

1-21-2015

# Reimagining the Dominant Narratives of Peer Tutoring: A Study of Tutors' and Writers' Stories

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REIMAGINING THE DOMINANT NARRATIVES OF PEER TUTORING: A STUDY OF  
TUTORS' AND WRITERS' STORIES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2014

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This study examines the narratives of writing center peer tutors and the writers with whom they work, investigating the ways in which their stories coincide with, contradict, and reimagine the dominant narratives of peer tutoring. Drawing from Grimm's (2002) theory of the "transitional space" of the tutorial and McKinney's (2013) conception of the "grand narrative" of writing center work, this study aims to reposition the conversation about the interaction between tutors and writers, illustrating the ways in which their voices can enhance understandings of writing center theory and pedagogy. Drawing from narrative inquiry and grounded theory, this case study examines the narratives of tutors and writers, addressing the following research questions:

- What stories do tutors and writers tell about their work in the writing center?
- How do these stories reflect how tutors and writers perceive writing center work?
- How do these stories support, contradict, expand or reimagine the dominant narratives of peer tutoring, and how can the study of tutors' and writers' stories advance our understanding of writing center work?

Ultimately, significant differences were discovered in the stories tutors and writers told and in their perceptions of one another and of writing center work. Tutors focused in their stories on “higher order concerns” and made clear differentiations about what issues tutors should and should not help with. Writers perceived the role of the tutor as more flexible and told stories that spanned well beyond the space of the tutoring session. While tutors’ stories were clearly shaped by dominant narratives of peer tutoring, their narratives also revealed significant insights about the teaching of writing; writers’ narratives, too, painted their needs, and insights in more complex terms than often discussed in writing center literature.

This study presents an argument for the inclusion of the voices and stories of tutors and writers in the development of writing center theory and pedagogy. Moreover, it posits that the dominant narratives of peer tutoring are insufficiently complex and that the stories of tutors and writers play a key role in the reimagining of these dominant narratives.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the guidance and support of my committee. Thank you to Dr. Sharon Deckert and Dr. Nicole Kraemer Munday, for being so generous with your valuable time, guidance, and feedback—I have learned so much from you both. Thank you to Dr. Ben Rafoth, for your constant patience, encouragement, insight, and uncanny ability to answer questions I didn't even know that I had. I truly appreciate having had the opportunity to work with you and learn from you.

Thank you to the IUP students and writing center tutors who agreed to participate in my research. Studying your stories has been a fascinating and challenging experience; talking to you, listening to you, and learning from you has been a privilege.

Thank you to all of my professors, classmates, and coworkers at IUP for your ongoing encouragement. In particular, I would like to thank Dr. Tina Perdue, for being such a supportive mentor during our time working together. In addition, many thanks to my summer placement reading friends for being such great sources of motivation and humor and for reminding me, as always, that “good writing comes from the heart.”

Thank you to the peer tutors at the Stetson University Writing Center. Writing the last chapters of this dissertation while sitting in my office, hearing the buzz of the writing center from down the hall, listening to you all laugh and talk and teach and learn from each other, was profoundly inspirational.

Thank you to Dr. Jon Olson and Dr. Julie Story, who introduced me to the wonderful world of writing center work. My time as a peer tutor in writing at Penn State University was a truly transformational experience. Thank you for being such wonderful guides and mentors—I would never have set off on this path without you both, and I am so grateful that I did.

Thank you to my husband, Jim Gates. I have been working on this dissertation for the entirety of our marriage, and during that time, I don't think our dining room table has ever been free of my books, papers, and notes. You never once complained, though, and more than that, you remained so steadfast, confident, and unselfish in your support of me and belief in me. Thank you, I love you, and I promise we can sit at the table to eat again soon.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this dissertation with many thanks and much love to my parents. To my father, Steven Herb—your enduring belief in the power and the magic of words and stories has become my own, helping to guide and shape my work and my life. To my mother, Sara Willoughby-Herb—knowing that you successfully made a similar academic journey yourself, under far more adverse circumstances, remained a constant source of inspiration to me throughout this process. You are my role model as a teacher and as a woman. I love you both very much.



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## CHAPTER 1

### THE PROBLEM

This study is an examination of the stories told by writing center peer tutors and the writers with whom they work. These stories were examined for what they reveal about how tutors and writers perceive each other, their work, and the writing center in general. These stories were also examined in relation to the metanarratives of peer tutoring that dominate writing center studies. Ultimately, significant disparities were found to exist between tutors' and writers' stories; in addition, these stories told by tutors and writers call into question the dominant narratives of peer tutoring and illustrate their entrenched, yet limiting, nature. The argument that this dissertation puts forth, then, is that the stories told by tutors and writers about the work they do have an important role in broadening and reimagining elements of writing center theory and pedagogy.

Though tutor-writer interaction has been frequently investigated in writing center literature, historically this research has marginalized the voices of tutors and writers concerning their own interaction (Vandenberg, 1999; Boquet, 2000). Furthermore, although arguments have been made for the importance of stories to writing center work (Briggs & Woolbright, 2000), the stories that are most often passed down and privileged are those that lack complexity and serve to preserve the status quo (McKinney, 2013). This study seeks to centralize the voices and stories of tutors and writers—stories that may often go unexamined—with respect to the complicated nature of their interaction and their perceptions of writing center work.

This chapter begins with a situated overview of the study's background, both with respect to my own professional experience that prompted the initial research questions and within the context of writing center and composition literature. Following this overview is a discussion of the study itself, its significance and a list of key terms and definitions relevant to the study.

### **Study Background**

The genesis of this study developed from my own academic experiences with writing centers, first as a student writer who received tutoring, then as a tutor myself, and later a writing center administrator and a composition teacher whose students frequently received writing center tutoring. My early experiences with tutoring—as a student writer seeking help and later as a peer tutor—were formative and transformative; however, as I moved away from my role as student and tutor, and on to other roles—writing center administrator and composition teacher—I found myself becoming more and more detached from those early experiences, even as I became more well-versed in the theory that informed them.

I remember my surprise when an ambitious series of tutor-training workshops I planned—my first major project as assistant director of the Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) Writing Center—were met with profound skepticism from the group of tutors with whom I was working. These workshops asked tutors to rethink their roles and their interaction with the writers they tutored, what I perceived to be an exciting new way to engage with tutors about the theory that undergirded their work. As I teased out their resistance, however, the disconnect on my part became clear: what I was advocating wouldn't work, the

tutors told me—or at least not with the limited time and resources at our disposal. (Herb & Perdue, 2011). And as I listened—finally—to their very practical and thoughtful concerns, I was struck by how completely I had managed to overlook their insight, as well as how much would have been lost without the benefit of their expertise

And it wasn't just tutors who had something important to say. Later that year, after I began teaching composition classes and encouraging my students to visit the writing center, I began to notice significant differences in the way that these student writers described their visits to the writing center as compared to those of the tutors with whom I spoke. While I had not intended to compare these descriptions side-by-side, a conference with a student one day in which she described her session at the writing center and the tutor who "hurt [her] feelings," followed by a chance conversation later with that very tutor who characterized their session as "really productive," concerned me. Struck by how differently both my student and the tutor described what had happened, I couldn't help but wonder how the tutor and the writer had come to perceive their shared experience so differently. And I wondered how often similar situations occurred.

Distinct though they were, these two experiences both helped lead me to the key themes that frame this study: the marginalization of tutors' and writers' voices in writing center scholarship, the knowledge and insight that is lost as a result, and the tremendous benefits to writing center research that could come from centralizing the stories told by tutors and writers.

## Context of the Study

Central to this study is the unique dynamic between peer tutor and writer and the interaction that is the result. This distinct, yet complex, relationship is a central focus in much writing center literature and serves as the very cornerstone of the work that many writing centers do. Profoundly influenced by North's (1984/2008) "idea" of a writing center that was student-centered and by Bruffee's (1984) work on collaborative learning, which centered on the pedagogical importance of conversation between peers, many writing centers moved away, in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from early models which focused on remediation and toward a model which placed collaboration as its central focus. Lunsford (1991) described this sort of model as a "Burkean parlor," in which "control, power, and authority" were placed "not in the tutor or staff, not in the individual student, but in the negotiating group" and which was "informed by a theory of knowledge as socially constructed, of power and control as constantly negotiated and shared, and of collaboration as its first principle of learning" (p. 5). This overall shift toward a collaborative tutoring model influenced tremendously how peer tutors learned to do their jobs—and still does to a great extent. Tutoring guides—many still in use today— are comprised of advice grounded in this early work, with suggestions for tutors to use questioning strategies, focus first on higher-order concerns, and share control of the session with the writer (Gillespie & Lerner, 2007; Meyer & Smith, 1987; Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2009).

Although far-reaching, this model was increasingly problematized as more and more writing center literature critiqued the "idealizations of peer tutoring



forwarded by collaborative learning theorists” (Gillam, 1994, p. 50). Shamoan and Burns (1995) addressed the benefits of more directive tutoring, arguing for writing centers to embrace alternate approaches as needed. Further critiques suggested that overemphasis on the collaborative model and the peer relationship between tutor and writer can mask the very real power disparity between the two and the institutional authority held by the tutor and the writing center relative to the writer (Bawarshi & Pelkowski, 1999; Grimm, 1999).

These types of conversations—primarily between fellow writing center administrators—about tutors’ roles and best tutoring practices continue today, in the pages of *The Writing Center Journal*, on listservs, and at writing center conferences. Certainly some of the “innocence” of early writing center work that Grimm (1999) critiques has been lost. Issues of power, authority, agency, and cultural and social contexts are increasingly invoked in writing center literature, reflecting a growing awareness that what happens during a tutorial is complicated and dynamic, often requiring the tutor and writer to renegotiate and reconfigure their roles and their power dynamic multiple times within the same conversation (Carino, 2003; Thompson et al., 2009; Thonus, 2001).

Even as this growing recognition of the complicated nature of peer tutoring exists, the ownership and context of the conversation is troubling. With a few exceptions, the theorizing in writing center literature about the tutor/writer relationship remains startlingly free of the voices of either party. Certainly admirable efforts have been made to draw tutors (though only tutors) into the professional conversation about tutoring and writing centers, from conference

participation to publications like *The Writing Lab Newsletter* or *The Dangling Modifier* to new editions of tutoring handbooks that introduce tutors to issues in research and theory. The small but growing body of empirical research on writing center tutorials at times includes interviews with and analysis from tutors about their tutorials (Blau, Hall & Strauss, 1998; Mackiewicz, 1999; Thonus, 2001; Thompson, et al., 2009; Wolcott 1989). And more recently, research produced by tutors has gained attention, such as Brown, Fallon, Lott, Matthew & Mintie's (2007) study of Turnitin.com. Still, tutors-produced research remains the exception rather than the rule, and overall, as Boquet (2000) suggested, more often "conclusions are drawn about peer tutors, information is produced for peer tutors, but rarely are those things created by peer tutors" (p. 18). The voices of the writers with whom tutors work are perhaps even more noticeably absent from research on writing centers. Writers' perspectives about the tutoring they receive are most often sought in order to gauge satisfaction with their tutorials (Carino & Enders, 2001; Thonus, 2001; Morrison & Nadeau, 2003), but further investigation into their perceptions of their tutorials is largely absent.

This lack of representation from tutors and writers in the conversations about the nature of peer tutoring is particularly troubling in light of the often ambiguous relationship between theory and practice with which many writing centers struggle. While this division has been frequently cited and critiqued (Hobson, 1994; Kail & Trimbur, 1995; Vandenberg, 1999), Welch (2002) provided perhaps the most vivid account of how such a disconnect can affect tutors. When she asked a group of tutors-in-training to describe their tutoring sessions, what

emerged from these narratives were “ ‘official stories’ of what should take place in the writing center” and “suppressed” stories, where misunderstandings arose, complicated conversations occurred or tutors and writers didn’t connect (p. 204). These “suppressed” stories that tutors tell are valuable, Welch argued, because they exist *between* theory and practice, in a “transitional space” that allows for ambiguity, questions, and multiple interpretations. Further, encouraging tutors to explore and investigate these stories can “count[er] the sense of a great divide between what [they are] reading in the tutor preparation class and what [they] experience day-to-day, countering that belief that there’s writing center ‘research,’ on the one hand and ‘what really goes on’ on the other” (p. 206).

Welch suggested that her group of tutors further explore this transitional space by analyzing their own narratives, examining not just what their narratives said, but what they did not say. Analyses of these narratives were revealing in how much of the interaction between tutor and writer contained contradiction, uncertainty and ambiguity. Also notable was the inclination of tutors to cast themselves as the protagonist in their narratives or, as one tutor noted, to blame the writer for any difficulties that occurred, a tendency that was revealed when Welch asked tutors to rewrite their narratives from the point-of-view of the writers with whom they had worked.

Such an exercise—in which tutors’ stories are used to explore the ambiguities of tutoring and the communication between tutor and writer—can certainly be a valuable training tool for tutors (and writing center directors) to better understand the complexities of the tutor/writer relationship. However, to

privilege the value of tutors' insights over those of the writers with whom they work is shortsighted at best. As Munday (2005) noted, when describing how tutors and writers can misunderstand each other, "as with any social interaction, a tutoring session always retains a hint of mystery because the true motivations and feelings of each participant are seldom explicitly stated. Tutors and writers can only guess at these based on the verbal and nonverbal feedback they receive" (p. 17). While this "guessing" at the writer's point of view through the creation of an alternate narrative may well be an eye-opening exercise, it stops short of providing true insight about the writer's lived experience.

Existing research on what makes a tutorial or writing conference successful provides a useful yet broad view on how writers may perceive tutorials (Walker & Elias, 1987; Black, 1998). Still, examination of writers' perspectives beyond their perception of the success or failure of the tutorial is largely absent from these conversations. What contradictions, questions or silences may lie in *their* suppressed narratives? As calls increase for the inclusion of tutors in the creation of writing center theory and for greater reconciliation between theory and practice in the field (Boquet, 2000; Dinitz & Kiedaisch, 2003; Vandenburg, 1999), further consideration of what writers' perspectives can bring is also needed.

### **Focus**

Stories have played a significant role in the development of knowledge in writing center studies, for better or worse. Significant writing center literature exists that is comprised of what North (1987) characterized as "lore" about tutoring writing. From reading aloud to asking guiding questions, to being nondirective,

ideas that have been passed down about “what works” are firmly entrenched in writing center work—despite the fact that a small, but growing body of empirical research tends to call these assumptions into question (Thompson et al., 2009). Indeed, as McKinney (2013) has suggested, many of the stories about writing center work that are repeated and passed down are not only lacking in complexity and diversity, but are also inaccurate.

Not only are these dominant narratives of peer tutoring problematic in their lack of empirical bases, but they are often lacking in their representation of the voices and perspectives of tutors and writers. In a field that has historically prized notions of shared authority, collaboration, and student-centered learning, the lack of research that privileges the voices and stories of tutors and writers is troublesome, particularly in light of the pedagogical value that can be gained from the stories that they tell (Boquet, 2000; Welch, 2002). Research on tutor and writer dynamics that looks not at success or failure but on what the tutor and writer find to be important about their own interaction would both help to bridge the disconnect between theory and practice in the field and work to broaden and reimagine the dominant narratives of peer tutoring.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to investigate, through the use of narrative inquiry and grounded theory, what stories tutors and writers tell about their tutoring sessions, focusing in particular on how both parties perceive one another, the work they do, and the purpose of the writing center itself. Particular attention was given to how these sets of narratives coincided, overlapped, or disagreed—with

each other and with the metanarratives that have typically dominated conversations about peer tutoring.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that this study examined are as follows:

- What stories do tutors and writers tell about their work in the writing center?
- How do these stories reflect how tutors and writers perceive writing center work?
- How do these stories support, contradict, expand or reimagine the dominant narratives of peer tutoring, and how can the study of tutors' and writers' stories advance our understanding of writing center work?

### **Research Design Overview**

Narrative is a means through which its creator's reality can be described and constructed, making it a rich source for inquiry (Bruner, 1986; Chase, 2008; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Chase (2008) succinctly summarizes the activity that takes place when a narrative is constructed and then analyzed:

Narrators explain, entertain, inform, defend, complain, and confirm or challenge the status quo. Whatever the particular action, when someone tells a story, he or she shapes, constructs, and performs the self, experience, and reality. When researchers treat narration as actively creative in this way, they emphasize the narrator's voice(s). (p. 65)

As this study seeks to centralize the voices of tutors and writers in the ongoing conversation about their relationship, analysis of their narratives can provide

insights into their perceptions of themselves, each other and their shared interaction. Further, these narratives can shed light on the “in-between” space of the tutorial: empirical research and tutor training guides continue to focus on the makings of a successful—or problematic—tutoring session, while the “transitional” ground that Welch (2002) envisioned between theory and practice, rich with multiplicities and interpretation, remains largely unexamined. The stories of tutors and writers, products of their own construction and performance, constructed in a place apart from scholarly conversations that dominate the discourse of writing center work, can be a revealing tool in the development of a far more nuanced understanding of the relationship at the center of the tutorial.

Thus, narrative inquiry serves as the anchor point of this qualitative case study. Tutors’ and writers’ narratives were produced through initial interviews, which drew from Gubrium and Holstein’s (2003) concept of the active interview, in which the interview subject is treated as a “productive source of knowledge” (p. 74) and the interviewer works to “activate narrative production” (p. 75). Participants were invited to tell a story describing their tutoring session; these narratives were analyzed using a grounded theory approach, with coding and analysis occurring concurrently with data collection, and continuous revision of categories and relationships found in data occurring throughout the research process. Follow-up interviews with tutors and writers were also conducted in order for participants to expand on or clarify their previous statements, and transcripts of audio recordings of their tutorials were also analyzed to clarify and enhance understanding of tutors’ and writers’ narratives.

The site of this investigation was the Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) Writing Center. Serving a public university with a student population of more than 15,000, this writing center offers both drop-in and online tutoring to a diverse student body. I served as assistant director of this writing center for two years, and my composition students regularly visited this writing center for assistance. As my research questions arose from these experiences, I elected to confine my study to this specific site.

The IUP Writing Center employs a diverse group of tutors, including undergraduate and graduate students, native-English-speaking students and multi-lingual students, and students from a wide range majors and programs on campus. The population of writers who visit the center are similarly varied in demographics, though the majority of writers who visit are undergraduate, native-speaking students who are taking university-required composition courses. Participants included both newer tutors (those who have been working for less than one year) and experienced tutors (those who have been working for more than two years), as well as writers who were visiting the center for the first time and repeat visitors.

### **Significance**

As the nature of writing center work—particularly the role of the tutor—is increasingly complicated through research and scholarship, so too is the question of how to best train tutors to engage in such complex tasks. The writing center literature that focuses on analysis of the tutorial itself—whether the focus is linguistic, conversational or content-based— seems to exist largely separate from the training texts whose primary audiences are tutors. And all too often, such



training texts focus primarily on imparting information about tutoring to tutors rather than including them into the conversation about what they do. Transcriptions from actual tutorial sessions with insight from the tutors involved are notably absent from these tutor training texts (Gillespie & Lerner, 2007; Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2009). The perspectives of the writers who visit the center are similarly absent from literature aimed at training tutors. This absence may be quite profound. When Welch (2002) used tutors' own narratives as a tool in their training, she described the inherent learning potential in these stories eloquently:

Any story holds within it a silence, suppression, a contradiction, another story that could be told out of the conversation with that silence, that contradiction. The story of the tutee who didn't know how to be a writer contains within it the story of the tutor who positioned this tutee as anything but a writer; and the story of the tutor who positioned the tutee as anything but a writer contains within it the possible story of tutor and tutee meeting as writers who find something to build on together. (p. 217)

And Welch only used tutors' narratives in her training. The stories of the writers would certainly further enhance the discoveries to be made. Thus, this study provides a model that can aid in developing this absent dimension—yet one rich with possibility— in tutor training by pairing tutors' *and* writers' individual perceptions of their interaction and examining how these stories can enhance our understanding of writing center work—peer tutoring in particular.

## **Definitions of Key Terms**

Terms that are particularly important to this study and/or used frequently throughout are listed below, along with necessary definitions or clarifications.

### **Tutor and Writer**

Throughout writing center literature, various terms have been used to describe the participants in a tutorial, and these terms are usually context-dependent and carefully chosen to reflect the tutoring pedagogy that the center employs. In this study, *tutor* and *writer* will be used to describe the tutorial participants because these are the terms used by the research site itself. While arguments concerning the appropriateness of various titles are rich in dimension, they are outside the scope of this study, which concerns itself with the interactions and perceptions of participants rather than the rhetorical implications of their titles. Notably, however, this study concerns itself with a writing center that employs a peer—rather than professional—tutoring model; therefore research, discussions and recommendations are limited to writing centers with similar models.

