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Generous Audience, Activist, Evaluator: Tutor-Teachers' Knowledge, Practices, and Values for Response to Writing

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Abstract: The relationship between tutoring and teaching has been a recurrent topic of interest among writing center directors and writing program administrators. While scholarship agrees tutoring experience aids composition teachers with implementing process pedagogy and fostering a collaborative classroom, the relationship between tutoring and assessment of student writing is less clear. This qualitative study uses interviews with eight graduate teaching assistants with tutoring experience to examine how they transfer and juxtapose knowledge, practices, and values for response between the writing center and the classroom. Like previous scholarship, this research finds writing center tutoring contributes to teachers' enactment of constructivist, student-centered pedagogy and enhances their understanding of students' relationship to writing and feedback, standard language ideology, and systemic inequities in education. However, evaluation led these instructors to experience tension between their values and preferred respondent roles, with many reporting anxious grading processes and some experimenting with alternatives to traditional grading. The article concludes with suggestions to build bridges between tutoring and teaching contexts, particularly through explicit attention to antiracist pedagogy and alternative assessment practices.

The relationship between tutoring and teaching has been a recurrent topic of interest among writing center directors (WCDs) and writing program administrators (WPAs). Both anecdotally and empirically, scholars and administrators have generally viewed the relationship positively, with the writing center providing a valuable site of professional development for writing instructors (Broder, 1990; Child, 1991; Cogie, 1997; Harris, 2002; Ianetta et al., 2007; Weaver, 2018; Worden-Chambers & Dayton, 2021). The emerging consensus indicates that tutoring experience can aid composition teachers with implementing process pedagogy, especially student-teacher conferences, and fostering a collaborative classroom. However, the relationship between tutoring experience and grading and responding to student writing is less clear. Therefore, this study focuses on one central facet of tutoring and teaching writing: responding to student writing. This qualitative study analyzes interviews with eight teachers of first-year or advanced composition with prior writing center experience. Like previous scholarship, my research finds writing center tutoring contributes to teachers' enactment of constructivist, student-centered pedagogy and enhances their understanding of students' relationship to writing and feedback, standard language ideology, and systemic inequities in education. However, evaluation led these instructors to experience tension between their values and preferred respondent roles, with many identifying grading as a source of keen anxiety due to the potential for emotional harm to students. I offer suggestions for WCDs and WPAs to build bridges between tutoring and teaching contexts, particularly through explicit attention to antiracist pedagogy and alternative assessment practices.

Tutor-Teachers and Development of Constructivist, Student-Centered Pedagogy

Writing center tutoring has been a longstanding component of graduate teaching assistant (TA) preparation for first-year composition (FYC), becoming widespread in the 1980s (Wilhoit, 2002) and continuing today. To better understand the relationship between writing center tutoring and classroom teaching for pre- and in-service teachers, it is necessary

to examine this common practice from the perspective of tutor-teachers (Babcock & Thonus, 2012, p. 74). The limited empirical research examining the role of writing center tutoring in TA development indicates tutoring experience allows TAs to gain insight into student writing processes, enact student-centered pedagogy, and reflexively connect composition theory to practice (Broder, 1990; Child, 1991; Clark, 1988; Cogie, 1997; Harris, 2002; Ianetta et al., 2007; Weaver, 2018). However, those benefits are tempered when the writing center serves as required “training wheels” for TAs preparing to teach FYC (Nichols, 2005). In such cases, writing centers lose control over staffing and writing center services, and pedagogy may be devalued by these TAs (Ianetta et al., 2007; Nichols, 2005). Furthermore, TAs required to tutor rather than self-selecting into the center may struggle to transfer one-to-one writing pedagogy to an entire class (Grouling & Buck, 2017).

Graduate TAs who spend time in the writing center gain practice with constructivist and collaborative pedagogy. As Harris (2002) observes, tutors learn skills that can be applied to teacher conferences, such as “question-asking strategies and techniques for establishing rapport so that collaboration can take place, for assessing who that writer is and what she needs (rather than what the paper needs), and how to motivate the student to write or revise that paper” (p. 201). Tutoring experience provides novice FYC TAs with insight into students as learners: knowledge of students’ understandings and misunderstandings, individualized writing processes, approaches to writing tasks, and experiences with writing across the disciplines (Clark, 1988; Cogie, 1997; Worden-Chambers & Dayton, 2021). Writing center tutoring also improves TAs’ understanding of assignment design and motivation to experiment with instructional strategies (Cogie, 1997; Harris, 2002; Ianetta et al., 2007; Worden-Chambers & Dayton, 2021). In addition to gaining instructional strategies, teachers may develop an understanding of students’ linguistic identities and experiences of standard language ideology and gain “a stronger sense of empathy, compassion, and patience” from their time in the writing center

(Worden-Chambers & Dayton, 2021, p. 117). Still, the transfer of learning between sites of teaching and teacher preparation remains complex, influenced by factors including teacher education, deepening knowledge, attunement to student learning, prior writing experiences, and circulation of concepts and ideologies across contexts (McQuitty, 2012; Newell et al., 2009; Qualley, 2017).

