

TRACTION AND TROUBLESOME LEARNING: A PRAXIS OF STUCK PLACES FOR COURSE-EMBEDDED TUTORING

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While many composition theorists have tackled the question of how to encourage transfer beyond their introductory writing classes (see Perkins and Saloman; Wardle; Beaufort; Fallon, Lahar, and Susman; Blaauw-Hara), we also need to consider how embedded peer tutors develop their practices as they enter into disciplinary tutoring and, over time, gain traction while tutoring in different disciplines. Whereas in a first-year writing course we might gear our pedagogy to students' development over a single semester but never fully know how they will transfer their learning into new disciplinary contexts, in an embedded tutoring program we mentor tutors who must transfer their learning and gain traction in new disciplines several different times during their semesters with us. Like Dara Rossman Regaignon, we define "traction" here as the process of engaging rigorously and in authentic ways, rather than passing smoothly over, the difficult analytic and rhetorical frameworks available in all disciplinary learning environments (121-22). We think that successful tutoring in an embedded tutoring program depends on such an engaged learning process. Not surprisingly, however, the experience of moving from class to class and gaining traction in the new one rarely happens smoothly for students *or* tutors. Instead, both frequently struggle as learning and practice become "troublesome," and they get "stuck." Building from the work of Jan H. F. Meyer and Ray Land on "troublesome knowledge" and Leslie Gourlay on "threshold practices," we investigate how tutor development and student learning in an embedded tutoring program can be understood and cultivated in relation to the idea of liminality that shapes their paradigm for learning. In this context, we offer a rationale for and an analysis of "a praxis of stuck places" for tutor development and student learning in an embedded tutoring program (Lather qtd. in Meyer and Land 379).

Metagenres, Ecocomposition, and Stuck Places: Introducing Tutors to the Challenges of Writing and Learning in Disciplines

When we work in the practicum that new tutors take upon joining our program, we aim—among other things—to help tutors become conscious of two contradictory aspects of university writing at once: the overarching shared features of academic writing *and* the specific requirements of disciplinary writing. That is, in some important ways, our praxis with new tutors confirms Bonnie D. Devet's call to introduce writing center tutors to two theories—metagenres (Carter) and ecocomposition (Weisser and Dobrin)—that together enrich our understanding of university writing. Educating tutors about both metagenres and ecocomposition, Devet argues, can facilitate their movement across the disciplines and help tutors understand their own position as both rooted in particular fields and migrating between them. With metagenres, tutors learn to understand similarities between "ways of doing" in various disciplines. As Devet explains, "When directors use training [in metagenres] to point out overarching features inherent in writing for the academy, tutors and their . . . [students] both realize that disparate disciplines share ways of knowing; tutors can avoid panicking when students are writing a paper in a major that differs from their own field" (3).

By contrast, ecocomposition draws tutors' attention to how writing, as Sidney I. Dobrin puts it, "takes place" in specific environments (within a classroom, within a discipline, within a university) (11). In this paradigm, entering a discipline is conceived of as being akin to entering an ecosystem. A tutor, then, can help a "student [to] see that she is becoming an inhabitant of an ecosystem . . . ; she contributes to the system as the system molds her. When tutors give . . . [students] this important perspective, student writers feel less intimidated, more welcomed" (Devet 5). Both of these concepts can help writing center tutors eventually come to see themselves as intellectual "travelers," learning to navigate from discipline to discipline and working to immerse themselves deeply into a new discourse community as soon as they arrive in it (see Drew 60).

Devet's call for dual awareness may not seem as applicable for course-embedded tutoring programs

where immersion in the disciplinary ecology might seem sufficient. Whereas writing center tutors need to be prepared for any surprise that comes their way, course-embedded tutors immerse themselves in the ecology—the “textual forms,” “cultural norms,” “interpersonal interactions,” and “purposes” and “ideas” (Cooper 369-70)—of a particular class. However, most tutors are not placed in the same course from one semester to the next, and many do not even tutor in the same discipline each semester; indeed, though we might call them “embedded,” these tutors are uprooted at the end of most semesters and grafted into new environments. As a result, these tutors must often consider, just as their peer writers must, how to gain traction anew as they move to a new class.

