

ABSTRACT

"Someone's Soul is at Stake": Navigating Difficult Belief in Writing Center Conferences

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This study investigates the responses of writing center consultants to tutorials in which client writing expresses difficult or offensive belief. The primary aim of this interpretive case study is gaining an understanding of the strategies tutors have developed for navigating these sessions without corresponding training. To this end, I interviewed current and previous writing center consultants about their experiences in difficult sessions, coding the resulting interview transcripts using grounded theory. This coding identified four specific methods of response consultants have developed for addressing difficult sessions. After identifying and describing these four responses, I establish theoretical frameworks for determining the appropriateness and effectiveness of each response. The study concludes by purposing this new understanding and theorizing toward the development of productive theories for tutor response in sessions containing difficult or offensive belief.

"Someone's Soul is at Stake": Navigating Difficult Belief in Writing Center Conferences

by

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DEDICATION

To the staff of the University Writing Center:
Thank you for collaborating with and supporting me.
May we always strive to treat our clients charitably,
never underestimating the influence of one.

CHAPTER ONE

Framing the Conversation

Introduction

I vividly remember my first writing center tutorial session. I had just begun working as a Graduate Consultant in the University Writing Center at Baylor University. My first client came in with her personal statement for her medical school application, and I felt well-equipped to help her. I had several close friends in medical school, and I believed I had a strong grasp on what medical school admissions committee might be looking for in a personal statement. Beyond that, I had just completed a week of writing center training and felt ready to begin my time as a tutor. Unfortunately, that feeling of confidence did not persist long, as I also vividly remember the first session I encountered where I did not know how to proceed. In this session, about two weeks following the other, a student brought in an essay about a text he had read in his Christian Scriptures class. Reading through his argument, I quickly realized that not only had the student taken verses from the Bible out of context, but he was using them to support arguments I found deeply offensive. And not only were the arguments offensive to me, I knew they could be particularly harmful to others, and—what perhaps concerned me most—I believed they were heretical.

Despite my strong emotional response, I felt that I could not share my opinions with the writer. Having only recently completed my tutor training, I knew the expectation was that tutors would employ non-directive strategies in

sessions, asking questions to prompt thinking instead of instructing students how to think or what to write. We were to avoid writing papers for our students or forcing them to think a certain way, so asking questions for clarification and knowledge generation was to be our primary mode of operation. Yet on a personal level, I was quite conflicted. Was this a time to disregard the rules and instead be honest with the writer about my own views? That seemed inappropriate, and the wrong course of action for a rule-follower like me; however, simply asking questions and ignoring the problematic belief in the student's writing also did not seem like the right course of action. I felt that by ignoring my issues with the content of the writing, I would be doing the student a disservice not only as a student but as a person. Ultimately, I kept my opinion to myself, deciding that sharing my belief would have constituted a breach of appropriate behavior in my role as a tutor. I asked the student questions about the context of the verses he had used, hoping that maybe by considering wider contexts he might come to reconsider his own opinion on the matter about which he was writing. He evidenced no such response. I ended up leaving the session feeling doubly guilty—one, as a tutor, that I'd asked questions hoping they might push my client to another understanding, and two, as a person, that I hadn't challenged a belief I found both offensive and problematic.

While I remember this encounter well, it was not the only of its kind I experienced during my time as a writing center tutor. Such difficult encounters were not unique to my experience, either. From conversations with fellow tutors, I quickly learned that sessions concerning difficult or offensive belief occurred more frequently than our training would have led us to believe. Whereas we felt

well-equipped to work with our students in terms of explaining the rhetorical situation for writing assignments, and we felt well-trained in asking questions about audience, purpose, clarity, and the like for various prompts, we were uncertain how to approach sessions in which we had strong personal responses to the ideas about which our clients were writing. Did tutors always have to assume neutral stances for the purposes of writing center sessions, or was there an appropriate moment in which we as writing center tutors could insert into sessions our own opinions or beliefs about the topics on which our clients were writing?

The non-directive training many writing center tutors receive may sufficiently train those tutors to reject editorial mindsets and instead become something akin to coaches of writing for their clients, but that training does not always address to the difficult ideas tutors will encounter in their sessions. Much of the work on non-directive tutoring focuses on how those methods will benefit or impact the client, not the tutor (Corbett 150-1). The tutors are trained to work in such a way that promotes student learning and engagement. This training is valuable, but it cannot account for all of the contingencies writing center tutors will face in their sessions. Additionally, though such an approach to training is appropriate in many instances, it runs the risk of dehumanizing the tutor by suggesting to tutors that their personal responses to their clients' belief have no value. Even if the client's views should receive the primary focus in the session—the client is the writer, after all—there must be a way to affirm the centrality of writer belief without diminishing the importance of tutor response.

As it stands, writing center tutors represent a diverse group of writers. Writing center consultants are both graduate and undergraduate students from a variety of disciplines, be it a writing-heavy one or not. Many tutors have completed intensive training processes, either through orientations, weekly training meetings, or coursework, but some have received more minimal training (North). Additionally, in areas where training may be lacking, tutors are forced to create their own methods for addressing sessions, such as those in which clients present writing containing difficult or offensive belief. These methods might be beneficial, but unless tutors are aware of the implications of the methods they adopt, they could also prove problematic. As a result, the best way to move toward theories of productive methods for tutors engaging conflicting belief in sessions is to first understand the strategies tutors have developed for doing so (see Denny for a recent example of this type of scholarship). These strategies will be diverse, and some may be more effective than others, but writing center directors cannot hope to help their tutors know how they should deal with these situations without first understanding how the tutors already are dealing with them.

Even if training plans do not place an emphasis on sessions in which tutor and client disagree on a fundamental principle expressed in writing, tutors do encounter sessions involving difficult or offensive belief regularly, and they do navigate them by necessity, whether they have received corresponding training or not. Seeking understanding of how tutors navigate these sessions will not provide all of the answers either tutors or the writing center community needs, but it is important; even so, we must eventually move beyond understanding to

theorizing for the future. Establishing understanding is certainly the first step, but it is not the only step. Out of that understanding, we must then work to develop a path for how writing centers might move from the “is” to the “ought.” The difficulties in creating such a path are numerous, and that path will likely need to be personalized to each individual writing center community. Yet the creation of such a path is possible, and in this study, I take steps toward establishing such a path.

My primary aim in this study is doing what I have stated above: helping the writing center community understand the “state of tutoring,” as it were, in the context of sessions regarding difficult or offensive belief. The primary focus of this research is understanding how tutors determine when or whether to share their personal beliefs in sessions and analyzing the effectiveness of the ways they have developed of doing so. In this way, my research project is tutor-focused. Some scholars have noted the dearth of scholarship on how writing center work impacts tutors, and I hope my project can help lessen that gap (Macklin et al). This investigation focuses on the ways tutors experience and respond to sessions involving conflicting belief. In this way, I hope to remind readers of the humanity of tutors, remembering they are just as human—and therefore their opinions just as valuable, and also fallible—as their clients. By talking with tutors, I learned about the thoughts they had when determining whether or not to respond by expressing their own beliefs, what they did when they responded, and how those discussions with their clients impacted them, both during and after the sessions.

Review of Literature

Much scholarship on the writing center focuses on how the work of the writing center impacts the student, not the tutor. Scholars aim to consider tutoring techniques effective at promoting student learning, seeing the focus of the writing center as the development of the clients who enter (Devet "The Writing Center"; Blazer; Van Waes et al). In the words of Stephen North, the writing center community believes first, that "writing is most usefully viewed as a process; and second, that writing curricula need to be student-centered" (50). The writing center adopts an approach that focuses on the needs of the particular student-client, allowing that student's needs to guide the development of the writing center session. Jeff Brooks writes that "most writing center tutors agree that we must not become editors for our students and that the goal of each tutoring session is learning, not a perfect paper" (128). After all, the "primary objective in the writing center session is not the paper, but the student" (132). In this way, the writing center focuses on the development of the writers who enter as clients. This student-centered view means that the writer's ideas, knowledge of the writing process, and overall learning are the primary concerns of the session, not grammatical correctness or polished perfection. This individualized, learner-centered approach, prioritizing higher order feedback and writer development as opposed to sentence-level edits and grades, affords an educational space that distinguishes writing center instruction from classroom instruction.

In order to achieve these client-focused goals, writing centers thrive on conversation. Stephen North writes that "the essence of the writing center method...is this talking," conversations particularly between tutor and client

(55). These conversations take many forms—tutors and students may converse about the students’ familiarity with writing, experiences in their classes, concerns for their papers, or any number of other topics. Ultimately, these conversations serve as means of enabling tutors to work with students in ways that are individualized to the students’ particular needs. Even scholarship dealing with tutoring strategies focuses on how those strategies will impact client learning, not necessarily how they may impact tutors (MacCauley; Menassa; Denny et al; Corbett “Tutoring”). Scholarship with such a focus urges tutors to “keep [their] pedagogy flexible and attuned to one writer at a time” because that is what will result in the best conditions for student learning, not necessarily that which is most beneficial or constructive for the tutor (Corbett “Tutoring Style” 153).

In an effort to best facilitate client learning, most writing centers train their tutors to adopt non-directive methods of tutoring. Scholarship on non-directive tutoring certainly addresses tutors, but it emphasizes tutor training instead of understanding how those strategies might impact tutors in writing center tutorials (Clark; Corbett 2013). In non-directive tutoring, tutors avoid direct instruction, instead focusing on questioning, crafting questions to help clients better understand and articulate their ideas. These questions may pertain to content (“Could you help me better understand the main idea of this paragraph?”), structure (“How might reorganization of this section might make your idea a bit clearer?”), or some other element of the writing process. In any instance, the non-directive tutor refrains from offering direct input or asking questions aimed at leading the client to a predetermined understanding. Indeed, “tutors learn that illegitimate collaboration happens when the tutor takes over a

student's writing by providing answers rather than by asking questions" (Shamoon and Burns 135). The client must remain in control of the paper, the client's ideas must inform the session, and the client's learning and growth as a writer must comprise the goals of the session (North; Devet "Untapped"). While some scholars push back against the non-directive model (Shamoon and Burns), or at least question whether modified approaches might prove more beneficial (Pemberton; Clark), the model's prevalence in both the *St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors* and *Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, two widely adopted tutor training guides, affirm its place as the dominant model of writing tutoring.

While the non-directive model of tutoring is certainly the prevailing method of tutoring in writing centers, the model is not without its drawbacks. Certainly non-directive strategies prevent tutors from adopting an editorial mindset, but tutors may feel constrained by these strategies to only focusing on certain elements of writing. By only asking questions, as the non-directive model encourages, tutors could choose to focus on structural and mechanical issues in the paper ("What organizational structure might make the most sense for the purposes of this assignment?") without ever focusing on the ideas behind the paper. While scholarship has repeatedly argued that no divorce exists between the form and content of writing, as one is ineffective without the other (Hillocks; Aumann; Doty; Ashwell; Wysocki), not all instructors, tutors, or students adopt this view of writing. Non-directive tutoring as a model does not guide students to focus on either form or content to the exclusion of the other. However, if tutors feel that non-directive tutoring constrains them from inserting their own thoughts and opinions on a topic into a session, they may refrain from discussing

ideas and instead keep their considerations at the level of form. In focusing their questions on form instead of content, tutors would maintain a distinction between the two and model that faulty view for their clients.

Value judgments of the non-directive model aside, the purpose of this popular strategy of tutoring is making the student the center of the session. And as students' writing, concerns, and experiences drive writing center sessions, various types of personal and emotional writing will inevitably appear in the writing center. Writing center scholarship already details accounts of tutoring writing over deeply held personal beliefs and emotional experiences (Perry; Kervin and Barrett; Dees et al), yet in keeping with the rest of the scholarship, these accounts are primarily focused on the client experience. Though Alison Perry points out that "there is a surprising dearth of scholarship on the topic" of tutoring deeply personal writing, she argues that research that does exist shows "writing consultants are often cast in the role of unofficial counselors," as situations require them to speak to the content behind the writing, not just the structure of the writing. Perry's work provides valuable insight for how consultants might best work with clients who visit the writing center in an emotional state, but it does not offer suggestions for how tutors might navigate similar difficulties when the client is writing about a topic that they view as integral to their sense of personhood, regardless of their emotional state. Beyond this limitation, scholarship like Perry's roots its suggestions for how tutors might respond in the ways those actions will be perceived by and influence the client; little has been written about how tutoring writing over personal topics impact the tutors as individuals.

Some work, much of it recent, has turned toward examining how writing center work impacts tutors (Rytönen; Zhao; Valentine; Wahlstrom). In a particularly powerful example, Neisha-Anne Green writes about the racism she experienced as a black woman tutor. The writing center community needs to hear more about the ways in which writing center work broadly and methods of training specifically impact tutors. For, “while there’s no shortage of suggestions for evaluating the work of tutors and their impact on their clients, the literature about writing center assessment seldom mentions the other side of the equation—the impact of writing center work on the tutors themselves” (Macklin et al 12). Particularly when it comes to tutoring sessions on potentially difficult issues like religion, race, and politics, this lack of study and understanding can have significant, ethical implications.

The connection between writing and ethics has been established repeatedly in scholarship (Traschel; Porter; Duffy, Stichler). By engaging in the act of writing, students do more than just define the beliefs they are expressing, for “at the point you begin to write, you begin to define yourself ethically” (Porter 150). Through the process of writing, writers engage in issues of ethics constantly as they select topics for inquiry, methods of argumentation, and audiences to address. Writers make ethical decisions as they choose to include and exclude information, and as they characterize not only their beliefs but also the beliefs of those who oppose them. Beyond decisions about the writing itself, the topics writers choose often deal with ethical issues, whether they are writing about personal beliefs or taking a stand on a divisive political issue (Neulieb).