### **Transitional/In-between/Potential Space**

In her research on the use of narratives in tutor training, Welch (2002) frequently referred to the transitional (or alternately, “in-between” or “potential”) space of the tutorial. Borrowed from the psychoanalytical theory of object-relations, this space, she argued, “exists in the negotiation between desired and sanctioned meanings...between what one initially thought and what one is starting to recognize now” and can be used for “questioning, negotiating and playing with meaning” (p. 208). Further, in this space, “competing, convincing perspectives can arise from the

same situation” and “we can examine the differences of those perspectives with interest...and a belief in our ability and authority to rewrite prior perspectives found to be incomplete, not always or entirely true” (p. 208-09). As this study draws from Welch’s concept in its analysis of tutor and writer narratives, her terms *transitional*, *in-between*, and *potential* are also utilized in discussions of the ambiguities, multiplicities and discoveries associated with these narratives.

### **Higher Order Concerns/Lower Order Concerns**

The presentation and discussion of data in Chapters 4 and 5 will frequently reference the paired notions of “higher order concerns” and “lower order concerns” in the tutoring of writing. Coined by Regstad and McAndrew (1984) and frequently used in writing centers and classrooms—these concepts indicate a hierarchy (and a division) in types of writing issues to be dealt with during the writing and revision process. The term “higher order concerns” generally refers to issues such as focus, argumentation, and clarity, while “lower order concerns” usually refer to sentence structure, grammatical or mechanical issues. These terms are not unproblematic; the hierarchy inherent in the terminology does not allow room for situations in which grammatical or mechanical errors might be of “highest order” to a student, for example. I use these terms in this study, however, because this hierarchical division between higher order and lower order concerns appears prominently in both the dominant narratives of writing center work in general (such as in tutoring guidebooks) and in the stories told by participating tutors in this study. A longer discussion of these concepts—and tutors’ and writers’ perceptions of them— can be found in Chapter 5.

## **Story/Narrative**

Throughout literature on narrative inquiry and narrative analysis, the terms “story” and “narrative” have both been used to describe the object of study in question. While in some scholarship, the words are used interchangeably, elsewhere lines are drawn between what constitutes each. Because this study draws from a wide variety of scholarship, some of which use “story” and some of which use “narrative” to refer to the same product, in this study, the words will be used interchangeably to refer to the content produced by participants.

## **Dominant Narratives**

As discussed previously in this chapter, early writing center literature was often based on anecdotal, rather than empirical evidence (Thompson, et al., 2009). As such, narratives have played a key role in the developing of knowledge within the field. In *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*, McKinney (2013) critiques the role of narratives within writing center studies, arguing that the singular “grand narrative” that exists about writing centers is overly simplified, limiting, and not indicative of the complexity of work that takes place there. Drawing from McKinney’s work, I argue here that there are particular narratives that dominate conversations about peer tutoring specifically. These narratives—also characterized as “lore”—remain entrenched in both theory and practice, despite being called into question in various empirical studies (Blau, Hall & Strauss, 1998; Thompson et al., 2009; Thonus, 2001). Thus, when I refer to “dominant narratives” of peer tutoring, I refer to those tutoring practices which are frequently characterized as part of this lore—nondirective tutoring, tutors’ use of questioning strategies to guide, tutors acting as

peers rather than teachers—particularly those critiqued in empirical research as being potentially problematic (Thompson, et al., 2009).

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following review of literature will provide history and context for the development and direction of this study and present a conceptual framework in which this study's research questions and data analysis are grounded.

With tutor and writer perceptions of one another and of their work as the central focus of this study, I will begin this review of literature by exploring how the tutor-writer relationship has been characterized—and idealized—in composition and writing center scholarship—and how these characterizations have shifted and been shaped over time. The extensive conceptual dialogue that exists in writing center scholarship on what this ideal interaction is will then be contrasted with the considerably smaller body of empirical research that examines real-world interactions during tutorials and how tutors and writers actually interact with and perceive one another. Ultimately, examination of this literature will make apparent how these representations of the tutor-writer relationship and the corresponding empirical research lack the perspectives and voices of the two central figures in the relationship being studied. I will then examine what this absence means—and what centralizing these missing voices and stories can add to writing center theory and pedagogy. Using Welch's (2002) concept of the "transitional space" of the tutorial and her use of narratives as a tutor training tool as a starting point, I will explore how stories and narratives have been used in writing center literature, as well future possibilities for their use. Drawing from research in education—particularly teacher education—I will explore how narratives can be used as a tool for bringing

the knowledge of those who are typically voiceless to light and can help broaden and reimagine our understandings of writing center work.

### **Portrayals of the Tutor-Writer Relationship**

I will begin by tracing how the tutor-writer relationship has been characterized in writing center scholarship, from the descriptions of a collaborative, conversation-based relationship that characterized early writing center works, to the more current representations—many grounded in postmodern, critical cultural frameworks—that depict the relationship as considerably more complicated. In many of these characterizations of the tutor-writer relationship, authors focus on the role of the “writing center” rather than the role of the tutor, which necessarily complicates such a discussion; however, I will be focusing in this review of literature on how the tutor-writer relationship is characterized and idealized, whether the authors frame their purpose as such or not.

Few scholarly works on writing centers today fail to acknowledge the profound influence of several early essays (Bruffee 1984; Lunsford, 1991; North 1984/2008; Trimbur 1985), which sought to both correct misperceptions of writing center work and present conceptual and theoretical foundations to ground models of writing center tutoring that focused on talk and collaboration. Although many have expanded on, critiqued, and challenged these early writings, to say that their influence is still present in writing centers across the country, through talk, through training—the repetition of “lore” (Thompson et al., 2009)—would be an understatement. And since this study seeks to investigate how tutors and writers perceive their interaction and their work and what shapes these perceptions, to

begin with a review of the familiar representations present in these cornerstone pieces is necessary.

Although these early essays and the ideas they contain may seem almost rote to those immersed in the last few decades of writing center scholarship, it should not be forgotten just how revolutionary these works were at the time. After all, many early writing centers, which developed in response to needs created by the open-admissions trend at colleges and universities in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, took a deficit-based, fix-it-shop approach to tutoring, with tutors often being graduate or upper level students, working with basic writing students, often as part of a course requirement.

Just as the 1970s and 1980s saw dramatic changes in the field of composition as a whole, changes in writing centers and the expectations of the tutoring that took place there took hold around the same time, with a shift to a peer tutoring model and a more process-based approach to writing that was reflective of, and parallel to, the developments in composition. The central concepts in discussions of the tutor/writer relationship during this era were conversation and collaboration. North's now-seminal essay "The Idea of a Writing Center" (1984/2008) worked to clarify these new directions in writing center work for a broader audience, many of whom may have been familiar with the previous "fix-it shop" approach but unaware of this new direction. That North's essay was written for a broader audience is significant; this means that the characterizations of writing center work made in his essay have been far-reaching. While many works of writing center scholarship continue to cite North, so too do many scholars outside of the writing center field



whose work touches on concepts of tutoring or writing center work (Boquet & Lerner, 2008). As such, North's characterization of the writing center as a neutral place, that does not advocate for teachers or students, but rather that is simply a place where writers and tutors can talk to one another, has had tremendous influence in shaping the perception of the writing center in academia. Ultimately the "essence of the writing center method" is "talking" (p. 43), North argued. While this claim sounds simple, the very idea that North labeled the writer-tutor communication as "talking" rather than "teaching" or "learning" or something else was in and of itself revolutionary.

So too was Bruffee's (1984) essay "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind,'" which attempted to clarify not what writing centers *aren't*, but rather what peer tutoring *is*—suggesting a theoretical base for the type of peer-to-peer tutoring that was already beginning to take place in writing centers across the country. Bruffee drew heavily from Vygotsky's theories of language and thought as he sought to characterize how writing and how talk about writing fit into this framework. Building on the premise that "thought is internalized conversation" (p. 6), Bruffee argued, "the first steps to learning to think better are to learn to converse better and to learn to create and maintain the sort of social contexts, the sorts of community life that generates and maintains the conversation from which a particular kind of thinking originates" (p. 6). The writing center then, which features collaborative conversations between peers, was an ideal place for this sort of conversation to take place. Ultimately, Bruffee pinpoints the central purpose of peer tutoring thusly: "as a form of collaborative learning, peer tutoring is important

because it provides the kind of social context in which normal discourse occurs: a community of knowledgeable peers” (p. 9). Like Bruffee, Trimbur (1985) also conflated collaborative learning in the writing center with students becoming members of the academic community—at least initially. Interestingly, the decidedly non-hierarchical nature of the collaborative learning being advocated served the ultimate purpose of helping students to enter a decided hierarchical community of learners (academia).

Yet, the importance of the non-hierarchical nature of collaborative learning in the writing center continued to persist. Lunsford (1991) built on the notion of collaboration as the central focus of the tutorial, envisioning a model of a writing center that has collaboration as its anchor point. The trend toward collaboration in composition studies and elsewhere, she argued, has created a “shift in the way we view knowledge” (p. 2) and a rejection of “traditional hierarchies” (p. 3). Lunsford described the model of the sort of writing center that embraces collaborative learning, describing it as a “Burkean Parlor,” which differs from earlier models of writing centers primarily in that power is shared and negotiated between tutors and writers. Such a writing center, she argued, is “informed by a theory of knowledge as socially constructed, of power and control as constantly negotiated and shared, and of collaboration as its first principle” (p. 5). Although Lunsford cautioned against viewing collaboration as a democratic ideal, it is easy to see in these early descriptions of collaboration at the writing center how such idealism can be read in the descriptions of a haven of sorts on campus, where peers collaborate and talk about writing outside of the pressures and hierarchies of the classroom. (The

subtext—that the idealism of these models in fact served as a method of reinforcing traditional hierarchies would later be questioned extensively).

Still, for all the supposed idealism and naïveté expressed in these early models of writing centers and tutoring, the reality that being a peer tutor is indeed a complicated role for a college student to take on was actually acknowledged right from the start. Although Bruffee’s (1984) vision of the tutor-writer interaction was focused in part on the equality of the exchange—writers bring to the table knowledge of their assignment and subject matter, while tutors bring knowledge of the writing process—he acknowledged the tremendous importance of training in helping students to become effective peer tutors. Trimbur (1985) similarly questioned how indeed peer tutors can strike the right balance between being a peer and being a teacher, questioning how much training is appropriate.

Regardless of the existence of difficulties inherent in these early depictions of writing center work—whether acknowledged or unacknowledged—tutor training literature and other writing center scholarship that addressed tutoring methods appeared to base recommendations to tutors on this early foundation. Interestingly, the emphasis in these early pieces on the importance of conversation, of tutor-writer collaboration, on process over product, on learning over better grades, seemed to result in recommendations that were focused on delineating what tutors should and should not do during their tutorials. Brooks’s (1991) oft-cited essay, “Minimalist Tutoring: Making Students Do All the Work,” focuses on ownership and agency, arguing, “we need to make the student the primary agent in the writing center session. The student, not the tutor, should ‘own’ the paper and take full

responsibility for it” (p. 2). The tutor, on the other hand “should not expect to make student papers ‘better’; that is neither [the tutors’] obligation nor is it a realistic role” (p. 2). To avoid taking on such a role, the tutor should avoid doing any editing, avoiding holding a pencil during the tutorial if necessary. While Brooks’s tutoring suggestions are often cited for their strident nature, in fact, many tutoring guides contained—and still contain—similar advice. Meyer (1987) defined the central purpose of *The Practical Tutor* as helping tutors to “formulate questions rather than to make corrections or additions for writers” (p. xvi), while *The Bedford Guide to Peer Tutoring* tells tutors, “you function as a sounding board or a mirror, reflecting back to writers what you hear them communicate...your purpose is to evoke and promote writers’ ideas, not to contribute your own” (p. 27). Notably absent from these directives is any input from tutors about the plausibility and functionality of such advice.

Although other handbooks aimed at tutors do a better job of addressing the nuances of the writing center tutorial (Rafoth 2005; Murphy & Sherwood, 2008), strategies born and developed from these early writings are still taught and passed along as part of writing center “lore,” the term used by North (1987) to describe the knowledge shared among composition practitioners, born of stories about “what works” rather than on theoretical foundations. According to Thompson et al. (2009), such writing center lore—the nondirective tutor, the collaborative nature of the tutor-writer interaction—is still tremendously influential on writing center tutorials—at times detrimentally. This study found that tutors often struggled to follow these directives about “what works,” particularly in more challenging

tutoring situations.

Certainly writing center scholarship has begun to seriously acknowledge the difficult position that tutors often find themselves in. The 1990s saw multiple critiques across writing center studies of seemingly sacred concepts, many of which questioned the very purpose of the writing center itself and its role in academia. Gillam (1994) critiqued the connection between collaborative learning theory and writing center work, labeling Bruffee's work to be "idealized, unproblematic, and acontextual" (39). What's more, Gillam pointed to Bruffee's "failure to acknowledge the role of ideology in knowledge construction" and unequal power relationships present in the tutorial, ultimately arguing that the collaborative exchange between tutor and writer is much more fraught than Bruffee portrayed (p. 39). Carino (2003) makes a similar argument—that unequal power is inherent in the interaction between tutor and writer:

To pretend that there is not a hierarchical relationship between tutor and student is a fallacy and to engineer peer tutoring techniques that divest the tutor of power and authority is at times foolish and can even be unethical. Yet to some degree that is what writing centers have done. (p. 98)

Carino argued that writing centers may purposely downplay these complications in the interaction between tutor and writer in order to preserve the notion of the writing center as a safe, friendly space. Still, a more directive, authoritative approach is at times necessary for the tutor to take. *Not* taking this approach may be, in fact, unethical, argued Shamon and Burns (1995), particularly when a writer is lacking knowledge about a particular method or convention: "directive tutoring

lays bare crucial rhetorical processes that otherwise remain hidden or are delivered as tacit knowledge throughout the academy” (p. 145-46). A directive approach may be particularly important for ESL writers, who might struggle with conventions of American discourse and for whom a Socratic approach to a tutoring session would be unhelpful (Harris, 1997/2008, Myers, 2003/2008). Thus directive tutoring can actually be empowering for tutors—who do not have to hint or hide their expertise—and for the writer (whether ESL or native speaking) who gains needed knowledge about particular academic discourse conventions.

Not only did the non-directive approach to tutoring receive a reevaluation as a useful tutoring strategy, but these ideas were pushed even further, with arguments drawing from postmodern and critical literacy theories that sought to rethink the purpose of the writing center in general and by extension the tutors themselves. Cooper (1994/2008), Barwashi & Pelkowski (1999), and Grimm (1999) all made arguments that the writing center should operate from a critical position—with tutors not just helping writers become aware of the unspoken rules of academic discourse, but helping writers critique and subvert them. Grimm described the need for tutors to be aware of the power structures that their role can help perpetuate, while Cooper suggested that tutors should “cast themselves as radical intellectuals” who “become agents of change in writing pedagogy, helping teachers create better assignments, letting teachers know what students are having trouble with” (p. 59). Barwashi and Pelkowski argued that the writing center should be a place where “under prepared students, especially those marginalized by race, class and ethnicity, are encouraged to adopt critical consciousness as a means of functioning within the

university and its discourses” (p. 43). In these frameworks, then, the writing center, and by extension the tutors, take on the role of a consciousness raiser of sorts, working to not just inform but empower the writers with whom they work.

While these critiques have far-reaching implications regarding the role of the writing center in academia, for the purposes of this review of literature, the key outcome is that the role of the tutor—and more importantly, the nature of the writer-tutor relationship—has been complicated and problematized. As demonstrated here, the subject of what a tutor is supposed to do has been fraught, and the consensus—as much as there is any consensus—is that rather than be a collaborator or a teacher or an editor or a friend or a coach, directive or nondirective, the tutor must be prepared to be all of those things, depending on the situation and the particular needs of the writer with whom they are working. This message is evident in materials written for an audience of tutors. The introduction to the *St. Martin’s Sourcebook for Writing Tutors* reminds readers that tutoring is “contextual, collaborative, interpersonal, individualized” (p. 1), and *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* acknowledges that “in tutoring, you function variously as an ally, a coach, a commentator, a collaborator, a writing ‘expert’ and a counselor” (p. 28).

With this general acknowledgement, then, of the complexities of the role of writing tutor, research on how tutors actually enact their complicated and varied roles—and how writers respond to their techniques—takes up comparatively less space within the body of writing center scholarship. This deficit has been acknowledged regularly throughout reviews of writing center research, from North

(1984) who noted, “much more is known, to put it bluntly about what people want to happen in and as a result of tutorials than about what does happen” (p. 29) to more recently, Pemberton (2010) who described the existence of such research as “too few and far between” (p. 24). The assumed rift in the field between theory and practice and the need for writing center practitioners to focus in their research on self-justification are just a few reasons that have been cited as to why studies of tutor-writer interaction seem to exist in lesser number than writings that focus on conceptual frameworks or critiques. Still, the body of research that does exist on tutorial talk is significant, in how the studies are framed, how the results are interpreted, and in what perspectives are missing from the analyses.

### **Research on Tutor-Writer Interaction**

Since analysis of talk in writing center tutorials is scant, studies have certainly not been guided by a unified research agenda; however early studies on writing center conference talk often examined how this talk was similar or different to more familiar types of conversations. Regstad (1982) studied conference talk to determine whether conferences were student-centered, teacher-centered, or collaborative. Davis, Hayward, Hunter & Wallace (1988) similarly looked at the ways in which conference talk differed from regular classroom talk or from teacher-student talk. Wolcott (1989), on the other hand, examined how talk in writing conferences compared to the talk of professional writers. While all these studies acknowledged that conference talk, particularly writing conference talk, differed from other types of talk about writing, a significant highlighting of the ways in which they differed was not featured.



In contrast to those studies, which attempted to situate conference talk within the broader context of talk about writing, other studies have used rhetorical and discourse analysis approaches to study the conference interaction itself. Severino (1992) conducted a rhetorical analysis to examine how collaboration worked during the tutorial and how power between the tutor and writer manifested and shifted through their talk. Similarly Blau, Hall & Strauss (1998) looked specifically at the dynamics of the interplay between tutor and writer by examining linguistic elements of their conversations. In studying questions, echoing and qualifiers in participants' speech patterns, the researchers found that tutors tend to overemphasize collaboration in their speech, which can result in tutorials that "waste time and lack clear direction" (p. 39). Mackiewicz (1999) focused on only one linguistic feature—politeness strategy—and used discourse frames to analyze how tutors masked the hierarchy at work in the tutorial. These analyses indicate certainly, that a non-hierarchical, collaborative approach to tutoring is not always appropriate. Blau, Hall, & Strauss (1998) further recommend that tutors approach collaboration with writers purposely, with an "informed flexibility" that allows them to vary this approach as needed (p. 39). More revealing in these analyses of tutor talk, however, is the attempts of the tutors to preserve the collaborative relationship, even at the risk of withholding information from or frustrating the writer.

In the relatively small body of literature, in both writing center studies and composition, that examine the tutor-writer conversation or interaction, still fewer actually analyze the perceptions of the tutors or writers themselves. One of the first

to do so to a significant degree was Walker and Elias's (1987) analysis of high and low-rated conferences between composition teachers and their students. Although this study was not situated in a writing center context, its research questions are significant in that they do not simply analyze talk, but also teachers' and students' perceptions of conference talk—notably, the perception of success. In this study, both teachers and students rated the “success” of their conferences; the conferences that received high ratings by both parties were ones in which the student helped shape the agenda and remained the focus of the conference, doing more talking than the instructor. In the lower rated conferences, the converse was true—the teacher talked more than the student and set the agenda. Significantly, Walker and Elias focused in this study only on the conferences where both parties agreed on the relative success of the session—those conferences that received mixed reviews were not explored to account for the difference in perception. One can only wonder how these teachers' and students' perceptions differed and why—questions that bring to mind the “transitional space” of the tutorial that Welch (2002) explored through the study of narrative. An examination of this ambiguous territory in which these teachers' and students' perceptions differed would no doubt be revealing in the understanding of their interaction.

In addition to Walker and Elias's study, other studies have attempted to measure perceptions of success within the writing center context specifically. Thonus (2002) focused on tutor and student perceptions of success, using conversation analysis and ethnographic interviews to identify characteristics of successful tutoring sessions. Similar to Walker and Elias's conclusions, Thonus

noted:

Symmetry of tutor and tutee perceptions correlates with judgment of the tutorial as 'successful.' Manifest lack of symmetry...produces a lack of mutual satisfaction with the tutorial session, whereas relative symmetry in tutor and student talk may indicate parallel orientations to the conversation and predict tutorial success. (p. 124)

Aside from this symmetry—the idea that tutors and writers with like-minded views about the session will interpret a successful result—Thonus also found that the factors attributed to the tutorial's success varied significantly, from smooth conversational turns, to laughter, to the presence of small talk. Another study by Thonus (2001) which studied tutor-writer talk using a triangulated look at writers', tutors' and professors' perceptions of the role of the writing center tutor and their perceptions of their sessions, produced similarly revealing results. This examination of these tutoring sessions revealed that the "tutor's role must be redefined and renegotiated in each interaction" (p. 77) and that "the relationship between tutoring and teaching is a far more vexed one than is portrayed in tutoring manuals and in most writing center research" (p. 78). Thompson et al.'s (2009) study of how the "lore" of writing centers is played out in tutorials also examined writers' and tutors' satisfaction with their tutorials, concluding that writing centers should "discard the lore-based mandate for dialogic collaboration in conferences" (p. 99), and that tutors should instead focus on "asymmetrical" collaboration and scaffolding teaching methods that will help writers to become more independent in time.

