Review

Illuminating Bodies: Bringing Tutor-Researchers to the Forefront

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Fitzgerald, Lauren, and Melissa Ianetta. *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors: Practice and Research*. Oxford UP, 2016. 597 pages.

To join a writing center is to be inducted into a particular set of traditions. Writing centers may be found in sunlit learning commons, or they may be cloistered within the library. Writing centers can be geared towards multilingual students or writing across the curriculum initiatives or first-year composition students or career services. Writing centers may be widely embraced, or they may be a grassroots project. They contain multitudes.

What all writing centers have in common, however, is quite simple: they employ folks who use inquiry in order to help others improve their communication skills. In my time working with, training, and mentoring tutors, I've found writing center pedagogy can often be broken down into five frequent questions: What are we working on today? Do you have any specific concerns? What does your instructor say? How much time do you have before your deadline? Would you mind reading your work aloud?

There's much more to tutoring than those questions, of course. If, for example, tutors begin working concurrently with their practicum, their training will likely be concerned with strategies for the everyday. Ryan and Zimmerelli's *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* exemplifies this, as each chapter details exercises a tutor can employ to help writers improve their process. This mode of training is eminently practical, though somewhat oriented towards problem-solving, rather than knowledge-building.

Another way that tutors might be trained, however, is grounded in historical records and theoretical lenses. For these tutor seminars, texts such as Murphy and Sherwood's *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors*

might be more appropriate. While these articles are certainly important, the knowledge they provide doesn't always translate easily to a 30-minute tutoring session.

To that end, Fitzgerald and Ianetta bring us *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors*, a text unique from most tutor guides, as it firmly ties the practice of tutoring with methods of research, highlighting tutor-researchers as essential contributors to the field of Writing Studies. This creation of knowledge is located not only in the interaction of student with tutor but also in the interaction of tutors with the scholarship of Writing Studies. Fitzgerald and Ianetta include the voices of tutor-researchers in references throughout the text, as well as part of the anthology of articles. *The Oxford Guide* continually reminds its readers that tutors aren't just coaches or guides for the students they work with but are also participants and contributors to the scholarly work of all writing centers.

While the chapters of *The Oxford Guide* don't have to be read sequentially, tutor-trainers leading a practicum or a more theory-oriented seminar will find the inherent scaffolding to be generative. The structure of each chapter includes catalysts for discussion, writing prompts that instructors can use, and research assignments that could be implemented through the course a semester.

So What Are We Working On Today?

Chapter one begins by introducing readers to writing as a scholarly pursuit. Being a good writer, after all, isn't necessarily equivalent to being a good writing tutor. Having an understanding of composition theory, then, gives tutors and their students the vocabulary necessary to talk about the writing process in a generative way (Downs and Wardle), as well as what standards they're aspiring to uphold. Before tutors can get to good writing, they need to know what they think that means.

In order to dispel common writing myths, Fitzgerald and Ianetta have constructed *The Oxford Guide* as, ultimately, a description of writing research. The authors opt to define research broadly, including lore, archival studies, theoretical work, empirical research, and rhetorical scholarship. Encouraging methodological pluralism (9), they create a space where any tutor can become participant in the field, regardless of their current level of training. By being identified as researchers up front, tutors are prompted to frame all their work according to three questions: "Is my research valid? Is my research reliable? Is my research ethical?" (10).

Moving from disciplinary space and into physical space, chapter two focuses more on the locality and materiality of a writing center. How does

a writing center remain cohesive across its platforms? Is a writing center a site, or is it a method? Are we beholden to our pencils and round tables? Must we have "cozy" spaces in order to be perceived as spaces (Grutsch McKinney 30)? Can we, as Kjesrud pondered, do away with walls and go to where the students are? Or, as the tutors of Marian University do, can we have pop-up writing centers, our locations determined by the weather and available chairs (Latta et al.)? While the physical spaces might not always be what we envision, the pedagogy of writing centers remains fairly consistent.

Just as writing centers can inhabit many kinds of material places, so too can writing tutors function in a variety of disciplinary spaces. By working with students from different backgrounds, tutors rely more upon interpersonal and dialogic communication. Because the tutor-student relationship lies outside of the instructor's sphere, the shared inquiry becomes focus of the session, rather than a grade for the document (though, like many other tutor handbooks, the authors perhaps understate students' concerns about their grades).

Chapter two also includes a historical overview of writing instruction and how that history frames the way our perceptions of writing. Fitzgerald and Ianetta highlight the need for theory in writing centers, for "unless we know why we're doing what we're doing and where we expect to get by doing it—unless we theorize it—we won't be able to assess whether we are making the best choices" (28). What then follows is a bracing and concise walk-through of composition as a scholarly field. The authors neatly categorize different schools of thought as centripetal theories—theories focusing on communities and what writers might have in common—and centrifugal theories—theories emphasizing the individual writers and how they differ (29).

Do You Have Any Specific Concerns?

The second section of the text looks more specifically at the specific tasks of a writing tutor. Chapter three details the habits of mind a tutor should acquire in order to work effectively. This foundational advice encourages tutors to be specific and flexible in sessions, allowing the student's concerns to guide the session.

Chapter four continues the pedagogical thread, turning attention to the process of authoring a piece. While most students are familiar with the traditionally accepted stages of planning, drafting, revising, and editing, they may not have considered the fluidity of these stages. The act of writing and working with a tutor illuminates the ways writing helps students sort and articulate their thoughts, and a tutor's feedback can help them recognize

how their personal writing process functions. The dialogue and questions that take place during a tutoring session will help students assume control of their own process.