“All writing is personal,” and engaging with the ideas of writers means engaging with them at a personal level (Newkirk 149).

Just as writers are engaged in ethical endeavors, so too are those who offer them feedback; teachers of writing, for example, “are always already engaged in the teaching of rhetorical ethics and that teaching of writing necessarily and inevitably moves us into ethical reflections and decision-making” (Duffy 230). There exists, then, a strong connection between the act of writing and ethical consideration. Particularly in the context of college writing, the recognition that writing is ethical is particularly relevant; college writers write for an audience, most commonly their teachers, who then must gauge for themselves the validity of if not the content of the writing, then at least the ways in which that content is presented.

If college writers are always engaged in ethical endeavors, then it follows that any discussion of that writing will require a consideration of ethics. Just as the writer makes ethical choices in deciding how to present her argument and choosing language to represent counterarguments, so too must the people with whom she discusses that writing, whether peers or authorities, decide for themselves whether they align with her choices. Are her arguments valid, her considerations of opposing arguments fair? There are ethical considerations in both the manner of the writing, such as in its fair consideration of counterarguments and careful attendance to elements of the rhetorical situation, and the content of the writing. The two work in tandem—a well-written and rhetorically sound argument in favor of Nazism, for example, would never be valid ethically, no matter how articulately and effectively written. As both

readers of and responders to student writing, tutors are cast into a role fraught with ethical considerations. Of their many daily appointments, tutors are bound to encounter content in writing that they find personally offensive or unethical. Yet tutors are often left without sufficient guidance when it comes to dealing with such topics.

Even when scholarship does attempt to offer guidance to tutors who are working with writing involving deeply personal beliefs or experiences, the advice that it offers is inconsistent at best. Within writing center scholarship, one line of thought suggests that the tutors' goal is to help their clients express their beliefs well; the tutors' own thoughts and opinions should play no role in guiding or informing sessions. For example, one article on tutoring emotional issues in writing states, "When a writer decides to use a personal experience or a deep-seated personal value for an academic paper, it is a tutor's responsibility to help the writer articulate the ideas he has and to provide a fair-minded response, even if it means reaching deep inside ourselves to do so" (Agostinelli et al 34). In other words, tutors must help the writer say what she wants to say despite the tutors' personal feelings on the matter. Even if helping a client in this way means the tutor must reach "deep inside" themselves, the clients' beliefs are to be affirmed and expressed, while the tutors must repress their own.

Yet this client-affirming view is not the only approach to emotional or personal writing adopted by writing center scholarship. Other scholars see writing center tutors as advocates for social justice and ethical belief. In one example, *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors* states that "tutors have not only a right but an obligation to challenge students' ill-conceived and morally

questionable ideas” (Murphy and Sherwood 13). Murphy and Sherwood cite other scholarship as a rationale for this view that the tutor holds the role of social advocate. The issue with adopting this approach is that it puts a great deal of pressure on the tutor. We can see from the culture around us that many people, at least those in the public eye, do not handle disagreement or conflicting beliefs very well; asking tutors, some of whom are peers with the students visiting them, to initiate a civil discourse of disagreement may be overwhelming. This view asks tutors to perform a role beyond the typical job description offered by the writing center. Additionally, such an approach marginalizes those tutors who by nature might be more reserved or slow to challenge while also empowering some tutors who might be more belligerent or have an exaggerated view of self-importance. Tutors, after all, can hold offensive beliefs just as easily as their clients. And even if tutors do hold generally moral, ethical beliefs, asking them to determine which of their clients’ beliefs are “ill-conceived and morally questionable” and which are acceptable could prove quite the challenge. Perhaps some ideas, like racism or misogyny, might be obvious, but what about more contested issues, such as the pro-life movement, euthanasia, or gun control? Also, personal experience can be a difficult force to challenge, particularly in a thirty- or sixty-minute appointment over writing. Positing the writing center tutor as one who roots out problematic belief is itself a problematic view. Maybe tutors should view their role in this way, but there would have to be a significant shift in not only how tutors perceive themselves but in how students and faculty perceive the tutors’ role, as well.

The tension between these two methods of engaging personal writing in the writing center has not been ignored (Sherwood; Freed; Janangelo). Some tutors who see their role as a social advocate may tend to “censor or urge self-censorship” of their clients’ writing, not maliciously but “in the interest of helping students adjust to and succeed in the academic world” (Sherwood 52). Of course, such behavior violates clients’ right to freedom of speech, thus putting the tutor in an ethically and legally challenging position. Yet for tutors who may be afraid of inserting their own voice into sessions, some scholars argue that “we would be doing students a disservice by not voicing our own opinions” (Freed 40). In all of this well-intentioned, if contradictory, advice, scholars miss opportunities to understand the ways tutors already engage in sessions regarding difficult or offensive topics before offering theories of ideal behavior; gaining such an understanding first might then enable more consistent, practical advice.

This study aims to fill that gap—to simultaneously work to understand how tutors engage in sessions involving difficult or even offensive belief while also considering best practices for tutors who will undoubtedly encounter such sessions in the future. To achieve this goal of understanding, the study first seeks to listen. In listening to tutors, I learned of the methods these tutors have developed for engaging difficult writing center sessions. I then organized tutors’ strategies by the themes that emerged through my conversations with them. Based on those themes, I worked to theorize both appropriateness of and rationale for each of these methods of responses. Then, I evaluated the effectiveness of these strategies in an effort to take steps toward providing a

productive theoretical path for a more conscious method of tutor response in sessions involving difficult or offensive belief.

Chapter Overviews

Chapter Two: Methods of Response in Sessions of Disagreement. This chapter examines the factors that informed the methods of response tutors developed for engaging in sessions of disagreement. Data from interviews revealed that most tutors framed their responses to clients in terms of the rhetorical situation. Additionally, tutor behavior was informed by their training in non-directive tutoring methods, a training some found constraining while others found empowering. Lastly, tutors discussed how their own views regarding the connection between the content and form of writing informed their responses in sessions of disagreement.

Chapter Three: Burkean Identification as a Charitable Response. This chapter examines the complex ways in which tutors employed Burkean identification in their sessions. While identification of common ground proved a primary method of engaging sessions of agreement, identification of ignorance appeared in some sessions of disagreement. Interestingly, in terms of sessions of agreement, tutors were not as hesitant to share their own opinions and beliefs, even when they had described such action as inappropriate for tutors when discussing sessions of disagreement.

Chapter Four: Toward a Theory of Tutor Engagement. This chapter provides a synthesized discussion of the results from the preceding chapters. Based on this synthesized discussion, I work toward developing a productive theory for how

tutors might effectively engage in sessions regarding difficult or offensive personal belief.

Terminology

The following terms appear in the aforementioned chapters of this study. In an effort to ease reader experience, I have explained the definitions of the following, significant terms in the context of this study below.

Belief. Tutors, clients, and humans generally have beliefs about any number of topics. Our minds likely immediately shift to religious or political issues, but it is important to note that other, less conventional concepts of belief could nevertheless provoke just as much frustration on the part of the tutor (I think, for example, of an English graduate student who perhaps strongly disagrees with a client's interpretation and application of *Hamlet*). In this study, "belief" will most often refer to the ideas expressed in clients' writing and the tutors' responses, stated or not, to those beliefs. At times, the word will be used to denote ways clients and tutors view writing, such as their "beliefs" about the distinction between form and content, but such instances will be clearly stated. This study certainly does not rely on an unconventional understanding of the word "belief," but I want readers to understand the focused nature of the term in the context of this study.

Sessions of disagreement. I use this term to simplify the discussion of sessions in which tutors disagree with the ideas or beliefs expressed in the client's writing. I do not use this term to refer to disagreement of any sort—such as disagreement over whether a comma or semi-colon would be the appropriate

piece of punctuation in a given location—but rather disagreement over the types of belief listed under the “belief” definition.

Sessions of agreement. I use this term to simplify discussions that are the opposite of sessions of disagreement—sessions in which the client and tutor agree on a “belief” as deemed by the above definition. All of the contingencies applicable to the definition of Sessions of disagreement apply here. Sessions of agreement are important because tutors adopt different strategies for navigating them.

Identification. This term comes from Kenneth Burke’s *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Burke notes, “You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his” (55, emphasis original). Though referring more to oratorical forms of rhetoric, Burke’s statement still applies to writing center conferences when he writes that identification promotes change “first by inducing the auditor to participate in the form, as a ‘universal’ locus of appeal, and next by trying to include a partisan statement within this same pale of assent” (59). In Burkean identification, the speaker finds grounds for identification with the listener, then uses that identification as a basis for pushing the speaker toward a certain course of action, usually a partisan one in Burke’s definition. Though tutors did not use this terminology themselves, themes of identification played a major role in tutors’ discussions of sessions of agreement, and a smaller role in sessions of disagreement.

Rhetorical situation. This term is used widely in writing studies. It refers to all of the factors impacting the effectiveness and appropriateness of a piece of writing. Most basically, the rhetorical situation includes writer, audience, and purpose, but it can also extend to counter-arguments, medium, genre, and a variety of other factors (“Rhetorical Situation”; Schneider).

Methods

In order to effectively study how tutors addressed sessions in which their clients’ views contradicted their own, I collected surveys from and conducted interviews with both current and former writing center consultants at the University Writing Center at Baylor University, a mid-size, private university located in the American southwest.

Participants

Eight consultants volunteered to participate in this study. Each of these participants had experience in the University Writing Center at Baylor University. Six of the participants were graduate students in English, while the other two participants were undergraduate students majoring in English and Professional Writing. No tutors from non-writing disciplines participated. Additionally, all consultants had received training in non-directive methods of tutoring writing. The six consultants who were current consultants were receiving on-going training in tutoring, all centered on non-directive approaches. All tutors volunteered to participate in the study of their own accord.

Teresa. At the time of the interview, Teresa was a second year Ph.D. student in English literature. She had worked in the UWC the previous year and

was teaching first year composition courses at the time of the study. Teresa held to moderately conservative political beliefs. She had completed her undergraduate degree at Wheaton College and her master's degree at the University of Edinburg. She worked in the communications and non-profit sectors before returning to study for a Ph.D.

Morgan. Morgan was a second year M.A. student studying literature and rhetoric/composition. She had worked in the UWC the previous year and was teaching first year composition courses at the time of the study. Morgan held to moderate political beliefs. She completed her undergraduate degree at Liberty University immediately before beginning graduate work at Baylor, and she planned to continue studying for a Ph.D. after completing her M.A.

Jane. Jane was a second year M.A. student studying English literature. She had worked as a consultant in the UWC the previous year, and she was still tutoring at the time of the study while also serving as a Graduate Assistant Director of the UWC. Additionally, Jane was teaching one section of first year composition. Jane held to conservative political beliefs. She completed her undergraduate degree at Hillsdale College and worked in marketing before beginning graduate work. She planned to study for a Ph.D. after the completion of her M.A.

Caedmon. Caedmon was a first year Ph.D. student studying English literature. He had been working as a consultant for three months at the time of the study. Caedmon held to conservative political beliefs. He had completed his

undergraduate degree at Patrick Henry College and his master's degree at the University of Regina in Canada.

Hank. Hank was a first year Ph.D. student studying English literature. He had been working as a tutor in the UWC for three months when he took part in the interviews. Hank held to moderately conservative political beliefs. He completed his undergraduate degree at Mars Hill College and his M.A. in Theology at Westminster Seminary California. Hank taught English abroad before beginning graduate study at Baylor.

Daniel. Daniel was a first year Ph.D. student studying English literature. He had worked in the UWC for three months at the time of the interview. Daniel held to conservative political beliefs. He completed his undergraduate degree at Union University and began graduate study immediately after finishing his undergraduate studies.

Elizabeth. Elizabeth was a second-year undergraduate student double majoring in Professional Writing and Rhetoric and History. She had worked in the University Writing Center for over a year at the time of the interviews. Elizabeth held to liberal political beliefs. She was one of only two undergraduate tutors who participated in the study.

Jamie. Jamie was a third-year undergraduate student majoring in English. He had worked in the UWC for about three months at the time of the interviews. Jamie held to liberal political beliefs. He was one of only two undergraduate tutors to participate in the study.

Data Collection

Each of the participants was working or had worked in the University Writing Center (UWC) at the time of the study. Some of the previous tutors had received extensive training in theories of tutoring as well as pedagogy, whereas the current tutors were still in the midst of their training. Nevertheless, all had been tutoring for at least a semester, with the longest-serving tutors working in the UWC for over a year.

Participants who accepted the invitation to complete the study first filled out a questionnaire. This questionnaire asked participants for demographic information, about their previous experiences teaching and tutoring, and about their experiences tutoring in the UWC specifically. Contained in this questionnaire were questions asking tutors whether they felt equipped to handle sessions dealing with offensive or sensitive material, how their own beliefs and values informed their tutoring, and whether they could remember specific instances in which their beliefs conflicted with their clients'. The questionnaire then called for participants to elaborate on these instances, asking them to categorize the nature of the belief as political, social (e.g., racism), religious, or content (e.g., a view of literature). Finally, the questionnaire asked tutors whether they had ever changed their own beliefs based on their experiences in such a session. Primarily, the results from the discursive questions on the questionnaire were used to craft questions for the focus group interviews.

