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Wiring The Writing Center

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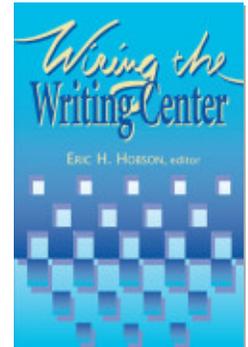
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Reflection and Responsibility in (Cyber) Tutor Training

Seeing Ourselves Clearly on and off the Screen

Rebecca Rickly

DONALD SCHÖN (1983) DESCRIBES “REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONERS” AS THOSE WHO are able to do all of the following: read and write and think and theorize about their own practice. They take what they’ve learned, assimilate it, and then they are able to apply it in different situations, altering content and application as context demands. This is the goal that most of us have for our peer tutors: to become reflective practitioners as they learn, observe, and practice their skill. Yet how do we teach tutors to become reflective practitioners? Somehow, the acquisition of this skill goes beyond merely completing reading logs and reflective essays. At the University of Michigan, the peer tutoring program is a shared responsibility: when I joined its ranks, the three co-directors divided primary responsibilities for recruiting, training, and administering the peer tutoring program, and every semester we traded jobs so that each co-director participated in all aspects of the program. With the growth of our program, we now have the possibility of including two more co-directors, and we’ve experimented with training students to tutor not only university students, but also those outside the university, accepting clients from other schools (and other countries) in our Online Writing and Learning program, and from high schools in two successful pilot programs.

In thus building our program, we found that both tutors and teachers must take on the responsibility of becoming reflective practitioners, to see their experience as a process which must be stopped and reflected on regularly and seriously. Camp and Levine (1991) suggest in their discussion of portfolios that this kind of reflection “makes visible much in learning that is otherwise hidden” (197). Making learning visible became a goal for our training program, since these student tutors putting into practice what they’d learned in order to help their peers. But as directors, we, too, had much to discover about making learning not only visible, but audible and tangible as well. Ultimately, both the instructors and student tutors

had to be willing to alter their current academic mindsets to see how their learning might affect their practice, might then be altered to fit a particular context—often, the rhetorical situation—so that a student’s or tutor’s needs are better met. In this chapter, I will describe how the peer tutoring program at the University of Michigan evolved, paying particular attention to how tutor training was conducted, re-examined, and altered as tutors and teachers became “wired.”

At Michigan, the peer tutoring program began as many do. Since students were often under prepared for college writing, yet were uncomfortable seeking help from professors, we began to recruit and train peer tutors to give students a chance to get help with their writing from a less intimidating experienced peer. Our recruitment and training program is a rigorous one: students must be nominated by a former teacher (they can self-nominate as well), must have reached junior standing, and then they must fill out a detailed application. After the directors review the applications, we invite the best of these students for an interview. As we reflect on these applications, we look for more than expertise in writing, though students must be competent: we look for experience in working with others, experience with writing outside of English courses, “people skills,” and personality/interaction style. Based on the interviews, we select the best students to participate in the required two-course sequence that all peer tutors must take: ECB 300, “The Theory and Practice of Peer Tutoring,” and ECB 301, “Directed Peer Tutoring.” The first course, which meets three times a week, includes readings, discussion, systematic observations, research, and a demanding array of writing and writing assessment to encourage reflection on a tutor’s evolving theory of peer tutoring. The second course, which meets only once a week, allows students actually to tutor for course credit outside of class. Once they’ve completed this sequence, the students have the opportunity to tutor for pay—currently \$8-\$10 per hour, depending on the level of experience and responsibility. In order to get to this point where they’re working for the university, these students must make a significant commitment to the program.

Yet such a commitment isn’t just one-sided. The directors, too, have to make a significant commitment: they must prepare, observe, assess, solicit feedback, and evaluate themselves, the students, and the effectiveness of the program. We must keep accurate and ongoing records to constantly legitimize what we do, or to ask for funding for a larger program to help more students. Finally, unless we continually solicit feedback and reassess how the program is working and how it might be made better, we’re in danger of stagnation. In this regard, the tutors have had a significant impact on the program itself and how it has changed and evolved. Perhaps the best recent example of this impact was the inception of our Online Writing and Learning, or OWL. The OWL came to be after I gave a demonstration on how to conduct research on the World Wide Web to an ECB 300 class. Afterward, one of the tutors, Jonas Kaplan, asked if I’d ever created anything on the web. When I replied no, he offered to teach me how to make a home page so that we might create a website for the peer tutoring program. I became the student, which was both