## **Representations of Tutors' and Writers' Voices**

Thus, the empirical research that exists on what happens during the tutorial depicts just as complicated a picture as the multitude of theoretical and conceptual constructions of tutoring that describe the complexities of the tutor's role and the writer-tutor relationship. With this complexity and difficulty of the tutors' role (and thereby the tutors' interaction with the writer) made quite clear, it is troubling that the perspectives of both are either missing or minimized from both theoretical and empirical discussions of their interactions. While a number of studies of tutor talk sought opinions from tutors or writers through interviews or surveys, more often than not, this data was collected and summarized by the researcher without the tutor or writers' words or voices figuring prominently (Thonus 2001 & 2002; Wolcott, 1989). One significant exception lies in Dipardo's (1992/2008) eloquent essay on the tutoring dynamics between Fannie and Morgan, a writer and a tutor who operate from significantly different cultural, racial and educational contexts, and how their differing contexts complicated and affected the success of their tutorials. Additionally, several recent dissertations on writing centers have featured tutors' perceptions prominently, including Jordan's (2003) study on power and empowerment in tutorials, Dean's (2010) study on new tutors at a high school writing center and their thoughts as they transitioned from student to tutor, and, most significantly Fallon's (2010) study on how the lived experiences of tutors compare to the representations constructed by others; not surprisingly, these representations were often at odds. Most significantly, research conducted by peer tutors themselves has, in recent years, appeared in *The Writing Center Journal*, from

Brown, Fallon, Lott, Matthew & Mintie's (2007) innovative study of the effectiveness of Turnitin.com to the 2012 special issue devoted to undergraduate research.

Ultimately, however, these developments—while significant—represent a relatively small portion of writing center scholarship. Bouquet's (2000) assertion about writing center research still resonates, 14 years later:

With few notable exceptions...conclusions are drawn about peer tutors, information is produced for peer tutors, but rarely are these things created by peer tutors. Tutors are often objectified and essentialized in the literature devoted to them...tutors are disallowed a voice in the literature that pertains directly to them. (p. 18)

And, I would argue that student writers are just as often essentialized, objectified and disappeared in writing center literature. Scholarship that features writers' perceptions of their tutoring sessions is perhaps even more rare than that which features tutors. Those studies that do focus on students are often spearheaded by writing center directors with (understandable) goals related more to assessment and self-preservation than anything else, such as Carino and Enders's (2001) study on students' satisfaction with their tutorials in relation to the frequency of their visits to the writing center, Morrison and Nadeau's (2003) research on writers' satisfaction with their sessions after receiving a grade on the work they brought in, and Williams's (2004) study of writers' post-tutorial revision behaviors. While such studies serve an important function, the concern over what happens *after* the session seems to have overshadowed other equally important questions about the writers who visit the center. Lerner (2003) argued in his critique of writing center

assessment that writing center practitioners need to move beyond self-justification toward making more significant research contributions regarding students' learning. He argued, "writing centers are uniquely positioned to investigate the ways that students—particularly non-mainstream students—encounter the cultures of higher education" (p. 61). And part of doing so, certainly, would be *talking* to these students about their tutorials, yet the existing body of research tends to shy away from the reported perceptions, thoughts and feelings of students about the tutoring session itself.

For a field that often prides itself on collaborative learning, on empowerment and on critique of traditional hierarchies, this lack of tutors and writers' voices reflected in its research is not only at odds with its professed values, but also ignores the tremendous potential that these voices can bring to the collective knowledge of the field. Dinitz and Kiedaisch (2003), who noted that "largely left out of...constructions of writing centers are tutor voices" (p. 63), conducted a case study with a tutor training program in which tutors were asked to read and write about writing center theory, considering the implications in their own practice. The results were revealing; in their interaction with theory, tutors were able to construct their own tutoring identities, as well as reimagine existing canonical theory (such as Bruffee's) based on their actual tutoring experiences. Ultimately, Dinitz and Kiedaisch argued, tutors should be invited to contribute to and interact with existing theoretical and conceptual constructions of writing centers not only for their own benefit, but for that of the field, which can only be enhanced by their representations of their own experiences.

Similarly, Welch (2002) also examined how tutors could contribute to how theory is understood and enacted in writing centers, and like Dinitz and Kiedaisch, argued that using tutors' own words was key to doing so. After noticing a profound divide between tutors' "official" stories about tutorials and their "unofficial" stories, which often contained difficulty, confusion or misunderstanding between tutor and writer, Welch asked tutors to write narratives of their sessions and analyze them. In studying their own stories of their tutoring sessions, Welch found, tutors could explore and learn from the "transitional space" of the tutorial. This space, she argued, "exists in the negotiation between desired and sanctioned meanings...between what one initially thought and what one is starting to recognize now" and can be used for "questioning, negotiating and playing with meaning" (p. 208). Rather than working with theory created by someone else about what is "supposed" to happen during a tutorial and comparing their own experiences, tutors were able to develop theoretical insights by analyzing and interpreting their own stories: "the work of writing out, interpreting, complicating, and rewriting stories of tutoring engaged them in the difficult, ongoing work of theorizing, the difficult, ongoing work of revisiting the generalizations we constantly, necessarily make" (p. 215). Not surprisingly, when tutors themselves were given the opportunity to make sense of their own experiences, the results were meaningful and contained context that someone not involved in that exchange would not have access to.

That both Dinitz and Kiedaisch's and Welch's work focus on self-reflection as a means both for tutors to gain insight into their experience and for other writing center practitioners to gain insight into tutors' experiences is significant, and I will

argue, a valuable remedy to the problem of the missing voices and perspectives of tutors and writers in writing center scholarship. In the reflective writing that the tutors in Dinitz and Kiedaisch's case study did, the tutors were able to connect their own experience to the theory that they were reading and discussing. While this reflecting produced valuable results, when the tutors that Welch worked with were specifically asked to tell a story about their experience, the results were even more revealing. Tutors were able to produce significant insights about how they perceived their role, the writer, and their interaction with the writer. The content of their stories was important—both for what they contained and what they did not contain—and so was the way they were framed. The sessions that were difficult were particularly interesting. While some tutors' initial narratives tended to place blame on the writer for the difficulties in the session, they were able to explore other possibilities in their revised narratives, imagining how the writer may have interpreted the session differently. Welch noted:

Any story holds within it a silence, suppression, a contradiction, another story that could be told out of the conversation with that silence, that contradiction. The story of the tutee who didn't know how to be a writer contains within it the story of the tutor who positioned this tutee as anything but a writer; and the story of the tutor who positioned the tutee as anything but a writer contains within it the possible story of tutor and tutee meeting as writers who find something to build on together. (p. 217)

As Welch's description illustrates, the narrative is distinctive as a genre both in the complexity of the product itself and the multiplicity of interpretations it can



produce.

Indeed narratives can be rich sources of data because of the process that takes place when they are created. Bruner (1986) conceptualized the links between language, thought and the production of narrative, describing them thusly: "language not only transmits, it creates or constitutes knowledge or 'reality.' Part of that reality is the stance that the language implies toward knowledge and reflection, and the generalized set of stances one negotiates creates in time a sense of one's self" (p. 131). Constructing a narrative then, is an active, performative process (Chase, 1995 & 2008). When individuals tell a story, they are creating not just a version of events, but constructing their own reality and, most importantly, their own sense of self (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). An individual's narrative is a unique product that necessarily "embodies the relation between narrator and culture" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 2).

### **Investigating Narratives**

This study, then, uses narrative as a means to investigate the tutorial from the point of view of tutors and writers. Although the study of narrative has not been primarily associated with research in composition or in writing centers, the study of narrative does connect closely to the study of what individuals know, how they construct their identities, and how they teach and learn. Research in education, particularly teacher education, has used narrative inquiry as a means of understanding how teachers (newer teachers in particular) learn, teach and develop their professional identities (Carter, 1993; Clandinin & Connolly, 1996 & 2000; Cortazzi, 1993). In fact, analysis of teachers' stories can reveal insight about their

knowledge and their teaching theories that other types of research may not.

As Clandinin & Connolly (1996) argued, schools are filled with all kinds of stories, from those told in the hallway by students to those told in the faculty room between teachers, but these are rarely the types of stories that appear in educational research, which tends to focus on sanitized, sanctioned stories.

Narrative inquiry, on the other hand can access these “secret” stories that in the past have been confined to the walls of the classroom and are perhaps more reflective of what teachers truly know, believe and understand. Additionally the narrative as a tool in teacher education research is valuable because of the nature of teaching itself. The story can reflect the ambiguities inherent to teaching and learning in a way that another medium cannot. As Carter (1993) wrote, “stories convey the multiplicity of ways actions and situations intertwine and thus accurately represent the complex demands of teaching” (p. 10).

In addition to research in teacher education, research in higher education has also used narrative inquiry to explore the varied experiences of college students, using similar justifications. Fung’s (2006) study on college students’ collective and social learning examined students’ narratives, also arguing that the story is revealing in a way that other data is not:

Narrative involves the thinking and feeling dimensions of the lifeworld of individuals, aspects of human experience that are not easily captured in quantitative or even qualitative research. The relationship between the actions of individuals and the ways in which they perceive the world around them is most commonly represented in everyday life through narrative – through a

telling of a personal story which constructs a sequence of experiences characterized in particular ways. (sec. 2, para. 6)

In addition to using narrative to study how individuals learn, research in higher education has also used narrative to investigate the way college students construct their identities. Abes, Jones and McEwan (2007) studied college students' narratives to trace their identity development and examine how their intersecting identities functioned in their lives. Barsky and Wood (2005) studied the narratives of not only college students, but of professors and staff at a university to examine how their identities and their interaction in the university environment (described as a "contact zone") shaped the way they negotiated conflict. The study of narrative is key in identity studies in higher education, Abes, Jones and McEwan argue, "because stories offer revealing glimpses into inner selves" (p. 5).

With the suitability of the narrative as a means of exploring how individuals teach, learn, and construct their identities established, the tremendous possibilities for learning more about tutors' and writers' interaction and their perceptions of one another through narrative is apparent. Despite the lack of tutors' and students' narratives in writing center scholarship, in fact, the case has been made for the importance of the story in understanding what happens at the writing center. Briggs and Woolbright (2000) argued that the story is an important tool for making sense of the various subject positions that writing center practitioners must enact. When we tell stories about what happens at the writing center, they argued, "story and theory can interanimate each other, making each more powerful" and can help people understand "the nature of language, literacy and learning" (p. xvi).

Unfortunately, the stories in Briggs and Woolbright's collection are exclusively told by writing center personnel who are administrators and professors rather than tutors or writers. And while Welch (2002) and Dinitz and Kiedaisch (2003) have eloquently illustrated the tremendous potential of tutors' narratives, the narratives of writers about their experiences at the writing center would be equally valuable in helping writing center personnel to understand how student writers learn, what they know, what they understand, and how their personal context can affect their reaction to and interpretation of what happens during a tutoring session. As Grimm (1999) explained:

Students tell stories every day in writing centers. Taken together, these stories can provide all of us in higher education with an understanding of the ways we might make literacy education more socially responsible and more open to the needs and desires of real people who pay and work for an education. (p. 120)

Indeed, students—tutors and writers—tell stories in writing centers every day; the potential value of these stories—to our understandings of tutorial dynamics, to the development of writing center theory, to our conceptions of teaching and learning—is invaluable. Just as teacher education and studies in higher education have embraced narrative inquiry as a tool in understanding the knowledge, learning, perspectives, and identity development of teachers and students, applying narrative inquiry to study of writing center tutorials may well produce similarly valuable results.

## Conceptual Framework

This study, then, explores what can be learned from tutors' and writers' stories about their tutoring sessions, particularly with respect to how tutors and writers perceive one another, their work, and the writing center in general, while each negotiates his or her varied subjectivity. Attempting to centralize tutors' and writers' voices in the ongoing discussion in writing center scholarship about what the ideal tutoring session should look like, this study examines how tutors and writers can contribute to our theoretical conceptions of the writing center and more importantly, aid in the critiquing and reimagining of the dominant narratives that shape writing center work. This study sought to answer the following research questions:

- What stories do tutors and writers tell about their work in the writing center?
- How do these stories reflect how tutors and writers perceive writing center work?
- How do these stories support, contradict, expand or reimagine the dominant narratives of peer tutoring, and how can the study of tutors' and writers' stories advance our understanding of writing center work?

The first two questions were addressed through analysis of the narratives themselves and the third examines the implications of these findings in relation to the dominant narratives of peer tutoring. In framing the investigation of these questions and analysis of data, I drew from both the model of the narrative inquiry space created by Clandinin & Connelly (2000) as well as the characteristics of the

dominant narratives (or “lore”) of peer tutoring outlined in Thompson et al., (2009). To begin, Clandinin and Connelly’s three dimensional model, comprised of temporality, personal and social influences, and place, allows the researcher to better investigate the totality of the narratives that participants create. As the narrative is told, analyzed and interpreted, intersections between these dimensions can generate meaning. Ultimately, the researcher’s work must “address both personal and social issues by looking inward and outward, and address[s] temporal issues by looking not only to the event but to its past and to its future” (p. 50) as well as “attend to the specific concrete physical and topological boundaries of [the] inquiry landscape” (p. 51). Thus, as I investigated these research questions, I used these dimensions of temporality, place, and personal/social to guide my interpretation and analysis of data.

Furthermore, as this study’s third research question sought to compare the narratives of tutors and writers to the lore about peer tutoring that dominates writing center work, I also used the collection of “mandates from lore” compiled by Thompson et al. (2009) as a framework for analyzing and interpreting data. This list of characteristics includes items such as “Tutors should act more as peers than instructors,” “Tutors should lead students to answer their own questions,” and “Tutors should avoid using directive tutoring strategies.” Thus, as I worked to answer the third research question, I compared the stories of tutors and writers to these aspects of the dominant narratives of peer tutoring, examining ways in which they overlap, reinforce or call these narratives into question. Chapter 3 contains a

more detailed description of the coding and analysis process using these various dimensions.

### **Conclusion**

As this review of literature has illustrated, the subject of the tutor-writer relationship covers rich ground. Much scholarship exists that focuses on various conceptions and models of the tutorial, but relatively little research examines the real-life interactions between tutor and writer. Even more notably, tutors' and writers' voices are largely missing from writing center scholarship, despite evidence that their contributions are of value to the field. This study therefore examines tutors and writers' voices, focusing on their perceptions of each other, their work, and the writing center in general. Because of its ability to reveal complexities of identity and knowledge, narrative is studied as a means of examining these perceptions. Ultimately this study explores how writers' and tutors' perceptions revealed in their narratives can contribute both theoretically and pedagogically to our understandings of tutoring and can allow us to expand and reimagine dominant narratives of peer tutoring.

## CHAPTER 3

### PROCEDURES

The main focus of this study is how writing center tutors and the writers with whom they work each perceive one another and describe their shared tutorial experience and the ways that these perceptions may differ. Though writing center research continues to examine the role of the peer tutor and attempts to define what good tutoring looks like, the voices of the two participants—tutor and writer—in this interaction have historically not been included in this research in a meaningful way. Although tutors' contributions to writing center research have been increasingly sought, a gap in writing center scholarship that privileges the voices of both tutors and writers continues to exist. As such, this case study focuses on that missing link by examining side-by-side the voices, experiences and perceptions of tutors and writers. The study's data indicates that the perceptions of tutors and writers can differ dramatically, with regard to what they perceive happens during the tutorial, how they describe it, and how they perceive the role of the tutor and the writing center in general.

The primary research questions that this study explored are as follows:

- What stories do tutors and writers tell about their work in the writing center?
- How do these stories reflect how tutors and writers perceive writing center work?



- How do these stories support, contradict, expand or reimagine the dominant narratives of peer tutoring, and how can the study of tutors' and writers' stories advance our understanding of writing center work?

In this chapter, which focuses on the methodology used in the study, I will first provide an overview of the study, looking at its rationale, followed by details on the site, the participants and the data collected. I will then discuss methods of coding and data analysis and describe the key themes that emerged therein.

### **Rationale**

As the purpose of this study was to focus on the missing voices of tutors and writers in scholarship on writing centers, a qualitative approach, in which a researcher attempts to “interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin and Lincoln, p. 4) was necessary. Because the practices and training in individual writing centers are all necessarily dependent on local context, a case study at one writing center in which tutors' and writers' voices could be explored in depth in their specific space and time was deemed most appropriate.

### **Research Design**

#### **Overview**

Below is a list of the key stages of the data collection to provide an overview of the entire process. Following this list, each is discussed in greater detail.

1. Potential participants were recruited during a tutor staff meeting and during visits to the writing center during work hours.
2. Data collection began with the making of audio recordings of the tutoring sessions of participating tutors and writers.

3. As soon as possible after these tutorials had ended, interviews were conducted separately with both participants—the tutor and the writer.
4. The process of analyzing interview data and tutorial recordings began, using methods drawn from category-content narrative analysis and grounded theory.
5. Follow-up interviews were conducted via email with tutors and writers.
6. Data analysis continued, using feedback from follow-up interviews to modify emergent categories and develop themes.

### **Research Sample**

Data for this study was collected between January 29, 2012 and May 9, 2012 at the writing center at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP). The research sample consisted of two groups: tutors who worked at the IUP Writing Center who elected to participate in the study and student writers who visited the writing center and who worked with these participating tutors.

These groups of participants were recruited in two stages; the tutors were recruited first. At the beginning of IUP's Spring 2012 semester, I attended a writing center staff meeting, during which I discussed my study with tutors and invited those interested to participate. Thirteen out of 18 tutors agreed to participate in the study.

Writers were recruited next. IUP's writing center operated at the time on a walk-in system, so I visited the work shifts of those tutors who agreed to participate and waited with them for a writer to stop by for tutoring. When a writer arrived, I spoke to him or her before the tutor began the session and invited the writer to

participate in the study. If the writer elected to participate, the tutoring session was recorded and further data was collected from tutor and writer after their session was over.

This study focuses on the data collected from 14 participants—seven tutors and seven writers. This number is intentionally small (I had intended to focus on between five and ten pairs), so that analysis of participants' narratives could be appropriately detailed and thorough. Of the seven tutors, five were current IUP students (four undergraduate students and one graduate student) and two were recently graduated IUP students working in the writing center as volunteers. All tutors were native speakers of English. Their level of experience working in the writing center ranged from one semester to three years. All tutors were over 18 years old.

Of the seven student writers participating, all were undergraduate students. One was a non-native speaker of English, and the others were native speakers. Two writers were nontraditional students. Four writers had visited the writing center before the session that was recorded, and the rest were first-time visitors. None of the writers who were repeat visitors had worked with their tutor prior to this session. All writers were over 18 years old.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. No compensation or incentives were offered to any participants. The Writing Center Director was not informed which tutors were participating in the study nor any information about the content of either the sessions or the interviews that could be attributed to tutors.

I have assigned all participants pseudonyms, which are used throughout this study in place of their real names. Participants' real names and corresponding pseudonyms are recorded in a single password protected file on my personal computer; all other data use participants' pseudonyms only.

### **Data Collection**

**Audio recordings.** This study's research questions seek to understand, in part, how tutors and writers may understand and interpret the same set of events differently. Because tutors and writers were asked to talk primarily about a particular tutoring session, audio recordings were made of the sessions they would be discussing in their interviews. Recordings served several purposes: for stimulated recall, as necessary, during the interviews. Stimulated recall (allowing research participants to listen to a playback of a particular event that they are being asked about) has been used in research on writing to generate more complete data from participants (DiPardo, 1994). More significantly—as few interview participants required playback of their session—the recordings served as a tool in the analysis and interpretation of data, particularly in using excerpts to illustrate, in Chapters 4 and 5, tutors' and writers' varying interpretations of same events.

Tutors and writers were provided with a digital audio recorder prior to the beginning of their session and shown how to use it; they recorded their sessions together, returning the recorder to me at the end. I listened to each tutorial carefully and subsequently transcribed those which are included in the study. Excerpts from these transcribed tutorials can be found throughout Chapters 4 and 5 to provide additional insight into tutors' and writers' accounts of events.

**Face to face interviews.** Face to face interviews with tutors and writers took place as soon as possible after their tutoring sessions ended. Tutors and writers were interviewed separately, either in an empty office or computer lab, away from the writing center itself so participants had privacy to discuss their honest impressions of their sessions without being overheard. During these interviews I utilized “active interviewing,” as outlined by Gubrium and Holstein (2003). An active interview “transforms the subject behind the respondent from a repository of opinions and reason or a wellspring of emotions into a *productive source of knowledge*” and its primary goal is to “activate narrative production” (p. 70).

Using this process, I first simply invited tutors and writers to tell me the story of their tutorial. During the narrations that followed, I allowed participants to talk with no interruptions, aside from clarifications or invitations to continue. According to Holstein and Gubrium (2000), often the best way to solicit a story from a research participant is to request it directly; in addition, participants should be permitted to speak without interruption in order for a story to emerge. As Chase (1995) cautions, the researcher must carefully attend to allowing the participants to talk about what they want to talk about when attempting to elicit narrative from them. An overemphasis on bringing the conversation back to the research questions can cause the participant to “pull away” from interview.

