Book Review

Talk About Writing: The Tutoring Strategies of Experienced Writing Center Tutors

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Review:

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Talk About Writing: The Tutoring Strategies of Experienced Writing Center Tutors is an ambitious project with two stated goals: "(1) to present an analytical research tool that others outside our locality can use to examine writing center talk, specifically writing center tutors' talk, and (2) to provide a close, empirical analysis of experienced tutor talk that can facilitate tutor training" (2). That Mackiewicz and Thompson are largely successful in this project is owed to several of this book's features: its attention to method

and methodological detail, its review of relevant literature and organization, and its implications for future writing center research and tutor training programs. While not immune to criticism, *Talk About Writing (TAW)* presents writing center scholars, directors, and coordinators with a variety of research opportunities and empirically-driven recommendations for tutor training.

TAW is a study that, in some ways, may seem 30 years overdue. The impetus for this study can certainly be traced to Stephen North's (1984) admonishment that, "[T]alk is everything" (444). More than 20 years later, Dave Healy (1995) wrote, "From one perspective, talk is the center's ether; from another, talk is always dissipating into the ether, from whence it can never be reliably retrieved" (188). Mackiewicz and Thompson's study retrieves writing center talk from the ether and centers attention on empirically researching what North suggested over 30 years ago: "If the writing center is ever to prove its worth in other than quantitative terms [...] it will have to do so by describing this talk: what characterizes it, what effects it has, how it can be enhanced" (444). These echoes of lore are the foundation of this study's methods and methodology, but it seeks to empirically investigate lore.

TAW's clear outlining of methods and methodology in Chapter 3 is an asset to writing center researchers and/or professionals. Mackiewicz and Thompson have done extensive research using cognitive scaffolding (Mackiewicz and Thompson 2014; 2013; Thompson 2009), and John Nordlof (2014) recently used Vygotsky to discuss writing center theory, an indication that this method is becoming relatively established in the field. Mackiewicz and Thompson analyze 13 highly-rated tutoring sessions conducted by

ten experienced writing center tutors using cognitive scaffolding theory and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. Vygotsky defines the ZPD as, "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (20). "[M]ore capable peers," in a writing center setting, can clearly be read to mean "experienced" tutors. The researchers identified the tutors as "experienced" because they "were all in their second year or more of working in the writing center" and "had completed a semester-long training practicum" (Mackiewicz and Thompson 50). A main reason the researchers feel this is an effective methodological approach is, "in writing center conferences, collaboration established through rapport and a shared commitment to the intellectual exploration required to achieve an agenda can theoretically push forward a student writer's writing ability" (21-22).

The authors engage in analysis at the macro- and microlevel: The macrolevel involves the three stages of conferencing: opening, teaching, and closing, and the microlevel involves tutoring strategies, of which there are three main categories, instruction, cognitive scaffolding, and motivational scaffolding (4). "These three categories contain a total of 16 individual tutoring strategies," Mackiewicz and Thompson explain (4).

TAW's literature review in Chapter 2 provides a sound basis for its methods and methodology. The literature review also folds in some of the study's findings, a way of introducing readers to topics elaborated upon in chapters 4 through 8. The authors observe:

> *We found that, even though early mandates for writing center tutors prescribed open-ended questions, closed questions can benefit student writers too. They can simplify immediate responses, lesson confusion, and allow tutors to lead student writers in inappropriate and efficacious directions. (35)*

Mackiewicz and Thompson use their familiarity with writing center lore to entice researchers by providing some pushback to that lore. This pushback is evidenced with findings from their study, and these juicy moments do, admittedly, make a pretty satisfying read. For instance, the researchers address disagreement in writing center lore about whether the student writer or the tutor should read aloud: "[C]urrent reading research suggests that the phenomenon of mind-wandering may in fact be more prevalent in reading aloud than in silent reading" (106). In other words, a student reading their own work aloud may experience mind-wandering. Therefore, the authors conclude, tutors reading aloud may be "a good pedagogical choice" (106).

After laying out their methods in Chapter 3, Mackiewicz and Thompson repeat their analysis methodologically in each of chapters 4 through 8. For example, each of these chapters concludes with "Implications for Tutor Training" (or in the case of Chapter 8, "Implications for Tutor (and Fellow) Training"), a feature I will discuss in more detail shortly. The macro- and microlevel analysis begins in Chapter 4, "The Three Conference Stages and Tutoring Strategies: The Overall Results." Chapter 5, "Instruction Strategies," discusses which strategies were used and how in each of the three stages of conferencing. In Chapter 6, the authors hone in on "Cognitive Scaffolding Strategies" in each conferencing stage, then Chapter 7 moves on to "Motivational

Scaffolding Strategies"; these are two of the four most used strategies, as we are told in Chapter 4. A case study with an especially advanced tutor comprises Chapter 8, and the study concludes with Chapter 9.

