A "Shared Repertoire" of Choices: Using Phenomenology to Study Writing Tutor Identity

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Abstract

Tutoring services often restrict their data collection and analysis practices to publicizing session counts and tutee GPAs. This study suggests that programs that offer writing consultation may enhance their sessions' epistemic power by researching their tutoring staff's instructional choices. After explaining why and describing how a phenomenological methodology was used to map one program's tutors' choices in sessions, this article closes by sharing the implications of this research for the program of interest and other sites.

In 2003, Nancy Grimm argued that when writing centers restrict their research activities to such practices as tracking and publicizing session counts and tutee GPAs, these programs tend to reinforce their status as "narrowly defined service units" (Pemberton & Murphy, p. 46). To "serve students better," she added, centers might expand their research activities to include study of "the conceptions, attitudes, and belief systems of the individuals involved in literacy activity" in their own programs (Pemberton & Murphy, p. 46). In other words, Grimm was calling on writing centers' staffs to document and make sense of what they knew and who they were—of the identities they (re)constructed—in their consultations.

Grimm's argument made finding research methods for doing such self-studies a priority, and some writing center scholars have since attempted to answer her call. Recently, White-Farnham, Dyehouse, and Finer have suggested writing centers' staffs may empirically "map" their "context-shifting practice"—their tutorial interac-

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tions—to better understand who they are and what they do (2012, p. 6). The authors add, however, that the understanding this mapping aims to yield is an elusive "ideal" (White-Farnham et al., p. 6). This elusiveness should not trouble center professionals; rather, it should encourage them to keep looking for methods for doing such program-based, interaction-level research well.

To that end, I began designing a phenomenological study for my center. I was guided by this question: what is the experience of making choices in sessions as a tutor in one writing center? By choices, I mean decisions such as setting an agenda through gaining a sense of a writer's rhetorical situation, acting in accordance with a strongly held belief regardless of a writer's intent, and so on. I had two guiding assumptions I continue to hold today. First, I agreed with Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, and Boquet that a tutor constructs an identity as a member of a community organized around a "shared repertoire" of practices (2006, p. 82-83). Second, I believed these practices could be particularly epistemic or knowledge-producing when taken up in "the interaction of individuals within [particular] discourse communities" (Berlin, 1987, p. 16-17). My center was such a community. In this light, creating a shared repertoire of our choices seemed a reasonable way for us to better serve students.

In this article, I first turn to writing center scholarship to explain that researchers today agree that tutorial interactions are knowledge- and identity-producing events but not on ideally how. Second, I explain how my study, using a phenomenological design, addresses this disagreement; in doing so, I describe a replicable method of data collection and analysis other writing centers could use to create maps of their own choices. Third, I present my results, a map of my own center's choices, including a close examination of three of its staff's choices. Fourth, I share the implications of this research for my own center and other sites.

How Writing Tutor Identity is Constructed in Choices That Can Be More or Less Epistemic: A Review of Research

Tutorial exchanges have always created tutor identities, but today these identities have the potential to be more epistemic than ever. In the 1980s, a single tutor identity was identified in popular

handbooks: the process era, non-directive consultant. Specifically, this tutor's aim was to be a writer-centered, "nonjudgmental, non-evaluative helper" who refused to write on tutees' work and asked open-ended questions (Harris, 1992, p. 376-377; Meyer and Smith, 1987). Since the late 1980s, this orthodox image has been challenged as a desirable standard. At that time, sociocultural approaches to teaching and tutoring writing began to emerge. From a sociocultural perspective, each act of writing or its instruction is a situated, social "event" (Phelps, 1988, p. 13). That is to say, when individuals write or instruct others in the craft of writing, they are manipulating social signs in a context. Sociocultural writers or tutors are not aimless. Rather, their literate acts are works of "practical reason," of "dialogic, context-bound negotiation based on values as they are applied to concrete situations" (Phelps, 1988, p. 23-24). As Carino puts it, sociocultural tutors are pragmatists who "learn to shift between directive and nondirective methods" to make sessions as epistemic as possible (Pemberton & Murphy, 2003, p. 110). Because they are encouraged to act based on situated assessments rather than orthodox principles, sociocultural tutors' knowledge-making potential is great.

