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Postsecondary Reading: What Writing Center Tutors Need to Know

Little research has discussed how writing center tutors can help postsecondary students develop skill in reading. Via individual interviews, this investigator collected data from eleven writing center tutors at a large urban public university. Analysis of this data suggests that while nearly all of the tutors lacked specific knowledge of how reading can be learned, all viewed reading theory as important to their writing center work. In addition, all participants exhibited a predisposition to a holistic approach to the acquisition of skill in reading. Suggestions are given for integrating appropriate reading theory into the professional development of writing center personnel.

Few educators today dispute the contention that writing and reading skills are interconnected, and most seasoned classroom teachers at any level are likely to confirm that strong readers tend to be strong writers, and struggling writers are often poor readers. A number of researchers have discussed the contribution that reading makes to the development of writing skills, especially in K-12 settings (Blanton, Wood, & Moorman, 1990; Krashen, 1993; Moffett, 1981; Smith, 1988). Others have examined the reading-writing connection in the postsecondary teaching of composition (Abartis & Collins, 1980; Bazerman, 1980; Kinneavy & Kline, 1976; Lindemann, 1987), but they mostly discuss the role of selecting materials and integrating readings into writing assignments. Few address what educators in colleges and universities can do to help students specifically develop reading skill.

In "Collaborative Learning and Whole Language Theory," Fitzgerald (1994) described the relationship between whole language theory and writing center work. She indicated that this theoretical viewpoint has particular relevance to the collaborative pedagogy utilized in many writing centers:

> It is not simply the working together which produces good writing
> in a writing center, but the practice such work gives the tutee in all
> the language arts... In a truly collaborative tutoring session, the tutor
> helps the student develop listening, reading, speaking, and writing
> skills simultaneously, so that what occurs is closely related to the
> benefits of whole language instruction rather than group work alone.
> (Fitzgerald, 1994; p. 12)

However, little has been written on the application of reading theory
to the teaching and learning that takes place in college and university
writing centers, despite the fact that university writing assignments
often require significant amounts of critical reading. Though various
writing tutor training textbooks make reference to the importance of
student reading in college level courses (Clark, 1985; Clark, 1998; Meyer
& Smith, 1987; Murphy & Sherwood, 1995; Ryan, 1994), surprisingly
few describe what writing tutors can do to improve their tutees' reading
skills—and thereby further enhance their writing ability.

Thus, it would be fruitful if writing center tutors, who often work on
the "front lines" with students struggling with college-level reading and
writing, were to receive training and information concerning reading
theory that they can use to begin 1) developing a concept of how reading
is best taught and learned, as they have likely already done concern-
ing writing and 2) formulating specific strategies to help increase their
students' reading abilities.

But how can we effectively judge what writing center tutors might
know or not know about the teaching of reading to college-level writers?
How should writing center directors, who may have had scant exposure
to reading theory themselves, select materials to include in their tutor
training programs regarding the teaching of college-level reading?

In order to explore these questions, this investigator reports the re-
sults of a study conducted to determine the attitudes and knowledge of
a "typical" writing center tutoring staff. It then concludes with relevant
concepts from the literature on reading that seem especially relevant
to the training of peer writing tutors.

Method

Information concerning writing tutor knowledge and attitudes about the
teaching of reading was gathered via interviews of the writing center peer
tutors at West State University (WSU)[1,] a large state-supported master's-
granting institution located in a diverse urban environment. Enrollment
by headcount exceeds 30,000 students, with only about 1,200 of these
residential, thus justifying WSU's status as a "commuter" campus.

Context and Participants

Although there exists no one profile of a "typical" writing center program, writing centers among comparable institutions are often quite similar (Griswold, 2003). The programmatic structure and services offered at WSU's Writing Center (UWC) reflect those often found in writing centers at other large public master's-granting universities nationwide: the UWC offers writing tutoring to the general campus student community and is staffed by undergraduate and graduate student peer tutors who are mostly English majors.

The University Writing Center (UWC) at WSU offers writing instruction via individualized tutorials to any enrolled student. Funded by the university's English Department as part of the composition program, the UWC offers 45-minute one-on-one tutoring appointments and is open Mondays through Saturdays approximately 48 hours per week. The total number of appointments offered per week averages 140.

The UWC staff consists of a coordinator who is a full-time tenure-track faculty member in the Department of English; a part-time assistant coordinator who is a lecturer in the Department of English; and 11 peer tutors. The peer tutors are all WSU undergraduates and graduate students. Each of the tutors works approximately 15 to 20 hours per week for the UWC program. Those hours are divided among on-site tutoring, in-class tutoring, and workshops, with approximately 90% of their time devoted to onsite tutoring in the UWC.

