



Listening in/to the Writing Center: Backchannel and Gaze

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“Science doesn’t know what listening is and . . . what consciousness is. Listening is hearing plus attention. Attention is something that takes place in the brain, not the ear.... We interchange these terms—listening and hearing—but less is known about listening than about hearing” — Pauline Oliveros

One challenge we face as reflective practitioners in writing center work is that a process central to our practice—listening—seems invisible. To Pauline Oliveros, a pioneering experimental music composer, listening is a mental process: it’s really hard to see. The perceived invisibility of listening is perhaps one reason that, as Anthony Edington pointed out in 2008, tutoring handbooks have largely overlooked listening as central to successful tutorials (9). But is listening really as invisible as we might imagine? Observations of sociologists and sociolinguists such as Erving Goffman and Adam Kendon, when applied to close readings of tutorial interactions, can yield valuable insight into how tutors can better communicate our engagement as active listeners in tutorials.

It is easy enough to acknowledge the importance of listening in tutorials: listening makes the collaboration inherent to a successful tutorial possible. Listening as a solely audible phenomenon would exclude members of the Deaf community; I hope to make the point here that listening behaviors in writing center work are visible as well as audible.¹ But—through audist lenses or not—our challenge remains this: how do tutors signal writers that we are not only hearing them, but also paying attention, as Oliveros would have it?

Gemma Corradi Fiumara, in *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening*, uncovers and reframes listening, suggesting that listening is both central to and under-examined in the Western rhetorical tradition. For Fiumara, “there could be no

saying without hearing [...] no speech which is not somehow received" (1). Drawing on Heidegger, Fiumara characterizes listening as extending beyond the simple hearing or receiving of another's speech, that listening requires a gathering "which brings under shelter," that it is an accommodation which "is in turn governed by safekeeping" (Heidegger qtd. in Fiumara 4). This vision of an invested, empathetic listening is close to what we aspire to as tutors in writing center conversations. But how tutors go about communicating an invested listening in the midst of a tutorial has been difficult to articulate, at least in part because of the relative invisibility of listening as an active behavior, when compared with the more observable behaviors associated with reading, writing, and speech.

Julie Bokser, who espouses a "rhetoric of listening" as a guiding principle in writing center tutor training, posits, "I don't believe it is possible to teach someone to listen. But I do believe it's possible that, by foregrounding listening, students will become aware of how they listen" (47). Bokser offers examples of how apprentice and experienced tutors (and writing center directors) become sensitized to complications deriving from an engaged listening posture in the writing center, complications which include but are not limited to "navigat[ing] conflictual discourses" (48) and "resisting attempts to impose consensus" (53). Bokser's vision, deriving from both Fiumara and Krista Ratcliffe's seminal work on rhetorical listening, implicitly argues that listening functions as a type of first principle in writing center practice, establishing the grounds for invention, reflection, and inquiry, central to Kenneth Bruffee's perception of tutoring grounded in social interaction.

But Bruffee's vision, as powerful as it has been in framing the social and conversational nature of tutoring, privileges the expressive features of this conversation. As Bruffee states, "[n]ormal discourse is pointed, explanatory, and argumentative" (9). By emphasizing the role of the speaker and the speaker's pointed intentions in normal discourse, Bruffee's work exemplifies what Fiumara has described as "an assertive culture intoxicated by the effectiveness of its 'saying' and increasingly incapable of paying 'heed'" (8). Fiumara's observation suggests that our intoxication with expressive speech blurs our perception of listening as central to tutoring practice.

In this sense, the challenges of listening for listening are kin to the difficulties experienced when examining the invention pro-

cess, connected to listening in both its invisibility and centrality to writing center practice. Consider Karen Burke LeFevre's suggestion from nearly thirty years ago about the social nature of invention and how her assertions readily apply to listening acts.

Historically, invention has been neglected as a subject of inquiry because it has been thought of as a private and personal activity. How, after all, should we study an act that is thought to be hidden, mysterious, and inaccessible to research methodologies? (23)

This is the dilemma in studying listening—while listening is clearly central to tutoring practice, it's tough to identify. As Bokser suggests, we understand that listening *per se* may be difficult to teach, but we do have the capacity to help tutors reflect on how they listen. Though we can't see "hearing" taking place, except in rare instances, can we make listening more visible, more legible to all participants in tutorial interactions?

EXAMINING LISTENING

For the past decade, a small portion of our "Theory and Practice of Peer Tutoring" course at Colorado College has been devoted to watching how we listen. On the final day of the first portion of our class, senior tutors videotape apprentice tutors tutoring each other on papers they are drafting for the course. In the second part of the class, we view segments of tutorials, generally just the first few minutes of the interaction. As we view these clips, aspiring tutors are asked to consider:

- Physical posturing: How are tutor and writer physically situated? Does this change as the tutorial proceeds? Do tutor and writer seem comfortable with each other?
- Discourse: Who is doing most of the talking here? Is the tutorial a dialogue?
- Relationship: Does interaction between the writer and tutor change as the tutorial proceeds?
- Ownership: Based on evidence above, who owns this paper? Who owns this tutorial?