But what choices should the sociocultural tutor make to be as epistemic as possible? Researchers today are divided on this matter. On the one hand, scholars such as Geller et al. (2006), Denny (2010), and Welch (1999; 2002) argue that the most epistemic tutoring privileges what Pemberton calls "critique" (2006, p. 265). In this approach, writers and tutors place primary emphasis on trying to transform ideas, views of what genres and modalities count as college-level writing, and more. For example, in the first of two related articles, Welch argues a tutor's identity should be constructed through her/his "inability to conform" to social laws s/he engages with as "transitional objects" (1999, p. 55). In the second study, she describes how "all the [consulting] stories being told" in an undergraduate practicum class became transitional objects. In the class, students used loop-writing responses and discussions of these stories to imaginatively "converse" with rather than "correct" these past events (2002, p. 213). As a result, the students engaged in practical reasoning, inventing multiple possible responses and identities (2002, p. 213).

On the other hand, scholars such as Pemberton and Murphy argue tutoring for "conformity" or assimilation is a more valuable goal (Pemberton, 2006, p. 261). To tutor for conformity means to approach consultations as goal-oriented enterprises wherein writers may acquire important social capital (Pemberton, p. 261). In this vein, Murphy agrees tutors may help writers "interrogate the everyday routines and habitual ways of operating in academic environments" (2006, p. 277). Still, she advises consultants to encourage writers' "identification" with the "social capital" of the academy and community—a body of publicly-valued knowledge that writing center workers are authorities on (Murphy, p. 277). It is not clear, then, just how sociocultural tutors should seek to be flexible.

For my purposes, this division among researchers reveals two things. First, tutor identities are likely to be particularly varied and reflective of their particular centers' tutoring cultures. Second, this division reveals that flexible tutoring has many supporters today who are nevertheless divided on how it should be practiced to serve students best. In this light, methods for empirically mapping tutors' choices appear to have considerable value and currency. Therefore, I ask this question: What is the experience of making choices in sessions as a tutor in one writing center?

A Suitable Methodology: Why Use Phenomenology in This Study?

Because I wanted to reveal my center's shared repertoire of choices, I needed a research methodology and data collection and analysis methods that valued these events as epistemic, knowledge- and self-making acts. A phenomenological approach met this demand.

First, this methodology was suitable because the purpose of a phenomenological study is to understand the meaning of lived experience. As Van Manen writes, "[t]he aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence—in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful" (1997, p. 36). This methodology appeared likely to work here because I wanted to develop a reflective tool for making sessions more epistemic.

With its mission of providing "face-to-face and online collaborative consultations…[to] help students develop productive writing habits and revision strategies," this service at a Midwestern public research university saw writing and its instruction as sociocultural acts where writers "generate[d] ideas" while learning tutor-selected "identifiable writing skills" (Hillocks, 1986, p. 123). Tutors were encouraged to be flexible guides here.

This sociocultural emphasis could also be seen in the center's training activities and self-authored tutor biographies. Novices and veterans read literature that framed writing and tutoring as social activities for their practica and staff meetings (Bruffee, 1984; Welch, 1995). Reinforcing the view of writing and tutoring as social events were staff meetings addressing the needs of specific populations and one on universal design. Finally, tutors' biographies emphasized their own experiences of writing as a difficult, knowledge-making struggle to contribute to the "'conversation of mankind"' (Bruffee, 1984, p. 647). For example, one tutor writes that he "understands how enormous the roadblocks to a finished paper can seem, having learned the hard way to write on in the face of persistent, daily urges to throw his computer in the garbage and skip town forever." For these tutors, though, the struggle to compose also meant having a chance to add to subject matters they valued. As another tutor says in his biography, "his reading and writing involves some combination of politics, armchair economics, indie rock, Parliament Funkadelic, and baseball," yet "he welcomes the opportunity to get his hands dirty in just about any subject."

The sociocultural approach to tutoring valued in this service made it a likely place to see both tutoring for assimilation and critique. Furthermore, it positioned its staff to use a shared repertoire of choices as it was intended: as a tool for reflexively reliving decisions made in past sessions in order to improve future ones.

