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A Synthesis of Qualitative Studies of Writing Center Tutoring 1983–2006 is a meta-research project that first gathers and describes the findings of multiple qualitative studies of what transpires during writing center tutorials and then attempts to develop a theory to inform and enhance writing tutorial practices. The text begins with a brief overview of the development of writing centers, and a discussion of the common issues faced by writing centers, such as how tutors collaborate and how tutees respond to directive and non-directive tutoring. The authors’ self-described impetus for the project is the need for “a theory grounded in data rather than in abstractions in order to present a complete model of what actually happens in tutoring sessions” (4). Organizing the reviewed studies according to various factors that impact what occurs during tutoring sessions as well as what results from the tutoring session, Babcock et al. focus on findings rather than researchers’ judgments and opinions in order to cleanly present the data. After detailing five factors and findings about each, the authors offer their own conclusions, including a description of what occurs in any tutoring session. Ultimately, though, data synthesis leads the authors to argue that writing centers should reconsider notions of collaboration, success, and direct versus indirect tutoring to find a middle ground where tutoring techniques blend “the ways of the old grammarians and the techniques of writing teachers who want their students to focus on self-expression” (123).

In their introduction, the authors describe the impetus for the project as well as their research methods, arguing that now is the time for a theory of writing centers built from the collected findings of qualitative studies and focused on what transpires during a writing tutorial. Chapters two through eight detail findings from the qualitative studies that the research team reviewed. Chapter two catalogue personal characteristics that impact the tutorial, largely in terms of “credibility, attractiveness, and power of the interlocutor” (13). These characteristics of interlocutors include knowledge, experience, race, sex, age, native language, (dis)ability, cultural identity, preparation, positive or negative attitude, writing skills, and appearance. Chapters two through eight all conclude with a summary of bulleted findings about each of these factors. Chapter three describes external influences on the writing tutorial, beginning with “[t]he entire discourse community as a whole, and Standard English
in particular” (27). From there, the authors describe findings regarding the impact of the university, academic discourse, the subject, the course, the teacher, the director, other people, duration of the tutoring relationship, expectations, cultural milieu, physical space, time of session(s), and medium (face to face and/or online). Chapter four recounts findings that explore communication—the tools by which the tutor and tutee relate to one another interpersonally through the tutoring relationship. Listening, questioning, praise, negotiation, laughter, connectedness—these are the discourse features and non-verbal cues that comprise the categories in this chapter. Though the authors work to avoid making sweeping conclusions in the chapters, they do acknowledge some common findings. The discussion of praise, for example, reveals that some researchers found that praise was sometimes misinterpreted—tutors used it as politeness, rather than as genuine commentary on the effectiveness of a written text, or of writing practices; tutees assumed the praise was genuine and became upset when the tutor then questioned the practice or paper later. Though this finding alone doesn’t lead to any specific prescription for how and when to employ praise in communicating during a writing tutorial, it does offer opportunity for readers to consider how, why, and with what possible effects the participants in a tutoring session relate interpersonally.

In chapter five, the authors explore the nature of roles in the tutoring session, demonstrating that each person plays various roles in the writing tutorial that are “mostly consciously chosen” (59). Some of the role categories described here include (non)directive, (non)confrontational, controlling, (non)authoritarian, gendered, and resistant. The discussion of the various roles that tutors and tutees assume during tutoring sessions demonstrates a rift between what tutors are taught to do and what they actually do, as well as a rift between what produces successful results for tutees, both materially (an improved paper) and affectively (satisfaction with the tutoring and confidence in developing writing skills). The authors offer a rather short discussion of emotion in chapter six, where tutor and tutee experiences are categorized rather simplistically in terms of frustration, fear, guilt, confusion, and comfort. Chapter seven details findings pertaining to temperament. Again rather simplistically, the categorization identifies three temperaments: (in)sensitivity, confidence, and empathy. Here the authors generate some conclusive observations based on the studies they have reviewed. For example, Babcock et al. argue that “[t]he natural disposition for most tutors is to empathize with a tutee to establish rapport” (84).

The authors discuss outcomes of tutoring sessions in chapter eight, arguing that all of the previously discussed factors converge to create the “focus” of the writing tutorial, which “results in the outcome” (87). Though they recognize at the outset that outcomes can be affective, cognitive, and/or material, the writers do not sort the findings according to these categories, but rather organize
findings by session focus, authority, material outcomes, and relationship status. As to the last of these, Babcock, Manning, and Rogers argue that relationship status is “characterized by solidarity, trust and comfort (or lack thereof), and is displayed in the tutoring session through collaboration and conflict, authority, and empowerment” (91).

The concluding chapter provides a helpful exploration of the difficulty in drawing general conclusions about their collected findings as a result of differing terminology around the notion of success. Rather than simply serving as an explanation for their inability to offer something akin to “guidelines for good writing tutorials,” this explanation anchors the main argument of the text: writing centers, tutors, and teachers need to rethink how success is defined in the context of tutoring sessions. The authors also invoke Marysia Johnson’s “theory of coconstruction” in secondary language acquisition studies and Lev Vygotsky’s “scaffolding” in order to offer an additional challenge to the notion of collaboration in tutorial situations. With these concepts, the authors argue that tutoring is a negotiation of the participants, in which both have personalities, communication styles, expectations, and desires for results that affect the session, either to its detriment or success. In closing, Babcock, Manning, and Rogers find that what theoretically should occur in tutoring (non-directive, student-centered approaches) is not what practically happens in writing tutorials (directive, text-centered or tutor-centered approaches). This may very well be an indication that familiar concepts for judging a session successful are not in practice for tutors or for tutees. The prescription is for more research into a “middle ground,” where effective writing center practices are a combination of “complementary features from the ways of the old grammarians and the techniques of writing teachers who want their students to focus on self-expression” (123).

_A Synthesis of Qualitative Studies of Writing Center Tutoring 1983–2006_ offers teachers, tutors, and writing center administrators a wealth of findings from various qualitative studies about what happens during writing center tutorials. Findings are categorized and discussed in a clear, direct, and largely unadulterated fashion. Though the collected findings are probably too basic for experienced writing center scholars, the text would serve nicely as a quick reference to a great deal of information. And beyond writing center walls, this text would be an excellent resource for writing teachers with only a peripheral, and largely lore-inspired notion of what happens in writing tutorials. Babcock et al. note at the outset of the book that distrust and misunderstandings between writing center tutors and teachers continue to make the work difficult, and their work goes a long way to both demonstrate that much goes on during writing center tutorials (it is complex), and that tutors are conscious of and attendant to the myriad complications. Babcock, Manning, Rogers, and Goff also nicely
set the stage for further research, not just in the call for further development of effective writing center practices, but even within the descriptions of studies in chapters two through eight, where an absence of collected qualitative work on a variety of tutoring factors and issues is evident. Though the conclusions fall short of offering writing center theory, as promised in their introduction, the authors effectively explain how theories and prescriptions might be premature—that basic notions of success, collaboration, and directive tutoring practices need further consideration.

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