Role Negotiation and Tutor-Teacher Response to Writing

The relationship between tutoring and TAs' ability to respond to and assess student writing remains uncertain. Some research has found that TAs feel less confident about responding to and evaluating student work after tutoring experience. Child (1991) found teachers entering the FYC classroom for the first time after tutoring felt challenged and frustrated by the responsibilities of assessment. In comparing an FYC program that required TAs to work in the writing center with a program that did not, Reid et al. (2012) found, "TAs who had had a year of experience tutoring in a writing center were unexpectedly *less likely* than [other] TAs to mention confidence about conferencing and providing feedback" (p. 57, emphasis added). On the other hand, Cogie's (1997) participants reported no adverse effects of tutoring experience on classroom performance, and Worden-Chambers and Dayton's (2021) participants felt they had gained insight into response strategies such as being encouraging and constructive from their experiences "working with clients who were discouraged by negative or vague commentary from instructors" (p. 117).

One explanation for these inconsistent results may be a misalignment of respondent roles between the writing center and the classroom. Child (1991) found that experienced teachers returning to the classroom after tutoring felt freed from authoritarian roles, while inexperienced teachers entering the classroom for the first time after tutoring felt anxious and frustrated by classroom dynamics and assessment. Traditionally, writing centers espouse student agency, and, as Harris (2002) suggests, instructors who embrace "nonhierarchical" relationships with students may

enhance their student-centered, collaborative skills as tutors, and these instructors may prefer their time in the writing center compared to the classroom (pp. 205–206). Furthermore, tutorial interactions can yield recognition of conflict between students' identities, voices, academic writing conventions, and assessments. One participant in Worden-Chambers and Dayton's (2021) study voiced this conflict, wondering, "The Writing Center showed me the struggle of letting students feel valued and speak in their own voice. But then, how do we help them not get a really bad grade?" (p. 118). Tutor-teachers may feel this tension between supporting students' voices and assessing writing within their classrooms.

WCDs and WPAs may experience similar tensions as they prepare TAs to respond to writing despite increasing attunement to intersections of language, race, identity, and privilege in writing assessment. Writing centers have a history of adopting a regulatory stance toward standard language ideologies that continues to circulate (Camarillo, 2019; García, 2017; Grimm, 1996). Recent scholarship has argued that writing center pedagogy's focus on the individual has obfuscated systemic inequities and privileged White, middle-class, monolingual writers while failing to attend to the needs of racialized, working-class, and linguistically minoritized students (e.g., Camarillo, 2019; Denny et al., 2018; Faison & Condon, 2022; García, 2017; Greenfield & Rowan, 2011b). Likewise, WPAs have explored strategies for shifting assessment cultures, such as introducing teachers to critical language awareness (Behm & Miller, 2012; Davila, 2017; Shapiro, 2022) or alternatives to traditional grading, like labor-based grading contracts (Inoue, 2021), engagement-based grading contracts (Carillo, 2021), or ungrading (Blum, 2020). While scholarship has occasionally featured narratives of writing center encounters that problematize and challenge tutors'—typically, White tutors'—understanding of linguistically minoritized students' writing experiences (e.g., Geller et al., 2011), much remains to be learned about how tutor-teachers transfer that understanding to the classroom assessment context.

WCDs and WPAs should attend to affective tensions in tutor-teacher roles. Tutors and teachers explore different approaches and personas in response, whether adopting the role of “a sistahgurl” (Kynard, 2006), an activist ally (Baldwin & Smith, 2022), or an accomplice (Green, 2016). Those roles may also include being

a teacher, reader, a guide, a friendly advisor, a diagnostician, a coach, a motivator, a collaborator, a fellow explorer, an inquirer, a confidant, a questioning reader, a representative reader, a common reader (or average reader or real reader), a sounding board, a subjective reader, an idiosyncratic reader, a sympathetic reader, a trusted adult, and a friend. (Straub, 1996, p. 225)

Caswell (2018) describes affective tensions in response, reminding us of the “tug and pull” teachers “experience between what they feel they should do (mostly driven from a pedagogical perspective) and what they are expected to do (mostly driven by an institutional perspective) when responding” (p. 71). Caswell’s case study participant, Kim, illustrates the paralyzing emotions that even veteran teachers experience when faced with conflicting values: In this case, a teacher with 10 years of experience spent 45 minutes on a single (short) paper, uncertain of how to proceed when torn between tensions of responding to content over grammar and preserving the student relationship over providing critical feedback. Such experiences remind us that “responding to student writing is an identity-shaping activity for teachers” (Caswell, 2014, p. 11) and deserves our rich attention.