frightening and exciting: frightening to give up the control and authority I had worked so hard to achieve, yet exciting to be learning something so dynamic, so creative. Jonas and I began meeting regularly, creating a Tutor Home Page, and as we did so, we came to realize how much more we could do. After going back and demonstrating the new pages for the class, I asked if anyone was interested in creating an OWL like Missouri, Dakota, and Purdue universities had, where students could send papers to “cybertutors” online. Several students expressed interest, and that summer, three tutors and I met twice a week to learn about the web, teach ourselves html programming, and see if we could, in fact, construct an OWL. First, we conducted research, examining the online sites at other universities, then we began to make decisions about what we liked and what best fit the existing program (such as an emphasis on interactivity and communication rather than the informational aspect of the web), and, after a lot of practice on our own home pages, we eventually became adept enough at programming to create the first version of the University of Michigan’s OWL. After discussing our plans with the other co-directors, we decided to try the concept out. Barbara Monroe piloted an email-only OWL the fall of 1995 with three sections of basic writing, and by December of that year, we had both web and email service in a larger pilot program. The OWL was open for public business campus-wide the following fall, during the 1996-97 school year.

When we first conceived of the OWL, we saw it as an extension of our physical peer tutoring: students would send papers in over email from their dorms or public computer labs rather than bringing them in physically, and the responses to these texts would be, we thought, quite similar. In both situations, our goal was to engage writers and tutors in a dialogue about the text, encouraging the writer to take primary responsibility. We did not proofread texts, but we did teach writers this skill by helping them to identify strengths and weaknesses by analyzing patterns and addressing directly the clients’ concerns. Ultimately, we wanted to create better writers rather than better texts. We felt that we could maintain the close, dialogic nature of the tutor conference on email. After all, the peer tutoring program itself wasn’t housed in an English Department or any other such departmental building. Rather, the tutors at the University of Michigan operate where writers are writing: in the largest public computer lab on campus. What used to be a library is now filled with over 300 Macintosh and DOS-compatible computers, and this expanse of technology is known as “The Fishbowl” (probably because there are windows on three sides of the open space, and glass skylights in the ceiling). The peer tutors hold consulting hours in one of the university’s computer classrooms adjacent to The Fishbowl. There, every Sunday through Friday evening, six undergraduate tutors are able to address the immediate writing needs of the student population in the location where they are actually doing their work. Along with the ECB peer tutors, the Computer Science department houses graduate consultants in the same computer classroom, so nightly, the room is filled with students coming in from the fishbowl, working on their writing or programming while waiting

to be helped, getting help on their work, and incorporating the advice they've received into their work as they remain in the classroom or finish up on one of the computers in The Fishbowl.

With the conception of the OWL, however, instead of merely moving from place (such a traditional "writing center" located within the confines of a writing department) to space (such as The Fishbowl where students are actually writing), we moved from space to medium (actually using the same media that students are using to write with). Since the University is technology "rich," all student having access to numerous computer labs both in and out of their dorms (as well as free ethernet connection from their dorm rooms if they brought their own computers), we realized that more and more of them would be writing online. Our newest goal was to go beyond simply being in the same physical space with the writers; we wanted to provide online writing help, using the same medium the students were using to compose, taking advantage of interactive aspects of the internet.

GOING ONLINE IN TUTOR TRAINING

While our undertaking seemed to be a logical one, since undergraduate students (and our tutors are all undergraduates) seemed to be composing more online, thinking more online, and communicating more online, none of us had really thought the concept of "going online" out completely. As computer users who are part of a larger professional community, we based our hypotheses of what would happen in the tutor training classes upon our own experience teaching writing using computers. Too, our tutoring program has been able to use this "wired" space so effectively to tutor (we've been located in The Fishbowl since our inception) that we believed that by going online more ourselves, both with our training and our services, we'd be doing the tutors and students a real service. Finally, we assumed that face-to-face (f2f) training and tutoring and online training and tutoring would be based on the same theoretical principles, just as we had based our writing classes on theories of collaboration, the social construction of knowledge, and process, all of which seemed to be enhanced by the computer. Therefore, both types of training, we felt, would necessarily be quite similar.

We'd already begun to integrate computers into tutor training as a means of community-building and knowledge-making—we meet the two required courses peer tutors must take in the computer lab where the students will be tutoring—and we continually evaluate our progress. When we first began, this integration of electronic media in tutor training meant email announcements (normally by the instructor to the list of tutors), mirroring a top-down informational structure that we came to realize we weren't completely comfortable with. Once we moved into a classroom equipped with networked computers, we used the Daedalus Integrated Writing Environment which was installed on all of the machines. Our first application was to post a class assignment: students came in and immediately logged on to see what the itinerary for the day would be. A typical example follows:

Tuesday, January 16 . . . Welcome back!

Today we'll be spending some good time on the reading, since I think what we read might be helpful to come back to. Before we begin our discussion, I'd like you to write down three questions you have, either about the reading or how it might affect what you do as a peer tutor.

