11-2019

Audience Awareness in the Writing Center: Guiding Introductory Writing Students with More Directive Comments

Samantha Clem
Utah State University

Recommended Citation

Audience Awareness in the Writing Center:

Guiding Introductory Writing Students with More Directive Comments

Samantha Clem

Abstract: Looking at the demographics of the students utilizing the writing center (WC) at a university in the US mountain west, the author questions whether the commenting styles in which WC tutors are trained accurately address the needs of the user population. Data on what courses WC visitors are enrolled in shows that the majority of WC user are introductory English students, with 70% of users being enrolled in one of the two required introductory level English courses (ENGL 1010 or ENGL 2010). Tutor training focuses on facilitative commenting styles, tactics that may not be effective for this given population of users. To better serve this specific introductory-level English student, tutors should be trained in how to give more directive (yet not authoritative) comments. In this way, introductory level students can build a solid foundational knowledge of traditional academic writing conventions from which they can make better-informed self-directed decisions later in their writing careers.

Keywords: Writing Center, Tutoring, Directive Comments, Facilitative Comments, Introductory writing courses.

The fall of 2019 brought with it many new roles in my life: from a curb-side recycler in southern Chile, I had become a PhD student, composition professor, and a writing center tutor, all for the first time in my life. Having never received formal training in English, I felt like an imposter in the English department. During training, I quickly began to develop ideas on what was expected of me as a writing center (WC) tutor. As required reading, we were given the Bedford Guide for Tutors. In this book, four practical suggestions were given to guide me in my tutoring practice: Ask questions, listen actively, facilitate by responding as a reader, and use silence and wait time to allow a writer time to think (Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2016, p. 15). During tutor training, sample tutoring sessions were demonstrated in which the tutors modeled these strategies, emphasizing how sessions should be facilitative. Tutors should allow WC users to form their own understanding of their writing and their writing processes. Part of tutor training involved observing four experienced tutors. As I began observations, even the evaluation sheet led me to form expectations of how to frame my role as a tutor with questions like: "What effective open-ended questions did the tutor ask?" It all sounded well and good -- allow students to develop their own understanding; that is, until I met Josh.

Being led into my observation of Josh, I was prefaced that Josh was typically a science writing center tutor who was only subbing at the WC in the English building. Observing Josh's session, I saw a clear contrast with the previous three tutors I had observed: Josh was assertive. "Read through your paper, let's find out where we can improve it." The student read. Josh listened intently, took notes, and gave the student direct feedback on what he suggested the student change and why. The student seemed relieved. This was why she had come -- she had wanted explicit help. Josh had met, perhaps even exceeded, the student's expectations. The

student thanked Josh generously before leaving. No other student had seemed so pleased upon leaving their tutoring session.

At the same time I was doing my WC observations, I had also began teaching my first English class, introduction to academic writing. When students turned in their first assignments, I quickly realized how many students were lacking a basic, structural understanding of common genres and organization. Both my time in the classroom and in the writing center led me to question: do introductory-level English students have a sufficient understanding of the foundations of academic English to support them in building their own understanding of how to *improve* their writing? In this sense, if the majority of students coming to the writing center are introductory level students, is the WC providing effective feedback that aligns with the needs and prior knowledge of the audience it is intended for?

The first task in addressing these questions was to determine who is using the WC. I looked at anonymized data from the English department writing centers, which included an online WC, one housed in the English department, one in the library, and the 'science writing center' found nearer the science disciplines on campus. I deleted all data from no show appointments and was left with 11,105 samples of writing center visits. Appointments ranged from the inception of the WC's online scheduling program on 5/8/2018 to the 10/14/2019 -- one year and five months of data. From there, I sorted the data by Class Name. It is important to note that these data forms are filled out by the tutors, so there was some margin of error as to whether sessions were assigned to the correct courses. Of those samples, 3,432 were identified as ENGL 1010 students (30.9% of the total sample), and 4,222 were ENGL 2010 students (38.0% of the total). These two courses represent the two required introductory English courses. A combined total of 68.9% of all writing center visits were by ENGL 1010 or 2010 students. Adding students

in other 1000- or 2000-level ENGL courses raises the percentage to 69.6%. There were only 107 samples of students visiting the writing center to discuss upper level undergraduate English courses (0.01% of the total sample). Clearly, the majority of students using the writing centers are introductory-level English students.

