

Examining Our Lore: A Survey of Students' and Tutors' Satisfaction with Writing Center Conferences

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During their rapid growth in the 1970s and 1980s, writing centers came to depend on “lore,” what Stephen North defines as “knowledge about what to do” (25), based on practice and inherited by one generation of practitioners from the previous one. This lore has been codified as “cherished beliefs” (Capossela 106), “default[s]” (S. W. Murphy 65), or the “bible” (Shamoon and Burns 226). Codified writing center lore covers a number of issues; however, its mandates about tutors’ roles as collaborators in conferences may have the most important effect on how well we serve students. In sum, writing center lore about tutors’ roles makes the following admonitions: To be successful, writing center conferences must be controlled by students; tutor dominance, often reflected in directiveness and possibly attributable to their greater expertise, upsets the collaboration by taking away students’ control and makes writing center conferences oppressive. Yet as writing centers continued to amass experience and as research about writing centers grew, the increased experience and the empirical findings led to questions about once-accepted mandates concerning the tutors’ roles in their collaborations with students. Over the past twenty years, empirical research has shown the limitations or inaccuracy of some lore-based mandates and has provided support for others.

Inspired by previously conducted empirical studies, the survey we report here brings together lore about tutors’ roles as collaborators in writing center conferences and assesses the influence of these mandates on tutors’ and students’ satisfaction. Conducted in the Auburn University English Center, the survey analyzed tutors’ and students’ responses from more than 4,000 conferences conducted during the 2005-06 academic year. Overall, the analyses of survey responses contradict lore mandates forbidding tutor directiveness and support empirical research findings showing that tutors are unable to avoid directiveness and that this directiveness is often appreciated by students (Clark, “Perspectives” 42; Thonus, “Triangulation” 74). The results also contradict the lore that mandates a tutor is more effective when lacking expertise in what a student is writing about and support findings from other empirical research that tutors need expertise in the genres of writing and, most often, in subject matter (Kiedaisch and Dinitz; Mackiewicz). For students responding to

this survey, the most significant predictors of satisfaction were their perceptions that tutors had answered their questions and that tutors were highly expert writers. Tutors responding to this survey were more satisfied when they believed they had used directive tutoring strategies. However, like previous empirical studies of writing center conferences, this survey supports the lore mandate about the importance of students' comfort in writing center conferences (Thonus, "Tutor" 125-26). Students' perceptions of their comfort and of receiving positive feedback from tutors correlated significantly with their satisfaction. Tutors' satisfaction was influenced by their perceptions that students felt comfortable and that they had provided positive feedback. In essence, therefore, among other attributes, satisfactory tutoring for these survey respondents requires caring, expertise, and a willingness to answer questions, sometimes directly.

One way of interpreting the results from this survey is to consider the applicability of Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford's distinctions between "dialogic" and "hierarchical" collaboration, adopted by other researchers to describe tutorial roles and conversations in writing center conferences (Blau et al.; Severino). These categories describe the two types of collaboration that, based on a national survey, Ede and Lunsford discerned as workplace practices. Borrowing these terms to describe writing center collaboration is problematic because they relate to "shared document collaboration" (Allen et al., 70), the common workplace task of team members collaborating to develop a product or solve a problem, the outcome of which is a single document – a rare situation in writing centers. In writing center discussions, dialogic collaboration, called "true" collaboration (Blau et al., 20), is often juxtaposed with hierarchical collaboration, which is associated with directiveness and power differences. According to Ede and Lunsford, dialogic collaboration is "loosely structured," with shifting roles and the allowance of unclear goals. Equality of power and an emphasis on the process followed in the collaboration distinguish dialogic collaboration, which Ede and Lunsford designate as "feminine" and "subversive" (133). Applied to writing center conferencing, dialogic collaboration requires tutors and students to assume equivalent or "peer" roles. On the other hand, hierarchical collaboration has "rigidly structured" roles, and the collaboration

is highly focused on efficiently solving a problem or producing a product. Ede and Lunsford associate hierarchical collaboration with a “masculine mode of discourse” and suggest that it is “typically conservative” (133). Applied to writing center conferencing, hierarchical collaboration requires tutors to assume more powerful roles than students and for students to accept their subordinate positions.

Based on the survey findings reported here and the results from other empirical research, we will propose that satisfactory writing center conferences exhibit a third form of collaboration, “asymmetrical.” This type of collaboration assumes expert-novice roles, where the tutor has more knowledge and experience than the student and the student wants the tutor to help with solving a problem or improving a draft. In asymmetrical collaboration, both the tutor and the student have power. The tutor has greater expertise in the subject matter or skill than the student, but the student has the power to initiate the collaboration and set the agenda. The tutor’s directive-ness is based on the student’s needs and expectations, and the tutor is responsible for making the student feel comfortable enough to take risks and develop and maintain motivation to complete the task. Although asymmetrical collaboration has not often been discussed in writing center conferences, it is commonly accepted in tutorials in other disciplines (for example, Fox; VanLehn et al.) and to some extent by researchers describing teacher-student conferencing about writing (Black). As other researchers have pointed out (Blau et al.; Henning), in successful writing center conferences, tutors are flexible in the strategies they use, sometimes directive and sometimes not directive, based on their ongoing diagnoses of students’ needs.

