

TO MEET STUDENTS' FEEDBACK REQUESTS OR NOT:  
A WRITING CENTER TUTOR'S PREROGATIVE (?)

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH

When conducting research on the *Writing Center Journal* in the spring semester of 2011 for a class assignment in Research Methods, I read the article “A Comparison of Online Feedback Requests by Non-Native English-Speaking and Native English-Speaking Writers” by Carol Severino, Jeffrey Swenson, and Jia Zhu. The authors measured the difference between what NNES and NES students asked for help with in their writing when booking appointments with the writing center online. This article has been instrumental in the development of my own research interests, which look to discover—at their most basic level—how much weight is given to students’ feedback requests by writing center tutors during their sessions.

Reading what others had to say about students’ feedback requests in the writing center inspired me to reflect on Texas State University-San Marcos’s Writing Center practices and to what extent those feedback requests actually influence the progression of student/tutor conferences. During the same semester in which I read Severino et al.’s article and over the summer, I worked in our writing center as an Instructional Assistant with both tutoring and administrative responsibilities. I know that it is common practice for students to be asked what they want to work on (i.e. what they need help with) both online when they book their appointments and again in person at the start of their tutoring sessions. I also know that, as part of their continued training, I have prompted and engaged our writing center tutors in an online discussion about tutors’ dual responsibilities of simultaneously respecting



students' right to set the agenda for a session while also helping them, according to our own understanding, become better writers. At times, these two directions can be contradictory, for example when a student asks for help with "grammar," but he/she has larger organizational problems that the tutor believes (and much composition pedagogy supports) should take precedence. Indeed, students often mean something other than "grammar" when they use this term because the term is often a catchall for other writing issues. From experience, I recognize that it is difficult for tutors to know exactly where to draw the line between meeting students' requests and putting those requests aside to discuss a "more important" writing issue. Engrained in this topic of agenda-setting are issues of authority and the power struggles that take place between tutors and students, which are influenced by other forces (i.e. pressures from professors, the Academy, participant backgrounds and ideologies, etc.), as well.

What I don't know, and what previous research has not addressed, is (1) how often conferences maintain focus on the writing issues students have asked for help with because both tutors and students agree that those issues are most important, (2) how often tutors ignore their own sense of what aspects of writing should be discussed in conferences because they see meeting the students' requests as most important, and (3) how often and in what ways tutors decide to deviate their talk about writing from what the students initially asked for help with because tutors see sharing their situated knowledge as their responsibility to students. I also don't know how students and tutors perceive the discussion in their conferences. Are students still satisfied if their tutors have deviated from the initial feedback requests? (Do they even notice the deviations?) Are tutors still satisfied if they have met the students' feedback requests at the expense of silencing their own (tutors') expertise?

When I began this project, my research goals were to qualitatively discover information on the aforementioned points about which little has been said. Existing research has discussed feedback requests quantitatively, students' and tutors' levels of overall satisfaction with their writing center conferences, and issues of tutor directiveness. My research attempts to both extend and complicate what has already been addressed by looking qualitatively, through observations and interviews, at what happens with students' feedback requests *after* they've been made in writing center conferences and how students and tutors perceive their sessions in relation to this. Insight gleaned from research on this topic will ideally impact future tutor training, student and faculty perceptions of writing centers, as well as continued (extended) research in the field.

### **Research Questions**

Based on my research interests and the gap in existing research, the questions that guided my study were:

- Do writing center tutors address students' requests for help with their writing during conferences? Why or why not?
- What are the participants' (both tutors and students') perceptions of how the requests are met or not met?
- What do the findings from these three questions indicate for writing center theory and practice?

To answer these questions, I observed six writing center conferences at the TexasStateWritingCenter, three of which are discussed in detail in Chapter Four, and identified themes in the data. To triangulate findings from my observations, I conducted

interviews with both tutor and student participants, identified themes in this data, and used data from both observations and interviews as foundation for my interpretations.

### **Findings in Brief**

After analyzing the data I collected for this research, I found that:

- Writing center tutors do tend to meet students' requests for help, yet they also discuss other writing issues with students based on their own agendas or additional requests from students during the sessions.
- Mostly, participants express satisfaction with how students' feedback requests are met, with only a few caveats. Even when a student may be more dissatisfied than satisfied, her comments are contradictory, falling on both ends of the levels-of-satisfaction continuum.
- There are many factors, other than students' requests, that influence which writing issues are discussed during writing center conferences and whether participants are satisfied with their sessions. Some of those factors are:
  - Students' desire for directive tutoring and tutors' withholding information
  - Cultural differences in collaborative practices
  - Prescribed gender roles and gender performances
  - Contradiction between students' requests and writing center theory
  - The interplay of students' language, culture, and identity
  - The "helpfulness" of writing centers and its contribution to hierarchical relationships
  - The continued indoctrination of students into the Academy

- Writing center practice is not always consistent with current writing center theory, particularly those that propose liberatory pedagogies, although opportunities to align the two abound. This begs the question of whether “satisfaction” should be the goal for writing center tutors and students in their conferences.

In the next chapter, I survey the literature that relates to my research interests, categorized by the research inspiration and the existing gap in the literature, collaboration and reflection, tutor directiveness, language and identity, and critical theory. In Chapter Three, I provide detailed information on my research methods for this project. In Chapter Four, I elaborate on the findings mentioned briefly above. Finally, the last chapter concludes this thesis by discussing implications for writing center work and positing questions for further research.

## **CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **The Inspiration and the Gap**

As mentioned in the introduction, the article that inspired my research interests by Severino et al. presented quantitative research on how NNES and NES students differ in their online feedback requests when they book writing center appointments. Eighty-five students' feedback requests from one university were categorized (since the request boxes were open-ended rather than pull-down lists) and analyzed. The authors' findings showed that, although NES students were twice as likely to ask for help with argument/ideas and NNES students were more than twice as likely to ask for help with grammar and punctuation, both groups of students "asked for feedback on all of [the possible] concerns and desired a full range of feedback on their drafts" (Severino et al. 122). The purpose of the authors' research was to find out if they should incorporate a pull-down list for the student feedback request section of their website because NNES students didn't have as much knowledge about what to ask for help with. Their findings indicated that such a change would be unnecessary.

I found the topic of students' feedback requests interesting, and I was further inspired when reading this article by one of its limitations—namely, that the perspective on students' feedback requests is one-dimensional. The researchers took what the students had asked for help with and categorized those requests, but they didn't conduct any observations to see if the students' feedback requests were the main focus of their conferences nor did they survey the tutors about their perspectives on what was discussed during the conferences and how

that matched/didn't match the initial feedback requests. I can see why Severino et al. did not complicate their study of "feedback requests" in such a way, since doing so wouldn't have been relevant to what they were specifically interested in learning, i.e. simply what NES and NNEST students ask for help with. My research, however, looks less intently at the structure of the online feedback request box and the differences between groups of students; instead, I attempt to discover to what extent students' feedback requests actually influence their sessions and to what extent having the tutor meet their feedback requests affects both tutors' and students' satisfaction levels for their sessions.

Doug Enders offers another method, different from Severino et al.'s, for categorizing what students and tutors discuss during writing center conferences. Enders, for the purpose of better knowing his center's clients and improving his administration, conducted a quantitative longitudinal study to discover how talk about writing is influenced by students' grade levels and disciplines. The data was categorized based on tutors' perceptions and reporting (as opposed to students' requests) of their sessions. Enders found that global writing issues were discussed more often among students in humanities and lower level courses, and editing concerns were addressed in more than half of the sessions from which data was collected. This thesis connects and builds upon Enders' research and Severino et al.'s research by explaining what happens *in between* students' providing feedback requests and tutors reporting what was discussed in their sessions.

My research also looks into students' and tutors' perceptions of their interactions regarding whether feedback requests were met and how those perceptions affect their levels of satisfaction with the conferences. In the article "Examining Our Lore: A Survey of Students' and Tutors' Satisfaction with Writing Center Conferences," Isabelle Thompson,

Alyson Whyte, David Shannon, Amanda Muse, Kristen Miller, Milla Chappell, and Abby Whigham conducted survey research exploring students' and tutors' overall satisfaction with their writing center conferences. Their findings "contradict lore mandates forbidding tutor directiveness and support empirical research findings showing that tutors are unable to avoid directiveness and that this directiveness is often appreciated by students," leading the authors to develop a theory of "asymmetrical collaboration" which "assumes expert-novice roles" (Thompson et al. 79, 81). Though my research on satisfaction is more focused than this study (since it would deal with satisfaction in respect to tutors meeting students' feedback requests, specifically), I initially expected that issues of directiveness and student/tutor collaboration would play a part in influencing my participants' satisfaction, as well. For this reason, I chose to further explore what's been said about directiveness and collaboration in writing center theory and practice before conducting any observations of my own.

### **Collaboration and Reflection**

In "Collaborative Conundrums," Joseph Mangino discusses his practical experience with negotiating collaboration in a writing center conference. He talks about a student who did not include an introduction in his paper because his professor did not want one. The tutor initially felt conflicted about the lack of an introduction because his writing experience and expertise told him that introductions are a component of "good" writing. Though the student initially did not seek the writing center's help in creating an introduction for his paper, the tutor felt inclined to share his knowledge about writing, and they worked collaboratively to develop a short one despite the professor's claim. Even though the tutor's agenda guided their session, the term "collaborative" holds because the student was not opposed to his suggestions—indeed, Mangino stated that the student left feeling "genuinely excited" (15).

This is an example of how collaboration, even when it results from tutor initiative, can lead to success in helping students become better writers. It also indicates that tutors might deviate from students' feedback requests and still have a productive, collaborative session in which all participants feel satisfied.

Supporting Mangino's pragmatic claims, Andrea Lunsford elaborates on her theoretical understanding of collaboration in the article "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center." She argues that Burkean Parlor writing centers are the best models for helping student writers (in contrast to Storehouse centers that view knowledge as "exterior" and "accessible," and Garrett centers that view knowledge as "interior" and needing to be extracted from students) because they are collaborative and view knowledge as socially constructed (Lunsford 93, 94). Specifically, Lunsford says that collaboration improves critical thinking and the "understanding of others," "leads to higher achievement in general," and "promotes excellence" (94-5). Though true collaboration is difficult to achieve, especially given the innate hierarchy of the tutor/student relationship, I could envision it functioning in an ideal writing center session in which the student asks for help with a writing issue and the tutor deviates from that request, but both participants remain working together toward the common goal of improving the student's writing skills—similar to what Mangino describes in his writing center narrative.

Irene Clark, when writing about the effects of the advent of portfolio grading on the University of Southern California's writing center, further explains Lunsford's idea of "true collaboration" by distinguishing between "legitimate and illegitimate collaboration" (519). She defines "*legitimate* collaboration" as



Primarily directed at developing the student's writing process and at improving the student's understanding of how texts operate in terms of their readers and the expectations of an appropriate discourse community. With this aim in mind, tutors can, for instructional purposes, make or suggest changes in a text; however, they must make sure that the student's own contributions remain predominant. (Clark 520)

When tutors offer illegitimate help to students, it resembles appropriation or plagiarism more than collaboration.

