MAPPING TUTORIAL INTERACTIONS: A REPORT ON RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

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At the University of Rhode Island (URI), we believe that assessment of writing center interactions can be useful beyond conventional efforts to measure the effects and effectiveness of tutoring strategies in sessions with student writers. In fact, we believe that assessment may be useful for developing knowledge about tutoring interactions in ways far more general but no less applicable to our field. Elsewhere, we have argued that engaging groups of tutors in assessment of tutoring strategies can yield multiple benefits for writing centers as organizations, such as establishing a writing center as a center for research in the University and fostering the disciplinary knowledge of tutors (Siegel Finer, White-Farnham, and Dyehouse). As a second step in reporting on a multi-year writing center research project, this article shares some results using a new instrument for assessment: tutorial interaction maps. We offer our model of assessment as one that shows promise for facilitating tutors' understanding and discovery of the work that happens in writing centers, and we suggest that such a model might form a basis for new kinds of tools for use in writing center assessment.

Towards Empiricism

Writing center research has described the *process* of tutoring—how tutoring sessions actually develop in time—in both practical and theoretical terms. Writing center scholars like Thomas Newkirk and Kristin Walker have published advice for managing how sessions develop. In theoretical accounts, academics like Irene Clark and Dave Healy have suggested how basic facts about language and reality ought to shape how we see the tutoring process. Although both practical and theoretical accounts of tutoring processes identify techniques and interactions that tutors regularly encounter, they treat these complex processes mostly as means or ends. Brooks, for instance, identifies "minimalist tutoring" strategies as a means to better tutoring interactions (3). North, by contrast, offered the end of "produc[ing] better writers, not better writing" as the *summum bonum* for writing centers (69).

Some studies have sought to describe what occurs in tutoring interactions from an analytical (not merely practical or theoretical) perspective. Severino, for instance, has analyzed writing center collaborations using rhetorical analysis techniques. Blau, Hall, and Strauss, in another example, have applied linguistic analysis methods to what they call tutor-client conversations. Thonus' study of conversational features and session success adds another dimension to rhetorical analysis of sessions by drawing on sociolinguistic terms and methods to describe in

particular the temporal features of tutors' and students' conversation.

Our "Mapping Tutorial Interactions" (MTI) study, unlike these analytical examples, conforms to a more formal understanding of empirical inquiry as defined by MacNealy: "research that carefully describes and/or measures observable phenomena in a systematic way planned out in advance of the observation" (qtd. in Gillam xvi). With our sights set on systematizing a procedure for data collection, we have developed a research study that engages groups of tutors in *mapping* how tutoring sessions develop with time; we describe this method of mapping in the following section.

Mapping Tutorial Interactions

Our MTI study derives in part from our immersion in the writing center conversation regarding "directive" and "facilitative" tutoring practices. Following the trajectory of oft-cited scholarship on this topic (including work by North, Brooks, Harris, Shamoon and Burns), Steven Corbett has offered a brief history of the conversation that argues for its continuing relevance. In particular, Corbett calls on writing center practitioners to "keep our pedagogy flexible and attuned to one writer at a time"—a sentiment with which we agree (par. 10). In our Center, we feel a particular connection to this idea, which we think of as a rhetorical or situational approach to tutoring. Several previous directors and tutors from our Center have published scholarship on such approaches to tutoring. Linda Shamoon and Deborah Burns's "A Critique of Pure Tutoring" is a staple of our tutor training literature, and the debate to which it contributes has inspired our inquiry into the nuances of tutoring generally (and former Assistant Director Matthew Ortoleva's inquiry into the directive/facilitative continuum in particular). Having accepted, practiced, reflected, and discussed the topic through many tutor cohorts, we now want to know more about the basic categories of activity that we call "writing centered."

Derived from this conversation, the MTI study asks two questions:

What does oscillation between facilitative and directive tutoring strategies look like in particular sessions?

What are the qualities of the interactions that result from oscillations between facilitative and directive strategies?

To begin to answer these questions, members of our staff planned systematic data collection and data analysis techniques that focused on identifying **directive** or **facilitative** tutoring strategies and **writ*er*-** or **writ*ing*-**centered tutoring interactions. Our project engaged tutors and administrators in the recording, transcription, and analysis of Writing Center sessions, culminating in a series of mapping activities carried out by the Writing Center's staff. In these mapping activities, we worked from transcriptions of recorded sessions to plot the facilitative or directive qualities of tutors' strategies and the writer- or writing-centered qualities of the resulting interactions. For each numbered segment of each transcript, tutors and administrators marked a point on a standard grid (see Fig. 1). By connecting these points in sequence, each participant produced a complex curve or "map" of each recorded session. We planned data collection and analysis to involve multiple (ideally all) members of our Center's tutoring staff to maximize the impact our Center's research could have on staff development.

