

# Theory Made Visible: How Tutoring May Effect Development of Student-Centered Teachers

Jane Cogie

Composition classes, particularly those at public universities, are increasingly multicultural and multigenerational. This fact is attested to not only by the experience of many of us and our graduate teaching assistants but also by statistics in a recent *New York Times* article showing that between 1984 and 1994 the number of students classified as "minority" or "foreign" rose 27.8% and the number of undergraduates 22 and older rose 49.8% (Menand 48). This growth in diversity highlights how essential it is to train teaching assistants to be responsive to the individual students in their classes. Without an awareness of the diversity of students and a willingness to test alternative strategies for teaching them, new teachers or those teachers retooling for student-centered classrooms are more likely to yield to what can easily seem the safer course: following the well-established conventions of the hierarchical classroom, an environment more suited to teaching the rules of writing than writing. As Salina Shrofel's research into teacher training confirmed, top-down teaching is extraordinarily resistant to change. For the first-time teachers in her study, Shrofel found the resistance derived from exposure to teacher-centered classrooms and fear of losing control of students perceived as ill-prepared for student-centered classrooms (163). "Much teaching behavior really stems from an unwarranted fear of things falling apart," as Peter Elbow observes (71-2). Another reason top-down teaching persists is the lack of opportunity for novice teachers to observe in action the varied writing processes of their students. Teaching composition solely in a large-group setting can mask the complex, individual nature of the writing process (Harris 14-15) and thus the need to find alternatives to the traditional teacher-centered approach.

A central issue, then, in training composition teachers is how to understand student needs and how to practice student-centered theories. With an eye to the potential role of the writing center in teacher training, I will discuss the results of my qualitative study of the effects of writing center tutoring on the classroom teaching of ten teaching assistants. All ten had taken or were currently taking a course on the theory and practice of teaching first-year composition. After summarizing the results, I will focus on two case studies. The first, Jenny, was an experienced teaching assistant working toward a PhD in rhetoric and composition and returning to the classroom after tutoring in the writing center; the second, Frank, was an MA student in literature, teaching for the first time after tutoring in the center. Before turning to the results of the study, however, I will review some facts related to the current training of composition teachers. While the main focus of my study is the training of TAs in a university writing

program, I include in this review as well the training of secondary composition teachers because these teachers face similar barriers while making the transition to classroom teaching.

Student-centered approaches have become part of many training programs for both secondary and college composition teachers. Yet to what extent have these programs allowed novice teachers to gain not only the theory but also the first-hand knowledge and experience they need to be motivated and prepared to risk these approaches in the classroom? A 1992 survey by Peter Smagorinsky and Melissa Whiting on secondary education methods classes provides a useful perspective on both the student-centered goals of such classes and the difficulty of realizing them. In studying 100 syllabi from methods classes at 81 universities, the researchers found that while 27 of the syllabi reflected the traditional survey approach, 23 reflected the more student-centered workshop approach, based on modeling of collaborative and process-oriented strategies (10, 14). Yet the authors of the study make clear that although this latter format may, in theory, seem effective for training student-centered teachers, it fails to prepare them for the "harsh reality of students who don't do the activities or assignments that appear so worthwhile in a lesson or unit plan" (14-15).

The danger of the workshop or modeling approach cited by Smagorinsky and Whiting is confirmed by Shrofel's teacher research in her own methods class. Shrofel initially tried to promote student-centered teaching by her methods class students through presentations emphasizing the advantages of student-centered pedagogies. This attempt failed in part, she feels, because in the field her preservice teachers were "paired with teachers . . . using a traditional teacher-centered methodology, or . . . not teaching writing at all" (161). Yet her attempt to compensate for such limitations through modeling student-centered techniques in her own classroom likewise failed. Once teaching themselves, her preservice teachers followed none of the student-centered strategies she had modeled. The student teachers blamed their failure to carry out the modeled strategies on the disconnection between "what they were learning at the university and what they were observing in the classroom" and on "difficult" and "lower ability" students they felt were ill-equipped for the responsibility of student-centered work (162-63). Faced with the traditional approach of the cooperating teacher and the real complexities of the composition classroom, these student-teachers gave way to the less threatening teacher-centered approach. Neither lectures on student-centered theory nor participation in a student-centered model helped them overcome these impediments.