Even after having read Clark's clarification of these kinds of collaboration, I can still understand that finding the exact line that separates legitimate and illegitimate collaboration would be difficult for both tutors and students. If a tutor were to suggest that she and the student discuss a writing issue other than the one the student was initially concerned with, and the student seemed resistant to that suggestion simply because he didn't understand it, should the tutor push further or let it go? If a student asks the tutor to look at "everything/anything" in her paper, is she providing enough guidance to legitimize the conference? These questions underscore the complexity of the situations tutors must navigate in their day-to-day work. Clark's explanation of the terms is helpful, yet tutors must also use their informed, reflective, best judgment regularly to avoid engaging in "illegitimate collaboration," especially when students appear to prefer that to legitimate collaboration.

One of the issues that can surface in writing center sessions that may prevent students and tutors from engaging in true collaborative interactions is students' overdependence on writing center services. (Of course, the opposite situation—when a tutor ignores the student and assumes control over the session—is also problematic.) When students enter their

sessions expecting tutors to provide all of the “answers” for good writing, the possibility for collaboration is diminished. Kristin Walker offers practical suggestions for handling such conferences. Specifically, she advocates the use of a student worksheet that encourages students to be reflective about their writing before a session begins. (I would add that such a worksheet should also encourage students to be reflective during and after their sessions, as well.) Requiring that students contribute their thoughts can help them feel capable and make the sessions more collaborative and highlight the differences in what they value and what their tutors value in writing. Based on current literature in the field, I might generalize about a likely possibility for those value differences in the following way: students value “correctness” in local writing issues and are heavily influenced by remnants of the current-traditional paradigm in our education system, while tutors value (or *should* value) empowering students and questioning the dominant culture.

Gail Okawa, Thomas Fox, and several of the writing center tutors with whom they work also advocate the use of critical reflection in writing center practices. Though they advocate reflection—reflection that “focuses on conscious explorations of language within a society stratified by race and cultural background”—in tutor training programs, incorporating similar practices for students in the writing center (i.e. the worksheet previously mentioned) would also be beneficial (Okawa et al. 41). Tutors and students should work collaboratively in their sessions, reflecting critically on their situations in the university and how students’ situatedness impacts their writing and what they value in writing; they should do so in order to achieve liberatory writing practices. Again, however, along with this liberatory ideal comes the issue of coercion. If students are resistant to thinking about their writing in such ways, how far can tutors push them before the collaboration turns “illegitimate”?

## **Tutor Directiveness**

Articles focused on tutor directiveness speak to some of the concerns raised in the literature on collaboration in writing centers. Lauren Kopec argues that tutors should be able to weave between directive and non-directive approaches “based on the dynamic of each session” and as befits the students’ specific needs (15). Likewise, Tom Truesdell offers support for this theory by discussing a student who initially wanted to work on local writing issues like quote integration, but Truesdell decided they needed to address her global problems—organization and argument—first. He took a more directive approach to tutoring by guiding her through the creation of an outline for her ideas. Once she felt comfortable with the larger changes that he recognized needed to be made, he switched his approach again to a non-directive style. This example shows support for tutors who decide to deviate from their students’ initial feedback requests; student/tutor interactions can remain collaborative regardless of a tutor’s level of directiveness, as long as both participants remain focused on improving the student’s writing skills.

Being flexible about their levels of directiveness during sessions is one way in which tutors reflect the “student-centered” goals of writing center ideology. Catherine G. Latterell, in an essay about authority in the writing center, explains that she is not concerned with the goals of student-centeredness, but with the way in which the “writing center community talks about accomplishing these goals” because much of the literature about student-centeredness discusses authority as being owned by the tutor and given to the student, which contradicts its liberating power (105, 111). She concludes that both tutors and students need to be open and honest with each other about their constructed roles and various identities that influence their writing center sessions. When conference participants are able to come clean and think/talk

about their values and situations reflectively with each other, their opportunities for true collaboration increase, especially when students feel empowered to decide the direction they want their sessions to take. What happens, though, when students resist tutors' attempts at directive tutoring?

Hansun Zhang Waring addresses the precursor to that question in the essay "Peer Tutoring in a Graduate Writing Centre: Identity, Expertise, and Advice Resisting." She conducted a conversation analysis of a writing center session between a graduate student and a graduate tutor in order to discover how and why students resist advice. Waring found that student resistance in this situation occurred primarily because of "competing expertise" and student identity claims (141). Though originally I didn't expect to find many cases of student resistance in my research study because my focus is on sessions comprised of undergraduate (first-year) students and graduate tutors, Waring's example of conversation analysis and her ideas about student resistance did help me to locate instances of students' resistance to tutors' deviations from their feedback requests in my research. I also looked at how tutors handle issues of collaboration and directiveness when students are resistant to their agendas.

A final representative article that encourages directive tutoring is Shamoon and Burns's "A Critique of Pure Tutoring." In it, they challenge writing center lore (i.e. "articles of faith that serve to validate a tutoring approach which "feels right") that pushes tutors into nondirective, student-centered instructional styles (Shamoon and Burns 226). They support their criticisms with personal experiences of how they learned to write for their disciplines and examples of alternative instruction across the curriculum. By building their case in this way, they attempt to prove that "directive tutoring provides a particularly efficient transmission of domain-specific repertoires, far more efficient and less frustrating than

expecting students to reinvent these established practices” (234). Such a claim makes sense; when tutors have a particular knowledge about writing that could be shared with students, it almost seems like academic bullying for them to withhold that information in the hopes that students might figure it out with enough questioning and encouragement. Their article explains both why tutors might be hesitant to use directive tutoring and the positive reasons for why they should try anyway.

### **Language and Identity in the Writing Center**

Another important issue is the dynamics of language and identity. Based on observation, a significant percentage of the population that chooses, or is required, to visit the writing center are English Language Learning (ELL) students. This likely has something to do with what Geneva Smitherman in *Word from the Mother: Language and African Americans* calls “linguistic push-pull,” defined as “Black folk loving, embracing, using Black Talk, while simultaneously rejecting and hating on it,” though the same linguistic principles are applicable to other ELL groups, as well (6). In other words, people often grow up in one kind of discourse community in which one language (African American Vernacular English or AAVE in Smitherman’s example) is required and then forced to adopt what is called Standard American English (SAE) for the Academy instead. By deeming SAE, when in fact there is nothing “standard” about it, the official language of American education, students’ home languages are often trivialized and potentially eradicated. That kind of eradication of language further calls students’ identities into question because language is felt and experienced in such a personal, meaningful way; language is a part of one’s culture, and to experience language discrimination causes one to question his/her self-worth, with varying consequences.

We can see this system of oppression, this mandatory assimilation of ELL students into dominant discourses, in action in the writing center, which brings me to the second reason language and identity is relevant to this thesis: writing centers are implicated in the larger institution's enforcement of the hegemonic use of SAE. In *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*, Nancy Grimm comments on harmful "cultural constructions," such as the domination of SAE, and their influence on writing centers, stating that "writing center work is depicted in innocent ways—as 'helping' students in the unfriendly world of academia—even though we are merely helping them conform to institutional expectations" (29). Although the current moves in writing center theory and practice call for social justice and institutional change, it's difficult for writing centers to suddenly shed their history as "fix-it shops," especially considering that many faculty and students who wish to make use of its services continue to perceive them as such. Spend a few hours in almost any writing center in America's educational institutions, and I can imagine you'll observe at least one instance in which a tutor is either coerced into or obviously willing to make use of tutoring practice that further indoctrinates students (and likely students of color) into the hierarchical ideologies of the traditional Academy that privileges SAE discourse above all others. While it's understandably arguable that a language standard is necessary for effective communication, it's also important that people realize that "standard" doesn't equate to "better" because such value-laden terminology is contextually bound. Injustice therefore should be a common component of tutor/student discussions in the writing center.

And what does this rejection of home languages and other differences mean for NNEST students? According to Jorge Ruiz de Velasco, a contributor to the anthology *Leaving*

*Children Behind: How “Texas-style” Accountability Fails Latino Youth*, many ELL students simply refuse to participate in such a discriminatory system. He claims that “low-performing teens,” the same teens whose home languages are ignored and/or devalued in schools concerned with SAE, “are the most likely to drop out” (Ruiz de Velasco 44). Of course, their lack of formal education then creates other challenges for them. The students who somehow manage to make it through secondary schooling and into higher education, such as Vershawn Ashanti Young—now a university professor—experience an identity crisis. In *Your Average Nigga Performing Race Literacy and Masculinity*, Young explains that, because of “the exaggerated racial perceptions that we have of black and white people” which “schools and teachers perpetuate,” he felt pressured to perform very different racial and gendered identities in his home community and school community—a limiting, binary, and internal conflict to have to experience (Young 130).

Scholarly writing on writing centers tells us that they’re positioned in such a way as to be a safe space to reflect on and negotiate such conflicting identities; tutors have the options of either “helping” students to assimilate into social norms and dominant discourses or bringing those norms and discourses to consciousness so that students can purposefully and rhetorically resist them. Though my research focuses on the meeting of students’ feedback requests in writing center conferences, it’s clear that such an issue cannot be fully discussed without also looking at the forces that are acting upon the writing center, the institutions within which the writing center functions, the historical context that has led up to contemporary writing center theory and practice, and the way in which students and tutors feel pressured to perform certain racial and gendered identities within and outside of the writing center.

## Critical Theory as Framework

To analyze the data I collected regarding what students ask for help with in their writing center appointments, whether tutors meet those requests and why or why not, the participants' levels of satisfaction with how students' requests were met (or not met), and issues of collaboration and directiveness in the sessions, I adopted a critical, or postmodern, theoretical lens. John W. Creswell, in *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, posits that there are four main worldviews from which to approach a research project: Postpositivism, Advocacy/Participatory, Constructivism, and Pragmatism (6). Though my research is qualitative and therefore inductive, meaning that my theoretical lens and analysis is dependent on what develops during the study, the way in which I tend to think about research and its potential is through all of those worldviews except for Postpositivism, at least as Creswell describes it (as reductionist and objectivist, for example). Though I agree with some of the ideas behind Postpositivism, such as "absolute truth can never be found" and "evidence established in research is always imperfect and fallible," this worldview is generally more "important in quantitative research" (7).

I do, however, value the Constructivist position that "meaning is constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting," the Advocacy/Participatory idea that "researchers [should] advance an action agenda for change...focused on helping individuals free themselves from constraints," and the Pragmatist position that research should be "real-world practice oriented" (8, 10, 6). This combination worldview affected the shape of the study and my analysis of the data. In particular, conducting interviews that allow for research participants to contribute their own perspectives and understanding of the topic is conducive to the Constructivist perspective.



Looking for ways to improve writing center practice and tutor training, based on findings from the research, which will benefit both students and tutors, is a component of the research that aligns with both Pragmatist and Advocacy/Participatory worldviews.

