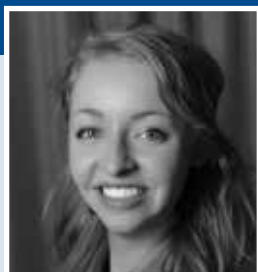WLN

Tutors' Column:
"Paradoxical Authority: Preparing Tutors for Classroom-Based Tutoring"

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While I was tutoring in a writing classroom one day, a student needed help finding direction within his paper. He wanted to offer his opinions on his topic more than back up his claims with research. Because he lacked research, his paper stopped at his own conclusions and ended up falling short of the page requirement. "What I would do," I told him, "is to find research that supports those ideas and research that goes against those ideas, and see how that information shapes your understanding of the topic." As I finished relaying this advice, I looked up and saw three other students with their hands in the air, waiting for help. Though I wanted to help this student come up with ideas, I did not have the time he needed—unlike what would have happened in the writing center. Later, when I thought about this incident, I realized there were numerous different factors at play in the classroom that were absent from the writing center—namely, the number of students who require assistance, the teacher's instruction, and the integration of the tutor as a part of the curricular structure. Because of these factors, the roles and methods the classroom tutor adopts vary in nature and effectiveness from those used in the writing center. In other words, the environment of classroom-based tutoring (CLBT) requires a new understanding of tutoring in ways beyond simply bringing the writing center into the classroom. Gradually, as I thought about the difference in roles between the two settings along with the debate between directive and non-directive tutoring, I decided that simply adapting to each student's needs allowed me to shift my focus away from my specific tutoring strategies and more to helping each student in the ways that serve him or her best.

Much of the pedagogy surrounding the tutor-writer dynamic assumes most consultations occur within the writing center. Scholars such as Stephen North and Jeff Brooks, whose essays are frequently assigned in tutor preparation courses, depict the ideal writing

center as an academic sanctuary built for breakthroughs and revelations. According to them, speaking within the context of the writing center, tutors should be Socratic, nondirective, and minimalist—and, as it happens, this style of tutoring lends itself well to the one-to-one dynamic of the writing center.

However, CLBT throws a wrench into the power dynamic tutors are used to in the writing center and prompts tutors to rethink the approaches (like nondirective tutoring) that some writing centers encourage. Instead of two people co-contributing, in CLBT, three voices—the student, the tutor, and the classroom teacher—are acting over a student's work. This confounds the close peer-to-peer relationship, and the curricular structure of the classroom complicates the power relationships between writers and tutors. As Candace Spigelman and Laurie Grobman contend, CLBT "operates amid contradictions within the productive chaos of writing classrooms; it confuses the nature of classroom authority; [and] it encourages noise and active collaboration at the very scene of writing" (219). In the classroom, teachers have authority in assigning and evaluating students' work and in determining how they want to utilize the tutors per the class's needs. Instead of collaboratively negotiating an agenda with the writer, the classroom teacher may establish the plan for the day. Barbara Little Liu and Holly Mandes, in "The Idea of a Writing Center Meets the Reality of Classroom-Based Tutoring," discuss the role-conflict tutors can feel when tutoring in the classroom: "Since tutors are a part of the curricular structure of a [CLBT course] and since the primary authority figure in the classroom—the instructor—introduces the tutors to the students, the tutors do, in essence, receive a 'stamp of approval' as an expert" (95). Because the teacher designates the authority to the tutors, the peer-to-peer dynamic is diverted by the built-in power structure of the teacher in the classroom. Thus, tutors in the classroom often serve as deputies to the teacher, and the teacher expects a level of expertise from them. As a result, the position of tutors in the classroom inherently establishes their authority when tutoring. Though the curriculum in the classroom carves a space for an authoritative role for tutors, this space also takes power away from them at the same time. The tutors' role is to help according to what the teacher wants. Therefore, the tutor's autonomy is restricted in the classroom setting. Thus, the issue of tutor authority in the classroom seems to be a paradox. Though tutors' roles are firmly established, their roles do not give them the power to simply tutor as they please. The idea that tutors in the classroom are, in a way, bringing the writing center to the classroom, is perhaps too basic an understanding of the dynamics involved in CLBT.

The established role of authority tutors possess in the classroom (though quite complex) may give them a platform to be more directive. Even though non-directiveness is an important feature of much tutoring practice, scholars such as Steven Corbett, as well as Linda Shamoon and Deborah Burns, have also acknowledged that there is a time and a place for directiveness—and I argue that one of those times and places may also be in the classroom. Even though tutors in the writing center have authority as a result of their positions as tutors, the power dynamics of the teacher-tutor-student triumvirate prompts directiveness in a way the reciprocal dynamic in the writing center does not—but only when that directiveness is used to tutor according to the curriculum established by the writing program and classroom teacher.

Another important difference between tutoring in a classroom and in a writing center is the ratio of tutors to writers: in a CLBT classroom, there may be one tutor for every five students. This ratio, in the context of a limited class meeting time, does not allow for a conventional tutor-to-student conference typically seen in the writing center. Simply stated, the Socratic, nondirective method so encouraged by traditional tutor preparation takes a lot of time. It can be time-consuming to keep tossing questions at the students in hopes that they will eventually find their own answers. Due to the logistical constraints inherent in CLBT, tutors must be innovative. As Spiegelman and Grobman write, "Classroom-based writing tutors will assume various roles and functions to meet the needs of particular tutoring situations and will therefore need to readjust and recalculate their practices on the scene" (220). This recalculation could be asking questions in a nondirective way, or it could be providing a clear set of instructions. It is up to tutors to adapt to the resources and constraints of the CLBT setting, using their best judgment.

Therefore, in preparing tutors for CLBT, the dichotomous understanding of directive versus nondirective tutoring may be less helpful than a focus on adapting to the various factors involved in CLBT: the teacher's instructions, the writer's preferences, the current condition of the draft, and the tutor's expertise. The degree of innovation required in CLBT reflects not only the unique structure of the classroom-based power divide, but also the paradoxical authority granted to classroom-based tutors because of their curricular position. The discussion surrounding CLBT cannot be a set of idealized projections of how tutors ought to tutor. The situations provided by the classroom offer such varying circumstances that they do not allow for a clear definition of what a classroom

tutor's role ought to be. Viewing tutors' roles in CLBT as primarily assistive allows us to break away from a binary discussion about directiveness or non-directiveness. The chaotic mess of authority—that as Spigelman and Grobman note is productive—prompts the innovation characteristic of the best tutors.

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