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Mobilizing the Center, Centering the Conversation

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Mobilizing the Center, Centering the Conversation¹

Beth Godbee

Although I have tutored for over six years, I continue to be amazed by the diversity of tutoring scenarios. Every day in the writing center, I work with writers whom I have never met. While one conference may flow smoothly, another will undoubtedly lead to misunderstanding or leave me drained from the effort required to make sense of texts. Writing center conferences, with the newness and inconsistency inherent in walk-in sessions, differ from the tutoring I do outside the writing center.² As a self-employed private tutor, I work with students in their homes or in other familiar settings. Perhaps most importantly, I meet with the same writers every week, so we develop continuity and friendships, which impact our tutorials.

A general sense that my home tutorials are more effective—or at least more comfortable and familiar—is what initially prompted me to investigate my tutoring practice and to explore the differences between tutoring in homes and writing centers. Through a comparative case study design, I have audiotaped a series of tutorials, conducted multiple interviews, and recorded ongoing observations of my tutoring practice. What I have found is that a combination of factors beyond environment influence tutoring effectiveness. Rather than focus solely on the location of the tutorial, we must identify the interpersonal dynamics of conferencing. Specifically, my research explores the link between effectiveness and the relationship and sense of community experienced in the tutorial. For this chapter, I share preliminary analysis of a session with Sméagol, which is the author's chosen pseudonym. After describing our tutoring relationship, I discuss the role of conversation and then consider what elements from tutoring in homes might be applied to writing center work to make it more effective. In this way, I discuss formalized writing center work in light of independent home tutoring.

Background

Sméagol is a Vietnamese-American woman who is three years older than I am. We attended the same women's college and met through a professor from our school. Sméagol and I have worked together for over two years, and during this time I have become more like a second reader and less like a tutor. We work at the kitchen table in my small basement apartment. The atmosphere is quiet and private with a sofa nearby, tea or coffee easily accessible, and lamps providing warm light. The space is homey and familiar; neither Sméagol nor I wears shoes; and we usually eat or drink during our sessions. Tutorials are informal, and we chat casually while reading and responding to Sméagol's texts.

Sméagol begins the session by explaining that she has written a "me piece," a response to her recent realization "that I've been a terrible person." Sméagol's composition addresses her informal placement of people into three categories, which she names "the shit list, up for review list, and ok list." She has come to the realization that although she has never categorized herself, she worries she might make "the shit list." Sméagol uses two anecdotes to explore this idea—the first being a rude interaction with an uncooperative store clerk and the second an instance of road rage when an SUV driver both cut in front of her and flipped her off. Throughout our session, we wander between serious discussion of her text and casual conversation of films, frustrations, and family life.

What becomes most apparent in the transcript of my session with Sméagol is the familiarity of our talk and interaction with one another. Notably, more than one-third of our session is conversation. Whether working on Sméagol's writing or talking off-topic, we have a quick pace and steady exchange of talk. While moving the session forward, we also take time to share stories and make connections to other parts of our lives. We relate to each other in a number of ways, including with laughter and confirmation sounds, such as *yeah*, *uh huh*, and *ok*. We also

have achieved a level of confidence with each other so that we can disagree. At one point, when I try clarifying how I understand Sméagol's topic, she immediately corrects me, saying "no," and explaining her intentions. Likewise, I freely admit to not knowing answers.

Because Sméagol and I learn about each other through conversation, we are better able to disagree, to openly discuss texts, and to enjoy our work together.

Human Connections and Relationships

When Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner consider what "the totally textbook session" might look like, they describe it as a dialogue, explaining, "It would look like two peers having a conversation about writing, where each is equally likely to ask a question, move the conversation forward or point out his or her confusion as a reader" (37). Gillespie and Lerner indicate that tutors and writers work alongside each other, talking out ideas, sharing opinions, agreeing, disagreeing, and generally interacting as friends. To build relationships that allow for friendship, tutors must extend themselves and seek human connection. Again, Gillespie and Lerner clarify: "what we have learned is that tutoring allows us to connect, whether it's with writers' ideas, with writers' struggles to make meaning, or simply with writers as fellow human beings sitting beside us in the writing center" (9). The tutoring experience, then, influences the tutor as well as the writer. In the best scenarios, everyone learns about respect, patience, and attentiveness; together, writers and tutors become capable and confident communicators who value working with others.

