



Praxis: A Writing Center Journal (2003-2011)

Sections

[Focus](#)
[Columns and Reviews](#)
[Consulting](#)
[Training](#)
[News & Announcements](#)

Archives

[Browse past issues of Praxis](#)

About Us

[About Us](#)

Submissions

[Submit an article to Praxis](#)

[Home](#) » [Archives](#) » [Spring 2008 \(Volume 5 Issue 2\) - Authority and Cooperation](#)

Encouraging Tutor Independence

[Spring 2008 / Training](#)

by **Gayla Mills**, *Randolph-Macon College*

Creating authority in peer tutors by decentering the director's role

To celebrate the end of the semester, I hosted a dinner for my tutors the day after the writing center closed for exams. As we sat eating and chatting, I was dismayed when one of them interrupted our dinner to answer her cell. But then I overheard a practiced "What's your thesis?" as she strode from the room.



Gayla Mills

I was charmed that a tutor would stop eating in order to help another student. This wasn't the first time I'd seen these undergrads put the needs of others first. On the other hand, I wondered if my role as director was to intervene. Should I let them choose where to draw the line with their needy writers, or should I guide them in determining the limits of their tutoring responsibilities?

I asked the other tutors in the room what they thought. They all agreed that Jes needed to take the call. "That's Sharon on the phone. She really does have a problem with developing a thesis," one of them said. And so I got a glimpse into a culture from which I, as director, was often excluded.

I also saw a small piece of the role that tutoring plays in the lives of these students and in their emerging selves. "Being able to help a student in need gives me a sense of purpose," said one sophomore.

[My tutors'] freedom from my authority has fostered their interdependence and sense of responsibility.

When I became the writing center director two years ago, I considered whether to change its existing schedule: it was open only in the evenings, from 6-11 pm, Sunday to Thursday. The theory is that students do most of their writing in the evenings, so that is the best time to offer them help. But it also means that

the tutors, all undergraduates, work unsupervised.

After talking with the seasoned tutors and engaging in some soul searching, I decided to keep the evening hours. I thought the benefit of having them take charge without a clear older authority present outweighed the loss of having an "expert" they could turn to in a pinch. They had to become their own experts, even if it meant they might stumble while finding their footing.

It worked. No matter how friendly I try to be, how approachable, or how supportive, I am still their boss. Their freedom from my authority has fostered their interdependence and sense of responsibility. They handle the evening crises, the appointment scheduling and drop-in logistics, the sudden software glitches or odd requests. To ensure fewer glitches, I schedule an experienced tutor on each shift in the fall. That way the new ones have someone to turn to if they get in over their heads. We also discuss how they handle questions they can't answer or the ways they can approach each other if they overhear a session taking a wrong turn.

I consider it an important aspect of my job to help tutors find [their] strengths and develop them.

As one tutor wrote in a class essay, "Working at the writing center has built up a sense of strong teamwork for me. Although we tutors have our sessions individually, we do sometimes ask each other questions or even ask for help when one of us gets stuck in a tough situation." Because they don't have an expert to fall back on, they learn to depend on each other. More importantly, each learns his own strength and shares it with others. I consider it an important aspect of my job to help tutors find these strengths and develop them. I am able to do that more easily in my role as professor.

I teach a one-credit fall semester class to new tutors designed to give them a context and crutch as they begin their first sessions. In addition to learning the nuts and bolts, they develop their relationships with each other and accept a new level of responsibility. For some, this is their first job. They also navigate their way, with some awkwardness, through the transition from calling me "Professor" to using my first name. But this, too, serves as a bridge between their lives as underappreciated undergraduates to their evolving professional selves.

One class assignment has been especially effective at helping them develop as tutors. They are asked to choose a discipline specialty and to teach each other how to tutor it. Their first step is to meet with the department chair, then with a second faculty member. The tutors come armed with questions about how students can write better papers in that discipline. In addition, they interview students in the major to find out what helps them with their class writing assignments.

Yet on a small liberal arts campus where everyone knows what's going on, it's important to showcase the tutors and build confidence in their abilities among the faculty.

The tutors then prepare and present a one page handout in class that summarizes their findings. The results are informative, helpful, and interesting because they reflect varied perspectives. If a particular professor has a quirk in writing preferences, that is noted too. One tutor wrote in her final class essay, "The handouts that came from this assignment are a great resource during

tutoring sessions and give me more confidence when I am asked to tutor a subject I'm unfamiliar with." Another focused on his own studies: "By interviewing the two professors I knew the best in the department, I was able to get a better understanding of the criteria teachers use when grading political science essays. This information will provide me with a resource that I can use for the rest of my college career, and one that I hope others will find useful as well."

From my perspective, the exercise is a subtle way to illustrate to my colleagues the more democratic structure of the writing center. As director of writing across the curriculum, I am expected to provide information in a top-down fashion. It's understood that these faculty and I, together, will discuss and address the "problems" students are having with their writing and "how to correct them."

Yet on a small liberal arts campus where everyone knows what's going on, it's important to showcase the tutors and build confidence in their abilities among the faculty. From the tutor interviews, faculty learn that the writing center is working to help students in each discipline. They learn that the writing center values the details considered essential for success in each field. And they learn this from the tutors, the ones working the front lines.

The next time I hear these budding professionals answering their cells, I'll be thinking twice about the bonds they're creating with each other and the culture on which they depend. And I'll be pleased to feel on the fringes rather than on top.

Gayla Mills is Director of **Writing Across the Curriculum** and Instructor of English at **Randolph-Macon College** in Ashland, Virginia. She is also a freelance writer and former book editor.

[◀ Consultant Spotlight](#)

[up](#)

[European Writing Centers Association Conference >](#)

Praxis is a project of the **Undergraduate Writing Center** at the University of Texas at Austin

[Editor login](#)