Calling back to the contrast between centripetal and centrifugal ideas of writing, however, tutors must also pay attention to shifting perceptions of authorship and originality. *The Oxford Guide* offers explicit ways to discuss plagiarism and attribution without sounding accusatory but also notes the common concern that a tutor might be providing too much help. Invoking Stephen North's maxim of helping writers improve rather than improving a piece of writing, *The Oxford Guide* concedes that nondirective pedagogy is important but failing to be direct on some points can be harmful. Tutors must strike a balance to provide just enough help as students enter into their own scholarly conversations.

Turning from academic identity to personal identity, chapter five provides strategies for fostering discussion when the two intersect. Given our understanding of students' identities, what strategies can we employ in order to help them achieve their academic goals? The authors caution, of course, that "such categorization never tells even part of the story about a person" (110), but it behooves tutors to understand issues of identity that students might experience and perceive.

Because identity is constructed through a variety of factors, Fitzgerald and Ianetta highlight ways that physical, cultural, and behavioral expectations might differ from the tutor's own. As many universities are experiencing rapid growth of international student enrollment, including many multilingual students, *The Oxford Guide* devotes extra attention to how linguistic and cultural diversity might factor into a tutoring session, as well as cautions tutors to be aware of unconscious bias they might have developed. If tutors don't take students' intersecting identities—including race, ethnicity, sex, gender identity, nationality, language, age, ability, class, and more—into account, the negotiation of session goals and priorities can become especially fraught.

What Does Your Instructor Say?

Chapter six tackles disciplines and writing genres, particularly looking at writing across the curriculum and writing in the discipline. While in some cases, such as with writing fellows programs, tutors may have specific knowledge of particular genres, tutors often work with students coming from very different disciplinary backgrounds. In order to be effective in those cases, *The Oxford Guide* encourages tutors to take a genre-based approach to their work. Through rhetorical analysis, the tutors can help stu-

dents articulate what they believe is expected for their field. Further, when tutors take the role of novice, they encourage students to articulate threshold concepts—ideas that the students might assume everybody knows and, thus, have left ambiguous.

Chapter seven similarly suggests tutors use rhetorical analysis as a tool. Under the banner of technology, the authors tackle two aspects of media: tutoring students on new media and tutoring through digital platforms. "Sometimes, our jobs as tutors include helping writers negotiate this technology" (167), and sometimes, it means learning how to effectively use technology ourselves. Invoking Bitzer's work on rhetorical situations, the authors highlight how writing centers are, in fact, multiliteracy centers (177), wherein tutors and students sharpen their understanding of how audiences are influenced by media and vice versa.

In the realm of online tutoring, the authors encourage that tutors use the same rhetorical strategies, in which the act of tutoring is framed by the same language. In synchronous tutoring, tutors need to take into account how the medium may constrain or impede communication. In asynchronous tutoring, tutors need to be cognizant of how their suggestions might play—multiple notes on copyediting, for example, are easy to change but might lead the student to ignore more substantive suggestions. In both methods, however, tutors have to possess a clear sense of the mindsets their electronic environments encourage.

How Much Time Do You Have Before Your Deadline?

The third section of *The Oxford Guide* returns to the research tutors might do. In chapter eight, Fitzgerald and Ianetta articulate how to effectively design a study. By articulating methods as lore, theory, historical, and empirical research, they provide tutor-researchers a number of ways to ethically participate in scholarly work, typically with a writing center director's guidance.

Chapter nine emphasizes that the goal for tutor-researchers "is the activity of theorizing, not the mastery of all theory" (211). Because tutor-researchers might come from any field, rather than just Writing Studies, their own understanding of disciplinary epistemologies will enrich the work that we do in our writing centers. Conversely, while "all tutoring work is theory work" (213), the authors walk tutor-researchers through learning the rhetorical moves that are made in writing center theory.

As writing centers are rich in lore, the history of writing center practice is essential to understand, thus chapter ten focuses on historical research. But first, Fitzgerald and Ianetta ask tutors to recognize writing center his-

tories—both oral and written—as ideological work that appeals to community values (224). Tutors are asked to recognize the intentionality of the stories we tell and how they reveal the ecology of the institutions that house our writing centers.

Chapter eleven responds directly to recent calls for more data-driven and longitudinal research (Babcock and Thonus; Driscoll and Perdue). The authors provide a brief but thorough description of empirical research, both qualitative and quantitative. By framing the chapter with a conversation between three comically competitive tutors, they demonstrate how even the unofficial title of best tutor might be assessed differently according to how the supporting data is collected and interpreted. Fitzgerald and Ianetta also spend time discussing how effective different methods of data collection can be conducted effectively in the time tutor-researchers might have.

Would You Mind Reading Your Work Aloud?

The fourth and final section of *The Oxford Guide* is an anthology of readings. Compared to similar anthologies, Fitzgerald and Ianetta's selections are largely contemporary. While texts like *The Longman Guide* present a historical narrative of writing center development—starting in 1950 with Robert H. Moore's "The Writing Clinic and the Writing Laboratory—*The Oxford Guide* presents fairly recent articles, written by both established scholars and aspiring tutor-researchers. Aside from Kenneth A. Bruffee's 1984 article, "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind'," the earliest article reprinted is from 2004. Tutor-researchers, then, can begin to see how research conducted by their peers connects and supports more theoretical work.

The Oxford Guide is a unique contribution to the field of writing center studies, both through its consistent positioning of tutors as scholars and its thorough examination of writing center research methods. By encouraging tutors to position themselves, first and foremost, as tutor-researchers, Fitzgerald and Ianetta foster a scholarly community in which all participants are invested, and all contributions are vital.

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