

A Multi-Institution Blog as a Site for Understanding Peer Tutor Discourse

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Writing center scholars have extensively examined discourses between tutors and writers (e.g., Mackiewicz and Thompson; Thompson; Harris). Scholarship about ways to talk and the values associated with those behaviors is codified in tutoring manuals such as Leigh Ryan and Lisa Zimmerelli's *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* is Lauren Fitzgerald and Melissa Ianetta's *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutoring: Practice and Research*. Although scholars have examined tutor identity and development (e.g., Hughes et al.; Denny; Green), less explored are the ways tutors talk about themselves and among themselves. Additionally, little scholarship analyzes students' online discourses in that key developmental time when they are new tutors.

As a former tutor and now director, I use staff development in part to train tutors how to be literate in writing center Discourses. James Paul Gee describes Discourses¹ as "ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities including gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes" (6-7). In our training at Penn State University, Berks, I ask tutors to try on (and take on) the Discourses of the field both explicitly (i.e., suggesting where to sit during a session) and implicitly (i.e., encouraging my tutors to value collaboration). In this way, I attempt to enculturate tutors into what I think are the discipline's best practices. However, traditional undergraduate peer tutors have their own Discourses within which most writing center directors are not literate. Directors can, as Gee calls it, "mushfake" literacy (13), but most are not authentically part of the undergraduate tutor community and therefore not part of peer tutor Discourses. Understanding tutor Discourses may enable administrators to more effectively communicate with tutors. Two cohorts could be examined to understand tutor Discourses: 1) a local cohort such as tutors at a single writing center or institution or 2) a cohort that involves tutors from across mul-

multiple locales. Specifically, a multi-institution blog may be an ideal instrument for gathering data representing the range of ways peer tutors write about, act on, value, and believe tutor practices in different institutional, cultural, and social contexts. This article attempts to uncover possible characteristics of that Discourse as depicted in a multi-institution blog for staff education courses across three universities.

A MULTI-INSTITUTION BLOG: DESIGN AND LOGISTICS

Blogs have been used in writing centers for some time, but this study attempts to expand how we discuss their design and use. In 2006, Melinda Baer shared how blogs were used in her writing center as a resources repository, an opportunity to include more technology, and a starting point for future staff conversations (2-3). In 2009, Jackie Grutsch McKinney offered more nuance to the topic of blogging by discussing writing style, integration of multimodal techniques, and public/private blogs (8-9). She suggested that in tutor training courses each tutor can write on a blog created by an instructor (8). In the assignment described in this article, I move beyond a single-campus classroom blog to a multi-institution blog across three campuses.

In the summer of 2011, I contacted two colleagues who taught tutors at two other institutions: Vicki Russel at Duke University and Eric Klinger at University of Colorado, Boulder. Both embraced the project. Our courses had slightly different purposes and practice training opportunities: Vicki's tutors were training to be writing fellows in first-year writing courses and did little-to-no tutoring during their course; Eric's tutors were training to be writing center tutors but did little-to-no tutoring during their course; and mine were training to be writing center tutors and were required to tutor two sessions per week (30 total sessions) during the course.

Vicki, Eric, and I collaboratively designed a series of prompts for the blog. We compared our syllabi and occasionally moved readings to new dates. Prompts were broad but still allowed students to draw on their readings. For example, one prompt read:

Imagine a scenario in which you work with a writer whose paper challenges one of your core beliefs. Describe the situation and discuss a strategy you might use to address the disconnect between your belief and that of the writer. What factors might go into your decision to challenge the writer's belief?

By understanding each other's objectives, we were able to design blog prompts we hoped would be appropriate for all tutors, even when they were not reading the same material.

Each week we posted a single prompt to our blog and then a subset of tutors at each school responded. Tutors were given the choice of using their real names or aliases; they were also reminded that tutoring sessions are confidential, so discussions of sessions needed to be anonymized. Tutors not creating posts that week posted comments.