A Summary of Writing Center Lore and Empirical Research Findings

Early mandates about tutors’ roles in writing center conferences included three related admonitions. First, unlike what usually happens in classrooms, tutors and students, because they are presumably peers, should collaborate as equals in writing center conferences, and students should feel nurtured and respected by tutors. Second, tutors should avoid directiveness in helping students improve their

skills as writers rather than telling them directly how to improve a draft. Third, to maintain the equality and avoid directiveness, tutors should not exercise their expertise (if they have any) over students, lest they “shrink students into passive sheep” (Hubbuck 27) and shift the balance of power in conferences. Being freed from the constraints of classrooms and the power of teachers allows students to ask questions and talk openly and honestly in writing center conferences (Harris, “Collaboration” 276, “Talking” 28). These three mandates with their view of peers helping peers most often by eliciting already existing ideas or knowledge about writing probably derive from notions of tutors and students as co-learners (Bruffee; Trimbur). They also appear to be influenced by adaptations of Rogerian psychology, which intends to help clients develop “the power to resume control and move forward” (Taylor 25; Boquet). According to lore, the most effective tutor-student collaboration is dialogic, in Ede and Lunsford’s sense of this term.

As previously stated, results from empirical research have validated the importance of students’ comfort during conferences. However, data collecting studies do not support admonitions against directiveness, particularly when tutors make suggestions based on their greater expertise and when these suggestions are appropriate for the students’ agendas. Based on analyses of taped conferences and in some cases of surveys of tutors and students, writing center researchers have found that tutors are likely to dominate conferences (Clark, “Perspectives” 38; Davis et al.; Wolcott). Though the distribution of talk in writing center conferences is more even than in classrooms, tutors, like classroom teachers, talk more than students (Porter). Further, as long as the students’ agendas are followed (Henning; Porter), their satisfaction is frequently not diminished. In fact, students expect tutors to be directive (Thonus, “Triangulation” 74). Subject-matter and genre expertise likely enhance tutors’ effectiveness, allowing them to focus more on global rather than exclusively on local issues, such as proofreading (Bell; Kiedaisch and Dinitz; Mackiewicz).

According to empirical research, equality of expertise and status are not required for conference satisfaction, but students do expect tutors to be caring. Along with having their questions answered, students want a “feeling of camaraderie” (Henning 9) with tutors.

Table 1

Mandates from Writing Center Lore Compared with Findings from Empirical Research

| Mandates from Lore | Findings from Empirical Research |
|---|---|
| Students should talk the most, or at least as much as tutors; conferences as conversations (Bruffee). | Not supported by research (Henning; Porter). |
| Tutors should act more as peers than instructors (Brooks; Bruffee). | Tutors are perceived and perceive themselves as neither peers nor instructors (Thonus, "Triangulation" 71). |
| Tutors should avoid using directive tutoring strategies (Brooks). | Not supported by research (Blau et al.; Clark, "Perspectives" 46; Davis et al.; S. W. Murphy; Thonus, "Triangulation" 74; Wolcott). |
| Tutors should make students feel comfortable during conferences (Harris, "Collaboration" 276, "Talking" 36). | Supported by research (Thonus, "Tutor" 125-26). |
| Tutors should provide positive feedback. (Tutor training handbooks, for example, Gillespie and Lerner; C. Murphy and Sherwood). | Supported by research about politeness strategies in writing center conferences (Mackiewicz; S. W. Murphy). |
| Tutors do not need subject-matter expertise to work effectively with students (Hubbuck). | Not supported by research (Bell; Kiedaisch and Dinitz; Mackiewicz; Thonus, "Tutor" 125-26). |
| Tutors should lead students to answer their own questions (Brooks; Bruffee; Hubbuck). | Tutors should use their expertise to answer students' questions (Mackiewicz; Thonus, "Triangulation" 74). However, Thonus describes one student who appreciated the tutor's "conversational avoidance" in forcing her to answer her own questions ("Triangulation" 73). |

Besides helping students determine and develop thesis statements, tutors are most likely to be successful when they emphasize students' ownership of essays (Thonus, "Tutor" 125). Success is also more likely when tutors provide positive feedback (Mackiewicz).

Based on articles about writing centers published since 1984, the year when Kenneth Bruffee published "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind,'" we identified seven conference attributes, which were used to construct our survey items (described below). Each attribute relates to tutors' roles and hence influences the collaboration in conferences and has been an aspect of lore and a subject of empirical research about writing center conferences. Table 1 shows the lore-based mandates and the research findings that together make up the conference attributes investigated in our study.