As befits such a worldview, I applied critical theory to my analysis of the data. The primary goal of critical theory is people's emancipation; it is a lens through which one can look at a situation in order to call attention to a variety of social injustices that occur and critique them so that change for increased democracy can be enacted. Thomas Huckin uses critical theory as a framework for the research method of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Several key components of critical theory as it's applied to CDA, according to Huckin, are that it is concerned with "the larger societal context including its relevant cultural, political, social and other facets;" demonstrates a connection between a text (or situation) and that larger social context; and takes "an ethical stance, one that draws attention to power imbalances, social inequities, non-democratic practices, and other injustices in hopes of spurring readers to corrective action" (95-6). Although I didn't analyze discursive texts at a micro-level as is required for CDA, I did analyze the data acquired from my writing center observations and interviews as a collective "text," looking for connections to a larger social context and critiquing the social injustices that I found.

Another scholar who makes use of critical theory in her research is Nancy Grimm, though she labels it "postmodern theory" instead. In *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*, Grimm writes, "from a postmodern perspective, writing centers are necessary spaces for the critical orientation and contextualization that fosters real learning. In a social setting saturated with contested meanings and values...both faculty and students need a space where values can be identified and discussed" (25). Her argument throughout

the book is that writing center workers can contribute to more socially just literacy practices by thinking critically about their cultural assumptions and enacting democratic change that has the potential to benefit all students, not just students from the dominant culture. I agree with the critical/postmodern worldview that heavily influences Grimm's work, and it has influenced my research. For example, from such a perspective, I am better able to recognize when tutors and students are participating as agents and victims in an unjust social system, as well as uncover instances of tutors' missed opportunities for engaging in social change with students.

## **CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Research Design**

#### *Access and Participants*

In order to conduct my research, I needed to gain access, both online and face-to-face, to the writing center at my university. Because I previously worked there and have maintained a good rapport with the writing center director, this was not difficult. As the gatekeeper, she signed a consent form and expressed a willingness to help as the project progressed.

As mentioned in Chapter One, I previously held a position in the writing center as an Instructional Assistant with both tutoring and administrative duties. This meant that my relation to the participants was slightly complicated. Tutors saw me as both one of them and a person they could come to for information, help, and guidance, depending on what they needed at the moment. The relationships I had with the tutors were further complicated because of our differences in age, race, gender, graduate/ undergraduate status, and program affiliation. We all have multiple identities at play that influence our perceptions of and interactions with each other. This is true, as well, for potential student participants and myself, but the hierarchical nature of tutor (even “peer” tutor) and student interactions should also be added. Furthermore, one of the student participants and I knew each other from having had writing center conferences together in the past. Now, however, that I no longer work in the writing center as an Instructional Assistant because I have been promoted to the

position of Teaching Assistant with first-year composition classes to teach, these issues of familiarities with tutors and students are less problematic (particularly because I did not observe any conferences that involved the students I teach). In addition, a majority of the tutors working during the time of my observations were new hires.

### *Ethical Considerations*

According to Creswell's suggestions for researchers regarding ethical considerations, I gained the agreement of the writing center director before conducting any research in that environment, only worked with participants who signed consent forms, coded all data and research writing for the confidentiality of participants' identities, respected the research site, looked for ways that my research could serve the purpose of benefiting participants and improving the "human situation," interpreted the data as accurately as possible, worked to ensure reciprocity by being as honest as possible with the participants during interviews, used appropriate and non-offensive language when disclosing my findings, and situated my position and research process along with the research findings in this final report (89-92). Eventually, my findings will be presented to the writing center director of Texas State (as she is on my thesis panel), so that she will have the option of enacting any potential changes that arise as a result of my research that might improve our writing center's practices.

### *Data Collection Procedures*

As previously stated, I conducted six observations of writing center conferences. All of the sessions observed were with students from English 1300, 1310, or 1320—our university's developmental and first-year composition courses—and graduate level tutors. This is one of the most common structures for our writing center sessions and contributed some consistency to the overall study. I viewed the writing center's online schedule at least

one day in advance of the session I planned to observe and emailed both the tutor and student involved, providing a brief introduction to my research and inquiring whether they'd be interested in participating, without appearing overbearing. If potential participants declined to participate, I did not contact them anymore; if they requested more information before deciding, I sent them a copy of the consent form with more details; if they agreed, I thanked them and provided them with a consent form to sign when their session was scheduled to start; if they did not respond to my email, I approached them again when they showed up for their appointment the next day, though I did not want to scare clients away from the writing center or coerce them into something they were uncomfortable with by being too forward in my attempts to find participants for the study.

During the actual observations, I used an audio recorder so that I could transcribe sections of the conversations later. The exception to this was my first observation: I video recorded the session and found that it made the tutor uncomfortable and hindered his ability to tutor effectively, interfering slightly with the data collected. I found an audio recorder to be a more accurate way of recording the data. To make up for the loss of a visual record, I also took field notes during the sessions, particularly noting data such as gestures that would not be apparent from listening to the sound record. On each note-taking document was a space at the top to record the date, time, and place, as well as two columns in which I wrote about the factual data separated into categories on the left and my reflections and questions about those facts on the right. Transcribing the audio after the sessions supplemented my initial observation notes.

One week or less after each observation (again, with the exception of the first conference observed), I scheduled, by means of email, short (twenty-five minute) interviews

with each participant, also audio-recorded. For the first set of interviews, almost a month had elapsed after the session observation, and the student and tutor had difficulty at times recalling specific details about their conference to support their responses to the questions I asked. That is why for the rest of the interviews I conducted I made sure the participants had their sessions fresh in their memories (because time constraints don't allow for them to listen to the audio recording of their entire session before they answer the interview questions). The questions for each interview were slightly different, aligning with the particularities of the session I wanted to know about and the interviewee's perspective on that session. Also, questions functioned as a guide rather than a script, and I made an effort to let the participants influence what we discussed as much as possible. The questions and conversation for the most part, however, related back to my initial research interests. Also, I tried to find a balance between being honest and transparent with the participants about my findings and why I wanted to know about certain things and not influencing their thoughts and responses. I took brief notes about what interested me most during each interview and transcribed the significant sections afterward.

### *Data Analysis Procedures*

To analyze the data I collected, I first looked for themes that surfaced within each session as the study progressed. I then deduced how many of those themes were common between multiple sessions. The themes I looked for were ones that could provide insight into possible answers to my initial research questions and ones that could extend my questions into other interesting research territory. I developed my own coding system according to the themes I saw developing and used it to code all of the transcripts, which brought a small amount of quantitative measure to my research. I also looked at the data through a critical

theoretical lens, as mentioned in the Chapter Two. Though I began this research with the intent to find answers to the questions posited earlier, what I actually found was that simple answers are insufficient for this study; qualifiers, complexity, and more questions have enriched and grown my thesis into something bigger and, I think, more meaningful.

### **Limitations**

Though the research I've conducted is meant to expand on and complicate the more quantitative literature that already exists on related topics, its most obvious limitation is the small sample size of the participants studied. I believe that I have enough complex data to make some generalizations, though if I had enough time to include more participants, the findings would be more reliable. Another similar limitation to my study is that all of the participants are students at one university, which makes my findings less generalizable than if I were to study writing center sessions at a variety of schools and geographic locations. Future studies could therefore expand upon my research by conducting similar research in different schools and communities to test the theories that develop from mine.

Furthermore, the fact that I only observed writing center sessions that follow one structure (ENG1300/1310/1320 students and graduate tutors) is another limitation to my study. Though I am choosing to limit my research in this way in order to keep one research variable more consistent, my findings would likely change if I included students and tutors from other levels and courses. Doing so could be a possibility for other future research studies. In addition, the fact that tutors and students knew what my research focus was before their sessions (because of the transparency of the consent form they signed beforehand) could have influenced their thoughts and actions. The benefits of an open policy with participants, however, outweigh its negatives, especially in a qualitative study.

Another limitation to my research is that I have been a member of the community that I studied. Indeed, it's this membership that has influenced me to explore these particular research interests. While this can be perceived as an advantage because it gives me some access and "insider" knowledge that I might not have at other writing centers or other communities, it limits my study because I have the potential to influence the tutors and students who know me and think of me in certain ways. It may also influence my interpretation of the data if I look at certain issues and ignore other valuable ones because they seem "normal" to me as a community member. I believe, however, that my open-ended interview questions and collaboration with participants have helped to guard against this limitation.

A final limitation to my study that I recognize, though undoubtedly there are more that I hope future researchers will continue to find and question, is the effect that audio recording and observation may have had on participants. I think such effects were minimal, especially compared to the effects of video recording in the first session observation, though I cannot discount them completely. They may have caused participants to be less genuine than they would have been if they weren't observed and put on record. To some extent, though, I think it's good for people to feel "on display," as long as they don't have high levels of anxiety about it, because such a feeling encourages self-reflection, which is an important predecessor to change and improvement.



## **CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION OF THREE SETS OF OBSERVATIONS AND INTERVIEWS**

Although I transcribed, coded, and analyzed all six of the sets of conferences I observed and interviews I conducted, I've chosen to include here a discussion of only half of them. These three sets led to the most provocative analysis, while still being generally representative of the whole. In this chapter, I first provide background information on the participants of these three sets of conferences. Then, I describe and reflect on the initial feedback requests students make and the tutors' complicit acceptance of those requests. The rest of the chapter is organized primarily in response to my guiding research questions: Do tutors meet students' requests? Do tutors deviate from students' requests? Are participants satisfied with how requests are met? For each question, I provide observational and interview data as well as analysis of the data to offer both an answer and an explanation. The data for each question is organized by conference number, so the reader experiences the same chronological process that I did. The analysis, however, is organized according to theme, showing the connections that can be made between conferences after reflection and coding.

### **The Participants**

The participants involved in this grouping are diverse in terms of age, sex, educational experience, linguistic background, and ethnicity, to name the more apparent identifiers. Though all of these students appeared to be traditionally-aged in terms of their

positions in the University, tutors are graduate students and clients are undergraduate students ranging from first-year to senior level (as mentioned in Chapter Three).

- From the first conference:
  - The tutor, Ed, is a white male majoring in English
  - The student, Lily, is an Asian English language learner (ELL) majoring in Music
- From the second conference:
  - The tutor, Alex, is a white female majoring in Rhetoric and Composition
  - The student, Jorge, is a first-year Latino ELL whose major is Business Administration
- From the third conference:
  - The tutor, Sarah, is a female majoring in Poetry
  - The student, Duke, is a senior male majoring in Physics
  - Both are white

The fact that a variety of students, moreso than tutors, is represented in this very small sample shows that writing centers are “poised to engage in transformative institutional work” in which administrators and tutors “become change-agents” (Geller et al. 90). As some of my analysis will show, however, “poised” is a stationary position—one that precedes action.