After this first part of the interview, in which narratives were solicited from the participant to address the first research question, the rest of the interview had a semi-structured format. During this part of the interview, I asked each participant

the same small set of questions (see Appendix A), but invited other threads of conversation to emerge and asked various follow up questions depending on what responses were generated from the initial questions. After the semi-structured portion of the interview was over, participants were invited to ask me questions or make any additional comments—and most participants did.

**Email interviews.** After face-to-face interviews were complete and data analysis had begun, I invited participants to participate in follow-up interviews via email. During the first round of these email interviews, all participants—tutors and writers—were essentially asked the same set of questions used to generate the narratives during the face-to-face interviews, in order to note any changes after the passage of time. The second round of email interviews was conducted only with tutors; in these interviews, I invited tutors to reflect on categories that were emerging in data and describe their reactions and responses to those themes. These responses were used to further refine categories and develop themes. Additionally, tutors' insights and analysis will be included in the discussion of data in Chapter 5.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Rationale**

Data was analyzed using methods drawn from both grounded theory and narrative analysis. Developed as a method for conceptualizing complex data, grounded theory is characterized by simultaneous data collection and analysis, the development (and continuous revision) of conceptual categories and relationships derived from data, and the collaboration between participant and researcher in

developing and interpreting this theoretical framework (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Charmaz, 2002).

To provide a guide for developing initial conceptual categories, I drew from Lieblich's (1998) four models of narrative analysis, primarily using the categorical content reading method of analysis. This method, similar to content analysis, "focuses on the content of narratives as manifested in separate parts of the story, irrespective of the context of the complete story" (p. 112). Although narrative analysis, especially in education research, often features holistic reading of narratives, categorical reading was used here in order to better compare tutors' and writers' perceptions of particular aspects of the tutorial side-by-side.

## **Procedure**

**Analysis of recordings.** After each set of interviews with tutors and writers was conducted, I began analysis of data by listening carefully to both the audio recording of the session itself and the audio recordings of the interviews. I then transcribed the audio of the tutoring session, as well as the accompanying tutor and writer interviews.

**Initial coding.** After sets of tutorial and interview data were selected and transcribed, I began initial coding of the tutor and writer interviews. I approached this process by reading these texts, as Lieblich (1998) suggests, "as openly as possible" (p. 113), using a combination of process, descriptive and in-vivo codes. The number of initial codes was over 60, and included codes such as:

- making corrections
- learning something new

- reading aloud
- negative past experiences with writing
- advice from teachers
- “second pair of eyes”
- asking questions

The tutors’ and writers’ interviews were coded together, as comparing the interviews about the same experience side-by-side was a key part of this analysis of data. Interview data only was coded; tutorial transcripts were not, as the focus of this study is on tutors’ and writers’ interpretations and perceptions of their tutorials, rather than an outsider’s analysis of their interaction.

**Analytic memos.** Grounded theory methods call for the researcher to regularly compose analytic memos during the data analysis process in which she reflects on emerging codes, categories and themes, in addition to other aspects of the research process. This reflective writing is an important stage in the analysis process; as Saldana (2009) notes, “analytic memo writing serves as an additional code-and category-generating method” (p. 41). I composed a total of 14 reflective memos, beginning with the initial coding process and ending well into the initial presentation of research results, found in Chapter 4. These memos were instrumental in the next stage of the coding process as described below.

**Focused/axial coding.** In focused coding, the researcher determines what Charmaz (2006) calls “the most salient categories” (p. 47) that emerge from the data, based on the initial codes that were developed. During this process, the more than 60 initial codes were condensed into 12 broader categories, and data was then



recoded based on these new categories. Key in developing these categories was the conceptual framework of the three-dimensional narrative space developed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). As such, I looked to develop categories that spanned all three dimensions: place (the writing center and what happened there, outside the writing center), time (past experiences, future plans), and personal/social (references to perceptions of self, other, and interactions)

The 12 categories that emerged during this stage of the process are listed below:

- Reflecting on past experiences with writing
- Describing own learning process
- Making higher-order revisions
- Making lower-order revisions
- Describing actions before/after tutoring session
- Explaining tutoring strategy
- Making suggestions
- Asking questions
- Describing perceptions of other person
- Reflecting on what tutors do (or don't do)
- Speculating on professors' thoughts/perceptions
- Describing writing instruction

**Development of themes.** As this recursive process of generating codes, writing memos, developing categories, and recoding continued, emergent themes were developed from this data. As Lieblich (1998) suggested, when a researcher

does a categorical-content reading of narrative data, “the contents collected in each category can be used descriptively to formulate a picture of the content universe in certain groups of people” (p. 114). Thus, to generate themes, I first examined each pair of tutor and writer narratives, side by side, looking for significant similarities, discrepancies and patterns between the two accounts. I then looked at the categories present in the data collected from each group overall, examining patterns and frequency among the seven tutors’ narratives and then among the seven writers’ narratives. After this stage of analysis, the themes that emerged were narrowed, using the three research questions and Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three dimensions of narrative space as a guide.

### **Key Themes**

The five themes that emerged are listed below. Each of these themes will be presented in detail in Chapter 4, with the implications of these findings discussed in Chapter 5. Overall, however, these emergent themes do indicate significant and provocative disparities in the way that tutors and writers perceive and describe their shared sessions and each other, both individually and collectively.

- In their narratives, tutors primarily describe work on higher order concerns, while writers describe both work on higher order and lower order concerns.
- When describing the actions that took place during the tutorial, both tutors and writers focused their narratives more on what the tutor did during the session.
- Tutors’ narratives spanned the time and space of the tutoring session only; writers’ narratives spanned time and space beyond the tutorial.

- Tutors perceive that their role is to work with students on the “big picture”, not on editing or correcting. Writers perceive tutors as those who “help” in a variety of ways, with a variety of issues, including editing and correcting.
- Tutors believe writing is often taught in a way that is detrimental to the writer and the writing center can help writers deal with these effects. Writers describe themselves as visiting the writing center for extrinsic reward and to please their professors.

### **Conclusion**

As with any qualitative study, limitations exist based on its inherent postmodern design and the subjectivity of reality, both as represented by participants and by the researcher. As Denzin and Lincoln (2008) write, “there are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of—and between—the observer and the observed” (p. 29). Thus, care has been taken in the degree and scope of which conclusions can be drawn about data. Applicability of the conclusions drawn is greatly context dependent. However, much writing center research is localized and context dependent because of the diversity of needs and goals in writing centers across the country (Harris, 2002).

While attempting to draw conclusions about other tutors or other writing centers from the data collected from this research is inappropriate, the process itself of studying the perceptions of tutors and writers may instead be used as a model for other writing centers, demonstrating how the voices of tutors and writers can aid in developing a richer understanding of what goes on during a tutorial, as well as how these contributions can aid tutors’ pedagogical development. Thus, though the

conclusions drawn from this study may not necessarily apply to other writing centers across the country, the importance of drawing from this particular population and applying their contributions to theory and practice is indeed more universally applicable.

## CHAPTER 4

### PRESENTATION OF DATA

In this chapter, I will present and describe key themes that emerged from the data collection described in Chapter 3. I will begin, however, by providing relevant context in which to position these themes, beginning with an overview of the research site, followed by a description and summary of each of the seven pairs of study participants and their tutoring sessions. After this, I will describe the five key themes that emerged from the study data, describing how each theme emerged in tutors' and/or writers' narratives. The relevance, context, and broader implications of these themes will be discussed in Chapter 5.

#### **Research Site**

All data was collected at the writing center at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), a public, Pennsylvania state-system university with a student population of more than 15,000. IUP's writing center serves the needs of a broad student population, both undergraduate and graduate students and both native and non-native speakers of English. Founded in 1972, IUP's writing center has established a strong tutoring program; over the years, its peer tutors have engaged in research, published articles, and presented at national tutoring conferences. This site was chosen for this case study because of my own personal and professional connections (having served as assistant director there for two years), because of the experience and training of the tutors it employs, and because of the wide variety of writers that visit the center.

## **Tutoring Sessions and Participants**

### **Overview**

Fourteen individuals (seven tutors and seven writers) participated in this study; seven tutoring sessions were recorded, and the tutor and writer participating in each session were then interviewed (see Tables 1 and 2 for list of all participants).

Below, I will provide a brief overview of each tutoring session and each pair of participants. These summaries are presented for two reasons: first, so that subsequent discussion of the data collected from the narratives can be placed in appropriate context; second, to illustrate the substantial differences that exist among the seven sessions. As later discussion of the themes will illustrate, significant similarities emerged among the way that tutors, collectively, talked about their sessions and their work and the way that writers, collectively, did the same. Thus, these descriptions are also meant to help illustrate that these similarities exist among the wide variety of tutors, writers, assignments, and types of tutorials that were studied.

Still, by providing these brief summaries of each tutorial, I do not intend to suggest that they are any sort of “official” accounts of what happened; in fact, as is evident in the data collected, participants would and do perceive their sessions differently. In the brief accounts below, however, in addition to presenting key details about the sessions and participants, I worked to draw attention to parts of the tutorials that will be discussed later in the chapter.

Table 1

*Participating Tutors*

Tutor	Degree Status	Major/Program	Semesters worked at Writing Center
Morgan	Undergraduate	English	3
Ramona	Undergraduate	English	1
Kayla	Undergraduate	Education	2
John	B.S. Ed. (recently graduated volunteer)	Education	2
Dave	Graduate	English	4
Rodney	Undergraduate	Education	3
Molly	B.A. (recently graduated volunteer)	English	6

Table 2

*Participating Writers*

Writer	Course	Assignment	First Time at Writing Center?
Erika	English Composition	Analysis essay	Yes
Anna	Business	Reading response questions	No
Caroline	English Composition	Research paper	Yes
Rebecca	Criminology	Group presentation PowerPoint	No
Teresa	Counseling	PowerPoint presentation	No
Patrick	N/A	PRAXIS test preparation	No
Rashad	English Composition	Short story	No

**Morgan and Erika**

Erika was a first-time visitor to the writing center. She brought with her a “pop culture analysis” of a reality television show that she had written for her university-required research writing course. As Erika explained at the beginning of the session, her professor had told her that her previous essays lacked focus, and he

urged her to come to the writing center prior to handing in her analysis paper to “focus on focus”. Erika explains this conversation with her professor matter-of-factly: “Sometimes I get a little off subject and I go into different details, I was told.”

Morgan, a soft-spoken and serious tutor, with a year and a half of experience, began the session by asking Erika some brief preliminary questions and then moving on to reading the essay aloud herself, explaining to Erika that they would stop after each paragraph and talk about focus. In addition to this, Morgan helped Erika make numerous sentence-level corrections along the way—some punctuation and other proofreading errors. Many of these errors Erika seemed to easily identify herself as Morgan read.

As for focus, Morgan asked Erika after each section of her paper about its connection to her main argument. At first, Morgan’s questions seemed overly broad: “Okay, so what about this paragraph? What are your thoughts?” As a result, Erika’s responses were vague: “Seems okay,” she said, before trailing off, “I wasn’t sure. . . .” As they read further in the paper, Morgan became more specific in her feedback, telling Erika that her analysis contained too many digressions or didn’t entirely align with her thesis, finally stating plainly, “When I look at [your paper], there are maybe a couple topics in this.” Even though Erika had expressed concern about her focus, she seemed resistant to Morgan’s critique. After Morgan once more pointed out that one of Erika’s paragraphs did not connect to her thesis, Erika disagreed:

Erika: I thought it was kinda on the same topic, and it is talking about obesity so I thought it was okay.

Morgan : Yeah yeah . . . I understand where you're coming from with that.



Erika: Maybe if we keep reading more it might sounds better

Although Morgan initially backed off and continued reading, she continued to return to Erika's lack of focus. Erika's resistance diminished when Morgan explained that she wouldn't necessarily have to rewrite a great deal of her paper, but rather revise her thesis statement to better match the content of her paper.

Erika listened to Morgan's suggestion on how to adjust her thesis and came up with some suggestions of her own. By the end of the session, Erika had written out a draft of a new thesis statement, saying that her revised focus and argument, "makes a lot of sense. I didn't think about it that way [before]."

### **Ramona and Anna**

In this session, Ramona, an undergraduate tutor with a little over a semester of tutoring experience, worked with Anna, a nontraditional and ESL student who was a repeat visitor to the writing center. In fact, Anna had already visited the writing center and worked with a different tutor earlier that day. Anna's assignment was for a business course that asked her to read a journal article and write a response to it that addressed a number of questions given by her professor. During Anna's first session, her tutor had advised her that she hadn't addressed all of her professor's questions; after leaving and working by herself for a few hours, Anna had returned to the writing center and asked Ramona to help her make sure she was now responding to the questions fully.

Ramona read the paper aloud, and she stopped often, addressing both content and mechanical/proofreading errors, including spelling. To address issues of clarity of content, Ramona would ask Anna questions like "What are you trying to

say here?” Anna’s verbal explanations often generated material for the revision, which Anna would type after talking out the new sentence or paragraph with Ramona. Ramona expressed several times that she was unfamiliar with the subject matter in Anna’s paper (business and marketing strategies); she often asked Anna, after they revised a section, “So, does that still hold true to what you were saying?”

As Anna generated this new content, Ramona helped her address mechanical errors within. Anna was especially intent on correcting these errors, particularly spelling errors, which seemed to emerge as one of her biggest issues. In most of these cases, Ramona pointed the error out to Anna, who made the correction. In addition to spelling, Ramona assisted Anna with errors typical of ESL writers, including article use and prepositions. Ramona also assisted with some minor word processing issues, including reminding Anna where and how to save her work.

As the session ended, they realized that Anna had answered all but one of her professor’s questions in her paper. Nearly out of time, Anna told Ramona she would work on answering the remaining question and then return to the writing center the next day to go over the final section with a tutor.

### **Kayla and Caroline**

Caroline, another student taking a research writing course, was a first-time visitor to the writing center and brought with her a nearly final draft of a research paper on “post-911 American culture.” She told her tutor Kayla, an education major with a year of tutoring experience, that she was happy with and confident in her paper but came to the writing center because her professor was offering students who visited the writing center extra credit. When Kayla asked her if there was

anything specific she wanted to work on, Caroline conceded that it would just help to have a “second pair of eyes” look over her paper and check the correctness of her in-text citations.

During the session, Kayla read the paper aloud, stopping to point out and explain minor sentence-level errors (misused or missing commas most often). Caroline also asked Kayla a few questions about various in-text citation issues. Her citation questions were nuanced, illustrating that she already had a fairly solid grasp on using correct citations. Kayla noted this after Caroline’s last question, telling her, “[that’s] a good question . . . I don’t think anyone’s ever asked me that, so that’s pretty cool.” After reading through the paper and correcting these sentence-level and citation issues, Caroline said she didn’t have any other questions or concerns. Kayla didn’t either, ending the session by praising Caroline’s paper enthusiastically: “To be honest, I wanted to read more of your paper . . . I think that is a great ending . . .and it flowed really well.”

### **John and Rebecca**

Rebecca arrived at the writing center consumed with confusion and frustration. She began her session with John, a recently graduated volunteer tutor, by complaining profusely about her assignment and her professor. John listened to Rebecca’s complaints sympathetically, but gently redirected her toward her assignment and her goals for the session. Rebecca explained that she was working on her section of a group presentation for a criminology class and had brought with her a sentence outline and a PowerPoint presentation to review. Her group had received critical feedback from their professor, which had confused them, so she

wanted John's help with parsing her professor's feedback, most of which related to APA citations and formatting of the sentence outline. With this goal settled, John and Rebecca began to look at her Power Point slides, which contained her outline, and address her professor's comments. While Rebecca was receptive to John's explanations, she continued to express frustration with the assignment throughout the session, particularly her lack of familiarity with sentence outlines, and her worries about her upcoming group presentation: "I have no idea what I'm doing, to be honest . . . it has to be in APA form. [My professor] said that our format was all wrong and that . . . basically everything was wrong." She continued to repeat this sentiment, later telling John: "I'm walking blind here." In addition to addressing her professor's feedback (which mainly concerned lack of consistency in formatting of the outline), John also advised Rebecca that she should find additional sources to use in her presentation and talked to her about using library databases. By the end of the session, Rebecca seemed less flustered and even expressed her willingness to confer with her professor again:

John: So, you feel like you know how to put this outline together better now?

Rebecca: Yeah, I'll probably make [a new outline] up tonight and then take it to [my professor] and if she still has problems, I'll just come back [to the writing center].

### **Dave and Teresa**

Dave and Teresa's tutoring session was the longest of all those presented here, at nearly an hour and fifteen minutes. Teresa, the writer, was a talkative, enthusiastic, nontraditional student who was a frequent visitor at the writing

center. Her tutor Dave, a master's student with several years of tutoring experience, was equally talkative and willing engage in in-depth conversation. Teresa brought with her a Power Point presentation for a counseling class and told Dave at the beginning of the session: "I just want to make sure that I have it typed correctly, because I don't type very well and I want to make sure that I didn't . . . put an extra space in where it's not supposed to be and that I have this cited correctly with the APA format." The pair read over each of Teresa's slides, with both Dave and Teresa identifying concerns—both the proofreading and citation issues that Teresa mentioned, as well as those related to word choice, organization and content. In addition, Teresa expressed insecurity about her computer literacy, at one point laughing and asking Dave, "You don't offer typing classes here at this center do you?" Dave helped Teresa with a number of issues related to the functionality of the program she was using, helping her eliminate extraneous spaces from her slides, for example.

The pair talked easily, often digressing and discussing interesting aspects of the content of Teresa's presentation. In addition to written content and style, the pair also discussed the visual imagery used in the presentation, particularly in relation to audience. On one slide, as part of a larger point about cultural touchstones, a brief reference to the 9-11 terrorist attacks was made; on this slide, Teresa had included a picture of the burning Twin Towers, which Dave dissuaded her from, calling the picture too "extravagant" for the point being made. By the end of the session, the pair had gone over each of Teresa's 19 power point slides with a fine tooth comb, with Teresa actively engaged in asking questions and making

revisions, discussing everything from how to create bullet points to word choice to grammar to clarity. Dave complimented Teresa's careful revisions and attention to detail at the end of the session, noting, "You really care about your education." "I do. I really do," Teresa agreed.

### **Rodney and Patrick**

Patrick, an education major, stopped by the writing center for help with his study preparation for the writing section of the Praxis I, a standardized test required of all students seeking admission to IUP's teacher education program. An education major himself, Rodney, the tutor, greeted Patrick with enthusiasm, getting a binder of Praxis test preparation materials kept at the writing center and telling Patrick, "You came to the right spot. I'm actually a student teacher now." Rodney immediately began to offer various test taking tips, telling Patrick first that the test would be similar to the PSSA (the Pennsylvania state standardized test that elementary and secondary students take) and then anticipating potential questions or fears that Patrick might have with advice: "The actual essay itself? Don't think they'll throw some random topic like, 'why did Napoleon decide to invade Russia?' or something like that, something you don't have any knowledge of. It'll be something you can relate to." Patrick responded to Rodney's advice with mainly "yeah" and "okay," but took notes while they talked.

Next the pair looked at a sample prompt in the writing center's test preparation materials and talked about strategies for responding to the question. Here Rodney pulled back on his advice and led Patrick through a sample question, asking guiding questions as Patrick developed a response and a strategy for writing

an essay. From here, Rodney also advised Patrick on style and on making good use of time during the test period. The session ended with Rodney making Patrick photocopies of some sample prompts and suggesting that Patrick return to the writing center after composing a sample essay to go over and practice scoring with another tutor.

### **Molly and Rashad**

In this session, the writer, Rashad, brought in a narrative that he had composed for his basic writing class. His professor had given the class a short prompt that they were to use as the starting point for a story. Rashad worked with Molly, a recently graduated volunteer tutor with over three years of experience tutoring at the writing center, who was soon to be starting graduate school in a rhetoric and composition program. At the beginning of the session, Rashad told Molly that his narrative was nearly finished but just needed some “polishing.” Molly invited Rashad to read his paper aloud, and the pair stopped frequently to address mainly sentence-level concerns. Comma use and tense were the areas that the pair spent the most time correcting, with Molly giving Rashad strategies to identify and correct these errors himself after she noticed a pattern. As the session progressed, Rashad recognized some of these error patterns and would stop and correct them without Molly’s prompting.

In the last few minutes of section, after they had read through the entire paper and made corrections throughout, Molly suggested that Rashad add additional descriptive details to his narrative to make it more entertaining for the reader, telling him: “I just think some of those little details could give it a little more

visual, a little bit more atmosphere.” Rashad agreed with this suggestion right away, pointing out a section of the narrative and noting, “I didn't explain, like, how I *got* to the window, I just said I went to the window. I could say you know, ‘I stumbled’.”

The pair identified a few other places in the narrative that were lacking in descriptive detail and brainstormed ideas for revision.

The session ended with Molly summing up for Rashad the main issues the two had worked on and her advice for him after the tutorial: “I think that if you go back and you add some of those little details we talked about, it'll be great. And just as you're doing that, remember to keep in mind about, you know, your tense. Keep it in the past . . . if you use longer, more complex sentences, remember about those commas.”