Second, to study the practical reasoning of tutors in choices, I needed to know tutors' perceptions of what they chose to do in particular sessions. In a phenomenological study, participants share their stories of the phenomenon of interest either in "long interviews" with researchers (Moustakas, 1994) or in writing "Lived Experience Descriptions" or LEDs (Van Manen, 1997). LEDs are written, narra-

tive accounts where a person aims to describe, not interpret, an experience he has had. LEDs seemed well-suited to my study, given that these tutors were skilled writers who needed to record their sessions within a busy center. After I modeled what an LED for this study should look like (see Figure 1), twelve tutors chose to participate in my study. These tutors included undergraduate tutors in their second term of service, graduate students who had more than five years of consulting experience, and one non-native speaker specialist.

Finally, I needed a methodology that could help me uncover the meaning of the tutors' experience of making choices. To do this, I used the approach to phenomenological data analysis I describe now. First, I read each account in order to select "phrases or sentences that directly pertain to the experience" of making a choice (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 53). To illustrate, here is an excerpt from one undergraduate male tutor's LED. He is describing a session with an undergraduate female who was "having problems with her thesis" in a literary analysis essay relating "themes of food and drink in Jane Eyre…to other themes in the novel." At one point, the tutor, Jeremy (a pseudonym, as with all names in this article),

> asked how it [the food paragraph] related to her overall argument and she started talking about how rich people had a lot of food and poor people didn't in the novel. I told her that this was a good start on an arguable thesis about class. She then started talking about themes and pointed out a paragraph that was about food and punishment as a theme. The themes also appeared in her thesis. We looked back at the assignment, and it became clear to me that stating how the theme of food related to the other themes in the text was a huge part of the assignment. I told her that was what I thought, so that it was definitely good that she was sticking to themes.

In working as an alternatively directive and non-directive flexible guide here, Jeremy seemed to be making a number of choices in this moment in his LED. Second, to identify these choices, I drew forward slashes (/) between the choices, drawing a line through other material, so that the previous except looked like this:

> I asked how it [the food paragraph] related to her overall argument / ~~and she started talking about how rich people had a~~

~~lot of food and poor people didn't in the novel.~~ I told her that this was a good start on an arguable thesis about class. / ~~She then started talking about themes and pointed out a paragraph that was about food and punishment as a theme. The themes also appeared in her thesis.~~ We looked back at the assignment, / ~~and it became clear to me that stating how the theme of food related to the other themes in the text was a huge part of the assignment.~~ I told her that was what I thought, so that it was definitely good that she was sticking to themes.

As the reader can see, only Jeremy's, and the student and Jeremy's joint, choices remain. Third, I created a list of choices for each tutor. Fourth, I engaged in member checking by giving each participant his or her account along with a list of choices I had identified in that account. This step allowed me to amend the choices on the lists for each individual so it reflected the participant's experience. Fifth, I combined individual tutors' choice lists into a single one. Finally, I clustered related choices under more general types, the synthesis represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Choices Made by Tutors in LEDs

Choices based on a tutor's…

1. Sense of the plan (such as moving on to one section of a conference settled upon at the start to another, indicated by statements such as "then we moved onto" and "there were a few more questions about")
2. Identification with the writer (choosing to "get picky" when working with a writer perceived to be particularly skilled)
3. Support for the writer as a writer (using false confusion to inspire a writer to explain her purpose)
4. Reflexivity (asking herself, "why did I spend so much time on that point?" as a judgment on her own performance in a session)
5. Limits (experiencing confusion and both feeling the need to turn and turning to the writer for clarification or explanation)
6. Desires (directing a session so it might end with the tutor

"feeling good")
7. Strategy use (ambivalently connecting praise with criticism in the interest of taking a writer further)
8. Theories of how one writes in general (recommending that a student work on her/his own with teacher comments and then come back for another appointment)
9. Theories of what a session is supposed to look like (focusing on affective matters in the interest of resolving a problem fully or enough in order to "get something done" on the writing project of concern)
10. Identity-as-tutor (silently reflecting on the tutor's own sense of the quality of a student's teacher's work ("that's a good assignment," "that's bad feedback," etc.))
11. Reflection on conference quality (silently critiquing her/his usual methods)

Synthesis: Tutor Identity Construction in a Shared Repertoire of Choices

Sharing a common training and ownership in the center's work, this center's tutors revealed their shared repertoire in their LEDs. In their choices, these consultants revealed they were tactful practitioners who shared a common, pragmatic, "get something done" identity. In pedagogical terms, they were nondirective process and flexible sociocultural tutors. When they were flexible, they focused more on assimilation than critique. In other words, this staff had a shared repertoire here wherein multiple tutor identities were under construction. Looking at a few choices closely reveals this repertoire.

