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Beth Godbee

Marquette University, beth.godbee@marquette.edu

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“Let’s Research”: Inviting Tutors into the Conversation

By Tanya Cochran, Georgia State University; Beth Godbee, Georgia State University; Deaver Traywick, Newberry College; Marcy Trianosky, Hollins University

At the 2005 SWCA workshop in Charleston, Beth, Tanya, and Marcy conducted a workshop for tutors and directors called, “Constructing Tutor Research(ers).” Their concerns seem particularly relevant as we look forward to the 2006 SWCA conference, whose theme is “Let’s Research.” The following were among the questions participants of the Charleston workshop were asked to consider: Why research? What activities count as research? What incentives do tutors have to research? How can directors create environments that encourage research by tutors?

During the workshop, directors and tutors formed small groups to generate answers to these questions, as well as to more pragmatic questions about project design, methodology, ethics of research, and publishing venues. Some of the ideas below emerged during this workshop; others have developed as outgrowths of that fertile conversation. We offer here a summary of our workshop, including an overview of designs and methodologies as well as a rationale for and examples of tutor research.

Research Design By Beth Godbee

Depending on the focus of your research question (i.e., what you want to know) and the context of your study (i.e., what you have available), you might consider one of three research methodologies: textual, historical, or empirical (see Figure 1).

While we most often think only of empirical studies as research, textual and historical research are equally important. Textual research might involve integrating multi-disciplinary frameworks; for example, applying critical theory to writing center work. For historical research, you might interview past tutors or directors, review invoices or budgets from the 1970s, or otherwise use artifacts to construct a history of your center. Empirical research involves both qualitative

(descriptive) and quantitative (experimental) research to examine a phenomenon you observe. For example, you might video or audiotape tutorials to observe how

Figure 1. Overview of research designs.

Textual or theoretical: Consists mostly of text-based research, including analysis driven by theoretical, rhetorical, or philosophical perspectives
Historical or archival: Includes oral histories and archival research on artifacts, such as print documents, news clippings, photographs, videos, and brochures
Empirical (qualitative and quantitative): Ranges from descriptive studies (case study, ethnography, and survey/sampling), to experimental ones (meta-analysis, quasi- or true experiment) to blended studies (such as program evaluations)

For more information, see Lauer & Asher; Bishop; Ray; Clandinin & Connelly; and Mortensen & Kirsch.

tutors use humor, or to count instances of interruptions or overlapping speech. Whatever the methodological design, be sure it matches your research question, accounts for your intended timeline, and involves participants in an ethical way. Be sure to consult your school’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) to be sure that your design meets ethical criteria.

Analyzing data of any research design involves determining patterns or connections among ideas. To ensure the validity and credibility of results, researchers should build into the data analysis several types of triangulation, the heuristic tool to ensure at least three points of intersection. As Wendy Bishop explains, there are five types of triangulation:

data triangulation: the use of a variety of data sources in the study
investigator triangulation: the use of several researchers or evaluators
theory triangulation: the use of multiple perspectives to interpret a single set of data
methodological triangulation: the use of multiple methods to study a problem

interdisciplinary triangulation: the use of varied disciplines, such as art, sociology, history, dance, architecture, and anthropology, to inform our research processes. (48)

Studies might draw on some or all of these five types, providing varied conceptual, theoretical, or methodological perspectives to interpret the data collected from a variety of sources. Whatever the type or topic of research, the design should include some method of triangulation to ensure the reliability of the findings.

Rationale for Tutor Research

By Tanya Cochran

In writing center work, we generally think of tutors, directors, and researchers as three distinct groups of people. What we may overlook is that these positions are often open at one time or another to almost all of us. Once in a while, researchers come from outside of our centers to observe or interview us. Many times our own directors act as researchers. But we tend to see tutors as the least likely to conduct research. Since our 2006 SWCA conference theme asks us to gather “evidence to support writing center work,” we think it is time to believe Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner who insist “tutors are researchers” (127).