Though any WSU student can apply for the student assistant tutor positions, most of the tutors are drawn from the English Department or closely related programs. The tutors' class levels, semesters tutoring, and degree programs are listed in Table 1.

Applications for tutoring positions are solicited each spring from faculty referral (both within and outside the English Department) and via flyers posted in the English Department and throughout the campus. All applicants submit writing samples and go through a formal interview with the Coordinator, the Assistant Coordinator, and a representative from the current peer tutors.

Once selected, all new tutors are required to attend a six-hour pre-semester orientation and training, and they must take a 3-unit upper-division course, "Theory and Practice of Tutorial Instruction in English" prior to or concurrent with their first semester of tutoring . All tutors are required to attend biweekly staff meetings as well as staff development sessions held before each semester.

Table 1: UWC Tutor Information

Name*	Class Level	Semesters in UWC	Degree Program
Maggie	graduate	10	Interdisciplinary (English/Art)
Fred	graduate	1	English Literature MA
Tim	graduate	6	Creative writing MFA; single-subject teaching credential in English
Karen	graduate	8	English lit. MA; single-subject teaching credential in English
Bob	graduate	1	Creative writing MFA
Betty	graduate	6	Creative writing MFA
Mandy	senior	1	BA English Lit.
Karina	senior	1	BA English Lit.
Thomas	senior	1	BA English Lit.
Alan	junior	1	BA English Lit.
Janet	senior	4	BA Women's Studies

* Not the tutors' actual names.

Procedure

Over a two-day period, one-to-one interviews were conducted with each tutor. It was stressed that the interview was not a part of evaluating their work in the UWC program. The interview method was a blend of the "standardized open-ended" and "informal conversation" interview types as defined by Patton (1990). In other words, while a fixed set of open-ended questions was asked of each participant, more casual discussion at the beginning and especially the end of each session was included, time permitting.

After obtaining the consent of each subject, each interview was recorded on a digital voice recorder. As soon as possible after the interview, a synopsis of the session was written. Within 48 hours of each interview, the subjects were contacted to thank them again for their time and ask if they had anything they wished to add. Any discussion points needing clarification were also discussed.

During the interviews, the tutors were asked several questions concerning their experiences learning to read and how they saw the teaching of reading fitting into their work as writing center tutors. These questions were adapted from those prepared by Weaver for use in miscue analysis pre-interviews with elementary school students (Weaver, 1994; pp. 237-238). The questions asked of each tutor are included in Appendix A. Although all of the participants had been asked to allow

approximately 45 minutes for the interview session, all but one lasted in excess of an hour.

During a four day period immediately following the conclusion of all the interviews and follow-ups, the data were analyzed by reviewing the voice recordings, session notes, and post-session synopses. Selected portions of the voice recording that seemed particularly relevant to the research focus were written down verbatim. As was promised to all participants, the digital voice recording files were then permanently deleted.

Results

Analysis of the interview recordings suggested that the tutors' experiences and general concepts about reading instruction had a predisposition toward a holistic approach (though none used the term "whole language") and that they felt at a loss concerning how to apply such reading theory to their work with students. Described below are key conceptual threads the tutors voiced concerning (a) their own experiences in learning to read and (b) how they see the teaching of reading as part of their writing center work.

When asked how they learned to read, nine out of the eleven tutors had trouble remembering any sort of school instruction that they could attribute to developing their reading abilities. However, all eleven mentioned vivid memories of home experiences such as being read to, having lots of books, talking about books, etc. Ten of the tutors said that they had no real memories of actually learning to read, but rather recall just being readers. All mentioned as significant in their early reading experiences a great deal of reading for pleasure, with reading for information, or "efferent" reading (Rosenblatt, 1982) later becoming significant in their college careers.

Mandy, an undergraduate English major, explained that her earliest memories were not so much having books read to her, but more of an "immersion" in books and the act of reading:

> When you ask about reading what I recall most is a huge, dark brown bookshelf that covered the entire wall of our living room. I must have been around four, and that wall of books was so massive to me. I don't have any specific memory of sitting on anyone's lap and being read a story, but I do recall thinking it would be wonderful to find out what was in those books. My dad loves to tell a story of when I said at about four or five, "It must be magic to read."

Fred, a graduate student in English literature, recalled having a number of illustrated books read to him when he was "five or six," mostly those based on Disney characters. He explained that his "most significant

literacy experience" was the occasion on his seventh birthday, when he was given a complete encyclopedia set:

> Upon reflection, it seems that having such a reference resource was related to power. I could find out almost anything I wanted, and spent hours looking for answers to things I wanted to know. What ranked higher, a captain or a colonel? When was World War I? What are the rules for football?

