Challenging Our Practices, Supporting Our Theories: Writing Mentors As Change Agents Across Discourse Communities

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Abstract: Classroom-based writing mentors facilitate learning and knowledge transfer for both students and instructors in their classes. They accomplish this by doing *with* rather than by only teaching *to*, making the means of learning more visible and, therefore, the writing goals more accessible; this provides a powerful means of furthering WAC goals and objectives on campuses. Since mentors are typically not experts in the discipline in which they work, they must rhetorically read the class and the discipline, articulating this process for the instructor and other students. This gives students a better understanding of how the disciplinary discourse operates, and shows instructors the challenges students in the class face as they attempt to enter that discourse. Mentors' dual status as both peer and expert expands the range of social interactions in the classroom community of practice, helping to expose the motives that drive students' writing, and the motives that should drive the activity of writing in the discipline. Drawing on research emerging from WAC, writing center, and literacy practices, this article theorizes the experiences of four classroom writing mentors in order to better understand how this process works, and how it might be duplicated in other institutional contexts as a means of faculty and student development to create a culture of writing.

In a Bakhtinian sense, with whom, in what ways, and in what contexts we interact will determine what we stand to learn.(Ball and Freedman, 2004, p. 6)

The image of a writing center tutor is that of a peer interacting with students, using perceptive questions, drawing on the knowledge writers bring to the table, and applying this to new writing situations. The questions tutors use stem from an understanding of writing and collaborative learning theories (e.g., Gillespie & Lerner, 2004; Rafoth, 2005; Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2006), from tutors' own tacit knowledge about being a student, and from their analysis of the writing task. This is how the ideal writing center helps produce better writers (North, 1984): with tutors who are trained to ask questions about and apply their own resources to the rhetorical situation presented by the writer. The success of these strategies is furthered by the tutors' non-evaluative positive position: they don't grade and, in fact, are taught to avoid assuming the authoritative stance of a "little teacher" (Bruffee, 1978). As a result, tutors are able to create the ideal learning environment described by Tompkins

(1999), one characterized by "greater sensitivity to the needs of students and a more sympathetic understanding of their positions, both as workers in the academy and as people in the wider world" (p. 24).

Tompkins was referring to an optimal classroom situation, one that, we believe, can be fostered by bringing the writing center environment to the WAC classroom. Situated within a WAC course, writing mentors (the term we prefer over "writing fellows") collaborate uniquely with students and faculty, modeling for both groups how to enter others' discourse, how to exchange ways of constructing knowledge, and how to enter a disciplinary conversation, creating an appropriate ethos while maintaining a personal voice. They help raise the visibility of assumptions and practices for all, making evident the hidden complexity of the community practices necessary to master written knowledge in a discipline. They accomplish this by doing *with* rather than by only teaching *to*, making the means of learning more visible and, therefore, the writing goals more accessible; this provides a powerful means of furthering WAC goals and objectives on campuses.

The Effectiveness of Writing Mentors: Theory

> People act in multiple, interacting systems of activity where writing that seems the "same" as what one has read or written before is in practice very different—and not only in the formal features, the "how" of writing. Lying behind the *how* are the *who*, *where*, *when*, *what* and—most importantly—the *why* of writing, the motives of people engaged in some system of activity (Russell & Yañez, 2002, p. 359).

Writing mentors' immersion in the course enables them to act as a type of classroom ethnographer, observing the actual "routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence and which has become part of [its] practice" (Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, & Boquet, 2007, p. 36). We maintain that because writing mentors[1] are analyzing the context of the class, they are able to address the "how" of writing, and respond to the disciplinary *who, what, when, where,* and *why*. Thus, the work writing mentors engage in with students comes to be shaped by the demands of the particular disciplinary classroom, and also, using the questioning techniques learned in a writing center, by the needs of the students seeking to enter that discipline.