In the next section, we describe our attempts at piloting this research project, since we foresaw a problem that we wanted to address before formally collecting any data: we recognized that tutors' subjectivity and various understandings of the terms (writing-/writer-centered and facilitative/directive) would influence the outcomes of our attempts to "map" the qualities and characteristics of actual sessions' interactions. Addressing the influence of subjectivity was the main focus of our pilot study, which we describe in detail below. We go on to describe some results from the official study, followed by implications.

Training and Pilot Study

Our first goal for the research project was to operationalize the terms we planned to use in our assessment map (see Fig. 1). Initial steps of research participants' training each semester included the

following readings: Brannon and Knoblauch's "On Students' Rights to Their Own Texts: A Model of Teacher Response," Brooks' "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student do all the Work," North's "The Idea of a Writing Center," Harris' "Talking in the Middle," and others. These readings gave our group a common theoretical foundation and a language with which to discuss tutoring generally, solve occasional problems, and discuss this project in particular.

Issues of facilitative versus directive tutoring often come up in our staff meetings and serve as a frame for our staff's discussions and problem solving. We have tried to emphasize that, while the MTI project investigates binaries (i.e., facilitative vs. directive, writing vs. writer centered), we do not feel that one pole on either spectrum is 'better' than the other. We have learned from Ortoleva, "As writing consultants, we must balance the student's desire to leave with an improved text and our desire to help students internalize the lessons learned during the improvement of that text" (par. 11). How to accomplish this balancing is frequently discussed in our staff meetings. The idea is not to privilege one type of tutoring, but rather to investigate when these types of tutoring happen and to think about why. However, the pilot phase of the mapping showed us that while we are seemingly good at determining when we are directive and how to be so, facilitative tutoring is harder to define and is ostensibly harder to 'do.' This caused us to pause in the research and focus more on tutoring practice; we implemented workshops for our tutors during weekly staff meetings. These workshops have given tutors practice in approaching common tutoring situations using a variety of facilitative materials such as markers, index cards, and post-it notes.

This next step of the training, in which tutors practiced mapping—making a decision about the characteristics of a tutoring session's interactions and physically plotting them on a quadrant of a paper map depicted in Fig. 1—was particularly productive toward the development of the project as a whole. During one of our weekly meetings, we discovered two major project-related concerns: 1) the tutoring staff had been

reading and learning about some of the theoretical foundations but had not actually seen the mapping in practice, and 2) the subjective nature of the mapping terminology was becoming clear.

Accordingly, we devised a way to address both concerns: staff mapping. We chose a random page of writing center dialogue and broke the dialogue down into interactions based on natural conversation cues; for instance, a tutor question and writer response was designated as an interaction, or a back-and-forth about a particular writer concern was designated as an interaction. The sample dialogue was distributed at a staff meeting, and everyone silently went to work plotting interactions on the poles, trying to answer questions like: is this interaction more facilitative or more directive? Does it focus more on the writer or more on the text?

When everyone finished their individual maps, we put entire staff maps of a few interactions up on the white board. To our surprise and delight, our tutors' maps were strikingly similar on almost every interaction. This evidenced two exciting indications: 1) our staff all understood the terms similarly, and 2) our terms were operationalized in a formal way, a "frame," as O'Neill suggests, was created (para. 9); we could more easily claim some meaning for our study because there was less subjectivity than we initially thought. To this day, and despite the much less satisfactory results of our subsequent mapping efforts, we believe that it is possible to map tutorial interactions in ways that generate meaningful agreement among groups of tutors.

Official Data Collection

Student writers were selected randomly as they came in for appointments; writers are generally URI undergraduate or graduate students diverse in age, race, and gender. They signed IRB approved consent forms indicating they would be audio recorded; a tutor then had a session with a student. Later, that same tutor listened to the tape, transcribed his/her own session, and wrote a reflection on the session. A group of additional tutors then mapped the interactions using the instrument (see Fig. 1 below). All maps were

then discussed by the group of tutors in order to draw conclusions about our tutoring sessions.