Therefore, this study asks,

- How do tutor-teachers transfer knowledge, practices, and values for response from the writing center to the classroom?
- What differences do TAs perceive in their respondent roles for the writing center and the classroom? How do they experience the role of evaluator?

Methods

Study Site and Context

This analysis examined participants' perceptions of similarities and differences in response practices and roles between the writing center and the writing classroom. This study occurred from 2017 to 2019 at a large, public, Midwestern, doctoral-granting university. This predominantly White institution has a sizable population of international and multilingual students and a growing number of first-generation students. I conducted this research from my vantage as director of the university-wide writing center, which employs undergraduate and graduate tutors from across the disciplines. The writing center selects graduate tutors through competitive application; there is no requirement for composition instructors to tutor before teaching. To recruit participants for this study, I extended invitations to graduate tutors and teachers of first-year and advanced composition courses. I did not offer any incentives beyond the opportunity for reflection.

At this institution, several departments offer courses that satisfy the first-year writing requirement, but the English department employed all participants teaching FYC. In this composition program, new English graduate students teach one section of 19 students each semester during their first year and two sections in the following years. A one-semester pedagogy education seminar introduces new graduate students to composition theory and assessment.

The university requires advanced composition for all undergraduates. Many courses satisfy this requirement, and course expectations and instructor training vary by department. In this study, participants taught advanced composition in literature, education, and writing studies/informatics.

All participants believed they were required to use traditional, letter-grade forms of classroom assessment; however, I did not collect data from the participants' departments to substantiate those beliefs.

Participants

Eight instructors volunteered to participate, all with at least one year of tutoring and one year of teaching experience. Half of the participants taught FYC during this study, while the other half taught advanced composition. Four participants were graduate students in writing studies, three in literature, and one in education. Seven participants were doctoral students, and one was a master's student (see Table 1). Five participants were White, one Asian American, one Black, and one Hispanic.

While I had envisioned these participants would have received training at my institution's writing center, the reality was that some had previously worked in a writing center during undergraduate or master's programs, some were working concurrently in the writing center, and some referred to additional tutoring experiences, such as with GED programs.

Table 1

Participant Tutoring and Teaching Experience

Participant	Program	Standing	Tutoring Experience	Current Tutor	Years of Teaching Experience	Current Course
Annie	Literature	1st-year PhD	1.5 (MA, PhD)	Y	2	FYC
Anton	Writing Studies	2nd-year PhD	7 (undergraduate, MA, PhD)	Y	4	FYC
Bea	Writing Studies	1st-year PhD	5 (community college, MA)	N	6	FYC
Kurt	Writing Studies	2nd-year MA	3 (undergraduate peer tutor) 4 (undergraduate GED tutor)	N	1	FYC
Lisa	Literature	2nd-year PhD	1 (PhD)	Y	4	Adv. Comp (100-level literature)
Ron	Writing Studies	4th-year PhD	3 (undergraduate, PhD)	Y	5	Adv. Comp (300-level digital composition)
Spectemur Agendo	Literature	3rd-year PhD	1.5 (undergraduate)	N	5–6	Adv. Comp (200-level literature)
Tony	Education	4th-year PhD	6 (undergraduate, PhD)	Y	4	Adv. Comp (200-level education)

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Data Collection

I collected data from multiple sources—interviews, classroom observations, and written feedback on in-progress and final drafts—to allow for a multifaceted representation of these TAs' pedagogies for responding to writing. Each participant completed two 60- to 75-minute semi-structured interviews. The first interview was held near the beginning of the semester and focused on participants' prior teaching, tutoring, and training experiences; expectations for student writing; goals for response; and current understanding of effective response strategies. The second interview was held near the end of the semester and gathered information about TAs' written feedback, using stimulated elicitation (Prior, 2004) questions based on student papers provided by the TAs (with student consent), as well as about the principles that guided response in teaching and tutoring contexts. I also asked questions to prompt explicit reflection on participants' experiences as tutors and teachers: How would you say your work in the writing center has influenced your teaching of writing, if at all? How do you think about your teacher role and tutor role differently in this process of providing feedback? How do you support student writing development as a teacher? What about as a tutor?

Data Analysis

To investigate the research questions indicated above, this analysis centered on the interview data and participants' reflections about their experiences responding to student writing. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and uploaded to the qualitative data analysis software QDA Miner. Analysis was iterative, inductive, and comparative (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and included passes of exploratory, descriptive, and values coding (Saldaña, 2013). I coded the data for instances when participants reflected directly on transfer or juxtaposition of knowledge, practices, values, and response roles between tutoring and teaching contexts. The findings summarize themes related to participants' transfer and juxtaposition of tutoring and teaching activities.

Findings

This study examined how writing center tutoring influenced TAs' response to student writing and how knowledge, practices, and values for responding were similar or different across contexts. Participants gained insight into students' relationship to writing and feedback, and they transferred constructivist strategies, respondent roles, and understanding of students. However, participants juxtaposed respondent roles within the two settings, particularly between the classroom role of evaluator and their preferred roles of generous audience and activist. Some experimented with assessment practices to alleviate tension between these roles.

