

# Transfer of learning in the development of peer tutor competence

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## Abstract

Many universities run Writing Centers to provide support for students wishing to improve their academic literacy. These centers are ideal venues for peer tutoring, which may benefit both student-tutors (through tutoring skills development), and those tutored (through opportunities to discuss writing with a supportive peer). In the context of a university in the GCC region, peer tutors, prior to working, must complete required Communication courses. The syllabuses reflect student-centered and collaborative post-process writing approaches, where scaffolding is emphasized over direction, and word-by-word instructor correction of student writing is de-emphasized. Peer tutors also undergo preparation aimed at equipping them with an understanding of the rationale for these approaches and the skills needed to adapt them to tutoring. Given these experiences, the researchers set out to determine whether tutors are able to articulate such understandings and apply them to tutoring. Interconnected interpretative methods were deployed, including tutoring observation, consultation-conversation analysis and semi-structured interviews with tutors. Results indicate that tutors have significant recent experience of non-directive writing classes and may be aware of the rationale and benefits of such approaches. However, in their tutoring, content appears to be transferred from their most recent experiences but their style relies on instruction predominated by telling, explaining, demonstrating and directing, reflecting formative experience at school. The relationship between tutors' experience, preparation, articulation and practice is explored, and recommendations are made to enhance Writing Center practices, in line with the concept of a constructively-aligned instruction system where all components address the same agenda and support each other.

## Introduction

A review of university websites in the GCC countries suggests that, as in other parts of the world, many universities now provide their students at all stages of their studies with access to a wide range of resources and services under the umbrella of a Center for Writing, Communication, Independent Learning or Academic Skills. While these centers are often aimed in particular at supporting students for whom English is an additional language, they may also serve others who wish to develop their academic literacy skills, including not only students, but also to faculty and staff. In all cases, such centers aim to provide support in the development of academic literacy skills, a term broadly interpreted to include such aspects as evaluating sources, reading, annotating, note-taking, outlining, report writing (including language development and editing) and referencing.

These centers' resources are often available online, and services may include tutoring offered by faculty and/or by trained students – 'peer tutors'. To become a peer tutor, normally students must meet various criteria, such as having a minimum GPA of 3.5. The decision to provide peer tutoring is clearly influenced by established models functioning elsewhere; however, centers in the GCC region frequently operate in an environment with a number of unique features. In particular, they may function within a gender-separated educational community designed to accommodate local cultural expectations and

conditions. It is also the case that nearly all within the student body in state institutions in this region have in common Arabic as a first language, and while some may be considered bilingual in Arabic and English, many enter higher education with a level of English language proficiency that varies (typically around TOEFL 500 to 550, or above), with different disciplines setting entry requirements that take account of the linguistic demands of specific programs of study.

These students, fluent in Arabic, often less so in English, are required to study in a context in which English is the medium of instruction, as in several countries in the region this is a national requirement for all higher education that is not concerned with areas such as Islamic Studies, Arabic language or related subjects. In recognition of the possible communication-related difficulties that these students may experience, most higher education institutions include, as part of their core curriculum, courses variously entitled 'Communication', 'Academic Writing', 'English for Specific Purposes (ESP)', 'English for Academic Purposes (EAP)', 'Academic Communication Skills', or similar. Student peer tutors supporting these courses will often be from a similar background, although of a higher academic standing. Given such distinct contextual features, the researchers sought to investigate the extent to which peer tutors transfer the approaches they have recently experienced as students to the tutoring context.

## **Background**

The Petroleum Institute in the United Arab Emirates is a university specialized in the provision of baccalaureate degrees in engineering related to the oil and gas industry. All students are required to have achieved a minimum TOEFL score of 500 before entry. Students initially follow a one-year program consisting of common subjects, such as Communication, intended to provide them with a broad educational foundation before specializing. Female students, enrolled in the institution's gender-separated 'Women in Science and Engineering Program', represent approximately 35% of the total undergraduate population. These students form the focus of this study.

Communication course design reflects the belief that students can most effectively develop academic communication skills through the acquisition and articulation of knowledge; in particular, writing and presenting are understood to be not only ways to communicate knowledge but ways to understand and learn it. To this end, a student-initiated, enquiry-based, collaborative approach is employed, in which students complete research projects, having been guided to identify suitable research questions that can be answered by gathering data from within their immediate contexts. Students engage in all stages of the research cycle including reviewing literature, writing surveys, interviewing participants and analyzing data. Throughout, a team-based post-process approach to both writing and speaking is adopted, which, in the case of written skills development, requires at various stages: discussion, reading and responding to reading, annotating, note-taking, documenting sources, planning, outlining, organizing ideas and writing about content extracted from primary and secondary sources using paraphrasing and quoting as applicable, redrafting writing to account for detailed instructor and peer feedback, integrating individual writings into single integrated team documents, editing and proofreading.

