

Spreading the Good Word: The Peer-Tutoring Report and the Public Image of the Writing Center

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In her assessment of the growing pains of writing centers, Muriel Harris frankly admits that writing centers have an image problem linked to the fact that "outside the lab too many people don't really know what we do or how we do it."¹ Whether with students, administrators or faculty, ongoing communication between writing centers and other sectors of the university is vital to their continued growth and maturity. Much attention has recently been given to one important constituency, the faculty. Jeanette Harris notes the importance of reaching out to the faculty in our efforts to expand the writing center audience across the curriculum:

Good public relations are important to any tutorial program but are especially vital to one that is expanding in new directions. Although most public relations efforts are student directed, aimed at students who might use the center, a multi-disciplinary program must direct its efforts primarily toward instructors.²

She goes on to suggest individual conferences with instructors and faculty workshops as means of making contact and communicating with instructors. Peggy F. Broder emphasizes that even with members of English departments there is a need for "frequent reciprocal communication about writing assignments. No lab can function effectively with an English department unless tutors are fully informed about assignments that students are working with." She further notes that teachers "should receive a brief summary of what aspects of the paper were worked on. This can be done simply with a checklist or the tutor can write a brief summary."³

While I agree that ongoing communication with the faculty is important, I would suggest that in adopting this perfunctory attitude toward written records of tutorials we might be neglecting a resource for improving a writing center's image, a resource so obvious that we tend to overlook it: the well-written tutor report. Such direct communication between a tutor and the teacher of the student tutored can do much to reverse the all-too-common attitudes of indifference or mild hostility towards writing centers on the part of faculty, who quite understandably distrust such no-credit, para-academic entities associated with counseling or education programs. While I am aware of the dangers of linking

writing center tutorials to classroom teaching—described by John Trimbur as a consequence of adopting the support service model with its subordination of tutor to classroom instructor⁴—I think the pitfalls of trial and conventional tutoring can be avoided and significant gains in faculty use of and respect for peer tutoring can be realized through direct written contact between tutor and teacher.

Efforts to establish meaningful communications between faculty and tutor are not without risks, however, and the problems are particularly acute in communications between peer tutors and teachers because the latter often look upon peer tutors as students trying to do a job for which they are not qualified. For example, teachers will pounce upon errors in reports as evidence of the inadequacy of peer tutoring. Obviously, poorly written tutor reports can undo the writing center director's efforts to secure faculty trust in the value of peer tutoring, and instead of improving the image of the writing center such reports ironically achieve precisely the opposite effect. Yet the risks do not outweigh the potential gain: well-written reports sent regularly to the faculty demonstrate as no other communication can the value and quality of peer tutoring, help to bridge the communication gap among tutor, student and teacher, and establish in immediate, concrete form the importance of a writing center.

Having become aware through negative feedback of the damaging nature of sketchily or hurriedly written, poorly organized, and error-filled reports, I took steps to improve our writing center's report writing and in the process discovered a method of upgrading the academic respectability of the writing center. In outlining this method I will focus on three areas: the tutor report as a circuit of communication; the qualities and format of an effective report; and the training of peer tutors in report writing.

The writing center director must first of all establish a circuit of communication if she/he hopes tutoring reports to function meaningfully. Tutors are instructed to describe their tutorials, taking notes during or immediately after conference and writing the report as soon as possible. Periodically these reports are photocopied and sent to the students' classroom teachers. I do this about once a month. A letter explaining the function of the writing center and inviting responses should accompany the first reports sent each semester. Teachers are informed that to protect students' rights and to keep the information exchange open and positive, students voluntarily using the writing center have the right to keep their reports private. Although most students opt to have their reports sent as proof of effort to correct writing deficiencies, faculty cannot use the reports as monitoring devices since some of their students may choose not to have their reports sent. Feedback from professors is communicated to the concerned tutor, student, or the entire tutoring staff if appropriate. At St. Lawrence we have generated a list of effective and ineffective report writing and tutoring techniques from faculty

responses to reports. When operating efficiently, this communication circuit helps promote real progress in writing while protecting the sensitive tri-partite relationship among students, faculty and writing center tutors. All parties know what tutoring work is in progress.