Enhancing Understanding of Students' Relationship to Writing and Feedback

Participants credited the writing center with improving their awareness of students' prior writing education, students' journeys through the larger university context, linguistic identities, and emotional effects of feedback. At times, their reflections about students' use of and reactions to feedback shifted fluidly between settings, such as when something learned or observed in the writing center was reinforced in the classroom or vice versa.

Participants expressed a heightened understanding of how students' prior education shapes their writing knowledge and skills. Some reflected on how misconceptions developed through simplistic or incorrect writing advice (e.g. "Never use 'I' in formal writing") and a lack of instruction affected the quality of students' writing. Tony recounted his experiences with "students that have come from under-resourced high schools":

The rules that they haven't been told are not there, and you know, if you focus more, like we stress here [at the writing center], . . . focus more on the actual components, the ideas, the flow, the power of the paper itself and then teach them the schematics, it just works so much better. And in some cases, they don't feel attacked, and that's something I learned from [the writing center]. Not from teaching.

Tony leveraged his experiences in the writing center to meet students where they were at, without judgment, and to support students through direct instruction and recognition of their ideas and goals.

Participants saw how prior writing instruction influenced students' strategies for drafting and revising, recognizing some students had been "taught to prioritize grammar" (Annie); some "don't always know they need a main point" (Tony); some may lack experience with research; and some may need instruction on integrating evidence. These participants also formed impressions of how writing standards were taught and enforced. Anton reflected on how students learn to become "good" writers:

A lot of [students] found out that, like, slang wasn't appropriate, or certain dialects of English, accented English, other languages were not appropriate when they tried it at school, and they were told that that was not appropriate. And so I think that, unfortunately, I think people learn to be good writers when they're singled out or . . . when that is commented on in some way. And so they learn what not to do as opposed to what to do.

Anton and others felt students lacked instruction and experience and had been taught more about Standard American English (SAE) rules than rhetorically effective writing.

These tutor-teachers also credited their work in the writing center to an improved understanding of students' writing experiences within the larger university context. Some expressed frustration with the teaching of writing in other courses. Tony elaborated on his understanding of students' need for direct, nonjudgmental instruction, saying,

This is not a critique of anybody, but just I think maybe something those of us who are here at the writing center have felt like, you can't always assume, and I feel like this is across all departments . . . , all courses, you can't assume that students know what a thesis statement is; you can't assume that students know how to support a point; you can't assume that students know how to contextualize a quote. . . . Personally, I don't think there's anything wrong with just telling them what a thesis statement is if they don't know.

From his writing center interactions, Tony believed that faculty across the disciplines did not teach writing explicitly but instead made assumptions about students' knowledge and experience. These interactions led him to perceive students sought out the writing center for that direct instruction.

Others indicated their work with students made them wonder what other teachers were looking for in writing, and some observed instructor feedback did not always match the assignment or provide helpful instruction. Several participants reflected on students' emotional reactions to feedback, finding students may perceive comments as "ambiguous or hurtful or confusing" (Anton). They recognized students may not ask questions about feedback because of power dynamics and suggested tutors can provide strategies for approaching instructors to explain the grade and feedback. Ron explained,

One of the things that I picked up really quickly was that students get a lot of feedback that's not helpful, that's not passable to them, and they don't feel comfortable asking for it or expecting that as a student.

In his teaching and tutoring, Ron aimed to empower students to feel "like they can insist that their . . . biology TA or professor explained why they got that grade on the short answer that they got. Expecting feedback that's at least trying to detail how they performed and why they are getting that grade in that sense." In their writing assessment, these instructors sought to provide a counterpoint, offering clear, specific, and helpful feedback connected to assignment goals.

Participants expressed awareness of systemic inequities in writing education, with several observing through their writing center work that not all linguistic identities were equally welcomed in academia or by academic practices. Bea credited her initial writing center experiences at a community college with insight into institutional inequities and an orientation toward social justice pedagogy, explaining,

So, so much of what I was asked to do was helping a lot of adult students find the verb to underline in the sentence. But what I was getting more from them was obviously realizing how effed up that entire thing was. From them, the people themselves, I was getting more stories.

Bea went on to tell the story of Michelle, an adult student who had tested into the lowest level of English and was required to take skill-and-drill remedial courses. Bea recalled,

So when she finally got into the class where she's allowed to write beyond a sentence level, . . . she would get stuck because she's like, "I don't have anything to say about this, I have to do a description and I don't know, I don't know what to do." She did though, it was just because she'd been locked into this institutional mindset of what writing is and what's valid. So, I feel like a lot of my interest in social justice, and a social justice pedagogy, really come from that time. Because I was seeing how people were being treated just as numbers.