The instructional context supporting the approaches above is primarily student-centered and collaborative, characterized more by facilitation, guidance and negotiation achieved through dialogue than by the instruction or direction that might be expected in a freshman composition class. Students are guided to acquire the habit of editing and proofreading their own writing, and word-by-word instructor correction of their writing is rare.

Students in this context are supported in the development of academic literacy skills not only by such classes but also by the provision of Writing Centers on both the female and male sides of the campus. Tutoring is provided primarily by students trained as peer tutors, who may tutor others in the same or different years as themselves. Peer tutoring was employed in the belief that all participants may benefit from the process: for peer tutors, benefits arise from developing tutoring competence as well as from the act of tutoring itself, and for students, there are potential benefits in learning proactively and collaboratively with supportive, informed and experienced peers free from instructor presence (Clark, 1985; Topping, 1996).

Peer tutors undergo approximately 10 hours of training prior to tutoring, which aims to equip them with an understanding of the rationale for the university's approaches to academic literacy skills development as well as the skills needed to adapt these approaches to the tutoring context. Training also includes the development of tutoring skills such as eliciting, active listening and mentoring, through which tutors learn how to:

engage in a dialogue with student clients, helping them understand the concepts and develop the skills they need to explore assignments, discover and formulate their own ideas, and generate original documents in their own words. Mentors do not give their student clients a voice; they help them find their own. (Cain Project in Engineering and Professional Communication, 2008).

Given therefore that these peer tutors have not only had direct experience of learning via the student-initiated, enquiry-based and collaborative approach described above, but have also undertaken significant preparation in tutoring skills reflecting this approach, the researchers set out to determine the extent to which tutors adopt such an approach in their own tutoring.

## Review of literature

### ***Communication vs language courses***

Significant research into second language teaching methodology (in particular that relating to university contexts) and adult learning supports the approach to teaching communication courses described above. Firstly, university communication course methodology may differ from general English language teaching methodology as a result of distinct starting points. While the starting point in the general English classroom is usually language, in the communication classroom it is normally the immediate and/or anticipated communication needs of students (Dudley-Evans, 2001; Hamp-Lyons, 2001) enabling a pedagogic focus defined in terms of the communicative competence required to function within students' target academic discourse community (in this case, undergraduate study of science/engineering). 'Communicative competence' in this context therefore transcends language skills to include the need for students to apply and develop skills through and for involvement in relevant and authentic academic contexts, engaging in a process that should lead to social and academic integration (Beder, 1997; Cooper et al, 2006) that is sufficient for survival within the target academic culture. All students in higher education have such needs, regardless of their proficiency in the language of instruction. Integration may be achieved in part by the development of appropriate behaviors, attitudes and strategies including enhancing awareness of learning processes through skills of reflection and metacognition. Writing about ESL students in particular, Cooper et al (2006) also emphasize the need for development and practice of the required skills through involvement in the academic community, noting that it may be helpful to view EAP students as participants in a "community of practice" (Wenger, 1998), given that learning is a social activity taking place within such a community. Hence, in ESL university contexts, the term 'language' may be distinguished from 'communication' as follows: while the latter encompasses the former, 'communication' goes beyond 'language' to include the use of language in

academic and professional contexts, and is therefore not usefully or feasibly separated from the skills development required in areas such as teamwork, peer-review and self-reliance.

### **Adult learning**

The authors of an overview of research into adult learning from behaviourist, cognitive and developmental perspectives (Tusting & Barton, 2006) concluded that it is not possible to assume that adult learners have common goals or ways of reaching their goals, and consequently it would not be appropriate to assume that adult learning could or should be controlled by an instructor following a curriculum. Instead, they argue that

learning is present in a dialectical interaction between individual, situational and social factors. The learner's contexts, purposes, and practices are the most important factors in the process.

In their summary, the authors draw a number of inferences about the potential of most adults engaged in learning; typically they:

1. have their own motivations for learning, and build on existing knowledge.
2. have a drive towards self-direction.
3. have the ability to learn about their own learning processes and can benefit from discussion and reflection on this.
4. learn by engaging in practice and participating.
5. build and reflect upon their experience.
6. experience a great deal of learning that is incidental and idiosyncratic, and learn through reflective learning that is unique to each person.
7. are able to reorganize experience and 'see' situations in new ways. Thus adult learning is potentially transformative, personally and socially.