Finding out how students engage in the writing process is central to mentors' classroom work, and they are trained to recognize the formulas on which students will rely. These formulas, previously successful in students' school writing experiences, often consist of external prescriptions that blind students to rhetorical cues that might demand different writing strategies or a different application of a writing strategy (see Bartholomae, 1985; Beaufort, 2007; Hillocks, 1995; Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006). "[G]iven the way freshman writing is typically taught," students are "ill-prepared to examine, question or understand the literacy standards of discourse communities ... in other disciplines, the work world, or in other social spheres they participate in" (Beaufort, 2007, p. 11). This leaves students, in Bakhtin's sense, struggling to engage a discipline's discourse, seeking to make it their own; this difficulty often results in what Beaufort (2007) calls "negative transfer of learning, a series of failed attempts to successfully meet instructors' expectations in disciplines outside of writing classes" (p. 11). We find that when a classroom-based mentor attends every class, integrates herself into the life of the classroom, interacts with the professor, and debriefs students on their writing processes, both the mentors and the student-writers engage in rhetorically reading the classroom and in learning how to speak more effectively within that community.

Mentors accomplish these goals by drawing on their authority and experience as rhetorical experts, as authorities on writing—but they are not disciplinarily authoritative. There is an advantage in this since mentors can then more readily use their analytical skills to see how the discourse operates— and how they might enter it. The discourse has not yet bound mentors to it and even though they "encounter it with its authority already fused to it...It is ... not a question of choosing it from among other possible discourses that are its equal" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 342). While mentors, like the students, lack the instructor's authoritative mastery of the disciplinary language, they bring to the classroom their tutorial understanding that disciplinary knowledge is constructed with language. They already know from their writing center practice that multiple discourses can merge to provide access to new communities. This experience in writing center pedagogy also prevents mentors from reducing writing to an authoritative formula. Instead, a mentor uses rhetorical expertise to unmask the student formulas by making apparent the internal dialogue that shapes students' writing and their interpretation of writing tasks. Mentors, however, engage in this task not just with student-writers but also with faculty.

For faculty, mentors project and amplify the difficulties that face a novice engaging in the community of practice. They embody and give voice to the internal dialogue in which students are engaged, uniquely articulating for instructors what students and mentor are experiencing. In addition to fostering faculty understandings of student positions, though, mentors use their questioning, collaboration techniques and observational abilities to draw out and examine an instructor's understandings of writing, to make visible their own tendency to articulate writing as formula instead of knowledge building. It is not unusual that faculty reduce the discipline to formulas because, as representatives of the authoritative discourse within the community, they are operating tacitly when it comes to writing. Writing, for the instructor, has "become transparent, automatic and beneath the level of conscious activity" (Russell, 1995, p. 70) and of conscious articulation— especially when it comes to writing assignments.

WAC and writing practitioners seek to accomplish what mentors practice on a daily basis: a gradual transformation of how faculty—and, therefore, students—think about and use writing to provide entry to a discipline. With what we are now learning about transfer in writing instruction, it seems that mentors provide faculty and WAC directors understandings that help promote student knowledge transfer.[2] Poised in that middle space between faculty and students, between their own discourse and that of the classroom, mentors witness that "internally persuasive word [that] is half-ours and half-someone else's." They work alongside students to "awaken new and independent words, ... [which are] not so much interpreted by us as [they are] further, that is, freely, developed, applied to new material, new conditions." Mentors encourage each student with whom they work to "enter into inter-animating relationships with new contexts" (quotations from Bakhtin, 1981, pp.345-46); but this active engagement with context applies to faculty also. A mentor can open up for faculty the internally persuasive dialogue that shapes their own activities and alerts them to the need to treat each classroom—each student—as a new context that must be learned.

Reciprocal Mentoring as a Model

Mentors learn quite quickly that when they enter a community of practice with its intersecting activities composed of a space, discipline, materials, prior knowledge, and expectations, they must work out together, with the students and instructor, a disciplinary identity that will successfully position itself and be heard. They accomplish this most effectively through mutual mentoring, a relationship that differs "from other superior/subordinate helping relationships. . . [and is defined by] a reciprocity between mentor and protégé and an accomplishment of an identity transformation

by each party" (Healy & Welchert, 1990, p. 18). This seems to describe accurately the exploration of internal dialogue and authoritative discourse in which faculty, students and mentor all engage.

