

Taking Initiative: The Evolution of a Writing Tutor

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In her 2009 article “Scaffolding in the Writing Center,” Isabelle Thompson called for “longitudinal studies of tutors’ scaffolding behaviors,” and this project looks to follow Thompson’s call and examine whether or not tutors in one writing center significantly change during their time in the center. Anecdotally, the director of the Wittenburg Writing Center (Mike) would argue that the tutors sound different as seniors—more confident, more mature, more patient—but we had not before attempted to prove that claim.¹

The data for the project is a collection of ten audio files recorded by five writing tutors—one each in their sophomore and senior years. The recordings are a requirement for employment; the tutors listen to and reflect on a session every year they are employed.² Such reflection gives the tutors (and the director) a chance to think about individual sessions, but the recordings also provide a chance to consider growth for the tutors overall.³ Thus the guiding question for our research: are there differences in the types of speech and conversation habits these tutors use as sophomores and as seniors?

To begin to answer that question, we utilized Jo Mackiewicz and Isabelle Thompson’s taxonomy for tutor comments: direct instruction, cognitive scaffolding, and motivational scaffolding. All ten of the audio files were sent to an outside transcription service—each file was close to thirty minutes, so there was a nearly equal amount of session time to compare for each tutor and for each year.⁴ Once the audios were transcribed, the authors analyzed and catalogued each tutor comment into Mackiewicz and Thompson’s categories.

THE BIG PICTURE

When we had a final tally, we discovered what seemed to be changes in the numbers, especially with direct instruction. We knew, though, that comparing numbers is not always as helpful

as comparing percentages, so we also calculated the difference between the types of comments in terms of percentages (table 1).

TABLE 1: Numerical and Percentage Comparison between Sophomore and Senior Semesters

	Spring 2015 Sophomore	Fall 2016 Senior	Total
Direct	294 (17.7%)	662 (32.3%)	956 (25.0%)
Cognitive	1188 (71.5%)	1210 (58.9%)	2398 (64.6%)
Motivational	137 (8.3%)	117 (5.7%)	254 (7.0%)
Other	42 (2.5%)	64 (3.1%)	106 (2.8%)
TOTAL	1661 (100%)	2053 (100%)	3714 (100%)

To us, there seemed to be some significant differences between the two semesters, but in order to verify our assumptions, we worked with Doug Andrews, one of the math professors on campus who teaches a statistics course. He ran a chi square test in order to determine whether the difference was due to chance.⁵ He found statistical significance in the numbers (p-value of 0.000 (stat=107.8, df=3)), and, in his words, “[C]hanges of this magnitude are really, really unlikely to happen just from natural variation.”

Something, then, had changed from sophomore year to senior year. If we look at the sessions in the aggregate, we could say that the tutors talked more and utilized more direct instruction and less motivational scaffolding. That might not be terribly surprising, as seniors would presumably be more knowledgeable and more willing to tell writers what to do, especially if the writers were younger. This change aligns with Mackiewicz and Thompson’s findings in *Talk about Writing*, as in the successful sessions they analyzed, “instruction played a critical role” (100). In other words, these data suggest that seasoned tutors offered more direct instruction and were more direct in their conversations. The big picture argues that the tutors did evolve during their time in the center.

However, such a leap ignores that the changes found here do not hold for all five of the tutors. For example, Vicki⁶ talked less in her senior year session and had a higher percentage of motivational scaffolding comments, even as she increased her direct comments; Sondra, on the other hand, talked more in her senior year, but her percentage of cognitive comments increased while the percentage of direct comments stayed relatively the same (see table 2). The big picture does not explain each individual session because of all the variables at play in a session. It is not just that a tutor is older—we also need to consider the level of writer they are

working with (first-year, sophomore, junior, senior); the assignment (lab report, narrative, literature review); the stage of the writing process (brainstorming, revising, editing); as well as a host of other concerns, such as the respective attitudes of the tutor and writer, whether or not they know each other (ours is a small campus), and whether or not the tutor is familiar with the faculty member who assigned the work.

TABLE 2: Comparison of Vicki’s and Sondra’s comments During their Sophomore and Senior Years

	VICKI Spring 2015	VICKI Fall 2016	SONDRA Spring 2015	SONDRA Fall 2016
Direct	52 (13%)	80 (29%)	67 (30%)	91 (31%)
Cognitive	307 (78%)	152 (56%)	116 (53%)	177 (61%)
Motivational	22 (6%)	22 (8%)	32 (15%)	15 (5%)
Other	11 (3%)	19 (7%)	5 (2%)	7 (3%)
TOTAL	392	273	220	290

Therefore, we chose to look more closely at individual sessions; particularly, we were interested in whether any tutors had two sessions that might negate some of the variables listed above. One of them did. In both of her sessions, Sondra worked with a first-year student writing an argumentative paper, and in both sessions the thesis statement was discussed. If those variables were similar, perhaps we could discover what changes Sondra made in her tutoring approach based on her experience.