### **Students’ Feedback Requests and Tutors’ Complacency**

In this section, I discuss what students’ feedback requests were, how tutors responded to their requests, and how their initial interactions may have set the tone for what followed in the sessions. The writing center client participants were varied in what writing issues they asked to be addressed. Lily (S) wanted Ed (T) to help her with the “grammar and syntax” in

her paper so that she could sound more “American.” Ed never asked her to clarify what she meant by grammar, a broad request, which made me question his commitment to meeting her requests. From her request, it’s clear that Lily wanted to lose some of the markers of her native language and further assimilate into standard American ways of writing. Ed did not seem to find such a request strange or appear resistant to it. His acceptance of her request may show his complacency in further indoctrinating students into a modernist ideology of binaries that proposes there exists a right and wrong way to write and perform nationality. In the follow-up interview I conducted with Lily, I asked her how she felt about participating in a system in which being an NNES student almost automatically guarantees that one will receive lower grades. She answered that she feels like ideas should count more than grammar when teachers grade student papers, but she understands why that isn’t the case in English composition classes. She feels like her writing might be satisfactory in other situations and for a different audience. She also showed frustration at the thought that she might never be able to write in Standard American English (SAE), referring to herself as a “not good student.”

Jorge (S), on the other hand, asked for help with “making [his] essays make sense” and “staying on topic,” which his tutor, Alex, interpreted as answering the prompt correctly. He also wanted help with his “grammar,” which, when prompted, he clarified as meaning commas and run-on sentences. Like Ed, Alex (T) did not seem to have reservations about such requests, and wrote them down to help her remember and stay focused during the session.

The student Duke from the third conference also asked for help with making sure his essay responded to the teacher’s prompt, and he additionally wanted the tutor to confirm that

he used appropriate language and vocabulary. Such a request—regarding the vocabulary concern—seems interesting for a student like himself who sounds like he has a strong grasp of SAE, but it might result from his inexperience in English classes, considering he is a physics major at the senior level of college. Again, the tutor, this time Sarah, voiced no immediate concerns about the this student’s agenda for their session, although scholars such as Shanti Bruce claim that “making a [shared] plan will give the conference direction while allowing the tutor to bond with the tutee right from the beginning by deciding and sharing a common goal” (35). Perhaps engaging in negotiations early on would have set a more collaborative tone for these sessions.

### **Tutors Meet Students’ Feedback Requests**

This section, as mentioned earlier, responds to the research question, “Do tutors meet students’ feedback requests?” thereby providing several specific examples organized by conference number that prove that, yes, tutors do.

#### *Conference One*

To some extent, all of the tutors met the students’ feedback requests from my interpretation of the observations. One instance in which Lily (S) and Ed (T) focused on an issue related to “grammar and syntax” in their session occurred when they discussed a specific word choice (which Ed claimed was “tripping [him] up slightly”), deliberating over how to make it sound more clear, more “American.” Ed offered a couple of suggestions for revision, and Lily wanted to know the subtle differences in meaning for each possible choice in order to understand which one was the “stronger” option. She seemed both frustrated at her lack of knowledge of the nuances of English language and concerned with having Ed help her to decipher them. In fact, much later in the session, Lily claimed, “I’m confused how

Americans say sentences because in my country it's totally opposite." Later in the interview that I conducted with Lily, she claimed that she is happy when writing center tutors will "fix" her grammar and syntax errors, but not happy because she remains unable to do so on her own. She hopes to receive the insider information from tutors that might help her further assimilate into the SAE discourse of the Academy, though she finds that tutors tend to be withholding and nondirective in their feedback.

To continue, Ed (T) pointed out an issue with verb tense consistency, and Lily (S) helped make the correction. Possibly as a "reward" for her demonstration of knowledge, Ed says, "And you can mark on [the paper], too." This was eighteen minutes into the session, which made me wonder if it perhaps took that long for him to build trust in Lily's ability to revise her own work. Such an interaction positions Ed as an authority figure in the tutor/student hierarchical relationship. In his interview, Ed confessed his ambiguous feelings about his role as a tutor. He explained that on the one hand, he knows he has some expertise with writing and feels obligated to share his knowledge with students, but on the other hand he tries not to "sound condescending" because he understands that writing is a "personal" experience for the students. He doesn't want to be compared to a teacher, lecturing and shutting students and their ideas down, therefore he tries to "pretend a hierarchy doesn't exist."

Later in the session, Lily (S) told Ed (T), after he had stumbled through a section of her paper, "If [the sentence] is awkward, I can take it out." Ed reassured her that no, "the sentence is good." As a former writing center tutor and current composition instructor, I might have felt uncomfortable in Ed's position because of Lily's willingness to give up her own words so readily or do whatever Ed thinks best. However, I can also understand why she

would feel that way, if in fact she did, since near the end of the observation she confided in Ed that she was frustrated about consistently making Cs on her papers in composition classes simply because of (according to Lily, based on her understanding of her instructors' comments) errors in grammar and syntax. From her interview responses it seems that Lily was both frustrated with the educational system that demands the use of SAE and her own inability to master the discourse.

As the session continued, Ed (T) found a grammatical mistake and asked Lily a leading question: "Is there something missing here?" Lily (S) didn't know what answer Ed wanted from her, but she attempted a guess, which was incorrect, and Ed explained the correction. Later, Lily caught a mistake in article usage, and Ed validated her by saying, "Yes!" He spotted and explained how to correct a punctuation error. These are a few examples, to me, that further position Ed as the knowledge holder and giver and Lily as struggling to attain that knowledge. By focusing on English grammar and syntax, something that Ed clearly has a better, albeit naturalized, understanding of, student and tutor participated in a "storehouse" model of writing center conferencing (Lunsford 93). Based on Lily's responses in our interview, it's clear that such a set-up does not work well for her. She claims that an ideal session for her would be one in which the tutor went through a couple of paragraphs of her paper with her in great detail, sentence by sentence, and not only "fixed" her errors in grammar and syntax, but also explained how and why she might fix similar mistakes on her own. From what I observed, I thought Ed did explain most corrections, although his explanation did not seem satisfactory to Lily. Ed himself confessed that he felt he needed to understand and articulate the grammar rules better, a weakness which he knows

is a result of growing up speaking a language similar to SAE and being unable to express those rules to someone like Lily who does not have a similar background.

Furthermore, Ed (T) said that a part of Lily's writing was "a little confusing to *us*." I wondered here if Ed was referring to NES people when he used the pronoun "us," if he was admitting to the cultural and linguistic difference between Lily (S) and himself, and if Lily noticed this slip of speech and appreciated that it might be the "insider" information she had been requesting. Closer to the end of the session when Ed began to realize that they might not have time to "edit" the entire paper (though it was less than three pages and they were together for an hour), he told Lily that after the session she should go back through on her own to look for mistakes with articles and verb tense—two of the more common mistakes she had made in her writing so far. In response, Lily asked him to at least underline all of the specific places where there were mistakes and then she would figure out what they were and fix them on her own. She seemed reluctant and anxious about having too much responsibility in self-editing. Ed gave in to her plea by saying, "When I'm done, we'll go back to this paragraph." In this interaction, I observed the conflicting agendas of Ed and Lily. Ed's concession shows that he respects her requests despite his initial reluctance to meet them.

Ed (T) further met Lily's feedback requests by explaining the function of prepositions when she asked about ending sentences with them. Several times throughout their session, after Ed had explained his suggestions for Lily's paper, he would ask her, "Does that make sense?" She usually nodded, and then they continued going through the paper. However, one time, she hesitated with a response, eventually nodding and laughing a little. To me, this meant that she didn't really understand but wanted to keep going anyway, which Ed did. As mentioned earlier, Lily (S) confessed to understanding few of the explanations about

grammar and syntax that the tutor offered—to the extent, in fact, that she didn’t even think he gave any explanation at all. Ed, likewise, claimed he felt he needed more training, or at least more practice, in working with ELL students so that he could have better strategies for explaining certain rules that he knows but finds difficult to articulate.

### *Conference Two*

If I were to compare the three sessions to each other, I would say that the second session—the one with Alex (T) and Jorge (S)—sticks to the student’s feedback requests more stringently than Ed and Lily’s conference did. Remember that Jorge asked for help with making sure his paper answered the prompt and that he used commas correctly and avoided run-on sentences. In his interview, Jorge explained that he knew he has had trouble with these same writing issues in the past because of the commentary his instructors had provided him on graded work. Before the tutor even looked at his paper, she conducted a brief mini-lesson on run-on sentences after Jorge explained that he knew what they were but not necessarily how to fix them. They looked at an example run-on sentence that Alex created and three ways to correct it. Jorge listened while she explained, nodding and “mhm”-ing, two kinds of communication which made up a significant amount of his contribution throughout the session. After their mini-lesson, Alex explained the way the rest of the session would work—she would read his paper aloud, stopping along the way to discuss comma and run-on sentence issues, and returning to a discussion of the prompt at the end. Jorge agreed, when asked, that this sounded like a good plan.

After reading Jorge’s introductory paragraph, Alex (T) paused to talk with him about using commas after introductory clauses in sentences. They looked at another made-up example from Alex and an example from his paper, and Jorge (S) seemed to understand, so



Alex moved on quickly. Further down in the paper she noticed a place in which he had used a comma after an introductory clause correctly, leading her to affirm his understanding of the rule, even if he didn't always apply it. Soon after, Alex also paused to discuss the use of commas before coordinating conjunctions. Then, when looking at a different sentence in the paper, Alex asked Jorge a leading question to find out if he could locate an instance in which he needed a comma according to the rules they had already discussed, and he could. She praised, "Yes, good." She used the same strategy again right after that, and then had to explain the use of commas with appositives. Jorge continued to nod and say "mhm" to show that he understood her explanation. In her interview, Alex told me that she wasn't sure how much of what they discussed Jorge really understood because of his quiet, almost subservient responses and interactions. Her uncertainty occurred despite Jorge's ability to implement guided revision of comma usage in his paper during their session.

Alex (T) also discussed run-on sentences with Jorge (S). She found two examples in the paper and worked with him to divide the sentence into its independent clauses (though she didn't use this formal vocabulary in her explanation) and use punctuation accordingly. Jorge did most of the work here on his own, but Alex also had to point out some of the divisions that he missed. He marked the changes on his paper while she watched. Alex later told me, during the interview, that he wanted to use a period to start a new sentence at every division rather than using semicolons or commas with coordinating conjunctions. She said that if there had been more time, she would have revisited other options for correcting run-on sentences to make sure he understood, and she would have discussed sentence structure and why it's important to vary that throughout a paper.

After reading the entire paper, Alex (T) looked again at Jorge's prompt and told him that, yes, she thought his story was a good example of what the prompt had asked for. However, she told me that she didn't think the prompt was very specific, and had she given it, she would have been looking for something slightly different than what he had written. She blamed (not angrily) the instructor for setting Jorge (S) and his classmates up to develop poorly constructed essays as a result of vagueness within the prompt. She also said that, again, if there had been more time, she would have discussed other possibilities for how he could have gone about answering the prompt so that he would have choices. To me, this seems like an important piece of information that a tutor should discuss with the student, especially an inexperienced student writer, so that he can understand the complexities of writing, complete with power hierarchies that position teachers in such a way as able to give poor grades to students when their own instruction is at fault. Perhaps if she had structured their session differently—by reading the paper through and discussing how well it met the prompt *before* looking at instances of comma and syntax errors, privileging global over local issues, for example—she might have chosen to have this discussion with Jorge rather than spending the majority of their time together on local issues.

