

What *Else* Do They Take with Them? (And What Do They Leave Behind?): Understanding Writing Center Conferences as Opportunities for Tutor Transfer

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There is an energy that permeates regional, local, and national writing center conferences, an excitement that select undergraduate writing center tutors have the privilege of experiencing for an electrifying few days. This energy is marked by the support tutors receive from their writing center colleagues, the pride of presenting in front of an audience of their peers, and the joy of networking with other undergraduates working within the field. My belief in the impact of these conference experiences comes from tutors' anecdotal feedback and from what I have observed

over my ten years mentoring undergraduate tutors as they prepare presentations. While writing center work is generally understood as bound by a tutorial, moving tutors beyond their sessions by simply attending a conference can be a transformative experience, one that introduces an undergraduate tutor to a professional community perhaps for the first time. Furthermore, after some tutors' first conference presentations, I have seen them go on to share their work at multiple conferences, offering tutors authentic public speaking opportunities during their undergraduate lives. Other tutors design conference presentations about their tutoring strategies, and upon receiving positive feedback at conferences, further develop their presentations into empirical research projects or publications. Still other tutors have gone on to use conference experiences in a range of ways, from referencing their presentations in cover letters and job interviews to leveraging their conference experiences in graduate school applications. These observations have led me to wonder to what extent the labor—and love!—of conference experiences have a transferable impact for undergraduate writing tutors beyond the conference itself.

EXPANDING OUR NOTION OF TUTOR TRANSFER

While scholarship on transfer in writing centers has proliferated over the past decade, transfer is often defined as bound to a tutoring session. Specifically, the field has developed its understanding of transfer through looking at how writing center consultations

contribute to students' perception of knowledge transfer from one writing assignment to the next (Devet). Writing center research has also addressed how tutors might transfer strategies from one consultation to the next to support disciplinary learning (Bromley, et al.; Driscoll & Devet; Driscoll & Wells). My work here looks beyond the tutoring session, taking up questions about tutors' development, learning, and transfer of skills beyond the writing center, building on the work of Bradley Hughes et al. in "What They Take With Them: Findings from the Peer Writing Tutoring Alumni Research Project" (PWTARP). PWTARP identifies the effects of tutoring on tutors' writing, analytical skills, confidence, and interpersonal communication post-graduation. Yet, while Hughes et. al. report that 41.3 percent of their tutor alumni participants "presented at regional and national writing center and composition conferences" (20) during their time as peer tutors, the impact of these conference experiences goes largely unexplored.

PWTARP lays the groundwork for how writing center scholars conceive of tutor transfer as focused on how tutoring cultivates tutors' professional skills that are marketable after graduation; my goal here is to widen this view of transfer specific to better understand the impact of undergraduate tutors' conference experiences. Beyond their work with students in sessions, writing center tutors who attend and present at local, regional, and national conferences engage in a range of experiences that undoubtedly impact them in some way. Our field's developing interest in the pre-professional value of writing center work is important for how we understand the writing center's potential for cultivating interpersonal skills and other marketable qualities that future employers will value (Dinitz & Kiedaisch; Mattison); however, this work overlooks the developmental potential that other writing center work—like attending conferences, developing proposals, and offering conference presentations—can have on tutors during college and after graduation.

My early impressions about the value of tutors' extended work at conferences has led me to develop a systematized, inquiry-based approach to examine the opportunities for knowledge transfer beyond tutors' conference experiences. I define and explore the value of writing center tutors' extended work, or conference-related activities tutors enact beyond their sessions. This extended work includes: attending professional conferences, drafting proposals in response to calls for presentations, composing a presentation, and presenting at a conference in front of an audience. While what follows is only the beginning of this investigation of the impact of tutors' extended work, I consider what other knowledge tutors transfer—and what opportunities for transfer we might miss—from conference experiences. In other words, what else do tutors take

with them from their broader writing center experiences?

CONFERENCE EXPERIENCES AS OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRANSFER

To craft my approach to studying tutors' knowledge transfer from writing center conferences, I draw upon Dana Driscoll and Sarah Harcourt's methods of studying knowledge transfer in an undergraduate peer-tutoring course where they note that metacognition—or creating space to think about learning—is “crucial to successful transfer” (3). In adapting Driscoll and Harcourt's approach to metacognition, I designed a series of questions tutors could answer to reflect on their conference experiences. I emailed the questions below to undergraduate tutors upon returning from the Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association (MAWCA) Conference that our staff attended at Towson University on March 6-7, 2020:

- What did you learn from this conference experience?
- What did you struggle with, either in preparation for the conference or at the conference itself?
- What did you learn through this struggle?
- How did this conference experience connect with your courses or extracurricular activities?
- In what ways are you considering continuing your work initiated at the conference?
- What questions about your work do you still have? How will you answer these questions?