## **Selected Themes**

### **Overview**

Having described the context of the data collected—the research site and relevant details about each of the seven tutoring sessions—I will now present and describe in more detail each of the five selected themes that emerged from collected data (see Table 3). These themes are grouped across Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative space of time, space, and personal/social. Thus, these themes fall into broader general categories:

- Description of the session itself/the writing center in general (Time and Space)
- Description of the time and space outside the session/writing center (Time and Space)



- Descriptions of perceptions of one another (Personal/Social)

Writers and tutors spanned a range of majors, programs, experience levels, abilities, motivations, and styles. The assignments and writing concerns that were addressed in each tutorial were similarly varied. Thus, consideration of the themes below—and subsequent discussion--should be read with the understanding that the trends among tutors’ and writers’ narratives emerged despite a wide range of sessions, participants, and topics.

Table 3

*Themes in Tutors’ and Writers’ Narratives*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Tutors’ Narratives</b>	<b>Writers’ Narratives</b>
<i>Higher vs. Lower Order Concerns</i>	Tutors focused in their narratives on work done on higher order concerns.	Writers described in their narratives a variety of both higher and lower order concerns.
<i>Actions Performed During Tutorial</i>	Tutors described their own actions more often than writers’ actions.	Writers described tutors’ actions more often than their own (when describing the tutorial itself).
<i>Time/Space of Narratives</i>	Tutors described the time/space of the tutoring sessions in their narratives.	Writers’ narratives covered time and space outside the tutoring session.
<i>Role of Tutor</i>	Tutors has clearly delineated ideas of what tutors should and should not help with.	Writers described tutors as helping with a wide variety of issues.
<i>Role of Writing Center</i>	Tutors described the writing center as a place where writing is taught differently than in the classroom.	Writers describe a strong connection between the writing center and their work in class; visiting the writing center pleases their professors and helps them earn higher grades.

## **Higher/Lower Order Concerns**

*Theme 1: In their narratives, tutors primarily describe work on higher order concerns, while writers describe both work on higher order and lower order concerns.*

In each of the seven tutorials, tutors' and writers' narrative accounts of what happened during the session generally corresponded as far as the basic facts of the sessions, such as what kind of assignment was worked on or notable actions or conversations that took place. For example, John and Rebecca both described their discussion on how to write a sentence outline; Dave and Teresa both recounted their conversation about deleting the Twin Towers image from a power point slide; and Ramona and Anna both described realizing that Anna's paper hadn't answered all her professor's questions. Although all seven sets of narratives contain these basic parallels, differences did emerge in the way that tutors and writers described the particular writing concepts that were worked on, both in the language used and in the level of detail.

According to the recordings and transcripts of the sessions, in five of the seven sessions studied, tutors and writers worked on both higher and lower order concerns throughout their sessions. The two sessions that did not address higher order concerns were Kayla and Caroline's, which focused on punctuation and citations only, and Patrick and Rodney's test prep session, which did not focus on a written product at all.

Of the remaining five sessions where both higher order and lower order concerns were addressed, three of the tutors did not mention lower order concerns at all in their narratives. Instead, tutors only described their work with writers on

higher order concerns such as audience, content, focus, and organization. In their tutorial, Morgan and Erika worked on revising Erika's thesis statement and on the overall focus of her essay, in addition to addressing sentence-level corrections that needed to be made throughout her essay. Morgan's narrative focuses only on the work done on the Erika's thesis statement:

When I read [Erika's] introduction, I thought it sounded fine but then when I started reading the . . . supporting paragraphs, I realized that they didn't necessarily tie to her thesis and when I brought that up to her she said that [her professor] wanted her to pick one thing for her thesis and not include . . . a three part thesis or anything.

Morgan doesn't mention their correcting of sentence-level errors at all in her narrative. Ramona, too, who helped Anna make sure her answers to her professor's questions were clear (in addition to helping with grammar, punctuation, and spelling) talks only about helping Anna with content. What they worked on in the session, Ramona said, was "making sure that [Anna] was conveying her points clearly. If I was having trouble understanding something, I would ask her, you know, what did you mean by this, and then she would . . . explain it to me in her own words." Similarly, in the case of John and Rebecca, the pair worked on a variety of writing issues during their session—developing and organizing content, in addition to formatting and mechanical issues. John talked mainly about their work on content and organization in his narrative; he did not address how he helped with Rebecca with formatting or word choice.

The other two tutors who had sessions that contained a mix of work on both higher and lower order concerns mentioned lower order concerns only briefly and spend more time in their narratives talking about higher order concerns. Dave mentioned that Teresa “wanted to focus in on issues with spacing and grammatical and mechanical errors throughout each slide,” but doesn’t say any more about those aspects and instead spends the rest of his narrative describing his work with Teresa on content and organization:

There were a number of slides that had some thoughts that were just kind of mixed up . . . it was unclear what she was referring to, or . . . whose thought it was, initially, 'cause there was one slide in particular where it was . . . a list of preconceived notions regarding the session and . . . it felt like contextually everything was supposed to be her preconceived notions, but there was one that was . . . her interview subject's preconceived notion, which actually fit in better with a different slide.

Clearly, this description of work on higher order concerns was far more detailed than his cursory mention of helping Teresa with mechanics and formatting. Molly also mentions lower order concerns in her narrative, but, like, Dave, describes this work quickly: “[Rashad’s] main concerns at the beginning of the session were primarily grammatical.. I would say, there's something in that sentence. Reread it and what do you think we should work on there and usually he was able to spot it then.” Aside from this, however, Molly focused in more detail on discussing how she helped Rashad generate more descriptive content:

So I talked about how he could draw on that experience and use senses other than hearing which is the primary one that he had already been using. He talked about hearing thumps in his house and about how his house might have been haunted. That's what was happening in the story. So I talked a little bit about how in particular places, like at the very beginning, he could talk a little more about, you know, were the lights on, did you run around the house turning them on, um what was that like, was it a dark house? That would give your reader a little bit more of a visual about what was going on. In fact, the discussion of generating more detail that Molly described took up a relatively short amount of time near the end of the session, compared to the majority of the session in which the pair focused on punctuation and grammar.

While this theme of focus on higher-order concerns was notable in tutors' narratives, the writers' narratives reflected a different trend: in those same five sessions that included work on both higher order and lower order concerns, all five writers described work on both higher order and lower order concerns, though several struggled to articulate their work on higher order concerns clearly. Indeed, often the focus in the writers' narratives contrasted significantly from the tutors' narratives.

Erika—who worked with tutor Morgan—characterized the work they did as “proofread[ing]” and “making corrections.” While she did not mention their work on her thesis statement specifically, she does note that Morgan gave her “insight on what [she] feels about [my] paper,” seeming to allude to their work on readjusting

the focus. Erika's narrative is particularly notable in how much it contrasts with that of Morgan, who did not mention their work on lower order concerns at all.

A similar contrast is evident when examining Rashad's narrative alongside Molly's. While Molly spent more time in her narrative on the work done on content during the last five minutes of the session, Rashad had little to say about that part of the tutorial, focusing mainly the first part of the tutorial, in which the pair worked on correcting commas and tense: "we checked for grammatical errors . . . commas and stuff like that." Of the second half of the tutorial, he only said, vaguely, "After [correcting comma and tense errors], we talked about . . . things that would be helpful about revising my paper in the future." Rashad seemed to place less focus on this brief conversation about generating more detail that came at the end of the session, interestingly characterizing it as advice about writing to consider in the future—not necessarily something that related to his current assignment. In Rashad's narrative, the real focus of the session was what occurred during the majority of the session—the work on grammar and mechanics.

As for the other three writers, Teresa, Rebecca, and Anna, all three described a balance of work on higher and lower order concerns—a balance that seemed fairly representative of the work done in the session. While Anna noted that Ramona helped her "check grammar" and "check for spelling," she also acknowledged that much of their work focused on making sure that she had answered her professor's questions and "making sure that [the answers] ma[de] sense." Anna discussed these elements together, not separately, and did not emphasize one over another, in

contrast to her tutor, Ramona, who focused primarily on their work on clarity and content in her narrative.

Similarly, Rebecca discussed both higher order and lower order concerns in concert, talking about flow and organization in the same breath as formatting issues, noting that John told her “how to make [the presentation] flow and change the format of [the sentence outline] . . . he brought up ideas . . . he told me to reword some things.” This contrasted with John, who talked primarily about organization and idea generation. Teresa, too, discussed a variety of work done during her session. She described the work she did with Dave on editing the content of the slides: “I learned that some of the ideas in my slides needed to be modified. I removed some content and changed the wording in other areas.” But in contrast to Dave’s detailed explanation of this process, Teresa also described, in greater detail, their work on mechanical issues. She mentioned both work done on “grammatical errors” and fixing citations, but notably spends most of her narrative talking about how Dave helped her with formatting and word processing issues related to the PowerPoint software itself. Teresa noted, “Visually, I don't see the space between the arrows [on the PowerPoint]” and described Dave as helping her figure out how to delete these extraneous spaces on her slides. This work received only a cursory mention in Dave’s narrative, however.

### **Actions Performed**

*Theme 2: When describing the actions that took place during the tutorial, both tutors and writers focused their narratives more on what the tutor did during the session.*

While clearly notable contrasts emerged in the way that tutors' and writers' narratives described the content of their sessions, a significant similarity emerged in the portrayal not of the type of work that took place, but on who did this work. Though initially analysis of narratives focused on what types of actions writers and tutors each referenced, it soon became clear that the most significant difference between the sets of narratives revolved not around what actions were being described, but who was described as performing those actions (see Table 4). In four of the seven tutor narratives, tutors made significantly more references to their own actions than that of the writer; in the other three, the tutors tended described what work was done without differentiating who did what. Most significantly, in those four narratives that do differentiate, references to actions performed by writers were not just less frequent than descriptions of tutors' actions—they were entirely minimal; all four of these tutors: Morgan, Ramona, Kayla, and Molly, each made four or fewer references to any action performed by the writer. This is a notable contrast when paired with the frequency of reference to their own actions, which ranged from twelve to six.

Tutors at times described themselves as performing a variety of actions, while the writer was clearly a presence in the story, but not performing any specific action. This excerpt from Morgan's narrative illustrates this tendency to disappear the individual actions of the writer:

I suggested that she take all of the main ideas from the paragraphs . . . and [try] to think of a thesis that could relate to all of those...I helped her find one that did and after we had that, I could see it in her, like, facial expression that



that made sense to her so, like, that was good. And then we read the rest of it, we discussed how what she had written could tie into that thesis.

In other narratives, the few references to the writers' actions that do exist tended to describe the writer's response to a particular action a tutor took or a strategy that a tutor used. For example, Ramona described using a questioning strategy with Anna:

If I was having trouble understanding something, I would ask her, what did you mean by this and then she would . . . explain it to me in her own words and I would say, well how about you just put that 'cause . . . actually that was a better explanation. It sounded more clear.

Similarly, Molly—the tutor who most often made reference to the writer's actions—still talked only about the writer's actions in response to her use of particular tutoring strategies. After describing her suggestion that Rashad add more descriptive details to his essay and giving him examples of possibilities, she noted, “He actually came up with a really good idea to change some of his verbs, one in particular.” Aside from this one suggestion that Rashad offered, however, the rest of the discussion of this conversation is about the suggestions that Molly herself made.

While the tendency to focus on self in a personal narrative is certainly not unexpected, this emphasis on the tutors' actions was also present in the writers' narratives of the tutoring sessions. In six of the seven writers' narratives, their descriptions of their sessions contained more references to actions performed by the tutors than those they themselves performed (the seventh narrative—Patrick's-- did not contain any specific references to who performed which actions during the tutoring session). Notably, none of the writers described themselves as performing

any more than two actions during the tutorial (See Table 5). Four writers—Caroline, Rebecca, Teresa, and Patrick—made no reference to their own actions during the tutorial at all. Caroline’s narrative begins:

[Kayla] asked me what I specifically needed help for and then she just read my paper out loud and as we went along she just pointed out any grammatical mistakes and just sort of did a running commentary on what she thought was good and what she thought I could improve.

When I asked her for more detail about the specifics of the session, Caroline continued to focus on only what Kayla did: “[Kayla] was just saying that my citations looked good. She just noticed a few silly things like missing a comma.” Rebecca’s narrative, too, begins with what John did: “He basically explained . . . the format of the outline, how to make it flow all into one, change the format of it. He brought up ideas that I didn’t even think of . . . he told me to reword some things.”

Significantly, though, when the focus is broadened to include any actions—not just those that took place during the tutorial, the writers were not hesitant to describe their own actions. Anna, who had already made multiple visits to the writing center, and who planned to come back to work on her essay, talked often in her narrative about her future actions/plans: “I’m just gonna take the questions, because I have . . . an introduction, so I’ll put the questions after my introduction and then just go from there.” When talking about the tutorial itself, though, Anna focused on what Ramona did, not what she did. Rebecca too talked about her own actions in reference to her future plans; her description of the tutoring session itself, though, only described what John did and told her during the session.

Table 4

*Number of References to Actions Performed in Tutors' Narratives*

Tutor	Actions performed by tutor	Actions performed by writer
Morgan	12	3
Ramona	6	1
Kayla	9	1
John	0	0
Dave	1	1
Rodney	1	0
Molly	7	4

Table 5

*Number of References to Actions Performed in Writers' Narratives*

Writer	Actions performed by tutor during session	Actions performed by writer during session	Actions performed by writer outside session
Erika	2	1	1
Anna	2	1	4
Caroline	7	0	1
Rebecca	3	0	1
Teresa	5	0	5
Patrick	0	0	2
Rashad	1	1	1

## **Time and Space**

*Theme 3: Tutors' narratives spanned the time and space of the tutoring session only; writers' narratives spanned time and space beyond the tutorial.*

While the first two themes emerged from writers' and tutors' description of the content of their session, notable, too, thematically was how and in what ways tutors and writers referenced time and space beyond the tutorial. In five of the seven

tutors' narratives, tutors talked only about what happened during the tutorial. In these five narratives, no references were made to their past experiences, such as other tutoring sessions or teaching/learning experiences, nor were there any references to anticipated future events. Rodney and Ramona's narratives do contain references to the space and time beyond the session, however, only brief ones.

Rodney referenced his own experience taking the PRAXIS test and how that made him a suitable tutor to work with Patrick. Ramona also briefly referenced the time and space outside the session, as she noted that Anna had done work in the writing center prior to her tutorial and that she planned to come in one more time. Aside from these brief references, though, no tutors described any other specific events or actions taking place outside the tutorial—either in reference to themselves or to the writers.

In sharp contrast, however, all seven writers mentioned either past events or experiences or anticipated future events in their narratives, with two writers actually spending more time discussing the time and space outside the tutorial than the tutorial itself. Some of these references were to prior work the writers had done with their papers or during previous tutoring sessions. Rashad talked about proofreading his paper himself before arriving at the writing center. Anna described her tutoring session from earlier in the day: “[the other tutor] read through it and made sure it makes sense, but then she said I didn't answer the questions so I have to go back and do that.” Anna also described the subsequent revisions she made before coming back to the writing center for a second time. Teresa, too, backed up in time during her narrative to talk about a prior tutoring session:

For the first time I composed—this is gonna sound crazy—a cover page and a reference page because someone here showed me how to do it last week. And my project wasn't due until next week, but I know between last week and next week, I'd forget. So I hurried up and went home and tried to do that. Teresa also made frequent references to her trajectory as a student and a writer in her narrative: "I know it sounds crazy but I didn't have a computer [growing up] so I'm terrible at typing." Later she reflects on her status as a nontraditional student, noting, "I'm just getting back into the whole schooling thing." Patrick, preparing to take a standardized test, reflected back on the last standardized test he had taken, noting: "the writing part in the SAT's wasn't too bad." Rebecca, on the other hand, talked about her lack of prior experience making sentence outlines.

At other times, writers referenced their anticipated future plans. Erika and Caroline both mentioned turning their papers in to their professors. Rebecca expressed concerns about time constraints when her group presents their project. Both Anna and Patrick talked about the further work they planned to do, particularly their intentions to return to the writing center. Patrick said, "I'll probably look over these [sample test questions] and I might actually come back tomorrow after doing, like, two [questions] and go over and see how I score."

Notably, two writers—Teresa and Anna—actually spent more time talking about the time and space outside the session than the session itself. Anna's narrative included her tutoring session from earlier in the day, her subsequent revisions, her session with Ramona, the revisions she plans to make after her session with Ramona, and her intention to come back to the writing center on Friday. Teresa's

narrative, too, began not with her session with Dave, but with a description of her arrival back in college after a long break and the disadvantage she feels this has created, technologically speaking. As Teresa's narrative begins, "My problem is that...like, I didn't grow up and learn how to type." She went on to talk about her issues with technology and new forms of writing and how previous writing center visits have helped her address those issues. At the end of the narrative, Teresa finally talks specifically about her session with Dave, but, like Anna, her story covers far more temporal and spatial ground.

### **Tutors' Roles**

*Theme 4: Tutors perceive that their role is to work with students on the "big picture," not on editing or correcting. Writers perceive tutors as those who "help" in a variety of ways, with a variety of issues, including editing and correcting.*

While the first three themes discussed focused on the content of tutors' and writers' narrative descriptions of their sessions only, the remaining themes also draw from their responses to the semi-structured interviews that followed.

While all seven tutors used different words and different kinds of examples, all seven described their role as a tutor as one who works with students on higher order concerns, or other "big picture" issues like helping them to develop learning or confidence in general. Morgan and John both made references to confidence boosting as part of their descriptions of their roles. Morgan characterized her role as a tutor as one in which she must help students to feel better about their writing abilities—especially in contrast to teachers and instructors who might have done the opposite:

I definitely make sure I explain to them, just so you know, like I think this is really great and don't think that this is wrong. But . . . for your class you might need to change your writing a little bit for your professor's specifications, as much as I know that can suck. Like I have to do it myself, but I just want you to know that . . . I think that this is really great and this is definitely something you could pursue, like outside of class, in your free time.

John also describes his role as a tutor as one that helps writers with issues of confidence. He says he often tells writers, "You know more than you think you know. You're better at this than you think you are. And I think hearing that kind of really helps them sometimes."

In addition to trying to help writers with confidence, John also described his role as one in which he helps students learn transferrable skills: "I want to make sure it's really a learning experience, where they kind of understand why I'm suggesting something." Molly expressed the same sentiment, stating, "I want the student to have learned something that they can take with them." Other tutors describe their role as one in which they help writers develop tools to express their own ideas and to access knowledge that they already have. "The most important thing," said Dave, "is to make sure that whatever the student is trying to say is coming across clearly, while not making them feel . . . like they have to adapt to almost a new language to get that clarity." Kayla agreed, stating, "my belief is that . . . you can write however you want." Her job as a tutor, then, is to help writers develop the skills to write in their own voice. Ramona, who vividly described a writer's

product as a “mirror into [their] soul,” said that tutoring is “all about getting [the writer’s] voice out” and that she “like[s] to let it be their voice not mine.”

Rodney described his role as one in which he challenges students to do their own thinking:

They're looking for someone who can . . . make those comments, ask those questions necessary . . . that's what I try to do, I try to approach it from more of a Socratic method, where I'll be asking questions a lot. I'll be asking, well what do you think of this? What do you think of that? Is there some way we can expand on this? And I force the students to kind of think about their writing in that sense

Although these seven tutors described the nature of their work in different ways, they were all in agreement on the “big picture” nature of their work. Five of the seven tutors also discussed what their roles did not include, and these comments revolved around a similar theme: tutors do not—or should not—be concerned with grammar and mechanics, with editing and corrections. Morgan stated this explicitly, noting that “it was good that [Erika] wasn't asking for like grammar and spelling stuff because that's when I feel like I'm not tutoring.” She later noted, when describing her personal tutoring philosophy that she isn't “really big on, on like the rules and specifics” and also critiques teachers and professors who are: “whenever [instructors] are so forceful with strict rules and stuff, no matter what and never provide an opportunity for a different kind of writing, then I think it makes students not want to write, and I think that's sad.”



Other tutors, too, expressed concern about helping with rules related to grammar and mechanics—and that doing so can cause tutors to be too directive. John noted, “I’d say one [part of my tutoring philosophy] is making sure that I’m not doing everything for them. I’m not saying, well, you know, this is how you change it, and this is how you do it, so that they don’t really learn anything.” Molly stated plainly that she doesn’t “make corrections,” and Rodney invoked a well-tread stereotype as he noted, “I don’t try to be a grammar Nazi, I don’t try to just correct papers.” Dave noted that lower order concerns should be less important in a tutoring session, stating “the message and the content need to be . . . what’s most important, not the grammatical accuracy, not the punctuation itself.”

Thus, although tutors used a variety of terminology, the theme that emerged across their words is clear—a tutor’s role is help with big picture, higher order concerns, to help students learn transferrable skills; a tutor’s role is not to edit or correct, and not to focus on grammar or mechanics. However, the writers’ perceptions of the role of the tutor did not contain this strict dichotomy that the tutors all seemed to speak to.