(Tusting & Barton, 2006, p. 36, adapted)

Such understandings are reflected in the Petroleum Institute's communication courses, where the development of academic and professional competence is seen not as a matter of replicating technical expertise but more as the development of artistry (Schön, 1987), in which reflection, dialogue, discussion and debate underpin collaborative enquiry, and in which learning is central and contextualized. This reflects a social constructivist view of learning, in which the role of culture and context is emphasized (Derry, 1999) as is the need for learners to interact with practitioners (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Social constructivist learning approaches can include reciprocal teaching and peer collaboration, of which peer tutoring may be considered an example.

### **Peer tutoring**

Peer assisted learning may be explained in cognitive or developmental terms, but its key features of social interaction and reciprocity in teaching and learning mean that it is most fully accounted for by a social constructivist approach, in which

supported (or 'scaffolded') exploration through social and cognitive interaction with a more experienced peer in relation to a task of a level of difficulty within the tutee's 'zone of proximal development' [is] a theoretical cornerstone. (Topping, 1996, p. 324).

Research suggests that peer tutors can help students both socially and academically. Peer tutors can support students in making the transition from high school to higher education (Reddy & Hill, 2007);

they can facilitate students' integration and retention (Hixenbaugh, Dewart, Drees, & Williams, 2006); and several studies have suggested that peer tutors can affect student learning positively (Helman & Horswill, 2002; Rae & Baillie, 2005; Topping, 1996). For peer tutors, their efforts can lead to a sense of personal satisfaction and an enhanced social network (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997). Tutors gain experience of working with people, which helps to improve confidence and communication skills and they have opportunities to revise content and develop their CVs (Reddy & Hill, 2007). Specifically, peer tutoring gives tutors practice in a range of metacognitive skills such as

planning, monitoring and evaluating, and the associated use of declarative, procedural and contextual knowledge; and the cognitive processes of perceiving, differentiating, selecting, storing, inferring, applying, combining, justifying and responding. (Topping, 1996, p. 324)

There can be significant value for tutors simply in learning to tutor:

... by increasing attention to and motivation for the task, and necessitating review of existing knowledge and skills. Consequently, existing knowledge is transformed by re-organisation, involving new associations and a new integration. The act of tutoring itself involves further cognitive challenge, particularly with respect to simplification, clarification and exemplification. (Topping, 1996, p. 324)

It is also the case that both parties in the process are able to become involved in and take some responsibility for an area usually reserved for instructors. This is a shift towards a culture in which learning is less a question of transmission of knowledge and more a matter of transformation through the personal construction of knowledge. Peer tutoring, by virtue of the fact that peers rather than instructors are involved, presents ideal opportunities for the development of non-hierarchical and informal relationships that encourage confiding and exchange, and in which both parties are equally engaged, in contrast to an instructor-student relationship which may be characterized by some imbalance owing to the power or authority that is invested in instructors. Peer tutors are close in age to those they tutor; in the case of this research setting they are the same gender and may be following identical fields of study or those with some overlap; and they have recent experience of the work required and of the problems and difficulties that can arise. They are therefore ideally placed to provide focused support. In this context, the quality of social interaction and reciprocity between tutor and student is paramount.

### ***Writing center pedagogy***

What does the research say about peer tutor training methodology used in Writing Centers to assist tutors in developing these interpersonal and metacognitive skills? Even in the early days of peer tutoring, with more traditional approaches to training curricula through workshops, seminars and lectures which typically included teaching strategies, grammar/surface-level correction techniques, and college policies (Carino, 1995; Harris, 1992; Mohr, 1991), we see Writing Centers including instruction on tutor self-awareness, adult learner needs and interpersonal communication skills (Houston, 1993; North, 1984). Some programs incorporated tutor training into required college courses with titles such as *Development of tutor effectiveness* and *tutorial principles* (Houston, 1993).

More recently, those running Writing Centers look for new ways to help tutors develop the kind of skills necessary to become competent and effective, both in content knowledge and understanding the complexities of interpersonal interactions. A number of studies recommend using former and/or experienced senior tutors as mentors and training facilitators (Boquet, 2002; Devet, 2014; Gillespie & Lerner, 2000; Hughes, Gillespie, & Kail, 2010; Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2010). Benefits beyond simply sharing practical advice and experience include establishing bonds, discovering common tutor characteristics, and stimulating reflection:

As a result, the graduated tutors and the current ones formed a team of shared concerns, interests, and goals. (Devet, 2014, p.13)

Particular emphasis in many Writing Center training programs is on reflective practice. Reflection-on-practice (Schön, 1983) in tutor training offers the tutor insight into preconceptions (Pedro, 2005), knowledge development in social constructivist approaches (Smyth, 1993), and developing awareness for ongoing growth and development (Sparks-Langer, 1992):

Reflection should not to be restricted to examining only technical skills; it should equally be concerned with the ethical, social, and political context within which teaching occurs. (Smyth, 1993, p.51).