### *Conference Three*

Though the third session with Sarah (T) and Duke (S) had the most deviations from the student's feedback requests as well as the most varied discussion of writing issues, the tutor still responded to the student's stated needs. Duke had asked that she check to make sure his paper responded to the prompt (which he didn't bring with him for Sarah to see) and that his language and vocabulary was good. It was slightly difficult for me to code the transcript of their conference because I felt like his request was unclear. I wonder if Sarah

also thought it was unclear and, if so, why she didn't take more time to clarify her understanding of what he meant at the beginning of their session. A possible explanation for her rationale comes from something she talked about during her interview with me. She said that she always tries to talk about whatever issues she notices in students' writing and it's merely a bonus if those things also match what the students asked for help with.

Before I go through her deviations, however, I'll explain the instances in which I believe Sarah (T) does respond to Duke's requests. First, Duke (S) interjected while she was reading his paper to say that he thought he should write more about imagery in his paper, but he still wasn't sure what exactly imagery is. The tutor gave him an example of imagery to explain; he stated his understanding of it from her example; and she said, "Perfect!" to affirm what he had learned. Only a little later, she realized he also didn't understand the terms "theme" and "tone," although Sarah let him talk through his ideas here rather than explaining their definitions to him. She told me that her reasoning was partly because she didn't have the prompt to look at, so she wasn't exactly sure what the instructor was expecting in regards to the student's use of such terminology in his paper. In other words, she felt like it was the student's responsibility to figure this issue out. She might have been able to give him some indication of what he wanted to know here, yet she withheld some "insider" information from him, perhaps as an attempt to maintain her authority. In support of the tutor's decision, on the other hand, Duke did have a handout (not the prompt) that listed several literary elements and their definitions, including the words he asked Sarah to explain. She did use that as a reference with him after learning about its existence.

Later, in an interaction that felt awkward to me as an observer, Sarah (T) crossed out the word "resultantly" that Duke (S) had used in his paper, stating that she didn't think it was

a word. Immediately Duke, who was a very active and engaged participant throughout the session (in fact, Sarah called him an “ideal” client because of this during our interview), argued that it is a word. Sarah was hesitant for a few seconds but eventually gave in and moved on.

The point at which Sarah (T) seemed to be wrapping up their conversation sparked another lengthy discussion related to the student’s initial requests for help. Duke (S) told her that he also wanted to know what Sarah thought about his use of “adjectives” and “description,” even though he admitted feeling silly for asking because he could have used a thesaurus. When Sarah didn’t respond right away, he changed his question to wondering if he used good quotes to exemplify his argument and the tutor said, “Yes, definitely,” further explaining how they did so in her own words. He asked her several questions that called for her to check his analysis of the story, and Sarah explained that she hadn’t read the story, so the analysis had to be left up to him, and he just needed to make sure he explained his analysis fully in the paper. She talked briefly about how to do that exactly, looking at a specific example from his paper.

After this, they returned to his thesis and revised it according to the changes in organization and clarification of ideas as they related to the prompt (or, at least, how he explained the prompt) they had made during the session. Duke (S) expressed some confusion about how exactly to write down that revision as they had discussed, at which point Sarah (T) wrote it down for him. This caused him to express a lot of gratitude: “Thank you so much... That’s good... A lot better... I know what I’m doing now.”

### **Factors Complicating How Students' Requests Are Met**

Much of my analysis of the sessions discussed above focused on the possible reasons why tutors chose to meet students' feedback requests to the extent described. Simply stated, the findings indicate that Ed (T) was reluctant to be as directive in his tutoring style as Lily (S) wanted him to be, possibly because of his awareness of writing center mandates like those expressed in Jeff Brooks's article "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work"; Alex (T) questioned the success of her collaboration with Jorge (S), showing that collaboration can look different when culture is taken into consideration; and Sarah's (T) gender may have been a factor—one that caused her to feel a need to prove herself—in how she interacted with Duke (S). The rest of this section further details this analysis; it is organized by theme—though, in this instance, theme coincides with conference number.

#### *Issues with Directivity*

Lily's (S) comments from the first session show that she wants Ed (T) to help her with the insider information about SAE that she, as an ELL, does not have access to. Though Ed does meet Lily's feedback requests to some extent during their session, he is reluctant to do so at times, and Lily leaves with some feelings of dissatisfaction. Beth L. Hewitt claims that "teachers and tutors resist making [directive] comments on student writing, but this reluctance can create confusion and negatively affect student learning especially in online settings" (72). Furthermore, that "reluctance to be forthright in teaching students can be traced to three conceptual theories: (1) expressivism, (2) social construction, and (3) postprocess," all of which are major influences in past and present writing center work (Hewitt 72). This is only of many arguments for the inclusion of directive tutoring when it may be appropriate for students.

Another argument might be that a tutor should be honest and transparent when interacting with the student. Ed's hesitancy to call attention to the inherent hierarchy in a tutor/student relationship shows an attempt to disguise power systems at work. Scholars have argued, however, that the "peer" in peer tutoring is a contradiction because tutors tend to be hired for having more specialized knowledge and experience than the students who visit to work with them and gain insight into that knowledge and experience. Furthermore, thoughts like those expressed by Ed reflect the current doctrine of writing centers that demands tutors be nondirective, although that might not be best for all students at all times, according to scholars such as Hewett who argues that tutors "need to be eclectic: They need to use any and all effective strategies from any and all epistemologies" (79).

Lily's frustrations with the struggle to acquire an English discourse similar to those of NES is legitimate. To better help her, Ed might have done well to recall Severino's advice in the article "Avoiding Appropriation," which he read as part of his continued writing center training when I was working as an Instructional Assistant with him. She suggests that one of the main ways tutors can avoid appropriation, or the "[taking] away" of writing "from the student writer," is to really listen to what it is that students are asking and "address [their] expressed needs" (Severino 53, 56). In this case, Lily was asking for him to be directive in his responses, yet he remained hesitant. If Ed were worried about potentially appropriating her text, he shouldn't have been because Lily appeared willing to collaborate with him in her learning if he had attempted to share the information that she sought.

However, tutors in Ed's position should also question why students like Lily make certain requests. Is it possible she doesn't understand her own position within an institute that systematically oppresses her because of her language and cultural background? What might

have been the repercussions of an interaction in which Ed chose to put aside talk about Lily's paper momentarily to instead have an honest conversation about the consequences of language assimilation? A. Suresh Canagarajah in *A Geopolitics of Academic Writing* explains how Western ideologies, like the one in which SAE is privileged over other discourses and ways of knowing, are detrimental to our meaning-making process at large:

Academic writing holds a central place in the process of constructing, disseminating, and legitimizing knowledge; however, for discursive and material reasons, Third World scholars experience exclusion from academic publishing and communication; therefore the knowledge of Third World communities is marginalized or appropriated by the West, while the knowledge of Western communities is legitimated and reproduced; and as part of this process, academic writing/publishing plays a role in the material ideological hegemony of the West. (6)

As one piece of this big and complex puzzle, Lily's insistence on gaining access to academic SAE reifies oppressive practices, and her tutor Ed chooses not to take the time to question her participation in the institutionalized silencing of her home language and identity. Various costs and benefits exist for all of Ed's possible tutoring choices in this session, but the problem is primarily one of transparency; he should explain to Lily the decisions he makes and their consequences for her, especially if that would increase her ability to help him make those decisions collaboratively.

Furthermore, Ed and Lily's failed interaction in regard to the explanation of English grammar rules highlights how many NES people might feel about their language, (i.e. that others should just know it as well). Ed may not actually feel this implied annoyance with

Lily and her language acquisition, but his inability to talk about grammar in an inclusive way does portray a bias in that extreme language differences are not something he commonly experiences. The belief expressed above has led to major language shifts around the world. As Catherine Prendergast explains in *Buying into English: Language and Investment in the New Capitalist World*, “because English has become so central to participation in the global marketplace, people in newly capitalist countries have had little choice but to throw themselves into learning it” (8). We see via Lily’s struggles with acquisition, however, that learning a second language is not as easy as NES people would like to believe. Although Ed does meet Lily’s feedback requests to some extent, she hoped he would do so in a more directive style because of her concern with learning to sound more “American.” Ed neither acquiesced to changing his style nor complicated Lily’s desires by bringing up a discussion about the injustice present in a system that relegates languages other than SAE as deficient. He also did not provide her with explicit information that would have allowed her to make critical decisions about their tutoring session for herself or with him.

### *Culture and Collaboration*

In the second session, as described in the previous section, Alex (T) largely meets Jorge’s (S) feedback requests and attempts to structure the session in a way that allows for student participation—and peer/tutor collaboration. Jorge’s lack of verbal input, however, causes Alex to question the effectiveness of that collaboration. In the article “‘I ain’t writin’ nuttin’: Permissions to Fail and Demands to Succeed in Urban Classrooms,” Gloria J. Ladson-Billings describes a scene in which an African American first-grader refused to participate in a “sharing activity” because her shared sentences were never chosen by her group to try to write (109). Subsequently, the student was given “permission to fail” by her



teachers “because her cultural style, form of language, and attitude deemed her unworthy of teaching” (Ladson-Billings 110). I thought of the example of this student’s refusal to participate in a discourse building educational activity when reflecting on Jorge’s quiet and submissive demeanor during his conference because I see a connection; when ELL students are not respected in school by their teachers and peers, they shut themselves off and learn to value the majority voice over their own. Perhaps Alex could have asked herself at some point during the session how she might show Jorge that she valued *his* input, as well—not that she should expect to change years of indoctrination with one writing center session.

Alex’s uncertainty of Jorge’s learning during their session, despite his successful demonstrations, surfaced again during my interview with her. This shows the impact that collaboration has on tutors’ measures of success in their conferences. To provide satisfactory individualized instruction, tutors need to be aware of cultural differences that affect levels of perceived collaboration. In this case, Jorge’s culture—one in which showing respect for authority is enforced—caused him to “prefer to listen” (he explained in his interview) to Alex and her sharing of information rather than engage in active questioning and other forms of communication Alex might have been familiar with based on her experiences with clients who are representative of more traditional or “majority” types of students. Though learning occurred in response to the student’s feedback requests during their session, it seems that Alex’s unfamiliarity with cultural differences like Jorge’s affected her perception of his success.

### *Gender Roles*

From the third session, Sarah (T) met Duke’s (S) feedback requests, but also discussed several issues that he did not originally ask for help with. She explained to me that

she feels obligated to do this because she believes it's her job to share her expertise in writing and, so far, she has never been met with overt resistance from students. Such a position is interesting in comparison to Ed's reluctance to own the authority inherent in his role as a tutor. Perhaps Sarah, as a female, feels more of a need to prove herself to her clients, especially the males, which could explain why she points out so many issues (mostly local ones) to discuss.