Data from the focus group interviews comprise the majority of the results in this study. Both general and individual questions were crafted based on study aims and questionnaire results. All of the questions focused on similar themes, including sessions in which clients' beliefs contradicted the tutors', as well as the

ways in which tutors' own beliefs informed their tutoring practices. The nature of the interviews was such that I only asked questions as necessary; generally, the tutors' thoughts propelled discussion forward. There were two separate focus group interviews: former Graduate Consultants Morgan and Teresa; current Graduate Consultants Jane and Caedmon; and Undergraduate Consultant Jamie took part in the first; while current Graduate Consultants Hank and Daniel and current Undergraduate Consultant Elizabeth participated in the second. Even though these interviews were conducted separately, similar themes emerged from the tutors' conversations in both interviews. These themes concerned tutors' responses in sessions of agreement and sessions of disagreement. Coding revealed major themes included framing responses in terms of the rhetorical situation, working within the bounds of non-directive training, debating the connection between writing content and form, and responding through Burkean identification.

Data Analysis

Data from both questionnaires and the focus group interview transcripts were analyzed using qualitative methods. Discursive answers provided in both questionnaires and interviews were coded according to interpretative case study theory (Yin; Stake). Coding allowed me to see consistent themes that emerged through tutors' answers and discussion, and it allowed me to group data into helpful, illustrative categories. The study was approved by the IRB, and all proper policies were followed. The names used in this study are pseudonyms chosen by the subjects.

Limitations and Benefits

Because of my immediate context, the focus of my research project is the University Writing Center at Baylor University. While there are limitations in focusing on a specific university, benefits abound. Strategies for tutors engaging in sessions over challenging or offensive belief will at least in some ways need to be individualized to each particular writing center context. Private, faith-based institutions may adopt different approaches than, say, a public, land-grant university. Nevertheless, in understanding the experience of writing center tutors in a specific context, we may still glean principles that we can apply to writing center tutors in a variety of settings, from high schools to community colleges to research-focused universities.

Some of the limitations of this study include sample size, location, and time frame. Less than ten consultants volunteered to participate in the study, and all served in the same writing center under the same leadership at the same university. Additionally, because of the nature of the thesis, interviews, coding, and result presentation all occurred within a period of six months. Even so, results from the study have been carefully studied and presented. Going forward, other scholars might replicate this study or a similar one at other writing centers to see if the strategies these consultants adopted are unique to Baylor or common for other writing centers.

A primary benefit of this study is that all of the participants had worked in the UWC within the past year. As a result, they did not have to reach back as far mentally to recall details of the sessions they recounted. Additionally, the group was diverse in terms of age, educational achievement, and previous work

experience. While limited to a single university, the participant population was not homogenous.

Ultimately, I listened to current and past writing center tutors about their experiences tutoring students whose beliefs contradicted theirs, learning about the types of conflicting belief they encountered and the strategies they developed for addressing such beliefs. The insights contained in this study, and hopefully those in future study, will help the writing center community move toward productive theories regarding how tutors might best interact with their clients in the context of sessions over difficult or offensive belief.

CHAPTER TWO

Response in Sessions of Disagreement

Introduction

Traditionally, much writing center scholarship has focused on how tutors may employ tutoring strategies that best promote student learning (Devet 2015; Blazer; Van Waes et al; MacCauley; Menassa; Denny et al; Corbett “Tutoring”). Because many writing centers view writer development and client learning as the focus of the center, such a leaning in scholarship is not surprising. Yet in prioritizing such a focus, writing center scholarship has neglected the experiences of the individuals who lead writing center sessions. While some recent scholarship has turned to focus more on the ways sessions impact tutors (Green; Rytönen; Zhao), our understanding of tutor experience still falls woefully short. For “while there’s no shortage of suggestions for evaluating the work of tutors and their impact on their clients, the literature about writing center assessment seldom mentions the other side of the equation—the impact of writing center work on the tutors themselves” (Macklin et al 12).

One area in which this lack of knowledge proves particularly concerning is in understanding how tutors engage with sessions regarding difficult or offensive belief. Because of the personal nature of writing, clients will often bring in writing representing their deeply held personal, spiritual, or political beliefs. While the fact that students bring such writing is not troubling in itself, trouble can arise when those values and beliefs conflict with those of their writing center tutors. While writing center scholarship has made some attempts to offer tutors

guidance as to how to engage in such sessions, recommendations are far from practical, and the advice is often contradictory (Freed; Sherwood; Agostinelli et al).

Because advice is lacking, this area proves ripe for study. In taking up this study, one of my primary goals was understanding the ways tutors engaged in sessions in which they disagreed with the belief expressed in their client's writing. I have termed these sessions "sessions of disagreement," in which the tutor and client held contradictory opinions of a certain personal belief on which the client was writing. By seeking to understand the ways tutors navigated these sessions of disagreement, I hope to help the writing center community take steps toward a better understanding of how we can prepare tutors for encountering these difficult sessions. While the sample size for this study was small, all of the participants recalled experiencing at least one difficult session of disagreement. Focusing on sessions of disagreement allowed me to hear from tutors about their thought processes and strategies for dealing with these types of sessions, distinct from sessions in which these tutors agreed with their clients' ideas. I wanted to learn if these tutors agreed that they "have not only a right but an obligation to challenge students' ill-conceived and morally questionable ideas" (Murphy and Sherwood 13), that "it is a tutor's responsibility to help the writer articulate the ideas he has and to provide a fair-minded response" even when the tutor disagrees with client (Agostinelli et. al 34), or if they fell somewhere between these two contrasting views; and, I hoped to learn the factors that informed their decisions of how to act.

Methods

Participants

Eight consultants from the Baylor University Writing Center volunteered to participate in the study. Graduate Consultants Jane, Hank, Daniel, and Caedmon, and Undergraduate Consultants Jamie and Elizabeth were currently tutoring at the time of the interviews; Jane and Elizabeth had been tutoring for over a year, and the other tutors had been tutoring for two months. The remaining two consultants, Morgan and Teresa, had worked in the writing center the previous year and were now teaching first year composition courses.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data from the focus group interviews comprise the majority of the results in this survey. Many of the questions focused on sessions in which clients' beliefs contradicted the tutors', as well as the ways in which tutors' own beliefs informed their tutoring practices. Data from the focus group interview transcripts were analyzed through the application of interpretative case study theory (Yin; Stake). The study was approved by the IRB, and all proper policies were followed. The names used in this study are pseudonyms chosen by the subjects.

Limitations and Benefits

Major limitations of this study include sample size, location, and time frame. Major benefits of the study include the fact that all of the participants had worked in the UWC in the past year and that the group was diverse in terms of age, educational achievement, and previous work experience.

Results

As participants engaged in conversations recalling sessions of disagreement, three distinct themes emerged. First, many tutors chose to frame their disagreement in terms of the rhetorical situation. While for some tutors this framing meant keeping their own beliefs private and instead introducing counterarguments as hypothetical considerations, for others the rhetorical framework meant sharing their belief and using the development of stronger counterarguments as justification. Secondly, tutors discussed whether or not they felt constrained by the non-directive mode of tutoring in which they had been trained. As a reminder, in non-directive tutoring, tutors refrain from offering direct instruction or guidance and instead ask questions prompting client thought and learning (Clark; Corbett "Negotiating"; Shamoan and Burns). Lastly, tutors discussed a potential divorce between the form and content of writing. Some felt as tutors they should focus solely on form, such as stylistic conventions and organization, while other tutors did not see a way to focus on one to the exclusion of another. These three themes represent the guiding principles on which tutors relied as they attempted to engage their clients effectively in sessions of disagreement.

Results Overview

Section I. Rhetorical Situation as Framework: This section details the ways in which tutors appealed to the rhetorical situation as justification for their actions in sessions of disagreement.

Section II. Non-Directive Training: This section details the ways in which tutors' training informed their behavior in sessions of disagreement. Because all of the tutors had received training in non-directive modes of tutoring, they all agreed their practices were informed by that mode of training. Some felt constrained by the non-directive approach, whereas felt freed by it from ethical obligation to oppose student ideas in sessions of disagreement.

Section III. Connection Between Form and Content: This section details the ways in which tutors' conceptions of the connection between the form and content of writing impacted their approaches to sessions of disagreement. Some tutors felt that the two could be separated and that they could focus on their client's writing style without ever addressing the ideas in the writing, whereas others felt disconnecting the two was not possible. The latter view accords with writing scholarship arguing that writing content and form are inextricably connected (Hillocks; Aumann; Doty; Ashwell; Wysocki), but not all tutors acted in accordance with this theory.

Rhetorical Situation as Framework

When confronted with sessions of disagreement, many of the study participants acknowledged framing their disagreement in terms of the rhetorical situation. While this framing sometimes meant appealing to hypothetical counterarguments, not all tutors remained in the realm of the hypothetical; instead, some disclosed their own positions to their clients, using elements of the rhetorical situation as justification for doing so. Teresa was one of the tutors who shared belief with a client, framing her response of sharing in terms of helping her client develop a better understanding of the implications of her argument

and the validity of counterarguments. In the example she recalled, Teresa's client brought in a paper supporting euthanasia, a topic on which Teresa said, "I don't know if there's anything else in this world that offends me more." While Teresa found the student's viewpoint personally abhorrent, what irritated her the most was the casual manner in which the student adopted it. To Teresa, "it seemed as though [the student] had taken this position almost flippantly...she had not counted the cost in terms of what it meant to people on the other side [i.e., people who would disagree and take the opposite position of the student]." The casual nature in which the student adopted her viewpoint bothered Teresa perhaps more than the viewpoint itself. The student was not well-informed on the issue, nor did she acknowledge validity in any proposed counterarguments to her claims. As a result, Teresa said, "acknowledging that I disagreed with her...felt like a moral necessity." She was compelled to talk with her client about euthanasia in real terms, not hypothetically, and felt that sharing her own belief might be the best way to help the client understand that actual people believed differently than her.

Because considerations for the rhetorical situation played a key role as Teresa developed a plan of action for the session of disagreement over euthanasia, her decision to share her own belief was justified in terms of the rhetorical situation. Teresa's "response was focused on her [the student's] argument" as expressed in the paper; Teresa did not get into a discussion of euthanasia outside the bounds of what the client had already written. In this way, she was sensitive to the occasion of the student's writing, only addressing the contentious topic in terms of the paper the student was writing. Teresa recalled first attempting to keep her disagreements hypothetical, suggesting

ways others might interpret the student's argument, but Teresa felt the student was not taking the session seriously with such hypothetical suggestions. When Teresa eventually determined that her client was not "greatly keen on making any significant changes to her paper," Teresa decided inserting her own beliefs about euthanasia into the session was appropriate as a means of ensuring the client took the topic seriously.

Despite her strong initial reaction, Teresa did not share her own opinion until she realized her client had no intentions of fairly considering counterarguments. Teresa recalled, "I told her she needed to acknowledge other points of view because someone like me who disagrees with her would have a hard time taking her argument credibly without an acknowledgement of where other people were coming from." While she didn't tell the student the specifics of her own belief, Teresa's comment made clear to the student that she disagreed with her, thereby making the student take the session, and her paper's content, more seriously. Teresa recalled, "it was sort of a surprise to [the client] that somebody would care, period, especially about a different perspective. Because it was very clear that she hadn't thought one way or another about people who might disagree with her." In this pushback against her client's opinion, Teresa remained within the bounds of the rhetorical perspective, even saying of her feedback, "I was able to frame it in the context of her argument." She portrayed her disagreement as a way of furthering the student's understanding of the significance of counterarguments, not as a way of directly disagreeing with the student's point of belief, which she did. To Teresa, by helping the student understand counterarguments, she was helping her to both become a better writer and strengthen her argument in that particular paper. Despite her

disagreement, Teresa never resorted to instructive methods of guiding the student to a new understanding of or opinion on euthanasia but kept her disagreement within the bounds of argumentation.

While counterarguments offered tutors an avenue for expressing their own beliefs in sessions of disagreement, even if hypothetically, tutors appealed to other elements of the rhetorical situation, as well. These elements included references to the prompt, appeals to other sources of authority, and questions clarifying the context or purpose of assignments. Morgan recalled a session of disagreement in which her client brought in a paper comparing Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* to Donald Trump. In this particular session, Morgan appealed to the specifics of the prompt as a way of encouraging the client to reconsider her argument. Morgan said of the essay, “It was actually a paper about how much this particular student loved Donald Trump, because of how similar he was to Willy Loman,” an argument Morgan felt was unfounded and inappropriate based on the actual details of the play. Even so, she never stated this response directly. Instead, Morgan said, “I mostly just wanted to redirect her back to the prompt, which was not at all about Donald Trump. And her paper was two-thirds Donald Trump.” She appealed to the assignment prompt as a source of authority; in so doing, she helped her student better understand the context of the assignment, thus enabling the student to recognize that her paper did not accomplish its purpose. Morgan was able to encourage the student to cut out portions of her paper because it was not in line with the prompt, and therefore not in line with the purpose of the assignment. The rhetorical elements of occasion, purpose, and audience provided avenues for Morgan to push back against her client’s ideas without having to explicitly state her own. Whether

they chose to insert their own viewpoints or not, tutors like Morgan felt their tutoring strategies were effective and justified when they were able to frame their disagreement in terms of the rhetorical situation.