Another particularly interesting thread that appeared in these inter-views is that four out the five male tutors mentioned comic books as a key source of early reading material, and all four stated that they felt such materials helped them significantly develop as readers. Of the six female tutors, none mentioned comic books. However, four females mentioned series books (e.g., "Nancy Drew" mysteries) as important childhood pleasure reading. Nine out of the eleven tutors also mentioned writing stories in elementary school as an important literacy experience.

Concerning the role of reading and their work in the writing center, all tutors expressed concerns about the reading skills of the students they see. Ten of the tutors felt that their students did not have prob-lems actually reading the words on the page, but rather had difficulty engaging critically with texts and distinguishing between key points and supporting evidence. Six mentioned that they thought students had unique problems in dealing with "infotexts" such as textbooks and academic essays (Feathers, 1993).

Karen, an English literature graduate student who was also complet-ing a high school teaching credential, posited that what so many of her tutees struggled with in reading was related to both the kind of reading and its physical format:

> For one thing, I think it might be that the kind of reading they [col-lege freshmen] are doing now is more like academic essays. In high school it was mostly fiction, and the emphasis in high schools is on teaching literature. Also what might be a factor is here students have to read texts that are purely that, lots of text, words on a page. But the textbooks in high school are so formatted, you know, to the point of being distracting with all the heading, pictures, graphs, colors. Now they just have to focus on the words themselves.

Finally, all eleven of the tutors interviewed indicated that helping students to become better readers was of importance in teaching writ-ing, and most (eight out of the eleven) said they were not sure how to do so. Only two had taken any formal coursework in reading theory or instructional practice, and both saw little application to their writing center work. One of the two stated that the course had focused "mostly on young kids, phonemes, and child development," while the other,

who had taken a different class, lamented "an overly simplistic, building-blocks approach."

Discussion

A key conclusion made from analysis of the UWC tutors' interviews is that while most indicated a lack of specific knowledge of how reading can be taught, all viewed teaching reading important to their work in writing centers, and all exhibited a predisposition to an approach that would integrate writing and reading.

Though it would seem optimal for writing center tutors to have a solid theoretical background in literacy theory as well as familiarity with how reading skill is acquired/developed, this is perhaps an unreasonable expectation. Still, in looking at the UWC tutors' beliefs, knowledge, and concerns about the role of teaching reading in writing tutoring, it does seem reasonable to contend that there are a number of important issues and concepts they should be exposed to either in tutor training courses, staff development, and/or staff meetings. And although extensive generalization from data collected from one writing center's staff is questionable at best, the modest analysis presented here may well be of use to directors of such programs in developing tutor training opportunities.

Perhaps a good starting point is for writing tutors to have some exposure to the concept that different kinds of texts call for different reading strategies. Feathers' (1993) work on "infotexts" and content-area reading, though aimed at secondary-level classroom instruction, may help tutors see the different requirements of different texts as well as the specific strategies that might help or hinder students in comprehending these texts. Though the work of writing center tutors is most often conducted outside the classroom environment, a knowledge of sound and not-so-sound classroom practices will empower tutors to better help struggling students work in whatever instructional context they may find themselves.

Much as is the case with writing instruction, all too often the teaching related to reading taking place in many college classrooms, though perhaps well intended, is not really conducive to acquiring increased facility in reading. As North suggests, due to their unique vantage point and interaction with students, writing center personnel see the "seamier side of things" in academia (North, 1994; p. 9). As they witness second-hand the wide spectrum of reading and writing pedagogy used in college classrooms across the curriculum, writing tutors with any amount of experience quickly realize that not all college-level classroom practice may be particularly sound. Thus, tutor examination of basic theoretical

information refuting some of the seemingly "common sense" assumptions about how skill in reading is acquired (e.g., problem readers should have more phonics, bottom-up approaches are best, etc.) as are found in Allington (1994) Smith (1988),Weaver (1994), and Rosenblatt (1982) would be appropriate.

It would also be useful for writing tutors to know that while the actual teaching of reading is not much discussed in four-year colleges and universities, there exists a body of work addressing reading development in such environments, and not necessarily as a remedial enterprise. Particularly useful might be descriptions of university-level reading programs and practices that are integrated into composition instruction, such as those outlined in Hooker (1986). Also of use may be works detailing specific strategies for approaching "infotext" reading, such as mapping (Feathers, 1993) and annotation, (Simpson & Nist, 1990).

