Review of *Talk about Writing: The Tutoring Strategies of Experienced Writing Center Tutors* by Mackiewicz & Thompson

Ben Rafoth

Indiana University of Pennsylvania
Indiana, Pennsylvania

In the 1960s, a young sociologist at UCLA named Harvey Sacks decided to study talk—the everyday conversations of life—by examining naturally occurring speech between people in careful detail, measuring every pause, hesitancy, repetition, turn, and topic-shift. Sacks and his collaborator, Emanuel Schegloff, focused on conversations because they believed conversations are a window into the deeper truths of human social interaction and because other scholars at the time had either ignored or didn't quite appreciate the significance of conversations. Linguistic science was on the march and attention had turned to Noam Chomsky's generative grammar, but Chomsky's syntactic theory left no room for interpersonal communication. Speech act theorists like John Searle and J.L. Austin had established solid philosophical foundations for language use, but they tended to rely on idealized examples rather than raw observational data. And while sociolinguists were well-grounded in social theory, researchers like William Labov focused on particular socioeconomic groups and their contrasting patterns of pronunciation and language use, not the paralinguistic aspects like interruptions and overlaps that bring conversations to life. In contrast, Sacks was interested in how people formed interactions through their conversations and how they manipulated things like timing, topics, and sequencing. He and Schegloff wanted to look closely at how people control a conversation's ebb and flow because they believed that the way humans conduct conversations with one another has implications for the larger social order. The difficulty for Sacks and his colleague, however, is that everyday conversations are enormously complex. Many social scientists at the time considered them interesting enough, but as data, they were thought to be too messy to analyze in a systematic and methodologically

rigorous way. All those topic shifts, back-tracks, and tangents, not to mention coughs and mumbles–what a researcher's nightmare!

But as we now know, the study of conversational interactions over the past 40 years has proved to be a fascinating and fruitful endeavor, capturing interest in such diverse fields as artificial intelligence, second-language acquisition, gender studies, and conflict resolution. I was reminded of this period of social science history when I first browsed Mackiewicz and Thompson's *Talk about Writing* and saw the good sense that could be made of data recorded from the "messiness" of tutors and student writers talking about writing. Everyday conversations and tutorial conferences have much in common, but seeing what makes conferences work differently from conversations is one of the many insights to be gained from reading this empirical study. The book's title may recall, for some readers, Beverly Lyon Clark's *Talking about Writing: A Guide for Tutor and Teacher Conferences*, published in 1985. The two books are quite different, although Clark's was among the first to include excerpts from tutoring sessions, as well as tutors' reflections. And while Mackiewicz and Thompson are not the first to analyze tutor talk, they may be the first to do so with the goals of giving writing center directors, tutors, and researchers a model for conducting their own studies and a tool for training tutors. The authors achieve these goals simultaneously, presenting data, analyses, and findings as they tease out implications for tutor education. The result is first-rate scholarship and a source of inspiration for anyone interested in writing center work.

In response to calls for writing center researchers to conduct more data-based, replicable empirical investigations, the authors begin with the theoretical framework of scaffolding, developed in psychology in the 1970s and '80s and closely associated with Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD). The core idea is that teaching in the context of one-to-one tutoring starts with the learner and what she knows or can do on her own; it then advances toward mastery as the tutor's support recedes and the learner can perform the task independently. The focus of the investigation in *Talk about Writing* is ten first-visit conferences between first-year students and experienced tutors. All tutors had completed a semester-long practicum; three were undergraduates and seven were graduate students, most but not all in English. The conferences totaled five-and-a-half hours

of talk and were examined for topic episodes at the micro-level and tutoring strategies at the macro-level. Using quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze the audio- and video-recorded sessions, the researchers zeroed in on three types of tutoring strategies: instruction, cognitive scaffolding, and motivational scaffolding.

Few concepts have informed teaching and tutoring as much as ZPD. One might ask, do we still need to study the ZPD, and if so, do we also need fine-grain analyses of tutorial conferences? Is knowing the minutiae of conversations worth the painstaking effort required to record and analyze them? Is this knowledge necessary for doing writing center work? And perhaps, do close-up analyses of tutoring sessions tell us anything about writing centers that context-laden research like case studies and ethnographies have not already revealed?