In an interpretive comparison of several such maps, we hope eventually to identify repeating shapes (or pieces of shapes), which can suggest generalizations about how different kinds of sessions characteristically proceed. In the present report, however, we focus on the agreements and disagreements we found among our tutors' maps and on our mapping methodology's possible implications in future assessments of tutoring sessions.

Some Results

In general, in the main phase of our "Mapping Tutorial Interactions" project, the maps of sessions produced by tutors did not tend to agree on the qualities or characteristics of particular tutoring interactions. However, in the area of identifying "directive" tutoring strategies, our group mapping approach to the assessment of several sessions showed some promising agreements. In the two examples to follow, we first discuss agreements among tutors assessing directive tutoring strategies and, secondly, disagreements and/or confusion among different participants in our analysis sessions.

Identifying directive techniques

Many practitioners can identify what constitutes a directive tutoring technique: it is one that clearly suggests a change in the writer's text or offers concrete advice. Here, we offer two examples of the strength of our mapping approach in identifying directive tutoring approaches.

First, 85% of mappers plotted interaction 31 of Session 418 with Phil in quadrant 4 (directive/writing-centered). The interaction is comprised of the tutor offering one final idea for Phil to consider and take away with him for the assignment, an essay comparing two poetry-reading events:

> **Tutor**: yeah, and space can really be an interesting aspect of [description], what was it like to see her in front of this auditorium versus this other guy in this very small space?

> **Phil**: okay
> **Tutor**: like, even having the person appear, what kind of a distance was between you?
> **Phil**: okay
> **Tutor**: And it can also help to kind of set up that scene and get your reading into that poetry reading mind frame.

Fig. 2 below illustrates the clear position of interaction 31 in quadrant 4 and the sudden shift that occurs immediately afterwards during interactions 32 and 33, which are focused exclusively on planning another session and saying goodbye. In fact, 100% of the maps show 32 and 33 shooting up and/or to the left as the tutor and writer part ways (see Fig. 2).

Barring the end-of-session farewells, this session ends on a directive note after a session in which the tutor uses a wide variety of techniques, including approximately 12 open-ended questions and sentences to facilitate Phil's understanding of the assignment and the poetry readings. The tutor's reflection on this session corroborates this interpretation: "In wrapping up, I'm glad that I was able to get the student thinking about the arrangement again because it helped to keep the focus on what the next step of the writing process would be."

A second example also suggests that a collaborative mapping approach can soundly identify directive tutoring strategies. In our analyses of Session 158 with Will, all mappers characterized it as a predominantly directive/writing-centered session. Fig. 3 illustrates the average number of points plotted in each quadrant. Mappers agreed that the most interactions fell into quadrant 4 (see Fig. 3).

Will was an English major and brought to this session a literary essay covered in critical comments from the professor; as Will put it: "she sorta tore my paper apart." In his/her reflection, the tutor acknowledges the heavy use of directive approaches such as ending sentences in "right?" to keep the student "on board." An interaction that occurs a quarter of the way into the session as Will and the tutor are trying to translate Will's instructor's comments exemplifies the tutor's approach; interaction 27 is plotted in Quadrant 4 by all mappers

as directive, and it is situated among Interactions 25, 26, 28, and 29, all plotted in a tight cluster in Quadrant 4.

> **Will**: But, like, what about that, like what should I do about the end, cause that's something that I normally have trouble with, I general[ly] like finding appropriate transition sentences.
>
> **Tutor**: Yeah. And, look at, she does say, this you need to avoid as openers. So, you mean when you get to the end of the paragraph, or do you mean, like, the end?
>
> **Will**: Uh, I mean, like the end of paragraphs, like doing those transitioning sentences and opening sentences for each paragraph, like your topic sentence that should be at the beginning of each paragraph, right? Or topical sentences?
>
> **Tutor**: She said she wants topical, well she calls them topical sentences, and then she says "Logical paragraphs," and often, when teachers say that, they do mean to use transitions. You could say, "This second example comparing," you know, you go on to other characters.

In a reflection, the tutor describes the directive techniques as a way to create a writ*er*-centered session, explaining that the session was more about helping Will acclimatize to "academic discourse" than the assignment at hand. S/he says "I felt the need to try and teach the student about the purpose of his writing…and literature essays generally." In this case too, our mapping approach showed promising reliability in identifying directive techniques.