Tutors were paid for one hour of optional professional development time if they chose to respond to the above questions. Three of six undergraduate tutors responded to the above questions, so my work here offers a local narrative of tutors' reflections, honing in on how tutors transfer knowledge related to rhetorical awareness, writing center tutoring, and future research interests. This preliminary work offers an early framework for how larger scale studies of tutor transfer might be designed.

PERCEPTIONS OF TRANSFER DEVELOPED THROUGH TUTORS' CONFERENCE EXPERIENCES

The metacognitive exercise created a space for tutors to reflect on the learning that happened during MAWCA's 2020 conference and to begin making connections between various rhetorical situations in their lives. In fact, rhetorical awareness emerged as a category in each tutor's response to the questions in the previous section. Drawing on their presentation experiences in prior contexts, two tutors reflected on their perception of audience. One noted, “I assumed that since the audience for the conference were [sic] writing studies scholars, they wouldn't necessarily need background for my study.” Another tutor noted how “writing center *colleagues* are

very different” (my emphasis) as audience members than those audiences for “other presentations” they had done, further identifying that “colleagues” at this regional writing center conference “were very forthcoming with giving suggestions, constructive criticism, and discussing different aspects of what people were researching.” Both tutors demonstrate what educational psychologists Gavriel Saloman and David Perkins call backward-reaching transfer (118), in that tutors’ knowledge transfer draws on past contexts; in this case, tutors derive their concept of audience from experiences of having written for or presented to other audiences in the past, growing that notion to better understand what a professional audience can look like.

Tutors’ conference experiences encourage rhetorical awareness beyond the writing center and present writing center administrators with rich opportunities for maximizing rhetorical learning. One tutor’s response about their rhetorical understanding of genre was clearly informed by the challenges of composing for an unfamiliar rhetorical situation: “I think I struggled most with the proposal process.” In working with a tutor-collaborator to brainstorm ideas for their conference proposal, this same tutor noted that “eliminating options [for a conference topic] down to one was difficult,” and “expressing that idea in such a small [proposal] space was incredibly difficult because most of our planning had involved free-writing or preliminary scripting, neither of which lended themselves [sic] to shortening our proposal into a short enough description.” This response demonstrates that undergraduate tutors, who are novices when it comes to conference experiences, may not have a prior framework for the 250-500-word conference proposal. Further, this tutor’s reflection punctuates the importance of cultivating “mindful abstraction” (Saloman and Perkins 126), which can lead to knowledge transfer. Mindful abstraction names the reflective process that encourages the “decontextualization of a principle, main idea, strategy, or procedure” (126) to make other connections in learning. In this case, mindful abstraction helped the tutor understand that the conference proposal was an unfamiliar genre involving different conventions than genres with which they had experiences in their past.

Another tutors’ reflection upon their return from MAWCA suggests that they enacted what Saloman and Perkins call forward-reaching, high-road transfer. Forward-reaching, high-road transfer happens when a person makes a connection between the learning they have experienced in two contextually different situations, and where one situation points to a future context (118-119). For example, in reflecting on a presentation they attended at MAWCA, one tutor

stated that they realized, in their own tutoring, they “may be presenting fixes to an individual’s writing rather than providing [the student] options to use in the future.” This tutor wants “to implement” new tutoring strategies “in moving forward with tutoring.” This conference experience, then, helped point the tutor to a future context, a time after the conference experience, when they may potentially apply their learning within their own tutoring.

MISSED CONNECTIONS: CULTIVATING A CULTURE OF METACOGNITIVE REFLECTION

Tutors’ perceptions of the value of their extended writing center work at MAWCA 2020 suggest high-road knowledge transfer occurred; however, tutors’ reflections also reveal that they might not connect their own rhetorical agency to their work with students in the writing center. For example, the tutor who noted they had no prior framework for composing a 500-word conference proposal did not indicate that they connected this learning experience to their work with novice writers. So, while tutors’ responses to my questions demonstrated that they perceived knowledge transfer between their conference experience and their own rhetorical learning, they did not identify a connection between their own rhetorical learning and their tutoring. Although it is exciting to see peer tutors connect their conference experiences to their own development as writers, I wish tutors had seen a connection between their developing genre knowledge related to conference proposals and the help they give to first-year students developing expertise within academic discourse and college writing. This gap in tutors’ transfer cued me into the need to foster further reflection related to genre knowledge, the conference experience, and the work of being a writing tutor. As a writing center director, I want to help tutors see their own writing in unfamiliar contexts—like writing a conference proposal—as analogous to the writing first-year students do in new contexts, as well.