An example of the possibility of Sarah's gender interfering in her session with Duke occurred when they disputed the legitimacy of the word "resultantly." I wondered if Sarah was attempting to "save face" here by backing down in their dispute. Was it more important for her to concede early rather than defend her position and be proven wrong by a dictionary? I believe this highlights the instability of her assumed authority as a tutor. As Geller et al. explain, however, "to keep a learning culture alive in a writing center, our tutors need to understand they need not 'have this all down'" (70). Tutors shouldn't be expected to know everything about writing; though, as a woman who has also felt threatened by male clients' distrust of the knowledge I have to offer, I understand why she might feel the need to project such a façade. When I talked to her about the instance later, I said that I might have told him that even if it is a word, it sounds strange because scholars in the discipline of English tend not to use it frequently. Perhaps it's a word seen more in fields that Duke is used to, like physics, biology, and math. Sarah agreed that, in retrospect, she might have done the same.

Also, as an observer, I was slightly surprised to see Sarah revise and rewrite Duke's thesis for him based on what they had discussed. Some scholars might say that Sarah went too far, in fact appropriated his work, by writing a new thesis for him. I'm more concerned with why, exactly, she felt compelled to do so. If I'm speculating correctly, it could be

because she wanted to prove to him that she deserved her position of authority, similar to the way in which an African American tutor in one of the examples from *The Everyday Writing Center* felt the need to defend her position as a qualified writing center tutor to a student who had brought in a paper with overt racism in its content (Geller et al. 88). I didn't ask her to confirm this during our interview, however, and am still curious whether she would agree. I cannot make the claim that gender is solely responsible for Sarah's tutoring style in general and in this specific session, but I don't think it is unreasonable to assume it plays a part in how Sarah chose to meet Duke's feedback requests.

### **Tutors Deviate from Students' Feedback Requests**

Following a pattern similar to the one in the previous section, this section responds to the research question, "Do tutors deviate from students' feedback requests?" Specific examples from the conferences that speak to this question are provided, in chronological order.

#### *Conference One*

Although all tutors spent a significant amount of time responding to students' feedback requests in the three conferences, they also all included deviations from those requests in their discussions. For example, in the first conference, Ed (T) took time to discuss Lily's introduction—a deviation from "grammar and syntax," which you'll remember as the topic of her initial feedback request. This deviation, however, was a result of Lily's own prompting once the session began (because she asked whether Ed thought the introduction was "strong enough") and the conversation remained centered on specific word choice. He also helped her with MLA citation—another deviation from grammar and syntax, but still a "local" issue. Furthermore, near the end of the session, Lily (S) gave a rationale for the way

in which she wrote her conclusion. Ed, however, suggested that she reorganize the paper so that what was then her conclusion became a third body paragraph instead. He seized the opportunity to deviate from her initial feedback request to explain that examples should go in the body of a paper and conclusions should wrap up what's been said with an "eye to the future" rather than introduce new information. By summarizing what she planned to do later about her conclusion, Lily seemed to be comfortable with this deviation, although she told me in our interview that she simply moved the quote she had in her conclusion to a body paragraph instead of doing exactly what Ed had suggested, which would have been a more extreme revision. Her active resistance, exercised when the session had ended, could indicate her strict adherence to issues of grammar and syntax over all others, even more "global" ones.

Later in their session, Lily explained a part of her argument to Ed when she said that people who use social networks like Facebook know how to protect their privacy, but not everyone wants to do so. I disagree with this statement; I think a lot of people, especially young people, don't know how to or why they should protect their private information on the internet. I wondered if Ed also disagreed with that claim or any other part of her argument. Unfortunately, I was unable to ask him about his thoughts on this instance during our interview because of time constraints. I think that a deviation from Lily's request would have been beneficial at this point because it could have shown her more about how argumentative writing works in terms of anticipating readers' response.

At another point in their discussion, Ed tried to figure out the organization and explanation of Lily's paper. She had to explain it to him verbally before he understood it. However, he just continued reading the next section rather than stopping to talk about

possibilities for revision that would make her writing as clear as her verbal communication. He did return to the unclear section, though, in the last few minutes of the session when Lily asked him about the overall clarity of the paper. It was at this point that I noticed the biggest departure, because it focused on the very global issue of explanation, from her initial feedback request. Ed told Lily that she should give more examples from the original argument that she was arguing against and generally explain more about the “why?” of both sides.

### *Conference Two*

As in Lily and Ed’s session, the tutor in the second session also found a few instances in which she wished to deviate from the student’s feedback requests of answering the prompt sufficiently, using commas correctly, and avoiding run-on sentences. First, Alex (T) asked Jorge (S) to clarify the meaning of a sentence after she had read it. Before he had a chance to respond, she figured it out, and he agreed that she had finally understood his meaning. She suggested that he revise that sentence for his other readers, and he offered a possibility for how he might do so. The tutor affirmed his proposal, but extended the idea to make it even more specific, and he wrote the revised sentence they worked on collaboratively. Jorge’s participation in this part of their discussion shows that he was not resistant to the deviation. Perhaps making revisions such as this was part of what he wanted to do, considering his original statement that he has “trouble making [his] essays make sense.” The same type of interaction, i.e. revising a sentence for clarity, happened two more times in the session, although the tutor talked more than the student at those times.

Another interesting issue that Alex discussed with Jorge were mistakes he made in using past tense verbs. He frequently left off the “-ed” of regular verbs (I counted seven

times), but Alex never stopped to explain this rule despite the fact that the pattern might have been an indication of “transfer phenomena from Spanish” that Jorge didn’t recognize or understand (Martínez 81). Furthermore, Alex decided to talk with Jorge about the difference between “which” and “who” because he had used the wrong one in his essay. She also pointed out a couple of typos, a name that was not capitalized, and a misspelled word. Talk about such writing issues shows a focus on surface correctness, which is less important than other global issues, especially in this paper, which Jorge explained at the very end of his session was only a first draft, and he had another writing center appointment scheduled for the next day.

### *Conference Three*

The last conference, which was between Sarah (T) and Duke (S), also shows several instances in which Sarah deviated from Duke’s feedback requests of checking that he responded correctly to the prompt and used appropriate vocabulary. Some of the writing issues she chose to discuss during the session were errors in pronoun reference and hyphenation, comma splices, the use of commas versus semicolons, commas after introductory clauses, clarity of meaning in sentences, explanation of the story and context of quotes, and organization of ideas. From this list, it’s clear that most of her deviations related to local issues, although more time in their conversation was dedicated to the global issues she raised. Duke never seemed resistant or combative regarding these deviations; in fact, he asked several clarifying questions, gave frequent verbal affirmations to indicate his understanding and agreement, and offered his own ideas for revision about much of what Sarah mentioned.

In his interview, however, he did indicate feeling some “bitter[ness]” about her comments on providing context because he felt like she wasn’t the right audience to give him such advice, not being a member of the class and not having completed the same readings. Duke said that after thinking about her comment he realized he hadn’t included any context, which he knew wasn’t good, and used that feedback to improve his writing in a different English class. Also during his interview, he claimed that he didn’t really understand her explanations about comma usage. During their session, however, he had not stopped Sarah to ask her more about commas, which might mean that he either wasn’t interested in learning comma rules or possibly that he was embarrassed, as a male, that she had more expertise on the topic.

### **Factors Complicating How Students’ Requests Are Not Met**

The methods of “problem-centered instruction” ensure that tutors choose to discuss some writing issues with students while ignoring others in order to adequately meet the “students’ most significant needs” (Hewett 27, 50). Hewett argues that tutors cannot and should not bring up every issue they notice because doing so would likely overwhelm and confuse the students when they begin to revise. However, in some of the findings detailed above, tutors are not following the advice of problem-centered instruction; instead, they sometimes discuss (too) many issues without providing enough explanation for them, or they choose to discuss issues with little significance for students at the expense of others. What are the possible factors that influence the decisions about which issues, other than those requested by students, tutors choose to foreground or background? Findings from the first two sessions indicate possible factors having to do with dissonance between writing center theory and students’ requests or issues surrounding language, culture, and ethnicity. The third

session continues to show that issues of gender and performance are at play. In the rest of this section, I discuss those potential explanations in further detail.

### *Theory Versus Students' Wishes*

From the first session, Ed (T) decided to mention some global issues such as incorporating more explanation and counterargument into Lily's (S) essay, but only near the end of their session when he no longer had enough time to discuss the suggestions in detail. I think these global issues should have been addressed first in the session, as they should take precedence during Lily's revision of the paper, but Ed may have been more concerned about the need to honor her requests for the structure of the session. Should tutors do so to the point that they ignore their own theoretical and pedagogical training and understanding? Or is it actually writing center theory and pedagogy—that recommend focusing on global before local issues—that are flawed, according to what students claim to want and need from their conferences? In this and the following example, theory seems to indicate that the tutors did not take their deviations from students' feedback requests far enough.

In the second session, although Alex (T) worked successfully with Jorge (S) on some local issues, like commas, I wondered whether she should have bothered discussing those local issues with him at all, considering he was only working on a rough draft and had another scheduled writing center appointment the next day. Though it seemed like Jorge was able to learn a lot about commas and some about run-on sentences, it might have been more productive to simply talk mostly about his ideas in this session. For example, his prompt asked him to discuss a stereotype that he used to have. What if Alex had entered into a discussion with him about his teacher's assumptions about and expectations for her students based on the prompt she's created, or his option to resist such a limiting prompt and instead



write about a time someone demonstrated a negative stereotype they had of him, etc.? In

*Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*, Nancy Grimm writes:

Postmodern thinking would move writing centers beyond helping students fit their experience into tidy genres and into dialogue with faculty about how the teaching of composition can be transformed so that students like Joe [or Jorge] can produce writing that he, his family, and his instructor would all value. (18)

I wonder if Jorge would have been open to such a discussion, and why or why not. Grimm thinks writing center conferences provide an excellent opportunity for such discussion and institutional change to begin to take place. It's interesting to imagine what writing centers would look like if tutors like Alex began to embrace such a possibility of change and encourage students to do the same.

#### *Language, Culture, and Ethnicity*

Returning to factors that arose in the first session, in "Negotiating Authority through One-to-One Collaboration in the Multicultural Writing Center," Susan Blalock talks about her experience working with a Chinese student over an extended period of time. She claims that, in order to get to the global issues in this student's writing, she had to establish her ethos by first addressing the local ones, which were the student's main priority. To her, writing center tutors should respect the students' cultural differences and help students with their writing according to what they are open to at a given moment. This would be relevant advice for Ed (T) to consider when working with Lily (S), except that their circumstance differs from Blalock's example in that they may only have one session together in which they can discuss this paper. Is it really helpful to give only global issues a passing consideration? In her interview, Lily confessed that she was not happy with the grade she received on the paper she

worked on with Ed, and she did attribute it to there not being enough of a focus on grammar and syntax during their session. It would be interesting to see her instructor's comments on the paper and whether Lily has correctly ascertained what the instructor meant. Does her instructor really reflect the ideology traditionally present in the Academy—one that values SAE in writing above all else? Or was Lily's paper lacking in other global measures, such as organization and explanation, which tend to be more difficult for less experienced writers such as Lily to interpret than are comments such "grammar and syntax"?