Our Survey

In a procedure approved by Auburn University's Institutional Review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects, post-conference surveys were administered to students and tutors in our English Center during Fall semester 2005 and Spring semester 2006. At the end of each conference, students were asked to complete a survey, reporting their perceptions of various aspects of the conference. This survey was printed on the back of the sign-in form, which was generated from the online data management system designed to keep track of use and other variables related to funding. When a conference ended, the tutor called the student's attention to the survey, explained its purpose, and left the student alone to fill it out. In leaving the English Center, the student deposited the filled-out survey in a box on the transaction desk. At the end of each week, two of the researchers entered the students' survey responses into an online Microsoft Access database. While the student was responding to the survey, the tutor was on the other side of the room writing the required conference report and responding to items on another survey. After completing the report and responding to the tutors' survey, the tutor submitted the information to an online Access database similar to the one used for the students' responses. At the end of Spring semester 2006, the data from the online Access database with the students' survey responses

and from the online Access database with the tutors' survey responses were combined in a third database according to the unique number generated by the data management system when a student signed in for a conference. The resulting database allowed us to view the survey responses from both the tutor and the student for each conference.

During Fall semester 2005 and Spring semester 2006, a total of 4,081 conferences were conducted. We collected surveys from 4,078 of these conferences. 1,490 different students worked with 42 English Center tutors. Of the 42 tutors employed in the English Center for 2005-06, 26 were English graduate students, and 16 were undergraduates, some of whom were English majors and some of whom were pursuing majors in other disciplines. All of the undergraduate tutors had been nominated by English Department faculty members based on their skills as writers and as peer reviewers, interviewed by the English Center Coordinator, and required to provide a writing sample assessed as acceptable by the English Center Coordinator. Of the 26 graduate student tutors, 6 had worked in the English Center for at least one year. Of the 16 undergraduate tutors, 10 had worked in the English Center for at least one year. Tutors who had worked for at least a year in the English Center were considered "experienced" in our analysis. All tutors who had not worked in the English Center previously were required to attend a weekly training practicum. They were closely supervised and evaluated each semester by the English Center Coordinator.

Both the tutors' and students' surveys contained eight Likert scale items. The Likert scale required a 1 to 6 response, with each end representing an extreme of a conference attribute defined in writing center scholarship or an assessment of conference satisfaction. Six of the survey items reflected conference attributes related to the tutors' role as a collaborator, and two items related to conference satisfaction. The survey items were piloted during the Summer 2005 term, and revisions were made based on the survey responses from tutors and students and from interviews with the tutors. Five of the items reflecting conference attributes were matching—appearing in slightly different forms on both surveys. Two other items reflecting conference attributes appeared on only one of the two surveys.

The items on both the tutors' and the students' surveys are listed below. The abbreviation for the item appears in parentheses.

Conference Attributes

- Who talked the most during the conference? [Same on both surveys] (How much students talked)
- How did you view the tutor? [Student survey]/What did you perceive your role to be in the conference? [Tutor survey] (Tutors as peers more than instructors)
- How directive do you think your comments or suggestions were? [Tutor survey only] (Nondirectiveness)
- How comfortable were you in the conference? [Student survey]/What did you believe the student's comfort level to be? [Tutor survey] (Students' comfort)
- Did the tutor give you encouragement or point to the good parts of your draft? [Student survey]/How much positive feedback do you think you gave? [Tutor survey] (Positive feedback)
- Did the tutor sufficiently answer your questions? [Student survey]/Do you believe that you sufficiently addressed the student's questions? [Tutor survey] (Students' questions answered)
- What was the tutors' level of expertise? [Student survey only] (Tutors' expertise)

Conference Satisfaction

Ratings for these two items were combined to develop a single conference satisfaction rating.

- How successful do you think the session was? [Both surveys]
- To what extent do you intend to incorporate the results of this conference in your writing? [Student survey]/ To what extent do you think that this conference will influence the student beginning or revising his or her writing? [Tutor survey]

As previously stated, the local context for the survey was the Auburn University English Center, which, as part of the English Department during 2005-06, served only students enrolled in the University's four required English core courses—two freshman composition and two world literature courses. Auburn University is a comprehensive, land-grant university, enrolling more than 23,000 students during the 2005-06 academic year. In the year of our study, the Auburn University student body was balanced by gender, but its enrollment

was mostly white, with African Americans constituting less than 10% of the student population.

Although the English Center users during the 2005-06 academic year included sophomores, juniors, and seniors, by far the most frequent users were freshmen, primarily those enrolled in the two-course freshman composition sequence. Over the academic year, English Center tutors conducted 3330 conferences with students enrolled in freshman composition courses compared to 725 with students enrolled in world literature courses. Twenty-six conferences were undefined. The gender and ethnicity of the students who participated in the English Center conferences mirrored the gender and ethnicity of the total student body at Auburn.