While also identifying long-term relationships as essential to effective tutoring, Irene Clark and Nancy Grimm differ in their rationales. For Clark, relationships help put students at ease so they can assume responsibility and answer tutors' questions. For Grimm, tutors and writers are able to unpack their assumptions, question different worldviews, and acknowledge multiple literacies through working together: "The intellect develops by *participating* in human

relationships, not by sitting on the sidelines and listening to the rules being explained” (89). Building on both Clark’s and Grimm’s ideas of human connection, I argue that when actively engaged through reciprocal relationships, tutors and writers are better able to develop literate identities. Ongoing relationships lead to both personal and professional (e.g., academic) benefits. To sustain long-lasting friendships, tutors and writers need reasons to keep participating, reasons that come from shared dialogue and open conversation—an exchange based in mutual, informal discussion.

Effective tutorials, then, are marked by conversation that helps tutors and writers generate vocabulary and fluency, brainstorm topics for papers, and learn more about each other. As Stephen North articulates in his 1984 “The Idea of a Writing Center,” we use talk to “produce better writers, not better writing” (438). As tutors, “we are here to talk to writers” (440). With these mantras now firmly engrained in writing center practice, it makes sense that we focus on the nature of conversation as it occurs in varied tutorials. Clark explains that writers are motivated when they see the tutor as an interested audience who is sincerely concerned about what they have to say. Through conversation, tutors and writers can forge intellectual partnerships that establish common knowledge and recognize multiple perspectives. This process occurs when tutorials allow for different types of talk.

Types of Talk

Laurel Johnson Black identifies three types of talk characteristic of writing conferences. The first, called *discursive*, focuses on textual concerns and includes any dialogue about writing, invention, revising, discourse, or language. The second, *affective*, indicates talk about emotions or feelings. The third category is *other talk*, which may range from discussions of films or coursework to sharing more personal information; other talk encompasses off-topic conversations

not directly connected to emotions. In the audiotaped session, Sméagol and I engaged in approximately 50% discursive, 35% affective, and 15% other talk. Through application of Black's schema, I see that tutorials include these varied types of talk and support a blend of conversation for establishing relationships.

Discursive Talk.

Drawing on Kenneth Bruffee's work, Ben Rafoth argues that what we do in writing centers—talk about texts—is essential to thinking. He supports discursive talk for developing ideas, strengthening connections among them, and finally putting them onto paper. Although many examples of discursive talk indicate a breakdown in relationships and a problematic positioning of the tutor as teacher, some examples do challenge this reading and even suggest that discursive talk can contribute positively to ongoing relationships. In the following conversation with Sméagol, I offer suggestions for word choice without dominating the discussion or becoming the authoritative teacher. Sméagol asks questions, I admit to not knowing answers, and together we find humor in analyzing language:³

Sméagol (continues reading her text, a “me piece,” as she calls it): “I burned all my tires to prevent my car from T-boning this guy, and his reaction to not being killed was his middle finger to my face. I saw myself walk over to his car and grabbed and twist his collar to cut-off the blood circulation. I then pull him through the window with my one bare hand the way Wonder Woman did to her”. . . (extended pause) . . . The question is, uh . . . *Antagonists* or *villains*? Which is better?

Beth: (pause) I don't know. Uh. . .

Sméagol: So. . .

Beth: Well, I mean, if you use the pronoun *her*, it makes sense to use *antagonists* because *antagonists* is a word in relation to *her*.

Sméagol: Yes. And then I thought that *villains* just sounds worse than *antagonists*.

Beth: That's true. It does seem to have more of an evil . . .

Sméagol: Yeah! | (laughing)

Beth: | (laughing) Despise (draws out the word to emphasize the evilness “d-e-s-p-i-s-e”).

Sméagol: Right. And they deserve it. Villains! *Villains* it is.