Trouble identifying writer- and writing-centered interactions

Although our mapping approach showed promise in identifying directive tutoring strategies, it was much less promising in its ability to identify more "facilitative" kinds of strategies. In addition, we discovered that we do not as clearly recognize or agree upon what constitutes writer- versus writing-centered interactions. For instance, in Session 353, the tutor helps Thelma organize an essay comparing two writers' experiences in slavery. After the session gets underway with the tutor asking about the assignment and reading Thelma's draft, Interaction 10 occurs:

> **Thelma**: …I'm on the right track, because when I first start writing, I, I'm all over the place, I don't know what I'm doing, but after a person tells me this is what you're doing right, this is what you need to work on, this is what you need to take out of your essay, then after that I can still start writing.
>
> **Tutor**: So at this point I don't really see anything that you should take out, let's take a look at this [assignment] sheet here and see, so you have a thesis, and your argument is convincing so far, and that organization, and I guess you do a good job because you always mention Jacobs first and then Douglass and then you go into the arguments, but like I said, maybe like a bridging paragraph or something like that between the two of them would help the organization.

According to the maps, the characteristics of the interaction are less easily detectable in this case; although most of the mappers plotted the interaction as generally directive, among the eight maps of this session, interaction 10 is plotted in three out of four quadrants by a fairly equal number of mappers: two mappers in quadrant 1 (facilitative/writing-centered), two mappers in quadrant 3 (directive/writer-centered), one mapper on the line between quadrants 2 and 3, and three mappers in quadrant 4 (directive/writing-centered) (see Fig. 4).

However, one should not dismiss this variation as a lack of *reliability* (to borrow a term from psychometric theory). When one considers the interaction, there appear to be arguments to be made to support each mapper's plotting choices. For instance, while the tutor directly suggests adding a transition to this particular essay (writing-centered), Thelma is already aware that her writing begins "all over the place," suggesting that this student and tutor are engaged in a conversation about her writing process (writer-centered?) as well as addressing a rhetorical device (transitions) the writer wants to master (writer-centered?). The tutor's reflection is similarly ambivalent about the nature of the session. S/he writes: "Since I hadn't read Harriet Jacob's [sic] narrative, I was taking complete stabs in the dark. I

tried to ask questions, and offer suggestions that would hopefully allow [the student] to draw a conclusion from the books that she hadn't before. I think I ended up accomplishing that, but all in all her paper was in pretty good shape before she even brought it to me. She seemed to benefit more from having me tell her what I felt she did well, and what I felt needed work. She bestowed this arbitrary authority on me, and wanted me to live up to it. Some people just need that."

The possibilities inherent in Thelma's tutor's motives during interaction 10 also exist in interaction 13. Here too the interaction seems to have been difficult to characterize. As Fig. 5 illustrates, four mappers identify it as writer-centered and four as writing-centered (see Fig. 5).

Interaction 13 focuses on tense, a common ESOL concern:

> **Tutor**: I think, um, you're on the right track, you put up some good arguments, and you follow along with the theses you set up. And I don't see too many problems, just a few things about staying in the same tense. You jump back and forth between past and present.
> **Thelma**: So, in this I should put it all in past tense?
> **Tutor**: Well usually when you talk about literature and stuff you want to stay in the present. Especially if you're going on analysis on the texts themselves, and not so much the events that happened.
> **Thelma**: OK.

Mappers who identified this interaction as writer-centered no doubt believe that the tutor is sharing knowledge that Thelma can apply across her writing assignments in literature and beyond. On the other hand, those who plot the interaction as writing-centered seem to read the tutor's words regarding tense as error-correction for use in this project only.

Since the maps disagree so significantly, they do not constitute a cohesive or successful reading of the trajectory of Session 353. While they offer us food for thought about individual tutors' practices and the situations that tutors are facing, the mappers'

agreement (or lack thereof) forces us to wonder how meaningful our mapping method has actually turned out to be.

Reflection and Implications

Given the mixed results of our project's main mapping phase, we are left with questions about the significance and worth of our mapping activity as an assessment method. Writing center studies, as a field, is only beginning to explore the kinds of assessments we have undertaken here. We suspect that assessment tools developed out of mapping approaches like ours could be useful to tutors and administrators, especially insofar as they could advance discussion of techniques and interactions in many sessions by providing a physical and visual data set rather than only a narrative account of a particular session. Such data and discussions in our center, for instance, led us to explore further the directive-facilitative continuum and articulate the rhetorical approach described earlier.

