DIALOGING A SUCCESSFUL PEDAGOGY FOR EMBEDDED TUTORS

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Introduction

Over the past three years, Rider University's Student Success Center Writing Lab has implemented an embedded tutor program for composition courses. Tutors attend class, participate in class discussions, facilitate writing workshops in class, and hold drop-in hours for students (in addition to tutors' Writing Lab hours). The Embedded Tutor (ET) program, facilitated by Jenny Scudder (who is also the Writing Lab Director), has been successful in helping students complete skills-based courses and connect to academic support services. Initial assessment of the ET program supports the inclusion of the tutor in a skills-based course. While an ET's training is similar to a tutor who works solely in the Writing Lab, there are key additions that are vital to the tutors'—and the program's—success.

We argue that, in order for embedded tutors to be successful in the classroom, tutor pedagogy needs to be developed and reinforced by both the Writing Lab Director and the course instructor. The core pedagogical approach in the Writing Lab is student-centered and facilitative. As with their Writing Tutor training, ETs are trained to integrate *what to learn* with *how to learn*, guiding students to identify the content (the writing skill) with the process (the strategy). The focus in an ET workshop is toward higher-order concerns. Most importantly, the ET uses questioning and modeling as students work through the writing process for an assignment. In this article, we will explore through a series of dialogues how the tutors reflect on particular pedagogical strategies Jenny developed for the ETs, and how composition instructor Megan Titus reinforced those strategies in the classroom.

Specifically, we focus on two sections of CMP 115: Introduction to Expository Writing that Megan taught during the Fall of 2013.[1] Jenny assigned two ETs—Josephine Boyle and Alison Sudol—to Megan's courses. Megan encouraged Josephine and Alison to facilitate peer-writing workshops and model questions that students should be asking during those sessions. In addition, Megan, Alison, and Josephine created a series of writing workshops that emphasized higher-order concerns for the students, such as developing a thesis, organizing ideas, and analyzing evidence. In particular, both color blocking and a Venn diagram assignment that helped students compose comparison essays demonstrated how the ETs could bring their knowledge from the Writing Lab into the classroom by marrying content with skill. Over the course of the semester, Josephine and Alison gradually took the lead on these workshops. The ET program is very much a conversation among the Writing Lab director, instructors, and tutors; all three must communicate successfully in order to best meet the needs of the students in each ET classroom. We mirror that dialogue here to demonstrate how the ETs work as liaisons between the Writing Lab director, instructor, and students.

Course-Embedded Tutors as Mentors

Course-embedded tutoring is often implemented across the disciplines (see, for example, Hendriksen et al.), but, as this special issue of *Praxis* suggests, it is becoming more utilized in composition courses to help underprepared students develop critical writing skills. Over the course of the last decade, much literature has discussed the rising role of course-embedded writing tutors (sometimes called "writing fellows" or "writing mentors") in first-year writing courses. The literature suggests that students who work with ETs earn higher scores than students who do not work with ETs (Dvorak, Bruce, and Lutkewitte; Hendriksen et al.). Studies show that the presence of a peer tutor in the composition classroom provides useful academic support for students; for example, Henry, Bruland, and Sano-Franchini argue that students who participated in their "Writing Mentors" course-embedded tutoring received significantly more "academic knowledge support" and "psychological/emotional support" due to the tutor's

presence in the classroom (6-7). In addition, the authors found that students' "predispositions as a mentee" (9) were a factor in creating a successful mentoring atmosphere; as we will discuss, students' predispositions also became a factor in the success of our program as well.

In the following section, in the form of a dialogue, we reflect on questions we asked our ETs, Alison and Josephine, about their experience tutoring for Megan's classes. We were most interested in the following:

- how Jenny's ET training made its way into the classroom
- specific strategies that resonated the most with the ETs, and why
- specific theories that the ETs were able to apply, and how

Throughout the dialogue, we reflect on the ETs' answers, and consider the extent to which our own teaching (both in the composition classroom and in the training of tutors) can be informed by the ETs' experiences in both environments.

Dialogue with Embedded Tutors

Impact of Training on ET/Instructor Pedagogy

First we will discuss the impact of ET training on ET/instructor pedagogy. Alison and Josephine clearly utilized this training, especially the concepts of modeling and scaffolding, in both classroom and group sessions with the students. Megan's decision to allow the ETs the freedom to create and lead workshops gave Alison and Josephine a role in the conversation on classroom pedagogy, thus strengthening the relationship between the instructor and the tutors, as well as the tutors and the students.