Talk about Writing answers yes to all of these questions and does so with a clear rationale, theoretical framework, methodology, and set of explanations, examples, and discussions. These aspects of the book are drawn together in the opening chapter to show readers what can be uncovered when two conferences are examined closely. In the first, a tutor comments on how a writer can improve his paper's focus, and in the second, a tutor explains how to make certain revisions. Each excerpt is the kind of sample one might find in any book or article about tutoring. Seen through *Talk about Writing*'s analytical lens, though, these excerpts reveal movements that take place below the surface: a writer's shifting priorities and how he is led to discover broken connections between ideas, how to repair them, and how to put the ideas in his head on paper in a way that is clear and satisfying to him. The ten conferences at the heart of the research for this book include sessions focused on brainstorming, revising, and proofreading, as well as writing in a discipline, a first visit, and a repeat visit. One of the later chapters is devoted to a writing fellow (former tutor) for a business and professional writing course. But from the first chapter to the end, readers see how short frames of verbal exchanges—the bursts of speech that make one-to-one tutoring unique—assemble to confront the big problems of teaching, learning, and motivation.

Tracking the appearance of discourse markers also shows what can be gained from close analysis. The analysis of topic episodes in Chapter Four confirms a consistent finding in conversation analysis, namely that speakers control movement from one top-

ic to another by signaling transitions with words like "so," "now," "O.K.," and "well." Tutors, for whom conversation is a primary tool of the trade, ought to be aware of discourse markers in their own speech and that of others because the way such markers are used, and responded to, tells something about what speakers' intentions are. Like many people, tutors might have a habit of using them too often or not enough, or they might not pick up on the ways others use them. Tutors who listen to their own audio-recorded sessions are usually surprised at how frequently they repeat common expressions. In *Talk about Writing*, observational data like this is offered as a tool for reflection and action, a way for tutors to share their experiences and learn from them.

Thinking of my own center, I often feel I skim the surface of what is really happening when tutors describe their sessions to me or even when I observe them. No doubt, I say, confidence is being built, questions posed, ideas developed, and advice given. But between us (assistant director, lead tutors, and me) we also witness stumbles and missed opportunities, times when things might have gone differently if maybe the tutor had approached the problem differently or with a larger repertoire of strategies. And while it's important to notice these moments, it is just as important for us leaders to be able to name and analyze them because doing so deepens our understanding of how they operate. In many centers, I suspect, we search for ways to describe our observations because we lack a conceptual and analytic vocabulary, and so we resort to telling: "the tutor said. . . . then the writer said. . . . then they discussed. . . ." and so forth. What we need, however, are terms that refer to the gears and pulleys of a writing conference so we can dissect them and figure out what difference, exactly, a tutor makes.

Talk about Writing helps to close the gap between what we see and experience and the vocabulary available for talking and thinking about these things. Its conceptual apparatus is good for staff meetings but also for research agendas, tapping into methodological resources we associate with fields close to writing centers like composition and education, and with those more distant fields, like psychology and discourse analysis. The book's point of entry into other fields is the multi-layered concept of *scaffolding*. Mackiewicz and Thompson use an eight-part coding scheme based upon work by researchers in math and reading. Using this scheme, the authors found that *reading aloud* and

responding as a reader or a listener are two strategies tutors used often, but what is interesting is seeing how tutors used those strategies and how they combined them with other strategies. Many implications and take-aways like this one fill the nine chapters of the book.