Next, let's situate ourselves as far as the required observations—perhaps even schedule them. Don't forget, you've got to observe six conferences, and you need to schedule both ECB and peer tutoring observations. You'll be taking field notes, and we'll talk about that, too.

Finally, we'll have a "mock" peer tutoring session. I asked you all to bring a work-in-progress today, so one of you will get some extra help on a paper. Afterwards, we can discuss what went on.

The tutors seemed to appreciate the fact that we were all on the same wavelength by the beginning of class, and the specific, step-by-step instructions made them feel comfortable in what was, for many of them, a new classroom environment. The instructor had laid ground rules in much the same way a client might expect the tutor to control a conference. Yet as the co-directors met to discuss the program, then stepped back and examined this practice, we felt that, by itself, it still reflected the "top-down" format we were trying to change.

The next application we used in Daedalus was Mail. Almost every day, the first item on the class assignment agenda was a "reading response." Formerly, these reading response discussions had been both written and oral: the students, who'd been assigned a reading or two the previous class meeting, were expected to jot down notes and questions about what they'd read, then come prepared to discuss problems and possibilities they saw with it, and how they might apply information from the reading to our situation. This kind of reflection on their reading was an attempt on our part to create situations where students had to think not only about what they'd read, but about their own thinking process, and how this process might eventually affect their practice as a tutor. Sometimes we'd ask students to consider specific questions about the reading in their reading response journal or in the class discussions, often asking them to "reflect on the ways in which they learn and fail to learn" (Mills-Court and Amiran 1991, 103). Unfortunately, the oral discussions of reading responses, while sometimes quite lively and informed, were often dominated by only a few individuals. Because of our successful experiences using synchronous and asynchronous conferencing in our writing classes, we decided to move these reading response discussions

online, using Daedalus Mail in order to give each class member a visible, public “voice” in the evolving community. Once we integrated more varied electronic communication into tutor training, classes might go something like this: As students wandered into the room before class, they immediately took a seat and logged onto Daedalus. Upon successfully logging on, they saw the class assignment, which the teacher had posted earlier. Here, the students were told that the first thing they’d do was to engage in a response to what they’d read on Mail, so the students got into the specified Mail files. There, the instructor had posed a question based on the reading material, and students then took all the time they needed to reply. They knew from the prompt that they were then expected to read the replies critically, and question, respond, or problematize them. An example of such a class assignment appears below.

Stardate: Tuesday, January 23

Welcome once again to the wonderful world of online communication. Today we’ll be doing a number of things:

1. Posting reading logs to the MAIL conference WHO WE ARE. To do this, simply choose ACTIVITY above, hold down the mouse button and select MAIL. Then, to join the conference WHO WE ARE, go up to MAIL on the menu and select JOIN A CONFERENCE. There you may post your reading log #2.
2. After we’ve posted and responded to Log #2 on Mail and responded to at least three of your colleague’s posts, we’ll come back to the main table and have a f2f discussion about what we’ve just talked about online.
3. Then we’ll form our WAC groups and set up dates for WAC presentations.
4. If there is time, we might try a role-playing exercise to start you thinking about WHO WE ARE as tutors.

The level of critical reading and honest reaction we were asking the tutors-in-training to engage in would be similar to the kind of directed reading and responding that they’d be expected to do once they began tutoring clients. The reading response on Mail generated some thoughtful, insightful commentary, but it also created some problematic situations. Because the commentary was public, if someone chose not to participate, their absence was also be public. Similarly, the responses made it clear for everyone to see who had read and thought critically about the assigned reading, and who hadn’t. There was simply no way to “hide” or to “slack off” here if the reading hadn’t been finished: students were

responsible for completing the reading, reflecting on it, and responding to what others had written publicly. In a traditional classroom, a student who hadn't done the assignment could depend on someone else to carry the load—not so online. Some of the students found the public nature of this discourse troubling; a few were worried that they'd be seen as un-intellectual if they took risks, so instead of “responding” to the reading, as they were directed to do, in the first few sessions many students chose to summarize first, something they felt more comfortable with. Some did then go on to problematize views or venture suggestions as to application. The interactive capabilities of Mail proved to be distressing for some; while they often found the comments of their classmates informative and interesting, many later said that they felt pressured by the performance aspect of the public, online discourse. They were all known for and hired at least partly because of their verbal ability, hence some of them saw the Mail forum as a place to display verbal prowess and flex academic muscles. So while the instructors viewed the online reading response entirely as a collaborative discussion—a “group-think” forum where the students could reflect and respond to their reading and their classmates' ideas, which it was to an extent—some of the students felt they had to compete with their classmates to sound like they belonged in the program.

A few students reacted to the new context by responding in a “safe” manner, by simply intellectually reiterating what they'd read or what others had said. For example, Duncan first summarized the reading, then cautiously responded:¹

Duncan:

The piece on minimalist tutoring basically sums up everything we've already discussed about getting the student to take control of her paper and not doing the work for her. The author suggests ways this can be done, which we've covered in class as well. A good point the author makes is that the primary goal is to help the student become a better writer, not to improve the student's grade on a specific paper.

