

# TUTORS' IDEALS AND PRACTICES

**ABSTRACT:** *This case study of two college tutors demonstrates the importance for writing instructors and tutors to engage in collaborative reflection to identify and examine their frame of reference, including their assumptions, beliefs, values and practices. An important finding was that the tutors' interpretation of writing instructors' authority influenced significantly how they translated their ideals into practices and had a clear influence on how tutors allowed student writers ownership of their texts. Consequently, for both writing instructors and tutors, central to their collaborative reflections is the question of the extent to which they support basic writers to become independent and authoritative writers and college students.*

To become effective writing instructors and tutors of basic writers we need to develop a critical understanding of our frame of reference: the beliefs, values, and resulting practices about teaching and learning. If we profess to teach and tutor in ways that support and nurture basic writers' ownership of their writing and, as a result, their development as autonomous and independent college students, an ideal that a majority of writing instructors and tutors claim to hold, then we must ask ourselves to what extent are our practices true to our ideals. For basic writers to develop the competencies necessary to compose increasingly complex academic papers, the relationship of the writing instructor, writing tutor, and basic writer must be thoughtfully and collaboratively examined. In the following case study of two college writing tutors, it becomes clear why writing instructors need to understand how college students translate their journeys as successful writers into tutoring ideals which, they claim, support basic writers' development as college writers. The challenges and obstacles with which college tutors contend as they try to translate those ideals into consistent practices can also inform writing instructors about the inherent difficulties we face as we attempt to fashion practices that adhere to our ideals.

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ing necessary to support ongoing and sustained opportunities for tutors and instructors to reflect on and analyze their instructional practices. As a consequence the tutors did the best they knew how, took their own best advice, and made decisions and choices that were never challenged. The two college tutors in this study made a number of assumptions about the intentions of both the student writers and their instructors, assumed they had correctly interpreted their students' assignments and the instructors' comments, but at no point did the tutors question if their interpretations were correct. Unfortunately for the student writers, there was no established route for the tutors and writing instructors to reflect on and analyze their practices. Writing instructors and tutors lead busy lives and, as committed as they may be, usually do not have the economic sufficiency to donate all the time they need to build an understanding of their actual practices and the implications of their practices on their student writers.

As an instructor who has both taught writing in dedicated courses and integrated writing in content courses and has worked extensively with high school and college writing tutors, I have found it beneficial to give serious consideration to Mary Kennedy's inquiries into the relationship between our ideals to our practices. Not surprisingly, Kennedy discovered that many teachers adopted practices similar to their former teachers. That is, teachers derived a frame of reference from their past learning experiences, which they then used to interpret and evaluate their current teaching situations, including their students' behaviors and intentions and their own. Conflicts and difficulties arose when teachers were expected to implement teaching practices that were new or different and did not fit into their existing frame of reference and might even contradict practices and expectations teachers considered valid measures of their students' accomplishments and their own. Kennedy noted:

Without a clear sense of how teachers' ideals translate into classroom behavior, with multiple ideals influencing their interpretation of classroom situations, and with the vagaries of the language of classroom ideals, these teachers' interpretations of classroom situations, and their responses to them, will depend heavily on a frame of reference we may never see and they may never be aware of (70).

Kennedy goes the next step, recommending that teachers carefully examine their instructional practices and embedded ideals, because practices cannot necessarily be predicted from knowledge of espoused ideals. In her analysis of teachers' responses to student writing samples Kennedy discovered that teachers' interpretations and

responses were sometimes even different from one situation to another: "The ideas and ideals they claimed to care about could be, and often were, incompatible with the ideas that occurred to them in the face of these specific situations" (57). Kennedy noted that the teachers responded overwhelmingly to the writing samples from a traditional prescriptive frame of reference, interpreting student-writing samples in terms of errors about rules of grammar, punctuation, and syntax. Even the majority of those teachers who espoused more modern rhetorical positions, in which concepts or students' strategies and purposes were held to be more important, tended to revert to interventions that were grounded in a traditional prescriptive frame of reference (58). Brannon and Knoblauch also found that teachers expected their students' texts to match their version of an ideal text and responded to their students' text in ways to make them conform. As a consequence, students have to struggle to maintain ownership, a difficult task even for the more confident student, or acquiesce and relinquish authority and semblance of independence (Fletcher 50).