For Bea, sustained interactions with Michelle and other diverse writers in a community college writing center fostered an understanding of systemic inequities in higher education and writing curricula. Through listening to these writers' narratives of lived experiences, she developed a social justice orientation to writing pedagogy that she carried forward into tutoring and teaching.

Many participants offered similar descriptions of coming to understand how linguistically diverse students were devalued through written feedback. For example, Kurt reflected on "the figure of the teacher with the red pen who told them they were terrible and not worthy of putting words on a page" and tried in his classroom "to create a pedagogical space that doesn't evoke those sort[s] of things that were so incredibly negative to them." Anton also reflected on students' negative assessment experiences, saying,

Every student has examples of, you know, "The feedback I got made me feel bad."

. . . And they can't maybe stop it from happening, but they can understand that that's not okay and that there are institutional reasons for that.

Anton connected these observations to his preferred respondent roles of informant and activist, explaining how the writing center offers a space where students can develop:

a critical awareness of how their writing is, might be, has been interacted with. And so, that's a delicate dance because they don't want to, you know, slam an instructor. Right. But if I can point to, if there's a rubric that says, you know, "Your paper will not be read if there are, you know, articles missing." We can talk about how, you know, what are the kinds of institutional forces behind that.

In response to the prescriptive, judgmental, and harmful feedback Anton saw students receive, he sought to create pedagogical spaces where students could question that feedback and develop a critical awareness of intersections of language, race, privilege, and writing assessment.

Others observed students' emotional reactions to writing assignments, like Annie recalling her "last-ever tutorial session" at a previous writing center with "a girl literally bursting into tears." From experiences like this one, Annie found "getting a glimpse at student anxiety is really useful, because it makes you see the ways like maybe you're feeding into that as an instructor. . . . I don't want to be that teacher that stresses them out." In general, participants felt that most students believe they are not good writers, many students have been damaged by previous writing teachers, and some students have been made to feel they should be ashamed of writing.

Through writing center interactions, these participants developed awareness of students' experiences of writing instruction and feedback. Participants credited these interactions with enhancing their understanding of systemic inequities and the intersections of language, race, privilege, and writing assessment. As a counterpoint, they developed facilitative orientations to writing pedagogy, with the goals of privileging students' ideas,

scaffolding their learning, and, for some participants, creating spaces for students to unpack and critically question instructor feedback.

Transferring Respondent Roles from the Center to the Classroom

Participants reflected on response practices and values developed in the writing center and transferred to the classroom. These tutor-teachers reported gaining collaborative, student-centered, and social justice pedagogies in the writing center and developing respondent roles of generous audience, informant, and activist.

Many participants described learning the utility of specific response strategies, such as questions, reader response, and praise. Ron adapted his tutoring approach to the classroom, saying he used “writing center best practices.” For Ron, those best practices include asking “some pointed questions” and using reader-response strategies “like, ‘I don’t know what this means exactly, could you say more?’” Ultimately, Ron said, he knows “not to just put like ‘awk’ or mark grammatical errors, which I just don’t do.”

Similarly, Spectemur repurposed reader-response strategies learned as an undergraduate tutor, saying the writing center taught her “how to respond to student writing as a reader, like, ‘I’m confused here, what do you mean?’ ‘I’ve lost you.’ ‘I’m very clear on what you mean right here, good job,’ things like that.” As a new teacher, she explained,

I had to find my way back there because when I . . . first started teaching I think it took that, like, very objective, this is right or wrong. But I’ve now returned to some of those earlier tutoring experiences and responding with, like, ‘I wanna be able to follow you, but I cannot.’

Both Ron and Spectemur recognized differences in the classroom context of response but reached back to knowledge gained in the writing center to enact dialogic written feedback.

Several participants reflected on the role of praise in feedback. Tony believed students need positive feedback to hear and accept the negative, while Annie believed praise to be “a double-edged sword” that may

detract from revision. To promote engagement in drafting and revision, Spectemur found students needed praise for the process, not the product. Kurt reflected on his experiences as a GED tutor:

Praise was something that [the students] had never gotten before. You could see sort of like the ways in which that served to be a motivator. And so for me, I tried to incorporate that. Even with papers that I thought kind of missed the mark completely almost, I was like there's still good stuff that's going on here.

Although some worried about when and how to best provide praise, these participants recognized its motivating potential and carried praise into their classroom response practices. In addition to response strategies, participants reported transferring respondent roles from the writing center to the classroom. A majority reported adopting the role of a generous audience. This role was characterized as being an interested reader, giving credit for what the student is doing and for what they're trying to do, showing appreciation for students' effort, inviting students to participate in the academic conversation, and being kind. Kurt explained, "I think the most important thing is just to be a receptive audience to their work. And just to be a good listener and a good reader." Ron said he is guided by "generosity, which is vague, but [he] think[s] that idea of trying to give a student credit for what they are doing just as much as what they are not, is really important." Bea echoed this point of giving students credit for beyond what appears on the page:

I feel like I'm able to honor what they're trying to do. So, like, I am the audience for the paper. I am obligated then to read it—well, read it, but read it generously. Think about [it], it's not just about the paper in front of me, it's also what I know about the student and what the student has been trying to achieve.