To prevent poorly written reports from short-circuiting this communication process, the writing center director must train tutors to write clear and complete reports in correct standard English. This first entails a clear definition of the qualities and format of an effective report. I have isolated four criteria: objectivity, tact, completeness, and mechanical correctness. To maintain the posture of objectivity in a report, the tutor must avoid subjective remarks on the attitude of the student or the quality of the work. Not only do such comments make the tutorial appear less professional and the tutor overly involved with non-writing problems, they endanger the relationship between writing center and academic classroom by interposing a tutor's judgment between teacher and student. Most often these remarks take the form of praise for the quality of a draft, commonly something like "the organization of Cheryl's paper was very good but she had problems with sentence structures." I stress to tutors that such a judgmental comment as the one above, that the organization of a paper was good, offers no possibility for gain but carries the potential for much harm. If the teacher recognizes the organization of a paper as good, there is no need for the tutor's confirmation in a report. But if the teacher disagrees with the tutor's evaluation and decides that the paper is poorly organized, the tutor's credibility will have been undermined for having stated the opposite conclusion in the report.

Two misconceptions motivate tutors to make evaluative remarks in their reports: a misunderstanding of the appropriate tutor role and a confusion of audience for the report. In the former case tutors sometimes feel they must play the role of a teacher, one with the authority to make judgments on the merits and demerits of a paper, in order to legitimize their tutoring. Whether motivated by insecurity, vanity, or just carelessness, these tutors fail to realize that in arrogating to themselves the power of professorial judgment they might be colliding with the teacher's judgment, not only on the paper in question but on their own roles as tutors. In discussing the following report with its writer, I tried to get her to see that her comment on the paper's organization might interfere with the teacher's evaluation.

Doug seemed to understand the basic concepts of indifference curve analysis. His paper was well-organized but he needed to define his terms more clearly and he has a "lot" of spelling errors.

Every statement includes a judgment of one sort or another. The first is not so damaging since the tutor qualifies the judgment with the word "seemed," but the second sentence includes a bald evaluation on the paper's organization and a most teacherly comment on the excessive number of errors. I counsel tutors to recognize that the power of the

grade and therefore meaningful judgment lies in professors' hands, and that the tutors' role, difficult though it may be, is not that of teacher or judge but of peer, of sympathetic and experienced reader. The tutor rewrote the report as follows:

Doug's rough draft had two main problems running throughout the paper—clear definition of terms and spelling. We worked on defining terms like "indifference curve" and "absolute conditions" more completely. I kept asking Doug questions and he began to see that what he had written was incomplete. He rewrote one definition. I helped him correct the spelling in one paragraph, pointed out his tendency to misspell words with double letters, and advised him to go over the finished draft very carefully. I offered to teach him to proofread his final draft if he returned.

Clearly this tutor is no longer invading the professor's territory and the report reflects a clear understanding of the interactive roles of tutor, student and teacher.

A second, associated misconception motivating positive judgments in tutor reports derives from an unclear perception of the precise audience for the report. In the beginning tutors often have an ambiguous audience in mind, one consisting of both teacher and student. Consequently, since positive feedback and encouraging remarks are stressed in tutor training sessions, the tutors write evaluative statements of praise into the reports as though the student were the reader. I encourage tutors to isolate teachers as the sole audience and to think of their reports as messages between tutor and teacher. They must separate what they say in a tutorial from what they write about that tutorial: in the former case they speak in private as a peer to a fellow student struggling through a paper and should make as many positive remarks as possible; in the latter case they speak in public as a tutor to the teacher and should avoid judgments as much as possible. For the tutors this is a useful exercise in the value of audience analysis in writing.