Using the rhetorical situation as a framework for sessions of disagreement satisfied the consciences of some tutors. By expressing their disbelief either explicitly or implicitly in terms of the rhetorical situation, tutors felt they had acted both appropriately in terms of their role as tutors and sufficiently as humans pushing back against potentially offensive belief. Teresa experienced this feeling of appropriate and sufficient action when a client brought in a paper arguing against the existence of systemic racism. While Teresa felt strongly that the student was in error, she did not allow her strong emotional response to inform her verbal response because she thought doing so would be addressing the issue outside of the bounds of the assignment. Instead, she framed her response in terms of the rhetorical situation, helping her client see the need for a careful definition of terms. She said, “Essentially all I had to do was define systemic racism for him...and I was essentially telling him that he was wrong in his paper, but I was doing it by defining the terms he was using incorrectly.” Teresa’s words here and actions in the session expressed a belief that a proper understanding of terms would lead the student to see the issue at hand from a new perspective. And if that did not happen, Teresa felt acquitted of responsibility. She said, “If, after defining these terms for him, he still agreed with himself, that was not my responsibility anymore.” In using the language of “responsibility” here, Teresa’s comment raises questions of tutor obligation in sessions. With the student writing about euthanasia, Teresa felt what she deemed a “moral obligation” to oppose the viewpoint presented in the writing, but in the

case of the student writing about systemic racism, Teresa felt that defining terms for the student was sufficient action. Even so, in both sessions, relying on the rhetorical situation offered what she deemed appropriate and sufficient responses to the pieces of writing her clients had created.

By framing their responses to their clients in terms of the rhetorical situation, whether they remained in the realm of the hypothetical or not, tutors felt they were acting in accordance with their non-directive training. By framing responses in the context of the rhetorical situation, tutors thought they were both educating their students on an important component of the writing process as well as prompting critical thinking without resorting to directive methods.

Non-Directive Training

As tutors recalled their reasons for resorting to the use of the rhetorical situation, they justified their behavior in terms of the training they had received. These tutors had all received training that focused on non-directive tutoring techniques. This training meant they were taught to avoid directive instruction about student writing, focusing instead on asking open-ended questions aimed at promoting student thought, engagement, and learning. Some tutors felt constrained by their non-directive training in sessions of disagreement, while others felt the training cleared them ethically from having to address the content in their clients' papers.

Tutors sometimes found their training in non-directive techniques restrictive because they felt that inserting any sort of opinion or belief into the session would be directive and thus a violation of their positions as tutors. Jane recalled a session of disagreement in which the student wrote on a view of

education with which Jane strongly disagreed. While Jane wanted to tell her client, “Well, you’re just wrong about everything, about education and your life,” she restrained herself from doing so, instead relying on the primary non-directive mode of response: asking questions. Jane said, “I did initially push back quite a bit,” claiming she *had* addressed the student’s problematic beliefs; yet when she recalled the details from the session, her posture was one of questioning, not confrontation. While Jane did ask some leading questions, she was never abrasive when the client did not give her the answer she wanted. Jane asked the student questions along the lines of, “Do you think that’s really the only purpose of education?” but when the student maintained her strong opinion, Jane directed the student, “Let’s look at your arguments for why,” instead of pushing back, continually referencing the article to which the student was responding. Jane felt the student’s offensive opinion sprang from a lack of understanding of that article, so she “kept pushing,” even though this “pushing” came in the form of “questions about evidence.” At the end of the session, Jane felt “really frustrated” and left “feeling sad” because the student “didn’t really understand what she was responding to, and...had a lot of sad conceptions.” Despite Jane’s desires to explicitly state her thoughts, and her feeling that she pushed back strongly, Jane ultimately kept her personal feelings detached from her discussions with her client and framed her response in terms of her non-directive training.

While non-directive tutor training aims at ensuring the client remains in control of the paper, it can leave the tutor with uncertainty or even fear about inserting their own ideas into sessions. In Jane’s case, it’s interesting to note how strongly she believed the student was in error, and how she even felt guilty

about how directly she felt she acted in the session, even though she never actually contradicted the student's belief. Reflecting on the session, Jane said she "wanted to talk to her [the student] so badly about why she was here, in her first month of college, if she thought that was all education was for." Jane felt the belief the student held was actually harmful to her development as an individual and as a student. But despite these strong feelings, Jane regretted some of her actions in the session, reflecting, "I wish I hadn't directly gone into that [disagreeing with the student]." Jane felt that her own strong opinions led her to oppose the student, even though her description of her chosen methods were actually quite non-directive; she relied on questions purposed toward prompting student thought, albeit unsuccessfully. Jane herself acknowledged the non-directive nature of this session. She "vividly" remembered thinking:

I don't really know how to approach this, but I do know we were just very freshly trained to steer away from statements, ask questions, and even just to push that back on the student and ask them things like, "Would you really think this...is the purpose of education?"

Jane found that questions were "almost a nice thing to resort to, to disagree with the student...it was what I was supposed to be doing." In this way, she felt validated professionally, as a tutor, because she had performed her role well, but frustrated personally, as a person, because her client left the session holding a belief Jane thought was harmful to the writer's formation. Jane's comments reveal the dual implications of the non-directive training methods: she was relieved that she did not have to engage the ideas directly, but she was also distressed that she felt constrained from doing so. Additionally, her specific view of non-directive methods led to worries that even in her questions she had gone beyond appropriate behavior as a tutor.

When tutors felt constrained by non-directive sessions, they not only felt incapable of sharing their belief on serious matters, but they also struggled to understand their own goals for the session in terms of student learning. Daniel had a student bring in an essay arguing against the historicity of the Biblical book of Jonah. Because of Daniel's undergraduate training in religion and the particular nature of his Christian beliefs, Daniel disagreed with the student and felt deeply and personally that the student's view was incorrect; his belief in the historicity of the book was informed not only by his own study but also by his faith. Even so, Daniel felt compelled to rely on questioning to navigate the session, saying, "The tactic that I took in that session was simply to ask questions...in a way that ideally would help him to think through the issue more deeply...I asked him a *lot* of questions." The questions Daniel asked were purposed toward "help[ing] [the client] think through the issue more deeply," as he asked the student questions about the validity of viewpoints both for and against the historicity of the book. Knowing his own belief, Daniel said he tried not to ask questions aimed at leading his client to a certain viewpoint. He did want to challenge his client with his questions, but more to prompt critical thinking than to change his mind. Daniel's goals in this session mirrored the goals of non-directive tutoring—he focused on prompting student thought through questions, not offering any sort of directive instruction.

Guided by his non-directive training, Daniel did his best to assume a neutral stance and help his client more fully consider the implications of his own belief and the reasons that he believed as he did; however, Daniel did not remain neutral for the entirety of the session. He did share his beliefs with his client, but he purposefully waited until the end of the session to do so. He seemed to feel

that the end of the session was the appropriate time for sharing his own belief because at that point the client would not feel any pressure to yield to the tutor as an authority figure. Yet, as Daniel recalled, “at that point, I had asked enough questions that the student actually ended up changing his mind,” deciding to argue the opposite point. Though Daniel said he had determinedly tried not to push the client one way or another, the client left agreeing with Daniel, something Daniel did not learn until the end of the session. His client has switched positions, even though Daniel claimed he had not intentionally led him to do so.

Because non-directive tutoring puts student learning in the driver’s seat of sessions, tutors recognize the importance of pushing their client to learn; even so, non-directive tutoring can sometimes confuse tutors in terms of their goals in sessions. Daniel, for example, was not pleased at the outcome of the session he recounted. Instead of feeling satisfied that the student had adopted the same position as him, Daniel said, “I felt bad...because I was afraid that I was overstepping my bounds,” admitting, “I’m not sure when [a session] crosses that line from just asking good questions to asking leading questions.” As a tutor, Daniel worried the student’s change in opinion showed that he had gone beyond what was appropriate in his role as a tutor. Daniel explained that in asking questions, “I wasn’t saying, ‘You should believe this.’ I was trying to ask questions that could either lead to the student strengthening his position by responding to objections or realizing there were too many objections to respond to...and it would make more sense to change his position.” Daniel had asked questions to help his client either see ways of strengthening his own belief or recognizing a need to shift it; however, when the client ended up choosing the

latter option, Daniel became concerned. Despite a change in the student viewpoint being one of the possible outcomes he had identified at the beginning of the session, Daniel thought the result meant he had acted inappropriately as a tutor.

Certainly, Daniel's questions implicitly or explicitly helped the student reach the conclusion that a change in opinion was the best course of action, but Daniel did not think had done anything malicious. He had employed the strategies he was taught and attempted to assume a neutral position to avoid instructing his client in a direct manner. But Daniel himself admitted,

When it's a session about an issue that I care deeply about, that's going to affect how I feel about the session, how I act to a certain extent because I would be more likely in that kind of session to ask leading questions. Whether or not that's a good idea, that's what I would tend to do the more that I care about an issue; whereas if a question is not understanding an author correctly or misinterpreting the author, I still want the student to get it right, but I'm not thinking, "Okay, your soul is in peril or something like that because you don't understand this author."

According to Daniel, the more a tutor cares about the idea in question, the harder it will be for that tutor to ask a purely objective question. If tutors are unable to acknowledge their biases in sessions, those biases can influence the questions they ask, whether they are cognizant of this influence or not. Beyond that, as Daniel's words suggest, there are some instances of disagreement where the tutor may think their client's "soul is in peril" because of a certain belief. In such instances, feeling unable to express their own feelings on a matter or feeling constrained to focusing on techniques of argumentation could cause at best frustration and at worst deep offending of conscience for some tutors. Additionally, it could prove harmful for the client, as latent biases and beliefs

could prompt leading questions on the part of the tutor, even if they pose those questions unintentionally.

Like Daniel, the other tutors felt that the primary method of engaging clients should be asking questions, though they did not specify the nature of the questions they should ask; and while questions certainly are a hallmark of non-directive tutoring, not all questions are beneficial or even appropriate. In Daniel's tutoring session, for instance, Daniel's intentions as he recalled them were valid, but the outcome of that session raises important questions about the use of hypothetical questioning in sessions. Can tutors fairly ask such questions if they do not first acknowledge their own biases to their clients? And, even if they can employ hypothetical questions effectively, might acknowledging their own biases be more appropriate for both tutor and client? Daniel was concerned about the student changing his opinion to align with Daniel's own, but he also did not agree with the student's initial thoughts; therefore, there was likely no outcome for this session that would have pleased Daniel. If the student's opinion remained constant, Daniel would have remained personally conflicted, but a change in student opinion left Daniel feeling professionally conflicted. Daniel worried that he had somehow unintentionally pushed the student toward his own way of thinking through his questioning.

Not every tutor felt constrained by their non-directive training. Some found appeals to non-directive strategies empowering, as it relieved them of a sense of obligation to address difficult belief in sessions of disagreement. Hank, for example, found comfort in the non-directive role for which he felt he had been prepared by training. Even acknowledging that different sessions call for different approaches, Hank viewed the non-directive approach as a helpful tool

in guarding against this overstepping. He said, “we talk about non-directive tutoring as a way of helping students learn to think about their own writing...but it’s also good because that non-directive approach protects the tutors.” Hank elaborated on what he meant by protection in this regard:

It creates some kind of safeguard for tutors because you can be in the position of asking questions and distancing yourself in a kind of way. I find that to be a comfort when I’m going into these tougher sessions, because I know that I’m not supposed to dive in and argue for my own case so much as I’m supposed to be questioning them.

Tutors arguing for or even expressing a certain viewpoint could put them in a precarious and potentially uncomfortable position. Hank found comfort in a view of the tutor as nondirective and unattached, and he thought tutors should aim to perform their role in this way, both for the students’ sakes as well as their own.

Offering an example to justify his statements, Hank recalled a session of disagreement in which his client had written on the topic of abortion. The student had been assigned a pro-life article, and she took up a pro-choice position in her response to that article. Though Hank disagreed with the writer’s opinion, he said, “I chose not to let my position on the issue be known...I didn’t see that as my role.” Even though the writing represented a belief about which Hank felt strongly, he didn’t see sharing his own opinion on the matter as relevant to the session or appropriate for his position. Said Hank, “I don’t see it as my role to push students toward the right opinion or view on the content.” Instead, Hank wants “to help the student articulate her position most clearly and effectively.” In the case of the pro-choice assignment, Hank saw the student’s own thoughts and arguments as the driving force behind the session, and he did

not think he had the right as a tutor to challenge those thoughts. Though he did not comment on the strength of the client's initial argument, he felt his obligation was enabling his client to state her beliefs more clearly and effectively. In this way, Hank took a high view of student opinion but a low view of his own opinion. He viewed his own opinions and beliefs as things that could be removed from the sessions, and he viewed the writing process itself as removed from the ideas. He "wants to help students write as clearly, sympathetically, and thoroughly as possible in such a way that the writing itself can become more ethical." In speaking this way, Hank created a distinction between ethical writing and ethical thinking, identifying his role as helping students with the former instead of the latter. Hank was not the only tutor to create or acknowledge such a distinction between the act of writing and the words contained in it. In this particular view, writing becomes ethical in terms of how it handles the information it shares, not because of the ideas it aims at conveying. In bringing up this discussion, tutors entered into the conversation about the connection between the form and content of writing.