The second piece, Collaboration and Ethics argues that active collaboration with a student (which may include proofreading) is productive. Though she brings up some good points, I feel that the tutor must deal with each situation on a case-by-case basis. I don't think it is ethical to proofread a student's paper for her. However, I would be compelled to help an ESL student with grammar and sentence structure because English is not her native language.

After these rather “safe” observations, Duncan ventured a personal experience based on the reading, incorporating some questions as his thinking became visible:

In high school, some of the best English teachers I had would tell me that certain sentences were awkward, or cross out words and replace them with better vocabulary. I often found myself incorporating these words into my own writing. Since so much of writing is imitation, aren't we just ripping off other people's work when we write anyway? I know that I incorporate a lot of what I

read into my own writing. It really is difficult to figure out where to draw the line. I don't think tutors should make up sentences for the tutee, or supply factual evidence to her, but if a tutor finds a sentence awkward, I can't see why she shouldn't tell that to the tutee.

This honest, straightforward commentary prompted a lively discussion about the students' own experiences and how they felt about recreating these experiences with their clients.

Several students rebelled against the initial intellectual tone and became chatty, using humor and self-deprecation to express themselves. Ironically, this behavior seemed to enhance the level of discussion. These students began to take risks—first with their tone, their online “persona,” and later these students were often more likely to take risks with their ideas:

Gary:

Hey Sports Fans!!!! I am coming to you live from the classroom 444C in Angell Hall. I'll be your commentator today for the tutoring session with Julie Grammar. I did not quite understand or agree with the idea of the tutor being commentator which was suggested in Harris. I think it would be hard to tell how all of it is related to the student's growth or improvement in writing skills". I understand the coach aspect and the counselor/listener aspect but I would find the commentating a little hard. I was also opposed to the idea of the teacher-centered conferences. That is not the environment that we are trying to create here at the University of Michigan.

Interestingly, here Gary has not only attempted to engage his audience cleverly, but he's beginning to wonder how this reading fits into the context of tutoring at the university. This kind of realization requires multiple levels of reflection: the student must not only reflect on his own thinking and learning, but he must also begin to see how these concepts will be affected by context. Such multi-layered thinking prepares the tutor for responding to a wide variety of clients and papers. One reading, later in the semester, encouraged tutors to do some thinking about the context they'd be working in, and Garth responded enthusiastically:

Garth:

Well, the battle cry is sounded! I really enjoyed Stephen North's article "The idea of a Writing center." Someone finally engaged with the subject we have been dealing with for six weeks—tutoring—with passion and fervor, and not as if composing a dissertation intended only for other professionals specializing in the same area.

North's central thesis—that the writing center should not be merely for mechanical mistakes, but should be a center for writers who care about their work, no matter what their level of expertise—is excellent. However, he is not so concerned with propounding his thesis that he ignores the realities of the college academic environment. He acknowledges that student/teacher

relationships should not be undermined by a tutor, and that tutors should, in fact, set their allegiance on the side of the teachers, or as North puts it we are not teacher advocates either—the instructor is simply part of the rhetorical context in which the writer is trying to operate . . . all we can do is try to help the writer learn to operate in it. (pg 30) This is a great idea. It doesn't whitewash the issue of teacher involvement in text, and make promises about a pressure-free writing environment or anything like that: it is a perfectly frank statement of purpose. Further, North responds to teachers who criticize tutored texts which aren't perfect by saying we aim to make "better writers not necessarily better texts."

After this insightful summary, Garth posted a more personal reflection on his recent experience. He includes it because he feels it has significance, though he can't yet articulate why:

Garth:

I had an interesting experience last night that I can't help but feel fits into our discussion (although I'm not sure why). In my fiction writing seminar, I had my first story workshopped, and I had to sit there while people talked about the strengths and weaknesses of what I had written. Then, I got about twenty copies of my story back from the class in their comments, words crossed out, things circled with NO written nearby (interestingly enough, some people would mark something NO, and others would mark the same thing GREAT—a good argument for the subjective nature of criticism). All I have to say is that I have never felt such a lack of control over my own work, and I have to admit that I found myself shutting out some critiques because they were phrased in such a way that they did not respect my authority over the text as its creator.

The ability of a tutor to read and listen carefully, then indicate that something is important, or even not quite right, even without being able to articulate why is nonetheless a valuable skill to have in the writing center. Simply reacting honestly and pointing things out to a client can serve as the start of a valuable shared negotiation of text.