The tutor's deviations in the second session also dealt somewhat with language differences between native and non-native English speakers. When Alex (T) chose not to have a conversation with Jorge (S) about past verb tense despite the numerous tense-issue errors he made in his paper, I questioned her reason for this. At first, it seemed like she thought this issue was only a careless mistake on Jorge's part, yet it continued to appear. Was she worried she wouldn't know how to explain it, similar to how Ed felt about his explanation during the session with Lily? Did she think Jorge already knew the rule and had just forgotten to apply it a few times? Did she not have enough experience with ELL students like Jorge to know this is a common issue? Did she think the rule itself was faulty/discriminatory? I don't think the last question I've posed is valid because if it were answered affirmatively, I think Alex either wouldn't have brought up the mistake at all, or she would have explained the consequences of choosing to fix or not fix the verbs. This is something we were unable to discuss in our interview because I gave other questions precedence.

### *Gender and Its Performance*

In the third session, gender and how Sarah (T) and Duke (S) performed theirs continued to be factors influencing their talk about writing. One example of this was when Duke expressed some negativity about Sarah's writing advice during our interview, which contradicted how he had received that advice during their interactions. At this point, I wondered why his thought process, as he explained it retrospectively, didn't match what the tutor and I observed during the session. Did her disciplinary knowledge trump his confidence, as a male privileged in the Academy, to dispute? Or did the security from his own position cause him to feel like it was unnecessary for him to consider or confront Sarah's shared knowledge? And what was it that led him to change his mind and be receptive to that particular criticism?

Duke's rationale on this issue is still unclear to me, but I do know that Sarah's jumping from issue to issue reflects her belief that tutors should provide students with all the information they can (in terms of "correctness"). I can understand why she might have this perspective, especially considering that, as a female, her abilities might be questioned from time to time, but both theory and practice show that it might not always be the best method for reaching students. (Recall Hewett's theory of "problem-centered instruction" mentioned previously.) After reflection on all of this, I still argue that Sarah's motley discussion of writing issues in this session is one way in which she feels able to prove herself as a female inhabiting a position of power—at least in comparison to other non-tutor students. The deviations Sarah made, compared to Ed's and Alex's, are more numerous and varied and, according to my analysis, utilize what would be considered a traditionally masculine tutoring

style that reflects an attempt to establish herself as an authority figure for male students who might otherwise challenge her credibility.

### **Most Participants Feel Mostly Satisfied**

This section and the following one provide examples from data that respond to the research question, “Are participants satisfied with how feedback requests are (not) met?” In their interviews, all but one participant (from both tutors and students) appeared to be mostly satisfied with how students’ feedback requests were met during the conferences. From the second session, Jorge (S)—only slightly more verbose in his interview than he was in the conference I observed—told me that, in general, he thought his tutor Alex was “nice”; she went over everything “step-by-step”; and she made him feel “comfortable.” He was also able to comment on the writing center tutors collectively because he had visited again since the initial observation; he claimed that all of the tutors he had worked with were “helpful” and patient.

Jorge also told me that he thought Alex’s comments responded to his writing concerns, which showed in the grade he received on his paper because it had improved a letter from the last paper he had written. He also thought that her comments that didn’t directly discuss what he had designated were nonetheless helpful because they reminded him of what his instructor does when she reviews his papers. The only two comments he made that weren’t completely positive were that (1) he thought his tutor and he would have had more things to discuss, like structure and brainstorming more content (comments from his instructor’s feedback), if their session had been longer; and (2) he thought the writing center should offer more drop-in tutoring hours.

Alex, likewise felt mostly satisfied about how she responded to Jorge's requests. She told me that she felt as though she helped him with his grammar errors, especially commas, which she sees as the easiest issue to discuss because it's common and concrete. She did, however, say that it was slightly difficult to help him with the other request about whether his paper responded to the prompt. As stated earlier in this paper, Alex felt that the instructor's prompt was vague; she would have discussed this more in depth with him if they had had more time together, a comment which shows her partial dissatisfaction. Furthermore, Alex complained that she wasn't sure how much Jorge understood of what they discussed. In retrospect, she thought she should have used questions, such as "Would you like me to explain this again?" that would have called for him to be more engaged and demonstrative. She told me that she felt satisfied overall with what they were able to accomplish, although she might have done things a little differently if given a second opportunity because she realized that his biggest issue was "writing coherently" rather than "grammar." At the time, she reflected, she didn't feel conflicted about sticking to his requests; it just took more time to discuss run-on sentences than she thought it would.

Participants from the third conference also felt mostly satisfied, although they voiced a few concerns. First, Duke (S) said that he felt like Sarah (T) helped him with answering the prompt and using precise vocabulary, though things would have gone even better if he had brought the prompt with him. He thought her suggestion for his thesis was especially helpful. Duke complained that most of his dissatisfaction comes not from their writing center session but from the larger academic system that has allowed him to make it to his senior year of college without taking this supposedly "first-year" course earlier. He said that he wished he had taken it sooner to help him with his critical thinking and writing skills. Duke also said

that Sarah's comments that deviated from his requests were mostly helpful, like the one about incorporating the context of quotes and examples, except for her feedback on commas because he wouldn't be able to apply those rules to his other writing. He was further satisfied about leaving the appointment with a clear plan for how he was going to revise the paper. Some of his direct quotes were that he "felt good about it," he "[thinks he] got a lot out of it," and the session "really did help [his] paper."

Second, Sarah qualified her own satisfaction with their session by saying that she thought she met his needs as adequately as she felt comfortable. She said that she didn't think he understood all of the vocabulary that his course required him to understand and felt conflicted about explicitly sharing her knowledge with him. She also felt somewhat conflicted about the role Duke seemed to want her to play as his tutor. She confessed to feeling uncomfortable when he referred to himself repeatedly as a "bad writer." Further resisting prescribed feminine gender roles, Sarah explained that she doesn't think it is her job to be a "cheerleader" (i.e. praise students and boost their self esteem); instead, she wanted to interact with them as peers and encourage them appropriately. With this comment, Sarah shows her reluctance to be pigeonholed into a feminine, nurturing tutor role. Something that contributed to Sarah's sense of satisfaction with the session was the improvement she saw in Duke's understanding of what they had discussed. She would have liked to have had more time with him so that she could provide deeper explanations about some of the writing issues in question and give him more opportunity to talk through his ideas. (Duke did not feel constrained by time in their session, on the other hand.)

The first conference, between Lily (S) and Ed (T), differs in participants' levels of satisfaction, which is why I chose not to discuss it first in this section. Although Ed claimed

to feel mostly satisfied, the student Lily did not. As previously stated, Ed felt mostly satisfied with their session, with the exception of his own perceived inadequacies at explaining certain grammar rules that are naturalized to him but confusing to Lily. He also felt like being recorded might have hindered his tutoring abilities slightly because it made him nervous. (Ed and Lily's session was the first one I observed, and I video recorded it. When I saw how much of an impact the camera had on the participants, I decided to replace the camera with an audio recorder in the following sessions. It was much less obtrusive. Though participants were aware of the audio recorder, they told me that they didn't feel as though it disrupted their conferences in any significant way.) Ed further explained that he believes the typical format for conferencing that tutors are taught—look at global issues before local ones—is generally effective. He didn't explain how this comment related to his session with Lily, so I'm not sure if he's under the impression that that model is the one he followed. His comment seemed positive, so I would assume so.

### **One Participant Feels (Dis)Satisfied**

Lily, the student who worked with Ed (T), was the single participant from this set of observations who expressed more dissatisfaction than satisfaction with how her needs were met, though her interview statements were wildly contradictory—hence the “(Dis)Satisfaction” from the title of this section. The first claim that she made during her interview was that she didn't find Ed's comments very helpful for grammar and syntax, the writing issues she was concerned with. She believes that most tutors in the writing center, Ed included, only help students with organization and ideas. At this time, she had only worked with one tutor who did what she wanted which was to “fix” all the issues in her writing to help her get an “A” on the paper. That interaction, she said, made her happy because she

wanted her paper to get fixed, but she was not happy that she needed someone else's help to do so. She complained further that most tutors will tell her that her written grammar is understandable, if not "American"-sounding, but her instructors still tell her she has grammar and syntax mistakes.

A similar comment Lily made about Ed's not meeting her requests was that he "didn't really do anything," which was stated after she informed me that she was not pleased with the grade she received on the paper they had worked on. Her understanding contradicts my analysis of their conference because I noticed, as discussed earlier, that he did address issues of grammar and syntax, as well as other issues during their session. She said that the only changes she made to the paper after their session were word order in a couple of sentences, the moving of one sentence from the conclusion to a body paragraph, and a few "-ing" words.

Lily told me that her ideal writing center session would be one in which the tutor went through her paper, or at least one to two paragraphs of it, in great detail, sentence by sentence, and pointed out all of her grammatical and syntactical errors, showed her how to correct them, and explained why she needed to do so. From her perspective, tutors she's worked with have not tried to explain corrections to her. This also seems contradictory to me based on what I saw during her conference with Ed. I did observe him attempting to explain certain grammar rules to her, although I agree with him that those explanations weren't always very thorough or clear. Indeed, Lily demonstrated her confliction by stating that she usually feels satisfied at the end of a writing center conference because she's done all she can do, but when she receives the returned graded paper she's no longer satisfied because she thinks she should have done better as a result of her visit.



One of her comments during the interview that shows she was at least somewhat satisfied with her conference, however, was that she understood why Ed decided to talk about issues other than grammar and syntax, because he has expertise in writing and can identify some issues that she cannot. Furthermore, she told me that she would continue to bring her papers to the Writing Center in the future despite her stated dissatisfaction. She told me that she thinks the tutors are helpful, that “now, [the Writing Center] is perfect,” and that she “[loves] Writing Center”—statements that directly oppose some of the other complaints she voiced earlier in the interview.

### **Factors Complicating Participants’ Satisfaction**

What follows in this section is analysis, organized by theme, of the data from the previous two sections on participants’ satisfaction with their sessions. The analysis is meant to explain why tutors and students might feel satisfied (or not) with how feedback requests are met. Possible reasons, explained in detail below, relate to power struggles between tutors and students, the writing center and the Academy, and other hierarchical pairings in our society-at-large.

#### *“Help” as Hierarchical*

While reflecting on Jorge’s and Duke’s satisfaction regarding the helpfulness of their tutors, I thought of Nancy Grimm’s *Good Intentions*. She explains that tutors who wish to simply be “helpful” can be problematic because “helping...the Other to become more like us also makes teachers and tutors the heroes in the narrative of outreach” (Grimm 13). Instead, tutors should value the ways of knowing and meaning-making that “Others” have to offer in order to both enrich the communal knowledge of the mainstream and legitimize voices that have been largely silenced. Adopting such a perspective would alter the traditional hierarchy

that exists between tutors, even peer tutors, and students. If tutors no longer view themselves as sharers of knowledge, and students no longer visit a writing center to seek “help,” what might then be the possibilities for systemic change? At the same time, I wonder, would writing centers be able to maintain a clientele after such a drastic shift?