A SMALLER PICTURE

Our examination of Sondra’s sessions was influenced in part by Mackiewicz’s *The Aboutness of Writing Center Talk: A Corpus-Driven and Discourse Analysis*. In that work, Mackiewicz takes two approaches: she uses corpus analysis, or quantitative measures that examine “particular words and word sequences” in a set of writing center conversations; she then complements that approach with qualitative discourse analysis, identifying “how speakers co-construct their interaction on a moment-to-moment basis” (3). To begin, we took both of Sondra’s session transcripts and “cleaned” them as Mackiewicz did, removing the writer’s words and any “indications of . . . nonverbal behavior and the abbreviations that marked speakers’ turns” (24) like laughing or long pauses. We then utilized Anthony’s AntFileConverter to convert the documents into plain text files, which we then uploaded into Anthony’s AntConc 3.5.7, where we isolated specific words within the text to better understand how they were used in the conversation. As Mackiewicz

explains, AntConc can identify “word counts, most frequently occurring words, type/token ratios [and] key words” (24). The version we used can also plot out when in a session a certain word is used, using straight lines on a bar to show the relation of the word’s timing to the overall session.⁷

In Mackiewicz’s study, she found “five writing-related words that were key in tutors’ talk” (76). The words are *sentence*, *paper*, *comma*, *thesis*, *paragraph*. In Sondra’s sessions, the word she used the most frequently of these five is *thesis*, twenty-nine times over the two sessions (see fig. 1), and it is the use of this word that we find most compelling about the sessions.

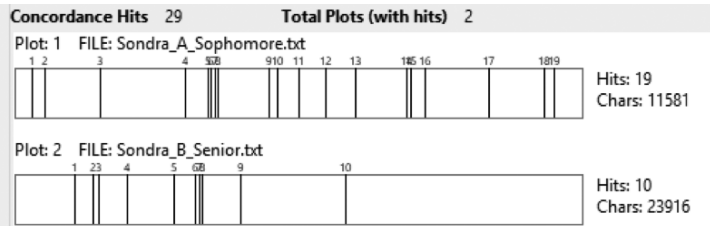


FIGURE 1: Concordance plot of Sondra’s use of thesis in her two sessions.

Again, we zeroed in on a tutor who had similar sessions in her sophomore and her senior years. Both times, Sondra is working with a first-year student on an argumentative essay, and both times one of the concerns is the thesis. Yet, just from the visual plotting alone, we can tell that the conversations are not the same. In the sophomore session (Plot 1), the topic of the thesis is raised early in the opening (pretextual) stage, and it is the writer who raises the issue. The thesis, she says, is her “biggest problem,” and she and Sondra spend most of the rest of the session talking about the thesis and ways to write a thesis—Sondra uses the word nineteen times, and she offers several pieces of advice:

- Something that you want to do in your thesis is to sort of start broad and then funnel down. So you’re kind of gonna give your reader, um, a preview of what you’re talking about in your body paragraphs.
- And then you think about them, you know, I have all these ideas, what is one thought or argument or claim that I can make based off of all these ideas? And then that’s your thesis.
- And then you go into your paper and do the same thing in more detail, your thesis is mirroring what you do in your paper, which is what it’s supposed to do.

Yet, the writer and Sondra never seem to have a conclusive moment, and this session has more talk about what a thesis is than what the

writer's particular thesis might be. The writer never really accepts Sondra's advice and explanation and continues to remind Sondra that she struggles with crafting a thesis because she cannot wrap her brain around what classifies as a thesis statement.

In the senior session (Plot 2), there is a bit of a delay before Sondra uses the word "thesis" because it is she, and not the writer, who raises the topic. This first-year writer mentions "flow" and "citations" as her major concerns. Once they begin reading the paper, Sondra stops and asks, "Okay, so is your thesis in this paragraph?" That question elicits some doubt on the writer's part, and Sondra quickly suggests a "thesis worksheet."⁸ As she tells the writer, "Okay, we have like a little worksheet that we could do really quick to help you come up with a good, like . . . a really rigid thesis." The two of them use the worksheet, and then Sondra asks if the writer "feels better" about her thesis, and the writer says she does. They finish the thesis conversation well before the halfway point of the session and move on to questions on organization. The last mention of "thesis" in the session (#10) is a reference back to the worksheet, directing the writer to remember her points and make sure her paragraphs connect with those points.

The comparison between these two sessions illustrates that Sondra is more comfortable and confident in initiating "topic episodes," which Mackiewicz and Thompson define as "talk focused on a single topic" (4), and that she has become more experienced in making those episodes productive. In this case, she utilized an outside resource. In the sophomore session, the writer initiates the thesis topic, and the two of them never move beyond that. Sondra does not seem to have the tools or the ability to move the writer past her initial concerns. In the senior session, it is Sondra who initiates the topic and then neatly brings in a resource that allows the writer to address the concern and move on.