## Issues in Training GTAs

While more varied in amount and kind than the training for high school composition teachers, training for graduate teaching assistants is more widespread and substantial than it was in the recent past. According to Paul Connolly and Teresa Vilardi's 1986 study of college writing programs, TAs "are more thoroughly trained and supervised than in the past, through courses, staff meetings, and classroom observation" (3). Indeed, Catherine Latterall's study, "Training the Workforce: An Overview of GTA Education Curricula" published

in the Spring 1996 WPA, backs up this positive assessment of GA training programs, at least among the 36 universities studied, all of which offer an English doctoral degree with a specialization in rhetoric and composition. Latterall observes that "Given the recent growth in rhetoric and composition graduate programs and the vitality of many teachers and scholars in this field, we can generally claim that GTA education programs are doing more and are doing a better job" (7). Yet Latterall emphasizes that while all of the programs studied provided significant training somewhere along the spectrum from apprenticeships and practica to teaching methods courses and theory seminars, a full three-fourths of the programs prepared new teachers of writing through a practicum, a course usually taught by the director of the writing program (18). Latterall praises the guidance such practica offer new composition teachers as they get started. She questions, however, the lack of theory to help ground the guidance and the "skills-based," "contentless," "WPA-centric" format: "The prevalence of this type of course may suggest that the rhetoric and composition field teaches teachers within a pedagogical model that relies on translation-based approaches to theory and writing instruction and on one-way modes of communication: GTA educator to GTAs, GTAs to first-year students" (19).

What seems to be lacking, then, in the training of many graduate assistants is an effective interface between theory and practice. Few would dispute that TAs lacking such an interface, will, when first teaching, tend to mirror the teacher-centered models they likely experienced as students. Certainly, the TAs at institutions requiring a theory seminar are likely to gain an intellectual framework for student-centered teaching, and those in practica are likely to build up helpful ideas for assignment sequences and in-class activities. Yet when faced with twenty-plus composition students, these TAs, though further along in their education than Shrofel's preservice high school teachers, are likely to find similar difficulties in translating this knowledge into the classroom. Indeed, not surprisingly, many articles on training teaching assistants cite the insecurity of beginning TAs and their propensity to deal with that insecurity through asserting teacher authority (Allen & Rueter, Irmischer, McBroom, Rankin, Reagan). In her study of five new teachers in a university writing program, Elizabeth Rankin comments that:

it often takes time for young TAs to adapt to their new roles and establish comfortable relationships with students. For most, the crucial issue is authority—or more precisely, their sense of their own authority. . . . They don't yet feel the authority they've been given, so they try to act it out in ways that feel false even to them. In the process, what they lose is the chance to relate easily with students, the chance to use their youth and shared culture to advantage in their teaching. (5)

In light of the continuing need to help teachers straddle the gulf between student-centered theory and its practice, one-to-one teaching in a writing center becomes a natural candidate for a more central role in the training of teaching assistants. Indeed, it was writing center tutors at my institution testifying to the value of tutoring to their growth as teachers that initiated my interest in studying this issue. A further impetus came from a study by Robert Child on the effects of

---

tutoring on first-time and experienced classroom teachers. Others—including Bruffee, Magnusson, Clark, Rottenberg, Gadbow, Broder, and Zelanek—have published observations and informal studies on the training value of writing center work for composition teachers. And indeed Shrofel, in the third stage of her teacher research, investigates the effects of tutoring on the teaching of the preservice teachers in yet another methods class (165-75).

Child's article, however, was the first on TA training to ground discussion of this issue in a formal study. The study involved observing the classroom teaching of two subjects and twice interviewing each of these subjects concerning the positive and negative effects of tutoring on their teaching. The first TA was returning to the classroom after tutoring. Concentrating his studies in British literature, he saw teaching composition as an inevitable but peripheral part of his career; he had no interest in the theoretical issues of teaching composition. The other was teaching in the classroom for the first-time after tutoring in the writing center as part of a practicum. He saw teaching composition as central to his career (173-74). To test the validity of the results, Child interviewed four more TAs—two experienced in the classroom and two inexperienced. Concerning the benefits of tutoring for classroom teaching strategies, the results of Child's study were unequivocal. All six teachers reported that writing center work had positively effected the following aspects of their teaching: "establishing agendas, dissuading authority, presenting materials, questioning, modeling, and testing performance" (172). Yet one striking difference between the results for the two groups was that the experienced and inexperienced teachers had, after tutoring, sharply divergent attitudes toward classroom teaching. The three experienced teachers, returning to the classroom, felt liberated from the role of authoritarian teacher. But the three inexperienced tutor-teachers felt anxious and frustrated by the restrictions imposed by grading and large-group work despite successfully using student-centered techniques of the writing center—such as modeling and flexible agendas—in their teaching (180-81).