In this tutorial, Sméagol and I work together to determine which word fits her explanation. Just as it is acceptable for me to admit to not knowing, we expect that Sméagol will make the final decision concerning her text. The dialogue moves easily back and forth between us, as we laugh, sympathize, and learn from one another. Because of our long-term relationship, Sméagol and I trust one another to contribute to the session and to respond sensitively. It is this type of ongoing relationship that allows for and is simultaneously strengthened by affective talk.

Affective Talk.

Comfort, familiarity, and open talk are important to establishing relationships among writers and tutors. As Black explains, we make connections and develop trust when we acknowledge and share the feelings that are naturally present even when we choose not to recognize them:

We come into conferences feeling something about this student, something about their texts at hand, just as our students come into conferences full of feelings. And when we ignore this dimension—as I believe we so often do—we miss what prompted our students to write or what kept them from writing what they wanted; we miss developing the trust that comes from sharing feelings as well as facts and writing strategies; and we are frustrated by what has remained unsaid, unexplored, or unresolved. (122)

Talking about feelings (or at least moving beyond the text at hand) allows for more human connections to develop among writers and tutors. Whether or not we plan for emotional responses, we feel welcomed, humiliated, valued, or even threatened throughout the day. Beyond responding to textual issues, tutors can provide a space to talk about feelings, a space that builds

relationships and can lead to the type of textual conversation Sméagol and I had regarding her use of *villains*. Building more affective talk into tutorials might change the nature of discursive talk, moving the tutor away from assertive explanations to nondirective or sincere questioning. In the same audiotaped tutorial, Sméagol and I openly discuss feelings of rage toward strangers and family members. We feel comfortable enough with each other (even while recording) to relate experiences we are now ashamed of. This conversation, like the one concerning word choice, grows out of Sméagol's writing and shows the potential depth of affective talk in writing tutorials:

Sméagol (continues reading): "I would have not have been angry at the cat, yet I was angry at the inconsiderate cat in the SUV. I was behaving like the abusive mother who would scream and yell at the children only I did it with the horn of my car." (pause) . . .

Beth: I think your narrative is so wonderful how you draw the parallels between things you're upset about and things you've done that you realize are similar to those things that you'd be upset about.

Sméagol: I really am so ashamed of what I told the store clerk that I haven't told anybody.

Beth: How long has it been since it happened?

Sméagol: It's been like three years.

Beth: Uh huh.

Sméagol: But at that time I was just so angry at this woman. And she was screaming and yelling at me, and I was like, why did I do that?

Beth: | Yeah.

Sméagol: | And I think I was so in shock that the store clerk was behaving this way.

Beth: Right.

Sméagol: And I guess in shock you don't think rationally.

Beth: | Yeah.

Sméagol: | Except, shock. And then on top of shock, I was like, upset.

Beth: Yeah, yeah. Right.

Sméagol: But I wish at the time I was like, you know what, and then just calmly talk her through it. Like, what do I need to do for you to help me, or, you know, whatever kind of thing. And then I realize that I would never insult a dog in heat.

Beth: Yeah.

Sméagol: (laughing)

Beth: | (laughing) Yeah.

Sméagol: I just realized, and I was, like, why did I do that? Because . . .

Beth: Well, it's anger. I can remember, especially in high school, running out of the house yelling, "I hate you!" to my dad, and I remember later feeling sooo bad about it . . .

Sméagol: | (laughing)

Beth: | Thinking I don't actually hate him, but I would get so mad. And I think it's just the same kind of thing.

Sméagol: I guess, for me, the relationship with parents or the things you say to your siblings may be bad, but I have this thing that I'm trying to be as polite to strangers as I am with family members. You know?

Beth: Yeah.

Sméagol: You know? And I guess in my culture they only teach be nice to your family. Family, family, family. And then everyone else can go to hell. That's the attitude that they have. And then, and then, and then I thought about it. In the American society, it's different. You are taught to be polite to everyone.

Beth: | Right.

Sméagol: | You know, you are taught to be considerate.

Beth: -- Or maybe even more considerate to people who aren't your family.

Sméagol: Yeah. Aw, the Chinese and Vietnamese, if you are not family, oh, they don't care about you. It's like totally opposite. With the family members, they would give anything.