In Mackiewicz and Thompson's collection of successful sessions, they found that "tutors launched or initiated topic episodes over five times as often as student writers," and they argue that this control "indicates tutors' roles as experts in writing, as conference managers, and as tutoring conversation facilitators—all roles that tutors must enact to generate successful conferences" (67). In her senior session, Sondra seems a much better conference manager and facilitator, and she takes on the role of writing expert by raising the question about the thesis and then offering a solution.

Granted, even though these sessions are similar in many respects, the writers were two different people, with different personalities. In the sophomore session, the writer portrays herself to be

someone who needs constant encouragement; she is doubtful of her abilities, and she expresses it often to Sondra: "I'm sorry. I get so confused." The writer, in fact, uses "sorry" five times in the session. Even when she mentions confidence, she immediately doubles back: "I think I'm good, I just ... I feel like I'm gonna stray off the topic." In the senior session, the writer was not seeking praise or comfort, but rather answers on how to perform to her fullest potential. The writer answers questions about her topic confidently, showing none of the self-deprecation of the other writer. When she is confused about something, such as a citation, she works through the difficulty with Sondra. The only "sorry" used in this session was from Sondra, who apologized when she could not make out a word on the page.

The difference between writers needs to be taken into account, but the difference was addressed by Sondra in her use of motivational scaffolding comments: they take up nearly 15% of the sophomore session and only 5% of the senior session. Sondra adjusts to the different personalities, yet in her sophomore session she does not initiate a topic episode as she does in the senior session. It seems fair to assume that the 200+ sessions she had between the sophomore and senior sessions improved her confidence to take more control over the conversation and be more efficient in her work with writers. She evolved into a more productive, successful tutor.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Just as The Carpenters sang, "We've only just begun," that is certainly the case with our question of tutor evolution. We have a tentative conclusion about Sondra's sessions, but we want to take that conclusion and go back to the other sessions and see if and how the other tutors might have initiated topic episodes and if we can chart their efficiency in those conversations. We also want to continue gathering audios each year and to make the same large-scale comparison between sophomore and senior sessions. The mix of the big and small pictures—the tutors' comments in the aggregate and their individual interactions with writers—helps us gain the most insight into our tutors' growth.

The work done on this project will be cycled into our tutor education. We will emphasize more resource use like the "Amazing Thesis Worksheet." Sondra's use of it in her session illustrates the efficiency of such resources, and we will take time educating tutors about all our handouts and encouraging them to use them. Also, in our overall numbers, we have a 7% total for motivational scaffolding comments, a number well below Mackiewicz and

Thompson's group at 22%. We need to ask what that means for our sessions with writers and if we should examine how often and in what ways we offer praise and empathy. In addition, we can utilize some of the analytical tools we have discovered from Mackiewicz's and from Mackiewicz and Thompson's works during our tutoring class. We can offer current tutors and tutors-to-be the chance to try AntConc so that they can examine sessions based on key words and word plots. Perhaps then, when they chart their use of words, direct instruction, and motivational and cognitive scaffolding, they can add to our knowledge about their overall growth as tutors.

Though ours is a small study at a small center, it is one of the few to consider writing tutors and their work over time. As Thompson argued, we need more such studies. It is important, yes, to examine individual sessions, but it is just as important to examine sessions as part of a long, complex, rich process of tutor development.



NOTES

1. We are grateful for the First Year Research Award (FYRA) from Wittenberg that allowed Kaitlyn to collaborate on this project.

2. The individual audio files are all accompanied by a permission form approved by our IRB office, and this particular study was separately approved # 062-201617.

3. The Wittenberg Writing Center employs between 25-30 tutors each year, about half of whom come in as sophomores and work for three years. Other tutors enter as juniors or seniors.

4. Such services usually cost \$1.00 per minute, and we had approximately 650 minutes of conversation. The transcription fee was paid for by a grant from the Faculty Development Board of Wittenberg University.

5. As MacNealy explains, chi-square analysis can be used when "we are primarily interested in the frequency or occurrence of a particular trait or quality," and such analysis is "based on the difference in what is expected to occur and what occurs" (104).

6. All names have been changed.

7. These programs, along with several others, are available free from the web site given in the "Works Cited." Once loaded, each program allows you to choose files to import. AntFileConverter turns Word documents into text documents, and then AntConc takes those text files and lets you select different options: e.g. upload a file, select "key words," and the program lists all the words used in the file in order of frequency. See also research.ncl.ac.uk/decte/toon/assets/docs/AntConc_Guide.pdf for an overview.

8. Google "Amazing Thesis Worksheet" for several versions of what we use.

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