Megan: How did ET training through the Writing Lab work its way into the classroom? Were there specific training sessions/strategies that you were able to apply to classroom work?

Josephine: ET training was helpful because we went over specifics such as how to contact the professor, what to do in the first class, how to set up the review sessions, and how to communicate with the class through Canvas. I used some things from the initial trainings in the class and sessions, such as answering questions with questions, encouraging participation by explaining how strategies we covered had improved my writing, and how transferring those strategies to other classes would help the students get good grades.

Jenny: Through the questioning and modeling approach, the tutor can assess where the student is developmentally and model the specific next step to help the student advance. In heightening the students' metacognitive awareness, cognitive strategies become stronger tools and gain transferability (Mackiewicz 61). The skills, whether it be drafting a thesis or searching for supporting evidence, become tangible content for the student.

Alison: I believe the intent of ET was to take the strategies learned in our training sessions and share them with students. In my sessions, the students needed help with specific aspects of what was learned in class. Instead of just teaching them strategies they could use, such as quote sandwiches, color blocking, graphic organizers, etc…I found it helpful to model the strategy and apply it to their specific assignments.

Jenny: Alison accomplished one of the biggest goals of the Embedded Tutoring program by modeling to a specific assignment. ETs provide the scaffolding for the student to learn how to strategize about an assignment, reflect on a reading, or communicate with a professor. While a tutor can describe or model ways to accomplish each of these in a session in the Writing Lab, in the classroom, the ET is able to be the metacognitive voice for the student (Vygotsky 86). The strategy is modeled within an authentic context.

Megan: Like Alison, Josephine also points to the benefits of color blocking for students, as many of the students in our course struggled with organizing their essays. We modeled color blocking in class with a sample essay, and Josephine walked the students through how to apply the model to their own writing.

Josephine: The color blocking exercise seemed like a good one to do for the workshop that I facilitated because it was easy to do as a group but still allowed the students to work individually. One of the difficulties of ET is balancing individual attention with group attention. The color blocking was easy to modify into instructions for the students to follow both on their own and with a peer. Dr. Titus had already led different writing workshops, which were a great template to follow, but I also used specific strategies from the ET handbook such as "incomplete" handouts with parts the student had to fill out.

Megan: The ETs and I worked together on developing workshops for the students; although I decided the workshop's subject, I increasingly gave the

ETs freedom to create materials. By the end of the semester, Josephine and Alison were both drafting materials and leading writing workshops in class. Together, we worked on assignments that encouraged cognitive scaffolding, which "includes strategies such as pumping questions...that prod and help students to think" (Mackiewicz 61). The Venn diagram assignment we created for the compare and contrast essay (an assignment based on the incomplete handout from Jenny's ET training), in particular, utilized both closed and open questioning, and forced students to choose a location in the diagram for their ideas (Mackiewicz 61-62).

Alison: There were several assignments throughout the semester where students were asked to compare and contrast. I always came to our sessions with Venn Diagrams...I found it necessary to fill in my Venn diagram or chart before trying to help students create theirs. I believe students worked better when they had something to use as a model.

Jenny: Some of the benefits of Embedded Tutoring are the connections developed between the tutor and professor and between the tutor and students. The ETs gain insight from the professor's perspective on assignments and are able to bring that to the Writing Lab for stronger individual sessions. The professor can gain perspective on a "typical" student's approach from the ET's experiences in the Writing Lab. Sharing those perspectives creates a new dynamic for the approaches utilized in both the Writing Lab and the classroom (Bruland). Using a strategy within the classroom is then reinforced in the weekly group session, or possibly in an individual session at the Writing Lab.

Alison: I think the teacher-tutor relationship is key to the program being a success. Dr. Titus and I exchanged e-mails, spoke frequently, and agreed on methods for instruction. I also found it beneficial when Dr. Titus outlined exactly what she wanted me to go over with students. In class, Dr. Titus asked for our opinion on certain class topics. This enhanced the program because the students got to know us, and us them.

Josephine: The methods of encouraging students to participate from the [tutor training] handbook were also useful (Mackiewicz 64). I found that some students who didn't participate in class would open up in the ET sessions. The ET program was a good doorway to the other Writing Lab services; students made individual writing appointments to build on the review sessions (Bruland). It was also helpful to attend the classes and see what the professor required; many students come to tutoring sessions without being able to explain their assignment.