Though it is doubtful whether the oft-heard suggestion that the best way to better writing skills is to "read more" results very often in any actual change in students' habits, it still would be beneficial for tutors to examine some of the reasons why the best way to develop reading skill is to read. Thus, some exposure to research indicating that pleasure reading has an enormous effect on the development of reading abilities and even language acquisition will no doubt be worthwhile. Especially useful is Krashen's succinct and readable *The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research* (1993) as well as a other articles on the relationship between reading and language acquisition (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Krashen, 1989).

Some discussion of the current politicizing of the teaching of reading in the public schools (i.e., the phonics vs. whole language "debate") will be particularly appropriate for writing center tutors, who, like many members of the general public, may have only the haziest notions of what is meant by those terms. What vague notions they have garnered via the garbled media portrayals may be quite erroneous. Taylor (1998) and Smith (1988) provide illuminating looks at the politics, incorrect assumptions, and quasi-research used in the public discourse concerning reading instruction, and McQuillan (1998) and Berliner and Biddle (1995) are especially readable treatments on the politically motivated crisis mentality that portrays American education generally, and literacy instruction specifically, as in a state of dire emergency.

To the many tutors who have some knowledge of current issues in writing center and general composition pedagogy, these misunderstandings may sound quite familiar. Just as writing process pedagogy (and thus writing center work) is often caricatured as ignoring the importance of grammar "basics" and can be thus made to appear quite silly and

"out there" as a teaching philosophy, so is whole language frequently depicted and demonized as a nonsensical approach to literacy learning that ignores phonics.

But tutors will find that a look beyond the hasty public rhetoric reveals a more measured truth (though it may not be as entertaining as "news"). Just as process pedagogy actually embraces grammar as important to writing while asserting it is only one aspect of the subject (but one often over emphasized by teachers, textbooks publishers, and the general public alike) so does whole language in many ways embrace phonics (or "phonemic awareness") as a part of literacy learning. Both process and whole language pedagogy stipulate, however, that focusing on one aspect of literacy (grammar and phonics respectively) to the exclusion of others in a rigid bottom-up approach usually results in brain-deadening drill-and-kill busywork that does far more harm than good. Thus, a discussion of the whole language/phonics debate in comparison to similar process/grammar discourse (though the latter has not as of yet been pounced on with the same ferocity by the politicians) will no doubt prove illuminating and worthwhile to writing center tutors.

Finally, writing center tutors should also be made aware that a lack of formal coursework in the teaching of reading does not mean they cannot be of great assistance to the students they work with. Just like those tutors who do not consider themselves "grammarians" but who nonetheless have acquired the ability to write grammatically correct English prose can be of assistance to students who have writing problems, so can tutors help students in developing reading skill without an extensive knowledge of reading theory. As implied by the process pedagogy/whole language parallels discussed above, the goal in the writing center concerning writing and reading proficiency is the same: understanding a process holistically rather than memorizing isolated rules.

In *Coming on Center: English Education in Evolution*, Moffett suggests—in a book written nearly two decades ago—that the "battles" over how to teach reading can be a quite a distraction for someone investigating the subject for the first time. Moffett also believes that a lack of inculcation in a certain approach or method may be a distinct *advantage*:

> To say that I never had any formal preparation in the teaching of reading
> is simply to say that I've never taken training in *any* area of teaching.
> Such innocence amounts to a real advantage in the field of reading,
> I realized, because it's a battlefield and the smoke of war obscures so
> badly that you have to step outside to perceive anything. I never had
> to strive to be broadminded and overcome the partisanship of being
> professionally brought up a certain way. (Moffett, 1981; p. 39)

Thus, as this modest study indicates, writing center tutors may already

possess the instincts and opportunities to effectively address another of the language arts in their work. And with a small amount of orientation to sound reading and literacy theory, they will no doubt be able to apply these concepts into useful and productive writing center practice. In doing so, they may in fact be performing a great service to teaching and learning in higher education, by re-integrating components of the language arts that despite our institutions' penchant for compartmentalization, were never really separate at all.

Notes

1. For confidentiality, a fictional name for the institution has been used.

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Appendix A:

Interview Questions for Assessing Writing Center Tutor Knowledge of Reading Instructional Theory

1) Have you taken any coursework in the teaching of reading? (If so, describe.)
2) What do you think reading is? That is, what are people actually doing when they read?
3) How did you learn to read?
4) Do you think you are a good reader?
5) What would you like to do better as a reader?
6) What problems do you see students you tutor having with reading?

7)What do you wish you knew about improving the reading abilities of adults?

8)If one of your students was having problems with reading, how would you help that person?

9)What do you see as the role of reading instruction in a writing center/tutoring writing?

—Some questions adapted from questions presented in Weaver, Constance. *Reading Process and Practice: From Socio-Linguistics to Whole Language* 2nd ed. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1994. page 11.

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