CULTIVATING PROFESSIONAL WRITING TUTOR IDENTITIES AT A TWO-YEAR COLLEGE

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Professional Development of Professional Tutors at Two-Year Colleges

Since their inception, writing centers at two-year colleges have had to be creative in their methods of maintaining a staff of tutors who can meet the writing support needs of their student writers. As early as 1981, Gary Olson noted, "[s]taffing the center is perhaps the most difficult problem two-year colleges encounter" (21). In contrast to writing centers at four-year institutions, which traditionally rely on peer tutors, the trend at two-year colleges, as noted by Leslie Roberts in 2008, has been to employ a wide variety of tutors, such as English instructors, professional tutors, and volunteers, in addition to peer tutors. Because writing tutors at two-year colleges come from a wide variety of backgrounds, they similarly bring a wide variety of experiences to their work. And while these varied backgrounds and experiences can potentially enrich the tutorials of student writers at two-year colleges, they can also potentially result in a disconnect between the writing tutors' expectations for the tutorial and the best practices in the field.

For example, English instructors employed as tutors by two-year colleges may over rely on their instructor behaviors during a tutorial, which are not always conducive to developing the non-evaluative environment that is accepted as a best practice in writing center theory.[1] Thus, a tutorial could end up looking and sounding a lot like a visit to office hours, rather than a writing consultation. Similarly, institutions that employ peers may struggle to maintain a strong pool of tutors, since tutors may privilege their responsibilities as students and transfer in two years (an occurrence noted as early as 1983 by Thomas Franke). Other two-year colleges employ professional tutors, and while these tutors have long played an integral role in writing centers, little research has been conducted on examining the unique professional development needs of professional tutors for work in two-year writing centers.

As part of a research project studying whether writing center tutor training programs could foster a "tutor identity" in their participants,[2] akin to what K-12 teacher educators have found in their research into "teacher identity," I observed the training program for professional tutors at a large two-year college in Southern California. Teacher education researchers Janet Alsup and Deborah Britzman determined that the inclusion of a "teacher identity" focus in teacher preparation programs produced pre-service teachers with a strong fit and understanding of the profession. In my research, I similarly found that the observed writing tutor training program prepared participants with a strong understanding of what it means to be a professional writing tutor at this two-year college. The program gave new tutors the opportunity to create a tutor identity that was distinct from their other professional or academic identities. The program's focus on developing a tutor identity prevented the new professional tutors from depending upon past models from other professional experiences that would not have been appropriate in writing tutorials. The observed tutorials of these tutors displayed evidence that the professional tutors similarly had a strong fit and understanding of the professional tutor identity as constructed by the local writing center. That is, the tutoring behaviors in the tutors' observed tutorials displayed evidence of the student-focused writing center philosophy promoted in the training program.

A Preparation Program Focused on Identity

As a former writing center tutor, consultant, and director, I've noticed how important it is for preparation programs to include explicit content about professional identity development, so that tutors do not rely on *acting like* tutors in their tutorials, but instead *become* tutors.[3] But, as anyone who has developed a tutor preparation program can tell you, it can be difficult to address both your center's theoretical approach to writing tutorials and pertinent practical concerns in the curriculum of your preparation program. This is especially true if your program is condensed to a one- or two-day workshop, instead of a preparation course. So, how can writing center directors at two-year colleges quickly facilitate the development of their professional tutors' "tutor identities" in a way that distinguishes them from other professional identities (particularly from that of teacher

identities)? Based on my observations of the two-year college writing center examined in my study and a review of relevant literature on identity development, I suggest that writing center directors at two-year colleges consider developing training programs that include a significant exposure to models of professional tutors[4] and a strong inclusion of the discourse of the writing center discourse community.[5]

Key Elements of Observed Preparation Program

The training program for the professional tutors that I observed at this two-year college began with the hiring process, where prospective tutors take a half-hour "skills assessment test." They are then debriefed about the test in a later interview between the tutor candidates and one of the two writing center directors. The test examines the applicants' abilities to isolate and explain grammatical errors, to respond to a section of student writing, to reflect on the difference between teaching and tutoring, and to complete a brief writing sample.

After the tutors are officially hired, they are required to attend a campus-wide, three-hour workshop for tutors in all disciplines. All of the writing tutors are also required to attend a one-hour "welcome back" workshop in the writing center held in the first few weeks of the fall semester; this is typically where new and returning tutors meet for the first time. At this meeting, new writing tutors are given a locally produced tutor handbook, which includes both theoretical approaches to tutoring and practical concerns related to working in the local center; newly hired prospective tutors are asked to read and annotate the handbook before their first shifts in the writing center. For their first few shifts, new writing tutors do not actually tutor student writers. Instead, they are introduced to the staff and the space of the writing center, and debriefed on their responses to the handbook by an available writing center director. They also observe tutorials performed by experienced tutors. After they conduct one or two tutorials independently, the new tutors are observed tutoring by one of the writing center directors, who later debrief tutors on their performance.

The writing center directors also hold a two-hour mid-semester workshop and potluck, where tutors check in with one another and discuss relevant issues they have noted through their observations or their self-reflections, which are completed after every session. At the end of the semester, each tutor completes an additional, longer self-reflection, and is again observed by a writing center director. The professional tutors are also presented with additional, optional modes of preparation: a one-unit course instructed by either one of the two writing center directors and monthly "brown bags" or informal colloquia focused on issues in writing studies, which are open to the entire campus community.

Observed Outcomes of Preparation Program

Due in large part to the significant exposure to models of professional tutors and the required inclusion of writing center discourse (in the form of the tutor handbook), the four professional tutors I observed in this research project developed professional tutor identities that were strongly aligned with the desired outcomes of the preparation program (as outlined by the two writing center directors). And because the professional tutors observed such a wide variety of tutor models, they understood that the preparation program did not promote a singular or static notion of tutor identity. Instead, the program encourages the new professional tutors to consider who they are as tutors, in addition to who they are as teachers, teaching assistants, writers, etc. This was due in part to the fact that, like many other professional tutors, the four professional tutors profiled in my research held at least one other professional position during the time data were collected. Perhaps, because the tutors already possessed fully developed professional identities, they were able to navigate the successful development of tutor identities using pre-established characteristics of their other identities.

Even though all four of the professional tutors in this case had exposure to potentially conflicting identity models, such as that of teacher or editor, they were able to resist employing these other professional identities, which would not have been appropriate for the writing center's context. The age and professional experience of these tutors indicated that they had been exposed to multiple identity models and had more experience constructing institutional identities. This suggests that writing center directors at two-year colleges may benefit from encouraging participants to consider the identity characteristics of past professional identities and how they align or conflict with the desired identity characteristics of the writing tutors at their own centers.

Notes

1. See Murphy and Hobson for descriptions of these practices.
2. The focus on "tutor identity" in this project was based on the theoretical frame that K-12 teacher educators have found in their research into "teacher identity." For examples, see Alsup, Danielewicz, and McKinney et al. for more information about teacher identity.
3. See Bright for a discussion of this behavior in undergraduate writing tutors.
4. See Wortham for a discussion of the use of identity models in identity construction.
5. See Benwell and Stokoe for an analysis of the use of discourse in identity construction.

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