Impact of ET on Students

A vital aspect of ET is the impact it has on students. Here we examine the changes Alison and Josephine observed in certain students, and highlight the connection between the students' improvement and ET training. Alison and Josephine also discuss the difficulty they experienced in addressing a wide variety of student needs in the group sessions. Other challenges they experienced were reaching a balance between teaching content and teaching writing, and working with students who attended sessions infrequently. Finally, we consider the importance of the program for student success, and consider why more students aren't consistently taking advantage of the program.

Jenny: Did you notice a shift or change in a particular student that you worked with, perhaps with some regularity? Can you track the shift or change to something from a session, link it back to training?

Josephine: I worked with Student A more regularly than the rest of the students, because she came to the most review sessions. The ET [drop-in] sessions benefited her in terms of clarifying instructions and specific writing expectations. However, review sessions where we were going over rough drafts or doing serious revision work tended to have a much higher attendance rate, making it difficult to give her the individual attention she needed. I think, though, that such sessions were beneficial, because the students were all working through the same problems and reviewing the same material.

Megan: Even though Josephine notes that Student A's writing did not improve as much as we might have anticipated given her attendance at the drop-in sessions, I noticed a significant difference in her communication skills. Early on, Student A would come to my office for help with an essay, and while I tried to employ a facilitative approach with her, she was reticent and I was more directive than I preferred. However, as the semester progressed, Student A became more forthcoming and was able to indicate where in her writing she needed help. I credit her sessions with Josephine for this change. Josephine worked with Student A on clarifying instructions and expectations, and I would argue that as Student A came to a deeper understanding of academic writing,

she was able to take more agency over her own writing.

Josephine: Someone who I did notice a change in was Student B. She remembered and utilized strategies that I went over in the review sessions or suggested in class (and that I had learned in ET training), especially organizational tactics. Her outlines and notes for initial revisions became more detailed and targeted as the year went on...[and in the case of color blocking,] Student B used the technique while we went over it and again in the review session when she showed me her draft and revisions.

Jenny: That the student was applying a strategy on her own and had drafts with revisions is a prime example of the anecdotal evidence that provides key support for an embedded tutoring program. The student was able to internalize the strategies and began to understand that writing is a process.

Alison: There were two students that attended my session every single week: Student C and Student D. I believe there was a shift in both Student C and Student D. Student D had some family issues toward the end of the semester so he fell behind, which is why I think the sessions benefited him more than Student C. Student C...utilized the Writing Lab to the fullest extent. After she left the ET [drop-in] session, she would make an appointment with me in the Writing Lab. Student C was already a decent writer; she just needed to refine her skills. Graphic organizers truly benefited her when she didn't quite know where to start, and the reinforcement and more in-depth use of them in Dr. Titus' class helped her too. Initially, Student C's papers were full of hanging quotes that were followed up with little support. But by the fourth essay, Student C was receiving high Bs on her papers and grasped the idea of synthesizing information from multiple sources and implementing them in her writing. Perhaps the greatest difficulty was in differentiating instruction. Student D was not at the same level as Student C and I often struggled to give them equal attention at sessions. If one or two other students showed up it became even more difficult. I also knew exactly where Student C and Student D were in drafting their essays, but if Student E or Student F showed up I had to devote time to seeing where they were in the process. I think the inconsistency of attendance made it difficult for me to help. If Student C was familiar with the quote sandwich strategy but Student E was not, I had to spend time with Student E going over it while Student C was left to her own devices. (Which wasn't always a bad thing). Student D, on the other hand, needed the entire hour of my undivided attention, which I often couldn't give to him.

Josephine: On that note, the ET program seems to be what the student makes of it. The students who really experienced growth and change in their writing were the few that came to more than one or two review sessions. Of course, attendance at the sessions is voluntary and it was difficult to convince many of the students that had yet to attend a session that it would benefit them even if they didn't have a rough draft or a final due next day. While the sessions were meant to help students learn the strategies to complete their work effectively, some of them did not understand the work enough to even learn the strategies. Sessions fluctuated between teaching strategies and teaching content; again, it was about being prepared. If I didn't read every story and every assignment, the students suffered. And, if they didn't read every assignment, we had to spend time reading during sessions. I had a strict policy that if students came into my session having not read, I wasn't spoon-feeding answers.

