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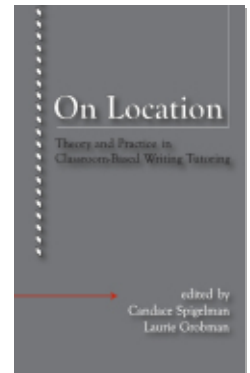
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BRINGING THE NOISE

Peer Power and Authority, On Location

Steven J. Corbett

*It launched forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself.
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.*

Walt Whitman, "A Noiseless Patient Spider"

The writing center is wide and long, stretching everywhere the conversation will take it . . . expanding to immense girth without wearing out.

Mike, *Noise from the Writing Center*

A few years ago we started getting serious about the idea of sending tutors into classrooms for peer group response facilitation, presentations, and what became special writing workshops here at the University of Washington's English Department Writing Center (EWC; a semiautonomous center staffed mostly by undergraduates). The excitement and critical pedagogical issues that emerged from our experimentation led me to write a short article in the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, "The Role of the Emissary: Helping to Bridge the Communication Canyon between Instructors and Students" (2002). In that essay I talk about how writing center tutors, as writing coaches, can expand into classrooms as representatives of writing center theory and practice for peer response facilitation and brief informational visits—with full confidence. My conclusions urge that we try our best to send tutors into classrooms in order to share the powerful message of peer-talk and to shake up the teacher-centered authority of the conventional classroom. I try to show how, and hint at why, tutors should interact with full faith in their own ability to act as a communication bridge between instructors and students. In other words, I encourage a directive, interventionist (I use these terms interchangeably) attitude and methodology to be carried into the classroom visits by writing center emissaries.

I still believe strongly in the interventionist idea behind that essay. Fortunately, in my multiple roles as a graduate student, writing center

tutor, quasi-assistant director, and first-year composition instructor, I am not alone in this belief. A noteworthy trend in writing center research, theory, and practice on the debate between the directive and nondirective tutor points to reasons why we should reconsider the importance of the directive tutor, both ideologically and epistemologically (Clark 1988, 1999; Shamoan and Burns 1999, 2001; Grimm 1999; Wingate 2000; Latterell 2000; Boquet 2000, 2002; Carino 2003). As the opening quotes imply, great ideas can be expressed and shared—authoritatively—by the well known (Walt Whitman) as well as by the not so well known (Mike). But the opening quotes also juxtapose, suggestively, the idea of the (supposedly) noiseless, patient nondirective tutorial approach advocated by such scholars as Brooks (1991) and Harris (1986, 69–71), and the (supposedly) noisy, urgent directive approach, most recently argued by Carino (2003) and Boquet (2000, 2002).

Since, with the help of scholars like Dave Healy (1993), Thomas Hemmeter (1990), Harvey Kail and John Trimbur (1987), and Mary Soliday (1995), my fellow contributors to this collection have done an ample job rationalizing why tutors belong in the classroom, I will turn the focus of this essay to the issues of power and authority that must be negotiated with every decentralizing visit writing center tutors make.¹ If the trend for classroom-based writing tutoring has been established, we must now ask about the types of tutoring style emissaries should carry into the classroom. In this essay, I will illustrate why more directive forms of tutoring are not only acceptable but also quite useful, as long as we remember that there are also beneficial aspects of nondirective tutoring as well. The first part of this essay theoretically links classroom-based tutoring to interventionist tutoring practices in writing centers. The second part offers a classroom-based snapshot that illustrates ways directive, along with nondirective, tutoring philosophies may be played out simultaneously in the classroom. Finally, I offer a discussion of what is at stake in balancing the role of minimalist tutor with interventionist tutor.