Without such exploration, students attempt to situate themselves in a disciplinary discourse's system of activity, focusing on external, identifiable markers as the key to entry; likewise faculty, already acculturated to their discipline, attempt to explain writing by focusing on these same external markers. Both will, for example, spend time checking off the component parts of a report: the literature review, the method, the discussion, the results. Students will then, often unsuccessfully, follow directions for what goes into each section that faculty believed they have explained. Unless students and faculty realize that an exchange of information is needed, these participants will continue to speak past each other. WAC activities such as free writing, journaling and workshopping of papers seek to open the conversation. However, our classrooms, faculty work loads, student schedules and the assumptions that underlie teaching and learning still serve as impediments to a free exchange of information.

As collaborative mediators, mentors regularly ask instructors questions that students usually have about assignments: What, for example, is the difference between "results" and "conclusion"? How long should the literature review be in relation to the three-page paper assigned? What do you mean by "discuss"? (see also Mullin, Enders, Reid & Baldridge, 1998). In turn, mentors find out what students assume about writing: What have you written before? How are you going to start this assignment? Why are you using the textbook as your primary authority here? Writing mentors dig out students' and instructors' internal constructions of which the externals are merely markers.

While instructors can also work with students in the same way, the mentors are better situated to do so because of their peer status and their non-authoritative positions (see, for example, Falchikov, 2001; O'Donnell & King, 1999). That position—a peer to students, but an authority on writing to faculty—promotes a mutuality of exchange through which all learn more about what is otherwise invisible: mentors provide a vocabulary from each to each.

According to Ball and Freedman (2004) the "role of the other is critical to our development; in essence, the more choice we have of words to assimilate, the more opportunities we have to learn" (p. 6). By fostering a dialogue necessary to communication and learning, writing mentors offer "more choice" and "more opportunities" to students and faculty. For students this means more effective transference to writing situations that vary because of discipline or social context; for faculty this means using student perspectives to reflect on their own tacit knowledge about writing in their disciplines and adopting a language of writing appropriate to their students; for writing mentors it means expanding their own abilities to analyze rhetorical situations and transfer knowledge—to writing, to the classroom and to the writing center.

Theories into Practice

It is actually much easier to experience the complexity of an interactive system that is continuously reasserting itself through mutual negotiation than it is to describe it accurately. In an attempt to demonstrate how learning results from a struggle between inner dialogue and authoritatively persuasive discourse, in either students or faculty, we focus here on the mentor. This Janus-like figure enters a disciplinary classroom with her own knowledge from the writing center community of practice, using it to establish a ground on which students' and faculty's internally persuasive discourses can emerge. Though fostering a dialogue among participants, she must also be open to an assimilation of their discourses into her own. She can't function effectively by standing outside the discipline.

As the writing mentors discussed below found, the process of achieving membership in the classroom community parallels the process of a student entering a discourse: it makes them reconstruct their own sense of "authority," and renew and rethink writing strategies within that context. This becomes evident when writing mentors first meet with their classroom instructor and a director of the mentor program to discuss the syllabus. As faculty discuss their objectives, mentors begin to "play" student; in actuality, they are trying to learn about this discipline as they ask "What are you looking for in this assignment?" "Do students know what a literature review is?" "What an interesting topic! I suspect students don't know much about suicide in Japanese films?" (faculty-mentor meetings, spring 07). From their first meeting, writing mentors model for faculty the struggles, questions, and confusions of the novice entrant to the community. Faculty respond by rethinking their objectives, assignments and directions: "Well, I really just want them to know how to interpret primary sources." "You know, they never do well on the literature review; maybe I should just have a paper where I teach them how to do that first." "Students write such odd things about what they see in these films; it's as if...maybe what I should do, instead of launching into the films is ask what they know about Japanese suicide?" (faculty-mentor meetings, 06, 07).