In the results section, we report mean ratings for conference attributes and for conference satisfaction among the students and the tutors who used or worked in the English Center during the 2005-06 academic year. Then, we provide information about how much influence each conference attribute had on conference satisfaction for tutors and students. The survey results strongly support other empirical research about writing center conferences. When considered along with this other research, they increase doubt about writing center mandates prescribing dialogic collaboration and about allowing tutors without genre or subject-matter expertise to work with students. The survey results also validate mandates demanding that tutors be supportive and provide positive feedback. Overall, they support the view that both tutors and students are most satisfied when tutors assume the role of caring collaborators with subject-matter and genre expertise.

Results

The survey results were analyzed to provide two kinds of information. First, we calculated the means for Likert responses to each item on the tutors' survey and on the students' survey and then statistically compared the means of tutors' and students' responses. Second, we identified relationships between the items reflecting conference attributes and those relating to conference satisfaction for both groups of respondents. We were interested in how various

conference attributes related to writing center mandates affected tutors' and students' conference satisfaction.

To simplify the analyses, we developed matching variables for tutors' and students' conference satisfaction by combining responses to the survey items reflecting perceptions of conference success and of how much influence the conference would exert on the student's future thinking about his or her draft. Students' conference satisfaction was determined by analyzing students' responses to "How successful do you think the session was?" and "To what extent do you intend to incorporate the results of this conference in your writing?" Tutors' conference satisfaction was determined by averaging their responses to the matching items on their survey. Tutors' conference satisfaction and students' conference satisfaction were considered "outcome measures" for the second analyses. Matching variables for tutors' and students' ratings of conference attributes were as follows: how much students talked, tutors as peers more than instructors, students' comfort, positive feedback, and students' questions answered. The non-matching variables relating to conference attributes were nondirectiveness (tutors' survey only) and tutors' expertise (students' survey only).

This section describes results related to two research questions:

1. *How did students and tutors rate various conference attributes, and how satisfied with conferences did they report being?* This question was answered by computing the mean and standard deviation for responses to each of the items on the surveys reflecting conference attributes and for responses about conference satisfaction. In addition, the means for students' responses related to a particular conference attribute and to conference satisfaction were compared with the means for tutors' responses to the same items to determine if one group rated the items significantly different from the other.
2. *What particular conference attributes influenced tutors' and students' conference satisfaction?* This question was answered by analyzing correlations between each of the conference attributes and overall conference satisfaction.

Some students rated the survey items according to what we identified as "socially desirable" responses. For example, some students

rated all of the survey items with a 6: their comfort, the positive feedback they received, the tutors' level of expertise, the tutor's having answered all of their questions, and the two satisfaction items. We filtered the database to remove these suspect surveys and were left with a total of 3,050 conferences. The analyses reported in this section are based on those 3,050 conferences.

Tutors' and Students' Mean Ratings of Conference Attributes and Conference Satisfaction

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for the ratings tutors and students assigned to each conference attribute and for their ratings of conference satisfaction. While both tutors and students indicated positive feelings toward the conference process, students' ratings were typically higher, as five of the six items rated in common received higher ratings from students. Also, while both groups provided their highest ratings for the same three items (students' comfort, students' questions answered, and tutors' and students' conference satisfaction), the item receiving the highest rating differed. Students were most positive in terms of their comfort during the conference, while tutors were most positive about students' questions being answered. On the other hand, how much students talked during the conference received the lowest rating from both students and tutors. Both students and tutors perceived that talk was fairly evenly distributed, rating how much students talked close to the midpoint of the Likert scale.

Statistical comparisons of the five conference attributes rated by both students and tutors and their respective ratings of conference satisfaction were made using six dependent-samples t-tests. A dependent t-test is used to compare the means between two related groups on the same or matching items. In this study, the students' mean ratings of conference satisfaction and conference attributes were compared with the tutors' mean ratings on the same items. The results from the t-tests are reported with a t value and a probability level, or *p* level. The *p* level indicates the extent to which the differences between the two groups would occur by chance. In this study, $p < .001$ means that fewer than one time in 1000 the result was obtained by chance. When the probability of chance is low, the differences are

Table 2

A Comparison of Tutors' and Students' Mean Responses on the Post-Conference Surveys

(N = 3,050 conferences)

| Conference Attributes and Conference Satisfaction | Students' Mean (Standard Deviation) | Tutors' Mean (Standard Deviation) | T-Test Comparisons |
|--|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------|
| Students' comfort ^a | 5.30 (.907) | 4.56 (1.091) | 37.02*** |
| Students' questions answered ^a | 5.21 (1.017) | 4.78 (1.007) | 26.32*** |
| Tutors' expertise ^a | 4.97 (.857) | NA | |
| Positive feedback ^a | 4.74 (1.174) | 4.05 (1.321) | 35.18*** |
| Tutors as peers more than instructors ^a | 3.15 (1.302) | 3.56 (1.199) | -14.48*** |
| Nondirectiveness | NA | 2.93 (1.231) | |
| How much students talked ^a | 3.06 (.899) | 2.76 (.839) | 13.16*** |
| Conference satisfaction ^b | 5.23 (.811) | 4.61 (.993) | 36.97*** |

^a This conference attribute is a six-point Likert scale item.