Connection Between Form and Content

While tutors were uniform in their adoption of non-directive techniques, likely because of their training, they presented a diverse range of ideas on the potential divorce between form and content of writing. As tutors recalled the methods they had adopted for engaging clients in sessions of disagreement, the connection between the form and content of writing composed a primary theme of discussion. While tutors were certainly not homogenous in their belief about the nature of writing and whether a distinction exists between form and content,

their behavior in the sessions of disagreement they recounted was similarly influenced by their beliefs about form and content. In interviews, Caedmon was a strong advocate for viewing the form of writing as separate from its content. He recalled a session of disagreement concerning a client's interpretation of *Gulliver's Travels*. In this session, Caedmon neither shared his own literary interpretation with the student nor tried to guide him to a new understanding of the literature through questions. Instead, he assumed the position of the writer and worked from that perspective.

The student for the particular session Caedmon recalled came into the writing center with an essay arguing that "*Gulliver's Travels* had no moral point, that it was a satire on exploration with some things about politics thrown in." Caedmon, a graduate student in literature, was familiar with *Gulliver's Travels*, and he saw no validity in his client's reading of the novel. Quite frankly, Caedmon believed "he was wrong." In response to the student's reading of the essay, Caedmon simply asked the student if he'd read the entire book. When the student said he hadn't, Caedmon felt that his hands were tied and thought, "I can't really teach you what satire is doing and what *Gulliver's Travels* is [doing] here...Because I can't just tell you you're wrong." Due to Caedmon's view of his non-directive role as a tutor and his own understanding of the distinction between writing form and content, he did not think he had the time, right, or responsibility to educate the student about anything other than the form of his writing. As Caedmon himself summarized, "I'm here to tutor your writing, not teach you your content," thereby solidifying his view of the distinction between content and form. Caedmon wanted to inform the student that his interpretation was wrong because he didn't understand the content of the book, yet he took no

steps toward ensuring the student changed his own perspective. Instead, Caedmon believed that he could help the client express even a poorly thought out argument more effectively.

Whether tutors believed the form and content of writing were distinct entities or inextricably woven together, their view of the relationship between form and content heavily influenced their behavior in sessions of disagreement. Because of his beliefs about writing, Caedmon said he was often able to “bracket my own opinions and assume the opinion of the student for the sake of the appointment.” This belief transcends the boundaries of the non-directive training Caedmon had received. Even though tutors felt their training meant they must avoid inserting their own opinions into sessions, that training did not tell them they had to assume the student’s position. Caedmon’s perception of the tutor’s responsibility to assume the writer’s belief shares some similarities with Peter Elbow’s “believing game,” though it is not identical. Elbow defines the believing game as, “the disciplined practice of trying to be as welcoming or accepting as possible to every idea we encounter: not just listening to views different from our own and holding back from arguing with them; not just trying to restate them without bias; but actually trying to believe them” (2). Caedmon, however, assumed his clients’ belief not so much as an act of goodwill but as a concession of necessity. Caedmon felt that if his clients were confident in their positions, then there was not much justification for mentioning a contradictory viewpoint. As a tutor, Caedmon said, “part of my job, even if I disagree with the person’s paper, is to get them to rise to the level of error, so they can actually coherently express their wrong idea.” In sessions of disagreement, Caedmon attempted to inhabit his clients’ viewpoints, but he did not do so charitably; he still viewed

their ideas as flawed, but as a tutor he believed he could help them communicate even flawed ideas more effectively.

In viewing the content of writing as divorced from its form, tutors were forced to choose one as more important than the other, thereby determining the focus of their sessions. If the tutor felt that effective content was not necessary for effective form, then they could address mechanics, structure, and stylistic concerns without addressing the writing's primary argument or evidence. Caedmon felt that once the client was able to express their own thoughts, even problematic ones, effectively, the tutor could "then...talk to them about their ideas. But until they've actually formatted and argued for it well, I can't have that content discussion yet." According to Caedmon, there does come a place in the writing center tutorial where the client and tutor can discuss ideas, but that is only after prioritizing a focus on the manner of writing. Not only did Caedmon view argumentation style and content as separate pieces, but he viewed style as the predecessor of the idea. Caedmon viewed coherent expression as the primary focus of tutoring, while he viewed coherent ideas as secondary in importance, only viable discussion topics once the style of writing was clear. Yet Caedmon offered no guidelines for what constitutes effective student writing without appropriate, thoughtful content. He remained steadfast in his commitment to a distinction between form and content, but he did not elaborate on how writing can be effective if it contains poorly thought out or even factually incorrect arguments.

Teresa similarly suggested a justification for viewing a distinction between form and content. Thinking in terms of student development, Teresa said, "We shouldn't expect eighteen-year olds to be expressing absolute,

transcendent brilliance. The idea is that they're learning how to express ideas, so when the good ideas do come...in the coming years over the rest of their lives, they have the tools to express them well." Unlike Caedmon, Teresa did not claim there was value in or suggest that it was even possible to create effective writing without effective content, but she did see value in helping clients understand ways of effectively expressing their ideas; then, as those writers develop, they will develop ideas that they can express using the tools of argumentation they have previously learned.

Not all tutors agreed in the existence of a distinction between form and content of writing, nor did they think that discussions of form must precede discussions of content. Daniel maintained that "good writing flows from good thinking, so part of our role as tutors is to help students to think well so that they can write well." From Daniel's perspective, students cannot actually write effectively until they have first fully considered their own positions, which includes acknowledging and understanding the counterarguments that exist to their manners of thinking. Daniel stated, "part of our responsibility as tutors is to ask good questions and to help students think well." As a tutor, Daniel placed emphasis on helping students think more critically and productively, not just helping them express their ideas more coherently. Elizabeth agreed with Daniel and elaborated some on his view, saying that as tutors, "our goal should be to expose these students to opposing ideas and show them the flaws within their own argument." She agreed that tutors should engage students at the level of ideas, pushing back not "in such a way as to convince them of a position that we hold," but in order to help them see ways their own arguments could be strengthened. Elizabeth felt that tutors must engage their clients at the level of

ideas, though the tutors must be careful that level of engagement does not become a manipulative exchange.

Some tutors were more hesitant to acknowledge a divorce between content and form, uncertain that focusing on one to the exclusion of the other was ideal or even possible. Teresa acknowledged the difficulties inherent in responding to sessions of disagreement, noting, "It's really hard to know for yourself...when you're responding in disagreement, that your focus is on [the client's] argument and on their writing and not just on taking the platform for yourself." When the ideas in writing contradict tutors' personal beliefs, especially strongly held or deeply felt beliefs, it would be very difficult, and perhaps impossible, for tutors to merely focus on the form of argumentation without also getting into a discussion, at least on some level, about the nature of the beliefs in the writing. Hank's statements affirmed this difficulty because even though he said he usually tries to focus on form, aiming to "just clarify confusing passages or unclear sentences or arguments that I don't understand," he acknowledged that in certain cases, when "the student doesn't have a clear position of their own, then it's hard not to lead them into something that you're thinking." Particularly in sessions of disagreement where the client's position is not thoughtful, Hank found the line between form and content too thin to attempt to focus on form without addressing content.

In line with scholarship arguing against attempts to divorce content from form (Hillocks; Aumann; Doty; Ashwell; Wysocki), some tutors found the most productive method for engaging sessions of disagreement was synthesizing the two. These tutors found that it was necessary to talk with students about their ideas if they were actually to help them enhance their writing. The tutors did not

believe it was always necessary for them to share their own perspectives, but they nevertheless felt they had to address their clients' beliefs in some capacity in order to have productive session. As Teresa wondered,

If the point is just to write within this form, when do we get to the part where the thing you have to say actually matters, and being careful about the thing you have to say is actually the important part of the argument? If I actually think that someone's soul is at stake because they're making an argument for euthanasia, then my supporting making the argument well does feel deeply problematic to me.

Teresa worried that a sole focus on the form of argumentation would prevent students from seeing that the ideas behind the argumentation are ultimately what matter, even if those ideas aren't fully developed. And Teresa admitted that helping clients make certain arguments more effectively can be problematic and concerning for her as an individual. In other words, tutors should help their clients understand that a major purpose of writing is generating knowledge and conveying ideas; and, secondly, tutors should be troubled at the thought of helping their client write about an offensive or troubling belief more effectively.

The most productive method for sessions of disagreement, then, proved to be not focusing solely on form or content but on seeing the two as wholly tethered together. Morgan offered one example of how this fusion of form and content manifested itself in her sessions. She said, "We're setting this up as, 'Well there's structure or ideas,' but all the time you've got the paper that's disorganized because the person hasn't finished having the ideas...so they are very frequently muddled." Describing perhaps an ideal conversation about writing, she imagined having a "student tell me, like, 'Oh, my conclusion's a little weak,'" and her responding, "It's not just a matter of like, 'Here's what a conclusion should do,' it's like, 'Actually, I don't think your topic matters. We

need to go back to the drawing board. You can't show why it matters because it just doesn't." Other tutors responded with praise to Morgan's comments during the focus group interview and agreed with her, suggesting she described an ideal tutoring session.

Morgan's commentary, along with the thoughts other tutors expressed during the focus group interview, proved helpful in illuminating tutors' understandings, or lack thereof, of the inextricable connection between content and form. Without substantial ideas, students' writing itself will never be substantial. Because writing aims at both creating and conveying information and ideas, tutors must feel comfortable at least engaging with their clients' ideas, even outside of the realm of the written word. But moving beyond that, tutors must also work to learn productive ways of inserting their own ideas and beliefs into those discussions, enabling their clients to better understand the implications of their arguments and the perspectives of others. To do this, tutors need to recognize the difficulty, if not impossibility, of separating writing content from its form.

Discussion

Ultimately, the tutors who participated in this study were rarely willing to "overstep the boundaries and be subjective...in expressing [their] views," but instead felt doing so would constitute a breach of their role as tutor (Freed 43). Tutors' comments raised important questions concerning the role of the writing center tutor, and tutors' own answers to those questions informed how they approached sessions of disagreement regarding difficult or offensive belief. While tutors did not reach a consensus on the role of the tutor or the best way to

act in sessions of disagreement, they did the recount strategies they had used to address past, similar sessions, as well as discussions on content versus form in writing and whether the tutor should focus on one to the exclusion of the other. Ultimately, few tutors actually inserted their beliefs into the session, at least forthrightly, when they disagreed with the client, and participants were unable to come to a consensus as to how tutors should view the purpose of their role.

When it came to expressing their own opinions in sessions of disagreement, study participants did not reach a consensus concerning how tutors ought to approach such sessions. Whether they chose to express their own beliefs regarding the topics about which their clients were writing, most tutors framed their responses in terms of the rhetorical situation. This framework for response allowed tutors to pushback in hypothetical terms when they disagreed with clients' ideas, and even if tutors did address their own beliefs in context of their clients', they were able to justify doing so as helping the clients develop a better understanding of counterarguments. This appeal to the rhetorical situation corresponded closely with the tutors' reliance on non-directive strategies, resulting from the primary training information they had received. Some tutors felt constrained by the non-directive approach while others felt empowered by it; those who felt constrained believed that asking questions limited the ways they could act in sessions of disagreement, while others felt that the approach freed them from needing to address the difficult ideas in their clients' writing. Finally, tutors' comments revealed the ways their understanding of the connection, if existent, between the form and content of writing impacted their behavior in sessions of disagreement. When tutors saw a sharp distinction between the two,

they were able to address elements of the written word as opposed to the particulars of the idea those words aimed at portraying.

While framing responses in terms of the rhetorical situation and relying on non-directive strategies comprised two of the main methods of engaging with sessions of disagreement, such methods are not without potential problems. By consistently appealing to the rhetorical situation and framing even their own disagreement in terms of helping their clients strengthen counterarguments, tutors could prevent their clients from seeing the actual impact of the ideas they have expressed in writing. A focus on the rhetorical situation could keep the ideas contained within the assignment at hand, unless tutors expand their and their clients' understandings of the rhetorical situation to consider how not just the writing but also the belief expressed in the writing will be received by both general and specific audiences.

Similarly, non-directive tutoring, while a widely-used strategy in writing centers, has potential for misuse. Asking questions and avoiding directive instruction or pushback makes sense when dealing with structural or stylistic issues, as these questions prompt the student to take ownership of their own writing and prevent tutors from making changes directly on the paper itself. Yet in sessions of disagreement, the tutors in this study admitted to asking questions about difficult content in the writing without first acknowledging their own response to those ideas. By not acknowledging their own beliefs, tutors run the risk of asking questions that are unnecessarily guiding. By repressing their own responses, especially when the topic of the session is one about which they feel deeply, tutors might express their own feelings on the matter in other, more subconscious ways. This statement does not mean that tutors will always set out

to ask leading questions in order to change student opinion, but they might do so subconsciously; alternatively, they might focus on one specific set of questions, perhaps because they do not think their client understands the nature of a specific counterargument to the ideas in the client's paper, a counterargument to which the tutor ascribes.

Tutors' understanding of non-directive tutoring also impacted their understanding of the connection between form and content of writing. Some tutors felt bound to talk only about the form of student writing, not addressing their clients' ideas, whereas others saw no distinction between the two, a view upheld by writing scholarship (Hillocks; Aumann; Doty; Ashwell; Wysocki). Regardless, tutors' own views on this connection or divide informed the way they addressed sessions of disagreement. But similar to an exclusive focus on the rhetorical situation, focusing on content to the exclusion of form, while perhaps easier for a tutor, presents an inaccurate view of writing to the client. Divorcing writing content from its form is not only inaccurate, but it could be dangerous for both client and student. An unethical argument written effectively would certainly prove problematic for readers beyond the walls of the writing center. More specifically, as some tutors expressed, helping clients express offensive or difficult belief, or at least belief with which tutors strongly disagree, more effectively proves troubling for some tutors. If tutors feel compelled to only focus on form, then they can easily feel compelled to ignore or reject their own thoughts and feelings about the ideas contained in their clients' writing. Training tutors to hang their personal thoughts and deeply held opinions at the door ultimately dehumanizes tutors, asking them to act robotically and treat their clients' writing in kind.