In addition, while Devet wants to help tutors feel more at home when working in unfamiliar disciplines so they can help students feel “less intimidated” by the expectations of a course (5), we want to value more fully than she does the intellectual discomfort and upending experiences of liminality both tutors and students encounter in moving from one academic place to another. Meyer and Land characterize liminality as “the conceptual space entered and occupied by higher education students” who experience difficulty “during their programmes of learning” (375). In more colloquial terms, they discuss liminality in relation to the idea of being stuck. Students *and* tutors get stuck: we know this from years of teaching and mentoring them. When this happens, they undergo experiences of confusion, doubt, and struggle. Further, while they remain stuck, students and tutors often feel as if their status (or even being) is called into question. Drawing on Gourlay as well as Meyer and Land, we conceive of both disciplinary writing and embedded peer-tutoring as having necessarily fraught ontological dimensions. Both disciplinary writing and embedded peer-tutoring are thus “threshold practices” with tacit, troublesome dimensions to them (Gourlay 183). These troublesome dimensions, moreover, cannot be “overcome . . . [merely] by technicist redesign of curricula” (Meyer and Land 378). Instead, as Patti Lather suggests more generally, we argue that in the peer tutoring of disciplinary writers and the training of embedded peer tutors a “praxis of stuck places” must “tolerate [and grow from] discrepancies, repetitions, hesitations, and uncertainties” (Lather qtd. in Meyer and Land 379).

We cultivate a praxis of stuck places in our Writing Tutors Program largely through our unique mentoring system. In our program, which combines embedded tutoring with WID collaboration, groups of six to eight peer tutors work under the supervision of

a “mentor.” The mentor is a university faculty member appointed at the rank of Senior Lecturer who specializes in the teaching and tutoring of writing and writing in the disciplines. Together, the mentor and the tutors prepare for the discipline-specific requirements of their courses. While collaborating actively with disciplinary faculty on writing pedagogy, the mentor simultaneously helps tutors to hone their tutoring practices in light of the philosophy and writing conventions at work in the course and the difficulties the student writers and the tutors encounter. Over time, we have learned that when we mentor tutors to work with students in these courses, we need to search actively for the different stuck places in the learning and work of both tutor and student. Our aim is, then, to help our tutors work more effectively in and around these different stuck places.

Troublesome Learning in the Field: Tutors’ Reflections on the Stuck Places

To help elucidate such a mentoring and tutoring praxis, we want to examine the work of one mentor, Tara Parmiter, and the end-of-semester reflections by two tutors, Paris and John, whom she mentored during the spring of 2014. In end-of-semester reflections, we find that our tutors almost always want to make sense of their fraught work at the intersections between their own learning and that of students. As we have suggested, Meyer and Land characterize this space where learning is troublesome as “liminal,” and in our experience, both tutors and students may feel extremely humbled by the confusion they experience in these liminal places where authentic tutoring and learning often occur (376). In their end-of-term reflections on their work, moreover, our tutors frequently describe how they struggle to help confused students gain traction and to gain traction themselves. We value these end-of-term reflections, whether they seem to suggest genuine threshold learning, appear to mimic such learning, or seem like honest reflections on the unproductive trouble tutors felt while being stuck. These reflections reorient and guide our own further work with tutors to cultivate a more effective mentoring praxis.

Prior to the spring of 2014, we almost always assigned mentors to one large or two smaller but related courses (for example, one humanities survey or two smaller biology labs) to make their development meetings with tutors more cohesively focused. In the spring of 2014, however, because of the needs of the department and the exigencies of the moment, we combined tutors from a biology lab course on

“Genetics and Genomics” and a twentieth- and twenty-first-century “African American Literature” course in one mentor group. To further complicate the dynamics, though all the tutors in this mentor group had several semesters of experience, two of the biology tutors were working for their first time in the sciences after tutoring primarily in humanities courses: one was an English and philosophy major who had most recently worked in a Shakespeare class, and one was a neuroscience major who would be splitting her time between “Genetics and Genomics” and “African American Literature.” At first, the pairing of biology and literature seemed like it would complicate the development meetings, requiring a shift in focus each week to whichever course needed the more practical attention at the moment. Instead, we kept finding metageneric overlaps between the courses, making the weekly meetings both grounded in the specifics of the disciplines and more expansive. Through working with two different ecologies of writing, the mentor group became a serendipitous meeting ground where we could draw insights from one course to another and gain traction in both in the process.