^b Conference satisfaction is the average of two six-point Likert scale items: one for students' or tutors' ratings of the successfulness of the conference and one for students' or tutors' ratings of how much conferences would influence the students' further thinking and writing.

*** $p < .001$

attributed to another factor. In this case, such differences are attributed to the source of the rating (either students or tutors). Given our sample size, researchers would expect a t statistic of +1.96 or -1.96 to occur five times in 100 by chance. Our six t values are greater than 10, with four of them exceeding 25. Each of these results are not likely due to chance. In fact, the probability that these results would occur by chance is less than one time in 1000. These results are summarized in Table 2.

The results from the statistical comparisons revealed that the students' mean conference satisfaction rating of 5.23 was significantly higher than the tutors' mean conference satisfaction rating of 4.61. In addition, students were more likely to indicate that they were comfortable, that their questions were answered, and that they received positive feedback. Even though students and tutors indicated that both talked approximately the same amount during the conference, the difference is significant, with students believing that they talked more than tutors believed that students talked. On the other hand, tutors were more likely to perceive their role in the conferences as peers. Students perceived tutors' roles as closer to peers than instructors, but students rated tutors less like their peers than tutors rated themselves.

Relationships between Conference Attributes and Conference Satisfaction

In order to examine the extent to which specific conference attributes were related to overall conference satisfaction, Pearson correlations were computed. A Pearson Product-Moment Correlation is used to describe the relationship between two variables. In this study, correlations were computed to describe the relationship between conference satisfaction and the various conference attributes. Correlations are reported as "Pearson's r ." Such correlations range from 1.0 to -1.0. The closer the r is to 1 or -1, the stronger the correlation. For example, correlations of $-.75$ and $+.75$ are equally strong. The sign (- or +) indicates the direction (positive or negative) of the relationship. Positive relationships describe variables that people respond to similarly, while negative correlations describe inverse relationships. For example, the positive correlation ($r = .70$) shown in Table 3 between students' questions being answered and their conference satisfaction indicates that, on the whole, the more students perceived that their questions were answered, the more they were satisfied. The opposite is also true in that the less they perceived their questions were answered, the lower their conference satisfaction. On the other hand, the negative correlation between nondirectiveness, not telling students directly how to improve their writing, and conference satisfaction for tutors ($r = -.27$) in Table 3 indicates that, on the whole, the *more* tutors viewed their behaviors in conferences as

nondirective, the less they were satisfied.

Statistical procedures allow the determination of the strongest correlations by identifying which are significant. Significant correlations are indicated by asterisks in the table, and the level of significance is shown by the p value. As explained previously, if $p < .001$, then fewer than one time in 1000 the result was obtained by chance. These correlations were examined separately for students and tutors because of the difference in ratings between the two groups reported previously. These correlations are summarized in Table 3.

Of the five conference attributes rated by both students and tutors, three were positively related to overall conference satisfaction for both groups. According to students and tutors, the most important conference attribute is answering students' questions. The extent to which both students and tutors perceived that students' questions were answered was most strongly related to their overall conference satisfaction. For both students and tutors, this correlation was .70 or higher, indicating a strong relationship and large effect size. In addition, students reported comfort during conferences and tutors' perceptions of students' comfort during conferences correlated moderately strongly with conference satisfaction. Furthermore, among both students and tutors, there was also a moderate correlation between the extent to which students reportedly received positive feedback and their conference satisfaction. This result is consistent with the lore mandate that one way writing centers address students' expectations and needs is by assuring students that their writing is potentially effective—including by pointing out strengths in the drafts students bring to the writing center. As previously discussed, tutors' reported conference satisfaction was not as great as students' reported satisfaction with the same conferences; however, tutors and students appear to have based those judgments of satisfaction on the same conference attributes.