THE CALL FOR CONNECTIONS: POSITIONING THE DIRECTIVE TUTOR IN THE CLASSROOM

In his essay “Power and Authority in Peer Tutoring” (2003), Peter Carino urges writing center personnel to reconsider the importance of the too-often vilified directive tutor. He points to two recent essays in the *Writing Lab Newsletter* that deal specifically with issues of what it means to be a “peer” tutor: one by Jason Palermi (2000), in which the author realizes

the importance of tutor authority when he is unable to show a student how to incorporate source material from her discipline; the other by Julie Bokser (2000), in which a new director comes to a writing center from the corporate world, where hierarchical power relationships are the norm (96–97). These examples lead Carino to assert that nondirective tutoring is a grassroots problem in writing centers. Carino suggests that because Palermi and Bokser are fairly new to writing center theory and practice, they can more closely identify with the types of power and authority issues tutors must face. From his claim that “to pretend that there is no hierarchical relationship between tutor and student is a fallacy,” Carino moves on to explain how “except for a few notable exceptions, writing center discourse, in both published scholarship and conference talk, often represents direct instruction as a form of plunder rather than help, while adherence to nondirective principles remain the pedagogy *du jour*” (98). Carino sets up for critique the idea of interventionist tutoring as anathema to the strict Rogerian questioning style advocated by Brooks (1991).

Carino then discusses Shmoon and Burns’s “A Critique of Pure Tutoring” (2001), in which the authors explain how master-apprentice relationships function in fruitful and directive ways for art and music students (2003, 99). In the master-apprentice relationship, the master models and the apprentice learns by imitation, from the authority of the master artist, the tricks of the trade. Reflecting on Clark and Healy’s essay (1996), Carino argues that nondirective approaches are defense mechanisms resulting from the marginalized history of writing centers within the university and their subsequent paranoia over plagiarism.² Further, Carino reports that Nancy Grimm (1999) advocates the directive approach so that traditionally marginalized or underprepared students are not barred from access to mainstream academic culture (99–100).

Conclusively, Carino suggests a dialectic approach to the directive/nondirective dilemma, implying that directive tutoring and hierarchical tutoring *are not* synonymous: “In short, a nonhierarchical environment does not depend on blind commitment to nondirective tutoring methods. Instead, tutors should be taught to recognize where the power and authority lie in any given tutorial, when and to what degree they have them, when and to what degree the student has them, and when and to what degree they are absent in any given tutorial” (2003, 109).

He offers a seemingly simple equation for when to be direct and when to be nondirect: the more knowledge the student holds, the more nondirective we should be; the less knowledge the student holds, the

more directive we should be. He wisely affectively qualifies this suggestion, however, by stating that shyer but more knowledgeable students might need a combination of directive prodding to urge them to take responsibility for their work and nondirective questioning to encourage them to share their knowledge, while chattier but less knowledgeable students could benefit from nondirective questions to help curb hasty, misdirected enthusiasm and directive warnings when they are making obviously disastrous moves (2003, 110–11). Interestingly, Carino points to the dichotomy of power and authority that has historically existed between the classroom and the center. Because centers have a “safe house” image compared to the hierarchical, grade-crazed image of the classroom, writing center practitioners feel the need to promote a nondirective approach, which they view as sharply contrasting to the directive, dominating, imposing nature of the classroom (100–2).

Along with Carino, Catherine Latterell (2000), Elizabeth Boquet (2000, 2002), and Molly Wingate (2000) have recently confronted the issue of tutor power and authority, advocating a more flexible approach to the directive/nondirective issue. In her essay “Decentering Student-Centeredness: Rethinking Tutor Authority in Writing Centers,” Latterell uses feminist theory to question the assumptions we make when we confine ourselves to minimalist tutoring or nondirective teaching. Informed by the work of Madeleine Grumet (1988), Latterell’s essay urges us to consider the contradictory nature of power: how we must be cautious, but not too cautious, with our authority. Part of realizing this contradiction involves admitting that we, as teachers and tutors, *do* have knowledge and if we continually deny or withhold that knowledge (by adopting a strict minimalist approach), we are robbing ourselves of the ability to empower students by sharing our insights with them (115–16).