The complexities embedded in writing instruction and tutoring provide fertile ground for contradictions to arise between our professed ideals about a writer's authority and our actual practice. Pointing to a more complex and problematic nature of tutoring than usually assumed, Healy identified a variety of roles tutors are expected to play and the flexibility that tutors are expected to have at hand, giving rise to role conflict and role ambiguity (43). Gillam helps us to further understand this as a state of affairs that "is neither surprising nor unsettling; rather it is a natural result of the multi-vocality and contradictions inherent in language" (3). Tutors can have a difficult time contending with such inherent conflicts and contradictions, a problem that is magnified when they do not use collaborative practices with their student writers, and consequently reinforce dependency, resulting in the disempowerment of the writer (Mullin 10; Pemberton 68). Instead of supporting writers' ownership and authority, tutors often contend for control that undermines the writer's authority by setting the agenda (Jacobs and Karliner 503), use questioning as a strategy to control (Fletcher 42; Reigstad 17), and impart information as an English teacher rather than responding to the writer as a peer collaborator and guide (Scott 9). It would therefore appear that granting student writers ownership is a challenge that confounds tutors, and the failure to do so results from experiences deeply imbedded in the frame of reference of writing instructors and tutors.

## **Denise and Larry: Their Ideals and Practices**

In the following analysis we meet Denise and Larry, both college

writing tutors of basic writers, who claim to value and support their students' becoming independent and autonomous writers. We learn about their history as writers and the influence their individual histories has had on their tutoring ideals and practices, the extent to which their practices support or contradict their ideals, and the extent they are aware of conflicts that might have arisen during the tutoring sessions or when they reflect on their ideals and practices.

The case studies were conducted at the writing center of an urban northeast college in a writing center that provides tutoring to students enrolled in a range of courses, with the majority being basic writers enrolled as either freshmen or sophomores in one of the two required composition courses. For this study, I met with each tutor individually for four times over a period of approximately six weeks. During the first meeting, each tutor described her background as a college student and writing history, tutoring philosophy and ideals, and pointed out what she considered to be her most important tutoring practices. Both Denise and Larry tutored two English as a Second Language (ESL) basic writing students during their first of two recorded and transcribed sessions. They then met with me individually and reflected on the practices revealed in the tutoring session transcriptions. Then based on what each had discovered in their reflections, I asked Denise and Larry to reflect on their plans for their second tutoring session with the same students. Again the process was repeated, the second tutoring session was recorded and transcribed, and I met with the tutors again and asked them to reflect on revealed practices.

## **Denise – Creating a Voice**

At the time of this study, Denise, a computer science major, was the less experienced of the two tutors, having only tutored for less than a year. She anticipated continuing her tutoring for an additional two years and hoped to develop her writing to a more advanced level so she would be prepared to tutor upper level students. Denise defined herself as a self-reliant and independent college student who deliberately sought out challenges in order to establish her voice in her writing, her most important goal, and was willing to investigate a subject and revise her thinking and writing until she was satisfied with the results. Her search for her voice began in elementary school and continued in college:

In the sixth, seventh, eighth grade writing was difficult. I didn't really know exactly what was expected of me. It took many more revisions than it does now in college. Even in high school it was hard to find my own voice. I found for myself as I got

## Larry and Writing - A Route to Self Discovery

Larry, a far more experienced student and tutor than Denise, had given much careful thought to his role as tutor and his responsibility to the students he tutored. His was a journey in which he attempted to gain knowledge about himself and define himself as a person. While he was a private in the Army, Larry made a conscious decision to write as part of a larger process to "find himself." Like Richard Wright, his desire was "to free himself through writing" and to therefore define himself as distinct from another person. If he could see himself on paper, Larry felt he would then be able to make decisions, to change who he might become in the future. After leaving the Army, his life became chaotic, and he even lived in a homeless shelter for a short period of time. Larry again turned to writing and he began to feel grounded and more in control of his life.

Eventually, Larry discovered that his desire to find himself through writing was not enough, and he decided that he "needed technical skills." He began a self-designed study of writing beginning with a study of grammar with *Harbrace*, an experience he described as intimidating and, at times, "just strange." "I opened up and I started on page one, and I took my index cards, and I just wrote them on one side, wrote the answers on the other, and I went over and over [the cards], day and night, while continuing to write at the same time."

As he diligently copied *Harbrace* and tried to memorize and use the rules, Larry realized there were differences between what he was able to write, how *Harbrace* was showing him how to write, and how published writers really composed. He noted: "I did not have the background, just did not have enough reading background. So I started reading some more." Along the way he read Albert Camus, Victor Frankel, Ernest Hemingway, Charles Dickens, F. Scott Fitzgerald and many, many others. Larry remained a serious and committed student of literature and philosophy, eventually majoring in both.