## Aims, Procedures, and General Results of the Study

If tutoring before teaching did indeed cause frustration and anxiety in first-time teachers, not only would educators not press to make writing center tutoring part of their training, they would advise against it. One aim of my study, then, was to follow up Child's work to discover whether my five first-time teachers felt a similar frustration and anxiety upon entering the classroom after tutoring. Another aim was to look at the effects of tutoring experience for TAs returning to their classrooms, already immersed in student-centered pedagogy before their writing center work. For both groups, not represented among Child's experienced teachers, I thought it interesting to see if prior theoretical immersion makes the practical experience of writing center work less valuable. In the case of both groups, the findings might help suggest the timing and amount of one-to-one experience advisable in the training of teachers.

In following up Child's study, I used essentially the same method, though increasing the number of TAs studied. I interviewed ten subjects, asking each to respond to an open-ended prompt on the positive and negative effects of

tutoring on teaching; then, I observed and took notes on one class taught by each tutor-teacher; and finally, I interviewed each of them a second time, asking specific questions raised by the observed class and the first interview. The effects cited by my tutor-teachers fell into two major categories: effects on the tutor-teacher's perceptions of themselves as teachers, their students, and the writing process; and effects on actual teaching strategies. The five experienced classroom teachers included four PhD students, with three of the four specializing in rhetoric and composition and the remaining one specializing in literature; the fifth experienced teacher was an MA student in rhetoric and composition. All of the first-time tutor-teachers were MA students, with three of the five concentrating in rhetoric and composition and the remaining two in literature and creative writing. During the study, the latter five were taking a seminar on teaching composition, required of all first-time teaching assistants and aimed at providing them with both a theoretical foundation and practical support. Thus, like the PhD students in rhetoric and composition, the first-time teachers faced the challenge of integrating theory and practice.

My findings on the effects of tutoring on the classroom teaching of my subjects were as unequivocally positive as Child's. All felt that tutoring, with the behind-the-scenes insights into students and the workings of the composition classroom it provides, shed light on the individual nature of the writing process, the needs of their students, and the importance of listening and responding to each student with care. They also felt that as a consequence of these deepened perspectives and the chance to practice a range of one-to-one activities, they were more motivated and prepared to experiment with a variety of strategies and types of assignments in their classrooms. My findings, however, on the effects of shifting to classroom teaching specifically for the first-time teachers in my study differed sharply from Child's. Unlike Child's first-time teachers, those in my study did not express frustration or anxiety at the differences posed by graded, large-group work. While one of my subjects in this category felt less at home in the classroom than in the Center, she stated that tutoring helped prepare her for the transition by making her aware that her class was not one undifferentiated mass but rather a group of distinct individuals with distinct needs and concerns.

As to the group of four experienced teachers specializing in rhetoric and composition, all of them felt that writing center tutoring was a valuable addition to their training. In various ways each of them said that it allowed them to understand the practical implications of student-centered theory and made them significantly more committed to practicing it in the classroom. Before turning to the case study of Jenny, I would like to quote a comment by Todd, another of the four experienced classroom teachers specializing in rhetoric and composition. It is worth quoting at length since it helps make clear an important link between writing center work and student-centered teaching:

After one-to-one work in the Center, you start seeing students in the classroom with attitudes toward traditional classroom learning that your writing center students have given you the chance to understand. That has led me to actively pursue a more fully interactive approach to teaching. I know three years ago, before tutoring, I'd say, 'I'm an interac-

tive teacher and I don't like lectures.' And then I'd walk into my 102 class and forty minutes later I'd say, 'Are there any questions?' . . . That's not happening now.

## Jenny

Jenny also saw herself as an interactive classroom teacher before her stint in the Writing Center. Under the influence of Peter Elbow, Mina Shaughnessy, and Paulo Freire, she began her writing center work with a student-centered teaching philosophy already in place, viewing students as "individuals," the teacher as "guide" rather than "manipulator," and the writing process as "individualized." Yet in her two interviews, she emphasized that her writing center work helped ground her theory-enlightened views in individual examples and thus enhanced her teaching in a way that theory alone could not. For instance, she stated that her personal interactions with her writing center students allowed her to see first-hand not only how sociolinguistic baggage can block student writing but also why teachers need to address this baggage in their teaching. Before her writing center experience, she had "divorced herself" from what then seemed to her purely personal issues. After tutoring, however, she began to leave time at the outset of class for her students to "purge" personal concerns about writing projects before expecting them to settle down to work. Another instance of writing center tutoring grounding theory for her was in the perspective it gave her into the writing processes of individual students: "When you're reading composition theory, you tend to get stuck in a kind of process rut. . . there are the different stages that theory has established that we follow. Being in the Writing Center has reinforced the idea that the writing process is a very individualized activity. And as a result, I'm constantly rethinking the theoretical aspects of composition and teaching."