Finally, on more than one occasion, some of them complained that while they knew their classmates well according to their comments, they really didn't *know* them: their faces, their voices, their personalities:

Dustin:

I was just wondering . . . Are we ever going to discuss things in class face to face instead of online? I am getting to know who some people are, but there is no way that I could match many faces with names. Also, I tend to get bogged down reading for so long that I lose all inclination to respond by the time I am caught up. I like the online thing, but I feel like it is being used a bit too much.

As a result of the frequent online discussions, students felt an intellectual kinship with one another, but they also felt disembodied, physically separate from

the evolving classroom community. It was time for us to pause and reflect on tutor training.

A REFLECTIVE PAUSE

Was it wrong to use the technology so frequently, especially when it required the students to be publicly accountable for the assignments? After all, they accepted the responsibility to participate fully in the program when they signed up. And their experience online with their classmates and instructor paralleled in some sense what they would eventually come to expect from those they tutored: that they would take the responsibility to help themselves, rather than wait to be told what to do, what to “think.” Whose standards were being challenged when the students “rebelled” by being silly or informal? At first, it would seem to be the rigorous academic standards of the program and of the university; yet the instructors were all flexible in what they considered “good thinking” both on and off the screen, much more so than the students seemed to be. These students, the “best of the best,” had been immensely successful at the university because they had bought into the traditional academic system—in this class, perhaps to the point that many were threatened by anything that appeared to skitter out of the realm of their immediate control and their known, safe experience. A few of the tutors continued to hide in the “safe” traditional academic safety net and responded publicly primarily by regurgitating information. Most, however, began to think critically not just about the readings, but about how they might be applied, and these were often the students who pushed boundaries. Similarly, we should now ask: what is the instructor’s responsibility in this training program?

Part of what I perceived as my responsibility as an instructor was to engage these students in critical reflection—on common course materials, their impending practice, the peer tutoring community, and their own unique, evolving identity as tutors—which I saw facilitated (although problematically) in the computer lab. Throughout the course, the tutors were creating portfolios of their experience.² The portfolio included a writing autobiography, their email reading logs, field notes from their observations and practice peer tutoring, email, OWL, and other electronic participation, a WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum) collaborative presentation and handouts, a seminar paper based on primary research, and a reflective essay. While we weighted the final paper more heavily in this course (since it also fulfilled the junior/senior writing requirement), we also encouraged them to include all of the text they felt displayed their growth as a tutor, from student evaluations to field notes. This less formal, inclusive representation of themselves broke new territory for many of these students, who had become accustomed to turning in only polished final performances. Instead, I was asking them to portray the messy process of self-discovery as they began to see how their education was evolving, and perhaps even take an active part in establishing goals and constructing themselves within the new context of peer tutoring. Rather than ensure that the

student tutors were comfortable, I chose to place them in situations that would be different from the courses they'd taken and succeeded in to this point so that these students might see themselves, their thoughts, and their practice in more than one context. I hoped that the uncomfortableness they felt might cause some reflection of the situation, their feelings, as well as who they were becoming.

The co-directors met several times a semester, sharing syllabi and experiences, and eliciting ideas and support from their peers. As a result of these meetings, we opted to introduce yet another electronic medium in tutor training: Daedalus InterChange, a "chat"-like program which allows all students to "speak" at once (students type in responses and comments, and when these comments are sent they appear on everyone's screen). Initially, we used InterChange for topical discussions. In these InterChange discussions, for example, students responded to what they'd seen in their required observations, a topic in peer tutoring they were engaged in and wanted to learn more about, or a continued, focused discussion on what they'd read for class, mirroring the type of student-centered discourse we valued. In these discussions, more so than in any other, students began to test boundaries—by changing their personas, by taking on chatty personas, and by flaming. Trying on these "voices" in the safety of the tutor training class allowed the students to experiment with a tutoring personality that would "fit" as they began their practice. In the following excerpt, I asked students to examine the "multiple universes" they brought with them as they embarked on the journey to become a tutor:

Mary:

Well, I'm a woman, which could (or could not) have implications on the way I interact with people, depending on how deep you want to go. It annoys me when people hype gender up so much that it permeates every aspect of a discussion, but in some cases, I think its valid. I think its possible that I could be intimidated by an assertive male tutor. Not necessarily intimidated, but hesitant to assert my own opinions. But in the opposite sense, I think that being the stereotypical "feeling" woman enables me to elicit comfortable conversation between people. Obviously, that's not just because I'm a woman, but I certainly think it plays a role.

Evan:

Hey Mary, are you a woman or a "womyn?"

In the same discussion, one of the students described herself as liking "the guy from ER," which prompted a rather long thread about the merits of a recent movie he was in. Sometimes, just as in actual tutoring sessions, these tangential comments generated a more interesting discussion based on what the students were feeling:

Julie:

Off the topic, but do you think your friends since you have come to college are more diverse or less diverse than in high school?