Empirical research is interesting to read when it is rendered transparent enough for readers to engage with it themselves, and the eight strategies Mackiewicz and Thompson identify in their coding scheme are open to further analysis, debate, and modification. For example, *pumping* refers to questions or statements intended to direct the writer's attention, such as "Where does a comma go in this sentence?" or "How can you incorporate those ideas into your draft?" Pumping makes it easier to respond because it narrows the writer's gaze. The fact that experienced tutors in the study used the pumping strategy relatively often suggests that we can expect our own experienced tutors to be using it. It also suggests that tutors believe pumping leads to a desired response. But whether it actually does or not would be a very good thing to know. Mackiewicz and Thompson help us to see, for example, that a key aspect of the pumping strategy is the degree of constraint it imposes on the writer's response, and this creates many opportunities to reflect on the give-and-take that occurs in tutoring. For example: Too much constraint in the pumping strategy may make the writer feel that the tutor is controlling, or too little constraint may lower the chances of a successful response. The result may be that the writer loses motivation, perhaps even signaling the opposite by nodding and smiling just to get things over with. How can a tutor know when pumping has become counterproductive? Or take the example one step further and consider that a tutor who is good at posing open-ended questions (low-constraint and therefore usually more difficult) is able to challenge motivated writers and keep them interested. Or perhaps the pumping strategy leads us to reflect on an entirely different set of issues. As an artifact of school discourse, the strategy imposes limits for some students on access to higher education generally and the writing center in particular. *Talk about Writing* does not take up this line of inquiry, but by focusing on the strategies, episodes, and sequences of tutoring, unraveling their implications both in its examples and illustrations, it helps us see our own contexts more clearly.

I also found surprises in the book. For example, the researchers uncovered relatively few instances of *demonstrating* in the ses-

sions they analyzed. This finding is surprising because demonstrating seems such a valuable way to teach and learn, to show not tell. Why didn't it occur more often in this study? I imagine my own tutors demonstrating how to cover all but the last line with a blank sheet of paper when proofreading, or showing how to read a paper from the bottom up to spot sentence-structure errors, or navigating to the hanging indent button in MS Word or the CMS section on the Purdue OWL. But are they actually engaging in such demonstration? Do they avoid it because it feels too much like doing the work for the student? Do they really know what they are doing in their sessions? In one of the later chapters, the authors reveal that one tutor who used the most demonstrating strategies was a writing fellow who tutored at her desk. These sessions involved more formatting than sessions with freshman papers, but the availability of a computer was also a factor, as well as the fact that the consultations were all with repeat clients, which expanded the opportunities for time-intensive strategies like demonstrating.

Another strategy the tutors in this study used rarely was *forced choice* as in, "Do you think the strongest support for your thesis is in this paragraph or in that one?" When writers are feeling overwhelmed with so many decisions to make, asking them to pick door number 1 or door number 2 serves an important function. It can help students prioritize their options and in doing so can settle one thing so writers can move to another. Forced choice is a cognitive strategy that also serves to motivate and teach. Why isn't it used more often? Are tutors reluctant to force writers into making a choice? Or is the analysis failing to detect it?

Not so much a surprise but a confirmation was learning the experienced tutors in this study were about as remiss as my own tutors when it comes to closing the session and planning the writer's next steps. A few years ago I found my tutors to be fairly consistent about negotiating an agenda in the opening phase of their sessions. But then at the end, before they wrapped things up, they neglected to talk about work the writer still needed to do before handing in the paper, though we had talked about this important step in staff meetings. Mackiewicz and Thompson's macro-level analysis of three stages of tutoring—opening, teaching, and closing—showed that only two tutors they studied summarized their sessions and set goals with the writer for work still to be done. One of my most experienced tutors re-

cently told me that closing with summary-plus-goal-setting is a hard thing to pull off because it makes her feel authoritative and intimidating. I want to know why.

In the 40 years since Harvey Sacks' research, the field of conversation analysis has been a theoretically rich, vital, and useful enterprise. It has paved the way for scholars like Deborah Tannen, for example, to study talk in the workplace and in families. It has also opened doors for studying a broad range of human interactions, from doctor-patient interactions to eye-witness testimony. One work to come out of conversation analysis had a particularly strong impact within the research community. In 1974 Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson published a DIY linguistic analysis in the highly regarded journal *Language*. In 2003 that article was recognized for being the most cited and most requested article in the journal's 80-year history, according to journal editor Brian Joseph (cited in Heritage 300). What made the piece valuable were the tools it provided to study conversations across contexts. *Talk about Writing* has the potential to be used in this way by writing center directors, tutors, graduate students, and composition researchers in a wide range of settings, not only because it describes a well-designed and thoughtful study but also because, as forms of human interaction, conferences and conversations are wildly interesting.

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