While all seven writers referred to the work the tutors do as “help,” this broad term was used to describe a variety of work. Several writers did acknowledge the “big picture” work that takes place at the writing center. Patrick perceived the writing center tutors as teacher figures, describing a session as like a one-on-one meeting with a teacher. Other writers, though, talked about the benefit of conversation with a peer. Rebecca said, “it’s a lot easier coming here than going to your professor if you have problems with writing . . . because they’re students and

they know . . . they just know how to teach, how to write.” Interestingly, though, Rebecca seemed to find tutors better suited to ask for help not only because they were fellow students, but because they “know how to teach.”

Other writers talked generally about the benefit of having *any* another person look at their writing. Caroline referred to getting a “second opinion on [her] paper,” and Erika talked about “extra insight” that comes from talking to tutors because “maybe you don't see the errors . . . that you have.” Teresa noted that ultimately, students who visit the writing center will become more independent and that “[tutors are] not there to do your work for you. You need to have your work done.”

Still, in a notable contrast with the tutors' perceptions, writers described tutors as helping with both the big picture issues mentioned above, in addition to issues like editing, correcting and proofreading. In fact, five of the seven writers mentioned these types of lower order concerns when describing—in general—the role of a writing center tutor. Erika said that tutors help “correct mistakes” and Anna mentioned “spelling and proofreading” in her description of a tutors' job. According to Teresa, tutors can help with “correcting grammar . . . formatting your paper, looking up citations” and Rashad said that tutors “help you . . . edit your paper, fix it.” Even Patrick, whose session with Rodney consisted of a conversation about test-taking techniques, described tutors as “helping out” with “grammatical errors.”

## **Perceptions of the Writer**

*Theme 5: Tutors believe writing is often taught in a way that is detrimental to the writer and the writing center can help writers deal with these effects. Writers describe themselves as visiting the writing center for extrinsic reward and to please their professors.*

Just as writers perceived tutors significantly differently than tutors perceived themselves, the reverse was also observed. Tutors perceive writers as having been negatively affected by the way they had been taught writing; what is more, the writing center is then characterized by tutors as a place where writers can learn to navigate inappropriate or unfair directives from writing teachers or receive help that they aren't able to receive from their teachers.

Morgan was the most vehement and passionate in her portrayal of writers as almost victims of bad teachers: "A lot of professors and teachers even in high schools and stuff are very um . . . they almost make students . . . not want to write." Morgan becomes more focused as she continues: "I think that that's the worst thing. Whenever [instructors] are so forceful with strict rules and stuff, no matter what and never provide an opportunity for a different kind of writing, then I think it makes students not want to write, and I think that's sad." Her job, then, as she sees it, is to help writers deal with the unfair, forceful or "picky" teachers, while trying to help them preserve a sense of self as writers.

While other tutors aren't as explicit as Morgan about helping writers to negotiate such difficult situations, many still bring up the damage that can be caused in the writing classroom. Kayla described her role as a tutor as to help writers

preserve their own voices. This approach, she explains, comes from her own bad experiences as a student: “I know that I hated it when I would have teachers who'd be like, this isn't right because it doesn't sound right.” John also alluded to students developing insecurities through their past educational experiences. Many students he works with, he noted, “doubt their abilities.” The starting point in many of his tutorials, then, is to help student regain this lost confidence. Dave described the necessity of correcting perceptions of writing that many student writers have—disagreeing with advice many of them have been given by writing instructors: “people don't need to word things in lofty, high academic, high theory terms to really, you know, to write a good paper.” Rodney even makes the argument that writers visit the writing center to receive the kind of in-depth help that they cannot get in the classroom: “They're looking for someone who can . . . read their papers. They're looking for someone who can make those comments, ask those questions necessary.” Interestingly, Rodney admitted that his perception runs contrary to the stereotype of why writers visit the center, but claimed that students do not often come to the writing center for “a grammar check” or extra credit, but rather for a larger purpose.

Unsurprisingly, from the writers' discussions of why they visit the writing center, notably different themes emerged. Three of the seven writers discussed coming to the writing center because of some extrinsic reward, and two others described coming to the writing center to please a professor. Anna specifically mentions that visiting the writing center has helped her—and can help other students—earn higher grades: “Instead of turning in [your paper] to get a B or

something, you can turn it in to get an A. You come to the writing center and they'll help you to get an A instead of getting a B." Rashad and Caroline also both mentioned grade incentives; their professors gave students who visit the writing center extra credit points and both attributed their visit to this purpose. As Rashad noted, "[the tutors] send a report to your professor so you can get points, credits towards coming." While Teresa and Rebecca did not mention grades specifically, they also noted that their professors liked it when students visit the writing center. Just as the writers' narratives of their tutoring sessions spanned the time and space beyond the tutorial itself, their discussions of the writing center in general focused on their own concrete day-to-day needs and concerns as students—concerns that reached well beyond the walls of the writing center. Six out of the seven writers did not discuss negative classroom experiences or difficulties with the way writing had been taught to them, nor did they identify the writing center as a place where writing is taught differently. Rebecca, though, who had arrived at the writing center frustrated and angry at her professor, did make this connection, noting that talking to a tutor was better than talking to a professor, that tutors "know how to teach," and that tutors can help writers figure out how to say things "not in the professor's way," but in their own.

### **Conclusion**

As expected, asking tutors and writers to talk about their tutoring sessions and their perceptions of each other and of the work that takes place at the writing center yielded a rich array of responses that can contribute significantly to the decades long conversation in writing center scholarship about what the tutor-writer

relationship does and should look like. Asking tutors and writers about their perceptions of their sessions and of one another and studying these narratives leads to a number of significant implications, some of which support previous research and some of which add new dimensions. These implications will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5, addressing not only these dimensions but also how this knowledge can aid in reimagining dominant narratives of peer tutoring.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter will build on the themes presented in Chapter 4, discussing and contextualizing them in connection to each of the study's three research questions:

- What stories do tutors and writers tell about their work in the writing center?
- How do these stories reflect how tutors and writers perceive writing center work?
- How do these stories support, contradict, expand or reimagine the dominant narratives of peer tutoring, and how can the study of tutors' and writers' stories advance our understanding of writing center work?

The themes that emerged from the data analyzed in Chapter 4 suggest compelling answers to these questions. Striking differences emerged between tutors' stories and writers' stories. Tutors told stories that were self-focused and, at times, became self-justifications or defenses of their work. On the other hand, while writers' stories were also self-focused, they were less stories of a single tutoring session and more stories of their process and progress as writers. While all seven pairs had accounts that generally matched with respect to key details from the session, tutors and writers told different kinds of stories, for different purposes. Certainly all the stories told described work of a certain kind, but the picture painted was rarely that of collaborative work; instead, a picture emerged of tutors and writers on different paths with parallel, yet separate stories to tell.

As such, the tutors' and writers' perceptions represented in these stories—of their work, of the writing center, and of each other—were often at odds. Tutors largely perceived their roles to have clearly delineated boundaries; their firm statements about what tutors and writing centers do and don't do were striking. The writers, on the other hand, had no such firm views about the scope and boundaries of writing center work; instead writers painted a (perhaps more accurate) picture of the complicated, complex nature of tutoring, one in which tutors “help” with a variety of skills and one in which higher and lower order concerns are necessarily intertwined in the work tutors and writers do.

The other significant difference in perception highlighted the fact that tutors and writers may often be working at cross-purposes. While writers perceived the writing center as a place to help them earn higher grades in their courses and please their professors, the tutors were sharply critical of these very courses and professors, painting a picture of institutional writing instruction that is damaging to students—and a picture of a writing center that can help undo that damage.

Ultimately these differences in perception between tutors and writers in the stories they tell are significant not only because of the potential effects on individual sessions, but also because these stories—collectively—call the dominant narratives of peer tutoring into question. Not only do these stories not coincide with these narratives, but they often contradict them. In fact, these stories of tutors and writers point to the substantial problems of overreliance on these dominant narratives, revealing the stories that are not being told and perspectives that are overlooked. The argument that this study puts forth, then, is that the study of the stories told by



tutors and writers can help the writing center field to reevaluate the dominant narratives of peer tutoring, allowing us to rethink and reimagine our work.

### **Tutors' and Writers' Stories**

The first of this study's three research questions is what kinds of stories tutors and writers tell about their tutoring sessions. While the importance of story in writing center work is well-established (Briggs & Woolbright, 2000; McKinney, 2013; Welch, 2002), also clear is the fact that most stories about writing centers have been told about the tutors and writers at their center, not by them (Boquet, 2000; Vandenburg 1999). The small, but growing, number of works that do focus on the stories of tutors and writers, however, make evident that their stories are powerful and revealing (Dinitz & Kiedaisch, 2003; Fallon, 2010).

The stories at the center of this study are no less revealing, both in what they contain and what is absent from them. Much empirical research on the tutor-writer relationship examines the nature of the collaboration between the two individuals, from aspects of their interaction, to balance of power between them, to level of directiveness of the tutor. And certainly one intention in the design of this study was to examine the nature of this collaboration from the tutors' and writers' points of view—highlighting their voices regarding the nature of their interaction. It is notable, then, that when tutors and writers were invited to tell stories about their interaction, the stories that emerged were not, in fact, stories of collaboration—they were stories of self.

On one hand, this is to be expected. Research on narrative production tells us that the process of creating a narrative is deeply tied to the development and

construction of one's identity. Narratives are contextually and situationally bound, and therefore strongly tied to each individual (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Indeed, one of the only extant studies that examines the structure of tutors' narratives about their sessions revealed a tendency of tutors to portray themselves as the heroes of their stories, placing blame on writers for anything that went awry (Welch, 2002).

Still, the fact that these stories told by tutors and writers in this study were largely self-focused, paired with the fact that significant differences emerged between these collective sets of stories, suggest some important questions about tutor-writer interaction—namely the degree to which tutors and writers may have different expectations, goals, and indeed, be working at cross-purposes during their sessions.

### **Tutors' Narratives: Stories of "Good" Tutors**

As illustrated in Chapter 4, tutors' narratives depicted not just a focus on self, but a focus on self as a tutor. Indeed, tutors' stories were often a *justification of self* as a tutor. Tutors' stories, then, were stories about their identities as tutors; both the identities that they had—and the identities that they constructed during their narratives.

The focus on their own actions over those of the writers was perhaps the most striking aspect of the tutors' stories. Certainly at first glance, this imbalance might imply that tutors dominated the sessions, with writers in a more passive role. However, the imbalance was not characteristic of the sessions themselves. In fact, all seven sessions featured writers who were actively engaged, coming up with ideas, making revisions, and otherwise fully participating in the session. The

imbalance, then, was present in the tutors' narratives only, not in the actual sessions themselves. This tendency to remove the writer as an active presence from the story was most evident in Morgan's narrative. Recall that during Morgan and Erika's session, Erika initially resisted Morgan's suggestions about changing her thesis statement—explaining why what Morgan was suggesting would not work. The pair had several more exchanges about the thesis statement; it wasn't until near the end of the session that Erika conceded that Morgan's suggestion may work after all.

In her narrative, however, Morgan doesn't mention any of this back-and-forth, and instead says:

I suggested that she take all of the main ideas from the paragraphs . . . and [try] to think of a thesis that could relate to all of those . . . I helped her find one that did and after we had that, I could see it in her, like, facial expression that that made sense to her so, like, that was good. And then when we read the rest of it, we discussed how what she had written could tie into that thesis.

Erika's continuing resistance is absent from this account—as is the dialogue that the two had. Erika as an active individual seems to be absent from this account all together; her contribution to the dialogue characterized as a “facial expression,” rather than words. This disappearance of Erika from this part of Morgan's story is significant; in eliminating Erika as an actor, Morgan also eliminates any mention of the fact that Erika initially disagreed with and challenged her advice. In a follow-up interview, Morgan admitted that she was worried she had overstepped and been too directive during the first part of the session as she made suggestions for Erika's new

thesis statement: “I think the initial stages of us thinking of a new thesis for her, I was kind of . . . putting more of myself into it than I would have liked to, 'cause I don't think she understood what I meant.” The disappearance of Erika from Morgan’s story, then, served as a way to preserve Morgan’s identity as a good tutor. If Morgan had described her persistence and her disagreement with Erika, this might have suggested that Morgan was being too directive. Not describing it, on the other hand, preserved a picture of a more harmonious, less complicated session.

While tutors’ stories generally featured more descriptions of their own actions, those few references to writers’ actions that did exist were notable. In almost every case, tutors described the writers’ actions as a response or reaction to their own. In particular, these references often seemed to depict the tutor successfully using a tutoring strategy; more significantly, when writers’ actions were featured, they were used to illustrate that the tutor was tutoring “the right way.” One of the few references Ramona made to Anna’s actions in her story featured a description of using questioning strategies in the session:

If I was having trouble understanding something, I would ask her, what did you mean by this and then she would . . . explain it to me in her own words and I would say, well how about you just put that 'cause . . . actually that was a better explanation.

In this part of the story, Ramona is portraying herself as tutoring the “right way.” She is being nondirective, and she is asking questions to help the writer access her own knowledge and ideas. Anna appears in this part of the story to illustrate that

Ramona was indeed successful as a tutor: Anna performed the right action in response to Ramona using the right tutoring technique

Molly made similar references in her narrative. Her references to Rashad's actions are references to his actions in response to Molly being a "good tutor." As she describes how they approached his problems with incorrect commas, she says:

The first couple, I corrected and explained how they went and from then on, I tried to get him to correct them. If he didn't immediately spot them, I would say, there's something in that sentence. Reread it and what do you think we should work on there and usually he was able to spot it then.

Although this section of Molly's story does depict Rashad as active, he is active in response to Molly's actions—actions that depict her as a good tutor. Molly is careful to indicate that she didn't correct Rashad's punctuation for him; instead, she noticed a pattern of common errors, which she identified and explained to him, then prompting him to correct the rest himself—illustrating that she performed her role of tutor correctly.

Indeed, this passage from Molly's story is also significant because it is describing work on punctuation. As discussed in Chapter 4, most of the tutors' narratives focused on work done on higher order concerns, either ignoring work done on lower order concerns all together or speaking of this work only briefly. These accounts rarely matched the actual balance of work done during the session, nor did they match the accounts of the writers in many cases. Some tutors did not mention lower-order concerns at all in their narratives. Those that did tended to either justify this work or minimize it. Although the majority of Molly and Rashad's

session was spent correcting comma and tense errors, Molly discussed this only briefly in her narrative, and in doing so, made sure to clarify that she was tutoring mechanical issues the “right way,” by teaching the concept and then compelling Rashad to find and correct his own errors.

Other tutors who mentioned work on lower order concerns spoke of them dismissively. Although Kayla initially said that her session with Caroline was successful, she was later reluctant to classify the session as one in which she was able to successfully enact her tutoring philosophy, saying, “I’ve had better sessions . . . I don’t know what it was.” Kayla continued to struggle to articulate this feeling, finally stating, “There wasn’t really much to work on.” Although the pair had worked on punctuation, citations and other mechanical issues, Kayla seemed to think that because the content and structure of Caroline’s paper was “good,” the work they did was not significant. Ramona, too, seemed to brush over the work done with Anna on mechanics as less important. She noted, “I mean, a few times I was like, well you might need an 'A' there or . . . you know, you spelled that wrong.” Aside from this, though, according to Ramona, the focus of the session was on addressing meaning and focus, with Ramona helping Anna to bring her own voice into the paper, “instead of just trying to make it say what [Ramona] thought it should say.”

This trend in which tutors focused on higher order concerns while dismissing and justifying work on lower order concerns is further indication that their narratives served as a justification as their work as tutors. As the dominant narrative of peer tutoring suggests, tutors are not proofreaders or editors; instead

they ask questions and help writers generate content. The writing center is a place where higher order concerns are attended to first and lower order concerns are addressed later. When lower order concerns are addressed, they are certainly not corrected for the writer—they are addressed as patterns and writers learn to correct their own mistakes. We see, then, the tutors in this study shaping their stories in service of this dominant narrative about what tutors “should” focus on. Tutors brushed over work on lower-order concerns in their narratives, describing their work on higher order concerns in more detail—even in cases where the actual emphasis in the session was reversed, such as in the case of Dave and Teresa or Molly and Rashad. In addition, in her narrative Molly made sure to emphasize that even though she worked with Rashad on lower order concerns, she addressed them the “right way.”

Ultimately, then, we can read the tutors’ stories as not just stories of self, but stories of their tutoring selves. More significantly, the stories also presented, at times, as justifications or defenses of these selves. Tutors worked to present themselves not just as tutors, but as good tutors who fit in and follow the dominant narrative of peer tutoring. The tutors told, as Welch (2002) described them, “official” stories of the writing center. We see, however, when comparing tutors’ narratives to those of writers and to the transcripts of the sessions themselves, tutors suppressing details or shifting emphases, making their narratives more “official” and their work as tutors more neatly fitting into the dominant narratives.

As both Welch (2002) and McKinney (2013) point out in their research on narratives of writing center work, every time a story is told, not only is the content

of the story significant, but so too is the content that is absent. As Welch argued, “any single story we tell about a writing center contains an excess, a surplus, something under-narrated or suppressed, not quite controlled, not fully in service of to the story’s guiding rhetorical claim” (p. 206). Thus, these tutors’ stories are notable not just in their focus, but in what is suppressed—particularly when compared to the writers’ narratives. In their focus on their own tutoring, in making sure they were telling stories of “good” tutoring, tutors often suppressed the needs, voices, and even very presence of the writers in their stories.

This tendency was evident in the example above, where Morgan largely erased Erika from part of her story, leaving out their minor conflict, and preserving Morgan’s identity as a good tutor, one who was not overly directive. Such absence of writers in tutors’ stories was not simply evident in the lack of action they performed in the stories, but in other notable details the tutors did not include in their stories. Recall that John and Rebecca’s session began with Rebecca nearly ranting with frustration and uncertainty about her professor and her assignment; while Rebecca talks about this uncertainty and frustration in her narrative, John does not. In fact, John’s only specific mention of Rebecca in his story is that he perceived her as eager to learn; he did not describe any of the unhappiness she expressed at the beginning of the session.

Similarly, a significant part of Dave and Teresa’s session focused on work on mechanical issues—not only punctuation and spelling, but also word processing issues. Teresa’s lack of familiarity with PowerPoint figured prominently in her narrative; Dave, however, barely acknowledged this, only mentioning briefly that at



times, helping Teresa with the functionality of the program was “kind of an adventure.” As such, in this omission, the full picture of Teresa, as a determined nontraditional student, struggling with new technology, is significantly underdeveloped in Dave’s narrative. Ramona’s narrative, too, in mostly leaving out Anna’s struggles with spelling and grammar, left out her struggles with those issues as an nontraditional ESL student. In fact, Ramona does not mention Anna’s ESL status in her narrative all. These absences are significant, certainly, as are the absences in any story; however, these absences become all the more pronounced when these tutors’ stories are paired with the writers’ stories and the differences in form and purpose are highlighted.

### **Writers’ Narratives: Stories of Process**

Like the tutors in this study, the stories writers told were also stories of themselves and their identities, rather than stories of collaboration or of a relationship. Unlike the tutors, however, the writers’ stories were not just about the tutoring session itself; the tutors told stories of themselves as writers and learners—stories that neither began nor ended in the writing center, stories in which the writing center was only one part.

On first glance, data from these writers’ narratives might suggest a different type of story was being told—one in which writers saw themselves as lacking in agency and autonomy. Recall that just as tutors focused more on their own actions during their narratives, writers also focused more on the tutors’ actions when they discussed what happened during their sessions. Not only did tutors erase writers from their stories, but writers seemed to erase themselves from their own stories at

times. Writers like Caroline and Rebecca did not talk about their own actions at all as they discussed their tutorials, focusing instead on what their tutors did and suggested.

If the writers' narratives consisted of only these descriptions of their tutoring sessions, in which they described primarily the actions of the tutors instead of their own, the question of whether writers felt acted upon or felt lacking in autonomy might be more pressing; however, writers *did* describe their own actions in their stories. While many of them talked more about the tutors' actions during the tutorial itself, these writers talked easily and frequently about their own actions outside the tutorial. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 4, writers' narratives were notable in that they spanned the time and space outside the tutoring session, with many writers talking about their past or future actions. The writers' stories, then, were not stories of their tutoring sessions—they were stories of themselves as writers, as learners, and as college students.

Anna's story, for example, was not—or not just—the story of her tutoring session with Ramona. Her story began with a description her assignment from her professor, continued to her first attempt to respond to the prompt, continued through one and then a second tutoring session, and would continue—as Anna predicted—with more revisions on her own and another visit to the writing center before finally handing her paper in to her professor. Anna's narrative was the story of her assignment and the story of Anna's process as a writer in completing it. The “help,” as she characterized it, from Ramona and the other writing center tutors were simply one part of this process.

