

Noisy Writing, Quiet Speaking? Exploring Conversations in Writing and Speaking Centers

By Shireen Campbell, Davidson College

Recently, my institution bolstered its emphasis on oral communication, which had been previously limited to two speech courses a year, taught by an adjunct. The first step involved hiring a full professor in communications, who would provide faculty development and offer support for oral communication through developing a speaking center in addition to teaching two courses and hiring other instructors for communications courses. After this professor was hired, she and I and another colleague in rhetoric and composition began discussing how our writing center and proposed speaking center could coexist and be mutually supportive.

By spring 2005, the college decided to house both the existing writing center and the new speaking center in one space, each directed by the faculty member with relevant experience. This expansion coincided with a facilities redesign. As the directors discussed the new space, some conceptual differences emerged. Whereas writing centers are often open spaces, featuring semiprivate conversational areas, the speaking center director requested private spaces with opaque glass and sound-proofing.

The speaking center joined the writing center in August 2005. In fall 2006, three semesters later, I decided to investigate the conversations taking place both within our separate tutorial areas and between them. This research had two main components: I analyzed tutorial tapes of sessions from both centers; I surveyed both tutorial staffs to see how and if writing and speaking center practices parallel and/or diverge from each other.

The results surprised and heartened me and have intriguing implications for tutor training and development in our writing and speaking centers.

Methods

After I got project approval from our human subjects institutional review board, recordings began in mid-November and finished in early December, with the



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exception of one additional speaking center session captured in late January 2007. I fell short of my goal to record two sessions by each tutor, which would have resulted in 20 total (14 writing, 6 speaking). A few sessions were not fully or effectively recorded, but the writing tutors did capture twelve sessions, semievenly dispersed among the staff.

In addition to technical glitches that lost two recordings, the speaking center had more difficulty in recruiting participants: three clients declined to participate in the project. Obviously, tutors would not press clients, already anxious about public speaking, into being recorded. In the end, I received useable tapes of three speaking center sessions total, two with one tutor, one with another.

Results

I listened to each session twice, recording the kinds of exchanges and amounts of time per exchanges. Overall, I found that tutorial sessions divide consistently into four phases:

Preamble—consisting of questions and answers about assignment and concerns. The tutor initiates this conversation, and the client answers questions, sometimes adding additional information without prompting. Then, the tutor explains the process for new clients, while for returning clients, the pair agree on methods.

Performance—at this point, the client reads the paper or gives the speech.

Q and A and discussion—once the paper or speech has been delivered, the tutor and client talk. This discussion may be tutor-driven, sometimes directive, even prescriptive, at other times, more Socratic and generative.

Wrap—most sessions end with a brief question and answer about final concerns, followed by tutor summary of the main points covered.

Other notable features—silence, laughter, and casual conversation—occurred in almost all sessions.

My major findings showed that my initial fears concerning divergent tutorials weren't accurate. Most sessions spent a few minutes initially on collecting information about the assignment and client concerns, then the tutor explained the general session format. The writing center sessions all adhered to the four phases—preamble, reading, Q and A and discussion, wrap. The only variant is that some

students read their whole essay, then talked with the tutor, while more read it in pieces, interspersed with conversation.

The speaking center sessions followed this overall structure, although no speeches were recorded. One was performed off-tape after the preamble. One rough version was rehearsed, with pauses devoted to developing power point slides, while another client elaborated on her topic during discussion of development and focus strategies, then practiced last off-tape.

Despite general structural similarities, sessions varied considerably in terms of the percentages of the total time spent on different tutorial phases. Specifically, the leadership during discussions and amounts of time on kinds of discussions were quite variable. Some discussions were primarily tutor-driven directive question and answer, while others included a higher degree of Socratic questioning. The three speaking center tutorials seemed to elicit much more client engagement—given the much higher percent of client talk during the discussion phase—in comparison to writing center tutorials.

Yet consider this difference in relation to the initial difficulty in getting speaking center clients to participate. Although five clients agreed to participate, resulting in three successful and two botched recordings, three other clients refused to participate. (In comparison, no writing center clients refused.) To explore the possible significance of these refusals, I exchanged email with the senior speaking center tutor who had reported them. As

I explained in my email, I theorized that the less confident clients weren't interested; the sessions I've heard on tape (three) involved pretty confident, chatty clients who did most of the talking. There is a higher degree of variability in the writing sessions; some less confident and more resistant clients just think they'll get commas fixed and shut down, while the best sessions (and most motivated writers) feature more client chat (Campbell n.p.).

The tutor replied: Yes, I definitely feel that your theory sums up the clients that I had. Two seemed unprepared (like the speaking center was a last

ditch effort before the presentation) and I did probably talk and give suggestions over half of the time. Normally, more confident clients do most of the talking, so I definitely agree! (Washington n.p.)

In view of her comment, the discrepancy between writing and speaking center sessions seems less meaningful.