In addition to the three conference attributes described above, students' perceptions of their tutors' expertise also played an important role in their satisfaction, resulting in a moderately strong positive relationship. Tutoring for freshman composition courses and world literature courses, like tutoring for more advanced courses in academic majors, seems to require knowledge that the students believed

varied among tutors and that related to their conference satisfaction. Further examination revealed that students' reported comfort during conferences was fairly strongly correlated with both their perceptions of tutors' expertise and of the extent to which they believed their questions were answered, two conference attributes related to the tutors' role as expert.¹ We interpret this result as validating Thonus's claim that nurturing accompanied by tutor expertise increases

Table 3

Correlations among Survey Items Reflecting Seven Conference Attributes and Conference Satisfaction for Tutors and for Students

(N = 3,050 conferences)

| Conference Attributes | Students' Conference Satisfaction ^b | Tutors' Conference Satisfaction ^b |
|--|--|--|
| Students' questions answered ^a | $r = .70^{***}$ n=2,290 $p < .001$ | $r = .71^{***}$ n= 2,457 $p < .001$ |
| Students' comfort ^a | $r = .55^{***}$ n=2,292 $p < .001$ | $r = .52^{***}$ n=2,456 $p < .001$ |
| Positive feedback ^a | $r = .50^{***}$ n=2,252 $p < .001$ | $r = .40^{***}$ n=2,450 $p < .001$ |
| How much students talked ^a | $r = -.05$ n=2,276 $p = .005$ | $r = .03$ n=2,463 $p = .087$ |
| Tutors as peers more than instructors ^a | $r = -.01$ n=2,287 $p = .683$ | $r = .12^{***}$ n=2,461 $p < .001$ |
| Tutors' expertise ^a | $r = .60^{***}$ n=2,291 $p < .001$ | N/A |
| Nondirectiveness ^a | N/A | $r = -.27^{***}$ n=2,455 $p < .001$ |

^a This conference attribute is a six-point Likert scale item.

^b Conference satisfaction is the average of two six-point Likert scale items: one for students' and tutors' ratings of the successfulness of the conference and one for students' and tutors' ratings of how much conferences would influence students' further thinking and writing

*** $p < .001$

students' satisfaction with conferences ("Tutor" 110). Moreover, the correlations in Table 3 provide some validation for the lore-based assumption that writing centers function as safe places for students (Boquet; Carino). Even though the correlation between how much students perceived that they talked and their conference satisfaction reached some level of statistical significance ($p = .005$), this level is less rigorous than the level we set, and its magnitude ($r = -.05$) was too small to be meaningful.

Besides the three correlations mentioned earlier, tutors' conference satisfaction was also moderately influenced by their perceptions of their directiveness. However, on the whole, the tutors responding to our survey favored directive over nondirective tutoring strategies. In other words, the more tutors believed they were being directive during conferences, the more satisfied they were. We broke out the responses of experienced tutors, those who had worked in the English Center for at least one year, from the responses of the less experienced tutors. The analysis showed that experienced tutors reported themselves as significantly more directive than inexperienced tutors. The weekly training practicum required for tutors in their first year of work in the English Center emphasizes nondirective tutoring strategies. Once the tutors are no longer reminded weekly to use nondirective tutoring strategies and once they gain experience in working with students, perhaps they become more directive. Some tutors may also have applied their ongoing authoritative experiences as teachers or may have been influenced by their own roles as students in teacher-dominated classes.

Even though students were not asked to rate tutors' directiveness in conferences, their responses to the two items about tutors' potential dominance (how much students talked, tutors as peers more than instructors) suggest that this conference attribute was not a critical part of the process. How much students talked and tutors' acting as peers more than instructors received the lowest ratings from students (see Table 2), with both means a little above 3 on the 6-point Likert scale. In addition, these two conference attributes were the two lowest correlating attributes with overall conference satisfaction. Neither reached significance (see Table 3). These results are consistent with interpretations of empirical studies by researchers such as

Susan Blau and her associates and Irene Lurkis Clark (“Perspectives” 46) that nondirective tutoring strategies can, and should, be used selectively and flexibly rather than as a total approach to tutoring. Hence, the results of this survey along with other empirical research about writing center conferences disprove the lore that tutors should always avoid directiveness.

Discussion

Our study intended to explore writing center mandates about tutors’ roles and collaboration as dialogic according to tutors’ and students’ responses to post-conference surveys in the Auburn University English Center. Because currently we have no definition of conference effectiveness in writing centers, we followed the example of other researchers (Carino and Enders; Clark, “Perspectives” 42; Thonus, “Tutor” 125) in using satisfaction as an outcome variable. Analyses of survey results showed that students’ perceptions of tutors’ expertise and of having their questions answered exerted the strongest influence on students’ conference satisfaction. Considered across all students’ survey responses, students’ perceptions of their own comfort and of the amount of positive feedback they received also influenced their conference satisfaction. However, survey items related to lore-based mandates that students should talk the most during conferences and that tutors should act as peers rather than as instructors did not influence students’ conference satisfaction very much. Considered across all tutors’ survey responses, the strongest influences on tutors’ conference satisfaction were the same as three of those for students. Perceptions of answering students’ questions were the strongest influence, followed by attending to students’ comfort and providing positive feedback. Even though tutors reported more concern than students about maintaining a peer role during conferences, this survey item was only a weak influence on tutors’ conference satisfaction. Moreover, nondirectiveness appeared to be a consideration more for less experienced tutors than for more experienced tutors. In other words, our survey supported only those lore-based mandates about the tutors’ responsibility to provide a comfortable place for students to ask questions. Our results suggest that