In *Noise from the Writing Center* (2002), Boquet argues for performative excess, play, and freedom from the fear of nondirective tutoring. Notably, she uses the example of legendary musical artist Jimi Hendrix to urge tutors to explore and inhabit the noise-saturated realm of the creative, uninhibited genius. In an earlier essay (2000), Boquet hints at why she advocates such a performative, directive approach: “I don’t want students to perceive me as having all the answers, yet very often I do have the answers they are looking for, and the students themselves know it. . . . What sort of message are we sending to the students we tutor if they perceive us as withholding information vital to their academic success?” (19).

Similarly, Molly Wingate (2000) warns us that “being too cautious results in sessions that are dull and unproductive. Writers come to the writing center to move their projects along; what a shame to lose them because the tutors try too hard to stay on safe ground” (14).

Moreover, research shows that a minimalist philosophy may sometimes actually cause tutors to (un)intentionally withhold valuable knowledge from students. Muriel Harris recounts how a student rated her as “not very effective” on a tutor evaluation because she was trying to be a good minimalist tutor; the student viewed her as ineffective, explaining, “she just sat there while I had to find my own answers” (1992a, 379). Although we could certainly question the student’s perceptions, the fact that writing centers’ most valuable player admittedly sometimes drops the ball prompts us to question the writing center’s dualized directive/nondirective philosophies. Applying these insights to classroom settings, I want to pose the same “higher-risk/higher-yield” question that Boquet asks of any tutor: “How might I encourage this tutor to operate on the edge of his or her expertise?” (2002, 81).

Arguments for negotiated, shared power and authority between tutors and teachers in classrooms should likewise guide our use of directive and nondirective strategies:³ Louise Z. Smith (2003) hints at these power negotiations in urging writing center directors and faculty across the curriculum to observe the “choreography” of one model writing center/classroom collaboration. Hemmeter asserts that group instruction does not solely “belong to the classroom” (1990, 43), suggesting that classrooms and center can share teaching authority; and Soliday (1995) shows that the roles of the classroom-based writing tutor must be flexible enough to move between what are traditionally considered more teacherly (interventionist) and more tutorly (noninterventionist) approaches during any given visit.

Recent examinations of classroom-based tutoring likewise suggest more active positions for tutors. At the IWCA/NCPTW 2003 Joint Conference in Hershey, Pennsylvania, four presentations focused on the rationales and methodologies—both directive and nondirective—that may be employed when tutors are assigned to classrooms on a regular basis (Nicolas et al. 2003; Spigelman et al. 2003; Ackerman et al. 2003; Ryan, Zimmerelli, and Wright 2003). In Nicolas et al.’s sessions, for example, I joined a mock peer group facilitation subtitled, “The ‘Just-Fix-It’ or ‘We-Just-Want-to-Work-on-Grammar’ Group,” in which the problem of the uncooperative group member was acted out with authoritative style. Two “students”

basically ganged up on a volunteer tutor, pushing and prodding him to “just edit” the papers. But the volunteer was obviously an experienced tutor and led them toward a dialogue and, at least, some progress. Afterward, as a group, we critiqued the volunteer tutor’s efforts. The two “bullies” lauded the tutor’s effectiveness, acknowledging how rough they had been on him for dramatic effect. They liked that he explained “the difference between a tutor and an editor,” emphasized “the importance of writers learning how to edit their own papers,” and explained “the purpose of the group” with authority *and* patience.