This type of affective conversation leads to social talk about cultural differences and family

structures. Sméagol and I share our experiences growing up and facing societal norms.

Comparing instances of anger and embarrassment, we are able to identify with each other's experiences and build community through empathy and understanding. Perhaps most importantly, this affective talk is based in friendship, which influences all parts of work together and stretches the tutorial beyond its meeting time. A key component of building the friendship that allows for affective talk is reciprocity, or a mutual exchange of ideas and feelings.

Other Talk.

Sandra Eckard maintains that stories bring writers and tutors together and help them break down barriers. Explaining that stories build relationships, Eckard suggests that storytelling is instinctively multi-directional: "listening is as important as telling" ("Telling" 41). Other talk, which I also refer to as off-topic or social dialogue, integrates storytelling with tutoring. Allowing for digressions provides tutors and writers the chance to tell varied types of stories, including those Eckard identifies: fables with "Once upon a time" beginnings and common tales that may be autobiographical, memoir, or fictive. These types of stories lead to unique conversations, including ones focused on academics; home life; and retellings of favorite books, video games, or television shows.

When incorporated in tutorials (intentionally or not), other talk may form the basis of conversation or may simply supplement discursive or affective talk. Many times off-topic conversations stem from talk about writing or academic subjects. Building on the content of Sméagol's response, we discuss the importance of instincts in making daily decisions and then share stories relating how we avoid dangerous situations. Our conversation leads Sméagol to state that she values this off-topic conversation because it allows her to work through ideas she has been pondering. I agree that other talk informs our thinking beyond the text at hand:

Beth: Yeah, a lot of time schoolwork can be the same way. I might have an instinct about a course or an assignment or how it's going. Relationships with friends and

professors and people we work with are so much about instinct.

Sméagol: You know, I really, truly enjoy our one-hour session because I know we go off the subject sometimes, but it does help me. Believe it or not, it does help me think about things, things I've been thinking about, wondering about, but then I talk to you, and I get to get feedback.

Beth: Yes, and the same is true for me.

Sméagol: Because I don't get to do that. I don't get to do that with anyone.

Beth: -- Yeah, just talk about ideas.

Sméagol: -- Yeah, because I am working all the time, and I don't get to, just . . . It's just the simple things. Like I realize I'm a piece of shit sometimes, but then I don't, you know. And I guess I need to talk through it to think about it.

Beth: -- Yeah, I'm the same. Yeah. I feel like I benefit just as much because talking to you makes me think about these issues as well.

This type of talk only slightly connects to Sméagol's text, but it goes beyond concerns of language or writing to a deeper investment in each other's wellbeing. Sméagol gives me unsolicited feedback about her experience in the tutorial, and this feedback supports taking time to wander off-topic. Furthermore, this dialogue indicates that work without conversation is just that—work. Effective tutoring should build on enjoyment and fun, which are often linked with chitchatting and light-hearted play.

Certainly what I see as talk that strengthens relationships may be reinterpreted as time away from the “real work” of tutoring writing. This interpretation became most apparent to me when a friend recently suggested the word *off-task* as a synonym for *off-topic*. I am reminded of teachers who post rules that students must remain on task at all times. Nancy Welch explores this issue in her article “The Return of the Suppressed,” where she describes how a tutor complains that he had to resort to “bullshitting” with a student writer (217). Describing off-topic talk as bullshitting indicates that conversation was not part of the tutor's agenda. Welch explains that talk was seen as desperation, a last resort, and not central to the tutorial. How many tutors view

talk as something separate from tutoring? Even as I argue for the value of affective and off-topic talk, I am aware that many tutors downplay its significance. What might account for these different attitudes toward conversation, and how might we form a more cohesive view toward the role of talk in conferencing? We might begin with a reconsideration of friendship and its role in tutoring.

Friendship

I have found that students (myself included) do their best writing for teachers whom they care about. Lad Tobin supports this belief that students succeed when teachers establish meaningful relationships with them. In fact, Tobin identifies friendship and support as key components of his writing experience. He credits his friends and colleagues for their role in his own writing process, saying, “People write most successfully when they enjoy supportive and stimulating relationships” (vii). With this grounding, I insist that we must focus on relationships to better teach writing. Without a productive context, writers often do not have the motivation for experimenting or otherwise taking risks with their writing.