Theme #1: Tutor's Effort to Take Part in Agenda Setting Through Gaining a Sense of the Rhetorical and Social Situation in Which the Writer is Working

One typical choice made in this center involved a tutor initiating agenda setting. When tutors asked "what's the assignment?" or "what are you working on?" to begin, then, they were understanding this choice differently. Here is one example:

> When Leroy sat down, I told him my name was Makela. He said he remembered from when we met before, which con-

> firmed my thought that we had met before. I was pleased that I had recognized his name. *I asked how his day was going so far.* He said he'd been feeling rushed trying to get here because he did not want to be late. He took out his paper and assignment while saying this. *We read through his assignment…. I asked him to tell me about which film he chose.*

Hearing Leroy's concern about being late helps Makela focus on the task at hand. Her first choice is to review his assignment. This is in part a response to Leroy and to her knowledge of the center's policy that all writers bring assignment sheets along with them to their tutorials. Only after reviewing this document does she ask him about the film he chose, getting close to his purpose in this essay. In another tutor's initiation of agenda setting, the beginning exchange starts out similarly, but the tutor—instead of directly turning to the assignment sheet—asks the writer about her response to the task:

> I greeted her, and she also asked me how I was doing. This led to some friendly chatting, which established rapport and led easily into my question about *what she was working on*. She explained that she had a medical history paper that needed more formal language.

Asking a writer "what she was working on" is simply not the same invitation to agenda setting that reading the assignment sheet together is. These different agenda setting choices suggested that this center's tutors' identities were under construction in diverse yet related ways.

Theme #2: Acting in Accordance With a Strongly Held Tutor Belief Regardless of Writer's Intent

How a consultant's choices helped constitute his or her identity as a particular type of tutor in this largely sociocultural service could be hard to parse out. This was not the case, however, when a conference led a tutor to draw on some of his or her strongest beliefs, values or attachments. If a writer's subject matter or a tutor's previous experience with similar requests touched on these commitments, the writer's intent could recede from the tutor's attention. In these cases, particular tutor identities might appear and not necessarily those associated with particular pedagogical models. One undergraduate

consultant takes on the role of disciplinary insider in the following example:

> My student comes back, and I say "You're Anne?" Whoops. Her name is Anna.…She's a freshman working on an English Comp paper about comparing biases in news articles. *Great—I'm a journalism major. I think that this will be easy, and I relax.*

After first focusing on establishing rapport, the consultant is put at ease upon discovering that this is a journalism essay. Is the tutor likely to share a world with the writer or professionals in her discipline in this moment? That is impossible to say, but there is a tension for this consultant in terms of what social ties she should value most. In this choice is this tutor's identity—the belief that when a paper deals with her major's subject matter, response is easier to give and a more directive conference may be justified.

In this choice, the tutor also reinforces the center's dominant, pragmatic tutor identity. In another tutor's use of the same choice, the effect is to frustrate that "get something done" stance. Minding the center's policy that tutors may consult on a take home exam only when the center has the professor's consent, one tutor fails to hear a writer's goals for their session. Instead, the tutor tries to ferret out a potential violation of the policy. As the tutor writes,

> As she [the writer] extracts her papers from her backpack, she mentions that this was "kind of a midterm exam" for her art history class. *I am distracted by this comment and try to remember the policy for discussing take home exams with students. I contemplate interrupting her and asking Jessie* [the director]*, who is working as the front desk attendant. I realize that I have only half heard her.* She is now talking about her concerns about the paper; the moment to ask has passed. I let her talk for a few more seconds. An opportunity presents itself and I ask her, "Did you say this was a take home exam?" She said, "Yes." …I hope I have…ask[ed] the right question. …"Yes, [the student says,] she told me that it was okay to come for…grammar errors and flow." …I feel myself relaxing.

Instead of having to end the session or—as she had done in other similar cases—needing to focus only on grammar, the tutor discovers higher order concerns are not off the table. Thus, the tutor sees that

particularly rich forms of knowledge-making are possible here.