We can see examples of why tutors should conduct research in Meg Woolbright’s “The Politics of Tutoring: Feminism within the Patriarchy” and Anne DiPardo’s “‘Whispers of Coming and Going’: Lessons from Fannie.” In 1993, both articles won the National Writing Centers Association Outstanding Scholarship Award. And while both present valuable insights into tutorials, they also raise questions about ethics in research, specifically regarding the researcher’s role, reciprocity, and the need for tutors as agents rather than objects of research.

In her observations of a tutor and student writer, Woolbright finds that the tutor alienates and even silences the writer by asking questions she herself answers, forcing on the writer a thesis deemed “good” or “correct,” and suggesting the writer construct the paper a particular way. Yet Woolbright is less critical and reflective of her own role as researcher:

The conference I am considering is one of eight conferences between the same tutor and student . . . My reason for doing this . . . was not only to learn more about what it is we do when we talk to students about their writing, but also to see if what tutors think *they* do when they tutor bears any resemblance to *my* interpretation. (69, emphasis added)

Without naming her participants (even with pseudonyms) or involving them in the research, Woolbright seems to privilege her own agenda for and understanding of the tutorials and to construct a “we/they” binary that prevents tutors from acting as agents in the research process.

Similarly, DiPardo’s case study of Fannie and her tutor Morgan illustrate the need for tutors to be, in DiPardo’s own estimation, more “inquisitive and self-critical” (116). It is easy, though, to find gaps between DiPardo’s values and her methodologies. DiPardo describes her sense of what happens in the tutorials and suggests that Morgan be encouraged to go beyond the confines of her thinking. But DiPardo does not include Morgan in the research, an inclusion that would make sense since she claims that Morgan should “be encouraged toward the yet-elusive understanding that . . . learning is never unilateral, inevitably entailing a *reciprocal* influence, *reciprocal* advances in understanding . . .” (115, emphasis added). Maybe the best way to allow tutors to be more critical and self-reflective is for tutors to become the researchers rather than the researched. Both Woolbright’s and DiPardo’s articles raise vital questions regarding ethics in research and suggest that tutors may have the most natural access to and the greatest insight into tutor/writer encounters.

Examples of Tutor Research

By Marcy Trianosky

Often the idea that tutors can be researchers seems daunting—especially, perhaps, for undergraduate peer tutors, simply because research-based methodologies seem too demanding (both for the director and the tutors) to undertake in such a setting. However, by keeping in mind the different kinds of research designs, it is possible to find an approach that is suitable for your particular institutional context.

Writing center work itself is highly contextual, both within the tutorial and in the ways a writing center is situated within an institution. So your choice of research design should suit your writing center and your tutors.

At Hollins University, a small liberal arts institution for women, two different approaches are used to allow opportunities for our undergraduate peer tutors to develop agency in writing center research: a research-based tutor training class, and dialogic journals that tutors create after each tutorial session. The ultimate goal of both these approaches is to deepen tutors’ ability to reflect deeply and thoughtfully on their tutoring practices.

A credit-bearing tutor training class provides an opportunity for in-depth research with scholarly demands that might be absent in less formal settings. At Hollins, tutors write two analytical papers for this class, both based on observations of tutoring sessions.¹ Tutors read Nancy Grimm's *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times* and choose a session they have observed to analyze in the context of Grimm's theories for their first paper. The assignment encourages tutors to question the post-modernist theoretical lens that Grimm offers, which tends to focus on the power relationship between the tutors and the student and how this dynamic may be reflected in tensions within the session. In the second paper, tutors tape-record one of the sessions they observe and analyze the language within one section of the tutorial, using the approach outlined by Laurel Johnson Black in *Between Talk and Teaching: Reconsidering the Writing Conference*. Although this book was written as a way of analyzing teacher-student conferences, its emphasis on a discourse analysis of the language of the tutorial provides an excellent way for tutors to attempt to analyze sessions objectively.