Tobin defines a productive context as one that fosters the reading and writing processes through a blend of interactive, dynamic, dialectical, and fluid interactions. Grimm adds that effective individualized instruction must be cooperative, involve relational learning, and lead to mutual outcomes. Effective relationships, then, combine listening and speaking so that all participants are invested in the larger composition process. Or, as Julie Bokser maintains, tutors must implement a “rhetoric of listening” so that talk is two-sided. Friendship is, I believe, this multi-directional, multi-faceted partnership. Tutors and writers participate in a reciprocal association that requires good rapport and care for one another. Rather than calling this relationship professional, educational, or peer, we should recognize the necessity of *liking* and

consider how tutors and writers can better work together as friends.

Friendship Versus Peerness.

Although many writing center professionals still characterize writer and tutor interactions as “peer tutoring,” increasingly we recognize the limitations of this definition. Writing center scholars, including Kenneth Bruffee, Alice Gillam, Diane Morrow, Linda Shamoon and Deborah Burns, and John Trimbur, have identified varied problems with peerness. Gillam, for instance, suggests that intimacy or rapport may be more a result of “chance factors” such as shared gender, ethnicity, class background, or investment in academic success than in “status equality” (50). Like Gillam, I argue that connections among writers and tutors result more from likeness and even friendship than from peerness. When writers and tutors work together as friends, they operate on a give-and-take basis and work toward reciprocal outcomes. As two women close in age, alike in education, and similar in our work situations, Sméagol and I hold fairly equal footing that allows for easier communication. When composing aloud a new section of her text, for example, Sméagol and I laugh over her invention of a Chihuahua love story:

Sméagol (composing aloud): The owner did not know that the dog had probably gone to socialize with the neighborhood four-legged friends or visit his Chihuahua girlfriend.

Beth: (laughing)

Sméagol: I love it! (laughing at the use of *Chihuahua*) I have to put that in. How do you spell it?

Beth: I have no idea.

Sméagol: Ok. Uhm, c-h-o-w . . .

Beth: Is it spelled with a z-h? I though it was a t-c-h or something?

Sméagol: Uh, I will find out on dogs.com. (some quick mumbling; then rereading her next text.) “The dog probably went to socialize with his neighborhood four-legged friends or visit his Chihuahua girlfriend.” (laughing)

Beth: | (laughing)

After laughing over the romantic involvement of dogs, Sméagol announces that *Chihuahua* is her word for the day. By including me in this announcement, Sméagol indicates that we are more than peers: we are friends. I become privy to her language use based on humor and fun. This other talk is distinctly linked with the discursive, as we concern ourselves with spelling, research practices, and word choice in writing. However, our conversation extends into playful (and silly) talk about dogs that builds on our ongoing relationship.

Familiarity.

Friendships are based in familiarity, an awareness and comfort with the situation and person. Establishing familiarity takes time and requires writers and tutors to blend the personal and professional through conversations and storytelling, through integrating affective and off-topic conversations with discursive talk. Feeling familiar and comfortable may lead to chattiness and laughter, while also allowing for flexibility and sincere connections. In the following conversation, Sméagol begins our tutorial by explaining the “me piece” she has written for the day’s session. She shares her realization that she would be on the “shit list,” a mental schema for categorizing people she meets:

Sméagol: This is just, a, uh, I guess, an editorial.

Beth: -- Uh, huh.

Sméagol: That I just wrote to practice writing for today.

Beth: | About SUVs? (curious tone, catching a word from her text)

Sméagol: | No. I, just about, I had a realization yesterday, no, last night, well, yesterday, that I’ve been a terrible person.

Beth: What do you mean?

Sméagol: I have been behaving like the people I put on the shit, the shit people list. I’m serious.

Beth: Uh, huh.