Equally telling are the changes in body language and the direction of discussion throughout the first meeting which takes place in either the faculty member's or mentor director's office. Within either of these institutional spaces, the faculty member generally, and unconsciously, assumes an institutional role: the conversation takes place with the faculty member speaking to the director—teacher to teacher. Faculty focus their eyes and speech toward their colleague, gesturing or nodding occasionally towards the third person in the room—the mentor; this dynamic changes as mentors ask their questions. Not only do the eyes, speech and body turn towards the mentor, but the conversation shifts. Faculty begin to direct their questions to the mentors: "Do you think students will understand this assignment better if I change it to...?" "How do you think I can get students to understand that I would like them to...?" (faculty-mentor meetings 06, 07). What surfaces in these meetings is the inner dialogue a teacher may be having ("what I should do..." "maybe I could..." "what I really ought to try..." "why can't they..."). This dialogue becomes explicit in the presence of a student-mentor, who serves, as one faculty member put it, as a teaching mirror (Abascal-Hildebrand, 1994), reflecting back the interior dialogue often not expressed by students (except by a frustrating "Would you explain the assignment again?").

This interaction is the first step in developing the mutual respect necessary to generating the reciprocity that marks a successful mentoring relationship. The second is evident during the debriefing of the mentors by the director of the program; mentors discover that "She [the faculty member] is so passionate about her students!" "I didn't realize faculty put so much thought into their teaching," and "Faculty really do care about teaching!" (mentor debriefings, 06, 07). This shift in assumptions about disciplinary faculty and their authoritative presence is equally necessary for mentors. They need to articulate, to give voice, to their own inner construction of faculty, of the discipline, of what constitutes classroom activity. Mentors also learn that while they have much to offer—their rhetorical expertise—they have much to learn. This also prepares the mentors for the new middle space they occupy in a WAC class.

When Amanda, for example, who was attached to a Germanic Studies course, found that her own system of activity—the writing center—no longer was the operative authoritarian discourse, she worked to become part of the new community of practice. This manifested itself in simple ways (students questioned why she was there and what she knew) and in more complex ways (she had to figure out the hybrid form of writing required, somewhere between literature and history). That Amanda and other mentors were able to successfully integrate themselves into the disciplinary community of students focused on learning course content might be gleaned from student class

evaluations: mentors "help them through their process"; a student will note that "though I was a good writer, I learned a lot"; and others concur that "I thought the mentor a waste of time, but I learned more in this class by thinking through it with her!" (student evaluations, 06).

These are, of course, the same kinds of praise often seen in student evaluations of writing center tutorials. What was different about the evaluations of writing mentors was that students could see mentors were learning *with* them: "Although [the mentor] is not a geographer [she] picked up the concepts quickly, and we both learned a lot from each other." When students were asked whether it is a good idea to have a mentor in a particular class, they often stated that, "because she knew what was expected of us in this class…there should be a mentor in every course!" They noted that "we didn't have to explain to her what geography is about or what was expected of us [because] she was very well informed and good at communicating assignments…having a mentor in class is vital to understanding just what is required and to answer questions completely" (student evaluations of fall 05, 06 and spring 06).

To prove themselves as learners, Amanda and other mentors met with students one-on-one, participated in class activities and created short classroom presentations, often with the instructors. These efforts that create an identity out of rhetorical practices of the writing center and the classroom also change faculty constructions of their own community of practice. Several faculty initially aren't sure that an undergraduate non-major in their classrooms can possibly help students improve writing and learning. Yet they later are convinced that the mentor "quickly began to learn how students needed to hear Wagner [in order to write their papers about the operas]" (faculty evaluation fall 05). Many note that students' writing improved "by far," or "is the best I've ever seen" (faculty evaluations fall 05 through spring 07); some speak of "now having a vocabulary with which I can talk about writing with my students" (faculty in-service fall 06); others write that "the mentor was exceedingly useful in helping students with some of the most difficult material they'll ever encounter" (faculty evaluations, spring 07). The change in faculty is stimulated not only by working with mentors, but by observing and hearing about the mentors interaction with students.

