Reflection for Stephen McElroy

By Shaw Patton

From the beginning, Dr. McElroy encouraged us to refrain from taking one discourse within the tutoring pedagogy as dogma, but to instead synthesize and even interrogate the myriad of philosophies presented. Over the past six weeks, as I have had the pleasure of theorizing in the classroom while at the same time working hands-on in the writing center, these roles have informed each other, and I have developed a budding sense of my own set of tutoring ideals. Although, I have tutored before, as I mention in my literacy narrative, I have never had the opportunity to so formally and intensively interrogate or reflect on the act of tutoring.

Many of the concepts brought up in class, especially the more theoretical, were brand new to me. Previous to taking part in boot camp, my ideas about tutoring were more "gut instinct" (more on that later) and complimented by specific rules and procedures set forth by the TCC Learning Commons. The TCC program in its training placed some of its greatest emphasis on tutoring ESL students, so before attending this course, this was probably the area I was most familiar and confident in.

Ultimately, the goal in the writing center, and the department as a whole, is to be responsive to students' needs and desires in their development toward writing. It is our job then to guide and interpret what the students want, walking a fine line in attempting to keep ourselves from being overly prescriptive, yet not taking this to a vaudevillian extreme, and modeling and directing for students when necessary. The metaphor of the writing center as a storehouse found in Fitzgerald and first described by Lunsford, is a result of "internally consistent

philosophy that integrates a specific notion of writing excellence with an understanding of how the individual learns to write" (28). As I said in my Blackboard post, the piece acknowledges the waning popularity and, even to an extent, lessening credibility of the storehouse model, but I respect how it also acknowledged the impact, influence, and continued use of this approach in practice even if in theory it is not as popular.

Perhaps partially because my other writing center did not have the luxury of a dedicated six week training course, and their mission may have been aligned with other concerns, there seemed to have been a lot more regulations there. For example, we were heavily discouraged from writing on a student's' paper. Although, this is still fundamentally a good idea, as studies have proven that writing by hand helps create connections, and we do not want to discourage student agency of their work, there are legitimate reasons to write for the student. Often times, whether it is due to time constraints or a form of modeling, writing on a student's' paper is necessary and even productive. In one of the first articles we read, Linda Shamoon and Deb Burns are quoted in Gillespie as comparing certain sets of rigid ideals from tutors as the "writing center bible." These prescriptions within the writing center bible are treated as less a product of research but a way to serve as "articles of faith to validate a tutoring approach which 'feels right.'" (152-153). Rather than adhering to a writing center bible, the Gillespie and company emphasize research and practiced theories that will benefit students' writing from a more empirical means. Though, I overall agree with this mode of thinking, there are certainly situations (especially involving administration or the political) where reality trumps the theoretical or ideal.

Another goal in which I want to be more cognizant of is my encouragement of confidence in writers. Not that I did not try to encourage writers when I first tutored, but I never thought of how linked the idea of encouragement could be to advancement in writing. On the topic of

encouragement, it was a pleasure to shadow and co-tutor with Jenn who had a tremendous amount of empathy and an ability to react appropriately to vasty differing situations. In one sitting, I witnessed her go from tutoring an undergraduate who was there for the first time with a heavily marked up draft to the next session which was a PhD student working on a mostly polished formal grant and whom Jenn had been working with for weeks. In both cases, she was encouraging of their skills.

Though all the tutoring experiences were helpful in my evolving practices, I found it extremely important to visit the tutoring center as a student with my own rough draft. Many of us in the course had never gone to a writing center for help on our papers. On its face, it seems hypocritical, akin to coaching a sport but having never played it. I feel as if being in the writing center grounded some of the lofty notions we were going over during our discussions. I am reminded how North's second piece tamps down some of the idealistic elements of his first essay. Many of his same points from his first essay still stand but are curbed with how students and tutors more realistically act and treat writing (with a very different idea of how much of a willing collaborator a typical student may be). I confess that I may have been more prone to have visited a writing center as an undergraduate if it had been advertised and presented as an opportunity to have a tutor "observe and participate" (439). I never realized the extent to which writing centers can be viewed as having a PR problem. I, too, even after working in a writing center, had an idea of it as predominantly for "remedial writers." An ultimate truth North touches upon toward the end of his piece is the idiosyncratic nature of writing centers and their missions, as well as the differing needs of students.

One concept I am still working through is the idea of collaboration in writing. One assumption is that collaboration is ultimately progressive, and while I mostly agree, the reality is more complicated. Though Lunsford describes the many ways in which collaboration has been

proven to strengthen writing, she also cautions that "collaboration often masquerades as democracy when it in fact practices the same old authoritarian control." Also, collaboration is decidedly difficult to successfully implement. A lack of means to effectively evaluate the individual, tendency to support the status quo (and perhaps quell individual creativity), and pushback from the academic community are all issues that arise from collaboration in student writing. Opportunities listed include aiding in critical thinking and problem solving. These are positive factors of collaboration that cannot be ignored, and it is through this course that I have become more open to collaboration even while questioning it. There is of course the inescapable fact that tutoring is inherently collaborative as well as the act of writing itself which builds off conventions and others' writings.

Overall, it was enjoyable to be able to migrate through the role of student, theorist, co-tutor and tutor over the past month. I was already excited to come back to the classroom after an extended break from academia, but I had forgotten how fulfilling tutoring could be as well. In fact, due in a large part to my experience tutoring by myself, I hope to return to the writing center again (perhaps next summer).