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Thesis Research Proposal

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To Meet Students’ Feedback Requests or Not: A Writing Center Tutor’s Prerogative (?)

Introduction

When conducting research on the Writing Center Journal last semester 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 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 my University’s writing center practices and to what extent those feedback requests actually influence the progression of student/tutor conferences. Last semester 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 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 should take precedence. Indeed, students often mean something other
than “grammar” when they say it because they use the term as a catchall for other writing issues. It is perceivably 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 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, 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 they see sharing their situated knowledge as tutors’ responsibility to students. I also don’t know how students and tutors perceive the discussion of 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 expertise?

My goals for this research project are to gain insight into these issues about which little has been said. Existing research related to my interests has discussed feedback requests quantitatively, students’ and tutors’ levels of overall satisfaction with their writing center conferences, and issues of tutor directiveness. My research would 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 could impact future tutor training as well as student and faculty perceptions of writing centers.
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. The 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 it, but they didn’t conduct any observations to see if the students’ feedback requests were the main focus of their conferences or even 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. My research, however, would look less intently at the structure of the online feedback request box and the differences between groups of students; instead, I would 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 method, for categorizing what students and tutors discuss during writing center conferences. He conducted a quantitative longitudinal study in order to discover how talk about writing changes based on differences in students’ grade levels and disciplines for the purpose of knowing his center’s clients and improving his administration. 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 some kind of editing concerns were addressed in more than half of the sessions from which data was collected. My research study would connect Ender’s 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 would also look 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. Isabelle Thompson, Alyson Whyte, David Shannon, Amanda Muse, Kristen Miller, Milla Chappell, and Abby Whigham conducted survey research in 2005-2006 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 will be more focused than this study (since it would deal with satisfaction in respect to tutors meeting students’ feedback requests), I do believe that issues of directiveness and student/tutor collaboration will influence my participants’
satisfaction, as well. For this reason, it’s important for me to further explore what’s been said about directiveness and collaboration in writing center theory and practice.

Collaboration and Reflection

One tutor, 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 he 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.

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, which view knowledge as “exterior” and “accessible,” and Garrett centers, which 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,” it “leads to higher achievement in general,” and it “promotes excellence” (94-5). Though true collaboration is difficult to achieve, especially among 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 described 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

[P]rimarily 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 which separates the two would be difficult for both tutors and students. If a tutor was to suggest that she and the student discuss a writing issue other than the one the student was initially concerned with, and the student seems resistant to that suggestion simply because he doesn’t understand it, should the tutor push further or let it go? If a student comes in and wants the tutor to look at “everything/anything” in her paper, is she providing enough guidance to legitimize the conference? These questions demonstrate example situations of what 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’ overdependency 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 to them, the possibility for collaboration is lost. Kristin Walker offers some 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 more of their thoughts can help them feel capable and make the sessions more collaborative. It can also bring to light the differences in what they value and what their tutors value in writing. I might generalize or make an assumption about a likely possibility for those value differences, based on current literature in the field, in the following way: that 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 empowering students and questioning the dominant culture.

Gail Okawa, Thomas Fox, and several of their writing center tutors also advocate the use of critical reflection in writing center practices. Though they discuss such reflection—reflection that “focuses on conscious explorations of language within a society stratified by race and cultural background”—in terms of training programs for tutors, incorporating similar practices for students in the writing center, like with the worksheet previously mentioned or in other ways, 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 that impacts their writing and what they value in writing; they should do so in order to achieve more 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 and Tom Truesdell, for example, both argue, in separate articles, 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 (Kopec 15). Truesdell offers support for this theory by discussing one of his sessions as an example. The student 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 which 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, at least for the one
who was a participant for her research, mostly occurs because of “competing expertise” and student
identity claims (141). Though I don’t expect to find many cases of student resistance in my research
study because my focus will be on sessions comprised of undergraduate (first-year) students and
graduate tutors, Waring’s example of conversation analysis and her ideas about student resistance may
still be helpful to me for locating instances of students’ resistance to tutors’ deviations from their
feedback requests. I will also look at how tutors handle issues of collaboration and directiveness when
students are resistant to their agendas.

Critical Theory as a Framework

To analyze the data I will collect regarding what students ask for help with in their writing center
appointments, whether tutors meet those requests and why or why not, the sessions’ participants’
levels of satisfaction with how students’ requests were met (or not met), and issues of collaboration and
directiveness in the sessions, I need to adopt a theoretical lens from which to view and interpret the
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 will be qualitative and therefore inductive, meaning that my theoretical lens and analysis will
be dependent on what develops during the study, the way in which I generally tend to think about
research and its potential is through all of those worldviews except for Postpositivism. 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 paired with quantitative studies, which goes against the nature of what I want to learn (7).

I do, however, presume that the foundational ideas of the other three worldviews Creswell discusses will influence my research and analysis. I believe in 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). I cannot foresee exactly how such a combination worldview will influence my research, but I see that it is already affecting the shape which the study will take. 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 better 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 envision that critical theory will guide my analysis of the data, similar to the way in which it guides Nancy Grimm’s research, though she labels it “postmodern theory,” in her book Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times. She 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” (Grimm 25). Her argument throughout the book is that writing center workers can contribute to more socially just literacy practices by thinking critically about our 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 I can imagine how it will also influence my research.