The organization in *TAW* makes it accessible to busy writing center professionals and researchers who are probably unable to read the volume in a continuous fashion. Readers whose time is limited can plan which areas to focus on by starting with Chapter 9. From there, those with less extreme demands on their time can read any of Chapters 4 through 8 based upon their personal or contextual interests. For instance, a director, coordinator, or scholar interested in the variety or number of topics discussed in a tutoring conference should investigate Chapter 4. Reading this book out of order or selectively should not pose too much of a concern as long as readers familiarize themselves with or accept the researchers' methods. The authors reiterate formerly made points and direct readers to those original passages.

As for how talk about writing can be enhanced, *TAW* has exciting prospects for future writing center research and empirical evidence for informing and advancing tutor training. Mackiewicz and Thompson note at the outset and the conclusion that their coding and methods of analysis can be picked up—and adapted, if necessary—by other researchers. Because this field has no prescribed method for conducting empirical research, having a starting place for analyzing tutor talk is reassuring for both novice and seasoned researchers. After all, developing one's own coding scheme from scratch is time-consuming, and time is a luxury that many professionals in academic settings do not have. Researchers wishing to employ the coding and analysis schemes used in this

study should pay attention to the list of six assumptions used in this theoretical framework (see page 3). Most likely, those involved in writing center work will readily recognize and agree with these assumptions, but it is nonetheless important for moving forward with a research agenda that employs another study's codes and methods.

The results of Mackiewicz and Thompson's study characterizes talk about writing as follows: "close to half (44%) of the tutoring strategies that tutors used were instruction," and overall, "tutors used four strategies the most: telling (instruction), pumping (cognitive scaffolding), suggesting (instruction), and showing concern (motivational scaffolding)" (79).

Pumping questions are one of the most interesting implications of this study, but it is a practice only two of the ten tutors employed in the closing stage of the conference. An example of one of those pumping questions a tutor poses is, "What would you say is the main thing you're going to work on when you go home?", to which the student replies, "Reflecting back to the thesis statement" (118). The authors recommend, "writing center directors should consider [this strategy] for tutor training" because when student writers "develop their own summaries of conferences and set their own goals," they will be "more likely to recall the range of topics they covered, to delineate the most important topics, and then to formulate strategies for addressing those topics" (120).

Although the study reports clear results, the suggestion above typifies a few hasty generalizations that relate back to, "what effects [talk] has" (North 444). While the suggestion to use pumping questions in the closing stage is sensible in that it draws

upon writing center theory and lore, the authors' study does not necessarily provide evidence for this claim. In the two cases where tutors used this strategy, it is unknown if the student writers acted upon the goals set at the end of the conference. Some of this problem is related to the questionnaire used to evaluate the sessions chosen for analysis, which points to a second problem: The only clear effects this talk has on student writing according to this study are that the tutoring sessions garnered positive appraisal from their participants. Tutoring sessions were selected for analysis based upon how the tutors and student writers answered two questions using two kinds of Likert scales (47). Both writers and tutors were asked, "How would you rate the success of the conference?" (47). Tutors were asked, "Do you think the student will incorporate the ideas discussed into his or her writing?" and student writers were asked, "Will you incorporate the ideas discussed into your writing?" (47). Even if a student writer responded that he was "very much" likely to "incorporate the ideas discussed," we do not know if that is partially owed to whether or not his tutor used a pumping question in the closing stage. Even then, the student could report likelihood of incorporating ideas (suggesting a revision was made), but never follow through. While selecting highly-rated sessions is initially a good basis for analysis, additional criteria would add depth to this study. But the authors are candid about the shortcomings of their research, noting that, "we have not examined the quality of student writers' revisions" (179) and aptly citing the "'vexing issue of measurement'" (qtd. 180) as a difficulty associated with determining a session's effectiveness. Another problem in the study related to talk about writing's effectiveness goes back to the read aloud strategy. The authors conclude that tutors reading

aloud instead of students can be "a good pedagogical choice" (106) and they report how often tutors in their study used this strategy, but they do not evaluate how effective it is. Again, we do not know whether students rated their sessions highly as a result of the strategies tutors employed, such as the read aloud strategy in this example. With only two questions asked, as I mentioned above, this survey does not provide a substantial enough evaluation of the sessions.

Mackiewicz and Thompson respond to two of North's three calls for research: they characterize writing center talk and suggest how it can be enhanced, but due to an ineffective questionnaire that is foundational to their methodology, they lack an answer to how effective writing center talk is. However, *TAW* is less about assessment and effectiveness and is more about the talk that occurs in writing tutoring sessions. In other words, this study is a building block for more studies that examine writing center practices; knowing "what characterizes" talk about writing can move researchers to assess "what effects it has" (North 444). Recent incidents in the North American writing center community would indicate talk about writing is still undervalued in many institutions, and Mackiewicz and Thompson's work is a reminder that more research on writing center work is necessary. *TAW* both upholds and challenges writing center lore, a practice that research and scholarship in this field must constantly bear out if the imperativeness of writing centers is to be effectively communicated to stakeholders. Despite its drawbacks, *TAW* offers writing center professionals an outline for research that can be duplicated or scaffolded upon. It is a tool that can and should be taken up because there is much building yet to do.

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