Meanwhile, all around me, other groups worked on “the apathetic group” and “the ‘we-don’t-trust-the-writing-fellow’ group.” The way these last two groups dealt with issues of power and authority is reminiscent of Smulyan and Bolton’s 1989 essay, “Classroom and Writing Center Collaborations: Peers as Authorities.” In that essay, the authors show that peer tutors can communicate aspects of the writing process that teachers cannot because of the teacher’s role as ultimate authority, especially over grades. Smulyan and Bolton conclude by suggesting how tutors negotiate issues of power and authority with every visit they make. Like Nicolas’s groups above, Smulyan and Bolton’s tutors had to deal with students who were “afraid to share their writing” or “took everything I said as law” or “didn’t take [them] seriously” (48).⁴

More directly, Barbara Little Liu and Holly Mandes, in chapter 6 of this volume, present a rationale and working model of interventionist tutoring during classroom writing workshops. Taking their lead from tutors in writing classrooms, Liu and Mandes discuss effective strategies for interventionist tutoring that do not seem overly intrusive to the students and then theorize these strategies by turning to recent writing center scholarship.

HIGH-WIRE WALKING: BALANCING AUTHORITATIVE (NOT AUTHORITARIAN) AND MINIMALIST TUTOR ROLES IN WRITING CLASSROOMS

In her essay “Collaboration Is Not Collaboration Is Not Collaboration: Writing Center Tutorials vs. Peer-Response Groups” (1992a), Muriel Harris compares and contrasts peer response and peer tutoring. She explains how tutoring offers the kind of individualized, nonjudgmental focus lacking in the classroom, and how peer response is done “in the context of course guidelines” with practice in working with a variety of reviewers (381). But she also raises some concerns. One problem involves

how students might evaluate each other's writing with a different set of standards than their teachers: "[S]tudents may likely be reinforcing each other's abilities to write discourse for their peers, not for the academy—a sticky problem indeed, especially when teachers suggest that an appropriate audience for a particular paper might be the class itself" (379). Obviously, the issue here is student authority. Since students have not been trained in the arts of peer response, how, then, can they be expected to give adequate response when put into groups, especially if the student is a first-year or an otherwise inexperienced academic writer? How can we help "our students experience and reap the benefits of both forms of collaboration?" (381).

The answer lies, as practitioners and theorists have found out, in a marriage of the two processes. Wendy Bishop made a call to be "willing to experiment" (1988, 124) with peer response group work over fifteen years ago. Laurie Grobman's chapter 3, "Building Bridges to Academic Discourse" answers that call by illustrating the pivotal role of the group leader in peer response. In "The Ethics of Appropriation in Peer Writing Groups," Spigelman addresses the issue of plagiarism and the active group member: "we might address the problematic of the student writer as individual, as primary author, and as active group member, by raising questions about autonomous originality and cooperative textual production and about public and intellectual property" (1999, 240). Spigelman suggests that students need to know how the collaborative generation of ideas differs from plagiarism. If students can understand how and why authors appropriate ideas, they will be more willing to experiment with collaborative writing. It follows, then, that tutors, who are adept at these collaborative writing negotiations, can direct fellow students toward understanding the difference. Programs like Spigelman's and ours here at the UW continue to experiment, willingly, encouraging the deployment of both directive and nondirective methodologies during these group negotiations.

An opportunity to try out these dual tutoring methods occurred recently, when Kimberly, an academic advisor/composition instructor, invited me, in my role as a writing center tutor, to visit her Advanced Expository Writing class to facilitate a peer response workshop. Although she would not be present during the workshop, she offered a detailed account of her students' progress on the assignment and furnished her assignment sheet, which asked students to write persuasively on any controversial topic they chose, and her guidelines for peer review. Her students had been asked to read each other's papers and supply comments.

The two-hour session involved twelve English majors. In addition to me, three additional tutors from the writing center were available for the session, one tutor for each group.

Taking full advantage of the two hours, I decided to lead a brief overall discussion at the beginning of the class. I encouraged the students to talk as much as they could about what they should look for in each other's essays—by asking an open-ended series of questions—and I wrote our plenary brainstorm on the board. To my delight, the class came up with most of the salient issues concerning peer review: clarity, focus, claim, warrant, tone, support, and so on. After the class brainstorm, I joined my group. They were in mid-dialogue over one student's paper. I heard constructive comments, so I tried not to be too invasive. Usually in such situations I just sit back and listen, playing the good minimalist tutor. If I hear good suggestions, I simply acknowledge with nods and umhms; if I hear something really crucial, I might extend the conversation. Glancing around the room, I saw my fellow tutors taking the same nondirective approach.