In my sample study, for example, when looking for themes that may surface again in future research, I felt inclined to view a certain occurrence from a critical perspective. The student was an NNES, struggling to gain access to “insider” information that would help her to sound more “American” in her academic writing. She claimed in her interview that she felt the tutor did not address her feedback request well. He, however, felt that he had addressed it, as well as a few other writing issues that he noticed. I wondered if it was possible that their very different interpretations of the same session could be a result of the tutor’s inability to empathize with aspects of the student’s identity that were, quite literally, foreign to him. Could their dissonance have resulted from the fact that he is incapable of fully understanding the challenges NNES students face when writing in a new language that is further complicated by strict academic standards? For, as Araiza, Cárdenas, Jr., and Garza suggest, “we cannot make assumptions about our students’ dominant languages and literate practices; rather, we have to discover their lived literacies and language use” (95). Could her native cultural demands, dictating that she behave politely and passively with “authority” figures, have made it difficult for the student to explicitly communicate to her tutor that he was not providing her with beneficial information? Critical theory would necessitate that I look at my data, like I did in this example, with the intent to question issues of cultural conflict in order to enact change for increased social justice in the writing center.

Research Questions

Based on my vested research interests and the gap in existing research, the questions that will guide my study are:
• 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 the above three questions indicate for writing center theory and practice?

To answer these questions, I plan to observe several (approximately five to ten) writing center conferences and attempt to locate themes and interpret the data inductively. Interviews with both tutor and student participants will then contribute to my interpretations.

**Research Design**

*Rationale for Qualitative Design*

A qualitative design will work best for my research project for the following reasons. First, I want to explore and understand why a particular social interaction—tutors responding to students’ feedback requests—happens the way it does in the writing center. More quantitative methods would not provide enough depth in the data to explain such complex behavior. Second, because I’m not testing a theory which already exists, my study would be considered inductive, “building from particulars to general themes” (Creswell 4). The nature of my open-ended research questions necessitates that I narrow the data only after having observed participants in their natural setting and identifying certain themes on which to focus. The complexity of the information I hope to find in this study is what will be valuable to the field and its current gap in the research.

*Access and Participants*

In order to conduct my research, I’ll need access, both online and face-to-face, to the writing center at my university. I don’t foresee any difficulties with this since I have worked there previously and maintain a good rapport with the writing center director. For the sample observation and interviews I’ve
already conducted, the director, as the gatekeeper, signed a consent form and seemed willing to help with anything I should need for the project as it progresses.

As mentioned in the introduction of this proposal, 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, it is unlikely, yet possible, that student participants and I will know each other from either having had writing center conferences together previously—as was the case with the student in my sample study, recognizing each other from our repeated presence in the writing center—or engaging in some other affiliation on campus or in town. 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 two first-year composition classes to teach, these issues of familiarities with tutors and students will be less problematic (particularly because I do not plan on observing any conferences which involve the students I teach). In addition, a majority of the tutors this semester are new hires.

Ethical Considerations

Once students and tutors have agreed to participate in the study, I will work to ensure reciprocity by being as honest as possible with them during the interviews and enacting (or at least suggesting that the writing center director enact) any potential changes that arise as a result of my research findings which might improve our writing center’s practices. In addition, according to Creswell’s
suggestions for researchers regarding ethical considerations, I will gain the agreement of the writing center director before conducting any research in that environment, only work with participants who have signed consent forms, code all data and research writing for the confidentiality of participants’ identities unless they do not wish to remain anonymous and understand the potential consequences of that decision, respect the research site, look for ways that my research can serve the purpose of benefiting participants and improving the “human situation,” interpret the data as accurately as possible, use appropriate and non-offensive language when disclosing my findings, and situate my position and research process along with the research findings in my final report (89-92).

Data Collection Procedures

As previously stated, I plan to conduct between five and ten observations of writing center conferences, depending on time constraints and the willingness of students and tutors to participate. Ideally, all of the sessions observed will be with students from English 1310 or 1320, our university’s first-year composition courses, and graduate level tutors. This is one of the most common structures for our writing center sessions and will contribute some consistency to the overall study. I will view the writing center’s online schedule at least one day in advance of the session I wish to observe and email 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 decline to participate, I will not contact them anymore; if they would like more information before deciding, I will send them a copy of the consent form with more details; if they agree, I will thank them and provide them with a consent form to sign when their session is scheduled to start; if they do not respond to my email, I may approach them again when they show up for their appointment the next day, though I don’t want to scare clients away from the writing center or coerce them into something they are uncomfortable with by being too forward in my attempts to find participants for the study.
During the actual observations, I will use an audio recorder so that I can transcribe sections of the conversations later. For my sample 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 think an audio recorder, would therefore be a more accurate way of recording the data. To make up for the loss of a visual record, I will also take field notes during the sessions. On each note-taking document will be a space to record the date, time, and place at the top, as well as two columns in which I will write 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 will supplement my initial observation notes.

