

## ARE WE REALLY STUDENT-CENTERED? RECONSIDERING THE NATURE OF STUDENT “NEED”

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Any plan of action the tutor follows is going to be student-centered in the strictest sense of that term. That is, it will not derive from a generalized model of composing [...] but will begin where the student is and move where the student moves. —Stephen North, “The Idea of a Writing Center”

### Introduction

Writing centers stand resolutely as the very embodiment of student-centered learning, dedicated — unflinchingly — to Stephen North’s enduring “idea:” that “writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction” (“Idea” 438). Indeed, the “concept of a writing center” explicated on the IWCA website positions the student in the center of our world: “Each student’s individual needs are the focus of the tutorial” (Harris). One would be hard-pressed to find anyone in the writing center community who disagrees with this statement. The writing center is widely regarded as “the ultimate point-of-need pedagogical scene” (Boquet and Lerner 174).

But who or what determines the nature of this need? According to the IWCA “concept,” student “needs” — which frame the “starting point” and “agenda” of a tutorial — are established through tutor-student collaboration:

The starting point of every tutorial is to find out what that particular student needs or wants. To set the agenda for the tutorial, tutors assess the student’s present situation, class requirements, past writing history, general composing habits and approaches to learning, attitudes, motivation, and whatever else is needed to determine how the tutor and student should proceed. Students are encouraged to participate actively in setting the agenda for how the tutor and student will spend their time together. (Harris)

Again, these are assertions with which few of us would disagree. But because students and tutors often enter a tutorial with drastically different priorities, they rarely view “need” in the same way. Students often expect — even demand — something quite different from what we offer them. When a student asks for line editing, extensive hands-on direction, or micro-level grammatical instruction, the tutor is thrust into the unenviable position of balancing these requests with

our process-driven, facilitative ideals. Tutors who choose to attend to these requests must willfully step outside their (our) prescribed boundaries — something with which they are not always comfortable. Conversely (and more importantly), those tutors who adhere to the order of concerns and our non-directive principles risk ignoring the desires of the student — who, ironically, is supposed to be at the very center of our practice. In this sense, tutors must reconcile demands and expectations that are not just divergent, but paradoxical. Can we prioritize higher-order concerns and a holistic, nondirective approach — even as students explicitly request something else — and rightly call ourselves “student-centered”? We conceptualize our work in terms of student “need,” but can we be student-centered if we do not do what the student *wants*?

In this article, I draw on written reflections from writing center tutors to critically examine our needs-based philosophy, suggesting that our pedagogy may have colonialist implications that can be linked directly to our claims of student-centeredness. These reflections constitute but one part of the data set from a large-scale empirical study comparing writing center theory and practice in North American universities.<sup>1</sup> This triangulated inquiry combined written reflections of 23 tutors and seven directors (obtained via e-mail interviews), direct observation of five tutorial sessions, and an online survey of 210 writing center professionals in order to identify and examine the shared epistemological assumptions underlying writing center instruction. My particular interest was in pedagogical situations that challenged tutors to break our own self-imposed rules, as well our “tendency to go off-task” (Boquet 478). I wanted to know the extent to which our words and actions are (in)consistent with our intent — whether the philosophy espoused by our tutoring manuals and literature manifested itself in writing center reality. As Jeanne Simpson observes, “The boundaries between what should happen in a writing center and what does happen and what might happen are porous to say the least” (4).

The reflections were written e-mail responses to open-ended questions about tutoring and writing centers, provided by tutors and directors from a wide

variety of institutional settings and cultural backgrounds. For purposes of this essay, I focus specifically on reflections of tutors, in the interest of foregrounding *their* perspective in our scholarly conversations. A perennial issue with writing center scholarship is that the voices of tutors – the very people who actually implement our pedagogy on a daily basis – remain conspicuously absent. Dinitz and Kiedaisch assert:

Writing center theory can be enriched by including tutor voices and perspectives. As the folks at the boundary of theory and practice, tutors are well-positioned to explore the connections between them, to tease out the subtleties, the complications, the assumptions, the omissions in our theory and our practice, and to see how one might shed light on the other. (75)

This article answers their call by privileging the words of the tutors themselves in my discussion; collectively, their cogent articulations say more about writing center reality than one researcher ever could.