This can transform training beyond only consulting student- and technique-focused service to something that also values the tutor experience and professional development (DeFeo & Caparas, 2014; Langor, 2000; Welsch, 2008).

DeFeo & Caparas believe that an emphasis on tutor professional development, highlighting the value and benefits of learning to tutors, can help motivate and encourage the tutor while acting as a method to increase support for consulting students:

Emphasizing the role and benefits of tutoring beyond its service aspects [...] with an emphasis on academic engagement and skill-building has the increased likelihood that Writing Centers will attract tutors who regard their work as a valuable personal and professional development experience, rather than just a paycheck or program requisite. (DeFeo & Caparas, 2014, p.159)

They suggest that this focus can be incorporated into a training program through “creating a professional development curriculum” that increases awareness and “contextualizes the personal and professional skills that they are developing as they tutor” (DeFeo & Caparas, 2014, p159).

All of the above aspects of peer tutoring suggest that it can play a valuable role in any instructional setting predicated on a social constructivist perspective. As a search of the literature suggests a lack of research addressing transfer of learning from social constructivist experience to practice in the context of peer tutoring, particularly in a gender-separated setting and in the Gulf region, we here address the following question: How well does tutor learning experience transfer to peer tutoring in the context of a Writing Center for female students in the UAE?

## Research design

In accord with a socially-situated perspective on peer tutoring, the research paradigm reflected a relativist ontology (assuming that realities are multiple and constructed), an interpretative epistemology (in which the researchers and the researched interact and influence one another) and a naturalistic methodology, in which a range of interconnected interpretative methods were deployed, including 1) consultation-conversation analysis, 2) participant observation and 3) interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). All data were gathered according to an ethical framework of seven criteria (Patton, 1990) including informed participant consent, guaranteed anonymity in dissemination and access to data limited to the researchers.

In keeping with the enquiry aims, the researchers focused primarily on consultation-conversations, as:

Talk is everything. If the Writing Center is ever to prove its worth in other than quantitative terms – number of students seen, for example, or hours of tutorials provided – it will have to do so by describing its talk: what characterizes it, what effects it has, how it can be enhanced. (North, 1984)

Four female peer tutors' data are presented here. All had achieved grade A in Communication courses; two were junior students, while two were senior students at the time of data gathering. All were aged

from 19-21. Two were Emirati, one Palestinian and one Jordanian; and all stated that Arabic was their first language.

### ***Phase 1: consultation-conversation analysis***

Two volunteer peer tutors were invited to record their tutoring conversations, having first obtained written permission to do this from the consulting students. In keeping with the conservative culture of the enquiry setting, relatively few students were willing to have their conversations recorded, and so the tutors continued to request permission until they had achieved the planned minimum of five recorded conversations each, from different students, in the course of one semester. One tutor made an extra recording, adding up to eleven recorded conversations. These were transcribed and organized into a table to facilitate analysis, with two columns for each participant: one for her utterances, and the other to enable analytic commentary. The completed table allowed for the identification in the tutorials of relative participant volubility (James & Drakich, 1993), measured by total words spoken by each participant and ratio of tutor to student words. It also led to a participant profile of questions asked, of *turns* (taken in interaction) and of conversational *moves* made by participants within these turns (Goffman, 1976). For example, the turn taken by a tutor in which she says: “That’s right. Can you find another example?” may be analyzed into two moves: 1. “That’s right”, which gives her reaction to the student; and 2. “Can you find another example?”, by which she prompts the student to provide a further example.

### ***Phase 2: participant observation***

Observation of consultation-conversations was employed in order to increase the number included in the dataset, and to provide data from a different perspective to contribute to triangulation. Although both recording and observing can be intrusive (the researchers did not interact with the participants during the observations in an attempt to limit intrusion), we expected that at least some students would be more comfortable being observed than taking part in a recorded conversation or vice-versa. With two volunteer tutors (different from those who had contributed to Phase 1) willing to be observed while tutoring, the researcher made verbatim transcriptions of dialogue segments, adding observation notes throughout eleven conversations (ten were planned but the researcher had taken the opportunity to complete an additional one). These were subsequently word processed and given to each tutor with the request that she respond by adding comment, reaction or explanation wherever she wished in the data. Each observation was also summarized in terms of peer tutor and student characteristics, including time spent talking, number of positive comments made and wait time allowed.