This seemingly off-topic comment was in response to the discussion about new people they had met—and could possibly be biased toward, or have difficulty communicating with—at the university. Sometimes, however, the tangential commentary simply deflated the entire discussion, as when one person's innocent request for Advil spawned a lengthy examination of headaches and their causes. The experience of staying on topic, exploring valuable tangential topics, and wasting time by going off topic all helped to prepare the students for focusing on a clients' needs in the limited time of a tutoring session.

Despite the fact that we engaged in only a few InterChange discussions (at least partially because of the difficulty these students had staying on task) I didn't see them as failures. Instead, I saw the students beginning to reflect on who they were as tutors and students, on the course, on the material, on the university and tutoring context, and on their own evolving practice. Interestingly, we also used InterChange (this time the students all chose pseudonyms) to evaluate the course at midterm and at the end of the semester. Here's what the students found when they logged on:

Andy Warhol:

You've done a lot of work for this class, and the end product is the portfolio you'll be turning in on Friday. Ok, now it's YOUR turn to evaluate this course. What did you like? What did you find helpful? What did you NOT like, or NOT find helpful? What would you change? Why? How would you do it differently?

The responses were extremely detailed and well thought-out. Following are some excerpts:

Ralph Wiggum:

The most important change I'd make would be to begin actual tutoring earlier. The rhetoric/theory was useful for a while, but after a certain point, the only way we can really learn anything is by doing it.

Snickers:

I, agree Ralphie, that we should have begun actual tutoring earlier. I really have learned a lot through my practice tutoring. Also, I like everyone in this class—interchange is the best—I like hearing everyone's thoughts . . . I'm going to miss this aspect of the class.

woody allen:

I also think that we should have begun tutoring earlier. Arguably the best experience I had was the tutoring sessions. However, I do not feel at all prepared for ESL conferences. I wish we had had some training in this area. If such a large component of the tutees are in fact ESL students, a large part of our training should have been also. I had one ESL student during a practice conference, and while it went ok, I did not feel qualified to help him.

topgun:

I think we should workshop the WAC presentations because its important to get some hands on experience before we actually tutor. I think there was

unnecessary pressure going into those practice sessions because we didn't have confidence in our skills because we had never tried them out.

Owen Meany:

My biggest suggestion is less computer work and more conversation. I didn't even know people's names and faces in here until like two months into the class. Seeing how this is my smallest class, and probably will continue to be the smallest one I ever have, it seems a shame to spend so much time staring at a screen instead of talking to each other. Why not discuss readings and ideas around the table instead of on the computer.

Jackie Chan:

I liked using the computers, it was a neat experience, but I still feel like I don't really know everyone.

These InterChange discussions became instrumental in how we reconceived the course. The tutors, then, took the responsibility to reflect critically on our practice and to offer specific suggestions for change. The co-directors, in turn, shared these among themselves, and, after much discussion and reflection, incorporated some of the ideas into our revised courses.

A MARRIAGE MADE IN HEAVEN?

After the introduction of InterChange in class, most of our discussions were online, either in InterChange or Mail, and the students once again began to complain vehemently about the lack of human contact in their classes. As a result of this reflection, we began to consciously integrate oral and online discussions into the training program. As we began to make these changes, a typical day might go as follows: After logging onto Daedalus and reading the class assignment, students might respond online to what they'd read using Mail, then we'd gather around the table for an oral discussion on some of the key points raised. Or, after reading the class assignment on the computer, we might forego the online reading response to have an oral group "norming" session on a sample student paper, then have an oral presentation by a group of tutors on a WAC issue. This balance of oral and online activities seemed to work better as the course progressed, but I noted some interesting general results: the Mail discussions continued to generate summaries first and then reflections; the students still tended toward safety here. The oral discussions (and, later, the InterChange discussions, which "feel" more oral than the Mail interaction), however, tended to be based more on personal experience and views—students were more likely to risk sharing their feelings, experiences, and individual viewpoints orally. These more personal discussions didn't occur in a vacuum, however; they appeared to have been fueled by the critical thinking and reflecting the students had done for their reading responses in Mail. Students tended to situate themselves and their thoughts in the text online, and then they applied this "construction" of thoughts and experiences orally. In effect, the combination of online

and oral classroom activities seemed to complement each other in a way we hadn't expected: the computers seemed to clear their heads and the oral discussions cleared their hearts. Yet I would venture to guess that, without the computer experience, we would have had fewer students participating orally, and their participation would tend toward the summary style we saw initially in Mail.