Direct quotations are anonymous, and are attributed to participants based on an arbitrary number (1-23). The numbers, which were randomly assigned during the data analysis, are meant only to separate tutor comments from one another. Pronouns (she/he) are also dispersed randomly, and may not reflect the actual gender of the participant. I use the tutor reflections as a launching point for my discussion of student “need,” as well as a means of exploring the compatibility of our epistemological assumptions with our pedagogical practices. The tutors in this study talk about what they do in particular way, reflecting, to varying degrees, the reductive potential of our disciplinary narratives. Please note that in culling together these examples, I do not wish to frame tutors or their methods in a wholly negative light; rather, my concern is that our discourses may push us further away from the students we purport to serve. Even well-intentioned actions can *appear* hegemonic – especially to a confused student who isn't familiar with our world.

### Whose needs?

Our teaching philosophy presupposes certain pedagogical goals and objectives. When we in the writing center community endeavor to make “better writers” rather than “better writing,” we define tutorial success *vis-à-vis* *our* goal for students. This complicates our professed student-centeredness because, while our intention is to empower the student, we are not always doing what s/he actually wants. Consider this reflection by Tutor 7: “The

writing they've brought in with them is writing they've already done, and I'm more interested in the writing they will do in the future.” He was not the only participant to construe our process-based approach so narrowly; virtually all of the tutors categorically reject product-based instruction in their reflections. Tutor 18 asserts (*italics mine*), “I want to tutor a writer, *not* a piece of writing. *My goal isn't to help them with one assignment*, but to give clients skills to apply to all the writing they do.” The language used by these tutors belies the contextual flexibility that tutoring necessitates. They are probably just articulating a desire to prioritize process-based concerns, but to a distraught student with deadlines to meet, they may as well have said, “I'm not really interested in working with this paper you brought me.” Such articulations are understandable, given the tendency of students, the institution, and the culture-at-large to fixate on form, mechanics, and the more immediate matter of grades. However, these statements bear a striking resemblance to our own discourses, many of which are steeped in such sharp distinctions. Process and product are presented here as diametric opposites – not, I think, because tutors ignore the writing itself, but perhaps because our conversations have so definitively separated it from “writers.” While there are good reasons not to focus exclusively on external issues, *appearing* to prioritize personal growth at their expense risks trivializing the importance of not only students' papers (the product), but also *their* conception of what they “need.” Here is another representative example:

Least important in my tutoring session is grades and/or pleasing the teacher [...] Writing in college is to benefit the student – it's not about the final product. Of course, I want students to get good grades, but I'd much rather them be excited about writing than agonize over getting every bullet point of a teacher's writing prompt taken care of. (Tutor 17)

This tutor has also prioritized process over product, the writer over the writing, this time at the expense of context and audience (in this case, the teacher). Certainly, we all love to see students “excited about writing,” and we've all had to bite our tongue when our students bring us poorly worded assignments. That said, interpreting and addressing a teacher's writing prompt is an integral part of academic writing – even if it may not seem to “benefit the student” in an immediate way. And whether or not we like it, grades matter – especially to students. Like the previous reflections, these appear to be informed by a dogmatic construal of writing as a “process;” this is process *in lieu of* product, as if the “final product” or

“grades” are somehow insignificant in light of process-based concerns. Again, I am led to wonder whether our own conversations can have a delimiting effect on the way tutors talk about their own practice. As non-evaluative sites of learning, writing centers can afford to prioritize being “excited about writing” over grades. However, if and when we voice these priorities, will students still feel that they are receiving what they “need”?

Our reticence to engage certain topics can leave students feeling understandably bemused. Several of the tutors recall bitter exchanges with irate students, often following an attempt to “redirect” (a word that occurs repeatedly in the reflections) the tutorial away from sentence-level mechanics and towards higher-order concerns. Tutor 7 reflects on such a session; his student was “uninterested in talking about writing in any holistic way [...] became irritated [and] repeatedly insisted that the writing center was here to ‘make it right’, and pointed to the paper over and over again.” This frustrating scenario is probably, at least in part, attributable to a misunderstanding about the nature of writing center instruction. But such tense situations also remind us just how difficult it can be for students to embrace *our* ideas, i.e. discussing writing in a “holistic way.” Tutor 20 emphasizes the need to maintain our priorities in the face of such angry demands: “I don’t think the tutor should ignore problem areas just because the writer didn’t specifically say to work on it.” Certainly, there is a lot of truth to her statement. How often, though, does the *tutor* establish “problem areas,” effectively determining what students *really* need? What concerns me is not *that* we do this, but how it might look to a student. I don’t mean to suggest that we should “ignore” major issues, but in our haste to do what we do, we may forget that students often visit the writing center for a different kind of “help” than what we provide.

