

REVIEW ESSAY

WHAT IS WRITING TUTORING NOW?: PERSPECTIVES ACROSS CONTEXTS, SPACES, AND FIELDS

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Rafoth, Ben. *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers*. Boulder, Colorado: Utah State University Press, 2015. 151 pages. \$24.95. ISBN 978-0-87421-963-0. Print; 978-0-87421-964-7. eBook.

Corbett, Stephen J. *Beyond Dichotomy: Synergizing Writing Center and Classroom Pedagogies*. Fort Collins, CO: The WAC Clearinghouse and Parlor Press, 2015. 159 pages. \$24. ISBN 978-1-60235-659-7. Print.; 978-1-60235-632-0. PDF.

As the student populations, locations, and expectations for writing tutoring shift and change at our institutions, it remains necessary to question and reflect upon our practices and approaches as tutors, administrators, and even instructors. Ben Rafoth's *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers* and Stephen J. Corbett's *Beyond Dichotomy: Synergizing Writing Center and Classroom Pedagogies* engage with what I think are key questions in writing center studies currently: What have we learned about tutoring writing—both one-to-one and in groups—within both writing center studies and related fields, and how can that knowledge guide, yet also challenge, what we have adapted as best practices for writing tutoring? In short, I see these authors asking, what makes good tutoring *now*? And as a reader, I come to these two

texts with an additional question: What should good writing tutoring *become*, especially in the wake of changing curricular and institutional contexts and student populations that these two scholars showcase? As a writing instructor, as well as a writing center administrator and former tutor, I recognize the particular significance of the questions that Corbett and Rafoth ask in their works, especially as changing contexts in writing tutoring continue to highlight the importance of being both adaptive in our practices and responsive to the needs of our students in our writing centers and beyond. As we enter our classrooms, writing centers, and other spaces that value and support writing and student writers, it is important to engage with these questions as we examine the changing contexts that shape our work with writers, perhaps especially with multilingual and international students (Rafoth's focus) as well as across learning spaces (as Corbett discusses).

Although looking at different contexts—Rafoth's focus is on the changing shape of the writing center tutorial as increased numbers of international, multilingual students enroll in universities while Corbett attends more broadly to issues of course-based tutoring (CBT) and its role in developmental writing classrooms—these texts share questions about how our contemporary concerns are reshaping the idea of writing tutoring and are creating need for adapting the practices and pedagogies that have become commonplace to writing tutorials. Rafoth's work speaks to an increasingly urgent shift in university writing centers: The rapid growth of multilingual and international student writers. Rafoth, a writing center director and graduate professor in the teaching of English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) and composition studies, writes that he has composed his book for “writing center directors and tutors who take seriously the preparations needed to work with international multilingual students in the United States, or in any context where English is the dominant language” (1). With this audience in mind, Rafoth's text focuses on providing new insights to directors and tutors for working with multilingual writers who visit writing

centers for assistance. Rafoth suggests, and I agree, that scholarship from the fields of second language acquisition (SLA) and TESOL provide valuable concepts, philosophies, and pedagogies that can help writing center tutors and directors go further with their multilingual clients. As Rafoth demonstrates, a wealth of information and research has been conducted in these adjacent fields, and for writing center directors and tutors, becoming familiar with these fields of study is growing continually imperative. Although writing center lore (à la North) might advocate simply flipping the script in multilingual sessions—starting with lower order concerns before moving on to higher order concerns—Rafoth’s text provides compelling evidence that there is much more to effectively serving international, multilingual writers than that simple move. Rather, the fields of SLA and TESOL offer richly informed perspectives and concepts that can guide writing centers and their staff as they face changes in student populations.

For some writing centers, the question of how better to prepare for the growing number of conferences with multilingual writers remains a future consideration, but for many tutors and directors, how best to work with and support multilingual writers is an ever-present concern. As Rafoth notes, “In the United States today, most enrollment increases in higher education come not from domestic but from international students” (21). As a result, “multilingualism has begun to define what it means to teach and learn in a writing center,” and has changed how tutoring, and teaching, writing happens in writing centers and beyond (23). The rapid increase of international, multilingual student enrollments at universities across the nation and the shifting cultures and expectations of writing centers have created exigencies for engaging with how best to address this change—How can tutors be prepared to work with multilingual students? How can tutor practices be changed and adapted for these writers? As a tutor and writing center administrator, I engaged with these very questions alongside colleagues, and we found, as Rafoth argues, that writing center directors can learn by looking outside of writing center

studies to fields like second language acquisition studies (SLA) and “borrow from SLA to help tutors respond to the needs of multilingual writers” (6). Bringing together the fields of SLA and writing center studies, Rafoth addresses the shift in writing center clients and tutorials by pushing writing center directors to consider “How might tutoring change as our student populations change?” (6). More than simply making do, writing center directors can adapt the pedagogical practices and policies in their centers by looking outwards to gain new perspectives and approaches that respond to the shifting contexts of their centers, and Rafoth offers readers a path towards such responsiveness.