Thus, after her writing center work and the behind-the-scenes insights it gave her into students and their needs, Jenny found herself far more open to "[letting] go of the teacher authority and [letting] the needs of students control the flow of the class." In addition to giving students time to deal with their concerns in class, after her own experience with peer work in the Center, she felt more adept at "orchestrating" such work in class and experimenting with variations of peer interaction. For instance, having gained insight in the Center into the often underrated abilities of inexperienced writers and the damage often done to their writing from lack of confidence, on editing days she asked students who had mastered one aspect of editing to serve as consultants on that aspect for their peers. This practice, Jenny felt, reinforced learning for both peer and peer consultant—just as writing center tutoring had reinforced her own learning as a teacher. It also helped to break down the traditional teacher-student lines of authority. And, finally, seeing the struggle of her writing center tutees with inflexible or vague writing assignments, she made a point of devising paper topics that balanced flexibility and guidance.

In the class session I observed (a special admissions section of English 101), Jenny used several of the writing center techniques she had discussed in her first interview, modeling and peer response, as well as a related technique she

---

had not mentioned: open labeling of her varied roles in the classroom. During the class, she played a variety of roles and labeled those roles for her students as she went. She became a "modeler" of strategies, a "reader" of essays, "peer respondent," "grader," and "writer" of her own essays. For example, she modeled for her students the high, middle and low style the students were to investigate in their current research paper on language (which could take the shape of either a traditional research paper or a dialogue with research integrated into it). Her flexibility in modeling the three styles was matched not only by the flexibility of her assignment but also during peer discussions of student drafts, by her easygoing movement from group to group, modeling peer response and asking open-ended questions as needed, and then providing her students the context in which to practice the modeled techniques. In her class, then, the emphasis she expressed in her interview on "letting go" of teacher authority translated into a highly adept, self-reflexive interaction with her students in response to their needs. In her second interview, she attributed her ability to vary her role in the classroom to the variety of roles she was able to practice in the Writing Center. She deliberately labeled her roles for her students not only to help break down views of the classroom structure as static but also to encourage in her students the flexibility and playfulness they needed to assume the various perspectives involved in writing. For students who see themselves in the role of "poor writer," as so many special admissions students do, such flexibility and playfulness is no small matter. If Jenny's use of labeling is "teacher-talk" (Heath 1), it is teacher-talk of a highly self-reflexive kind.

## Frank

Like Jenny, Frank, one of the five TAs teaching in the classroom for the first-time after tutoring, felt that his writing center experience gave him insight into his students, into what he referred to as "the different baggage" each of them brought to the classroom, and into the need in many of them to be encouraged as writers. In turn, these insights, he felt, helped give him the determination to find ways to interact meaningfully with his students. During a discussion in the seminar for new TAs, he realized that such a commitment to student-centered teaching set him apart from a number of other first-time teachers in the class, who perceived breaking down the classroom hierarchy as risky:

One of my peers told me that if the instructor came across as just another student struggling with writing, the class would be inclined to slip into apathy, but I have yet to find this problem. . . . In fact, after I brought a draft of my own to class and participated in peer groups with my students, they have been more responsive to exercises we do in class.

This is not to say that achieving a balance between relating to students and setting the expectations necessary to a productive classroom is easy, particularly for first-time TAs. It is rather to say that writing center work—providing, as it does, knowledge of student needs and low-risk practice with student-centered teaching strategies—can build a confidence and commitment to student-centered work that can help TAs find that balance sooner and with greater sureness.

---

Writing center tutoring affected not only Frank's perspectives on his students and himself as teacher but also his teaching strategies. In the class I visited, he began by modeling on the board how to use mapping to brainstorm. He then divided the students into groups and had them brainstorm maps of the topic for their next paper. Once all their maps had been copied on the board, Frank and the students discussed how each map might be used to focus an essay. It was evident in both his interview and in his classroom demeanor that he thoroughly enjoyed the dynamics he had initiated in the large group setting. It is also clear that he had found effective ways to move students beyond what Douglas Barnes refers to as "presentational talk"—the talk typical of students concerned with the "right answer" and the teacher's evaluation—to the far rarer "exploratory talk" in which students have the chance to make information and ideas their own (50).

