

“DEVELOPING WRITERS”: THE MULTIPLE IDENTITIES OF AN EMBEDDED TUTOR IN THE DEVELOPMENTAL WRITING CLASSROOM

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In her essay “When Basic Writers Come to College,” Patricia Bizzell explains that writers placed in developmental courses “are asked to join an academic community ... united almost entirely by its language” (296). Specifically, students are asked to learn “new dialect and discourse conventions ... [and] the outcome of such learning is the acquisition of a whole new world view” (297), which requires not only a different way of writing and communicating but a different way of thinking. This is no small task. Therefore, some of the problems that developmental writers face “are best understood as stemming from the initial distance between their world views and the academic world view” (297). James Paul Gee further defines these communities as “Discourses” where students can create an “‘identity kit,’ which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize” (7). Many of us would agree that most writing center tutors have successfully negotiated these different communities and Discourses, adapted alternative viewpoints, and even created various identities through their work in our centers, which results in tremendous change and growth. As Hughes, Gillespie, and Kail have demonstrated through the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project, the work of tutoring has a profound impact, changing the way tutors perceive writing, learn critical thinking, value the power of collaborative

learning, and develop a new-found sense of personal confidence.

In Saginaw Valley State University’s (SVSU’s) program model, where the tutors embedded in the developmental writing classroom are former developmental writers themselves, the ways these tutors change and grow becomes particularly relevant. Our embedded tutors are positioned with a unique world view: through their past experiences in the developmental writing classroom, they understand the students, the course expectations, and the demands of being a first-year developmental writer at the university in ways that traditional writing center tutors cannot. In addition, these tutors, whose primary work occurs not in our writing center but in the classroom, are asked to operate in multiple Discourses or communities, so they are constantly moving in and out of the identities of student, tutor, and instructor. The world view our embedded tutors bring to the classroom based on their past experience as developmental writers, along with the various identities any embedded tutor must negotiate, raises some interesting questions. Can one be inside one community or Discourse without being outside the other? Or, as Etienne Wenger might suggest, do these different identities not negate each other, but actually build on one another as tutors shape their identities through their work in different communities? And most importantly, how do these different identities

shape the tutors' world view: how do the tutors think and understand their shifting sense of themselves as students, tutors, and people? This essay will examine preliminary answers to these questions informed by the voices of the embedded tutors themselves.

SVSU Embedded Tutor Program Overview

The embedded tutoring program for our developmental writers at SVSU began as an intervention strategy. Although over 300 students enrolled in English 080, Developmental Writing, in 2010, the Writing Center completed only over 120 tutorial sessions with this same group of students (see Tables 1 and 2). In addition, the pass rate in this course was extremely low: only 65% of the students passed the course in the fall semester, with only 45% passing in the winter semester. The pass rates are not surprising, considering the demographics of these students. At our regional Midwest university, students are placed into English 080, Developmental Writing, if they score a 15 or below on the English portion of the ACT (or if they have a SAT writing subscore of 380 or lower). In addition to struggling in writing, about two-thirds of English 080 students are concurrently enrolled in other developmental reading and/or math courses during their first semester. These students (40-45% of whom are students of color) are often first-generation college, Pell-eligible, and from literacy-poor backgrounds.

The English 080 embedded tutoring program was developed in fall 2010 to begin to address issues of student success in English 080. For the past four years, the Writing Center has recruited, trained, and coordinated students who successfully completed English 080 and English 111, Freshman Composition, during their first year of college to return as embedded tutors in English 080 the following year. These tutors support current English 080 students in two ways: by providing individual tutorial sessions to English 080 students inside the Writing Center once a week, and by working inside the English 080 classrooms with the students and the instructor one day a week. Our Writing Center has collaborated with the First-Year Writing Program and the English 080 instructors, so every English 080 course (typically 10-14 sections in the fall and 2-3 in the winter semesters) now includes an embedded English 080 tutor. Since the program's inception, we have seen an increase in the number of tutorial sessions provided for English 080 students; combining both tutorial sessions provided in the classroom and in the writing center, our embedded tutors provided over 400 tutorial sessions for English

080 students each year for the past two years (see Tables 2 and 3). More importantly, although a number of factors contribute to student success, the embedded tutoring program has been a critical component for the steady increase in pass rates in English 080, with 21% more students passing the course in fall 2013, and 48% more passing in winter 2014 when compared to the pass rates prior to the start of the program (see Table 4).

Although the impact of this tutoring program on developmental writing students is clear, the impact on the tutors, all of whom were former developmental writing students themselves, was not as easy to quantify. To understand the benefits—and challenges—of this program for the embedded tutors, we decided to ask the tutors themselves.