While asking tutors to always repress their own beliefs proves unethical, there are certainly dangers latent in asking tutors to express their own opinions, especially in sessions of disagreement. For one, the tutor could hold an offensive viewpoint, so if the tutor was particularly domineering and the student particularly subservient, the student might be forced into expressing a viewpoint with which she doesn't feel comfortable. Perhaps the more obvious danger would be that the student with the offensive belief would agree with the tutor for the sake of the session, merely pretending to agree while secretly ignoring the tutor's suggestions; or, the student may blindly accept the tutor's viewpoint because of the tutor's position of power, changing his initial belief only because he accepted the tutor's, not because he had done the work of considering the belief for himself.

Neither asking the tutor to assume an objective stance nor asking the tutor to share their own ideas proves without potential difficulties. Yet, as the participants suggested both explicitly and implicitly in their interviews, their own beliefs about the topics addressed in their clients' writing do inform their approaches to sessions. Tutors may assume neutrality for a particular session, but that stance is no more than a façade. Tutors, as humans, are far from neutral on some of the issues about which their clients are writing. Asking them to pretend they do not have a view on the matter at hand dehumanizes them, and doing so suggests to tutors that their viewpoints are unimportant relative to those of their client. Beyond this, the adopted neutral stance inhibits the clients from understanding the real impact of their beliefs. By talking about the nature of their ideas with tutors who might disagree, clients would have opportunities to engage with embodied counterarguments, learning through experience that

writing constitutes more than just words on a page. The client would learn, and the tutor would remain humanized and aware of the ways her beliefs were impacting sessions. Certainly, there could be unproductive and unhealthy use of this type of engagement in writing sessions; however, just as tutors are currently trained in non-directive techniques, there ought to be ways of training them to engage with different perspectives in appropriate, productive ways. We need further research to determine best practices for training tutors in this way, but the results from this study suggest rather straightforwardly that the current model of tutoring inhibits both tutor and client. A shift in understanding on this topic could prove reinvigorating for the writing center, positing it further as a space for idea generation and exploration.

CHAPTER THREE

Burkean Identification as a Charitable Response

Introduction

One aspect of writing center work that can prove particularly taxing for writing center consultants is engaging in sessions regarding difficult or offensive belief. Clients will often bring in writing representing their deeply held personal, spiritual, or political beliefs, but writing center scholarship offers little guidance to tutors in terms of navigating these sessions. The guidance scholarship does offer is neither completely practical nor consistent; often, even that guidance focuses on the impact of these difficult sessions on clients, seemingly forgetting that tutors themselves also ascribe deeply to certain personal, spiritual, or political beliefs (Freed; Sherwood; Agostinelli et al).

In undertaking this study, I sought to understand the ways tutors engaged in sessions like those described above. While deciding whether or not to express disagreement with clients proves one of the primary challenges for tutors in sessions regarding offensive or difficult belief, I was also interested in investigating how tutors navigated situations in which they actually agreed with their clients about these sorts of belief. For the purposes of this study, I have termed such sessions “sessions of agreement.” In the context of sessions of agreement, I wondered if tutors remained non-directive in their approaches and experienced the same types of frustrations and constraints as they did in sessions of disagreement, or if they adopted different methods of tutoring when they shared common beliefs with their clients.

In understanding the ways in which tutors engaged in sessions of agreement, I found Kenneth Burke's idea of "identification" particularly useful. Burke writes, "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his" (55, emphasis original). This concept of identification applied to the tutoring sessions recalled by participants in that even in these sessions of agreement, the tutors were often attempting to persuade their clients to come to slightly different understandings of the topics about which the clients were writing. The pair often shared basic fundamental beliefs about the issue at hand, but the tutor felt the client did not have a full or nuanced enough understanding of the topic. Notably, in discussions about sessions in which tutors employed identification, tutors did not discuss the constraints of the non-directive technique, nor did they continue their conversation about the connection between writing form and content.

Kenneth Burke's work on identification has not yet been applied to the writing center conference in scholarship, but it has appeared in scholarship on writing more broadly (Lunsford et al.; Comprone; Ratcliffe). Lunsford et al. interpret Burke's concept of identification helpfully: "in sharing our identities through symbol systems such as language, we come to identify with others" (478). Identification promotes the finding of common ground between two parties. While I sometimes use the terms "identification" and "common ground" seemingly interchangeably, it is important to note that the two terms have slightly different functions. In identification, a person often identifies the nature of a belief they share with another; in other words, identification identifies common ground between individuals. Research in writing studies has examined

the role of common ground in areas such as research writing (Williamson and Huot), ESL writing (Mosher et al.), partnership building (Waldo and Madruga), and teaching writing (Condon), but just as with identification, the function of establishing common ground within the context of the writing center conference has been overlooked.

Despite the connection's absence in research, Burke's work on identification certainly applies to the context of the writing conference when he writes that identification promotes change "first by inducing the auditor to participate in the form, as a 'universal' locus of appeal, and next by trying to include a partisan statement within this same pale of assent" (59). In Burkean identification, the speaker first establishes grounds for identification with the listener, then uses that identification as a basis for pushing the speaker toward a certain course of action, usually a partisan one in Burke's definition. While the writing center consultants interviewed for this study did not necessarily push their students toward partisan stands, they did employ identification for various ends, often hoping their client might see a given topic from a new perspective. Identification functioned primarily in sessions of agreement, but I was surprised to learn of its role in sessions of disagreement, as well; though not as frequent, acts of identification occurred in some sessions of disagreement when the tutor identified their ignorance on a topic in order to both appease and then challenge the client. Both forms of identification served as important rhetorical models for writing center tutors.

Methods

Participants

Eight consultants from the Baylor University Writing Center volunteered to participate in the study. Graduate Consultants Jane, Hank, Daniel, and Caedmon, and Undergraduate Consultants Jamie and Elizabeth were currently tutoring at the time of the interviews; Jane and Elizabeth had been tutoring for over a year, and the other tutors had been tutoring for two months. The remaining two consultants, Morgan and Teresa, had worked in the writing center the previous year and were now teaching first year composition courses.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data from the focus group interviews comprise the majority of the results in this survey. All of the questions for this session focused on sessions in which tutors engaged in identification with their students as a method of navigating difficult sessions. Data from the focus group interview transcripts were analyzed through the application of interpretative case study theory (Yin; Stake). The study was approved by the IRB, and all proper policies were followed. The names used in this study are pseudonyms chosen by the subjects.

Limitations and Benefits

Major limitations of this study include sample size, location, and time frame. Major benefits of the study include the fact that all of the participants had worked in the UWC in the past year and that the group was diverse in terms of age, educational achievement, and previous work experience.

Results

Tutors primarily employed Burkean identification in sessions of agreement. Though tutors did not have a name for their behavior, they often identified with their clients with the aim of pushing the writers toward new or more nuanced understandings of the topics on which pair shared common belief. Notably, some tutors also employed identification in sessions of disagreement; however, the identification in sessions of disagreement functioned differently, as the tutors who used this strategy identified their own ignorance about the topic as the basis for establishing rapport with clients and propelling sessions forward.

Results Overview

Section I. Identification in Sessions of Agreement: In this section, I investigate how tutors engaged in sessions of agreement. Tutors employed Burkean identification as a primary strategy for engaging sessions of agreement, even though they did not have a term for their strategy. In acts of identification, tutors were forthright about the beliefs they shared with students, and they used that shared belief as a starting point for pushing clients to different or more nuanced understandings of a topics. Additionally, tutors felt that identification put clients at ease, helping them view tutors' questions as coming from places of beneficence instead of antagonism.

Section II. Identification in Sessions of Disagreement: In this section, I investigate how tutors modified identification to fit the context of sessions of disagreement. Though identification appeared far less frequently in sessions of disagreement than in sessions of agreement, in sessions of disagreement tutors

sometimes identified their ignorance on a matter as a way of establishing rapport with clients. By this phrase, I mean that tutors were open about their lack of knowledge on a topic, using an expression of ignorance, feigned or real, for the same purposes as identification in sessions of agreement—to both put their clients at ease and help them come to fuller understandings of issues.

Identification in Sessions of Agreement

In sessions of agreement, tutors most often employed identification as a strategy when they agreed with the overall framework of or underlying principles guiding their clients' arguments but disagreed with the particulars of their clients' arguments. These sessions were still sessions of agreement because the tutor and student shared important, fundamental beliefs about the issues being addressed in writing. Even so, in these sessions, tutors often hoped to help their clients come to more nuanced understandings of topics. Morgan shared the details of a particular session of agreement in which she agreed with the overall principle guiding her client's argument but felt that the client had misapplied that guiding framework. The student in question was "writing a very simplistic, hot-take, off-the-cuff, unresearched paper on abortion...her take was like, 'Young women who get pregnant unexpectedly are just selfish and lazy for having abortions. It's not that disruptive to just wait and give it up for adoption.'" While Morgan actually agreed with the student's pro-life stance, she found the particulars of the student's argument offensive. In this session, Morgan said she "led...very directly, like with my own belief and then put it back in [rhetorical terms]." In leading with her own belief, Morgan told the client, "Hey, I think you and I are actually on the same page, but I think that what you're saying is

actually super offensive, and here's why." Morgan disclosed the belief she and her client shared at the start of her session; in this way, the shared belief formed the foundation of the session. This establishment of shared belief then served as a launching point for helping the client understand how someone could morally oppose abortion yet still recognize the challenges associated with an unplanned pregnancy and act charitably toward those who would disagree with her stance.

Tutors who employed identification viewed the act as functioning in important ways rhetorically. Speaking of aligning with a client over a particular shared belief, Teresa said, "I think that's part of argumentation...finding that common ground." Even though tutors were not necessarily framing their identification of belief in terms of the rhetorical situation, at least not as frequently as when they disagreed with their clients' ideas, Teresa thought even this identification of common ground between tutor and student was, in fact, acting with the rhetorical situation in mind. Teresa said:

If your common ground is just the general belief, you could say, 'Well, I believe this too'...It puts the student at ease, and also you've told them what you think but you're able to push them, not from a position of antagonism, but from a position that they know that you agree with them in the end.

Teresa's comments point out the purpose for which tutors often relied on Burkean identification—identifying shared belief "puts the student at ease," and then the tutor is able to push their client toward a more nuanced or fuller understanding of the issue at hand. The tutors felt that their clients were more comfortable with being pushed when they knew their tutors ultimately shared the same framework of belief as them; recognizing that, the clients more readily accepted their tutors' questions as purposed toward positive development of their belief instead of antagonistic toward that belief.

Tutors believed that identifying with clients about guiding beliefs or frameworks would enable the clients to see tutors' questions as aimed at helping them rather than opposing them. Establishing shared belief identified the tutor and client as part of the same "family," and as Morgan pointed out, "you can be a little more critical of people on your team and in your family." In the session she recalled about the hastily written paper on abortion, Morgan actually agreed with her client fundamentally, as she and her client shared the same beliefs about abortion in its own right. Even so, Morgan did not agree with the particulars of the argument her client was making, nor did she agree with the student's characterization of women who get pregnant unexpectedly. Morgan said she had to be careful how she approached the session, and identification allowed her to approach the session in a productive way.

Morgan identified with the student who wrote about abortion in more ways than just in terms of fundamental belief. Coming from a conservative background herself, Morgan felt that the conservative student probably expected, "these weird English professors are going to smack me down for being a good Christian," and by writing in a bold way, the student probably felt that she was being bold for her religious convictions. Morgan said if she had not acknowledged shared belief but had questioned from a hypothetically neutral position, the student would have been more likely to assume her tutor's questions came from a place of antagonism and therefore have been more reluctant to engage in the session or even have become hostile in her actions. To avoid this, Morgan felt that identifying her own belief as far as it accorded with the student's would lead to a more productive writing session. Morgan felt comfortable saying, "Hey, I think you and I are actually on the same page,"

acknowledging that she and the client agreed in terms of their fundamental belief about abortion. From that place of identification, Morgan was then able to say, “But I think that what you’re saying is actually super offensive, and here’s why.” Ultimately, Morgan didn’t know whether her client changed her belief or not on the basis of the session, but she did think the client came to a better understanding of the truth that “these beliefs might affect real people in real ways, and I need to be really careful how I frame this argument.” Morgan felt her shared understanding gave her a unique position from which she could help the student better understand the implications of the argument she had made.

Not only did identification serve as a way of moving students toward more nuanced understandings of the topics their writing addressed, but the act also served as a way of mitigating potential negative effects of criticism. By employing identification, tutors aimed to put their clients at ease, posturing themselves as offering criticism from a place of common identity instead of antagonism. Hank, for example, referenced a conference in which a student came in for a session with a paper about the impact of technology use on individuals. Hank recalled responding to the reading of the student’s paper by commenting, “I do agree with you, but...” After establishing agreement with this client, Hank went on to address some points of concern in his client’s paper. Hank said, “I think I expressed my agreement to be an encouragement to the student so that he didn’t think that his whole position was invalid, but I gave that support by saying, ‘I think you’re arguing some really creative and useful things here, but we need to strengthen these sections of your essay.’” Here, agreement served as a tool for critique, enabling Hank to soften the blow of what he thought might be

taken as harsh criticism. Hank was “trying to springboard from agreement into some areas where we could actually improve the essay as a whole.”