In discovering this audience confusion I also stumbled upon the source of another problem in the writing of tutor reports: the absence of tact. In correcting the remarks of positive evaluation in the reports, I led some tutors to think that they were not supposed to say anything positive in a tutorial just because they were asked not to make positive judgments in report. Naturally this attitude was reflected in negative or sarcastic comments in their reports, again oversimplifying the rhetoric of the tutor report. While the student may not be the reader of the report, he or she is definitely involved in this communication (as the subject of the writing) and has certain rights, in particular the right of freedom from libel. Again tutors need to become aware of their reports as public documents whose contents may be damaging. Even though a student may have been rude or uncooperative in a tutorial, the tutor must keep a professional, unemotional distance both in tutorial and in report writing.

In reporting on a common type of unproductive tutorial in which the student brings in a finished paper for the tutor to touch up and approve—without suggesting changes requiring the student to retype the paper—a tutor might follow this politic model report:

Fritz came in with an already-typed paper and wanted to work on spelling only. We went over the paper and corrected a few mistakes. Problems were also noticed with paragraphing, sentence structure and capitalization.

Without having stated directly that the student did not take seriously any suggestions for change, the tutor has conveyed quite clearly to the teacher the student's attitude and the tutor's recognition of the problems in the paper. It is there for the teacher to read in the first sentence indicating that the student brought in the paper already typed and clearly wanted to make only cosmetic changes so as not to have to retype the paper. This report manages to protect the tutor's integrity without damning the student.

To promote completeness as well as objectivity in reports, I advise a three-part structure for descriptions of tutorials: a clear direct statement of the writing problem(s); a brief description of the specific work done in attempting to solve the problem(s); and concluding remarks pointing out writing problems not taken up in this particular conference and scheduling future tutorials. The first two steps ensure that the teacher learns what actually occurred in the tutorial and the third gives a sense of closure even while making plans for further writing instruction. In discussing the tutorial in a problem-solving context, the tutor not only maintains a non-judgmental neutrality but keeps the focus on what the teacher is truly interested in: meaningful work on the student's writing problems. While faculty in the sciences have expressed appreciation of this report format, faculty in the humanities likewise appreciate a report's clear focus on the writing problem, as exemplified in this tutor's report and the English professor's written response:

Charles brought in his rough draft. He had written five paragraphs on the ineffectiveness of the new drinking age law. We discussed the lack of detail in his essay and although he didn't have a lot of time before it was due, he left to rewrite one of his paragraphs and he will come back with it later tonight. I suggested that next time he bring in his rough draft at least a full day before it is due. We also worked briefly on the use of commas, especially after introductory clauses, and I pointed out various spelling errors and suggested the use of a dictionary.

In an unsolicited note the student's teacher wrote,

Very nice job of reporting on the tutor's part as well as keen understanding of Charles' problems. I'm impressed and grateful for

the help to me and Charles. I feel certain that he will return to the WC—oops! Writing Center. He wants very much to do well.

As the first sentence of this note indicates, the teacher appreciates the report's focus on the student's writing problems.

One necessary feature of an effective statement of the writing problem(s) is specificity. In the report above the tutor clearly refers to "five" paragraphs on the particular topic of the ineffectiveness of the drinking age law, and he refers not merely to mechanical problems but to the use of commas before introductory clauses. In reading such a detailed account, the teacher becomes aware not only of the particular nature of the writing problems but of the careful, knowledgeable instruction of a competent, concerned tutor. We know from our own reading that abstract, vague writing is less interesting and given less attention than detailed prose. In the following two reports on tutorials for paper structure, both of which follow the structural guidelines mentioned above, the former appears pale and lifeless when contrasted to the latter.

Becky brought in her draft. We worked mainly on organization. She had all her ideas, and needed a direction in which to write. We worked on an order of ideas for her paper. She was using her ideas in such a way that they were spreading out all over. We grouped together ideas relating to one another, and tried to find an order in which to put them in her paper. We did not, however, get to work on the following: transitions, diction and grammar. I suggested that she return when she is first starting a paper for help in organization and thesis writing so that she may also receive help in the other problem areas before the paper is due.