We also wonder, however, if it would be possible to achieve better agreement among mappers' interpretations. We suspect that techniques drawn from writing assessment projects might help us refine our analysis methods—and to more reliably map tutors' strategies and sessions' interactions (see Niiler; O'Neill; Shale). For instance, more elaborate norming or training sessions for mappers would almost certainly help us to achieve better agreement on our maps in future phases. Such agreement could set the stage for an ideal: the emergence of generalized, temporal patterns on maps that may help us understand, for one instance, facilitative tutoring not only in theory and training, but also in interactive, context-shifting practice.

Moreover, despite the complexity of the judgments involved in mapping tutorial interactions, advances in natural language processing and computerized assessment technologies might eventually make possible automatic forms of writing center assessment. Imagine tutors watching a session recording in which an assessment algorithm suggests likely interpretations of interactions and strategies.

With only a few first steps towards writing center assessments of this kind, and given the limited resources of most writing centers, such a scenario may seem mere fancy. Yet, we contend, such a scenario is not necessarily as improbable as many of us might assume.

Unlike early investigators into writing assessment, writing centers' administrators and tutors are not as intimately part of the terrain of educational testing and research in which large-scale, "holistic," and even automated writing assessment has developed (White). As a field, we might prudently decide to abandon research into reliable assessments of tutoring strategies and interactions with little fear of reprisals to us or to the writers with whom we collaborate. However, such a decision probably merits more consideration than it has garnered. As a research team, we can attest to our own intellectual excitement over developing new knowledge about tutors' professional development, the effects of collaborative research on a writing center staff, and the writing center's role in the research University. These more immediate, practical results of MTI, while satisfying, have not addressed the remaining problem of developing knowledge about the ways in which writing center sessions may typically develop with replicable methods. Despite our project's mixed success, we believe that such methods deserve discussion—and, we believe, such discussion ought to be augmented by a wide sense of the possibilities that methods like ours put in play.
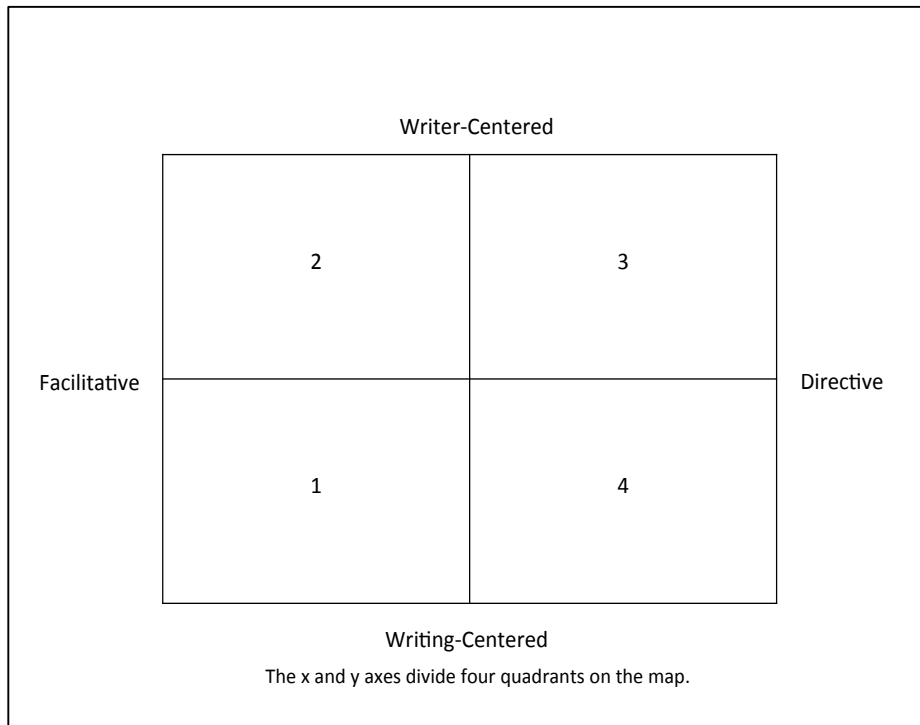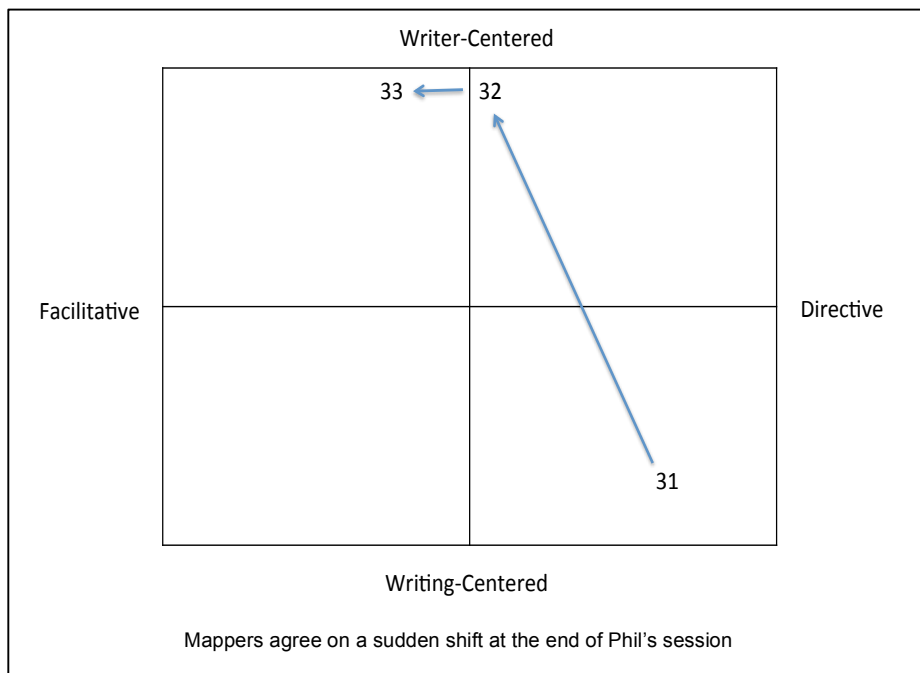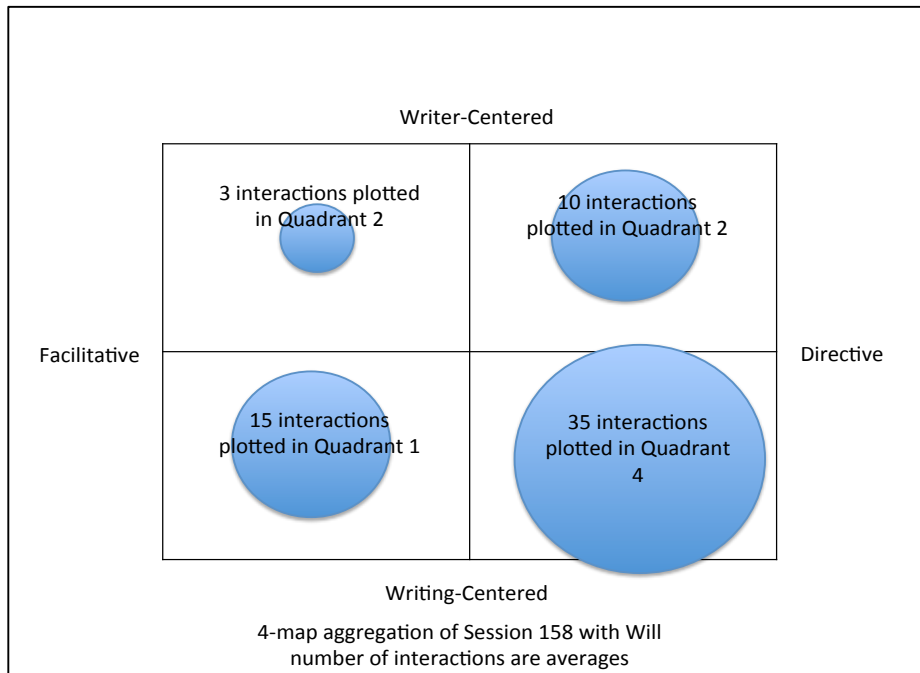
Figure 1

Writer-Centered

2	3
1	4

Facilitative

Directive

Writing-Centered

The x and y axes divide four quadrants on the map.