## Conclusion

Certainly, not all the flexibility and commitment to interactive teaching evidenced by both Jenny and Frank—and by the other eight TAs in the study—can be attributed to their stint in the Writing Center. Each of the ten subjects, however, made clear that their insights into student-centered theory and their comfort level with new roles and new classroom strategies stemmed in large part from their experience with one-to-one teaching in the Writing Center.

Yet can one make a case for expanding the role of writing center tutoring in the training of classroom composition teachers on the basis of this study—or even on the basis of this study combined with Child's and with the numerous articles testifying to its value? The answer is both "no" and "yes." No, because one should not presume to apply the results of a qualitative study beyond the study's specific context. And yes, because, if not scientifically, then intuitively one must assent that few activities provide as firm a ground for the transition of teachers to the classroom. In the writing center, free of the "fear of things falling apart" imposed by the large group setting and the power of the grade, tutors can explore translating student-centered theory into practice. They can discover first-hand the causes for an individual student's writing problems, try out strategies for overcoming those problems, and gain insight into how specific approaches in a student's class succeed or fail for that particular student. Such experience can give teachers the confidence and insider knowledge they need to center their classrooms on students as individuals learning to write.

## Works Cited

- Allen, R. R., and Theodore Rueter. *Teaching Assistant Strategies: An Introduction to College Teaching*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1990.
- Barnes, Douglas. "Oral Language and Learning." *Perspectives on Talk and Learning*. Ed. Susan Hynds and Donald L. Rubin. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1990. 41-54.
- Broder, Peggy F. "Writing Centers and Teacher Training." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 13.3 (1990): 37-45.

- 
- Bruffee, Kenneth. "The Brooklyn Plan: Attaining Intellectual Growth Through Peer- Group Tutoring." *Liberal Education* 64 (1978). 447-69.
- Child, Robert. "Tutor-Teachers: An Examination of How Writing Center And Classroom Environments Inform Each Other." *The Writing Center: New Directions*. Ed. Ray Wallace and Jeanne Simpson. New York: Garland, 1991.
- Clark, Irene Lurkis. "Preparing Future Composition Teachers in the Writing Center." *College Composition and Communication* 39 (1988): 347-50.
- Connolly, Paul, and Teresa Vilardi. *New Methods in College Writing Programs*. New York: MLA, 1986.
- Elbow, Peter. *Embracing Contraries*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986.
- Gadbow, Kate. "Teachers as Writing Center Tutors: Release from the Red Pen." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 14.4 (1989): 13-15.
- Harris, Muriel. *Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1986.
- Heath, Shirley Brice. *Teacher Talk: Language in the Classroom*. Language in Education: Theory and Practice 9. Washington, D. C. : Center for Applied Linguistics, 1978.
- Irmscher, William F. "T.A. Training: A Period of Discovery." *Training the New Teacher of College Composition*. Ed. Charles W. Bridges. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1986.
- Lattarell, Catherine G. "Training the Workforce: An Overview of GTA Education Curricula." *WPA:Writing Program Administration* 19.3 (1996): 7-23.
- Magnuson, Robin. "Preventing Writing Wrecks: The Role of the Writing Lab in Teacher Preparation." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 10.8 (1986): 11-14.
- McBroom, Geraldine L. "A New Crop of Teaching Assistants and How They Grew." *WPA:Writing Program Administration* 15.3 (1992): 62-68.
- Menand, Louis. "Everybody Else's College Education." *New York Times Magazine*. 20 April, 1997. 48-49.
- Rankin, Elizabeth. *Seeing Yourself as a Teacher: Conversations with Five New Teachers in a University Writing Program*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1994.
- Reagan, Sally Barr. "Teaching TAs to Teach: Show, Don't Tell." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 11.3 (1988): 41-51.
- Rottenberg, Annette T. "Learning to Teach by Tutoring." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 12.10 (1988): 11-12.
- Shrofel, Salina. "Developing Writing Teachers." *English Education* 23.3 (1991): 160-77.
- Smagorinsky, Peter and Melissa E. Whiting. *How English Teachers Get Taught: Methods of Teaching the Methods Class*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1995.
- Zelanek, Bonnie. "Ideas in Practice: Preparing Composition Teachers in the Writing Center." *Journal of Developmental Education* 17.1 (1993): 28-35.