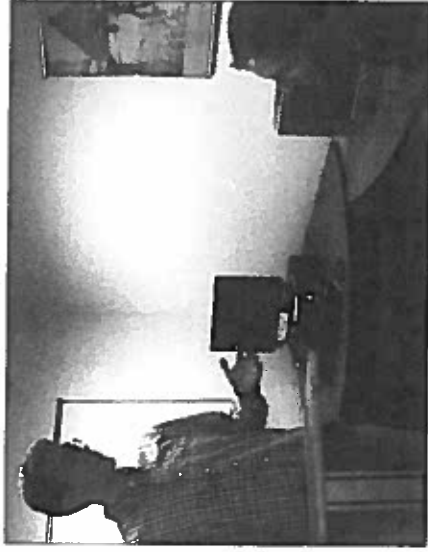
Overall, both centers have resistant as well as engaged clients. While the writing center encounters more resistance from clients who believe that they need only fine-tuning and surface-level help, the speaking center has more clients with a high degree of anxiety about their public speaking abilities.

Survey

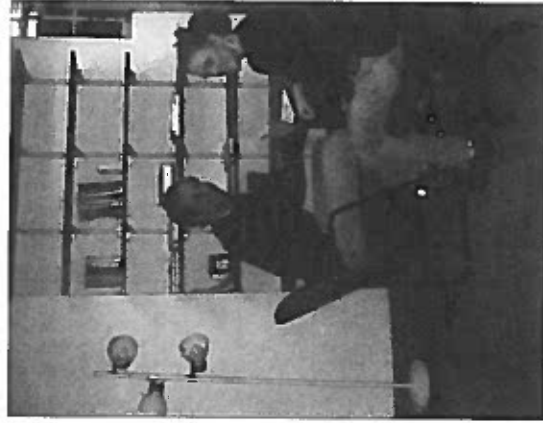
Further information came from staff survey responses. I made a survey available to all tutors in the fall using the Surveyor tool, which allows on-line, asynchronous, anonymous responses. The survey included ten multiple choice questions with single answers and one discursive question. Nine of ten tutors responded, with one botched partial response from a writing center tutor. Their responses reveal that writing tutors chat occasionally about upcoming papers; speaking center tutors and one writing center tutor have chatted about presentations (see Appendix One). Our students seem to have greater initial familiarity with the writing center, probably because more classes require writing; yet the writing center tutors have used speaking center since they started tutoring and became aware of its existence. And yet tutors report little cross-over to draw on the expertise of the "other side." The tutors discuss general campus life and work when they are not busy, but they converse about specific tutorial strategies or work infrequently, if at all.

Implications

Begun more than a decade apart, directed by faculty from different disciplines, our writing and speaking centers use separate spaces in our shared facility and select and train tutors separately. Because learning to intervene effectively in one's own



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writing process and developing mnemonic devices for recalling material during presentation are different goals, our tutors do need some specialized training. At the same time, this study convinces me that our tutorial practices and challenges overlap considerably: the college writing and speaking centers should alter initial and on-going training in light of such overlaps. Through combined training, we could cover a host of similar concerns, ranging from time management of sessions to structuring of sessions and the importance of a final wrap to emphasize the most important points covered in a tutorial. We could also incorporate cross training that requires new tutors to work with a tutor on the "other side" of the center as well as on their own, which would further enhance tutor sympathy for the anxious client. The writing center tutors, for example, routinely give presentations on the center to first-year writing classes, and they could rehearse these presentations with speaking center tutors.

Building on overlaps could also enliven on-going professional development. For example, we should draw on tutor expertise in managing "challenging" clients. The writing center tutors are accustomed to resistant clients, while the speaking center tutors encounter more overtly anxious clients. Tutors with particularly effective strategies could share them with the other writing and speaking center tutors.

Studying our centers' tutorial conversations reminds me that good conversation, like an effective tutorial, requires attentive listening. In an academic context, where disciplinary divisions magnify the differences in our subject matters and practices, this research has reaffirmed for me just how valuable—how mutually supportive and energizing—cross-disciplinary conversation can be. ✨

Works Cited

- Campbell, Shireen. "Re: Speaking/Writing Center research." Email to Tia Washington. 5 February 2007.
 Washington, Tia. "Re: Speaking/Writing Center research." Email to author. 6 February 2007.

Tutoring

Before you became a tutor, did you use the writing center for assistance with papers?

Speaking 2N 1Y Writing 3N 3Y

Since you have become a tutor, have you used the writing center for assistance with papers?

Speaking 2N 1Y Writing 4N 2Y

Before you became a tutor, did you use the speaking center for assistance with speeches or presentations?

Speaking 2Y 1N* Writing 3N 0Y

*The speaking center tutor who was hired in Spring 2005 started at the same time as the center began, so she would have been unable to participate. Only responses from writing center tutors who began after the speaking center began are included.

Since you have become a tutor, have you used the speaking center for assistance with speeches or presentations?

Speaking 2N 1Y Writing 4N 2Y

Chatting

Since becoming a tutor, have you chatted with other tutors about papers in progress?

Speaking 3N 0Y Writing 0N 6Y

If yes, how often?

Once or twice 2 a few times 4 often 0

Since becoming a tutor, have you chatted with other tutors about upcoming presentations?

Speaking 3Y 0Y Writing 5N 1Y

If yes, how often?

Once or twice 2 a few times 2 often 0

Overall, how much interaction about writing or speaking do you have with tutors who work in the "other" area? (i.e. if you are a writing tutor, this refers to the speaking center tutors, and vice versa)

None 1 Infrequent 2 Casual conversation 6