This stance of generosity encompassed students' goals and intentions beyond the written product, and being a generous audience supported participants' values of building confidence, motivation, and agency.

In addition to being a generous audience, some participants adopted the role of rhetorical audience to encourage students to develop skills for communicating with audiences beyond a particular course. For instance, Anton reflected on giving students advice about development by taking on the audience's perspective, saying,

Okay, here's a place where I think that you need to expand this, because your reader is going to be reading this and, you know, by the time that they're two pages in and they don't have a sense of what's going on, they might stop reading, right? In a real world, quote-unquote, context.

These participants indicated the writing center helped them learn to take the "long view," in Lisa's words, recognizing each assignment or course was just one small point in the student's writing trajectory.

Several participants reported taking an informant role in the writing center and classroom. They tried to avoid making assumptions about what students might know or not know and instead worked to dismantle myths and barriers about academic writing. As Bea explained, her overarching response philosophy "is of informed consent. In terms of, yes, students can make choices, but they need to in some way know what the potential effects of those choices are." She explained how this philosophy was tied to an early writing center experience:

So, I once was told . . . how a student came in talking about the "meadow of nursing" in her paper. And [the tutor] realized, "Oh she used the thesaurus, and just replaced 'field' with 'meadow.' But wasn't that a beautiful metaphor? And didn't it open up all this stuff?" And I was like, "Yeah, but it's wrong. And you may have had this beautiful moment of introspection, but you didn't tell her, and that's effed up." . . . Students need to know that they're making the choice. Sometimes they don't know that they are making the choice, it's just an error. And maybe it's a beautiful error, maybe an error they want to cultivate, but they need to know that some people are going to read "meadow of nursing"? And no scholarship. You know?

Bea's adoption of an informant role arose from reflections on linguistic diversity she encountered as a tutor and her desire to support students' agency over their communicative choices. She felt a responsibility to provide "informed consent" so that students could consider audiences' potential reactions to nonidiomatic phrasing, assess alternatives, and weigh options in their use of language.

In some cases, the informant role was extended to being an activist, aiming to build critical language awareness and create a problem-posing space for students to question the histories and politics of language supremacy and SAE. Anton described using FYC as a space to interrogate assumptions about writing that students bring from high school. He explained,

I don't necessarily mean that college is open to other dialects and registers, but I think students come in with a lot of rules and ideas, right? Like, "Well, I shouldn't do this. I shouldn't do this. I've been told this." And I think it's a nice moment in their trajectories to stop and say, "Well, why is that?"

Like Anton, Bea also intended to create an environment for students to "question assumptions of what a discourse or language is. And what is standard, or standardized written English, and how it is marked in its own way. It's not neutral." These participants' preferred respondent roles were guided by their understanding of multilingualism and critical language awareness, which emerged from a constellation of coursework, commitments to social justice pedagogy, and knowledge of students' writing experiences developed through writing center encounters.

The enhanced understanding of students developed in the writing center led these participants to transfer to the classroom response strategies like question-asking, reader response, and praise. These tutor-teachers also described a spectrum of preferred roles developed in the writing center that they transferred to the classroom, such as generous audience, informant, and activist.

Juxtaposing Respondent Roles: Collaborator or Evaluator

These participants found grading to be a fraught activity. Participants juxtaposed the generous and activist roles they could adopt in the writing center to the classroom roles of evaluator and authority. Some reported frustration with the extrinsic motivation provided by grades; several reported arduous grading processes shaped by anxiety about harming students; and some experimented with alternate modes to improve transparency or resist evaluation.

Several participants juxtaposed the collaborative possibilities of the writing center with the authority of grading. All perceived an institutional expectation to provide letter grades, and some experienced the grader role as contradictory to their goals for student learning and motivation. In the writing center, Bea explained, “We’re gonna co-create outcomes for this session, for this paper, for your trajectory in this class, for you as a writer.” In the classroom, however, Bea “had a lot of discomfort with the rule of authority, but obviously, duh, that’s what it is. [She’s] grading everything. So [she’s] gotten slightly more comfortable with that.” Lisa and Annie similarly felt the classroom context imposed competing agendas, where instructors want to support agency, choice, and exploration, while students expect direction. Lisa worried about her students reading her comments as “a to-do list,” prompting a focus on task completion rather than reflection (i.e., “I’m going to go through and fix this because my instructor has said I need to [do] X, Y, and Z in order to get this particular grade”). Participants felt the evaluative context distorted the feedback-and-revision dynamic, where students used feedback to achieve a particular grade rather than develop as writers.