TAKING THE TUTORING ONLINE

While we included various types of computer-mediated conferencing in tutor training to help make visible the social construction of knowledge, the creation of a classroom community, and a means of reflective thinking, electronic media had originally been included in order to train the peer tutors to work f2f with clients in the "space" where writers were writing: the computer lab. But when we opened the practice to online tutoring, via email and the web, we decided that this training would work perfectly for OWL tutoring, too. Up to this point, while we had a class email list which students used outside class, most of the work for the course was done in a networked computer lab. We wanted to "initiate" each of the tutors into internet use so that they'd be comfortable with the OWL, and to do this we first signed all the new tutors-in-training up for the OWL email list. Everyone who was subscribed to this list received everything that came to the OWL in their private email accounts. When the OWL began, the directors and a few students who were involved in its construction were on the OWL list; the other students, who tutored only f2f, were not involved. During the pilot year, we subscribed only volunteers to the list; once again, the f2f tutors weren't involved. We soon decided that OWL training might actually benefit f2f tutors, and vice versa, so we made both mandatory. For a four-week period during tutor training, everyone in the class was signed up for the OWL list.

The first and most compelling problem that arose for the tutors was time and email management; most tutors, though familiar with email, were not able to handle the large amount of mail the OWL email list generated (for instance, a tutor might receive five student papers for the OWL on a particular day, then five more messages "claiming" the paper which had been cc'ed to the OWL, followed by five more messages cc'ed to the OWL with detailed responses to the original five papers). Most students only checked email once a week or so, and they were overwhelmed when they had 75 or more messages waiting for them. We tried to teach a "skim and delete" pattern, but students complained it took too much time out from their schoolwork and personal time. We directors were forced to think about *our* responsibility: Was it to teach email management? Were students learning skills that would help them as tutors? Based on this experience, we decided the answer was "no," so we compromised by asking students to join the list long enough to do a "reader response"/participant observation analysis of three OWL conferences which they then included in their final portfolio. Once they were finished with these observation reports, they could get off the list. From that point,

the instructors (who were all subscribed to the OWL list) would forward interesting or intriguing conferences from the OWL to the class list.

When students had reflected on three OWL conferences on their own, we began discussing papers and responses from the OWL on the regular peer tutoring email list. However, students were still so overwhelmed with email that they often missed the discussion, or simply did not participate. What had been a somewhat lively list at the beginning of the semester dwindled to almost nothing toward the end. Once again, the co-directors were forced to reflect on what might be more pedagogically sound for the tutors. Finally, as with the f2f training, we opted to more fully integrate both electronic and f2f interaction with the OWL training. Interesting OWL conferences were printed out (with identifying material such as names, schools, email addresses stripped), and we analyzed them orally in class. First, we might look at a student paper from the OWL, standardizing on it: what did the student request help with? What kind of help did the paper need? How would you go about addressing this student? Next, we handed out a tutor's response (once again, stripped and printed out) and asked them to assess it. Did the tutor meet your expectations? How about the student's? What was the tone like? Was there enough help? Too much? Finally, I forwarded some actual OWL papers to the tutors and asked them to pair up with someone in the computer lab during class and respond to the paper as an OWL tutor would, keeping in mind all of the criticisms and praise they'd heaped on the papers we'd looked at before. Instead of sending the responses to the entire OWL list or to the student, they sent responses to the class list where students had the option of reading and reflecting on each one. I then stripped the headers from three of these, printed them out, and during the next class period we discussed these sample responses orally. What worked? What didn't work? If you were a student, how helpful would this advice be? How could it be more helpful?

Just as a combination of oral and online work seemed to help the students reflect more easily on their f2f reading and practice, so, too, this integrated approach seemed to work when training tutors to respond online. As the OWL grew and training switched to high gear, the co-directors met frequently to discuss the OWL and its service. Despite the emphasis on computer interaction, we were all amazed at how difficult it seemed to be for the students to develop an internet "online persona" who could both address the students' requests and do so in a tone that was neither condescending nor directive. The students were all developing into competent tutors, yet many of them had great difficulty putting this skill into practice in an accessible, friendly manner online. As a result of this observation, we began to question our initial assumption that f2f tutoring and online tutoring were the same; in fact, initially the pendulum swung a bit too far in the opposite direction, and we concluded that f2f and online tutoring were completely different. Yet after one more semester of refining our integration of online and f2f training, we drew in to the center, seeing online and f2f tutoring as

cousins who shared many familial traits, but who nonetheless needed to be treated as individuals.

REFLECTIONS ON TUTOR TRAINING

Can the computer—or the integration of electronic and oral communication—provide a more reflective environment for the evolving tutor? How can we encourage students to become “reflective practitioners”? And how can we be more reflective in our teaching and practice? In our experience, it would appear that such reflection requires similar situations for the co-directors and the tutors. Based on this experience, I’ve outlined below a necessarily brief list of suggestions concerning experiences that might encourage reflection and responsibility in tutor training.

