Review of *A Synthesis of Qualitative Studies of Writing Center Tutoring 1983-2006*

Babcock, R.D., Manning, K., Rogers, T., Goff, C., & McCain, A. (2012). *A synthesis of qualitative studies of writing center tutoring 1983-2006.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

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What components are involved in writing centers, and what is a successful tutoring session? Even though a great deal of research has been conducted on writing centers, no overarching theory providing a picture of this topic had emerged until the publication of *A Synthesis of Qualitative Studies of Writing Center Tutoring 1983-2006*. This work provides a useful summary of qualitative research studies on college-level writing center tutorials of the last 20 years, and builds a theoretical framework for writing center tutoring. The book synthesizes 58 qualitative research studies of writing centers by using a grounded theory analysis, and the data are drawn from 26 dissertations, 3 book chapters, 28 journal articles, and one paper from a conference proceeding, which includes studies using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Relying on only the actual data presented in the studies, not commentary or conclusions by the authors, *A Synthesis of Qualitative Studies of Writing Center Tutoring 1983-2006* describes, rather than prescribes or evaluates, what constitutes a tutoring session, and what writing center tutorial practices look like.

In this volume, the authors effectively analyze, compare, and contrast the issues that have been addressed in the writing center research literature to date. This book identifies 7 domains of tutoring sessions and discusses each domain. First, the effect of the personal characteristics of the tutor and the tutee on the tutoring session is discussed. The personal characteristics identified include knowledge of a certain subject, education or training, tendency to seek out a tutor of the same race, gender stereotypes, age, non-native speaker or native speaker status, disabilities, preparedness, attitude, writing skills, and outward appearance.

The authors explain that external influences such as the discourse community and Standard English also affect the tutor and the tutee, and impact tutoring sessions. The external influences on the tutee's part include the nature of the academic discourse in question, the subjects being studied, the course that the tutee is taking, the tutee's teacher, and other people who act as resources or the audience of the tutee's paper. Other external influences involve the university, the director of the writing center who is in charge of the selection of tutors and training, the duration of the relationship between the tutor and the tutee inside and outside of the tutoring session, expectations that the tutor and the tutee bring to the tutoring sessions, the cultural milieu, the physical space, time pressure, and the medium (either on-line or face-to-face).

The next topic of discussion deals with the domain of communication between the tutor and the tutee. Through the influence of personal characteristics and external influences, the tutor and the tutee communicate to build an interpersonal relationship and to get the work done. They use various listening styles, different types of questions, purposeful praise, negotiation of meaning, humor and laughter, "communication to connect with each other" (p. 48), various discourse features, and non-verbal strategies.

Another area that emerged in the literature of the tutoring sessions is the roles that the tutor and tutee consciously choose. The tutors' role can move along a continuum between directive and non-directive. The relationship of the roles of the tutor and the tutee can also move along a continuum between confrontational and non-confrontational. The roles are related to the degree of taking charge of the session, being active or passive, managing authority, feminine or masculine tutoring style, exercising power, resistance on the part of the tutee, being either a teacher or a peer, and the sincerity of the tutor's opinion about the tutee's work.

Emotion is also an important factor in the tutoring relationship. The emotions discussed in this book include frustration due to thwarted expectations or collaboration; fear of the other, his or her work, or even technology; guilt about unmet goals; confusion; and comfort/discomfort. Temperament, a person's stable natural state, also influences the tutoring session. (In)sensitivity to another's cues, confidence, and empathy can be adjusted during the session. Depending on all the other factors discussed, outcomes are determined in terms of session focus, authority, material outcomes, and relationship.

Babcock and her colleagues find that two people having distinct personal characteristics affected by external influences communicate by negotiating their various roles, emotions, and temperaments to reach certain outcomes. A collaborative and efficacious tutoring session is shaped through the interaction of all these components.