Hank’s actions represent a different goal in the use of identification. He used agreement as a way of establishing rapport with a client in order to then offer critique, as opposed to identifying in order to push for a more nuanced view of a topic. He identified with the student so that he could both question and push back charitably. Jamie said he felt this particular use of identification was “a natural human tendency. Like, I can beat up on my little brothers and that's okay, but if someone else beats up on my little brothers then it's a lot more offensive.” With this parallel, he turned back to the writing conference and said, “in the same way, with argumentation, I can beat up on someone else's argument if we're kind of part of that same mindset, that same family. But if it's someone from the outside, both sides are more likely to be more offended overall.” By expressing agreement, the tutors aligned themselves with their clients, theoretically putting those clients at ease and enabling the tutors to ask harder questions of the ideas their clients presented. The participants in this study could only speak to their impressions of how their actions impacted their clients; I collected no data on the clients. Further research on identification in sessions of agreement could examine client experience when tutors employed identification and seek to more fully understand the benefits clients experience when their tutors identify common ground as opposed to responding with primarily hypothetical positions and ideas.

What defined the approaches of tutors who identified common ground with their clients was the fact that the tutors and their clients agreed in some way about a fundamental belief. The inverse of sessions in which tutors felt

uncomfortable acknowledging their own beliefs because they conflicted with client belief, in these sessions the tutors could essentially tell their clients, “I ultimately agree with you,” thereby establishing common ground. After identifying with the client in that way, the tutors could then help their clients consider different perspectives on the beliefs they had expressed, sharing these new perspectives while reminding the clients, in Morgan’s words, “to picture me as a real human” when offering new viewpoints on this topic. In this way, the tutors presented themselves as representatives of potential counterarguments held by real people with real beliefs held as deeply as the client held their own. Tutors felt that presenting these counterarguments after acknowledging common ground made their clients more receptive to these new ideas.

Identification in Sessions of Disagreement

While identification formed a primary method of engaging clients in sessions of agreement, some tutors saw value in employing a different form of identification in sessions of disagreement. As opposed to identifying common ground as the basis for the session, tutors would instead identify their own ignorance, or at least feigned ignorance, on the topic addressed in writing. Like with acts of identification of common ground, tutors hoped that identifying their own ignorance would put their clients at ease, as the clients would not have to wonder whether the tutors’ questions came from places of antagonism. Especially in the case of feigned ignorance, tutors hoped this identification of ignorance might enable their clients to see their ideas from new perspectives.

Morgan recalled a particular session in which she purposefully identified her ignorance on a matter. At Baylor, some writing instructors assign a “This I

Believe” paper in which students have to write essays about particular beliefs or traditions that are important to them and explain why those beliefs or heritages are important. In the session Morgan recounted, a client, “6’5”, super buff, camo jacket, camo hat,” came in writing one of these “This I Believe” essays. This particular student was writing “about how his family tradition is duck hunting.” Morgan said her initial, internal reaction was, “I don’t like guns, and I don’t like people owning guns...I don’t know anything about hunting. Hunting is for lame, creepy weirdos.” On a fundamental level, Morgan was opposed not only to hunting as an activity, but even to the ownership of guns, a necessary component of hunting. When talking with the student at the beginning of the session, Morgan felt she would be able to identify no common ground for the purposes of the session, and she prepared to adopt tutoring strategies accordingly.

Because Morgan had decided the session about hunting would be what I would term a session of disagreement, she felt identifying her ignorance about hunting would be the most effective strategy for conducting a productive session. As a result, she was open with the client about her lack of knowledge about hunting, playing up the nature of that ignorance while keeping private her own feelings about the activity. Morgan recalled that she began the session by asking the student, “Hey, I don’t know a lot about hunting. Can I ask you some questions?” In this way, Morgan did not assume a hypothetical position but instead questioned the client from a place of genuine ignorance. She said that she was “very forward” about her ignorance, and “even told him I was from California and no one in my family owns guns, just to make it super obvious, like, ‘I truly don’t. I’m not making this up.’” She felt that acknowledging this ignorance would offer her an inoffensive way of asking the student questions

about his commitment to hunting; these questions would be questions of genuine inquiry as opposed to questions inherently antagonistic toward his tradition. Just like with identification of common ground, Morgan felt that identifying her ignorance on the topic would prove advantageous in terms of putting the student at ease and enabling her to ask questions more productively. In taking the stance she did, Morgan only partially revealed her personal knowledge about hunting. She still kept her negative view of hunting private, feeling that acknowledging that component of her opinion would have been counterproductive to her initial goal in expressing ignorance.

Like Morgan, not all tutors who identified ignorance in sessions were completely open with their clients about the nature of that ignorance. In Morgan's case, for example, she was not as fully ignorant regarding hunting as she made it seem; after all, she had developed an opinion on the activity, so she had at least a base level of knowledge about hunting. Speaking of identifying ignorance in this way, Teresa wondered, "Does the ignorance have to be genuine?" Teresa questioned whether identifying feigned ignorance would be as effective as acknowledging a genuine lack of knowledge about a particular topic or issue. Feigning ignorance, while effective in Morgan's case, perhaps because it was mostly truthful ignorance, aligned more closely with other strategies employed in sessions of disagreement, such as appealing to hypothetical counterarguments in the context of the rhetorical situation. Whatever ethical concerns may accompany falsely assumed ignorance, it is important to note that within the context of sessions of disagreement, hypothetical responses still played a role even when tutors employed Burkean identification.

Though Morgan was not open about the totality of her belief on hunting, by focusing on areas in which her knowledge was truly lacking, Morgan essentially put the student in control of the session, posturing herself as needing to learn from him. This was a major benefit of identification of ignorance: tutors handed over control of the session to the clients, as the clients became the experts and had the responsibility to explain for their tutors the topics on which they were writing. Yet while Morgan thought her questions would help her client reconsider his own view of hunting, his answers ended up shaping Morgan's view instead: she learned more than she anticipated and came away with a new appreciation for the activity she had disdained. It was Morgan, not her client, who ended up experiencing a transformation in perspective. Listening to the client read his paper, Morgan was shocked to hear how eloquently and effectively he had written about the importance of hunting to his family. He had done so in ways in ways that Morgan never expected to hear; her assumptions were shattered. Morgan said, "It's, to this date, the most beautiful piece of student writing that I have ever read. I'm not joking. It was just stunning and made me really think about it." Because of the effectiveness of the student's writing style and the ways the narrative described hunting, Morgan reconsidered her own opinion on the activity. Morgan found herself "haunted by how good the paper was" and seeing hunting from a new perspective. She realized that for her student, the activity was more than simply some masculine act of sport; instead, hunting was "beautiful and communal and out in nature and quasi-spiritual." Though Morgan had started out antagonistic toward hunting, her view of the activity was complicated, challenged, and ultimately changed by the

student's writing and the profound ways in which he described and demonstrated the importance of hunting in his and his family's lives.

Not every tutor who employed identification of ignorance in sessions of disagreement experienced a change in perspective as a result. Morgan claimed she adopted this strategy quite frequently for sessions of disagreement, but the session on hunting was the only one she ever recalled impacting her in the way that it did. Morgan said that typically when she disagreed with a client's writing and identified her own ignorance as a response, she would "frame [her response] in terms of, 'I'm not from such-and-such a background,' or, 'I don't know a lot about this social position.'" In this way, Morgan said, "I can jokingly let them into my own background without being like, 'I don't believe in X.'" Identification of ignorance allowed tutors to be open about their lack of knowledge on a topic but still keep the full nature of their belief on that topic, even if uninformed, private. By adopting this form of identification as a tool for sessions of disagreement, tutors were able to leverage ignorance to the benefit of the session, diffusing tension and prompting student thought.

Discussion

Tutors primarily employed acts of identification in sessions of agreement. In these sessions, identifying common ground required tutors to be honest with their clients about the nature of their own belief, something these tutors had described as inappropriate in the context of sessions of disagreement; even the identification of ignorance in sessions of disagreement, though calling for some acknowledgement of belief on the part of the tutor, did not require tutors to admit when their own beliefs contradicted their clients'. Contrastingly,

identification in sessions of agreement required tutors to do the very thing they had cited as inappropriate. When asked, tutors did not have an answer as to why they felt acknowledgement of their own belief was acceptable in one instance but not in another.

On the level of social interaction, of course, it makes sense why tutors would be more comfortable with stating their ideas when those ideas accord with their clients'. Saying we agree with someone doesn't put them on their guard. Agreement establishes a sense of community, whereas disagreement has a more negative social function. Yet if the tutors' goal is pushing their clients toward higher levels of critical and independent thinking or more thoughtful opinions, then tutors being open about their own beliefs only in the context of agreement seems to be doing only half of the work. Some opposition to sharing beliefs in sessions of disagreement arose in the realm of authority; tutors worried that if their clients saw them as authority figures, they may adopt the tutors' viewpoint only because they thought the tutor must be more knowledgeable and therefore correct. But if that is true for sessions of disagreement, then that rule should apply to sessions of agreement, as well. If the concern is that clients will take tutors' words as the final authority, then acts of identification would present the same risks.

Even if there are risks in the implementation of identification within the writing conference, the strategy seems ripe with benefits for both tutor and student. Tutors who employed Burkean identification experienced more positive sessions overall. While I collected no data on client response to identification, future research might seek to understand the ways clients experience sessions in which their tutors identify real, common belief instead of relying wholly on

hypothetical ideas. Tutors who work to identify common ground treat their clients' writing and beliefs—even those with which they don't fully agree—charitably and positively. In identifying common ground, tutors affirm a certain aspect of their client's beliefs without focusing solely on the source of disagreement. And, as tutors in this study pointed out, even if the identification of common ground serves as a precursor to later pushback, clients seem to receive that pushback more positively. By first identifying common ground, tutors posit their feedback as coming from a place of care and shared belief as opposed to antagonism or a particular agenda. Identification allows tutors an opportunity to both model and engage in charitable argumentation.

Of course, the use of identification as a tutoring strategy is not without its potential problems. Even if identifying common ground is a natural human tendency, without a conscious recognition of their goals in identifying with clients, tutors run the risk of perverting the act. Identification in writing conferences aimed at even a slight change in client belief could become manipulative. As the tutor acknowledges shared belief to put the client at ease, the client may become more receptive to ideas she would have never before considered. While opening a client's mind to a new idea is not problematic, it could become so if the client has aligned herself too closely with the tutor. Particularly given the tutor's position of power and shared point of belief, the client may adopt a viewpoint solely out of a feeling of community or trust. While identification certainly gives the tutor a unique position from which to help their clients, that unique position could easily become an unhealthy one. Additionally, some tutors who hold offensive beliefs themselves might merely reaffirm troubling beliefs clients express in writing.

Identifying feigned ignorance is another strategy that carries potential ethical issues. Even if the strategy is effective, conveying false ignorance portrayed as genuine raises concerns. Regardless of the tutors' goals for the sessions, feigning ignorance in such a way that the client thinks that ignorance is genuine raises ethical red flags. Beyond this, if tutors hope to help her clients come to more nuanced understandings of a topic through that feigned ignorance, their tactics could become manipulative. The tutors may not have malicious intentions, but by portraying themselves as unknowledgeable in an attempt to put their clients at ease, tutors risk priming those clients for manipulation.

While tutors' use of identification in sessions of agreement might not be surprising, it is worth considering why identification as a strategy differed so drastically from the other strategies used in sessions of disagreement at all. Perhaps most notably, conversations about the distinction between form and content were absent from discussions about identification. In recounting identification as a strategy, tutors made no distinction between the form of the writing and the ideas their clients were discussing, even though no tutor noted this difference during the interviews. To deal with ideas productively and fairly, it seems that tutors should employ similar strategies regardless of the clients' beliefs. Employing similar strategies for all sessions would ensure equitable treatment of all ideas, beliefs, and viewpoints, and make acts of identification less prone to manipulation; if tutors were constantly and consistently engaging their clients with real ideas, there could be no hint that they were only sharing their belief in order to manipulate their clients. To be clear, no tutor participating in this study expressed that aim in identifying shared belief with students, but these tutors represent only eight tutors at one university, compared to the thousands of

tutors at writing centers across the country. For tutors to employ different strategies when they agree with clients as opposed to when they disagree with clients, while common, is not necessarily an ideal practice.

Yet, as the chapter on sessions of disagreement revealed, the solution to the potential problems with identification is not asking tutors to remain silent about their own beliefs when those beliefs contradict the ideas expressed in student writing. Employing identification pushes tutors further toward an ultimately ideal tutoring session. Much of the danger in identification lies with tutors who are not aware of the reasons they employ the act. If tutors cannot articulate why identification of shared belief might be appropriate in some instances but not in others, they cannot be confident they are acting properly in either scenario. Identification should not stop at sessions of agreement, for as this study has shown, it can function well in both sessions of agreement and disagreement. Tutors who do the work of establishing common ground regardless of the nature of the session are likely to find a similar receptiveness from their clients. Tutors think in terms of the rhetorical situation and argumentation quite frequently, and as Teresa said, identifying common ground is an important element of argumentation. By working identification into sessions of all types, tutors would not only model for their clients an important component of charitable argumentation, but they would also be compelled to work with their clients not only on writing style but on content, as well. Both identifying common ground and identifying ignorance prevent tutors from divorcing writing form from content, as they must not only model a way of engaging differing ideas but must actually engage with those ideas in order to effectively identify with clients.