Embedded Tutors' Perspectives

During the academic year 2013-14, the English 080 embedded tutors were asked to keep online discussion posts. During the fall semester, these tutors were asked to respond to questions about the process of tutoring: what was working, where they were struggling, and what questions arose during their time in the classroom and the Writing Center. During the winter semester, the tutors were asked questions about their perception of tutoring: how they saw their role as both a tutor and former developmental writer in the classroom, in the Writing Center, and as a student in the university. Here, their responses became instructive for the program and for English 080 students, so much so that we captured each of them in subsequent videotaped interviews, which are shown to current English 080 students at an orientation session every semester. Their answers to these questions told us a great deal about the multiple identities embedded tutors negotiate based on the given discourse community in which they find themselves and, perhaps more importantly, how these identities have shaped the tutors' trajectories to form their overall identity.

First, it became clear that these embedded tutors reside in a dynamic space, their work forcing them into what Mary Louise Pratt calls a "contact zone" inside different discourse communities, all with different and competing power relationships. For example, as at most writing centers, our traditional tutors are proven to be successful students, often scholarship winners and campus leaders who position themselves for advanced degrees beyond their undergraduate education. Moreover, these tutors are students who have always seen themselves as "writers": possessing the innate skills to write well and

using writing to demonstrate their intelligence and acumen. In contrast, most of our embedded tutors are students who entered the university labeled as developmental writers, who often began college uncertain of their ability to be successful. Typically, these embedded tutors came from high schools that did little to prepare them for the demands of college writing, and many of these tutors saw themselves as poor writers. Yet these embedded tutors find themselves having successfully completed developmental writing and freshman composition courses in their first year, and returning to the university as sophomores with the label of “writing tutor”: a rapid movement from one very different discourse community to another in a single year’s time. Although these embedded tutors are brought into the Writing Center, they sometimes feel a sense of disconnect from the community of the traditional tutors, whose skills at speaking, writing, tutoring, and “student-ness” seem to give them more power and authority in the Center. And by being embedded in the classroom, the tutors are put in another location with very distinct discourse communities: those of the students and the instructor. Although the instructor typically holds the power here, the tutors themselves are not part of the students’ discourse community in that specific classroom context. Because of their role as an embedded tutor, they truly belong to neither community; thus, the embedded tutors’ power—or lack of power—in the classroom is often amorphous, constantly shifting in and out of focus. These various competing contact zones in the Writing Center and the classroom can problematize the identity of the embedded tutors. In fact, it is sometimes easier to define our embedded tutors by what they are not, rather than what they are.

However, it is possible to move away from this simple paradigm. Perhaps the focus should move away from what the embedded tutors are or are not, and we should consider instead what they are becoming. The responses below come from our embedded tutors when the reflection on their practice—and its influence on their own shifting identities based on the various communities in which they reside—had just begun. As their comments show, much of the work they do as embedded tutors is (re)discovering the multiple identities of student, tutor, non-instructor, and overall self, and reflecting on how these identities shift, change, and build upon one another.

Student Identity

The first identity the embedded tutors examined was their *identity as a student*, specifically as a student

who belonged to the “developmental writer” community. All the tutors commented on their ability to relate to the current community of developmental writers: the lack of confidence and sense of disengagement, or even futility, from being labeled as “developmental.” Acknowledging membership in this community was an important aspect of the embedded tutors’ identity, not only to build relationships, but to demonstrate the ability of moving beyond this initial community into other identities and other possibilities.

In his video interview, Kramer Stoneman discusses his identity as a former developmental writer with the English 080 students directly: “When I was a 080 student, I was the guy that sat in the back of the class. I decided I’d show up, and do the minimum, you know. And then my teacher said, ‘I think you could be a good writer,’ so I started to apply myself. And now I ended up here, as a tutor for this class. So you know, if you apply yourself, you never know—maybe you could be in my shoes someday.”

In addition, many of the embedded tutors talk about the importance of entering into the developmental writers’ community by getting to know each student in their class personally, acknowledging the importance of connections based on shared experiences. In her discussion post, Taeler Singleton wrote:

Embedded tutors connect with the students on a more personal level because we are in the classrooms every week, getting to know each student individually. We have a better understanding of how well each student works, and we learn to figure out each writer’s weakness and strengths As embedded tutors, we have developed the skills to identify with the students we work with, since all of us have taken that class, and we know what it feels like to have a concern about the class or our overall writing ability.

In fact, she argues her work in the classroom is “much more intense and much more personal than a regular one-on-one session. You have to take the time out to understand who the students are, where they are coming from, and what their struggles are to really be able to help.”