Sméagol: Oh, my god. I've just realized it, and so it's like, but then I'm like, wait a minute. Every time I misbehave towards people I justify it that they deserve it, as they pissed me off or something, but then I thought about it, and no, it's not them. It's me. I'm the one with the problem. You know?

Beth: | I don't know about that.

Sméagol: | And so I go on this whole thing to complain.

Beth: So, it's kind of the point of view of . . .

Sméagol: | Yes.

Beth: | Of how people are interacting with each other, I guess.

Sméagol: | No, to, to, to explain like how I've come to realize that I'm one of those people I put on my shit list.

Beth: Oh!

The familiarity of our long-term relationship allows Sméagol to share this introspective editorial, a piece not assigned by a teacher or employer. Sméagol relates a story that happened three years ago that she has been “so ashamed of” that she “hasn't told anyone.” Certainly a level of trust must exist for Sméagol to share this experience, one she uses to write a reflective (and perhaps therapeutic) “me piece.” In this way, the writing tutorial is like the writing itself: both allow for deep reflection and critical analysis of life events. To make the conference a satisfying experience, it makes sense to diverge from the text and to connect with writers as people. Conversation, which strengthens relationships, actually improves tutoring, as it leads to familiarity, which becomes friendship. Talking out ideas leads to clearer thinking, just as talking about writing leads to better understanding of the composition process. This type of productive relationship requires trust, rapport, and continued nurturing.

Recommendations

How does my work with Sméagol apply to tutoring in the writing center? First, we should consider factors that make home tutorials different from those that regularly occur in academic environments. Notably, when I work in homes, I am paid an hourly rate by the writers or their parents. Sméagol, for instance, initiated our conferences and continues to take full responsibility for scheduling and preparing for sessions. Because she is paying, she freely gives me feedback about what she finds more or less helpful so that I can adjust my tutoring accordingly. In turn, I find that I am open not only about our tutorials but also with my own writing and life stories. While I do not suggest that we charge student writers for visiting the writing center, we can build the end result—responsibility and care about tutoring—into the tutorial structure. When writers form relationships with tutors, for instance, they are more likely motivated to work toward the next session to *not* disappoint the tutor, their reader.⁴

In order for writers and tutors to establish regular relationships, writing center administrators should hire tutors for extended periods of time. If tutors are interested, they can work for the duration of their academic career in a particular institution or program. Otherwise, they can work for several semesters so that they have the opportunity to meet with the same students over time. Writing centers can also establish programs that pair writers and tutors and support a structure for weekly or biweekly meetings. Once writers find a tutor whom they enjoy working with, they can schedule regular appointments. Not only will this lead to more continuity in tutoring, but it will also allow writers and tutors to develop the type of relationship that leads to friendship and reciprocity. Within these regular tutorials, writers and tutors may negotiate expectations, language, and roles, thereby building community that allows for recognition of progress over time.

Furthermore, to build Anne Ellen Geller's notion of epochal time (time measured by

events and rhythms rather than clocks) into conferencing, writing centers might allow students to schedule longer tutorials with the understanding that they may end early, whenever it feels natural to the writer and tutor. As we encourage open discussion of timing, we also allow for affective and other types of talk that extend beyond the text at hand. For writers and tutors to freely interact with one another, we need time to talk and to build friendships. Longer appointments of at least fifty to ninety minutes allow the time needed for writers and tutors to become engaged in conversation.

Another way that home tutorials differ from those held in writing centers is location. Because I meet in homes, the writers and I have privacy in our conferencing and a high level of comfort that comes with a home environment. We may easily take bathroom breaks or interrupt the conference as needed without any concern for other writers waiting, which is not the case at busy times in the writing center. Writing centers also need to become comfortable places where writers initiate tutorials. Although institutional in their nature, writing centers can take steps to become more home-like. Offering coffee and tea, using lamps for warm lighting, and providing relaxed seating all work to create a more comfortable environment. Still, comfort is not the only concern, and we must account for writers who desire privacy or space away from noise and other distractions.