Larry entered college on the GI Bill, and passed the entrance writing test. Even though he received an A on most of his papers in his first English composition course, Larry soon realized that his knowledge of *Harbrace* was not enough and decided that he needed to learn more. It was also during this period Larry began to develop a more critical eye about writing instructors and entered into what he described as his "cynical stage." He said that he "started seeing that what I was reading about what writing was had nothing to do with what I was being shown on the board." Larry found the five-paragraph essay meaningless, a "creature," for which he had no use. Larry recalled that he often heard teachers telling students not to make comma splices or have fragments "but at the same time, we never went over that struc-

ture, the structure of the sentence, so these words were meaningless." He continued by noting that too often his composition instructors concentrated on "grammar" and yet did not even appear to know or want to explore the meaning of an essay. Larry wanted to know, "If you don't know what an essay is how are you going to know how to compose one?" and compared the author of an essay to the architect of a building who "knows the features of his building before he constructs it."

In his junior year, Larry elected to enroll in the college tutors preparation course and was most impressed with Susan Horton's *Thinking through Writing*, the primary text of the course. Larry used Horton to confirm his more mature personal theme that writers had to find their own way and needed to decide for themselves how best to use the advice of others.

### **Larry's Tutoring Ideals – What is an Essay?**

Larry remained concerned about possible definitions of essays both for himself and for the students he tutored. He had concluded that student writers were frequently confused and "boxed-in" because they were looking "for a recipe" and incorrectly treated "the five-paragraph essay as a definition," but failed to conceive the essay as "an act of discovery." He continually tested students about their commitment to his definition of the essay and writing, in effect determining if they were forming a "new value system." Larry asked students how they wanted a tutoring session organized; however, if a student asked him to focus on grammar, Larry interpreted this to mean that the student was fearful about passing a course and did not want to take the responsibility to improve her writing: "The worst thing of all is that they have that in reverse. Their first priority is to meet the course, not to deal with their writing itself." Like himself, Larry held student writers responsible for learning to improve their writing, and tried to accomplish this goal in several ways, using each approach as a test of the student's commitment. He also assigned each student readings from his tutoring course: Frank Smith's "Myths of Writing" and "Reading Like a Writer," selected readings from Susan Horton's *Thinking through Writing*, and Wayne Trotta's "Overcoming the Fear of Writing." Larry assumed that, if students read the articles, "It tells me how committed they are; how much effort they're ready to put; how much time they're going to put; how much they thought about it." He usually liked to begin with Trotta's article because "you want to get rid of the fear first." Larry did note, however, that few students seemed to read the articles or were as interested as he would have liked in adopting his philosophy of writing.

It is not possible to understand Larry's tutoring ideals separate from his feelings of resistance and resentment toward the authority of college writing instructors. He believed some of the difficulties students experienced resulted from their attributing far too much authority to their instructors. "But my professor said" is a statement he heard over and over: "I have to even prick myself, pinch myself to make sure that I do hear it again because I've heard it so many times that I've stopped hearing."

## **Larry's Tutoring Practices**

In his two transcribed tutoring sessions, Larry quickly set his priorities and used a question-and-answer and lecture format with two female ESL students. He never asked them to describe their prior writing experiences. In fact, during the first session, Larry took approximately 90% of the time trying to define an argumentative essay that he thought would meet their instructors' assignments, explaining the importance of reading the four articles, and the importance of separating composing and grammar:

Because the most important thing is getting your ideas across on paper. Who cares if you know grammar a hundred percent? If you're confused, it doesn't matter. You know what I mean? Some people can write grammatically correct sentences and still they're confusing when it come to their ideas. And teachers are more forgiving if you make mistakes with just grammar, but your ideas are good.

Larry also gave the students a checklist to guide them in reviewing their drafts before bringing them to the tutoring session, even though he did later admit that he did not know how many of his students actually used this list. He also asked them to bring index cards to review the parts of speech and "traditional prescriptive grammar that they go over in class," and to bring a writing journal that was to be included in a binder with dividers for their papers and the four articles.

True to his longstanding feelings about writing instructors, Larry contrasted himself with the students' instructors, explaining that while he could be trusted to tutor the students as adults rather than as children, their instructors would not:

And this stuff [readings and approach to be used in tutoring] is graduate, undergraduate to graduate work. Sometimes

when you go into these classes, I'll be the first one to tell you in these composition courses they treat you like a baby, which is really bad for writing. I'm not going to treat you like a baby. You're going to be ready for graduate and for undergraduate courses.

He also told his students that they had two options when they heard their instructor's response: they could assume "this person doesn't know what he's talking about," or they could assume their instructors "know what they're talking about, but they don't know how to speak to me. One of the two." Larry usually assumed that the first explanation was true.

How successful was Larry tutoring basic writers? Larry did not hesitate to express his frustration about how slowly the ESL student writers were learning his definitions of the argumentative essay and began to blame the two students for not having taken the time and effort to memorize the revised definitions. To his credit, Larry did acknowledge he was not as familiar with second language issues as he might have been and wondered if ESL students were less likely to challenge or question him or their instructors.