Not only did these teachers worry about diminishing students’ agency and involvement in revision, but they also worried about the effects of feedback on students’ confidence and motivation. Kurt struggled with the role of grader. He felt “grading undermine[d] [his] whole approach”—his effort to show genuine, generous engagement. Kurt elaborated by distinguishing between feedback and grading, saying,

When I went to grade, I was like, this doesn't feel like it's helping anyone. And that people, you know, they get frustrated, like, "I got a C+ on this; this sucks." And then that can end up killing the motivation, where it's like, . . . "I'm a terrible writer, this is no fun, why am I in this class, I want to be a biologist, this is an English course," or whatever. It's like all these different things that come up in response to grades that is not really helpful in terms of actually helping students write better.

Kurt was not alone in worrying about the dampening and damaging effect of grades; several respondents reported dread and anxiety around the obligation of grading and its potential for emotional harm. Anton recalled struggling to grade during his first semester as a teacher, saying,

I would look at a student text and I'd be like, "I don't even know what to do." Because I'm like, "I don't want to mess this person up," and like, "What if this is bad advice?" So just major indecision.

Spectemur also described feeling anxiety when receiving student papers:

I'm interpolated into their world of experiencing grades like condemnations of their soul and their morals. And so I feel the burden of carrying their sense of self-worth [laughs] in the grade I give them. And I have to do exercises myself, like reflective journaling and breathing techniques to remind myself, like, this is the banking system. And I'm being interpolated into it right now, and I have a duty to them to be a problem-posing teacher, so let it go, let it go, and just be honest. So, yeah, their feelings are what I experience as the biggest burden when I get a batch. And fear.

To avoid the negative emotional toll of grading, some participants reported procrastinating, which resulted in long nights of binge-grading. Kurt explained, "I do them all the night before because I just don't want to grade." Anton also mentioned that grading tends to be an "occluded" activity, something rarely discussed among peers and mentors. That sense of grading behind closed doors perhaps contributed to the anxiety many of these instructors experienced.

Given their anxiety about negatively impacting students through assessment, these participants experimented with methods to improve

transparency or aid reception. Lisa developed a rubric for her advanced composition course, reasoning, "I feel like I have to, not defend myself, but make sure that I provide some kind of transparency for the student in terms of why I gave the grade that I ultimately gave." Many reported prioritizing feedback to avoid overwhelming students. Ron stated that one of his response goals was "not overwhelming a student with millions and millions of comments." Several also reported minimizing attention to grammar. Kurt stated,

I don't grade for grammar. Cause that has been a concern that second language writers have brought to me . . . , asking about 'Okay, how do you grade? Are my grammatical mistakes going to be counted against me?' And that's where I clarify like that's not what I'm looking for when I'm evaluating.

These instructors struggled to reconcile what they felt was an institutional imperative to evaluate assignments with a desire to support student learning. To resolve this dilemma, they experimented with strategies like rubrics, prioritized feedback, and explicitly not evaluating grammar.

A few participants experimented with modes of evaluation that they perceived as forms of resistance to traditional assessment, even if in small ways. For example, Anton incorporated portfolios and audio-recorded feedback to align his evaluation methods more with his student-centered values. However, he felt the FYC program did not condone these modes of assessment. As another form of resistance to the institutional obligation of grading, participants like Kurt, Annie, Lisa, and Ron often gave high grades. Most of his grades, Ron explained,

are like B+, A-. I know that's not ideal. I also, when confronted about those things, tell people my main concern is whether or not that student came out of the course a much better writer than they entered it. On some level, it's not my job to produce measuring criteria for corporations, which is what grades really are. . . . The word "grade" came from how they differentiated the quality of grain. The grade of grain.

In general, these teachers felt grading impeded student learning. They felt their efforts were not helpful and, in Bea's words, were "never good

enough.” They had observed students’ feedback experiences in the writing center and worried about the emotional harm of grading. As a result, they experienced their own emotional toll when tasked with grading. These participants wanted to support and affirm student writers and felt that grading directly countered these goals, which they felt better able to accomplish in the writing center.

Discussion

Knowledge, Practice, and Values for Written Response

This study has examined how eight tutor-teachers transferred knowledge, practices, and values for response from the writing center to the classroom and how they experienced differences in respondent roles across these settings. First, they credited writing center interactions with enhancing their understanding of students’ writing education and relationships between linguistic identities, systemic inequities, and negative writing feedback. Second, they reported transferring specific practices—like questioning, reader-response, and praise—and preferred respondent roles—like generous audience, rhetorical audience, informant, and activist. These participants juxtaposed their preferred roles with institutionally obligated classroom roles of authority and evaluator, with several reporting anxious grading processes and some experimenting with what they described as alternatives to traditional grading. Tutor-teachers experienced tension between institutional sites of writing education and struggled to enact in classroom writing assessment the social justice commitments they developed or enhanced in the writing center. These findings contribute to ongoing discussion about the writing center’s role in teacher learning and development.