This time, however, while listening to one group member comment on her peer's paper (arguing that Asians should not undergo cosmetic eye surgery just to look Western), I started to think about the student's need for counterclaims. The critiquing student had advised her peer to try to empathize with someone who feels so out of place that they would resort to cosmetic surgery. Instead of simply encouraging a good suggestion, I went one step further, taking a more directive role. I gathered the whole class' attention and gave a brief speech regarding counterclaim. I emphasized how important it is to consider the opposition's point of view in order to make one's own case more sound. After my announcement, the room erupted into fresh, almost urgent, conversation. I watched as tutors sometimes held back, listening to the stream of student utterances, or sometimes let loose, offering their own brainstorms regarding counterclaim.

The overall results of this session were positive, and all of the writing center tutors gained from knowing that we helped this class gain a better understanding of what it means to review a peer's work. We entered this class as a nonjudging group of (near)peers with the attitude of listeners and facilitators. We did not rush here and there trying to get every student to some magical place of readiness for (re)writing; instead, we sat and listened and offered advice when we could and praised smart comments when we heard them; we did it with laughs and jokes. But we were also not afraid to provide direct suggestions when we felt it appropriate,

modeling how the appropriation of ideas is negotiated. We found that the best way to model peer response is by becoming a “meta-tutor” employing meta-talk. As Decker explains in chapter one of this volume, the role of the meta-tutor is “encouraging students to tutor each other. In this capacity, tutors are not doing what they would be doing in a one-on-one conference in the writing center—they are showing students how to do it.”

Any time tutors venture into classrooms, they inherently bring their more sophisticated level of meta-talk with them: they model for students and teachers how to talk about what they’re learning, exploring—and they concurrently learn how to become better models. They rehearse, rehearse, rehearse—and students, then, *imitate* their tutors’ actions. Edward P. J. Corbett argues: “Classical rhetoric books are filled with testimonies about the value of imitation for the refinement of the many skills involved in effective speaking or writing” (1990, 461). He further illustrates the importance of imitation with more recent testimonies from Malcolm X, Benjamin Franklin, and Winston S. Churchill (462–64). Corbett, as well as Carino, show how as artists/writers, we empower and we become empowered when we rehearse and imitate—students, tutors, and teachers—together. We learn to negotiate how much authoritative knowledge student, tutor, and teacher hold in any given moment.

In *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge*, Kenneth Bruffee asserts that peer tutors can bring about “changes in the prevailing understanding of the nature and authority of knowledge and the authority of teachers” (1999, 110). Boquet, likewise, asks if writing centers should be places “where people seek out the genuine information that might otherwise be suppressed or eliminated” and whether they can be places “powerful enough to allow for the mutation and potential reorganization of our system of education.” She goes on to assert, “These are not rhetorical questions. I really believe the writing center is that place. And if you are working in a writing center, if you are ‘supporting’ the writing center at your own institution (however you might define that support), then you had better believe it too” (2002, 51–52). Writing centers, and by extension tutor trainers of all stripes, can help classroom-based tutors to understand just how authoritative they can be, and how, with just enough minimalist in them, they can avoid being authoritarian.

TOWARD A CLASSROOM WRITING COACH HYBRID (ONLY IF . . .)