In these instances, tutors' disciplinary and policy attachments cause them to tune out the writers they are working with momentarily. In the case of the first example, though, tutor-specific attachments and the center-wide pragmatic tutor identity are strengthened. By contrast, the tutor's policy mindedness ends in a frustration of expectations—and of the center-wide "get something done" stance. These choices do not reflect pure pedagogical models or exclusively assimilative or critical flexibility. Rather, they are center-specific, individually tailored identities under construction.

Theme #3: Tutor Experiencing the Moment of Needing to Speak, and Telling the Writer What She Sees as a Necessary Revision or Place in the Paper to Target

In some cases, my colleagues made decisions that appeared to be particularly epistemic. One such choice is a tutor reaching a moment where s/he needs to tell the writer about a necessary revision or place to target in draft.

I saw this choice used when tutors found nondirective pedagogy was productively frustrating an effort to get something done. As one tutor writes,

> I was about to make a suggestion about her use of detail in her example when she was talking about herself, when she told me she didn't feel like her two example paragraphs fit and asked me if she should get rid of them. My first reaction was "Is she kidding?" And then I thought, "She really is unaware about what is good in this paper, which means she probably doesn't know what it is about and is looking for direction." So I told her to keep the two example paragraphs and drop everything else. And she seemed more engaged at that point and appeared open to that idea. I thought, "Eureka! I know what we need to do for the remaining 15 min."

At this point, the tutor's choice to communicate a necessary revision shows the belief that improvisation is, in this situation, more important than the plan. He prefers being text-centered to being writer-centered in this situation. Furthermore, this is flexible tutoring for critique.

Another tutor's experience of the moment of needing to speak reflects more resistance to adopting a sociocultural identity. Like her male colleague in the previous example, a tutor forgoes nondirective, process era writer-centeredness for flexible text-centeredness in order to get something done. Unlike him, she regrets this choice:

> I…wanted to try and find some aspect that she could write about in more detail. …[I was] preoccupied with trying to find SOME organizing idea. Eventually I suggested that maybe a theme to this paper might be that your "family" makes you a better person…. Then she started asking me lots of really specific questions about what she should write and how exactly she should write it and I started to feel a little uncomfortable—I'd already created her organizing idea.

Had the writer in the first example displayed the same dependent behavior, perhaps the tutor would have expressed similar regret. Still, what the tutor experiences in the second example is regret at having used a flexible approach, implying that she either does or should ascribe to a more nondirective professional identity than the tutor in the first example. Like the more predictable choices, identifying the choice of needing to speak to communicate a necessary revision reveals some of this center's shared repertoire.

Choosing Our Most Epistemic Futures: The Value of This Research

Did this choice map reflect our shared repertoire? The map implied our center's tutors tended to construct sociocultural identities where being goal-oriented was valued more than exploratory critique. The map also implied that when critical flexibility was present, it tended to play an epistemic role. Specifically, tutors appeared to use critical flexibility to extend writers' higher order thinking. Epistemic yet rare, tutoring for critique warranted greater emphasis in this center's tutor training efforts.

These findings suggest what the experience of making choices as a tutor in one writing center was. What, though, is the value of this study for practitioners elsewhere? I want to make three points. First, by demonstrating what a shared repertoire of a center's tutors' choices is and can do for a center's staff, this research calls attention

to what Ackerman calls the conflict between "what tutors believe they already know about their tutoring and new evidence reveals" (2007, p. 38). Creating a shared repertoire of choices can allow tutors to critique past and envision alternative future choices and identities as members of a community. Second, this study uses empirical evidence to affirm the sociocultural view that writing tutors are flexible guides who use semiotic tools to construct professional identities. Among these tools are critically flexible choices that may be rare but should be encouraged because of their epistemic power. In representing such choices here, I show how study of a center's shared repertoire may reveal a program's shared life in order to improve it. Finally, making this shared repertoire visible was the fruit of a phenomenological approach. This is a valuable methodology for writing center constituents because it bases its findings on tutors' self-reported, everyday stories of writing center work, and it is inexpensive to perform. Most importantly, phenomenology offers an epistemology that values individual writers' and tutors' exploration as the essential foundation of literate events—a fact that should be embraced in every writing consultation.

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