will happen nor an evaluator who indicates where a paper met or failed to meet acceptable criteria. A tutor may assess what the writer should work on, but statements such as “You need to organize this paragraph” or “Your conclusion isn’t logical” aren’t appropriate comments from a tutor. Tutors too far down the road toward “teacherhood” are no longer sympathetic, supportive helpers, sensitive to the needs of fellow students whose world isn’t very far removed from that of the tutor. I was vividly reminded of how useful it is for tutors to draw from their own experience as students when I overheard one of our Writing Lab tutors vigorously questioning a student before she returned to the library for more research on a political science paper. Why, I wondered, was the tutor so busily asking the student what headings, key words, and terms the student would use in her search? The tutor later explained that he recognized a tendency he shares—to become so intimidated by all the resources that all one can do is wheel-spin, frantically noting every possible topic and source that might be remotely related to the paper. “I wanted her to have a shopping list so she wouldn’t check out everything in the *Readers’ Guide*,” the tutor explained. Good tutors must be fellow learners as well as fellow writers. Experienced teachers know this, but new tutors anxious to prove their credentials can—unless reminded—try too hard to cast aside their “studentness” and play the all-knowing professional.

The tutor, then, is a hybrid, somewhere between a peer and a teacher, who cannot lean too much one way or the other. Suspended with a foot in each discourse community, tutors perform a valuable service for their students. Since tutors speak with words students recognize and understand, they act as interpreters for those bewildered by the critical vocabulary of teachers. But this sensitivity to what students are unable to understand can become dulled if the tutor, enamored of the jargon of the field, moves too far into the teacher’s world. John Trimbur describes new tutors as often “caught in the middle, suspended in a no-man’s land between the faculty and the students” (23). Tutoring, continues Trimbur, is a balancing act that asks tutors to juggle roles, to shift identity, and to know when to act like an expert and when to act like a co-learner. Those of us who train peer tutors frequently have to remind over-enthusiastic novices, delighted with their newly expanded vocabulary, that we can talk about “heuristics” and “restrictive clauses” and “cohesion” in our training group but that these are not words to sprinkle into tutorial talk.

A somewhat different problem—one shared by teachers who promote peer response and by those who work in writing centers—is the marginalizing of this kind of pedagogy. The problem in the writing center is explained by Virginia Perdue and Deborah James:

The teaching in writing centers runs counter to the conventional notion of teaching: students, not teachers, set the agenda; the tutor responds and

suggests rather than directs. The student may or may not take the suggestions, and for that matter, may not return for another session. And of course, there are no grades or evaluations. Because the teaching that occurs in writing centers is often informal, collaborative, and egalitarian, it is invisible. And this invisibility makes writing centers vulnerable to uncertain budgets, staffing, and locations, but most importantly, vulnerable to misunderstanding that marginalizes writing centers not just within our home institutions, but even within our departments' writing programs. (7)

This marginalizing also creeps in when writing center directors are reviewed for promotion and tenure. I have yet to convince one of my colleagues that I fulfill part of my teaching obligation to the department when I tutor. Classroom teachers who use peer-response groups are equally prone to being marginalized because their teaching has a similar kind of invisibility. The work of preparing, structuring, and monitoring groups is overlooked by people who see the teacher as someone who puts students in groups and then spends her time staring out the window.

This reminder of shared problems brings us back to the ways in which tutoring and peer response are similar, for we recognize that they share a commitment to the collaborative, interactive talk that helps writers return to their writing with a better sense of where to go next and how to do it. When working well, both forms of collaboration should keep the student active and in control of her own writing, but neither tutoring nor peer response precludes the other. Tutoring offers the student individualized help over a broad spectrum of writing skills and problems, help which includes instruction of a kind often available only in the personalized, collaborative, nonjudgmental environment of a tutorial. And because the tutor is a skilled responder, the response time is spent more productively than is possible in group work until students learn how to respond. But tutors can also create confusion for writers when they intrude with criteria different from the teacher's. An advantage of peer response, therefore, is that it is done in the context of course guidelines. In peer groups, students also read a variety of other responses to an assignment and they get a lot of practice in responding. But to be productive, peer response requires that class time be spent in developing group skills and in learning how to offer and receive responses.

Given the advantages and disadvantages of tutoring and group work, then, there is indeed a solid argument to be made for helping our students experience and reap the benefits of both forms of collaboration.

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