Collaborate With Colleagues

Take advantage of colleagues with administrative experience, with interpersonal experience, with theoretical and pedagogical experience, and don’t limit your interaction to those in your field. As co-directors of the peer tutoring program, we met regularly to discuss the peer tutoring program, shared ideas about how it might be improved, and when conflicts arose, we compromised our views. Most programs, granted, don’t offer a co-directorship, but that doesn’t limit opportunities for collaboration. If you have access, you can explore the descriptions of peer tutoring programs around the country via the World Wide Web (starting with the National Writing Center’s home page at <http://www2.colgate.edu/diw/NWCA.html>), and for those with internet access, lists like Wcenter (information about how to subscribe can be found on the NWCA home page) provide interaction with colleagues from around the world.

Collaborate With (and Among) Students

Our program would never have evolved at the rate nor to the extent it did without frequent collaboration with the students. The OWL is the most outward representation of that collaboration; without student input, the OWL would likely not exist. Similarly, the content of our peer tutoring program is greatly influenced by the feedback we get from students, both during and after the course. Finally, we found it helpful for the older tutors to meet with the tutors-in-training at least a few times a year to share their insights and experiences.

Be Flexible With (and Within) the Curriculum

It’s important to base a tutor training curriculum on sound theory as well as specific university concerns. But allow students to determine curriculum within the context of the classroom. For instance, in one InterChange discussion, it seemed to be more important for students to express their concerns about their impending tutoring rather than discussing the reading for the day. If students need to reflect on an issue at length, don’t be in a hurry to move on. Alter the curriculum as needed.

Become a Learner Yourself

Those of us who work with technology soon realize that we need to become comfortable with “not knowing.” Because technology changes at such a rapid rate, if we don’t become learners over and over again, we miss out on ideas and abilities that could supplement our practice. It’s easy to become comfortable in our expertise, in our “knowing.” But by becoming learners, we not only open ourselves to new experiences and ideas, but we also realize how difficult it is to reflect on these and assimilate them successfully into our practice. This realization can only help to make us more effective, empathetic teachers.

Determine Needs and Ask for Resources

In order to expand a program or increase participation, detailed records must be kept to justify requests. For instance, when the OWL was finally open university-wide, we needed to convince the university to increase our funding so that we could employ “cybertutors” to populate the OWL while still maintaining our growing f2f program. Our records helped us to write proposals and grants, our positive public image throughout the university helped build our ethos (the OWL was linked directly to the university home page, and several tutors wrote articles about the OWL), and by consulting each other and other experts, our specificity impressed “the powers that be” to give us what we asked for.

Take the Time to Reflect

Evaluation shouldn’t come only at the end. Take the time to reflect on what goes on daily, and how it fits into the mission of the program, of the school, and of the larger theoretical framework. If a particular practice isn’t working, then solicit feedback and offer an alternative. Examine the theory, the practice, and the outcome of the training program on a regular basis.

When Using Technology, Have a Plan

Initially, we expected our use of technology to mirror our own positive experiences personally and professionally. We began with a sound theoretical foundation, but we weren’t prepared for the differences context and audience might cause. The corollary to this axiom is, of course, also true:

Don’t Be Afraid To Change That Plan

Be aware when the plan is too rigid or isn’t working, and try to rethink how it can be revised. In our situation, that meant a conscious integration of electronic and oral interaction as we trained students to tutor both f2f and on the OWL.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, we found that the ability to go back and forth in a text, to see thoughts made visible on the screen as a tutor wrestles with ideas, concepts, and

applications, does, in fact, help the tutor reflect on what he or she is doing and becoming, just as it helps the instructor to “see” the thinking going on in the classroom. Yet the tutors also seemed to need the physical reality of human contact to ground that reflected image and synthesize what they’d learned in a community of like-minded peers, just as the instructors needed to meet regularly to discuss and assess the program. Too much of either environment seemed to limit the tutors in their classroom interaction and in their subsequent practice: those who were exposed only to oral classrooms had difficulty getting past their own definition of “school” and academic discourse as it appeared in student papers. They tended to be a bit more top-down in their thinking and with their clients, following and modeling the example they’d been successful with to this point in their lives. However, with the inclusion of computer-mediated discourse in the tutor training program, students became uncomfortable but began to take risks, to push boundaries, to try on new personas. More importantly, they began to see beyond the physical text—even when the “physical” text was online—to seeing writing as ideas generated by someone in a specific rhetorical and physical situation, rather than a simple, new-critical text unto itself. In both cases, the tutors take responsibility for their own work; in the latter instance, however, they are able to reflect more often, more fully, and from different perspectives about who they are, what they do, why they do it, and what it means to others in the writing center.

NOTES

1. All names of tutors have been changed, but the excerpts have been cited with permission.
2. A copy of the syllabus for this course can be found at <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/ecb/ECB300.html> and <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/ecb/ECB301.html>. For a description of the peer tutoring program at the University of Michigan, go to <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/ecb/peertutor.html>.