Sarah and I spent considerable time making sure that all her points were relevant to her thesis. We worked through her examples and found that many did not adequately reinforce the point she was trying to make. Her paper was heavily laden with "Elizabeth" examples, and light on the "Mr. Darcy" side, although her thesis gave them equal importance. I stressed parallelism to her—if she is devoting her paper to the simultaneous "growths" of E. and D., then her examples should parallel one another. We eliminated (zap!) a lot of tangential stuff, as well as a whole lot of repetitions and summing-up statements. Her conclusion did not address the specific ideas covered in the paper; i.e., she saw growth in terms of revelation within the paper, but then defined it as new-found generosity in the conclusion. Sarah does not know how to use semicolons.

This second report displays a lively mind at work, not only in the writing but in the tutorial. The detailed references to the particular characters of the novel and to the ideas of the student's paper contribute to the sense that this is a real voice speaking about a particular tutorial,

while the abstract diction of the first report belongs to a textbook voice speaking about the tutorial as though it were one among several of this same general type. As the teacher's comments above indicate, the faculty are concerned about individual students and like to see individual attention given to the particular problems of each student. While the tutor writing the first report may have given individual attention to the student, it is not reflected in the writing of the report, whereas the writing in the second report clearly reflects personal attention to the particular student.

This latter report, however, also reveals a failure of tact in the tutor's attempt to conclude the description. While I do ask that reports end with comments citing writing problems not taken up in the tutorial, to state so baldly that "Sarah does not know how to use semicolons" is not only blunt, it is also possibly untrue and fails to inform the teacher whether the tutor advised the student of the weakness, worked with the student at all on this problem, or even mentioned this mechanical problem to the student. A better close to this report might have been as follows: "I mentioned to Sarah that semicolons are consistently misused in the paper and that, since we had run out of time, she could bring the paper back tomorrow afternoon to review the rules. Although she did not make an appointment, she said she would get some help with this problem before handing the paper in." I counsel tutors to end their reports with some such statement pointing out writing problems not taken up in the tutorial and commenting on future tutorials not only to give the report a formal close and to protect tutors from faculty assumptions that they did not recognize or work on certain problems in a paper, but also to remind tutor, student and teacher that progress in writing comes step by step, one problem at a time. I advise tutors to focus on one or, at the most, two different writing problems in a single tutorial, so that in openly listing other problems recognized but not worked on, the tutor clearly puts the responsibility on the student to reschedule another appointment to address these problem areas. In noting this in the report as well as informing the student, the tutor ensures that all parties in this complex writing interchange are aware of their actions and advice.

Although this three-part format may seem rigid, in practice it produces a great variety in reports. For one thing, the format stretches to accommodate the numerous types of writing problems brought to the writing center. This same format works for literary analysis papers, laboratory reports, economics papers, research papers in the social sciences, and tutorials in basic grammar and punctuation. Since it follows the conventional paper structure—introduction, body and conclusion—the report format appears familiar and natural to both readers and writers. In training tutors to follow this report format, I labor to keep the form from hardening into an inflexible mold which might inhibit individual expression or a lively voice. No organizational structure is valuable if it cramps expression into lifeless prose. While I want a neutral voice, I

do not want a dead voice. In introducing this reporting method, I work from actual reports written over the years by tutors in the writing center, using individual examples to focus on the different responses appropriate to different tutoring situations. We review over a dozen model reports, discussing how the tutor reported on recalcitrant students, failed conferences, pre-writing conferences, tutorials on the basics, etc. I reproduce the reports, mostly superior examples, precisely as they were written, giving me the opportunity to comment not only on the structural features but also on the writing style and voice.