Both papers encourage tutors to engage in several important research activities: to learn to observe carefully, to understand theory as a way of analyzing tutorials, and to question whether these theories have a legitimate application to the sessions they are observing. My experience has been that tutors see themselves very differently after engaging actively in this kind of research; they are much more likely to question their tutoring techniques in a thoughtful way.

Once tutors complete their training and become full-time tutors, they engage in regular journaling after each tutorial. Reflective practice is in itself a type of ongoing research; incorporating dialogic journals in our writing center allows tutors to maintain an ongoing conversation with each other and with me (as the director) about their strategies in and response to tutorial sessions. Tutors read each other's journals daily, and use them to understand in general the problems and successes that arise in tutorials, and the particular relationships between tutors and students that develop due to recurring visits to the Center.

Because of the protected, confidential space in which the tutors create these dialogic journals, the journals are a frank, uncensored reflection on what is and isn't working for tutors in their sessions. Areas the tutors discuss include understanding student resistance within the tutorial, questioning directiveness as a tutorial strategy, and unraveling a students' confusion about the assignment. The insights that tutors gain through the journals, and the questions that tutors raise within the journals, form the basis for our weekly staff meetings, during which we discuss the ways in which tutors approach tutoring and why.

Figure 2. Examples of potential research projects.

Textual or theoretical:

Respond to a seminal article or chapter on writing center theory, or to a recent article in *WCJ*, *WLN*, *Praxis*, or other journal. Engage with tutors from different disciplines (social sciences, music and visual arts, science and math) and explore application of their theoretical perspectives to writing center work. Examine the implications of a particular theory on your specific student body. Consider the ethnic, sexual, and economic diversity on your campus.

Historical or archival:

Examine changes over time in your center's mission, philosophy, personnel, or budgets and purchases. Compare these changes to the archives of other centers, or to the archives of the field at large (WCenter, *WCJ*, and WCRP archives). Establish trends in usage data, identifying and analyzing changes over time. Record and examine the minutes of staff meeting and training sessions.

Empirical (qualitative and quantitative):

Investigate correlations between writing center use and factors such as graduation rates, GPA, or participation in athletics, Greek organizations, or student government. Seek cross-institutional support; collaborate with retention specialists or other staff and faculty to design research that has practical applications outside the writing center. Design an evaluation or survey to assess writing center effectiveness and attitudes about writing on campus. Communicate with other tutors by listservs, interviews, and public journals to compare and analyze tutoring experiences; look for similar trends or radical variations in experience; ask clients to join this project. Practice discourse analysis on complete sessions, or on specific points in the tutoring process (see Gillespie and Lerner for a brief, practical description of discourse analysis).

Ideas for Future Research

By Deaver Traywick

We hope that the ideas presented above will generate ideas and discussion about the purpose and design of tutor research in writing centers across the region. The chart below documents some of the specific projects suggested during the workshop, but it is in no way exhaustive. We assume that the examples provided will also serve as catalysts for further thought and experimentation in your writing center (see Figure 2).

Collaboration among writing center directors and tutors is necessary to establish a culture of research in any center; whether professionals, high school students, graduates, and undergraduates, tutors will always need the guidance of administrators and the access to resources those figures represent. However, tutors eventually deserve the opportunity and the challenge of initiating and designing projects. Directors must take care that tutors don't simply collect and process data, but also develop as agents of research, from posing questions to designing projects, analyzing results, and presenting findings.

By providing you with some of the ideas generated by SWCA workshop participants, we hope it will be easier for you to get started with your own research for our 2006 SWCA Conference in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. See you there!

Footnote

¹ I am grateful to the Writing Center at California State University at Chico for the ideas I have adapted here, and for their presentation (by tutors and directors) at the CCCC Conference in New York in 2003, which inspired me to re-design the Hollins tutor class to parallel theirs.



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