While observing and critiquing videotaped tutorials is a common staff development practice in many writing centers, we have found that our focus has turned increasingly toward listening behaviors. We are drawn to examining what listening looks like, studying, discussing (inevitably laughing about...) how listening is *performed* or manifested in the tutorials of aspiring tutors. What we've collectively observed over years of reviewing clips of tutorial practice is that listening appears to be manifested in

at least two visible or audible ways: in backchanneling and in gaze direction.

BACKCHANNELING

Roxanne Bertrand, et al. have described backchannels as short verbal utterances, e.g. *yeah*, *OK*, vocal interjections, e.g. *uh-huh*, or gestural signals, such as nodding or smiling. Magdalena Gilewicz and Terese Thonus say verbal backchannels serve a specific function in tutorial conversations. A verbal backchannel such as *yeah* can mean: “I support what you are saying and agree with you—and you still have the floor” (28). Gilewicz and Thonus assert “speakers generally deploy backchannels at sentence and clause boundaries as a supportive move to show agreement, attention, or empathy while accompanying the on-the-floor speaker” (32). Backchannels indicate not just hearing, but a listener’s active, audible attention. Yet, backchanneling can backfire—it can be a symptom of anxiety rather than understanding, or may function as an empty signal when a listener is not necessarily in sync or accord with a speaker. Backchannels can also indicate a struggle for control of the conversation or even signify displeasure (Gilewicz and Thonus 33). But backchanneling, based on my years of observing videotaped tutorial interaction among our novice tutors, is largely benign and affirmative, as evidenced in the following brief transcription at the early stage of one of our videotaped tutorials. Bracketed speech below indicates audible backchanneling or speech overlap; text enclosed in directional markers < > represents visible interaction between participants. Numbers in parentheses indicate a speaker’s pauses, in seconds.

W: Umm, sure. I do have, I have two copies (1) I have all seven, not seven, six pages—um, so I don’t know, we don’t really have the time

[OK] [So what would
<Tutor maintains eye contact with writer,
turned toward writer>

T: be most effective for these fifteen minutes?
<Writer looks down to draft in hand, hand to face. Tutor follows gaze to writer’s draft>

W: Hhhh—Umm—there are a couple of paragraphs I (2) there are a couple of paragraphs I’m worried about—yeah. [OK]

In examining these videotape excerpts as a class, part of what we are seeing and hearing in this tutor’s backchanneling and response is simple (and crucial) politeness. As Susan Wolff Mur-

phy has observed, successful writing center practice rests on acts of politeness (67). However, backchanneling of this variety communicates something deeper: a fundamental openness and a posture of active listening.

GAZE

In class sessions we frequently view videotaped tutorials with the sound off, slowing images down to track gaze, eye contact, and off-gaze glances. Adam Kendon's work on patterns of behavior in focused encounters offers insight into how gaze direction might be read in tutorials. Kendon draws from the work of Erving Goffman, suggesting "direction of gaze plays a crucial role in initiation and maintenance of social encounters" (52). According to Kendon,

whether or not a person is willing to have his eye "caught," whether or not, that is, he is willing to look back into the eyes of someone who is already looking at him, is one of the principal signals by which people indicate to each other their willingness to begin an encounter. (52)

Following from Kendon, establishing a mutual gaze—a nonverbal interaction between tutor and writer—is a central initiating act in tutorial interactions. Goffman asserts that

once a set of participants have avowedly opened themselves up to one another for an engagement, an eye-to-eye ecological huddle tends to be carefully maintained, maximizing the opportunity for participants to monitor one another's mutual perceiving. (95)

In class observations of apprentice tutorials, we often see postures reflecting Goffman's "ecological huddle." For Goffman this posture of "working consensus" creates a mutually held ethos between collaborating partners, accompanied by a "heightened sense of moral responsibility for one's acts . . . a 'we-rationale'" (98) shared by interacting participants in a mutual exchange. For Kendon, gaze direction on the part of both participants in a two-person conversation has both a "regulatory and expressive function" (81). In experimental studies, Kendon found that a listener's gaze upon a speaker is viewed by the speaker as a signal of undivided attention.