our students want tutors to be subject-matter experts with extensive experience in the genres of freshman composition and in literary analysis. Our results do not support lore-based mandates advocating dialogic collaboration between equals. Instead, they reflect a more pragmatic and possibly more realistic view of writing center conferences. It is likely that students come to writing centers to improve the grades on their essays and that they expect to feel comfortable during conferences. However, they do not come to writing centers to form peer relationships with tutors.

Our results support findings from other empirical research, calling into question some aspects of writing center lore and supporting other aspects. For example, in developing a profile of a successful tutorial, Teresa Thonus writes that tutors should be concerned both with students' comfort and with helping students to improve the quality of their drafts ("Tutor" 110). In another study, Thonus again found that students expected tutors to have expert knowledge of writing, and although they did not perceive tutors to be instructors, students expected tutors to be directive ("Triangulation" 70-71). Thonus's tutors—all of whom were graduate students—were somewhat concerned about being too directive. Their directiveness was nevertheless documented by Thonus's analyses of transcribed conferences. Based on our survey results and on other empirical research such as Thonus's, we can conclude that tutors often use directive tutoring strategies in writing center conferences and that, on the whole, those strategies do not reduce satisfaction for students and or even for tutors themselves. However, neither our survey nor other empirical research about writing center conferences suggests totally discarding nondirective tutoring strategies. Students' efforts, feelings of being challenged, willingness to take risks, and independence are vital for their engagement. As Henning points out in her review of empirical research about writing center conferences, tutoring strategies have been found most satisfactory when they are flexibly used—when they vary between assuring students' comfort and ownership of their writing and answering students' questions to improve writing quality.

The findings from our survey also suggest the importance of genre expertise for tutors. In Jo Mackiewicz's empirical study of writing center conferencing, the tutor with the most expertise in technical

writing was also able to provide the most comfortable learning situation for the engineering students. The more expert tutor treated the engineering students' writing seriously, modulated the force of her suggestions, showed approval, and conveyed solidarity. Jean Kiedaisch and Sue Dinitz's research similarly demonstrates the importance of subject matter expertise in tutoring students from advanced courses. Our study suggests that rather than being overwhelmed by expert tutors, students find comfort in their greater subject-matter knowledge and writing proficiency. Our students' conference satisfaction correlated more strongly with their perceptions of tutors' expertise and having their questions answered—both conference attributes arguably related to the students' concern to improve their written products—than with student' perceptions of their own comfort or the positive feedback they received.

It appears that rather than dialogic collaboration, conferences in our writing center are most satisfactory when an asymmetrical collaboration is maintained. In this type of collaboration, unlike in dialogic collaboration, the collaborators are not equals because one has more expertise than the other. However, the collaboration is not hierarchical, with one person controlling the process. Instead the less expert student collaborator has a great deal of power in determining the focus and goal of the collaboration, while the expert tutor collaborator provides support for helping the student achieve that goal (E. Flynn et al.). The asymmetrical collaborative relationship is likely to proceed through scaffolding, where support and challenge from the expert allow the less expert to perform at levels higher than he or she could have achieved without assistance (Clark, "Maintaining" 85, "Collaboration" 7; T. Flynn and King; Hogan and Pressley). To enhance the performance of the less expert through scaffolding, an expert must be skilled in performing the task and must also be attentive to motivation, balancing comfort and challenge, and helping students feel comfortable enough to take risks. Scaffolding leads to and encourages students to be independent. As soon as the student has mastered the task, the tutor diminishes support. The tutor is concerned with helping the student develop greater expertise through successful performance improving a final product.

In an asymmetrical collaboration with an expert tutor and a less

expert student, the use of nondirective tutoring strategies encourages student control and ownership, but tutor directiveness is also expected, even required. As research shows, tutors and students are most satisfied with their collaboration when they agree mutually about the agenda for the conference and when tutors stick to the mutually agreed upon agenda rather than directing the students to tasks not agreed upon as important (Henning). Once the agenda is established, tutors are responsible for helping students maintain motivation and interest in the task through nurturing behaviors. However, tutors are likely to be directive in such ways as modeling, questioning, hinting, prompting, and probing students to successful performances (see Harris, "Modeling" 77; King for discussions of modeling that downplay its directiveness). In writing center conferences, therefore, experienced tutors may be torn between directive and nondirective tutoring strategies. Although writing center mandates might lead tutors to believe that tutoring should be nondirective, based on their experience with helping students successfully complete tasks, our survey suggests that they also believe that some directiveness is necessary.