CHAPTER FOUR

Toward A Theory of Tutor Engagement

Discussion

Because of the non-directive training most writing tutors receive (Clark; Corbett “Negotiating”; Pemberton; North; Ryan and Zimmereli), these tutors may feel ill-equipped to handle sessions in which their clients bring in writing expressing difficult or even offensive belief. Research on the writing center offers tutors little in terms of advice on handling sessions over difficult belief, and the advice that research does offer for such scenarios is often contradictory (Freed; Sherwood; Janangelo; Green; Agostinelli). As a result, tutors are left to develop their own methods of navigating difficult sessions, often doing so without the assistance of theoretical frameworks as they have to make difficult decisions in the moment, with little time to prepare.

In order to remedy the issue of tutor unpreparedness in the face of sessions over difficult or offensive material, writing center scholars must aim to theorize productive methods for tutor engagement in such sessions. Yet such theorizing will not be effective unless we first understand the methods tutors have already developed for navigating complex and challenging sessions. Before the writing center community can move toward effective theories for tutor engagement, it must first seek to learn and examine the ways tutors are already responding to difficult sessions. Then, by theorizing the appropriateness and effectiveness of the methods tutors are already employing, writing centers can

begin to develop methods of response for tutors facing sessions involving difficult and offensive belief.

This study aimed to investigate the methods tutors have already adopted for dealing with difficult sessions. Interviewing current and past writing centers tutors, I was able to ask participants about their behavior and methods for navigating both “sessions of disagreement” (sessions in which the tutor and client disagreed about the nature of a significant belief, one that factored heavily into the client’s writing) and “sessions of agreement” (sessions in which tutor and client agreed about the nature of the same type of belief). Tutors recounted details of their sessions, and I identified five specific themes that emerged in tutor discussion. These themes included acts of Burkean identification, both of common ground and ignorance; framing within the rhetorical situation; influence of non-directive tutoring; and debate over the connection between form and content of writing. Identification was a response that occurred in both sessions of agreement and disagreement, while the other four responses were limited to sessions of disagreement.

Tutors most often employed Burkean identification as a strategy in sessions of agreement. Tutors would be open with their client about the nature of their belief regarding the topic expressed in writing insofar as that belief mirrored the client’s. In other words, tutors identified the lowest common denominator of shared belief with a client—the common ground of their belief. After identifying common ground, tutors usually worked to push their clients to develop more nuanced or fuller understandings of topics in order to help their clients become better educated on their topics and craft more effective arguments. Tutors felt that acknowledging shared belief put clients at ease,

allowing tutors to ask questions without the clients assuming those questions came from a place of antagonism. Tutors did not have a name for this strategy, but their behavior accorded well with the theory of identification established by Kenneth Burke in *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Identification allowed tutors to establish a sense of community with their clients and work with their clients' arguments in more charitable, and potentially more productive, ways.

In sessions of disagreement, tutors sometimes identified their own ignorance, verbally acknowledging their lack of knowledge or opinion on topics about which their clients were writing. This form of identification in sessions of disagreement achieved some of the same ends as identification in sessions of agreement. Tutors hoped that playing up their ignorance, real or feigned, would put their clients at ease and enable the tutors to ask the clients clarifying questions without seeming hostile. Even if the tutors did have an opinion on a topic, they found that focusing on their lack of knowledge about a specific aspect of the topic, or feigning ignorance about the topic as a whole, was most effective.

One potential problem with identification as a tutoring strategy is that tutors could become intentionally or unintentionally manipulative, lulling clients into a false sense of identification in order to sway them into adopting new beliefs. Tutors felt comfortable sharing their belief in the context of sessions of agreement, even when they felt the same was inappropriate in sessions of disagreement. This incongruence of opinion on what constitutes appropriate tutor behavior points not only to inconsistent application of tutoring theory but also to a lack of understanding regarding the role of the tutor. With identification of ignorance, dangers arise particularly when tutors fake their ignorance in order to establish rapport. In such instances, tutors are not being wholly honest with

their clients, and their questions could easily and unintentionally become leading or manipulative in nature.

Another popular method for engaging sessions of disagreement was for tutors to frame their responses to their clients in terms of the rhetorical situation ("Rhetorical Situation"; Schneider). Whether the tutors shared their own beliefs about a topic or remained in the realm of the hypothetical, tutors justified their actions by appealing to the rhetorical situation. Often, tutors made claims that they were trying to help their clients understand the need for fair counterarguments, clearer definitions of terms, etc. These appeals to the rhetorical situation also included appeals to audience, external sources of authority, and assignment goals. While a focus on the rhetorical situation in writing center sessions is both logical and appropriate, tutors could not articulate why bringing up beliefs that contradicted their clients' was acceptable when the tutors posited those beliefs as hypothetical but was unacceptable if the beliefs the tutors wanted to address were their own.

Many tutors admitted their insistence in appealing to the rhetorical situation was birthed out of the non-directive training they had received. In looking to the rhetorical situation, tutors were able to act in the context of writing theory, avoiding both directive instruction and conflict about the material contained in their clients' writing. Some tutors felt protected by non-directive tutoring methods, specifically in sessions of disagreement. These tutors felt freed from obligation to address either their own belief or problematic belief on the part of the client because they felt their training did not allow for direct conversation on personal belief. By asking questions, they were able to avoid confrontation or tense moments. Other tutors, however, felt constrained by the

non-directive method. Some of these tutors felt strongly opposed to the views their clients expressed in writing, sometimes believing those views were harmful to the students holding them; even so, they felt they were unable to address the beliefs directly. These tutors wanted to act, even feeling compelled to do so, but they believed such actions were inappropriate given the nature of their training. Thus, tutors viewed and applied their non-directive training inconsistently. This inconsistent understanding of non-directive tutoring suggests the writing center community may benefit from a fuller explanation of the nature and application of non-directive tutoring, particularly in the context of difficult or offensive ideas.

Finally, tutors' decisions of whether or how to act in sessions of disagreement were informed by their understandings of the connection between writing form and content. Whereas some tutors saw a distinct divide between the two, others found form and content inextricably woven together. Those tutors who saw a divide between form and content identified one as more important than the other, suggesting writing style can be effective and even ethical regardless of the nature of the content addressed. These tutors believed their role was to focus on the form of writing, employing non-directive modes of questioning to help their clients enhance the ways they wrote about their topics. Not all tutors agreed form and content could be divided, however. Even though these tutors were unaware of scholarship suggesting the same (Hillocks; Aumann; Doty; Ashwell; Wysocki), they did not see how writing could be ethical if the ideas contained in it were not. For these tutors, a discussion of writing necessitated a discussion of the ideas expressed by that writing; these tutors did not say they had to share their own opinions about those ideas in order to have

productive sessions, but they could not envision ways of engaging with their clients' writing that did not involve engaging the ideas as a part of that discussion.

Ultimately, my conversations with tutors revealed that they had inconsistent understandings of appropriate behavior for their roles as tutors when faced with writing about a significant belief. Even though these tutors had all received comparable training from the same leadership at the same university, they still had disparate understandings of the application of that training. In these differing applications, some tutors felt constrained from ever straightforwardly addressing content of student writing, focusing on structure and form instead of the ideas expressed in their clients' writing, while others felt positively freed by their training from any ethical obligation to address problematic ideas. Out of these differing views, tutors developed differing strategies for navigating sessions of agreement and sessions of disagreement. While similar themes emerged through coding tutor responses, the responses were nevertheless individualized to the tutors who had adopted them. Though informed by their training, tutors' strategies were not birthed directly out of that training. Their mostly non-directive training alternatively constrained and freed them, but that training did not offer explicit guidance for tutors forced to navigate sessions dealing with difficult or offensive belief.

Writing center tutors could benefit primarily from a more conscious recognition of the ways they are behaving in sessions of disagreement and agreement. Coding of interview data, not tutors themselves, revealed the themes I have identified. With sessions of agreement, for example, tutors were acting in ways that very closely mirrored Burkean identification, but tutors were unaware

of that theoretical framework and unaware of the implications of that behavior. Because they had adopted these techniques on their own, the tutors had not considered theoretical rationales for or implications of their actions, nor had they considered how their strategies in some sessions contradicted their strategies in others. Training tutors to be more self-conscious of their tutoring methods, considering why they do what they do and the implications of those actions, would prove beneficial for tutors and clients alike.

After establishing a more self-conscious mode of tutoring, writing center leaders should work with tutors to develop fuller theoretical understandings of the strategies they have developed for navigating sessions of agreement and disagreement. Instead of trying to construct wholly new strategies for navigating these challenging sessions, the writing center community would most benefit from greater exploration of the underlying principles and implications of the strategies tutors have already adopted. This exploration may reveal that some strategies tend toward the unethical, but it would also help to reveal the most effective strategies tutors have developed. Investigating in greater detail the themes explored in this study would allow the writing center community to consciously reject those behaviors that are potentially detrimental to tutor and client while also offering tutors and leaders opportunities to further enhance and refine the most effective strategies.

Though more research needs to be done in this area, one of the strategies identified in this study that appears particularly useful for difficult sessions is Burkean identification. Employing identification allows tutors to continue framing their response to student writing in terms of the rhetorical situation, as identifying common ground with an audience is a part of argumentation.

Additionally, by working to identify a point of shared belief, tutors are encouraged to act charitably toward their clients. Even without admitting the particulars of the nature of their disagreement with client belief, tutors can still admit to their clients that while they do not agree with them fully, they do agree with them at a certain level. Identifying that shared belief would have all of the benefits of identification tutors acknowledged—making students feel more comfortable, positing themselves as charitable tutors and writers, etc. Certainly such a posture would be more inviting to clients, as this approach would both affirm parts of the clients' beliefs while also allowing tutors to share their own. Tutors might still choose to identify genuine ignorance in certain situations, but they could first work to identify the least common denominator of shared knowledge or belief. In Morgan's example about hunting, for example, she might inform her student of her ignorance about hunting but affirm that she, too, has family traditions that she holds dear and that have shaped her as a person, even traditions that may not be clearly significant to others. Identifying shared belief would help establish affinity between client and student, as well as establish a charitable and supportive tone for the sessions tutors encounter.

Certainly identification is not without its potential problems. As already acknowledged, identification could devolve into manipulation if tutors are not honest with themselves about their goals in using the strategy. If tutors only want to assure their clients of shared beliefs in order to challenge the clients' beliefs more aggressively, then the tutors have misunderstood the point of identification in the context of tutoring sessions. In theorizing a productive method for employing identification in both sessions of disagreement and agreement, writing center leaders must acknowledge potential problems with

identification and work to propose potential solutions within the frameworks of training they have already established. Thinking in terms of non-directive strategies, for example, we could train tutors to understand the purposes of identifying common ground as both mirroring charitable methods of argumentation and being honest about the level of shared belief between tutor and client; such a training must necessarily ensure tutors recognize their role is never attempting to forcibly or manipulatively change their client's belief, no matter how offensive it may be. This stipulation is important. Allowing tutors to insert their own beliefs on topics addressed in writing during does not mean those tutors should actively try to sway students from their beliefs. As Sherwood points out, the clients have a governmentally protected right to freedom of speech ("Censoring Students, Censoring Ourselves"). As easy it may be, we cannot conflate tutors sharing their own opinions with attempting to change those of their clients'. The former should be permissible, even encouraged, while the latter would lead to many problems.

Certainly, more study needs to be conducted on this topic. Scholarship would benefit a great deal from hearing about the similar experiences of tutors in other contexts. Greater diversity in terms of tutor race, socioeconomic status, age, gender, and writing center placement might illuminate different strategies for engaging in sessions, or it may reveal similar themes to those included in this study. Additionally, future research could examine the effects of these varying strategies, particularly identification, on clients, which would be helpful in determining overall efficacy of practices. There are a multitude of helpful avenues that could expand on the results I have presented in this study, and future research needs to be conducted on this issue before conclusive results can

be determined and procedures implemented. In the meantime, the writing center community would benefit from further consideration of ways Burkean identification might function in sessions concerning difficult or offensive belief and how identification might be merged into current training plans as opposed to functioning as a completely new addition to established methods of training. Tutor training, even if ongoing, is still limited by time, so practical considerations should factor into determinations of identification's place in tutor training. Even so, I think there are productive methods for grafting identification into the current non-directive, rhetorical training many tutors receive in ways that would benefit tutor, client, and the writing center community at large.

Conclusion

Because of the personal nature of writing, writing center tutors will undoubtedly face many sessions of difficult, emotional, or even offensive topics or belief expressed in student writing. Tutors' own deeply held beliefs may trouble them as they determine whether or not to address the ideas expressed in their clients' writing. These sessions will stretch tutors, who may feel ill-equipped for handling such encounters, uncertain of the appropriateness of a given response based on their training. At Baylor University, current and previous writing centers have done their best to adopt tutoring strategies that promote student learning while also addressing the context of the assignment and remaining obedient to the tutors' interpretations of their training. Even so, many of the tutors have adopted these strategies subconsciously, not thinking at great length about the theory behind or implications of their actions. This study has sought to better understand the framework through which tutors have

engaged in these sessions and to take steps toward theorizing productive ways tutors might engage in these difficult sessions going forward. While further study is needed to provide a better foundation for future action based on these results, this study has aimed to start a conversation that focuses on understanding the impact of writing center work on tutors while also equipping those tutors who facilitate the important and challenging work of writer development in writing centers across the country.

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