Writing mentor Derek asks faculty to require students to meet him in a ten minute one-on-one at the beginning of the semester, before a paper is assigned. These conferences initiate a semester-long dialogue on writing. In each meeting, Derek explains the non-directive, non-evaluative philosophy of a writing mentor and the logistics of student-mentor interaction. He also begins to present himself as a writing role model, emphasizing that, like the classroom-based students, he is an undergraduate; he has papers of his own to write, and despite his ostensible *authority*, still seeks feedback on his writing. Most importantly, these conferences show the students that the mentor is not a jukebox full of rules about comma placement, but someone who thinks with them. The introductory conferences help Derek develop rapport, and find and establish common ground—all things absolutely essential to working closely with students, overcoming their doubts, and helping them start to learn.

Much of this can be accomplished in writing centers where tutors work with the same students over the course of a semester. However, the classroom space is present during these mentor meetings, even when they take place outside the classroom. The mentor engages with the student to make that classroom of practice a bit more visible by examining the expectations and practices that need to be unpacked: students' understandings of readings, of the discipline, of the instructor's expectations— even students' fear of instructors, since mentors also encourage direct instructor-student interaction. All of this is conveyed in multiple ways to the instructors: through direct conversation, mentor feedback on assignments in progress, or through mentor-suggested class presentations on writing or peer review. The mentors' interactions contribute to a more transparent educational experience, one that is based on collaboration through a shared unpacking of expectations, assumptions and internal dialogues.

The importance of working through these internal dialogues to make evident this struggle to enter a community of practice was exemplified in writing mentor Rachel's work in an NROTC class on leadership and ethics. The purpose of the class was for each student to situate him or herself personally within the authoritative military structure, a structure that, for those outside the community and for its initiates, seemed to clearly direct their writing as well as their identities. For these students, the "how, why, who, and what" was even encoded in the physical structure of the ROTC building—their "where"—which contains levels and rooms named after those in a ship. NROTC students either find their voices within this military structure, or they lose their voices, or don't fit into the structure at all. There is, in fact, a balancing lesson here that puts in relief the Bakhtinian theories we use in this article: while the NROTC is authoritative, successful corpsmen and women have to build their own authority to speak and make decisions. In Rachel's mentored class on ethics and leadership, students had to make those decisions in a way that corresponded with their ideological selves. In Bahktinian terms, students and Rachel had to come to terms with each other's discourse and together, find their way into the discourse of the authoritarian military.

For Rachel, an English department graduate student with her own assumptions about "military" and "ethics," the mutual mentoring seemed most evident in a tutorial with Lena[3] . Lena broke down and cried during a mentoring session, voicing her concerns about her religious beliefs and her fears about her ability to "pull the trigger" if called upon to do so in the line of duty. In this case the struggle was part of the student's induction into the profession as she sought to articulate her place within the military, her position on the paper under discussion, and her own identity. She was not crying to someone who might or might not understand the military community; she was not crying alone either. She was instead with Rachel, a newly accepted member of her community who, with her, successfully worked through the position, paper and identity in question, allowing Lena to construct these with/in the authoritative discourse she had chosen to speak.

For Rachel's part, she came to be an articulate translator of NROTC to those outside of that community, challenging assumptions about what constituted military education and who entered the military. While still retaining her initial position about military service, Rachel's ground also shifted, making her an effective mentor of three NROTC classes.

While mentor experiences such as these verify that writing into a discourse is a social activity, a balancing of voices, a hearing and rejection, an effective assimilation, the practices that allow these experiences seldom make it into our classrooms, much less WAC classrooms. Instead, our classrooms reflect an "authoritative discourse [that] may organize around itself great masses of other types of discourses (which interpret it, praise it, apply it in various ways), but the authoritative discourse itself does not merge with these" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 343). The merging does take place, however, when the *practitioner* representing the authoritative discourse does more than just acknowledge that other types of discourses exist.