Within two weeks, and hopefully less than one week, after each observation, I will schedule, again by means of email, short (twenty-five minute) interviews with each participant, also to be audio-recorded. For my sample interviews, about a month had elapsed after the session observation, and the student and tutor had difficulty at times recalling specific details about the session to support their thoughts on the questions I asked. For the future interviews I plan to conduct, I would rather the participants have their session more fresh in their memories since time constraints don’t allow for them to listen to the audio recording of their entire session before they answer the interview questions. Right now, I think the questions for each interview will be slightly different, aligning with the particularities of the session I want to know about and the interviewee’s perspective on that session. Also, questions will function as a guide rather than a script, and I will try to let the participants influence what we discuss as much as possible. The questions and conversation should, however, relate back to my initial research interests. Also, I will try to find a balance between being honest and transparent with the participants about my findings and why I want to know about certain things and not influencing their thoughts and responses too much. This may mean that what I come clean about gets saved for the end of the
interviews. I will take brief notes about what interests me most during each interview and transcribe significant sections of them afterward.

*Data Analysis Procedures*

To analyze the data I collect, I’ll first look for themes that surface within each session as the study progresses. I’ll then see how many of those themes are common between multiple sessions. The themes I’ll be looking for are ones that could provide insight into possible answers to my initial research questions. I will develop my own coding system according to the themes I see developing and use it to code all of the transcripts, which will bring a small amount of quantitative measure to my research. I will also be looking at the data through a critical theoretical lens, as mentioned in the Literature Review section above, though cannot be more specific about my data analysis procedures, since this is a qualitative study, until I have more data to guide my work. Hopefully, I will be able to condense the coded themes into a coherent thesis that answers my research questions at the end of the study.

*Organization of Thesis*

In my final thesis product in which I share my research and findings, I plan to include five chapters. The first will narrate my interest in the research questions I chose to answer, give an overview of the gap in the field that I’m addressing, and provide a brief summary of my findings. The second chapter will include a literature review and an explanation of my research framework. The third chapter will host detailed findings from the observations and interviews I will conduct. The fourth will posit a discussion of those findings, and the last will consider the significance and implications of the findings.

*Limitations*

Though the research study I plan to conduct 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 to be studied. I believe that I’ll have enough complex data to make some generalizations, though if I had enough time to include more participants, the findings would be more
Another similar limitation to my study is that all of the participants are students at one university, which will make 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 plan to research writing center sessions that follow one structure (ENG1310/1320 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 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 will know what my research focus is before their sessions (because of the transparency of the consent form they sign beforehand) could influence 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 I plan to study. 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 situated 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 expect, however, that my open-ended interview questions and collaboration with participants will help 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 on participants. I think such effects will be minimal, especially compared to the effects of video recording in my sample observation, though I cannot discount them completely. They may cause participants to be less genuine than they would be if they weren’t being 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.

**Conclusion**

Based solely on data collected in my sample observation and interviews for this research study, I found the following (incomplete) answers to the questions I plan to look into further.

- The sample writing center tutor did address the student’s request for help with her writing during their conference, but not to the student’s complete satisfaction, and he discussed other writing issues, as well.

- The main reason why the tutor, according to him, met her feedback requests was because he felt pressured by her desire to see improvement in her grades. The main reasons why he deviated from her requests in their session were because she, on occasion, asked him to on and he believes it’s his responsibility to share his expertise in writing with students even when they don’t know exactly what to ask.

- The student contradicted herself when talking about her perceptions of the conference by saying that she didn’t think the tutor met her feedback request at all, yet she felt satisfied at the end of their session—until she received a disappointing grade back from her professor on it. The tutor, on the other hand, felt mostly satisfied with the session and his ability to meet the student's feedback requests, though he did express concern that the video recorder distracted him from communicating as effectively as he would have wanted to. He claimed that he thought the student felt satisfied with their session,
as well. The contradictions in these answers could be explained by the amount of time that had elapsed between the interviews and the participants’ initial conference or by my inability to frame the questions in a concise and coherent manner.

• The findings of this sample study indicate that there are more factors at play in students’ satisfaction with their writing center sessions than simply whether tutors meet their feedback requests. However, it is an important factor, and students (if the sample is at all generalizable) do think it is important that tutors address their issues of concern, yet they also understand and appreciate that tutors often have other advice about writing to offer. Another implication of the sample research findings may be that writing center tutors need more explicit training in directive and non-directive tutoring styles to better meet the needs of their students.

While I don’t believe that this one sample study will be completely indicative of the other sessions and participants I plan to observe and interview, especially because the student was a non-native English speaker, I do think some of the themes which surfaced in the data will continue to appear. I also see, more now than before I conducted the sample study, that attempting to answer these research questions will prove valuable for writing center practice. Tutors should be reflective about the decisions they make in their talk about writing during conferences with students. Students, as well, should be reflective about the extent to which their knowledge is valued or considered by their tutors and why that is. All writing center community members should think critically about what it means for tutors to ask students what they want help with and what it means for tutors to respect or ignore those requests. Hopefully my research and the continued research of experts in the field will bring greater understanding to the nuances of students’ feedback requests for all parties involved in writing center practice.
Works Cited