I also work to preserve each tutor's individual voice within the report format by giving feedback to each tutor on her or his reports as they are written. I try to read through the accumulated reports at least once a week, writing the tutors notes of praise or criticism on tutoring methods, format of report, and writing style and correctness. Though reading through the reports consumes a few hours of my week, the time is well spent, keeping me current and involved in tutoring problems and activities in the writing center. Some might object that this eavesdropping violates a privileged communication among tutor, teacher, and student, an illegal wiretap into this circuit of communication, but I maintain that the nature of report writing is public and reports should be open to scrutiny. The content of the report—the details of the particular tutorial—is of course kept confidential, but both student and tutor need to learn that writing is not an obsessively private affair but a social exchange and that improvement comes only through public exposure.

Habitually checking over tutor reports returns an additional dividend in preventing poorly written reports from reaching teachers. Although few tutors need to work on their reporting writing by the middle of the semester, I continue to read all reports to ensure a uniformly high quality of writing. In effect I edit the reports to protect the image of the writing center as truly a center of effective writing. While my editing is minimal—I always protect the tutor's voice and never change the substance of what is said—I will ask a tutor to delete obvious errors and to change a tactless or careless remark. The faculty at St. Lawrence have responded favorably, appreciating the clear description of tutorials with their students. I present one final model report with the teacher's response as confirmation of the value of well-written reports in bolstering the reputation of a writing center.

Debby came in with a summary and critique of an experiment in "Type A" and "Type B" students. Her main problem was a lack of support for the ideas in her critique. She would make a statement and then state her opinion again in a different way, but she did not explain or support her points. I asked her many questions, and she wrote down a few sentences to add. However, she still did not seem to fully understand what evidence entails. I invited her back tonight if she wanted to work more extensively on the support in her paper.

Other problems were misuse of colons and semicolons; dropped "s" endings on nouns and verbs; a few transitions. We worked briefly on some of these, but we did not have time for extensive work. I mentioned to Debby that she might want to make an appointment in the future to work on these.

I received the following note from Debby's teacher:

I would like to compliment one of your tutors, Tom Rickey, on his report on Debby Lane. It sounds like Tom is doing a good job of getting students to express their point of view clearly (with evidence) and not just correctly (e.g., punctuation). While all of the reports I received were informative, Tom's report was particularly well done.

Not only did the teacher learn from the report that meaningful work was taking place in the writing center, he understood that the writing center proceeded on the sound principle of emphasizing clear and well-supported writing over correct writing. In conveying this writing principle to the teacher so directly and concretely, through a tutorial of one of his students, the report had communicated a difficult but important concept more effectively than any writing center director's memorandum, meeting, or conference with the teacher could have done.

In providing the faculty clear, complete pictures of tutorials, well-written reports dispel the air of mystery hanging over writing center activities, bringing to light the meaningful teaching of a difficult skill. Faculty awareness of and support for writing center tutoring helps maintain the precarious balance between serving students and serving faculty. Both must be served if the writing center is to play a meaningful role on a college campus. The tutor can neither write the paper for a student nor act as the teacher's aide; neither frustrate the student's needs nor disappoint the teacher's hopes. The pedagogical role is difficult, but it is impossible without clear understanding among student, faculty and writing center. Such understanding must be cultivated through effective communication. This is after all, the writing center's *raison d'être*. Clear and articulate reports put into practice what writing center directors preach: they are a picture in words of the value and importance of effective and informed talk about writing. The faculty will believe what they see.

Notes

¹Muriel Harris, "Growing Pains: The Coming of Age of Writing Centers," *The Writing Center Journal*, II, No.1 (Fall/Winter, 1982), 5.

²Jeanette Harris, "Expanding the Writing Center Audience," *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, 6, No. 3 (Spring, 1983), 42.

³Peggy F. Broder, "Such Good Friends: Cooperation Between the English Department and the Writing Lab," *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, 5, No. 2 (Winter, 1981), 8-9.

⁴John Trimbur, "Students of Staff: Thought on the Use of Peer Tutors in Writing Centers," *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, 7, Nos. 1-2 (Fall/Winter, 1983), 34-35.