PEER TUTOR DISCOURSE FEATURES

As the semester continued, patterns emerged in tutors' posts. April Leuhmann and Liz Tinelli's work on teacher blogs offered a useful heuristic for coding features of emerging patterns. They analyzed blog posts and comments (326) and found that writings fell into three categories: Cognitive Work (wrestling, displaying competence, critiquing self, experimenting); Affective Work (showing emotions, advocating); and Social Work (encouraging, commiserating, mentoring, sharing resources, dialoguing, connecting). With IRB approval, I used Leuhmann and Tinelli's categories to code 143 tutor blog posts and 236 comments, adding two additional categories they did not account for (critiquing others and offering agreement) since those categories emerged from the analysis. As a single researcher, I read each post and comment multiple times and coded each twice a few months apart. If there was any discrepancy in my coding, I evaluated those individual cases. As I coded, I considered the blog and comments in relation to each other and the prompt. For example, if the blog post asked for feedback on an idea, then the comments were not coded as "critiquing" others since the critique was requested. Each post and comment could have been given multiple codes. My results showed that in the blog posts tutors-in-training were most likely to critique themselves (55% of posts) and share emotions by describing experiences or reactions to situations (34%). In comments to posts, tutors were most likely to encourage fellow tutors either explicitly or with language of agreement such as "I agree" or "Great point" (59%). Finally, new tutors were unlikely to critique one another's ideas or suggestions and often did not ask questions of other tutors. In fact, they only negatively critiqued another's ideas in five comments. In the following section, I provide examples and explore each of these findings.

Critiquing Self

Leuhmann and Tinelli's study defines self-critique as writing that identifies personal strengths and weaknesses (327). In my data set, tutors-in-training frequently self-critique.² In this representative example, a tutor posted the following:

For me, I've always been told I was a strong writer. I never really

agreed with that, but it's what I was told. In fact, for the most part, I don't particularly enjoy writing. I can never think of what to say, I second-guess myself constantly, and I never feel like my writing conveys what it is I'm trying to say very well.

In such admissions, tutors offer negative self-critiques (i.e., never agrees with a strong writer identity) about their own writing and abilities. Rarely did the original posters write self-congratulatory or wholly positive comments about themselves, although commenters were often quick to encourage writers. This tutor's image of herself suggests that literacy in tutor Discourses, at least as offered tutor-to-tutor, may involve denial of one's own ability. Such self-critique makes sense: when tutors work with writers, tutors do not want to seem superior. Perhaps tutors undercut their own ability so as to feel relatable to their peers, or perhaps they genuinely do not see themselves as strong writers at this early stage of tutor development.

Issues of authority are always at play in Discourses around tutoring, and posts like this one can reveal possible features of tutors' doing-valuing-believing combinations.

In other self-critique instances, posters reveal how they are shaped by external Discourses:

I have to confess...I'm a Type A. Completely and utterly. If I write anything, even if its [sic] a piece of [. . .] rhetorical crap, my mind is probably going to standby [sic] by it, cross its arms, and say "Yup, looks good to me." Years of the academic training to b.s. proficiently has conditioned it to be that way. [...] So you can imagine my surprise when control-happy me stepped into my first writing appointment a year ago [as a writer], completely ready to give over that control. I had no desire to be in control. I had been brought up thinking that the writing center was [a] fix-it, here's-your-polished-paper-now-leave [sic] place where struggling writers went. I was...was it possible[?]...being a TYPE B. Because of stigma. Tutors are going to have to fight Type As and Bs alike because of stereotypes and stigmas. They are going to have to shove the writing reins back into the hands of the tutoree [sic]. We have our work cut out for us, but reverse the stigma we shall!

In this example, the writer shares her realization that context might significantly influence her writerly identity. She starts by "confess[ing]" that as a Type A personality, she tends "to standby" her "crap" no matter what. However, once in a situation of being tutored, she says she "has no desire to be in control," making her think she might actually be a Type B personality. She seems to realize that the Discourses surrounding the writing center have shaped the way she believes she should behave in the center. She

suggests that her behavior in giving up control perpetuates a myth about writing center tutoring as tutor-controlled, as evidenced by her exclamatory ending that tutors will “reverse the stigma,” which seems to refer to the “fix-it” shop myth. In this example, the tutor laments authority issues that pepper our sessions (“[tutors] are going to have to shove the writing reigns back into the hands of the tutoree”), but does so in a positive way. Ending the post with “but reverse the stigma we shall,” this writer seems to echo the optimistic energy of many writing center professionals.

Sharing Emotions

In Leuhmann and Tinelli’s study, sharing emotions is a significant part of teachers’ blog posts; that also holds true for the tutor blogs I examined. Most tutors shared personal stories. A recurring theme is represented in this excerpt:

I would write a paper and during the review, [my teacher] would demolish it. [...] I remember feeling sad, angry, and as though my opinion on my paper was not important. But it was those feelings that will make me a better tutor.

