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Bolstering Writerly Instincts: Using Role-Play to Help Tutors Address Later-Order Concerns

[Spring 2011/Training](#)

by **Kate Warrington**, *University of North Texas at Dallas*

Students who are selected to be writing tutors or who apply for jobs in the writing center are generally confident in their writing ability and have received reinforcement from faculty and peers that they are “good” at writing. These students often have stories of their friends approaching them for help editing their writing assignments, and they happily obliged. But before their tenure in the writing center, these student writers have rarely been asked to explain why a comma should be placed at a certain location in a sentence or why a particular word doesn’t fit in the context of a sentence. In several tutorials I observed, the tutors struggled to address grammatical concerns in student writing, often relied on instinctual knowledge to identify errors, and sometimes presented rules of thumb as solutions to these errors which resulted in incomplete answers to student writers’ concerns. Tutors use these explanatory shortcuts, I think, for two reasons: 1) they are afraid of becoming too directive—of teaching instead of tutoring, and 2) they aren’t completely sure of the grammatical rules themselves. Breaking tutors’ reliance upon rules of thumb (like placing a comma where you should pause, and never using “I” in an academic essay) and giving them more concrete knowledge to share with their clients are challenges for tutor training, particularly because many rules of thumb “work” –most of the time. Writing tutors have been rewarded for using these strategies in their own writing; therefore, they share these strategies with their clients in the writing center.

In the tutorials I observed, tutors recognized that they were relying upon their instincts, and sometimes displayed some uneasiness about not being able to offer the student a more concrete explanation of the concern. For example:

Tutor: (reading the writer’s paper aloud) “The hidden crisis states,”
Okay, for one thing, that might be a, it isn’t really “stating” it...
Writer: um hmm
Tutor: maybe it implies or it... (she pauses for several seconds)
Writer: okay (writes “implies” on the paper)

In this instance, the tutor explains that her reaction to the sentence beginning with “The hidden crisis states” is that “states” is not the appropriate word in this context. Then, she suggests the word “implies” to replace “states” and, with a marked pause, moves on to the next point once the writer accepts “implies” as an appropriate substitution for “states.” Of course, the word “implies” is not an appropriate correction because it personifies “the crisis,” which is the problem with the writer’s initial word choice “states.” The tutor seems discontent with the way she addresses this particular concern, as suggested by her lengthy pause. The tutor’s instinct is correct that “implies” doesn’t work, but she may not have the tools to back up her instinct.

To help tutors bolster their knowledge about grammar and mechanics so they can support their instincts when they identify concerns in student writing, I've used role-play situations in a tutor training course that focus specifically on helping writers address later-order concerns. The goal of these role-plays is for the tutor to eventually notice when he/she is relying upon rules of thumb that offer incomplete explanations of the specific concern in the student's writing and/or to practice providing more complete explanations of the error and an appropriate correction that the student writer can use to identify and address similar errors in the future. I provide each tutor with a copy of the same sample paper, and one tutor volunteers to act as the tutor to my "writer" in front of the class. I encourage the tutor to conduct the consultation as he/she normally would, and I ask questions focusing on later-order concerns (as many writers do). I admit that I sometimes act as a particularly difficult writer, asking the tutor to explain "why" he/she is recommending I pay close attention to certain parts of the paper. For example, this would be a common exchange between the tutor and me (as writer):

Writer: I know I have a lot of trouble with semi-colons. My professor says I use them too often.

Tutor: Okay, well, let's look at where you use them (pauses).

Okay, here, (points to a place in the paper). Why did you choose to use a semi-colon here?

Writer: Well, I didn't think a comma would work, so I used a semi-colon.

Tutor: Why did you think a comma wouldn't work?

Writer: I don't know...would it have worked?

Tutor: Yes, I think a comma would have worked better.

Writer: Why?

In the above example, I hope to encourage the tutor to explain the rules behind his/her suggestion that a comma would work better because if the writer understands the rules, he/she may be able to use semi-colons more effectively. Oftentimes, in these kinds of role-play situations, the tutor will realize that he/she does not know how to explain, in concrete terms, the reason for his/her feeling that there is an error in the student's writing. In that case, this role-play activity opens the floor for discussion of the specific rule or grammatical concept that the tutors need to become familiar with.