### ***Phase 3: semi-structured interviews***

The 22 consultation-conferences in Phases 1 and 2 yielded a total of 322.5 recorded minutes, giving an average consultation length of 14.66 minutes across both phases. Analysis of these data prompted the researchers to conduct semi-structured interviews with two tutors in search of the past experiences that informed their tutoring approaches; this involved one tutor who had contributed to Phase 1, and another who had participated in Phase 2. Both interviews included, but were not restricted to, the following questions:

1. How would you characterize the teaching you experienced as a high school student?
2. How does the high school experience you’ve just described compare with the teaching you experience at the Petroleum Institute? What differences can you identify? (Prompts: lectures,

seminars, Studio Physics, team project-based learning in Communication, other courses and Writing Center training).

3. How has your tutoring style been influenced by your experience of high school teaching? Of teaching at the Petroleum Institute? Of the preparation you received prior to tutoring? Which has been most influential, and why?
4. How do you think you could develop your tutoring style?

The interviews were recorded and then transcribed, analyzed and synthesized with the aid of word processing software, with the specific aim of optimizing opportunity for familiarization and understanding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A grounded theory 'constant comparison' approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), involving reading, rereading and annotating facilitated the tracing and identification of emerging interconnected emic themes (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984).

## Results

### *Tutor talk*

Tutor talk dominates the Writing Center conference in the research context. The consultations were conducted in English, although this is not an explicit policy of the Writing Center. Analysis of relative volubility in Phase 1 data (eleven consultation-conversations) shows in terms an average utterance length of 19.89 words for tutors compared to 7.13 words for students, reflected in exchanges such as those below, drawn from both Phase 1 and 2 data (in the extracts used for illustrative purposes, the first part of the code indicates the data phase (P1 = Phase 1, P2 = Phase 2, etc.) while the remainder (e.g. 'RR2') is an identifier used to ensure anonymity).

Tutor: Yeah, you need something, change the word, you need something, as a severe problem because here, 'significance' shows something important, change it for example to 'severe'.

Student: What does 'severe' mean?

Tutor: Severe problem, like a strong problem. You can say here 'we will show the results reviewed and discuss them'; instead of saying all this, just say 'discuss them'.

(P1/RR2)

Tutor: Um, don't use this. Try using a different word here.

Student: 'As well as'?

Tutor: Yeah, 'as well as'.

(P2/AM4)

Of tutors' talk time, 70% is spent giving advice or correction, or following up on previous advice or correction already given, as in the above extracts as well as those that follow:

Tutor: So I think it's better if you say it's one of the – or part of the – ADNOC Operating Companies or OPCOs, because you have to say it's one of the ADNOC petroleum companies, as it's already a petroleum company. So say OPCOs, it's better, I think. It's written, go google ADNOC OPCOs.

(P1/RR1)

Tutor: Okay so put a comma here... ummhhh, okay, you wrote "petroleum engineer from Zadco, one of the team members met him face to face" ... 'for this interview', not 'from this interview'.

(P1/RA7)

Students, as would be expected, spend most of their talk time (86%) responding to the tutor's advice or correction, as in extracts P1/RR2 and P2/AM1 above, plus:

Student: So there's no need we mention it again? (P1/RA7)

Student: Ok, cool, and that's it? And how to end the conclusion? (P2/AM3)

### **Question frequency and type**

Analysis of number and function of questions (Stivers, 2010) asked by consultation participants reveals that tutors ask significantly more questions than students (64.85% of all consultation questions were asked by tutors, compared to 35.15% by students). It was also found that question type differs significantly between the two groups. 49.6% of all tutors' questions were requests for information or clarification, as in:

Tutor: The maids are high in population, dividing the work between family members, how? You mean letting each family member work instead of the maid? (P1/RR3)

Tutor: When you say entertainment attractions, do you mean theme parks, stuff like that? (P2/AM4)

The second most likely question type for tutors, representing 38.93% of all their questions, occurs when seeking concurrence with a suggestion, as in:

Tutor: Yes, so you can rephrase this one, right? (P1/RA9)

Tutor: Okay here a full stop, then you should start a new sentence, right? It shows it's an example, do you see? (P1/RR6)

For students, the most common question types are seeking confirmation (61.97% of all students' questions) followed by requesting information or clarification (32.39%), as in these extracts:

Student: This one I finished. But I want to combine this with this. I feel all this part doesn't matter but I want to add it. Is this right? (P1/RR4)

Student: We write the objectives in order? (P1/RA9)

### **Consultation ease**

In Phase 2, the researchers sought to relate observed tutor or student characteristics to consultation ease or difficulty. Tutor characteristics observed and associated with ease were: rapport, frequent eye contact and an apparent desire to connect with the student; evidence of enthusiasm; motivation; helpful feedback and examples; positive comments; giving the impression of being in charge and being direct (when associated with rapport). For example, the researcher summarized one consultation as follows:

In charge; direct; speaks very fast but with great energy and passion; connected with student; excellent rapport and eye contact; outgoing; cheerful. (O/A-M3)

Characteristics observed in the data and associated with problematic interaction included: rapid speech; not focusing on student or her work; little eye contact; lack of dialogue (with most of the discussion consisting of the tutor speaking and student listening; little interaction; awkward silences); few or no positive comments or reinforcement with most comments being critical or "tough"; being very directive (by telling and being prescriptive, correcting, instructing, and allowing insufficient or no wait time for responses). For example, the researcher made the following summaries of two consultations with different tutors and students:

Tutor mostly explains / talks; no wait time for responses; not much positive reinforcement. Most comments critical; limited positive comments; tough; 90% of the discussion was the tutor speaking; student mostly listened; not much interaction or comments from student. (O/A-J1)

Too much tutor talk; 90% of discussion is tutor speaking; she asks questions and requests examples but student seldom responds. Difficult to know if student comprehends everything. A lot of awkward silences in this session. Did not allow much wait time for student to answer. (O/A-M2)

These two consultation extracts show the kinds of difficulties that can occur when there is a lack of rapport, too much tutor speaking, inadequate wait time, limited interaction, perceived awkwardness and/or tutees having few comments/questions.

### ***Influences on tutors' approaches***

Several features of Phase 1 data indicate that tutors favor a directive and tutor-centered approach to tutoring, characterized by tutor volubility and question type frequency in relation to consulting students' contributions. This conclusion is supported by Phase 2 data, which included many observations contributed by the tutors in relation to the consultations and in response to the researcher's observations on what had taken place. For example, this tutor noted that at one point she:

was trying to drop in suggestions from a reader's point of view; the way I'd like the sentence to appear and sound. (P2/AM4)

Though this extract suggests a reader-centered focus, the tutor does not suggest that the student reflects upon the reader; instead she "drops in suggestions" with a view to making the student's writing more closely resemble her preferences. This same tutor is sensitive to the effect her approach might have, which she describes as "butchering" another student's work. Here, she shows that she tries to compensate for this:

After every session with a student, I like giving them some sort of encouragement. It's hard to open up to another person and lay down your writings for another student to butcher. I do this to make up for anything harsh I might've said. I don't want anyone getting offended. (P2/AM4)

In relation to a different consultation, the same tutor explains that she:

...like[s] to point out their mistakes at the end, sort of in the form of a summary. (P2/AS3)

She justifies this, saying:

That way, the student feels that I've diagnosed their problem and chances are that she would return for another session. (P2/AS3)

In her comments on a further consultation, she realizes that students arrive with expectations of the process:

I've noticed how some [students] expect you to solve or pinpoint their problems in one go. (P2/AD1)

It seems likely that this tutor's approach is strongly influenced by what she believes her students expect of her. Students' expectations of a tutor and a consultation are also likely to influence how they behave themselves. In Phase 2, student characteristics observed and associated with consultation ease were: being cooperative and attentive; showing a serious, polite and respectful attitude; confirming understanding; making good eye contact; giving good responses; being articulate and confident; reacting well to criticism and asking helpful questions. The data contained only one characteristic associated with consultation difficulty on the part of the students observed, namely, reluctance to ask questions.

Phase 3 interviews gave the researchers the opportunity to enquire further about some of the findings. One tutor was particularly forthcoming. She described the K-12 private education she had received in the UAE, which until Grade 9 had relied on:

A rote system [...] that was really really rigorous [...] they tried to drill facts into our head. That was more like a spoon-feeding method if you will. [...] It sort of helped me because [...] we were actually prepared for our IGCSEs a whole year in advance. [...] The only reason we used to study was because we knew that there was a quiz at the end of every class. (P3/AN)

This tutor spent Grade 10 at the same school engaged in revision, “doing past papers, again and again and again, all the way through the 1980’s, yes, we had that much time”. For Grade 12 and 13 (in changing school systems she missed Grade 11) she had moved to another school, which offered:

more independent study, teachers come to deliver the content but you’re free to do whatever you want and you’re basically free to study the way you want. All the pressure was taken off. [...] The good thing about that was we actually had a time period to learn how to do independent study before coming to university.

She describes having further independence on moving to university, with her communication course in particular requiring a great deal of interaction and collaboration among class members, as well as team building. When asked about what had most influenced her tutoring approach, she replied:

I take what I took from the communication classes, and sort of implement that because I know that interaction is really important.