Figure 2

Writer-Centered

33 ← 32

31

Facilitative

Directive

Writing-Centered

Mappers agree on a sudden shift at the end of Phil's session

Figure 3

Writer-Centered

3 interactions plotted in Quadrant 2

10 interactions plotted in Quadrant 2

Facilitative

Directive

15 interactions plotted in Quadrant 1

35 interactions plotted in Quadrant 4

Writing-Centered

4-map aggregation of Session 158 with Will
number of interactions are averages

Figure 4

Writer-Centered

Facilitative

Directive

Writing-Centered

Interaction 10 in Thelma's session is mapped in 7 different locations
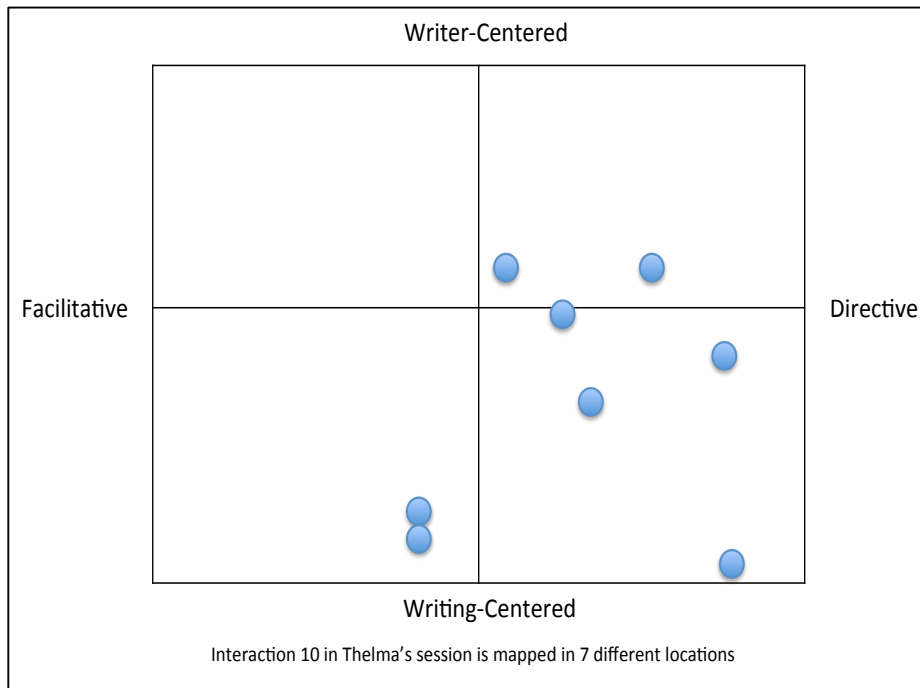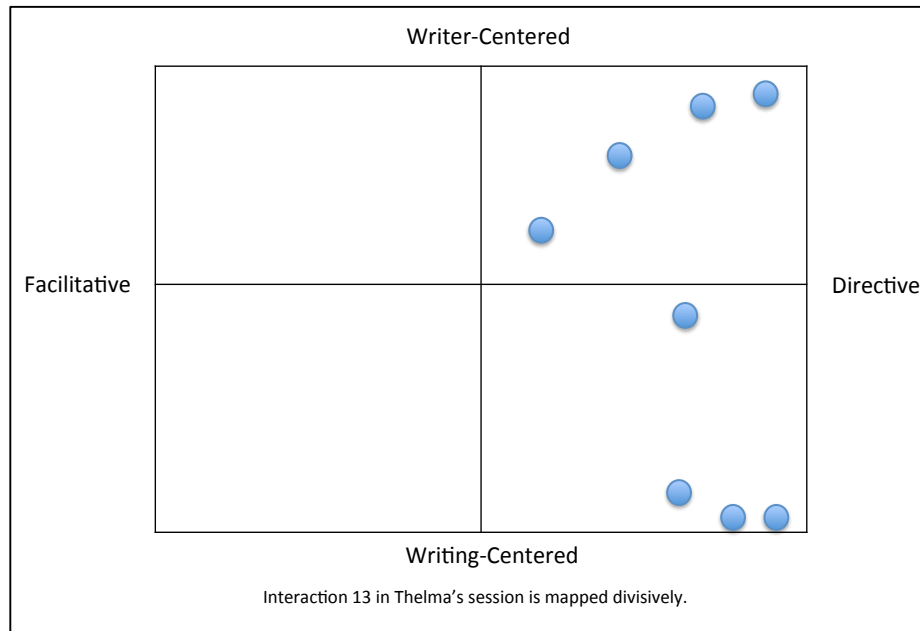
Figure 5

Interaction 13 in Thelma's session is mapped divisively.

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