If the tutor knows the appropriate rule or concept to explain to the student writer, he/she will practice explaining it as if he/she were involved in a real tutorial, using accessible language and presenting it in a way that a novice writer can understand. Sometimes, at this point in the role-play when the tutor points out a specific suggestion, as in the above example, the tutors who are observing the consultation interject believing that the tutor is being too directive by telling the writer what is correct. They fear that the student writer will merely add the comma and pay no attention to the explanation of why the comma would work better than the semi-colon. Tutors have similarly expressed a fear of being directive when I've spoken with them about their consultations I've observed. For example, the tutor in the consultation I referenced at the beginning of this essay characterized her tutoring style in that consultation: "I try not to be too directive. It slips up sometimes when I say 'why don't you put this here' and she just writes it down." Alice Gillam et al. claim that "tutors frequently evaluate their tutoring effectiveness in terms of their use of authority" (166), which this tutor does during our conversation.

Tutors struggle with the desire to be helpful to students, to help students improve their writing, and to uphold the values of the writing center and the academy. Tutors hope that if they use non-directive approaches, they can avoid offering words or ideas to the writer, thus allowing the writer to maintain ownership of his/her work. However, addressing later-order concerns can become particularly difficult when the writer has very little

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knowledge of grammatical conventions. When tutors find themselves struggling to apply characteristically non-directive strategies like open-ended questioning, they sometimes run into problems making these strategies work for later-order concerns. Once these strategies fail, they resort to using a more directive approach, which they feel is going against their training. The role-playing activities not only help tutors become more familiar with the rules that support their writerly instincts and allow them to practice explaining those rules to student writers, but they also open dialogue about non-directive/directive approaches and effective tutoring.

Tutors who are able to identify later-order concerns in student writing and to explain the appropriate correction for these errors using concrete rules that the student can apply in future writing assignments are better equipped to use non-directive approaches effectively. Some tutors may feel that using rules of thumb helps them to be less directive because these "rules" may be vague ("put a comma where you would pause" still requires the student to decide where he/she would pause) or are considered common knowledge that writers have likely heard before. Tutors sometimes have the misconception that offering concrete advice jeopardizes their ability to be non-directive, and, of course, tutors do not want to cross ethical boundaries and write the essay for the student writer. However, as Irene Clark and Dave Healy argue, "it is worse than simplistic to require that writing centers withhold helpful information and refrain from helpful practices out of a misguided sense of what is ethical" (43). If a tutor knows the grammatical rule that may help a student to learn to correct his/her own writing, then the tutor should feel comfortable sharing that rule and how it should be applied without feeling as if he/she is violating pedagogical best practices. In fact, tutors who are able to feel comfortable with their ability to identify errors in student writing and to confidently explain how these errors can be corrected, are better able to engage in effective, individualized writing instruction, which, according to Clark and Healy, is the mark of an ethical writing center (43). It is best practice to be non-directive without being vague.

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Another benefit of these role-playing activities is that they acquaint tutors with the resources available in the writing center for helping student writers address later-order concerns. Role-playing activities do not encourage tutors to memorize every grammatical rule in the English language, but they do encourage tutors to know where to

find the answers to the questions they don't know how to answer. As Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner emphasize, "Don't be afraid to take a handbook off the shelf and say, 'Let's look this up'" (94). For example, during the role-play, if the tutor cannot explain the reason for the comma being more appropriate than the semi-colon in the writer's paper, the tutor is encouraged to ask the audience of other tutors or to access handouts or online resources in the writing center to find the answer.

Once tutors have the tools to support their instincts, they begin to recognize the limitations of rules of thumb, and they are better able to provide concrete advice that student writers can take away from the consultation. Students who have engaged in these role-playing activities seem to appear more comfortable addressing later-order concerns, and they realize that while they don't need to be grammar experts to be effective tutors, being a writing center tutor provides an excellent reason to revisit and relearn grammatical rules. The long-term result is to give tutors the knowledge and confidence to be truly helpful to student writers by offering writers tools they can use to improve their writing and to uphold Stephen North's often quoted goal for the writing center: "to produce better writers, not better writing" (438).

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Kate Warrington is an Assistant Professor of English at the **University of North Texas at Dallas**. Her current research interests are quite diverse including writing center theory and practice; assessment; and video gaming, ethics, and authorship.

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