Although this suggests that she was most influenced by her Communication classes, in fact she is referring to content rather than to tutoring approach. She continues:

Like back in high school, I never used to pay attention to plagiarism ...like if it was there on the net and I copy pasted it that was alright ... now I really pay attention to plagiarism and paraphrasing.

Later in the interview she describes her tutoring approach:

I try to break it down for her [...] I look at the level of work they’ve just given me – and based on that I try to be very friendly with my [student] and ask them, do you understand this? I try to point them in the right direction and sometimes if that doesn’t work I give them the exact sentence and I say, you could write it this way and I try asking them, do you understand what I just did right now? And then I try to make them explain what I just told them. And if that works, and if that’s exactly along the lines of what I wanted, then OK, we move along [...] I try to break it down to their level.

She realizes that this is a description of “spoon-feeding”, just as she herself had experienced. Asked about her development as a tutor, she said:

If I were to change it? [...] What I usually end up doing is, I usually end up telling them, this is how you’re supposed to write it. Because you know after once, twice, thrice, they’re not getting it, so I should just tell them. So what I would want to do is, I would like want to tell them this is where you’re going wrong, try doing a little bit more research yourself because what I’m basically doing is spoon-feeding as well. I mean I do try to make them be more independent, I guide them but I think I would want to guide them more instead of telling them what to do, what not to do.

This tutor appears to understand that a ‘guiding’ rather than a ‘telling’ approach might be desirable. She also realizes that sometimes students’ expectations encourage a ‘spoon-feeding’ approach, as:

If repetition doesn’t work they sort of look at you with those, come on, just tell me, just tell me what I’m supposed to be doing. [...] where am I going wrong, just tell me without going round the bush.

The second tutor interviewed (P3/RM), who had also completed all of her schooling in UAE private schools, was less able to identify techniques or strategies that her teachers had used, but when pressed,

she noted that at school, there was no team work, because her teachers “needed to see individual ability, the quality of each person”. She contrasts this with university, noting that as a tutor:

I don't apply what I learned in high school. All the other stuff, how I talk to them, how I tell them to write the essay, it's all from Communication. [...] I always given them advice, [...], but sometimes they don't paraphrase or their direct quotes are not necessary [...] and I'm like, “you shouldn't do that”.

She expresses her belief that her university communication courses have the greatest influence on her approach to tutoring, but when asked to give examples, she describes a directive approach (as in the extract above), and she later describes telling her students about referencing, paraphrasing, writing introductions, designing a survey, reporting and discussing results, and making recommendations. These constitute the “what” of her communication courses, rather than the “how”.

### **Summary**

From these observations, all of which support those made in relation to the other tutor interviewed and are also supported by the results of Phases 1 and 2, it can be concluded that *what* tutors teach may be influenced more strongly by recently learned content, while *how* they teach is influenced more by previous, formative, experience at school. To summarize, we observe and conclude that:

1. Tutor talk dominates, with tutors speaking almost three times longer than students.
2. 70% of the time that tutors spend talking is spent in providing feedback in the form of giving advice or correction, or following up on earlier advice or correction.
3. 86% of the time that students spend talking is spent in responding to the tutor's advice or correction.
4. Tutors ask approximately twice as many questions as students, with tutors being far more likely to request information or clarification and make suggestions, while students are largely concerned with receiving confirmation of the accuracy of their work, followed by requesting information or clarification.
5. Tutors appear to favor a directive and tutor-centered approach to tutoring.
6. Students generally behave in a respectful, compliant manner, expecting tutors to identify and address problems in their writing.
7. *What* tutors teach seems to be influenced more by recently learned content, while *how* they teach may be influenced more by formative experiences at school.

### **Discussion**

There are several good reasons why we might want peer tutors in a Writing Center context to adopt student-centered rather than directive approaches to their tutoring. Directive approaches have been criticized for encouraging superficial understanding (Spiro, 1991); for being less able to develop students' problem-solving or critical thinking skills (Brown, 1989); and for focusing on transmitting content rather than meeting students' needs (Clasen, 1974). Consequently, they may encourage the oft-observed 'quick fix' attitude of students to a Writing Center or other learning support facility (Young & Dziuban, 2000), and the assumption that Writing Centers are there primarily to help bad writers (Runciman, 1990). Student-centered approaches, on the other hand, eschew instructor-controlled expositions in favor of active learning, using individual and team-based activities, such as solving meaningful and relevant open-ended problems through which they can create, acquire and connect

with knowledge (McCombs, 1997), to develop self-reliance, cooperation, and critical and creative thinking capabilities. Such approaches have been shown to enhance motivation, retention, depth of understanding, and appreciation of subject matter (Felder & Brent, 1996).