Clearly, the importance of membership in what Gee might call this “primary Discourse” community is a central tenet of the embedded tutors’ identity. He claims, “aspects of one Discourse can be *transferred* to another Discourse” (9). In Kramer’s and Taeler’s comments, we see this kind of transfer. The tutors understand the attitudes and beliefs of this community. Moreover, the tutors’ genuine interest in

recognizing the individual student's needs, or, as Taeler says, "understanding who the students are and where they are coming from," is critical to the tutors' own identity as students who resided in this community in the past. By transferring their past experiences into their new identity as an embedded tutor, they are able to engage more readily with the current developmental writing students.

Tutor Identity

The embedded tutors also discussed their *identity as a tutor* based on the two distinct communities: the classroom vs. the Writing Center. Gee claims, "all reading and writing is embedded in some Discourse You cannot teach anyone to read or write outside of a Discourse" (11). For English 080 students to have more opportunities to engage in the Discourse of the academic community, the embedded tutors worked weekly in the classroom and provided individual tutoring for their students in the Writing Center. Therefore, all the embedded tutors had experience working in both communities, which provided several benefits to the students. Taeler explains:

My role as an embedded tutor is to work with the students in the classroom and in the Writing Center. My duty is to provide assistance in helping students develop a writing process that fits their individual thinking structure. In the classroom, my work is more active and hands-on because I work with multiple students at a time to help brainstorm ideas, to take detailed notes for later reference. The entire time, I work on getting an overall feel for what my students are like and observe ... how they learn. In the Writing Center I provide one-on-one services tutoring English 080 students. The Writing Center is a quieter setting for the student to concentrate and to feel more at ease at talking about their problems with writing in a private conversation.

Crystal Brinson acknowledges that she prefers her work in the classroom, where she sees her role as more focused on establishing connections with individual students:

I have the opportunity to assist students in the classroom during every stage of the writing process This is very important because every class that I spend with the students, I am learning their writing styles: their weaknesses and also their strengths. Being in the classroom helps them open up to me. They have many opportunities to sit

with me and discuss their writing, and their lives, versus having thirty minutes in the Writing Center.

However, she realizes this community comes with the challenges as well, one of which is very different than tutoring students individually in the Writing Center:

You have to learn to be okay with seeing the student more than once, whether you liked that person or not. When I worked in the Center it was easy to help a student, complete a task, and leave the Center. Working in the classroom is different because when you have a "bad session" or become frustrated, you have to learn to take a step back and then re-approach the situation another day. It is critical that you do not offend a student and walk away, because that student will be there the next week. You have to be patient.

Taeler and Crystal recognize the importance of working in these two different settings, the Writing Center and the classroom, which for the embedded tutor seem to remain dual and distinctly different communities. And these two communities can be challenging to negotiate, as they define the embedded tutors' identities as multi-faceted, identities that require constant changing depending on the situation and context.

"Non-Instructor" Identity

The tutors also examined their *identity as an instructor*, or, more specifically, a "*non-instructor*," exploring the ways they were placed in the contact zone between the instructor and the student in the classroom. Recognizing that tutors are not an instructor—nor are they attempting to be—the tutors examined how this "anti-role" could be helpful to the students. Again, Taeler explores this idea:

Part of my job is to connect on many different levels so the students feel comfortable discussing any problems that they might not express to the professor. Because I am not teaching the class, I am able to observe and take mental notes on what the student struggles with the most in class, even if they don't discuss it with me. That information helps during a one-on-one session to get straight to the root of the problem.

However, placed "in between" an instructor and a student, embedded tutors work to define their roles in different ways. Zach Gibson writes, "In the Writing Center, the tutoring sessions are independent: you, the

tutor, run the session. In the classroom, you work with the instructor to improve the learning process. The instructor runs the classroom, and you have to adapt to what that instructor needs. And each instructor is different.”

And sometimes this identity can be confusing to the students as well. As Crystal points out,

I believe that being in the classroom helps students relate to me more. When I am in the Writing Center, I am usually dressed professionally, and this sometimes puts students off. Many times last semester, students would ask me if I was a student here at SVSU, since they thought I was a teacher! But being in the classroom has helped them realize that I am a student, someone who was put in English 080 just like they were, and it shows they can be successful as a 080 student too.

Here, as Crystal emphasizes her past role as a developmental writer, she redefines what she sees as a critical part of the embedded tutor’s identity, one more affiliated with student than instructor. Crystal’s comments mirror Gee’s claim that “[s]omeone cannot engage in a Discourse in a less than fully fluent manner. You are either in it or you’re not” (9). All of the tutors saw themselves as most removed from the community of the instructor/authority figure in the classroom, not fluent in this Discourse nor pretending to be. Although it is not clearly articulated in these responses, the tutors’ past identity as a developmental writer may actually remove them more completely from the identity of an instructor. This posture helps negotiate the tendency for the developmental writers in the classroom to look at a tutor as a “surrogate teacher,” according to Candace Spigelman, and repositions the tutor more firmly in the community of student and tutor.