## **Ideals, Practice, and the Question of Authority**

Consistent with Kennedy's finding, Denise and Larry interpreted their behaviors but their students' responses to be consistent with their ideals and experienced no role conflicts (Healy 45) or competing ideologies (Gillam 10). Denise pointed out all the instances in which she felt she had supported and allowed her students' development of voice; Larry pointed to the many instances in which he believed her had allowed his students to challenge his authority and to build a definition of an argumentative essay. Denise was certainly more true to her ideals, while Larry barely allowed his students space to breathe or voice their opinions or questions.

There are several plausible hypotheses to explain the contradictions between Denise and Larry's ideals and practices. The first hypothesis is that both Denise and Larry were so influenced by their perceptions of writing instructors' authority they consequently ended up subscribing to multiple, and sometimes conflicting ideals (Kennedy 69). Denise wanted her students to develop their voice, yet she was constrained by a need for her basic writers to accurately answer the assignment and satisfy the instructor's requirements; consequently, she could not support her students to take the risks necessary for them to continue to develop their writing. As a result, Denise also continually failed to realize or develop her authority as a responsive reader. Larry



wanted his students to question the meaning of an essay, and simultaneously the authority of the tutor and writing instructor. Yet at the same time, Larry wanted the ESL students to accept his form of the argumentative essay that he knew would help them meet the demands of their writing instructors and, by doing so, probably receive higher grades. Another hypothesis is that neither Denise and Larry really trusted the judgments of their ESL basic writers; both tutors seemed to have decided they knew best and did not actually expect the students to be able to develop more sophisticated or complex writing. Denise never moved beyond addressing the sentence level construction of their texts, avoiding or being unaware of how they might consider and develop the controlling ideas of their texts and relationship of the paragraphs to each other and to the text as a whole. In addition, even though both Denise and Larry acknowledged they knew very little about tutoring ESL students, neither one voiced an intention or need to talk with an instructor, another tutor, or to read further. And, finally, a concluding hypothesis is that the real and imaged authority of the writing instructors permeated the tutoring atmosphere, influencing how both Denise and Larry interpreted their relationship with their students. Both Denise and Larry compromised their student writers' ownership and authority of their writing by allowing their interpretations of instructors' authority to determine their tutoring practices. Consistent with Kennedy's findings, this case study again points out that tutors and teachers practices, "cannot be predicted from knowledge of their espoused ideals. Without a clear sense of how teachers' ideals translate into classroom situations, and with the vagaries of the language of classroom ideals, these teachers interpretations of classroom situations, and their responses to them, will depend heavily on a frame of reference we may never see and they may never be aware of" (70).

## **Creating a Professional Community**

Gillam challenges writing instructors and tutors to learn from "the tensions which seem so indigenous to writing center life, the competing ideologies and mixed loyalties which collide and contend on a daily, even hourly basis, can be re-read as positive, as providing fertile ground for writing and talking about writing." Since, she argues, language and meaning develop only through social interaction, student tutors and writers will experience conflicts and tensions, and it is through these very contentions that the "growth of conversation, the writing center's richest resource" will occur (5).

Both instructors and tutors need program time to reflect on and analyze their instructional practices, with each acting as a critical friend

engaged in peer review, and perhaps, when useful, designing new and modified practices that support basic writers' ownership of their texts (Houston and Johnson 6). This will require that we view the other as a colleague, for as this case study has clearly shown, writing instructors and tutors cannot work in isolation of the other and assume students will benefit (Harris 40). Gillam offers a helpful solution worth considering in which writing instructors and tutors engage in dialogue with each other and interpret and re-conceptualize the dynamics of writing instruction and tutoring through the lens of social dialogue. Such a perspective would focus our attention on learning to ask and act on a number of questions about the transactional nature of their activities: what voices of the writer are present in the text and how do the instructor, tutor or writer attend to these; how does the instructor, tutor, and writer hear the text; how do the instructors, tutors, and writer's responses to the text enable the writer to respond to contradiction or incongruence in the text; how does the writer interpret and use or ignore the responses of the instructor and tutor; what options for continued writing do the instructor's and tutor's responses allow; what possibilities for future discussions does the instructor's, tutor's, and writer's conversation allow? (9). Addressing these questions lays the groundwork for writing instructors and writing tutors to play a critical role in the education of basic writers toward the independence and authority we know they must achieve.

When writing instructors and tutors do support students' ownership of their text, students do actually gain a number of benefits: increased motivation to learn; raised tolerance for uncertainty and conflict; defined movement from dependence on professional authority toward a belief in their own abilities to create knowledge (Imel 2).

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