Many tutors wrote about when someone “demolished” a paper, and that such experiences fueled their desire to be a compassionate, empathetic tutor. Part of a tutor Discourse, then, seems to be that tutors can react emotionally to situations, but they need to reflect on that reaction and use it to make them better tutors.

Encouraging

Another common aspect of tutor Discourses in my data set is encouragement. Leuhmann and Tinelli describe encouragement as it relates to “professional practices,” but I coded any moment that tutors-in-training offered positive support: “Great point” “I totally agree,” “I think that you brought up a very important point in your blog post,” and “I really liked the picture and the statement that we should not be scared to relearn things. [. . .]. Thanks for sharing this.” Tutors consistently encouraged one another in comments to blog posters.

Conversely, only five comments offered any criticism of posts, and one of them generated much in-class discussion. One critique occurred in response to a writer at another university who had not used their campus’s writing center: “You haven’t visited the writing center yet but you’re a tutor? I go to Penn State University so I guess I could be confused by Duke University’s policies. Do the tutors not tutor in the writing center?” One way to read this comment is that the original commenter is asking about the space and location of the writing center and wondering why the writer had

not visited the writing center space yet. However, this statement reads as a critique because the commenter is responding to a post that reveals the author had never been tutored. Tutors from two universities read the commenter's post as critical and judgmental because the comment suggested that the original poster did not have credibility because she had not herself experienced tutoring.

Lack of Questioning

Finally, posters did not usually ask questions of their audience, nor did commenters frequently ask or respond to questions. As a writing center director, I spend much of my tutor-training time teaching tutors the value of asking questions during tutorials. However, in the blog forum, tutors rarely asked questions of one another, and, if they did, they rarely received a response. The comment section offered encouragement, commiseration, and sharing of additional perspectives or experiences, but few questions to original posters. Given how integral questions are to tutoring, I had hoped that the blog would also be a space where students asked questions of other writers. When I watch tutoring sessions in my center, my tutors-in-training do ask writers questions. Perhaps the prompt itself led to the discrepancy between the blog and tutorial questioning; it asked writers to "comment on" the posts. Other language such as "respond to" might have elicited another action, including questions. Additionally, a blog just may not be a place to engage in dialogue the way that we do in person, although Leuhmann and Tinelli's data set showed that teachers were quite likely to ask questions. Finally, another possibility is that tutors may not find value in asking questions—at least in that forum.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This analysis shows that tutors-in-training from the three campuses wrote in ways that are encouraging, self-reflective, and personal. The posts generally lacked questions, but these new tutors shared details of their pasts and a general positivity for their local and national colleagues. These elements seem to characterize some features of peer tutor Discourses. The analysis of these blog posts and comments is a starting point for understanding tutor Discourses because the posts begin to reveal saying-behaving-valuing literacy combinations—at least in this particular context. This study examined only three universities; other academic institutions may complicate this initial description of tutor Discourses. Limits to this analysis exist. First, requiring online blog posts written as part of a graded assignment to an audience of known and unknown peers obviously shapes what is and is not

expressed. Secondly, no tutors were interviewed as part of the study; posts and comments stood on their own. Therefore as someone who is not part of this Discourse community, my interpretation may be quite different from the original posters' intent. Yet, these posts can serve as one data point in a larger investigation into peer tutor Discourses. Finally, it is hard to determine if what students actually value is consistent with what they write. Perhaps future studies could use ethnographic methods that include undergraduate researchers to more effectively explore the relationship between the writing of tutors-in-training and their beliefs and values.

As an administrator and researcher, I find understanding peer tutor Discourses to be enormously helpful in four specific ways. First, identifying the ways tutors speak to one another can help me develop ongoing staff education opportunities. For example, I could imagine developing one workshop for handling conflict among peers or another for ways to give meaningful positive feedback. A second use for understanding peer tutor Discourse is that it helps me reflect on my own feedback practices with tutors and how my Discourse patterns intersect/converge/diverge with theirs. In addition, I may be able to help tutors who are struggling to fit into our community by possibly examining their interpersonal Discourse practices against those of the group. Finally, examining tutor Discourse opens lines of inquiry that I hope our community will take up, specifically to define the features of tutor Discourses and examine how literacy impacts group cohesion and development in a writing center community.

NOTES

1. Gee makes a distinction between discourse (with a lowercase "d" and Discourse with a capital "D"). A capital letter "D" refers not just to syntax and grammar of language but also to values, beliefs, and behaviors that a person uses.

2. Please contact Holly Ryan (holly.ryan@psu.edu) for additional information about the coded data.



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