The stories of Patrick and Teresa covered even more ground; theirs were not just stories of a particular assignment, but of themselves as students. Patrick's story included discussion of previous standardized tests he had taken—the SAT and the PSSA—and how those compared to the PRAXIS. He discussed the fact that he intended to visit the writing center again, after he had written a sample essay, to look it over and score it with a tutor. He also talked about how he might use the strategies that Rodney had given him when he takes the test itself, mentioning that more people would do better on standardized tests if they would “be smart” and “know what to expect.” In addition, Patrick discussed his science education major, noting that he is not often required to write papers, but that if he was, he would probably make more frequent visits to the writing center. Patrick's story, then, is not just reflective of his session with Rodney, but is reflective of himself as a student and his experiences with writing and test-taking. Teresa's story spanned even more ground; even more than being a story of herself as a student, it was the story of a significant life-changing event. Teresa told a story of herself as a returning, nontraditional student, working to readjust after being outside of academia, struggling with the new technology that had emerged in the meantime, but also being pleased with her own accomplishments thus far.

Thus, in the end, the stories told by writers were, in fact, stories of students taking action and making choices about their learning. While writers focused on their tutors' actions when talking about their tutorials, specifically, the time and space span of these stories depicted the writers as the ultimate autonomous, active figures in their stories. These were stories of writers, learners, and students,

engaged in a process, for whom visiting the writing center was just one of many experiences and events on this journey.

When examining tutors' and writers' narratives side-by-side, then, we see tutors and writers all telling stories with themselves at the center—tutors telling stories about themselves as tutors and writers telling stories about themselves as learners. While their stories do not necessarily contradict either other, nor do they intersect; in fact, when tutors and writers were questioned further about their perceptions of one another and of the work that takes place at the writing center, their responses—paired with their narratives—suggest that not only are tutors and writers on separate journeys, but they may in fact be working at cross-purposes.

### **Tutors' and Writers' Perceptions of Writing Center Work**

While the first research question in this study focuses in general on the kinds of stories tutors and writers told, the second question asks how tutors and writers perceived one another and the work that takes place at the writing center. The first research question highlights the different paths tutors and writers found themselves on, and the second makes these differences even more stark.

As discussed in the review of literature, while much scholarship on writing centers has posited what the ideal role of the tutor should be and what kind of relationship should exist between tutor and writer, rarely have these studies highlighted the voices of tutors and writers about their roles and their relationship. As Fallon (2010) argued, the lived experiences of peer tutors are often ignored at the expense of their experiences as conceived by those who are not peer tutors. What is more, the perceptions of writers about their experiences at the writing

center have been studied even less. As Babcock and Thonus (2012) noted, “most of what we know about student expectations of writing center consultations comes from anecdotal reports” (80). Research on writers’ post-tutorial perceptions are similarly scant, with Harris’s (1995) study, “Talking in the Middle” and DiPardo’s (1992/2008) “Lessons from Fannie” as significant exceptions. Thus, the tutor and writer perceptions collected in this study are significant both because of these gaps they can help fill and because they reveal significant differences in perception, between tutor and writer, certainly, but also between the individuals at the heart of the tutorial and the accepted wisdom posited by those outside the pair.

### **What Do Tutors Do?**

One of the most significant contrasts in perception revealed in tutors’ and writers’ narratives is in their descriptions of what peer tutors do. As discussed in Chapter 4, tutors in this study depicted a clear dichotomy in their stories of what tutors should and should not do. According to them, tutors should help with higher order concerns; tutors should ask questions and help writers develop tools to become more independent. Tutors should not help with grammar and editing.

Not only did all seven tutors make a point to make this differentiation clear, they were emphatic about clarifying what their role does not include. In fact, when I asked the tutors to describe their tutoring philosophy, all seven tutors described their philosophies in part by describing what they do not do. More significantly, four out of the seven tutors *began* their descriptions of their tutoring philosophies with a description of what they do not do.

Molly: Primarily, I think I try not to just make corrections.

John: One thing is . . . making sure that I'm not doing everything for [the writers].

Morgan: I'm not really big . . . on, like, the rules and specifics in the way that if they're like hindering the students' writing, I don't think they should be as important.

Rodney: I don't try to be a grammar Nazi. I don't try to just correct papers.

That tutors were so vehement about what is conscripted by their roles is significant in the way that it echoes critiques about the rhetoric used in the writing center field as a whole. Carino (2002) and Harris (2010), notably, have critiqued the rhetorical frames that writing centers often use to present themselves to the public. In his analysis of the “institutional discourse” of 20 writing centers, Carino found, among other themes, that these materials functioned as a way to clarify the role of grammar instruction at the writing center as less important and to correct the mischaracterization of the writing center as a “fix it shop.” Examination of this rhetoric is significant, Carino argued, because “the rhetoric that directors produce tells us much about how centers, individually and communally, have constructed themselves in the academy” (p. 92). A danger exists, he notes, in being overly defensive about the outsiders’ expectations of the writing center.

Harris (2010) takes this argument further in her content analysis of writing centers’ online materials. She, too, noted the defensive and negative nature of much of the rhetoric, going even further than Carino and declaring it ineffective: “Affirmative messages are more likely to be remembered correctly than negative messages. Yet we persist in our practice of stating what we do not do” (p. 55). We

can see in this study, then, as tutors talk about their roles and their philosophies as tutors, echoes of this problematic, negative rhetoric described by Carino and Harris—rhetoric that, as Carino notes, may be shaped by a lingering defensiveness connected to the historical marginalization of writing centers. Consequences of this type of rhetoric, both Carino and Harris argue, are both alienation of potential clients and the creation of unclear or inaccurate perceptions about writing center work.

With tutors' stories utilizing such forceful rhetoric in their discussions of their work, the differences between theirs and the writers' perceptions of what tutors do are all the more notable. While tutors made clear delineations about what they do and do not do, the writers largely made no similar differentiation; in fact, in contrast to the tutors who began their discussion of their tutoring philosophies with a description of what they do not do, the writers used only positive rhetoric—describing only the work that tutors do, in fact, do.

Even more significantly, despite the fact that tutors took such great pains to illustrate the relative unimportance of grammar and other lower-order concerns and to clarify that tutors do not make corrections for students, five of the seven writers did, in fact, use phrases like “checking grammar,” “proofreading,” “editing” or “fixing.” This mismatch in perception would be significant by itself, but examining the content of each of the seven sessions studied adds an additional complication. In six of the seven sessions studied, tutors and writers *did*, in fact, work on lower order concerns, including correcting grammatical, mechanical, and proofreading errors.

Not only that, the addressing of lower order concerns played a larger role than the discussion of higher order concerns in half of these sessions.

Therefore, a troubling contrast is painted when examining tutors' and writers' perceptions of writing center work. On one hand, we see tutors taking pains to clarify that their work is not to help with lower order concerns and not to "fix things" for the writer. On the other hand, we see writers describing that very work tutors do as "helping with grammar" and "fixing," with the sessions studied indicating that these are, in fact, things that tutors help with. In light of this, the insistence of tutors that their work does not involve editing or correcting takes on a notable defensiveness or cognitive dissonance. And it is not only in their perceptions of what tutors do that writers' and tutors' stories illustrate vast differences; their perspectives on why writers should and do visit writing centers also reflected a significant—if not conflicting—difference in perspective.

### **What the Writing Center Does**

As outlined in Chapter 4, tutors' narratives illustrated both significant criticisms about the way writing is often taught and beliefs that the writing center can help, in various ways, to correct this damage done to students. The criticisms leveled by tutors against writing instructors certainly do not break new ground. That being too prescriptive can have a negative effect on student writers—a charge leveled against composition teachers by tutors like Morgan, Dave, and Kayla—has been long established in composition studies. Not only that, much early writing center scholarship promoted the notion that writing centers are places where



writing is taught differently—an antidote of sorts to what takes place in the classroom.

The tutor's role as a peer, rather than a professional, was central to this claim. Kail and Trimbur (1995) characterized peer tutoring as an “alternative to the dominant hierarchical model of teaching and learning” that “replaces the metaphor of the generation and transmission of knowledge with that of a conversation” (p. 9). Through this peer tutoring model, they argue, faculty lose their omnipotence while students gain more power and autonomy.

Later scholarship complicated this thinking, however; notable works by Cooper (1994/2008), Bawarshi and Pelkowski (1999), and Grimm (1999) argued that this vision of peer tutoring was idealized, and not only that, that writing centers—and by extension, tutors—were complicit in reinforcing the dominant paradigms of teaching and learning. Peer tutors were not challenging the dominant hierarchy, in this view—they were acting as reinforcers and gatekeepers of it. A better model of peer tutoring, according to Grimm (1999), is for tutors to act as critical consciousness raisers of sorts. As such, tutors would not help writers assimilate, but work with them to critique these dominant structures of the classroom and the university. Still, this approach has been critiqued, with the argument that it is unethical if tutors do not help writers learn what they need to in order to succeed within the university (Pemberton, 2006).

Indeed, the matter of how the work that takes place in the writing center supports, contradicts, critiques, or reinforces the work that takes place in the classroom and throughout the university is fraught—and the tutors in this study are

clearly aware of the complicated nature of their roles. On one hand, some tutors' words reflected the arguments of Bruffee (1984) and Kail and Trimbur (1995) as they described the writing center as a place where students could learn from their peers to develop their own voices as writers—voices that may have been suppressed or silenced by their teachers. On the other, tutors like Morgan and Dave acknowledged that part of their job is helping writers develop their voices and thoughts within the “framework,” as Dave characterizes it, imposed on them by academia. Morgan's reflections come closest to matching the role of the critical consciousness-raising tutor; she tells students, she said, how much she knows it can “suck” when they have to suppress their voices and styles as writers to match a “picky” teacher's specifications, forcing them to write in ways that do not feel “natural” to them. Morgan said that she often tells writers things like, “I think that this is really great and this is definitely something you could pursue, like outside of class, in your free time.” While Morgan stops short of discussing with students *why* they must suppress their writing voices in the classroom or making any kind of systematic critique, her words are quite illustrative of the complicated position that tutors find themselves in, and they recognize her awareness of these constraints.

While tutors described the role of the writing center differently, their perceptions were alike in that they saw the writing center as a place that exists not to reinforce what takes place in the classroom, but to cover gaps, correct, or reimagine. This trend is notable both on its own and in the significant contrast from how writers described their perceptions of the writing center. Writers, notably, did not seem to perceive a contrast between the work of the center and their work in

the classroom; in fact, many writers felt that the two were closely linked. Patrick described Rodney as “like a teacher” and Rebecca and Caroline both noted that professors like it when students visit the writing center. Most notably, the notion of extrinsic reward was present in several of the writers’ narratives, in contrast to the tutors—none of whom mentioned grades at all.

While this trend conflicts with tutors’ perceptions, it is certainly not unexpected in and of itself. Although so many writing centers borrow North’s “better writers, not better papers” mantra, what little empirical research exists on students who use writing centers indicates that these students do, in fact, care about their grades and about what their professors think; these students, in fact, want “better papers” (Carino & Enders, 2001; Morrison & Nadeau, 2003). Further, Thonus (2001) found, in her triangulated examination of the tutors’ role, that the instructors she spoke with viewed tutors as their “surrogates” outside the classroom.

Overall, these differences in perception between tutor and writer are significant—both in their perception of the tutor’s role and their perception of the writing center itself (see Table 6). While some of these differences are not entirely unexpected, they are notable in their implication that tutors and writers may be beginning their work with significantly different goals and expectations.

Table 6

*Thematic Differences Between Narratives*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Tutors' Narratives</b>	<b>Writers' Narratives</b>	<b>Differences/Similarities</b>
<i>Higher vs. Lower Order Concerns</i>	Tutors focused in their narratives on work done on higher order concerns.	Writers described in their narratives a variety of both higher and lower order concerns.	Significant differences between tutors' and writers' narratives, with writers' narratives tending to reflect the scope of the session more accurately.
<i>Actions Performed During Tutorial</i>	Tutors described their own actions more often than writers' actions.	Writers described tutors' actions more often than their own (when describing the tutorial itself).	Both sets of narratives focused more on what tutors did during the tutorial.
<i>Time/Space of Narratives</i>	Tutors described the time/space of the tutoring sessions in their narratives.	Writers' narratives covered time and space outside the tutoring session.	Significant differences—writers' narratives spanned the time/space outside the tutorial often, while tutors' almost never did.
<i>Role of Tutor</i>	Tutors has clearly delineated ideas of what tutors should and should not help with.	Writers described tutors as helping with a wide variety of issues.	Differences between perceptions of tutors' roles—writers saw tutors' roles as broader, more flexible.
<i>Role of Writing Center</i>	Tutors described the writing center as a place where writing is taught differently than in the classroom.	Writers describe a strong connection between the writing center and their work in class; visiting the writing center pleases their professors and helps them earn higher grades.	The main difference lay in the perception of the degree to which writing centers either challenge (tutors' narratives) or reinforce (writers' narratives) what takes place in the classroom.

Indeed, several tutors indicated in their follow-up interviews that differences in expectation/perception often cause difficulties in their tutorials. As Molly noted, “tutors expect a conversation about writing in general, while most students expect instruction on a particular piece of writing.” Ramona too expressed an awareness of these differences in perception and their effect on the tutorial:

A lot of times students say ‘can you just make sure my grammar is okay,’ and even though the tutor may do more than that, like fixing their thesis or conclusion, the student still only sees that their grammar was done.

Unfortunately, I think most students are mostly concerned with grammar, even though there are so many other things they could do to their paper to make it better.

As much as these differences in tutors’ and writers’ narratives are significant in understanding the complexity of the tutorial, comparing them to the dominant narratives of peer tutoring is also revealing. Indeed, the stories tutors and writers told and the perspectives reflected in them are notable in the way that they call into question the dominant narratives of peer tutoring, suggesting that these stories have a largely unexplored—yet significant role—in our understanding of what takes place at the writing center.

### **Dominant Tutoring Narratives**

This study’s third research question asks how the stories told by tutors and writers coincide, contradict or call into question the dominant narratives of peer tutoring—and what implications these stories have for the writing center field going forward. While the stories told by tutors and writers are revealing on their own,

comparing them with the stories and themes that dominate writing center work illustrates just how important these voices are—and how much can be learned from critically examining writing center stories.

As discussed in earlier chapters, writing center work—as depicted in its scholarship— has been particularly shaped by stories. Indeed, much early writing center scholarship focused more on the anecdotal than the empirical—a trend that was perhaps necessary as writing centers struggled to defend and define themselves. Thus, these early stories about what works—or “lore,” as characterized by North (1987)—became an accepted and important part of the field’s body of knowledge (Thompson et al., 2009). And in general, stories have been cited as an important way to share knowledge within the writing center field. In the forward to their collection, *Stories from the Center*, Briggs and Woolbright (2000) argued that stories shared by writing center workers do indeed, “constitute our professional knowledge” and “need to be taken seriously . . . be shared publicly” (p. x). Stories can be used as a way to understand and interpret theory, and moreover, they argued, “narrative provides a way to speak things otherwise unspeakable, to give voice to that which would otherwise go unheard” (p. xi). Ultimately, Briggs and Woolbright urged writing center workers to “trust” their “narrative selves (p. xi).”

Still, many question the role stories have played in shaping professional knowledge in the writing center field. Indeed, as several important studies (Blau, Hall & Strauss, 1998; Thompson, 2009) have illustrated, often, the stories (or lore) about what works is not always reflected in actual tutoring sessions. Moreover, as McKinney (2013) argued, in general, the stories we return to and rely on most often

are too identical, too sanitized and perhaps most importantly, not reflective of the rich reality and complexity of writing center work. While “writing center work is complex,” McKinney argued, “the storying of writing center work is not” (p. 3). Instead, the way we talk about writing center work “fits into a relatively familiar pattern” (p. 3). In fact, McKinney claimed that a “grand narrative” of writing center work exists and describes it thusly: “writing centers are comfortable, iconoclastic places where all students go to get one-on-one tutoring” (p. 6). This grand narratives is limiting, then, because it “narrows the gaze” (p. 9) of writing center workers.

Also limiting, I argue here, is the dominant narrative that exists about peer tutoring, specifically. In this familiar narrative, tutors are friendly peers—not teacher figures; tutors are nondirective and help writers discover their own voices. Tutors follow North’s advice to make “better writers, not better papers” and focus on ideas and content over grammar and mechanics. These dominant narratives of peer tutoring are reflected throughout the writing center community—from tutoring handbooks to writing center websites to conference presentations. And, just as McKinney suggested, these dominant narratives can too be just as limiting, promoting narrow understandings of writing center work and potentially creating cognitive dissonance among peer tutors if their practice doesn’t match up with the story.

And the stories that tutors and writers told, in this study, do indeed point to significant implications about the dominant narratives of peer tutoring and writing centers embraced in the field. To start, tutors’ and writers’ narratives illustrate and

quite clearly support the argument McKinney made: the grand narratives of writing center work that the field relies upon are insufficient. In addition, I will go further and argue—based on the stories told in this study—that the dominant narratives associated with peer tutoring specifically are just as insufficient. Furthermore, it is precisely because of the limiting nature of dominant narratives of peer tutoring that the stories of tutors and writers should be studied. As illustrated in the review of literature, as much as the writing center field has been shaped by stories, it has been shaped largely by the stories of those who research or direct writing centers, not those who work in them. As both Welch (2002) and McKinney (2013) argue, all stories of writing center work are notable not just in what they contain, but in what is missing. The stories of tutors and writers, then, both bring a needed dimension to extant narratives about peer tutoring and illustrate the ways in which dominant narratives of peer tutoring are limiting and, at times, inaccurate.

As this study illustrated, tutors' narratives were clearly shaped by their sense of a larger story of what peer tutoring is *supposed* to be. Indeed, their narratives reflected a preoccupation with making sure their tutoring fit this larger story. Tutors were quick to characterize themselves as not being overly directive, as working primarily on higher order concerns, on empowering writers, and on not correcting grammatical or mechanical errors. These tutors' reliance on and preoccupation with adhering to this dominant narrative has numerous implications—for tutoring sessions, for outside perceptions of writing center work, and for the field as a whole.



## Implications

### For Tutoring Sessions and Campus Outreach

The potential implications of tutors' adherence to dominant narratives of peer tutoring are particularly apparent in this study when looking at tutors' and writers' stories side-by-side. Unlike the tutors, the writers who participated in this study had no sense of a dominant narrative about what a writing center is supposed to be and what tutors are supposed to do. Thus, without this constraint, their stories were, in some ways, a more accurate and honest representation of the shape and scope of their tutoring sessions. Unlike the tutors, who tried to downplay their work with writers on grammar and mechanics, writers did not see this work as something unimportant or inappropriate. To writers like Anna, Rebecca, Rashad, and Teresa, work on correcting grammatical and mechanical error was an important part of their sessions, and they had no reason to downplay that. In fact, for writers like Anna—an ESL student—and Teresa—a nontraditional student struggling with using technology—having a tutor help them correct spelling, punctuation or formatting issues was the main reason for their visits to the writing center.

It is here that we can see one way that tutors' overreliance on dominant narratives could potentially affect their sessions. Even as writers like Anna and Teresa clearly needed the most help with lower-order, mechanical issues, we see the tutors with whom they worked—Ramona and Dave—downplaying or dismissing this need in their stories and working instead to explain how their tutoring sessions did, in fact, match the preexisting grand narrative about what good tutors are supposed to do. While these particular tutors did not ignore the writers' lower order

concerns in the sessions themselves, the degree to which they were dismissive of and uncomfortable with them is notable. Other empirical studies have reported findings that tutors were less effective in their sessions when they felt constrained by a particular tutoring “rule” such as nondirectiveness or reading aloud (Blau, Hall & Strauss, 1998; Thompson, 2009; Thonus, 2001). If tutors are overly focused on adhering to a set of “rules,” they may become less inclined to evaluate the needs of each individual writer, instead using a “one size fits all” approach, regardless of whether it fits the individual writers. As such, this might make tutors less inclined to consider the context of each writer with whom they work and how each writer—and his or her needs—are shaped by that context.

While during the tutoring sessions themselves tutors were not reluctant to help writers with lower order concerns, for example—several of the tutors’ narratives did reveal a lack of concern for or understanding of the individual context of the writer. A poignant example of this is in the paired narratives of Teresa and Dave. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Teresa’s narrative was one of her journey as an older returning college student, who felt ill at ease with the new technology that she was required to use. On the other hand, Dave’s narrative did not mention Teresa’s nontraditional status at all and mentioned her unfamiliarity with technology only briefly; instead, Dave focused in his narrative on how he tutored the “right way” (describing mainly his work with Teresa on content issues). That Dave’s narrative brushed over Teresa’s very significant and apparent context as a nontraditional student illustrates how a tutors’ desire to adhere to a dominant

narrative of tutoring could interfere with the tutor from fully appreciating and perceiving the writer as an individual learner with unique needs.

Although Dave and Teresa both agreed that their tutoring session was successful, Dave's framing of his story is still significant. As Carino (2002) and Harris (2010) both suggest, the rhetoric that writing center workers use to talk about their work can play a significant role in shaping institutional perceptions of writing centers. As we saw in tutors' discussions of their tutoring philosophies, all expressed strongly delineated views of what a good tutor does and does not do—and these perceptions neatly aligned with the dominant tutoring narratives. Moreover, these tutors used negative rhetoric to frame their descriptions of their work, and all of the tutors made strong statements about what their work does not include. Just as this type of negative rhetoric would be problematic on a website or flyer (as Carino and Harris suggest), having writing center workers use this rhetoric to describe their work also has notable implications.