Almost immediately, we realized that though the assignments varied greatly in content, their similarities helped us prepare for both courses. In particular, each professor’s focus on crafting arguments, using researched sources, and paying attention to formal structures helped us find a shared focus for our meetings. These similarities were particularly noticeable to Paris, the tutor working in both classes, who found that “the ability to tell a good story was at the heart of both a successful biology lab report and an African American literature critique” (Paris). The language of “storytelling” came from the biology professor, not the literature professor, and it helped us see a key overlap in the class ecologies. Where students were getting stuck, however, differed from class to class. Paris noted that in her literature conferences the students were uncertain of their arguments, but were willing to join her in conversation and try to figure one out; they seemed to appreciate that “collaborative talk” (Harris 30) could lead them to insights and eventually an argument of their own, and they were open to exploring new notions in the liminal space of the conference. The biology students, however, appeared less willing to admit they were stuck. As Paris saw it, the biology students tended “to be more risk-averse, constantly searching for the right answer, not the answer that most accurately fits their story (their data, in this case)” (Paris). Rather than taking a risk to present what they actually found in their research, these students were reporting what they believed they *should have* found, convinced that such a

route would secure a better grade, even if what they reported was not what had happened in the lab. Paris made it her goal to confirm, adapt to, and care for her peer colleagues who were in the midst of troublesome learning, assuring them that they could get the “wrong” results in an experiment yet still write the “right” paper about those results, and helping them overcome their anxieties about “fitting in” so that they could reclaim their writing. She shifted the focus of her conferences, then, to “encourage science students to loosen the confines of their fear of failure [and] to open up the conversation for more truthful and telling writing” (Paris). It was the combined insight that came from working with the students in each class, however, that helped her make this leap.

In Meyer and Land’s terms, the problem these students experienced is a version of mimicry. Often when students encounter conceptual difficulty, they desire to “fake it” rather than grapple with not-knowing. In the example Meyer and Land cite from Glynis Cousin, students in cultural studies courses sometimes fake an understanding of otherness, especially male students, in order to “bypass an interrogation of their own masculinity,” and instead “churn out dutiful . . . assignments” that they hope will “attract good marks” (qtd. in Meyer and Land 383). In “Genetics and Genomics,” Paris noticed a different version of mimicry, as students tried to “fit in” to the experiment’s norms and thus attempted to elide having to grapple with their own results. The outcome was writing that mimicked established reasoning about established results and at the same time avoided actual reasoning about actual results.

When one attends to the metageneric “discourse similarities as well as differences” (Severino and Tracschel) between learning challenges in different writing ecologies, one begins to learn, as Paris’s reflection attests, to cultivate “a third ear that listens not for what a student knows (discrete packages of knowledge) but for the terms that shape a student’s knowledge, her not knowing, her forgetting, her circles of stuck places and resistances” (Ellsworth qtd. in Meyer and Land 378). Paris’s focus on these students’ resistances and the terms of their understanding and misunderstanding allowed her see how to help students begin to let go of their desire to have correct results. They would have to learn to let go of their drive to fit in if they were to learn how to reason more truthfully about the actual knowledge that their own experiments did and did not produce. Such work is perhaps best accomplished among collaborating peers, because it very much does have a troublesome ontological dimension for these budding scientists, if they are actually to come to understand in a

transformational way how a geneticist learns, knows, and does his or her work (Meyer and Land, Carter).

In a similar fashion, we find that embedded tutors themselves can also fall prey to mimicry, knowing what they are supposed to do but being blocked from actually doing it. While placing a tutor into a disciplinary course where the tutor has no content knowledge may put the tutor at a disadvantage at the beginning of his or her development, doing so later in a tutor's work can help the tutor to develop more dynamic understandings of his or her practice. Meyers and Land theorize the problem of naïve versions of threshold concepts that act as proxies for the real thing while discussing an economics course where the concept of "opportunity cost" was used to find "out whether students had an inclination to 'think like an economist'" (381). They reason that teachers should avoid introducing a naïve version of "a threshold concept (. . . a deliberately simplified and limited delineation)" to students, because the naïve version can "act to a certain extent as a proxy" (381). We find that an analogous process also happens among tutors, who, despite our careful work with them, sometimes initially learn to talk the talk (about active listening, working from the writer's point of interest, and working in relation to a learner's proximal zone of development) but may not be able to walk the walk in their actual practice.