This study highlights one labor-intensive facet of teaching: responding to writing. These results add to scholarship that indicates writing center tutoring allows TAs to develop strategies for responding constructively (Child, 1991; Clark, 1988; Harris, 2002; Worden-Chambers & Dayton,

2021). While much of that research has focused on response in contexts like student-teacher conferences, the tutor-teachers in this study attributed written feedback practices like question-asking, reader response, and praise to their writing center experiences. In some cases, connections between the writing center and classroom settings and practices were not instinctively apparent, and some participants, like Spectemur, described a trajectory of beginning with a more objectivist orientation to classroom response before reaching back to earlier experiences as a peer tutor for constructivist practices.

Beyond specific strategies, these tutor-teachers felt they gained knowledge of the interrelationships between language, identity, and education. Some scholars, like Cogie (1997), have found tutors acquire insight into the “baggage” students accrue from prior education and bring into the writing classroom. These participants similarly reported learning about the emotional effects of negative feedback and, like Worden-Chambers and Dayton’s (2021) participants, understood students’ feedback experiences within the context of systemic inequities in education and standard language ideology. Participants like Bea, Anton, and Kurt listened to students’ stories of assessment—the “figure of the teacher with the red pen who told them they were terrible” and the “effed up” institutional gate-keeping practices around “what writing is and what’s valid.” These participants recognized the effects of those assessments on students’ confidence and motivation and connected such stories to their own deepening commitments to social justice pedagogy. Wood (2020) discusses aligning teachers’ antiracist assessment values and response practices. While these graduate student TAs sought to enact their values through response, they did not feel empowered to resist letter-based grading with assessments like labor contracts (Inoue, 2021) or ungrading (Blum, 2020).

Given their orientation to students’ emotions, these tutor-teachers experienced their own affective tensions in response. Like Caswell’s (2018) case study participant, these instructors experienced anxiety about assessment, sometimes leading to fraught grading processes. Seeking to enact

respondent roles of generous audience, informant, and activist, the participants struggled when faced with perceived institutional roles of authority and evaluator. In other words, the participants experienced dissonance between what they felt they should do and what they believed to be condoned by institutional expectations for classroom assessment. On the other hand, they perceived the writing center as an institutional site where they could better enact their valued roles in a setting that embraces collaboration, activism, and “nonhierarchical” (Harris, 2002) relationships. Caswell (2018) suggests teachers can engage in emotional reflection to become aware of affective tensions (p. 91). However, these participants’ experiences suggest reflection alone will not resolve affective tensions. Such tensions must be considered within the context of tutor-teacher education and support for assessment.

WCDs and WPAs should collaborate to support the knowledge, practices, and values that tutor-teachers will transfer from one institutional role to another. WCDs can prompt reflection on response strategies and insights into students-as-learners that tutors will bring to the classroom. WPAs can further support teachers during grading and assessment. This study suggests teachers desire information about alternative assessments and explicit permission to experiment with such approaches. While the language participants used to describe their teaching philosophies varied (social justice pedagogy, critical pedagogy, liberatory pedagogy), many took an antiracist stance whether or not they credited their writing center and FYC professional development with explicitly introducing such pedagogy.

Much recent scholarship has addressed antiracist writing assessment (e.g., Condon & Young, 2017; Faison & Condon, 2022; Inoue, 2015; Wood, 2020), and this study only further corroborates the need—and, on the part of tutor-teachers, hunger—to avoid the “week twelve approach,” where a topic is raised once in pedagogy education, discussed fleetingly, and not returned to (Greenfield & Rowan, 2011a) and instead provide

specific, sustained attention to social justice, standard language ideology, and antiracist assessment in tutor-teacher professional development.

Conclusion

While WCDs and WPAs have a longstanding interest in what transfers from tutoring to teaching, the nature of learning to respond is messy: It is not necessarily unidirectional from the writing center to the classroom but reciprocal and additive as tutor-teachers move between contexts. In this study, some participants started as tutors, others as teachers; some experienced these settings concurrently; and several experienced tutor-teacher training at multiple institutions. Tutor-teachers may perceive direct applications from one setting to the other. Still, the transfer of knowledge, practices, and values will be impacted by affective tensions between respondent roles and beliefs about what is possible within institutional contexts.

Future research should include observation of tutorials to better understand the knowledge, practices, and values that tutor-teachers carry or transform across settings. This analysis centered on interview data and participants' self-assessments of knowledge, practices, and values used for response. Relying on self-reported data provides insight into tutor-teachers' values and intentions but may not accurately capture enacted practices. Furthermore, research should closely examine concepts presented in tutor-teacher education related to linguistic diversity, standard language ideology, and antiracist writing assessment. Including attention to training materials and topics will help WCDs and WPAs better understand the complementary nature of tutor-teacher education and the circulation of antiracist pedagogical practice between settings. To paraphrase Caswell (2018), our goal as tutor-teacher educators should be to reconcile the tension between what teachers' values drive them to feel they should do and what they believe higher education institutions expect them to do when assessing writing.

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