Self-Identity

Finally, when asked about how being an embedded tutor *shaped their identity of self*, several tutors wrote about the identities as students: the ways they saw themselves as more capable and confident, specifically focusing on their abilities in writing. But a few tutors also talked about seeing themselves in a larger context, specifically how they were not only helping themselves, but others as well—a part of their identity in which they took great pride. This expanded world view connects the tutors more closely with the academic community in which they now reside. Ka Vang discusses this idea:

Being an embedded tutor, I am always learning new strategies, skills, etc. This has improved areas of my writing and personal life in multiple ways.... I've been able to build more confidence in my writing and develop an academic voice (which is still a work in progress). I've learned great ways to manage my time and developed better researching skills that will help me in the future. Mostly, I understand I have the ability to help others, not only in the center or in the classroom, but outside of it as well.

Zach adds:

This job has had a significant impact on my success as a student. I have learned how to perform research if I do not know the answer to something. Also, by helping students see their mistakes, I am able to identify my own mistakes in my writing.... The most important change I have noticed is I am able to be more assertive as a person. This is especially important to me, since I have the dream of being a manager one day. What I like most about my job is that I have had a role in these students’ success in college. I know when I was a 080 student, my tutor was the reason for my success, and why I am able to be a 080 tutor today.

Bizzell notes, “Basic writers’ ‘outlandishness’ in college strongly suggests that the difference is great and that for them, to a much greater degree than for other students, acquiring the academic world view means becoming bicultural” (298), or being able to operate in two different cultures: that of their home environment and that of the current academic community. Surely the acculturation that occurs for these embedded tutors is not complete. Yet by engaging in these various communities and by playing multiple roles as embedded tutors, these former developmental writing students have found a stronger sense of themselves built on negotiating these multiple identities. More importantly, our tutors acknowledge the impact that this experience of tutoring has had on their sense of themselves and on their vision of the future beyond college, developing skills that will serve them well in their future careers. And, as Zach and Ka tell us, this is a world view they seem to embrace.

Discussion

Although writing center administrators work to make their writing centers a safe space for our

students, as Hughes, Gillespie, and Kail stressed in their 2014 keynote address at the European Writing Centers Association Conference, it is not always a safe space for tutors: it is a place fraught with challenges, risks, and even failures. For an embedded tutor, these risks may be even greater. Their work is defined by a series of high and often competing expectations from writing center administration, faculty, students, and fellow tutors. Arguably, the stakes are even higher in the classroom, where embedded tutors are expected to negotiate the needs of multiple students and adapt to instructors' expectations, which can vary from instructor to instructor and class to class. And in the classroom, this complicated work is done alone, where success and failure is very visible. However, as these tutors demonstrate, success is possible, even for—or perhaps because of—their past identities as developmental writers themselves. Indeed, the very act of negotiating these varying discourse communities creates a sense of self-efficacy and confidence that matches—or even goes beyond—that of a traditional tutor.

Based on the efficacy of SVSU's program not simply with the students, but the tutors themselves, writing centers could benefit from hiring and training former developmental writers to work in developmental courses. Not only do these tutors expand their world view and understanding of their own identities, but they bring to the classroom their own experiences of negotiating challenging contact zones and different discourse communities, experiences traditional tutors are often lacking. The presence of former developmental writing students in the classroom and the writing center is a powerful demonstration of the ways at-risk students can move into the academic discourse community and expand their possibilities for success.

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Appendix: Tables

Table 1: English 080 Number of Students Enrolled

AY	Fall	Winter	Total
2009-10	232	74	306
2010-11	213	52	265
2011-12	212	29	241
2012-13	153	19	172
2013-14	147	30	177

Source: SVSU Office of the Registrar

Table 2: English 080 Writing Center Individual Tutoring Sessions

AY	Fall	Winter	Total
2009-10	102	22	120
2010-11	189	27	216
2011-12	297	32	329
2012-13	223	25	248
2013-14	149	45	194

Source: SVSU Writing Center Database

Table 3: Number of Classroom Tutorial Sessions

AY	Fall	Winter	Total
2012-13	203	35	238
2013-14	189	29	218

Source: English 080 Tutor Classroom Logs

Table 4: English 080 Pass Rates

AY	Fall	Winter
2009-10	65%	45%
2010-11	75%	60%
2011-12	82%	72%
2012-13	84%	79%
2013-14	86%	93%

Source: SVSU Office of the Registrar