A second tutor whose reflections suggested how he got unstuck, John, was an English and philosophy major who had worked primarily in humanities courses but had generously signed on to work in "Genetics and Genomics," one of the biology courses we regularly partner with that many tutors who major in the humanities try to avoid. John's generosity and willingness to take a risk paid off remarkably, as what he noticed most in reflecting on his experience was that the troublesome learning of this new environment liberated him from some habits he had formed while tutoring in his previous classes. In his reflections, John describes his transformed understanding of his practice; as he put it, the new ecosystem of the science classroom "forced me out of the comfortable idea space I had lingered in during my previous two semesters" (John). No longer able to lead a "comfortable" discussion of the tropes, themes, and ideas in Shakespeare's plays, John realized he had to listen more attentively to the students seated beside him in conference. "I found myself learning from the student, in a way I hadn't before," he reflected at the end of the semester. "Most of them had a more detailed knowledge of material I was completely unfamiliar with. Having them explain it—at times with impressive clarity—made me realize how engaging the

process can be, even when my knowledge of the course material was limited at best" (John). Whether he considered it as such at the time, in looking back John could see he had been stuck in the comfortable space of his own knowledge as a tutor in the Shakespeare class. Being placed in a completely new ecology of writing but approaching it with the experience of a former humanities tutor, John found that "not only can the learning process be discursive, but the fundamentals we learn are surprisingly versatile."

Gaining Traction

By combining Devet's call to incorporate metagenres and ecomposition theories with Meyer and Land's emphasis on the value of troublesome knowledge, we can now look back and consider why this mentor group helped Paris and John reflect so valuably on their work as tutors and on the struggles that students faced in writing in their respective disciplines. Course-embedded tutors benefit from their embeddedness; unlike writing center tutors, they are a part of the writing community of the class, included in discussions of material and methods with professors, and privy to the larger expectations and goals of the particular class environments. But just as importantly, they bring with them insights from their previous (and, for Paris, her other) embedded courses and their own experience as students within particular majors. One thing revealed by troubling disciplinary ecologies via mixing them is tacit knowledge: fresh conversations can be had, fresh understandings can be generated, and new metagenres can be created from the hybridized discourse of such a mentor group. In ecological terms, we could call our spring 2014 mentor group an ecotone, a transitional zone where two ecological communities meet and mingle. The question now becomes how to create more of these fertile grounds where the mentor and tutors can search within and across disciplinary ecologies for the "stuck places," both in their own practice and in student learning, in order to engage more rigorously and caringly with one another.

In addition, Devet, Meyer and Land, and the spring 2014 experiences of this mentor group also help us see more clearly that any travel or transition from one stage of learning to the next ought to require some level of genuine intellectual discomfort. What we might have originally described as transfer, then, we now think of as transport and traction: the ability not simply to carry already-acquired information into a difficult, new environment but also to work through the liminal places in tutor and student learning and

help them gain, particularly where the footing is uneven and rough, the necessary traction to propel themselves forward. When tutors and students gain such traction, as Paris and John both did, they are able to “extend [and clarify] their use of language in relation to [new thresholds in the learning],” often leading to “a shift in the learner’s subjectivity” and “a repositioning of the self” (Meyer and Land 374). Yet such understandings usually emerge only after troublesome transitional periods where variations occur among learners, and learning itself is experienced as a challenge. Gaining traction involves passing through liminality: identifying, working through, and eventually moving beyond the stuck places—the discrepancies, uncertainties, resistances, and proxies—that are inevitable and also valuable for the learner. Further, as our recent experience suggests, embedded peer tutor programs should seek to variegate their pedagogical ecologies more often by intentionally mixing these “complex, socially-situated” disciplinary writing and tutoring environments (Gourlay 182). Thus, we advocate for more experimentation with cross-pollination and a clearer focus on stuck places as embedded peer tutoring programs engage tutors and students rigorously and caringly in the midst of troublesome learning.¹

Notes

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