Mackeiwicz (2004) discusses the necessity of having peer tutors who are experts in the field in which they are tutoring. While her discussion relates to the need for tutors to have expertise in engineering when tutoring engineering students, the same argument can be logically applied to other fields. The question then arises of whether the WC tutors might be considered 'experts' in the field of English. Following Mackeiwicz's (2004) example, I found data on the what the tutors identified as their majors. Of the 81 tutor currently on staff at the writing center, 66 gave information on their major. From those, 43 tutors, or 71.6% of all tutors, identified having a major housed within the English department. When adding tutors who had identified a minor in English degrees, that percentage rises to 80.0% of all tutors. Aside from this majority, we can also assume that all tutors have passed ENGL 1010 and 2010, which has allowed them to declare a major. In this sense, it is safe to say that most, if not all, tutors could be considered experts on the content of introductory English courses.

Miller et al. (1998) looked at the differences in professor responses to student work by discipline, showing that an engineering professor's comments were more directive than the facilitative norm set by composition studies. The authors explain that the particular level of directiveness found in their study "can be explained by the *introductory level* of the class: the students have had little or no experience in the genre and would therefore more likely need *more direction*..." (Miller et al., 1998, p. 456, italics added). Here, the authors draw a direct tie between degrees of direction and the level of prior knowledge of the students, asserting that

introductory-level students should receive more directive (rather than facilitative) comments. While this was not the focus of their study, the researchers also added an often overlooked criteria in the discussion of commenting strategies -- the students' responses and expectations to certain kinds of comments: "In general, the attitude of engineering students concerning the directive comments was positive and accepting" (Miller et al, 1998, p. 455). From this study, we can draw two important conclusions: 1) students in introductory level classes should receive a higher level of directive comments given the lack of prior knowledge that many students may have about the subject content; 2) these kinds of directive comments may align with the students' expectations, leading to greater levels of satisfaction with the feedback.

When I observed Josh tutor I was shocked. After he finished his session we were able to chat a bit. I asked him if he felt like his comments were more directive than some other tutors and, if so, why? He laughed. He told me that he had also recognized a disconnect between what he was taught in tutor training (facilitative commenting) and what he practiced (more directive commenting). It was his personal experience as a pre-med student, he claimed, and his work at the science writing center that had led him to take on a more directive style. I thought about the students in my ENGL 1010 class. The next day in class, I asked my students how many were planning on being English major; not a single hand was raised. Many said chemistry, animal sciences, and business, biology perhaps. So then, would these not be excellent candidates for more directive comments? (It is important to point out that with 'more directive', I am not advocating for *authoritarian* commenting styles. See Straub, 1996, p. 224-225 for further discussion on these distinctions.) To be able to self direct learning, a certain level of base content knowledge is necessary. WCs needs to re-evaluate their users, identifying the needs of that audience, and how their training of new tutors might or might not be effectively addressing those

particular needs. In the case I studied, with the vast majority of writing center visits being made by introductory-level English students, the WC should better prepare students to analyze their audience at the beginning of the tutoring session. In cases where the WC user is an introductory-level student, training should be provided on how to effectively give more directive comments to students. In this way, introductory students can learn the basic skills necessary to be able to direct their own writing in the future. We need to teach students the basics so that they can then grow.

Works Cited

Mackiewicz, J. (2004). The effects of tutor expertise in engineering writing: A linguistic analysis of writing tutors' comments. *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, *47*(4), 316–328. https://doi.org/10.1109/TPC.2004.840485

Miller, P., Bausser, J., & Fentiman, A. (1998). Responding to technical writing in an introductory engineering class: The role of genre and discipline. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *7*(4), 443–461. https://doi.org/10.1080/10572259809364641

Straub, R. (1996). The Concept of Control in Teacher Response: Defining the Varieties of 'Directive' and 'Facilitative' Commentary. *College Composition and Communication,* 47, 223-251.