Indeed, defining writing center work in black-and-white terms of what is done and what is not done, with the emphasis on what is not done, could be alienating to potential writers who are unfamiliar with the writing center and be misleading to faculty and others within the campus community. More significantly, the disconnect in the rhetoric between tutors' and writers' stories is also potentially fraught. If tutors emphasize that they do not work on grammar or lower order concerns with students, what, then, are the consequences if writers—perhaps accurately—talk to faculty or to their peers about the assistance with “editing” or “proofreading” that tutors provide? Certainly this disconnect could also lead to

confusion on the part of students and faculty regarding what to expect from a visit to the writing center. Indeed, as Molly and Ramona indicated in their follow-up interviews, this mismatch in expectation is often apparent during their sessions.

### **For Writing Center Studies**

As established in earlier chapters, while writing center research as a whole lacks the voices of peer tutors, as this trend is slowly corrected, the value of tutors' perspectives is becoming increasingly evident. From Welch (2002) to Dinitz and Kiedaisch (2003) to Fallon (2010), more and more writing center scholarship shows the valuable contribution of tutors' voices in research, theory, and pedagogy. Indeed, the complicated and complex work that tutors do make them ideally positioned to make important contributions to the field. As Thonus (2001) notes, tutors' roles may need to be "redefined and renegotiated" multiple times within the course of a single tutoring session (p. 77). And it is not just the complexity of their roles that make tutors' contributions to the writing center field—and beyond—so meaningful. More than almost any other figures on campus, tutors have a wide, unfiltered perspective on how writing is taught and how students respond and react to various professors, lessons and assignments. This, paired with their own experiences as students and the complexity of the work they do as tutors, makes tutors uniquely positioned to further the theory and pedagogy of the writing center field. And, as Fels (2011) argues, their contributions are needed in the field of composition too because of this positioning: "tutors' experiences...offer researchers two lenses through which to view the effects of institutionalized demands for writing on students' work, agency, and identities" (p. 125). These "lenses" that tutors possess—

as student, as tutor—can produce important insight on the way writing is taught, and on the effects on students, in a way that would be difficult to be gleaned otherwise. The tutors that participated in this study made thoughtful, critical comments in this vein, illustrating the clear potential to act as the “radical intellectuals” that Cooper (1994/2008) envisioned. Indeed, tutors like Morgan, Kayla, and Dave criticized professors for being overly rigid in their expectations, for imposing their voices on students, and for robbing students of their agency as writers—all criticisms that have significant and far-reaching implications if explored further.

In order for tutors to be participants in conversations within writing center studies and within composition studies, however, they need to be empowered to talk and to reflect without constraint about what it means to be a tutor. If tutors feel that they must adhere to an official narrative of what a good tutor does and what good tutoring is supposed to look like, this may prevent them from fully exploring and investigating the realities of their work and prevent them from contributing to wider conversations about writing centers and composition. As such, the dominant narratives of peer tutoring can serve as a way to both silence tutors and to preserve the status quo, with respect to both the tutoring and the teaching of writing. The dominant narrative of peer tutoring, then, serves to hide the complexity of writing center work and—because of tutors’ reliance on this narrative—may also hinder tutors from contributing to conversations about theory and pedagogy, despite the tremendous value of their contributions.

Clearly, then, tutors' and writers' stories, when examined side by side, and when examined in comparison to the dominant narratives of peer tutoring, suggest that these dominant narratives are inadequate compared to the complexity of work that takes place in the writing center. And we learn in particular, from writers' stories, that the dominant narrative of what tutors do and do not help with is limiting and misguided. Some writers may indeed need help and guidance with correcting mechanical errors, and a dominant narrative that privileges work on higher order concerns could prevent these writers from asking for or receiving the help they need. Indeed, writers in this study had no sense of any kind of hierarchy of concerns, with some, like Rebecca and Teresa, talking about grammatical and content concerns in the same breath, suggesting that the dominant narratives of peer tutoring could get in the way of tutors understanding and responding to the needs and concerns of writers. Moreover, tutors' preoccupation with being "good tutors" and following the "rules" further illustrates how the dominant narrative of peer tutoring can interfere with their work and could interfere with peer tutors reaching the potential they possess due to their unique positioning and insights about the teaching of writing.

This study suggests, then, that the dominant narratives of peer tutoring are insufficient and must be critiqued and reimagined. It is through this critical awareness of the dominant narrative that we can begin to allow a more complicated picture of writing center work to emerge. As McKinney (2013) argued, "taking the effort to acknowledge how the narrative operates, writing transgressions of the narrative, allowing the suppressed and peripheral pieces to surface, and re-

envisioning the boundaries of writing center work will allow us to dislodge our established rhetorical and visual ways” (p. 90). And, I argue, perhaps the most important way to do that is by centralizing, empowering, and studying the voices of those whose stories have most often been suppressed—tutors and writers.

### **Recommendations**

If we are to “dislodge,” as McKinney puts it, the dominant narratives of writing center work, we must do so by making the voices and perspectives of writers and tutors a central part of our theory, pedagogy and research. The solution is not to privilege one sort of narrative over another, however. Although I argue here for the centralization of tutors’ and writers’ stories in writing center studies, I am also highlighting the necessity of investigating and critiquing writing center stories—of all kinds. As much as this study illustrates how much can be learned from writing center stories, it also illustrates just as plainly the problems with stories that remain unexamined and unquestioned. As such, I will suggest several general recommendations for writing center researchers and practitioners that focus on both listening to tutors’ and writers’ stories and investigating those stories. The recommendations that follow are broad and are presented with the understanding that the implementation and applicability of any such recommendations would be heavily dependent on local context.

#### **In the Writing Center**

One of the most notable and potentially problematic themes to emerge from this study of tutors’ and writers’ stories was just how entrenched the dominant narratives were in tutor’s stories. And as discussed earlier, this trend has plenty of

far-reaching consequences for writers, tutors, and for the field of writing center studies as a whole. Thus, examining when and how these dominant narratives are imparted to tutors is critical in allowing tutors the freedom and ability to express the complex realities of their work.

Certainly any tutor training handbooks used by tutors should be examined for the degree to which these dominant narratives are entrenched. As the review of literature illustrated, many handbooks largely consist of rules, guidelines, and advice, passed from expert to novice (Gillespie & Lerner, 2007; Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2009). In fact, McKinney (2013) argued that these handbooks play a role in the creation of the grand writing center narrative: “we claim to work with all students, our positioning of us and them, as indicated in the tutoring handbooks at least, says something about our expectations about who tutors and who gets tutored, who is normal and who is different.” (p. 71) In short, tutoring handbooks can certainly play a role in setting up tutors’ expectations and allowing them to begin to form a picture of what is “normal” and what is not. Therefore, providing tutors with training texts to read that invite reflection and that offer a variety of perspectives and real-life tutoring stories is one way to prevent one dominant tutoring narrative from becoming entrenched.

At the same time, tutor training can also be used as an opportunity to offer new tutors a wider perspective on what a writing center can be and what it means to be a tutor. Indeed, many universities offer required tutor training courses for peer tutors, covering the theory and pedagogy of tutoring and teaching writing. And certainly many such programs offer tutors opportunities for observation, reflection,



and theory-building. Clearly, though, one aspect of training that must be emphasized in a tutor training course or program would be the variable nature of what tutoring is— that there is no “ideal” model for a tutoring session, but instead a myriad of possibilities. Training should focus less on the ideal and on the hypothetical “problem scenarios,” but on the rich middle ground in between—the lived experiences. And not only should tutors be encouraged to share stories about their experiences, but they should be encouraged to reflect upon them and critique the assumptions and beliefs presented therein. In Welch’s study, tutors’ initial stories adhered to dominant writing center narratives; they were stories of whether “official” tutoring techniques worked or did not work. When Welch invited tutors to interact with their stories in the “transitional space,” however, tutors rewrote their stories with a greater eye toward the nuance and complexity of their interactions with the writers. Thus, centralizing tutors’ stories and then using these stories as material for teaching and learning as part of tutor training would allow tutors to explore the complex reality of their work.

Furthermore, while many tutor training programs require tutors to engage in observation and reflection, it is not just the lived experiences from the perspectives of tutors that must be discussed, but those of writers as well. How are tutors taught to talk about the students they tutor? What do they learn about them? *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, for example, categorizes writers into “types”: the unresponsive writer, the antagonistic writer, the writer who plagiarizes, and so on (p. 100-103). Writers are presented as problems to solve, rather than individuals. Similarly, in Welch’s (2002) study, when her tutors initially told their stories, they

tended to paint themselves in the hero role and implicitly blame the writer for anything that went wrong during the session. And—as illustrated in Chapter 4—the tutors in this study tended to downplay the role of the writer in their narratives, focusing instead on their own actions, often only mentioning the writer to emphasize their own work as a “good tutor.”

Thus, I suggest here that any kind of peer tutor training must allow tutors to hear the voices of the writers with whom they will be working—beyond simply reading articles or studies. The training process must also involve tutors working with actual writers on their campuses. Interviewing students who regularly visit the writing center would be one such technique; so would interviews with students who do not regularly visit the writing center or those who have had bad experiences there. In order to train tutors in such a way that training is less about what tutors are supposed to “do” and more about the possibilities and complexities inherent to their work, an exploration of “real life” tutoring is necessary, as is learning more about the students who actually come to the writing center. Notably, the tutors in this study tended to focus in their narratives on the tutoring sessions themselves—rarely mentioning anything about the writer outside the context of the session. The writers in this study, on the other hand, told stories in which their tutoring sessions were shown to be deeply enmeshed in other aspects of their lives as writers and as students. For several, their narratives focused less on their tutoring sessions and more on other aspects of their lives. Spending time, as part of their training, learning about the students they tutor and studying the stories they tell

would help tutors develop an understanding of the complexities of not just their sessions, but also the students with whom they work.

In addition to spending time focusing on the complexities of their work and of the writers with whom they work, another aspect of tutor training to review is the way that tutors are trained to attend to lower-order concerns. The degree of resistance participating tutors in this study had to lower order concerns—while still gamely attending to them—is significant. If tutors are taught—or learn through lore from other tutors—that lower order concerns are less important, but at the same time are asked to help writers with these same concerns, how successfully are they actually helping students with these lower-order issues? Conversations with tutors about the type of help they are “allowed” to give, in addition to specific, explicit training about how to tutor lower-order concerns (beyond merely pointing them out and correcting them) are important areas to consider in any tutor training program.

### **Outside the Center**

While this study illustrated how tutors can be constrained by the dominant narratives of peer tutoring, so too did it illustrate the valuable insights that tutors have about how writing is taught. Although tutors’ narratives reflected constraints, when I asked them directly about their tutoring philosophies, nearly all the tutors spoke without prompting about their concerns and criticisms with the way that composition is taught, both at the high school and the college level, illustrating, as Cooper (1994/2008) suggested, the important intellectual role that tutors have the potential to play. These criticisms they made—most notably, that students’ voices as

writers are often silenced in the composition classroom—are particularly valuable because of the multiple lenses through which they can view the teaching of writing.

How often are tutors given the platform and tools to express these insights, however? While writing center studies has certainly opened its doors wider to include the research of peer tutors, tutors' voices are absent from other fields of study—such as composition—in which their expertise would certainly be of value. Moreover, in order to truly place value on the expertise of peer tutors, they need to be given more than a temporary platform; those in writing center and composition studies need to treat the research and the insight tutors produce with just as much value as those of writing center and composition researchers. The fact that *The Writing Center Journal* devoted an entire issue to undergraduate research in 2012 is an important step in centralizing the voices of peer tutors; however, in order to make such a move more than tokenism, there needs to be a greater effort on the part of writing center scholars to not just offer peer tutors platforms, but to treat their insight with the same value as that of “established” writing center scholars. Tutors should not just be given opportunities to do research, but the research they do should be engaged with, cited, and treated as valued knowledge within the field. Examination of the stories told by the tutors in this study revealed that tutors felt constrained by the dominant narratives of the field, but were also positioned to and desired to affect change in the way that writing is taught. Thus, empowering tutors to make meaningful contributions to writing center theory and pedagogy could allow their voices and contributions to both dismantle and reimagine dominant narratives of peer tutoring.

And it is not just in the venue of academic scholarship that tutors' expertise should be highlighted. Within decisions made on our campuses about the way writing is taught, we should consider how writing center peer tutors can be included in these conversations and what value their insight can bring. While tutors are on the front lines, engaging with the effects of any decisions made regarding writing curricula at the university, rarely are they included in the decision-making process. Insight from tutors like John, who helped Rebecca through her frustration with her professor's teaching style, or Dave, who witnessed how a student like Teresa's technological deficiencies could hinder the writing process, would certainly be applicable and of interest to others on campus, beyond the walls of the writing center. Indeed, because of their unique status as students and as tutors and because of the unfiltered view they have of how students perceive writing instruction, being granted more collaborative, influential roles in university-wide decisions about writing instruction would be beneficial to both instructors and students.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

In addition to the practical recommendations for writing center studies and practice outlined above, this study also indicates several rich directions for further research. The narratives of the writers, in particular, suggest a number of intriguing directions for further research that were beyond the scope of this study. First, despite the fact that writers were asked to narrate stories of their tutoring sessions, the stories that emerged were more often stories of those individuals as writers and learners. Little empirical research exists on the role that visits to the writing center play in a college students' writing processes –and specifically what students learn

from their visits to the writing center. Though these questions were not the focus of this study, the fact that some writers' narratives were actually broader literacy/learning narratives is intriguing, perhaps pointing to a connection between writing center visits and self-reflection/identity as a writer. Further, exploring the connection between frequency of writing center visits and development as a writer and learner would be another valuable direction to explore.

Moreover, this tendency in writers' narratives to discuss their literacy development seemed to directly defy some of the common stereotypes often invoked by writing center workers. The trope of the writer who does not understand the "real" purpose of a writing center and who shows up at the center asking "will you check my grammar for me?" or "will you fix my paper for me" is well worn, and often presented uncritically as a commonplace of writing center work. While I do not intend to argue that this characterization is wholly inaccurate (Molly's and Ramona's comments indicate otherwise), I will argue that the narratives of writers who participated in this study indicate a greater awareness and ownership of their processes as writers than writing center workers perhaps give them credit for. Indeed, the narratives of these writers illustrated that when writers ask for help with grammar or help "fixing mistakes," they may, such as in the cases of Teresa and Anna, mean just that; they may indeed be well aware, as Teresa was, that the writing center can help students with a multiplicity of higher and lower order issues, but are visiting the center specifically for needed help with those lower order concerns that tutors tended to disavow. Moreover, the fact that writers did not perceive a hierarchy of concerns with regard to their writing also calls

attention to the fact that the way writing centers and tutors characterize these aspects of writing may be unhelpful and possibly inaccurate.

In addition to these general observations, two of the most compelling writer narratives, I would argue, were those of Anna—an nontraditional and ESL student—and Teresa, also a nontraditional student. While a number of works do look at facets of nontraditional students' experiences at writing centers (Garner, Lyman & McLean, 2002; Haynes-Burton, 1994) the narratives of these two women—both frequent visitors to the writing center—further suggest that the literacy/learning processes of nontraditional students are a fertile ground for study, particularly the role of the writing center in the learning/writing processes of these students. Furthermore, Anna's ESL status provided an interesting potential dimension in her interactions with Ramona; however, as the only ESL writer or tutor included in this study, few suppositions can be made about how language status may or may not affect a tutors' or writers' story. Still, if we are to dislodge or reimagine the dominant narratives of writing center work by highlighting a multiplicity of stories that may often be suppressed, specific attention to the stories of a wide variety of students must certainly be paid.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, I sought to explore how the stories of tutors and writers—too often ignored in writing center studies—can provide important insights into the nature of their interaction and relationship and—more significantly—how these stories can challenge the dominant narratives of peer tutoring. Through analysis of the narratives of 14 tutors and writers and the themes that arose therein, I

discovered significant differences between tutors' and writers' stories, differences that illustrated notable disparity between their perceptions of each other and of writing center work. I argue here that these disparities between tutors' and writers' narratives and the disparities between their stories and those of the dominant narratives of peer tutoring illustrate the limiting and inaccurate nature of these metanarratives. Indeed, it is through the privileging and recentering of tutors' and writers' voices in studies such as this one that these insufficient dominant narratives can be reimagined.

I introduced this study—fittingly—with a story. It was a story of myself, someone who has had the privilege of viewing writing center work from multiple lenses over the past 15 years—as a writer seeking help, as an undergraduate peer tutor, as a graduate administrator, as a composition instructor whose students used the writing center and, currently, as a writing center director. I noted that the further I moved “up the ranks” and the more enmeshed I became in writing center studies as a field, the further removed I felt from the day-to-day work that these studies are meant to inform. This feeling, paired with some fortuitous conversations with my students and writing center tutors with whom they had worked, led me to the questions and themes that helped to frame the beginnings of this study: the insights that tutors and writers have to offer about the work they do and what is lost when those of us in positions to do so do not ask them.

Because I began this study with an attempt to make meaning through the telling of a story, I would like to conclude in this manner as well. In the time since this study has been completed, I now work at a different university in another part



of the country, now as a full time director of a new writing center. Last week, when I meet with our center's six new tutors, who had just completed their first week of tutoring on their own, I asked them all to share a story from their first week on the job. "A story about a difficult session?" one of them asked. "Or a story about a session that went well?" Neither, I told them. Or either. Or both. Just a story. And the stories they told were just that—neither stories of successes or failures, but stories of what happened in the writing center that week, stories of connection, stories of misunderstandings, stories of tutors and stories of writers.

Neither these stories, nor the stories told by the participants in this study, nor any particular set of stories are a panacea for the writing center field's ongoing lack of representation of the voices of tutors and writers (indeed, over-relying on any set of stories as a source of knowledge is problematic). And certainly the dominant narratives that exist about peer tutoring are deeply entrenched in our work and will require ongoing effort to dismantle and reimagine. Still, centralizing and highlighting the voices of writers and tutors through their stories, particularly in writing center research like this, is an important way to begin. As Welch (2002) said about writing center stories, each one "holds within it a silence, suppression, a contradiction, another story that could be told out of the conversation with that silence, that contradiction" (p. 217). Tutors' and writers' voices and their stories have been long undervalued and marginalized, and we are only beginning to understand the extent of what ideas and insights have been long suppressed. It is time, then, to ask—and to listen.

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## Appendix A

### Sample Interview Questions

#### For Tutors:

- How would you describe your tutoring philosophy? (“Tutoring Philosophy” was defined for tutors as “the beliefs or values that you have about teaching and writing that you try to enact when you tutor.”)
- Were you able to enact your tutoring philosophy in this session you just completed? Why or why not?
- Did any misunderstandings or difficulties occur during your session?  
Describe and explain what you think may have caused them.

#### For Writers

- How would you describe what the tutors here do?
- How would you describe what the writing center is, if you were talking to a friend who knew nothing about it?
- Did any misunderstandings or difficulties occur during your session?  
Describe and explain what you think may have caused them.

## Appendix B

### Informed Consent Form for Writers

Dear IUP student,

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study. My name is Maggie Herb, and I am a doctoral candidate in IUP's Composition and TESOL graduate program. I am conducting this study as part of my dissertation research on tutoring.

I would like to learn more about what students who visit the writing center think about their tutoring sessions. Therefore, I would like to audio tape your tutoring session so that I can transcribe and analyze all responses; I would also like to conduct a brief interview with you afterwards in which you tell me about your tutorial. There are no risks to participating in this study. You may find participation in this study to be an enjoyable learning experience, and you may gain personal insight about your writing process.

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may end your participation at any time, with no adverse consequences. If you choose to participate, all information concerning your identity will be held in confidence. All data collected will be stored securely in a filing cabinet in Maggie Herb's office. You may withdraw at any time simply by contacting Maggie Herb (see below).

If you are willing to participate, please sign the attached voluntary consent form and return it to me. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to ask.

Researcher:

Maggie M. Herb, Ph.D. Candidate, Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
English Department, 110 Leonard Hall  
Indiana PA, 15705  
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Project director:

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**This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724/357-7730).**

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent Form for Tutors

Dear Tutor,

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study. My name is Maggie Herb, and I am a doctoral candidate in IUP's Composition and TESOL graduate program. I am conducting this study as part of my dissertation research on writing centers and tutoring.

I would like to learn more about how both tutors and the students who visit the writing center perceive their tutoring sessions. Therefore, I would like to audio tape your tutoring session so that I can transcribe and analyze all responses; I would also like to conduct an interview with you afterwards in which we discuss what happened during your tutorial. There are no risks to participating in this study. You may find participation in this study to be an enjoyable learning experience, and you may gain personal insight about your tutoring process.

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may end your participation at any time, with no adverse consequences. If you choose to participate, all information concerning your identity will be held in confidence. If you decide not to participate, Dr. Rafoth will not know this. All data collected will be stored securely in a filing cabinet in Maggie Herb's office.

You may withdraw at any time simply by contacting Maggie Herb (see below). If you are willing to participate, please sign the attached voluntary consent form and return it to me. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to ask.

Researcher:

Maggie M. Herb, Ph.D. Candidate, Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
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**This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724/357-7730)**