It is also the case that, in the Petroleum Institute's communication courses at least, faculty tend to use more student-centered approaches, with the specific aim of accommodating Tusting & Barton's (2006) social constructivist perspective on adult learning, which emphasizes the centrality of learning and collaborative enquiry that is underpinned by reflection and interaction. This is in order not only to meet the need that students have to engage in the academic discourse community, but also because in recent years

the needs of industry have changed to a different type of worker, one who is a continuous learner, a problem-solver, self-directed thus requiring little supervision. (Warmkessel, 1997, p. 81).

If tutors are able to adopt approaches that are in keeping with these understandings and values, then they will contribute to a constructively-aligned curriculum, with components addressing the same agenda and supporting each other (Biggs, 1999).

However findings 1-7 above suggest that any learning taking place in the Writing Center is more likely to be a result of a transmission pedagogy rather than the transformative and student-centered approaches to learning which are preferred in the research context. In such an approach we would expect to find proactive students, taking the initiative, with tutors responding to their questions and guiding students to improve their work. Instead tutors appear to take control of the interaction and retain it throughout. Students tend to be compliant, and on no occasion offer, or attempt to offer, extended commentary on their work (for example, a description of what they intended to convey, including alternatives considered, such as to content or to organization, with their differing effects) though they certainly have the linguistic proficiency enabling them to do so (albeit in some cases with inaccuracies and use of first language). It appears that though both participants in the consultation-conversation have recent and significant experience of student-centered approaches to learning, in this intimate situation free from the presence of an instructor who might be a reminder of preparation activities, both participants return to more directive approaches. It is reasonable to assume that directive approaches are more firmly established as a result of the instruction experienced during earlier, formative education, described in a recent review (Farah & Ridge, 2009) of K-12 education in the UAE (wholly in accord with the tutor's experience presented above), as being a

tyranny of rote memorization [carried out through] teacher-centered, textbook-driven ways of teaching" (p. 2) [and assessed by] examinations [that] have retained a heavy focus on textbook memorization, and therefore discourage teachers from embracing new student-centered approaches to teaching. (p. 3)

It appears that despite the recency of student-centered learning experience and the emphasis placed on it by instructors involved in preparing peer tutors, such experience that is limited to a few semesters does not readily replace years of directive educational practices, particularly when it comes to turning experience as a student into practice as a tutor.

## Conclusion

In the context studied here, it is considered desirable for Writing Center tutors to adopt student-centered and collaborative approaches to tutoring, and it was expected that they would readily do so. Firstly, such approaches correspond to those experienced by both tutors and students in several courses offered by our institution. Secondly, faculty take student-centered approaches to tutor preparation, and these approaches form a study focus for new tutors. Thirdly, such approaches offer both tutors and

students ideal opportunities for the development of communication and interpersonal skills, the ultimate aim of a Writing Center. A collaborative pedagogy sees the writer within a social context and writing as benefiting from a joint effort that includes contributions from different perspectives. Such a

student-centered, collaborative, learning strategy [can] transform students from being passive, teacher-dependent, uncritical recipients and reproducers of information into engaged, questioning, reflective and autonomous learners. (Gardiner, 1996, p. 2)

Clearly then, student-centered and collaborative Writing Center tutoring practices would be required in a constructively-aligned curriculum (Biggs, 1999).

However, to expect peer tutors to be able to adopt student-centered approaches after ten hours of preparation and four semesters of almost certainly part-time experience in student-centered classrooms appears to be unrealistic in the light of what could be up to 13 years of comprehensive experience of directive approaches, and during a formative period too. The researchers therefore identify an urgent need to re-examine tutor practice, with a view to ensuring that initial preparation is supported by continuing development and feedback on peer tutors' practice for the duration of their contribution to the Writing Center facility, in order to provide a forum through which deep-seated pedagogic beliefs and practices may be the subject of dialogue and reflection. This is currently not the practice at the Writing Center which formed the focus of the study. It is also the case in the institute in question that the Writing Center is just one of a number of Learning Support Centers, some of which employ peer tutors or have plans to do so. It would be useful to ensure that tutors working in different support centers have a forum that enables them to share experiences and advice; a meeting area or blog could fulfill this function. The need for 'on-the-job' support and development, and the opportunity to meet peers in similar roles, are both recommendations that might be considered by those running Writing Centers in other locations.

Given that this research was limited to the facility for female students in a gender-separated university, it is also recommended that the enquiry is extended to the facility for male students in order to establish the extent to which the findings might be gender-related. Once this stage is completed it would be informative to extend the study to other Writing Center facilities in the region and beyond, with a view to determining any cultural basis for the findings

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