Faculty, working with mentors, are less likely to feel that students are "not following directions" and more likely to feel that they themselves need to articulate carefully their expectations (faculty evaluations, 06, 07). While faculty may be used to teaching particular ways, giving particular assignments, those working with mentors reconsider how language might generate learning in their classroom. Rather than just assigning disconnected in-class writing or journaling, faculty working with mentors are more responsive to thinking holistically, to measuring how one assignment ties to another, how an in-class writing supports the learning needed for a research paper. They transfer the practices of peer review, short writing assignments, developmentally structured research papers into other classes (faculty in-service, 06, 07) and they make them work there. These activities are no longer seen as *just* for writing-intensive classes since faculty's awareness of how writing is part of their disciplinary system of activity is no longer entirely tacit. Faculty engage in new practices that

reflect thought-provoking fractures in their learned responses to student writing, in their definition of their disciplinary writing, and in their construction of students.

In their evaluations of the mentor experience, faculty note that students' writing and their enthusiasm for writing improved ('05, '06, 07). They also say that an advantage of working with mentors is that they "gave feedback about class discussions as well as writing," and that mentors "also provided an opportunity for me to hear about some of the students' concerns that they may not have expressed directly to me." For another instructor, the mentor "helped me be more effective by providing a student perspective." Faculty also like "to have someone to bounce ideas off of," and recognize that they "have to think more carefully about how to construct a syllabus and assignments" (faculty evaluations, 06, 07).

Conclusions: More to Think About

One mentor's classroom challenge also exposed for us a lesson to be carried to our work with faculty in the disciplines: Tim was attached to a class studying women's construction of their roles in our culture. His work with students was complicated by the subject matter, and he faced a critical self-awareness of the unexamined, gendered relationship to writing pedagogy he was unconsciously modeling; it conflicted with the feminist orientation of the course and got in the way of good mentoring. As a graduate student-instructor in English and a writing tutor, Tim was not naïve about gender and its dynamics (e.g., Zawacki, 2001; Miller, 2005). However, in this case the transparency that mentors bring to the classroom was problematic. Tim was challenged to re-think whether it was possible, or even appropriate, to "locate himself within" the conversation taking place in the classroom. Female students wrestling with controversial gender topics would not respond to his modeling efforts the way they would, we suspect, to a female mentor. Nor did Tim feel that he, as a man, could adequately model the cognitive and emotional journeys his female students were required by the course content to make. His experience thus raised a number of disruptive questions about WAC pedagogy: to what extent do faculty understand how gender affects work with any student—even when that faculty member is aware of the theories in play? Can/should a male mentor collaborate with women writing on gender and violence? Are the terms "collaborate" and "help" still part of the problem in such a context and in the vocabulary of writing, WAC, and classroom-based tutoring research? While there are several studies on gender and the writing classroom, have WAC practitioners considered the implications of these on writing intensive classrooms?

Tim's experience underscores the challenges to faculty, WAC directors and mentors: to address critically their own constructions of students, their constructions of authority, and the challenge to their ability to create the environment articulated by Tompkins (1999), one that opens up the multiple inner-persuasive dialogues within a community of practice. We know that "language instruction in the schools demonstrates how difficult it is for people to communicate honestly and work through their ongoing difficulties. . . .[and] internally persuasive discourses need opportunities for testing against opposing points of view" (Ball and Freedman, 2004. p. 28), but the issue of gender raised here puts in high relief the difficulty facing us, with our best intentions in the WAC classroom: the need to create opportunities for honest dialogic communication, for participants' inner discourse to become articulated, and for new writing and teaching practices to organically emerge.

While our on-going studies that examine student papers in writing mentored classrooms may tell us more about the surface markers that improve as a result, we believe that writing mentors facilitate a deeper understanding of how writing, especially disciplinary writing, works. The current scholarship on transference of students' writing abilities supports our contention here that unless the inner dialogue actively contends with authoritative discourse, and unless that discourse is visible,

integration into a discipline will continue to be an arduous process for students and a frustrating one for the faculty who teach them.

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Notes

[1] There are many names for "classroom-based tutors" (DeCiccio, 2006; Soven, 2001; Speigelman & Grobman, 2005). We use "mentor" to indicate the reciprocal relationship (see Healy & Welchert, 1990) of our classroom-based program.

[2] See, for example, Beaufort (2007), Thaiss and Zawacki (2006).

[3] Student's name is changed to protect privacy.

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