While the trend toward open writing center spaces does allow for continued tutor training and even mimics the environment of public coffeehouses, it also limits privacy. Ideally, writing centers could occupy several locations on campus, some of which are large, open areas and others that might be offices or more like rooms in a house. Offices allow for privacy without emitting the negative, institutional feel associated with cubicles or carrels. Perhaps holding tutorials outdoors or in a corner of a cafeteria would accomplish the same goal of achieving privacy without requiring a room dedicated to tutoring. Some universities have, in fact, opened writing

centers in residence halls, while others conduct tutoring in dining halls or cafés. For an urban university like Georgia State, tutoring in the library, quadrangle, or even nearby restaurants might all be options. If the writing studio could establish satellite centers, then it might also be able to reach writers across campus and allow students choice about when and where they are tutored.

In addition to changes in policies of hiring and scheduling and to the center's physical location, writing center practitioners should think more about the day-to-day interactions that occur within tutorials. Jennifer Staben and Kathryn Dempsey Nordhaus suggest two mantras that help tutors think more carefully about interactions with writers. The first, "talk before text," reminds tutors to put the person first, to base tutorials in conversation that is not necessarily linked to textual concerns apart from the writer or the writing process. This aphorism validates the importance of affective and other kinds of talk. The second, "be direct, not directive," helps to clarify effective versus ineffective tutoring. Staben and Nordhaus explain the difference as a matter of positioning: while there is no need to hold back information or insights, tutors should provide writers with options rather than instructing what they must do. While directive instruction takes power away from the writer, being direct does not. Instead, it allows the tutor to be honest and share her understandings or ideas in an explicit, open way.

Staben and Nordhaus further identify the following strategies that show respect and sensitivity toward the writer. These suggestions are based in common friendship; therefore, being friends with the writers will naturally lead to these practices:

Share your own ideas.

Point out places where an essay suggests connections to your own life or experiences.

Point out ideas that make you think—or make you think differently.

Highlight places that are unclear to you; ask the writer to expand her ideas by

providing examples or anecdotes that help clarify her thoughts to you.

Play devil's advocate—help the writer see other sides to his ideas.

Identify places where the writer could strengthen her argument by acknowledging other opinions, or where she could diffuse counterarguments by addressing them directly. (79)

While idealistic in nature, these suggestions draw on ideas of relationship and community that are essential to effective tutoring. Once writers and tutors form partnerships, they integrate conversation and off-topic talk with discursive talk, all for the purpose of deeper, more meaningful interactions. To this list, I would add the following points, intended to complicate our understandings of relationships and community: (1) engage in some light-hearted “bullshitting.” (2) Admit to not knowing, being uncomfortable, and having flaws. (3) Discuss the underlying emotions of the situation. (4) Apologize when it falls apart. All mantras are problematic in their simplicity, but they do communicate our underlying beliefs and goals about the world. When we see ourselves as writers and tutors, then we can better understand what it means to do tutoring. At the core of this work should be a desire for human connection. These practices enrich the theory that grounds one-on-one tutoring both in homes and on college campuses, thereby mobilizing the center to center the conversation, conversation that builds relationships and is at the heart of what we do.

Notes

1. My deep gratitude to the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) for providing professional and financial support by recognizing my thesis, from which this chapter is adapted, with a Graduate Research Grant.
2. The Writing Studio at Georgia State University is moving toward an appointment-based system where writers schedule ongoing conferences with the same tutor. At the point of conducting this research, however, we still experience more walk-ins than scheduled appointments. When tutors come to work in the writing center, they cannot predict their day's schedule ahead of time, just as they cannot foresee the number of walk-in students who will be waiting for a tutorial.
3. Standard transcription notations are applied in the excerpts as follows: (1) . . . for pauses; (2) -- for interruptions; (3) | for overlapping speech; (4) () for commentary by transcriptionist; (5) “ ” for reading aloud; and (6) *italics* for reference to a word as a word (e.g., “There is a difference between *that* and *which*.”).
4. The nature of paying for in-home tutoring raises significant questions for future research. For instance, how do the economics of tutoring affect motivation? Assuming that writers who pay for tutoring are more motivated to prepare ahead of time, what motivators other than money would produce the same effect? How can the public sector that offers free tutoring encourage writers (consumers) to prepare for conferences (i.e. to do homework)?

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