Moreover, students are likely to encourage tutors toward directiveness. The students whom we surveyed might have been more concerned with efficiently improving their drafts to meet instructors' requirements than with improving their writing skills in general. At first this observation seems damning both to students and to the required English courses. However, besides their impetus to invest as little time as possible in English assignments, many freshmen and sophomores may not yet be mature enough to appreciate nondirective tutoring strategies. As found in longitudinal studies of development during the undergraduate years, students may change their views of knowledge and social responsibility substantially from their freshman year until graduation. As freshmen, students are likely to believe that "Right Answers" exist in the minds of "Authorities," whose role is to pass on those "Right Answers" to students (Perry 9; see also Baxter Magolda). By the time students graduate from college, some students replace this view of authority and truth with a view of instructors as experts, but not always right, and truth as relative.

Based on the results of our survey and findings from other empirical research, writing center researchers and practitioners can

discard the lore-based mandate for dialogic collaboration in conferences. The application of Ede and Lunsford's discussion of workplace collaboration to writing center conferences was likely mistaken from the beginning because the students who use our services are concerned with their own individual accomplishments rather than sharing skills to produce a single document that serves an employer. Once we are no longer hampered by the lore-based preference for dialogic collaboration, we can explore the nature of the asymmetrical collaboration that more likely occurs in writing center conferences. Research on the appropriate use of directiveness and on the importance of tutors' expertise in subject-matter and genres has already begun that task (see especially Mackiewicz).

Future research should be conducted to further define the asymmetrical collaborations in writing center conferences. For example, we could compare certain discourse features that occur in writing center conferences with the same discourse features occurring in teacher-student conferences and in peer review conferences. Using Tom Reigstad's models of teacher-student conferences as a framework, Kevin Davis and his associates and Willa Wolcott began this research in the late 1980s. Findings from both studies indicate that tutor-student conferences are sometimes as directive as Reigstad's teacher-centered conferences but that roles vary, with students having a great deal of control, particularly in setting the conference agenda. The finding that students rather than tutors set the agenda in satisfactory conferences suggests that writing center conferences likely differ from teacher-student conferences in some important ways. In addition, at their most satisfactory from the perspectives of both teachers and students, peer review conferences may achieve the dialogic collaboration mandated by writing center lore. Examining the talk in satisfactory peer review conferences could allow us to develop more understanding of genuine peer collaboration.

The asymmetry of writing center conferences also leads to a second direction for research, again considering the talk between tutors and students. Although Clark has suggested that effective tutoring likely includes scaffolding ("Collaboration" 7, "Maintaining" 85), little published research has reported analyses of satisfactory writing center conferences to determine if scaffolding does indeed occur and

to describe its characteristics. (An exception is Williams's analysis of writing center conferences with L2 speakers.) Starting in the 1990s, cognitive science researchers began to analyze conferences with what they called "expert" tutors teaching students concepts in math and science (Chi et al.; Cromley and Azevedo; Fox; Person et al.). This research has resulted in a fairly detailed description of scaffolding. We can use this description to begin our analyses of writing center conferences, modifying it as needed for our special circumstances.

In our training practicums for new tutors, we should discontinue prescribing lore-based mandates for dialogic collaboration. As John Trimbur pointed out twenty years ago, peer tutoring is "a contradiction in terms" (288). To encourage tutors to deny their expertise in striving for equality may hurt students because it may lead tutors to hold back suggestions that students need to improve their writing and because students are not likely to trust tutors who are not more expert than they are. However, it is important for tutors to know that their collaborations with students should not be hierarchical. Students likely not only set the agenda but also maintain control throughout in most satisfactory writing center conferences. Tutors also need to learn when to answer students' questions directly and when to require students to figure out their own answers, and they need to learn that, among other considerations, the level of directiveness appropriate for writing center conferences is relative to the relationship they have developed with the students and the students' expectations for particular conferences. When students feel they have lost control of their conferences, tutors likely have been too directive. Tutors need to support students in learning how to be responsible for their own learning.

We hope that, when considered along with other empirical research, our survey results will encourage writing center researchers and practitioners to do what Stephen North says does not happen with lore. Even though North writes that nothing is ever discarded from lore, it may be time to clean our writing center closets. Probably because of the lack of research about writing center conferences and the large demand for writing center practice during our rapid growth in the 1970s and 1980s (Boquet), many of us had to build our writing centers on the lore that students and tutors approach conferencing

as equals. Although much writing center lore is useful and has been empirically validated, especially the importance of students' comfort, the mandates upholding equal roles for tutors and students need to be cast into our discard bin. Impossible to follow, these mandates can be harmful to the students we serve.

NOTE

1. This finding is from a regression analysis evaluating the strength of the conference attributes as predictors of conference satisfaction. A full discussion of this analysis is available from the authors.

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