Alison: Embedded Tutoring is a fantastic and rewarding program. I believe that it should be implemented in every composition course. However, I am not sure how to get more students to attend the weekly sessions. I noticed a lot of students needed the extra help after looking over their work in class, but they never came to get it. This was the most frustrating aspect of Embedded Tutoring: to see a change in several students, knowing there could be more.

Assessment and Conclusions

Assessment of the impact the ET program has on student success and retention has been challenging. Success for a student is not black and white, and, like the impact of writing center work, is not immediately internalized by the students. The assessment initially applied to the ET program was modeled after Supplemental Instruction (SI), but Jenny quickly learned she needed to separate it because of the key differences in the coursework. SI courses are content-based, while ET courses are skills-based. SI assessment does not address that skills are not finitely learned like specific content for a history or science course ("SI Summary Report"). This differentiation has impacted assessment. Additionally, we still face the same three assumptions identified by Lerner that drive the need to individualize our assessment based on our

understanding of our students' academic needs and our institution's assessment needs.

Initial assessment of these two sections of CMP 115 shows that the students did better academically than students who were not in courses supported by the ET program. In the section Josephine supported, the ET group had a GPA .40 higher than the non-ET group. In the section Alison supported, the ET group had a GPA .72 higher than the non-ET group. We believe that the reinforcement of pedagogy from both Jenny and Megan helped Josephine and Alison succeed as ETs and helped the students in Megan's classes succeed as well. While this is promising, simply looking at successful course completion does not include the other measurable benefits of ET. As we have continued to "establish [embedded tutoring] as a 'formalized process'" and review the tools used, we discovered our "pitfalls" in assessment and work now toward developing our "best practices" (Henry 12). With these lessons learned, we continue to "think broadly about research on [ET] effects, not just about how many students came through our doors or if those students were satisfied, but about how does our [ET program] contribute to the teaching and learning goals that our [composition program] holds dear?" (Lerner 64). Over the next year, ET assessment will retain student evaluations and course grade assessment, but will now include draft-to-final essay grade comparison, a revised faculty evaluation, and analysis of impact of classroom contact compared to number of weekly group sessions attended.

As Alison and Josephine both note, the real difficulty in our ET program is convincing students to attend the weekly out-of-class sessions. This issue is mirrored in Henry, Bruland, and Sano-Franchini's study with the observation that students' predisposition to being mentored is a factor in the extent to which students and ETs recognize student growth. The authors ask: "How are students predisposed to mentoring, how do these predispositions shift over the course of mentoring, and is there a resultant attitude change that lends to behavior conducive to succeeding in and beyond a course" (10)? In our own work, we would agree that the students who attended regularly saw real value in the sessions, and were perhaps predisposed to see Alison and Josephine's mentoring as beneficial; however, as we have noted, that number was quite small. The question of how to gauge students' predisposition to mentoring, and the extent to which students who are not predisposed to mentoring can shift their attitude, is one that we plan to target and assess in Fall 2014.

In addition, group sessions will now be sign-up only, in order to encourage students to register ahead of time. We also have ideas to incentivize the sessions; for example, Megan is offering two bonus points per session attended to the writing assignment covered during that session; two points will hopefully motivate students to attend multiple sessions and thus, raise their grade incrementally, with the rationale that bonus points will eventually become secondary to the value of the sessions.

In order for our ET program to be successful – that is, to help our students improve their writing skills as well as to heighten their overall comfort with academia – the Writing Lab director, tutors, and instructors must work together to develop a pedagogy that will benefit each particular composition course. As Josephine and Alison show, the tutors need to pull from their ET training and act as supportive and knowledgeable mentors for the students. In turn, instructors need to utilize the ETs' training and add the ETs' skillset into their pedagogy. The dialogue on writing must expand from instructors, directors, and ETs, to the students becoming more actively engaged in the conversation about writing. Students can become part of this conversation in the ET classroom by regularly attending both in- and out-of-class workshops, and by doing their part to come to those workshops prepared and ready to engage in dialogue about both the writing and the course content.

Notes

[1] For more on the connection between embedded tutoring and the first-year writing classroom, see Spigelman and Grobman's edited collection *On Location: Theory and Practice in Classroom-Based Writing Tutoring*, as well as Osche, McMillin, and Hafer, among others.

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