When Bob Dylan (1969) sings “whatever colors you have in your mind, I’ll show them to you, and you’ll see them shine,” he captures and reflects

how part of any artist's (or educator's) job is to capture his or her impression of a given event and reflect that image back to participants and audience as poetically and clearly (and, perhaps, educationally) as possible. The epistemological and ideological stride that marks the postmodern movement in education is the view that knowledge is constructed, negotiable, and mutable. Such postmodern thinkers as Foucault, Fish, Rorty, Bakhtin, and Barthes have exposed complicated notions of power and authority in communicative situations. However, if students do not receive much modeling of effective academic communication, they will not experience what Bruffee deems "iterated social imbrication" (1999, 45), or the gradual layering it takes in order for a student to learn how to negotiate a specific academic discipline. This layering is learned much quicker in an environment that places peers in Vygotsky's (1978) zones of proximal development. When tutors enter classrooms, they can bring profound knowledge of how to maneuver within disciplinary discourses. As Bruffee's early work on collaboration and peer tutoring explained, peer tutors can act as models of the kind of academic communication that is valued by the university, which fellow students can rehearse or imitate (1984). But it takes a directive, confident tutor to be able to share valuable information with students *and* teachers. A tutor satisfied with playing a strictly minimalist role may learn a lot but may lose out on important opportunities to also teach.

Tutors and tutoring program directors are immersed in collaborative learning and collaborative teaching theory and practice every day. The collaborative games tutors learn to play can be shared with others who are interested in learning more about issues of communicative interdependence and the writing process as collaborative rather than individual. In classrooms, tutors will learn a lot also, about the dynamics of situations in which they have to interact, with some authority, with many students. These close collaborations allow tutors a glimpse of just how hard a job classroom teachers have and help to blur "us" and "them" power and authority issues.

The idea of learning as collaborative and negotiable rather than individual and prescribed motivates my praxis, whether in the classroom or in the center. As a first-year writing instructor, it has spilled over into my teaching as well as with my work with other tutors. In "Tutoring and Teaching: Continuum, Dichotomy, or Dialectic?" Helon Howell Raines argues for tutors and teachers to explore the "Hegelian dialectical process, in which opposing forces conflict, but in their meeting they also mix,

each altering the other until ultimately both transcend the interaction to become something new” (1994, 153). I believe this transcendental notion can be shared with teachers and students visibly in the classroom, but *only if* tutors approach these teachers with a Freirean authoritative, but not authoritarian, willingness to learn as well as teach, as so many WAC (official and de facto) scholars have urged (see Graham 1992, 125–26; Haviland et al. 1999). Only then will all who offer instruction be able to help teachers revise their roles as authority figures and help tutors (re)consider their roles as teachers, as Soliday suggests (1995, 64). When tutors and teachers enter classrooms together, they are participating in a two-way dialectical street involving listening as well as talking, directive questioning as well as nondirective questioning. If they offer themselves as partners in a dance in which the choreography is shared and negotiated, then they will truly enjoy the fruits of their labors with a clear conscience, and with the deeper respect of their classroom colleagues. They will be able to better model, thereby allowing students to better rehearse and imitate, how academic communication works.

Recently, I invited a group of tutors to aid with peer response in my first-year composition class. The first half of the class, though, I just had Anna, a senior and new tutor, visit to talk about her writing class experiences as a first-year and to offer any words of wisdom she could. I invited her because I have noticed her charisma when she tutors or talks about tutoring (or anything else for that matter). But I didn’t expect her to act with the authority and confidence she did. I was amazed at how earnestly she talked about her shyness as a first-year, how she was afraid to talk to her teachers, how she didn’t talk that much in class. This confession stood in stark contrast to the confident, assertive student I saw before me. She articulated the importance of making oneself stand out in the classroom, how it helps students learn more and do better in the class. She talked about how she wished she’d heard of writing centers when she was a first-year—how she studied, wrote, and researched *alone*. Finally, she segued into peer response workshopping by urging my students to utilize writing centers—to take advantage of them before it’s too late. She stressed that help writing—quality, authoritative, informed help—is available. I’ve had classes with instructors and professors who could learn a good lesson on delivery from powerful, effulgent undergraduates like Anna.