While the body of *A Synthesis of Qualitative Studies of Writing Center Tutoring 1983-2006* deals with only the data presented in the studies, the conclusion includes the evaluations and commentaries that the researchers made in each study included in this project. The authors show that their findings match those of others, and make connections with other scholarship and other theories such as Vygotsky's theory with particular reference to the construct of the Zone of Proximal Development and the concept of scaffolding. Based on the domains affecting the tutoring session that have been summarized and analyzed, the conclusion considers what defines a successful session. Rather than presenting a set of conclusive criteria for success, this book posits "a system-based thinking" process through which the tutor and the tutee "will have negotiated their own definitions of success that seem, indeed, to be simultaneously variable, but limited to a range of possible favorable outcomes" (p.111).

An important implication of this project is that collaboration and efficacy during a tutorial session depend on the needs of the tutees. Distinguishing collaboration from success, and not overemphasizing the pedagogical view as opposed to the pragmatic view, are important points for other researchers to consider. Suggestions for future research concern work on the unique position of writing centers as "both a fixer of papers and an improver of writers" (p. 124). This simple phrase signifies the lived experiences of many writing tutors and researchers, a complicated reality of tutoring sessions.

With respect to the authors, Rebecca Day Babcock has dedicated her career to writing center research and was awarded the 2011 International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) Outstanding Article Award. Kellye Manning has taught writing for many years and serves as the director of the Writing Center and the coordinator of Developmental English at the University of Texas of the Permian Basin. Travis Rogers has worked at the same writing center under Kellye Manning. Their excellent credentials and background suggest that they have the expertise to write this synthesis and develop a coherent theory.

The most significant aspect of this book is that it exhaustively summarizes, analyzes, and compares the practices, theories, and issues related to writing center tutoring, which have been disconnected, and synthesizes them under a unified and comprehensive framework. As the authors mention, this study will serve as a description and not a prescription. Separating the data from the commentaries in the studies included is an innovative way to synthesize the relevant sources. The initial synthesis of the data from the studies gives readers an extensive description of what happens in a

writing center. Afterwards, bringing analytic commentaries in the studies to tie this work to other theories enables readers to think about how to reconcile diverse and sometimes contradictory findings among different studies. In this way, the authors succeed in giving the reader a thorough and consistent picture of writing center research by presenting the complex dimensions of writing centers and providing multiple perspectives from the lore and stereotypes of the writing center to academic research and pedagogical practices.

This volume would be a useful guide and resource for all who are involved in the writing center field, such as researchers, practitioners, administrators, and tutor trainers. The summary at the end of each chapter is extremely helpful since it includes not only brief findings of studies but also provides the citation of each finding.

Moreover, the introduction describes how this grounded theory project started and progressed: recruiting team members, preparing the team, making bibliography and inclusion/exclusion criteria, coding and debriefing with team members, developing a draft, member checking, developing a theory or framework based on results and findings. This detailed explanation provides a valuable resource for novice qualitative researchers.

It would have been more rewarding if the discussion of Babcock and her colleagues had included an in-depth discussion of the issues of non-native speakers or tutees with disabilities, since tutorial sessions with these populations are characterized by very different power dynamics from those with native speakers. Further discussion of the connection between plagiarism and tutoring would also have been beneficial.

The authors emphasize that there may not be one general way for humans to learn best, and that it is essential to meet the tutee's needs and to understand tutoring as a whole. This comment sounds like common sense, but it is difficult to practice. Like other topics of social science and studies of human beings, writing center tutoring involves a dizzying number of strategies and inordinate possibilities for chaos, and thus needs adaptation, cooperation, and collaboration on the part of researchers and practitioners. As Babcock and other researchers comment, a researcher's job is "to prepare pedagogy for a leap forward" (p. 121). *A Synthesis of Qualitative Studies of Writing Center Tutoring 1983-2006* would serve as a departure point for this leap, and thus is a necessary book for all who are engaged in writing center tutoring.