This metacognitive survey also revealed that undergraduate tutors do not necessarily see their work at conferences as existing within a larger research framework, as only one tutor connected the conference experience to their own future research. According to their response, presenting at MAWCA helped this tutor understand that they “would *like* to do research” (emphasis in original), and they plan to answer tutoring “questions through further research in psychology and writing center pedagogy.” While this response offers some sense that conference experiences *might* support tutors’ research, overall tutors’ responses do not point to a generalizable claim about the impact of conferences on tutors’ future research projects. Further study on tutors’ conference experiences could ex-

pand these findings to include a focus not only on tutors' conference experiences, but also on how conference experiences might impact tutors' future research projects, beginning with developing research questions, to collecting and analyzing data, to writing up those results for presentation or publication.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSFER, THE EXTENDED WORK OF TUTORING, AND UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH

This small survey revealed the need to help tutors make explicit connections between the work they're doing as tutors to their work beyond the writing center. As a result, I hope to establish sustainable methods for tutors to engage in metacognitive reflection about their rhetorical work beyond writing center sessions. Assuming a higher education climate that affords the luxury of a stable budget—a reality we may not see until well after the COVID pandemic—I will require tutors to answer metacognitive questions as part of tutor education, blocking an hour of the tutoring schedule for this work, rather than allowing this exercise to be optional. While I will ask tutors to reflect on the same questions that I indicated in an earlier section of this article, I will contextualize my questions differently, giving tutors a more specific sense of the range of work they completed prior to and during the conference. I will also add a question that helps tutors consider possible connections between their experiences as conference-goers and the work they do with college writers. My revised metacognitive activity is as follows, with specific changes italicized below:

Consider all the work you did related to this recent conference: composing a conference proposal, preparing and rehearsing a presentation, collaborating with writing center colleagues, and attending and presenting at the conference. Keep these activities—and anything else you might have done to prepare for the conference—in mind as you answer these reflective questions:

- What did you learn from this conference experience?
- What did you struggle with, either in preparation for the conference or at the conference itself?
- What did you learn through this struggle?
- How did this conference experience connect with your courses or extracurricular activities?
- In what ways are you considering continuing your work initiated at the conference?
- What questions about your work do you still have? How will you answer these questions?
- *How did this conference experience connect with your work helping students in the writing center?*

As part of this on-going process of data-collection in our writing center, I have constructed a Qualtrics survey to centralize tutors' reflections on their conference experiences. The accessibility of the Qualtrics platform allows for easy dissemination of survey questions and an accessible database of results. I also plan to make the categories I report in this piece explicit in future metacognitive assignments upon returning from each conference that tutors attend. In particular, I will foster tutors' ability to make connections between their conference experiences, rhetorical knowledge, and tutoring.

Further research is necessary to understand the intersections of writing center work and knowledge transfer related to tutors' conference experiences. Building in a framework for reflection after each conference—when directors and tutors alike are both energized and exhausted from such labor—can foster undergraduate tutors' ability to connect the knowledge they transfer from their extended work at conferences to other sites of research. After all, conference experiences can be a gateway into undergraduate research for writing center tutors and the potential to expand administrators' conceptions of the writing center beyond a service-oriented tutoring site. As Lauren Fitzgerald notes, conferences offer venues for writing tutors that “can serve as an invitation to professional conversations” (22), which may also lead to future publication. Framing the writing center as a site for undergraduate research also creates an urgency to mentor tutors' research more intentionally. In his study of tutors' and mentors' research experiences, Christopher Ervin suggests that “tutors recognize how research skills might transfer across contexts in a general sense,” yet participants in his study “seldom specifically described the nature of such transfer” (53). Ervin's claims about mentorship, alongside my framework for tutors' post-conference reflections, offer greater insight into what else tutors take with from writing center work other than tutoring sessions, and what tutors might also *leave behind*. This study is a call for further research into transfer after conferences to better understand the actual, not just anecdotal, impact of conferences on tutors. Such insights can help tutors maximize the impact of their labor to serve their own personal, professional, and academic growth.

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