Kendon also found speakers much less likely to maintain steady eye-to-eye gaze with a listener while speaking, but a speaker's upraised gaze served two functions: 1) to ascertain "that he is being 'received'" and 2) to indicate that he is willing or interested in sharing the floor with the listener (77). For a speaker,

fielding a listener's gaze is to "receive an indication that one is being taken account of" (88). Gaze itself becomes a backchannel response, signaling a willingness to gather or receive (on the listener's part) and to share thoughts (on the speaker's part). Kendon suggests intermittent mutual gaze expresses continued commitment, that "to perceive two eyes focused upon one acts as a 'release' for specifically social action" (87). In close reading of the visual rhetoric of tutorials, we can aspire to identify postures of listening and openness in our practice.

CULTURAL FACTORS

Backchanneling and gaze behavior in writing center interaction are grounded in cultural practices and related to politeness, deference, and gendered behavior. Duration and frequency of eye contact clearly carry different meanings and weight from culture to culture. One experimental study of eye gaze display conducted on Trinidadian, Canadian, and Japanese subjects showed a wide range of willingness to maintain eye contact when subjects were asked questions to which they knew the answer, but almost no differences in eye contact between nationalities when subjects were asked questions that required thought and reflection (McCarthy, et al. 721-722). As Terese Thonus has noted, when working with non-native speakers of English, tutors exhibited "fewer overlaps, less laughter and greater volubility, creating an uneven distribution of talk" resulting in a "tutorial [that] exhibits the transactional nature of a service encounter rather than a conversation" (237). Flexibility and cultural sensitivity to learning practices are undoubtedly crucial to successful tutorials, but accomplishing goals may mean paying more attention to non-verbal cues and behaviors inherent to the contact zone work of writing centers that see a rich diversity of writers.

In *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers*, Ben Rafoth notes the importance of creating opportunities for tutors to reflect on tutorial interactions. Close observation of these interactions "can help tutors learn to balance their responses to the complex demands of working with multilingual writers" (Rafoth 65). A heightened awareness of how listening behaviors impact our practice recently resulted in the following excerpt from the observation log of one of our apprenticing tutors.

Probably the greatest thing that stood out to me about Peter's style of tutoring was how active and attentive he was. Whether it was through back-channeling, hand gestures, near continuous eye-contact, his confidence, or rephrasing

the tutee's paragraph as he understood it after she had finished reading, there was no instance where I felt that the tutorial flagged, was uncomfortable, or where Peter wasn't fully in the here-and-now present of the session. He also didn't take notes, which so far I have been loath to do. But after tutoring Charles and then seeing [Peter], I can honestly say that not taking notes made me feel like he was listening more, and absorbing, rather than filtering more, which I appreciated a ton.

TUTOR TRAINING ACTIVITIES

Clearly, a more systematic study of listening behaviors and postures of active listening in writing center tutorials and further investigation of the deep body of work on language and gesture would greatly benefit understanding of our practice. But here are some tutor training and staff development activities that can help bring listening to the forefront.

1. Ask tutors how they know someone is listening to them.
2. Identify and catalog postures and sounds of active listening, e.g. backchanneling, eye contact, and gaze direction.
3. Videotape tutorials between volunteer members of the staff to view with participants, or in larger staff development sessions, focusing on postures and interaction signaling engagement and active listening.
4. Invite staff members to collaborate while observing tutorials, focusing particularly on signs of engagement and listening. Ask participants to debrief each other and report their observations and reflections to the larger staff.

Active listening seems central to establishing an ethos of cooperation and shared responsibility in writing center tutorials. As Lonni Collins Pratt and Daniel Homan state in *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love*,

[w]hen you listen you get past yourself. . . . In the listening stance, the focus shifts from the self to the other . . . we have to make a choice to be receptive, to stop speaking and take an open stance. (qtd. in Jacobs 576).

This receptivity—central to writing center work—extends to reconstructing the role of listening in broader academic and civic spheres. Shari Stenberg has recently suggested “there is no genuine dialogue without dwelling in another's ideas” (252). The writing center is a dwelling built for just such dialogue.

1. Listening, for students who are deaf and tutors who work with these students, is cued by visible backchanneling behaviors, e.g. head nods and steady eye contact. For more on how listening behaviors bear on the success of tutorials with deaf writers, see Katherine Schmidt, Marta Bunse, Kynzie Dalton, Nicole Perry, and Kayla Rau's "Lessening the Divide: Strategies for Promoting Effective Communication Between Hearing Consultants and Deaf Student-Writers" (*WLN* 33.5). For an in-depth study, see Rebecca Day Babcock's "Interpreted Writing Center Tutorials with College-Level Deaf Students" (*Linguistics and Education* 22.2 [2011]: 95-117.).

2. My thanks to recent members of Colorado College's "Theory and Practice of Peer Tutoring" classes, particularly to Elliot Mamet, Jin Mei McMahon, and Jessalin Nagamoto. Names referenced in excerpts drawn from student writing are pseudonyms.



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