Granted, students often do not know what they want. Many lack the vocabulary to spell out exactly what they “need.” They don’t speak our language or know how to characterize their writing problems. Proofreading, for example, is all some students know, and the oft-heard entreaty, “I need help proofreading” simply means “I need *help*.” It is perhaps precisely this lack of student awareness that leads tutors to “redirect” a session. However, such actions may leave students feeling like our discourses of empowerment are somewhat insincere.

### Getting defensive

The tutors in this study report feeling conflicted, compromised, even threatened by students who

wanted editing or proofreading. While these lingering misconceptions of a tutor’s role have existed as long as writing centers have, they led many of these tutors to retreat into a defensive mindset:

In cases where it was, ‘Dude, proofread this for me’ [...] well, then it’s a question of boundaries. I don’t do that. You can’t make me. It’s disrespectful of you to insist on it after I told you it’s not part of my work and not what I can do for you. (Tutor 4)

A number of other tutors report being similarly annoyed by student requests for proofreading and editing (*italics are mine*):

Being big on collaboration, I am *insulted* when a student asks to drop off a paper for me to edit for him/her. (Tutor 17)

I had one of the most *horrific* sessions with a freshman male student who kept pushing his paper in front of me and telling me to write out what I had just talked about with him. (Tutor 8)

Occasionally, I have a student who just wants a proofreading service. That expectation absolutely has to be *combated*. (Tutor 16)

It’s certainly understandable why tutors feel compromised; the aforementioned circumstances would frustrate anyone trying to sustain a holistic, facilitative approach. However, the words they use are very revealing. They are “insulted” by requests for editing; proofreading and authoritative instruction are described as “horrific” experiences that must be “combated”. The word “combated” is a particularly interesting choice, as it implies vigorous, militant opposition, which flies in the face of our student-centeredness, and seems completely antithetical to the supportive reassurance that most tutors purport to give.

These statements reflect the tendency of some writing centers to define themselves in starkly negative terms. It bears mentioning that North takes an extremely uncompromising position in his landmark essay, pitting *us*, the writing center community, against *them*, those in the academy who have misconstrued our mission, insisting that writing centers be accepted only “on their own terms” (“Idea” 446). Writing centers have since adopted a somewhat defensive, even defiant, stance. For example, Jeff Brooks offers specific strategies to “fight back” against “uncooperative students” who do not embrace our ideal of “minimalist tutoring” (4). The participants in this study continue to lament the lingering “fix-it shop” perception that North railed against over 20 years ago. Due in no small part due to North’s enduring influence, writing centers are still often

defined first and foremost in terms of what they are *not*. We do *not* proofread. We are *not* fix-it shops.

It is not so striking that these students did not want to proofread and spoon-feed ideas, but the extent to which they were apoplectic about it gives us pause. Tutor 8 asserts (*italics mine*), “I have to continually talk to myself when working with such students, and tell myself that *what this student wants is not what I should be doing*.” Perhaps our approach has been so deeply entrenched that tutors sometimes have difficulty accepting other methods as appropriate or effective. As these examples show, some tutors are not only uncomfortable but outwardly irritated when pushed to do something outside their own prescribed boundaries. “These writers,” says Tutor 20, “don’t understand the writing center philosophy of collaborative learning.” Indeed. Our relationship with students, far from an equal collaboration, is predicated on what *we* believe they need.

I use these examples not to illustrate the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of these tutors, but to demonstrate the covert ways that our epistemological assumptions may affect the trajectory and outcome of a tutorial session. We mean well – but those of us who insist that the tutorial session is entirely in the hands of the student may be at odds with our own actions.

## Conclusion

One of the more difficult things for teachers to learn is, in the words of Stephen Brookfield, that “the sincerity of their intention does not guarantee the purity of their practice” (1). Julie Bokser argues that “aggression” is an unavoidable aspect of our ostensibly collaborative exchanges, and that “with only a slight shift in perspective, what appears to be help (‘charity’) might be understood as the violence of imposition and self aggrandizement” (23). The discourses surrounding writing centers can have a quasi-evangelical air about them, making it difficult to see that our altruism is a product of our own positioning. Bawarshi and Pelkowski take this a step further; they worry that we may be “imposing academic discourse on marginalized writers and calling it a ‘service’” (51). While I don’t see us involved in quite so hegemonic a relationship, I do think that our benevolent motives can hide the ways in which our “help” may be interpreted as self-serving and dominant. Historically, writing center pedagogy has taken on a liberatory tone, but like any other teachers, we run the risk of adhering too rigidly to our own assumptions. We need make our students aware of the ways in which *our* discourses construct *their* reality. Jeanne Simpson reminds us that “our community’s

definitions, like everyone’s, have been filtered through our own value systems” (1). In our ongoing, laborious attempts to define and re-define ourselves and the nature of the service(s) we provide, we must remember that our students were not there when we established the rules.