On a similar thread, should it be the goal of the writing center and its tutors to make students’ papers better, as Duke (S) stated was the result of his session with Sarah (T)? Writing center theorist Stephen North would, of course, say no—that tutors should focus on writers rather than writing in order to empower students to help themselves. On the other hand, it’s almost silly to assume that most students who visit the writing center don’t have immediacy concerns about their papers and the grades they’ll receive on them. If tutors deviate too far from student concerns—by either focusing more on the writer than his writing or by attempting to remove the hierarchy between students and tutors—it is likely they’ll begin to lose clientele, rendering writing centers obsolete because one-to-one tutoring has been the primary focus of writing centers throughout their history, despite the fact that they tend to do a large amount of other kinds of work, as well. This analysis highlights the fact that when students visit the writing center for help and tutors are complicit in offering help, hierarchies that devalue students continue to exist, yet without those hierarchies writing centers may no longer be seen as valuable within academic institutions.

#### *Academic Indoctrination*

Lily’s (S) stated feelings of inadequacy with American grammar show the extent to which instructors, if hers are representative, value the use of SAE for all students, despite the fact that research has shown such an ideology damages all students and especially students who didn’t grow up in a culture in which SAE is spoken and written. Although Valenzuela

discusses the problems with standardized testing in public education in the book *Leaving Children Behind*, her conversation relates to the institutional expectation that students write in SAE only. She states, “The very notion of a mainstream, standardized educational experience implies a systemic disregard of children’s personal, cultural, and community-based identities” (Valenzuela 4). In essence, such a stringent language requirement presents students such as Lily limited options: they can either choose to assimilate into an academic system that does not value their discourses and cultures, or they can fail. Writing centers and their tutors are situated in such a way as to help conflicted students make informed decisions about assimilation and resistance to it, breaking down the binary of indoctrination/failure that is meant to pressure them into either striving to reach an unattainable ideal or dropping out. Would Lily have been more satisfied with her session if Ed had tried to shed light on this complex issue?

Lily’s dissatisfaction with her session could be the result of two factors: (1) her interview was conducted nearly a month later than their conference, so she may have forgotten a lot of its details; and (2) the grade she received on the paper tainted her perspective on how helpful she believed Ed’s feedback to be. This isn’t to say that Lily doesn’t have any legitimate concerns—just that some of her other comments during the interview were contradictory to her belief that tutors such as Ed don’t attempt to explain grammar rules, which shows me that her memory might be less reliable than other participants’.

To go into more depth on the possibility that much of Lily’s dissatisfaction comes from the low grade she received on her paper, I speculate, because of the few revisions Lily admitted to making, that what caused her to receive a low grade might be

her misunderstanding of the tutor's feedback; I understood that he had suggested she make several more global revisions than what she actually decided to do. Maybe he didn't have time to explain those suggestions well enough since so much of the session focused on local issues, or perhaps Lily was simply unwilling to listen to feedback not having to do with what she perceived as her writing problems. Because she informed me that her instructor's comments indicated she still had a lot of grammar errors, it's possible that those are the only comments Lily is open to at this point. I could be speculating too much, of course; it could be true that "grammar" holds the most weight in grading for Lily's composition instructor. Her instructor could likely hold traditional academic values that place an emphasis on "correctness" over all else. A review of Lily's graded paper with its commentary would help to clarify this point.

Lily's contradictory statements of enthusiastic satisfaction with her experience in the Writing Center, on the other hand, cause me to wonder if she merely loves the idea of the Writing Center rather than its actual benefits to her, and if she's excluding herself from the possible students that the Writing Center is able to help. Earlier in the interview she said that tutors must find ELL students like her annoying because of the kinds of help they ask for. Does she think everything works well in the Writing Center as long as NNES students are removed from the equation? If so, how could she feel all right about that? Maybe it has something to do with her participation in an education system (at least in high school and college, since she was schooled elsewhere before that) that tries, and succeeds in many ways, to silence and exclude people who are not representative of the white, SAE speaking majority population. Her focus on grammar and sounding more American demonstrates a continued

desire to assimilate into this system that sees her failure to speak and write in “correct” SAE before anything else about her person.

### *Problematizing Satisfaction*

Something else I’d like to call into question at this point relates back to satisfaction as a thing to measure. What does it mean that most participants in these observations felt satisfied with how students’ feedback requests were met? Does that mean the sessions were successful? Should we define success in writing center sessions in relation to satisfaction? Is a tutor’s main goal to give her clients the information they seek? Is it to show the client how to figure things out on his own? Or is it to question power structures that have led to the creation of institutions such as the writing center in the first place? Could a session still be deemed successful if the client leaves without having her feedback requests explicitly met? However one chooses to answer such questions, I think it’s clear that much more could be said, space and time provided, on the “satisfaction” of students and tutors in the writing center.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

### Implications for Writing Center Work

Before conducting this thesis research, I simply wanted to know about whether students' feedback requests were what tended to guide the talk about writing during writing center conferences and whether students and tutors felt satisfied about how those requests were handled. I found that tutors tend to meet students' feedback requests, as well as deviate from them, and participants are generally satisfied about this, except when ELL students observe stagnation in their grades despite their work in the writing center. After analyzing the data, however, I realize that the issue is too complex to be fully answered with such yes/no responses. Factors such as students' languages and identities, values of the Academy, and the ambiguousness of the writing center's purpose have all complicated my findings, to the extent that I've ended with more questions than I had when I began the study. The final section in this chapter, as a contribution to future inquiry and research, lists some of those questions. Before that, I propose how the information I did gain from this project might influence both writing center theory and writing center tutor preparation.

#### *Writing Center Theory*

In much writing center scholarship, the motif of an existing friction between theory and practice surfaces. Critical theorists such as Nancy Grimm, for example, argue that "writing centers can do a better job of supporting students if we stop locating literacy problems in individuals and instead locate them in cultural constructions" (29). However, if the findings and analysis from the writing center sessions I observed are at all generalizable

to a larger writing center community, practice indicates that writing centers continue to “help” students assimilate into a frequently unjust academic and societal system. As proof, consider Lily’s requests for help in sounding more “American.” Consider Ed’s withholding of insider information, his attempt to ignore the tutor/student hierarchy. Consider that at least two tutors overlooked or ignored good opportunities to engage students in a critical discussion that would challenge an oppressive system. This shows a need for writing center theory to look further into this theory/practice conflict and better articulate the function and purpose of writing centers as they currently are and as they could be.

### *Writing Center Tutor Preparation*

On a related note, I am still of the worldview that social justice is a goal our society, and writing centers in particular, should strive for, despite the fact that my research demonstrates that all participants in the writing center community might not feel the same. Perhaps tutors might feel more inclined to begin engaging in explicit liberatory tutoring practices if their preparation offered direct instruction on why and how they should do so. The following are some examples of what such preparation might look like:

- Assigning writing center readings from critical perspectives, such as Nancy Grimm’s *Good Intentions* or other short articles that relay a similar message
- Locating opportunities for challenging oppressive powers in writing center transcripts
- Role-playing scenarios in which tutors might practice liberatory tutoring
- Observing other writing centers or other tutors that/who actively and commonly engage in critical tutoring practices

Another key component in encouraging tutors to work toward social justice is ensuring that they feel “safe” to challenge traditional practices in the writing center. If tutors feel that

they'll be interrogated or punished for challenging the dominant system in which the writing center functions, they won't feel convicted in their attempts at democracy.

None of these suggestions for tutor preparation are meant to criticize the particular writing center in which I conducted my research, especially considering some of the preparation practices I mentioned are already in place there; rather, they're directed toward the writing center community as a whole. As indicated in my analysis in Chapter Four, there are several factors that contribute to the stifling of tutoring for social justice, but recognizing them and taking measures to counteract their effects can help forward a practice aligned with Grimm's position that "we need to hold ourselves responsible for changing the cultural practices, the institutional conditions, the unconscious habits that contribute to structural oppression" (108).

#### *Questions for Continued Research*

Part of the way in which writing center theory and practice might be further developed is by continued research related to the issues previously discussed. I have no shortage of questions to which such research might respond. Geller et al. might suggest that my inundation with new questions that have resulted from this research is a good thing; "by calling into question the practices we feel certain of, we invite Trickster to help us reveal the value of meaningful discomfort and to teach a kind of mindfulness to human interaction," "the result [being] a shape-shifting writing center practice, one that is not easily pinned down" (22, 18). For them, it's important to maintain a curiosity about writing center work, not limit oneself to what's taught as rules in writing center training manuals, and look for possibilities to make positive changes in writing center practice, especially as they relate to social justice for all. The following questions are just a few that have resulted from my



research, and they act as potential areas for future inquiry and research that might function to promote social justice in writing center work.

1. Lily's expressed dissatisfaction of her session with Ed seemed to be primarily the result of the low grade she received on the paper they had discussed. To what extent are other students' perceptions of the writing center dependent on the grades their essays receive after they have worked with a tutor on them? What does that say about the far-reaching consequences of assigning grades to students' work?
2. Which should take precedence for writing center tutors: providing ELL students explicitly with the information they need to be more successful in SAE discourse or demonstrating to them that the traditional academic system that requires the mastery of SAE is inherently unjust? Do tutors' beliefs on this issue align with their practices?
3. Sarah (T) attempted to avoid being discriminated against as a female tutor who lacked authority because of her gender by adopting a tutoring style that could be described as traditionally masculine in nature. In what other ways does gender performance manifest in writing center practice? Are those performances effective, according to the tutors who enact them?
4. Part of the difficulty in Alex's interaction with Jorge was a result of his cultural differences and how they influenced the way in which he chose to participate in his learning. How does collaboration change across cultures, and how can tutors become more aware of those differences in order to have more culturally and collaboratively effective conferences?
5. If students' feedback requests regularly oppose what contemporary writing center theory dictates tutors should discuss with students (global issues, ways to challenge

- an unjust system), does that indicate that theory should evolve to better meet students' needs, that tutors should follow theory regardless and students will eventually fall in line, or something else entirely?
6. Ed and Alex both encountered opportunities in their conferences to discuss potential injustices faced by Lily and Jorge, yet they avoided actually doing so. Why do tutors continue to avoid acting on opportunities to call negative attention to injustices at play in the Academy? Is it that they simply don't recognize those opportunities when they occur, that they don't want to embarrass the students experiencing injustices by mentioning them, that they don't want to call attention to their own privilege because they don't face similar injustices, that they don't see value in such discussion, or some other reason?
  7. When tutors deviate from students' feedback requests in order to discuss an academic or other kind of injustice done to student writers, do levels of participant satisfaction decrease? I wonder whether students would actually find more value in a liberatory discussion or feel like it was a waste of their time. Having knowledge of the answer to such a question could influence tutors' decisions on whether to bring up issues of injustice with students.
  8. If a writing center were to engage strictly in an activist-style pedagogy, what affects would be seen in its position in the Academy and its clientele statistics? Would the institution that housed it become less supportive of its role in students' success? Would students themselves find less value in visiting the writing center for writing help? What do those findings indicate for the future of writing center work?

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