My concern is not with tutors or our pedagogies, but how we *talk* about them. I don’t necessarily believe that writing center orthodoxy has been embraced uncritically. However, our collective discourses can make some of these issues appear more cut-and-dried than they actually are. North’s revisions to his own position (“Revisiting”) have not had the staying power of his original maxims. Our conversations still tend towards tried and true aphorisms (e.g. “making better writers”) that don’t entirely capture the nuance of what our tutors actually do. Lerner and Boquet suggest that the “wide and uncritical invocation” of our core ideas “have become a kind of verbal shorthand, a special handshake for the initiated, an endpoint rather than an origin” (171). Certainly, this is not a new issue, but these discourses have enjoyed an amazing durability within writing center circles. I worry that our shared ideals continue to coalesce into what Shamon and Burns once called a “writing center bible,” the components of which function “like articles of faith that serve to validate a tutoring approach which ‘feels right’” (135). Have our definitions of our own practice expanded beyond Angela Petit’s “purified space,” where the “discourses presented to tutors seem as impermeable as the walls of the center itself?” (114). As Simpson notes, the way we characterize our own practice is critically important: “Inflexibility causes writing center folk to be unnecessarily defensive about our work and to be offensive to others when we tell them their ideas are wrong. We need to understand that we can only influence, not control, the way others see or missions, goals, and methods.” (4).

Simpson rightly points out that the “core issue is one of perceptions” (3). What do we *look* like – our centers, our tutors, our practices – to an outsider? Visitors to the writing center are often newcomers to a unique world, a world in which *we* have determined the means and ends, the purpose and nature of instruction, the parameters and goals. As Harry Denny observes, our “educational rituals” (“collaborative writing, active learning, and recursive process”) are unfamiliar and uncomfortable for many students (58). Suddenly, the priorities these students hold dear (e.g. external text characteristics, grades) cease to be the focal point of their learning. Throughout all of this, we tell them we are “student-centered.” Is it any surprise that some of them are confused? Our claims to

student-centeredness have been vexing me for quite some time, not because they are anything but well-meaning, but because they may *appear* to be disingenuous. All of the tutors in my study said they would adapt their session based on “student need,” but by and large it was the *tutors* – not the students – who determined the nature of that need. It’s vitally important that we not only listen to our students, but that we send “a clear signal that we [are] indeed listening” (Simpson 2). This means acknowledging that we exist in a fairly unique learning environment, essential and meaningful to us, but frequently baffling to those unfamiliar with it. In a culture fixated on outcomes, where an increasingly pervasive model of education positions students as consumers rather than learners, *we* are the peculiar ones. This is undoubtedly a good thing, but such an environment obliges us to be especially transparent about our expectations. More than that, we need to actively promote the very idea of what we do, even if its benefits are self-evident to us. Frustrating as it may be (and no doubt is), our job is to bridge what Simpson terms “perceptual gaps;” to explain ourselves, consistently and explicitly, helping our institutions and our students understand and appreciate what *we* value (4). The alternative may be a growing disconnect between our stated pedagogical philosophy and the students we purport to serve.

Value conflict is a virtual inevitability in a tutorial, and it’s not unthinkable that our student-centered pedagogy could be misinterpreted as an act of imposition. Bawarshi and Pelkowski argue that our well-meaning rhetoric can have “unmistakably colonialist” ramifications (45). At times, the reflections of these tutors smack of a “*we* know what’s best for *you*” mentality that borders on parental. Admittedly, some students truly do not know what they want, and more often than not tutors do know better – but when we steer students away from their own initial desires, can we rightly call ourselves student-centered? There is a difference here, between what a student *wants* and what a student *needs*. And we may have to qualify our student-centeredness, because while our intention is to cater to the latter, we don’t always act in accordance with the former. It is thus incumbent on writing centers to reflect upon this issue – to consider and reconsider the ways that our practice relentlessly challenges the nurturing, student-centered philosophy that informs it.

#### Notes

1. For a more detailed discussion of methodology and findings, please see *Contextualizing Writing Centres: Theory vs. Practice*, a Master’s thesis available via ProQuest

Dissertations and Theses and Library and Archives Canada. Contact Philip J. Sloan ([psloan@kent.edu](mailto:psloan@kent.edu)) for more information.

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