As Rafoth engages with the question of how writing tutoring can address the changes of student populations, merging conversations from SLA studies and writing center studies, Corbett poses a similar question about how course-based writing tutoring approaches can adapt to shifting contexts—from one-to-one tutorials, peer writing groups, and writing tutoring occurring both within and outside of the classroom. In light of the changes in student enrollments that Rafoth highlights, Corbett’s questions become particularly relevant as we explore how best to support various writers’ needs across spaces and contexts. Corbett, who has held positions as both an assistant writing center director and writing program administrator, unites what he calls the “parent genres” of CBT, writing center tutoring, WAC writing fellows, peer writing groups, and supplemental instruction, in conversation to develop his perspectives and arguments (13). Though all of these areas are often distinct in their missions, purpose, and institutional locations, there is value in bringing these sites of writing tutoring together to push “boundaries between...knowledge communities” and inform CBT as a pedagogical approach that moves across contexts (14). As a writing instructor who values the central tenets and philosophies of writing center studies and, like Corbett, tries to incorporate them into my teaching, I find it especially helpful that his text offers insights into how we can make our classrooms, writing centers, and other writing tutoring spaces unified in purpose while

also diversifying our approaches to writing pedagogy. Corbett writes,

Rather than practice in the center, or in the classroom, rather than seeing teacher here and tutor there and student over there, CBT asks all participants in the dynamic drama of teaching and learning to realize as fully as possible the myriad possible means of connecting. (12)

Corbett's CBT pedagogical practices, especially through merging "parent genres" and scholarly perspectives, highlight one way instructors, tutors, and administrators can become more adaptive in the face of changing educational landscapes and student populations. Although the focus of Corbett's text differs from Rafoth's, I see the experimentation inherent in Corbett's text, especially as he merges CBT parent genres and employs such approaches across spaces, as embodying an effort to be adaptive and responsive to students' needs by diversifying pedagogical approaches across teaching and tutoring spaces.

And although both Rafoth and Corbett are focused on university-level writing tutoring, their research has relevance to all writing instructors interested in the use of tutoring as part of their pedagogies. Rafoth's insights into merging writing center studies practices with pedagogies from SLA studies can be useful, perhaps especially for educators working in the classroom with students with English proficiencies at various levels, and similarly, Corbett's CBT approaches demonstrate how writing tutoring can find a home in the classroom, pulling from the "parent genres" that shape CBT instruction and can reframe writing instruction within and outside of the classroom.

As Rafoth and Corbett bring together various fields to address issues within writing tutoring, they situate their projects in relation to the conversations that directly influence their inquiries from writing center studies and related fields. Rafoth proclaims his work "offers an informed invitation for writing center directors and their tutors...to make great use of the theory and

research from the field of SLA” (3). From work within writing center studies on multilingual writers (such as Nakamaru’s research on lexical issues in writing center tutorials with international, multilingual students and Thonus’ examination of tutorials with first- and second-language writers, which bridges the gaps between writing center studies and SLA) as well as SLA concepts and theories (from key concepts of negotiated interaction to linguistic terms like “input, interlanguage, transfer, and fossilization” (73)), Rafoth draws links between these fields to provide writing center directors and tutors with concepts, perspectives, and talking points to help them navigate the new terrain of working with multilingual writers. Overall, Rafoth provides a fairly comprehensive representation of discussions from SLA on working with multilingual writers; helpfully, Rafoth weaves together foundational research from the field with more contemporary texts, providing readers with a full sense of the field as it stands and its potential significance for writing center studies. Drawing upon SLA research and pedagogy, Rafoth makes practical suggestions, aimed at writing center directors and more advanced tutors, for working with multilingual writers in tutoring sessions. These suggestions derive not only from Rafoth’s survey of SLA pedagogies and theories but also from his own experiences as a writing center director and, importantly, from interviews with and observations of multilingual tutors and clients in various writing center contexts. With these data, Rafoth provides insights into the real experiences of multilingual writers in the writing center, both as clients and tutors. Importantly, Rafoth uses their experiences and insights as evidence to demonstrate the need to make writing centers as diverse as possible, not only bringing new resources, like adjacent fields of study, but also new people, like multilingual and multicultural tutors who can enrich centers with their ideas and perspectives on language learning and translingual experiences, academic and beyond. These practical suggestions will be useful to advanced tutors who have already mastered the basics of writing tutoring and must learn to adapt their practices to new clients, and they will be helpful to writing center directors

who are struggling to respond to the needs of multilingual and international student writers. From Rafoth's suggestions, I can see the foundations for extensive training programs being developed so that soon not only advanced tutors can learn from such insights about working with these student populations but also new tutors will benefit.

Corbett, in turn, brings together research and approaches on writing center studies, WAC writing fellows, supplemental instruction, and peer writing groups. Central to his research and experimentation with CBT instruction—within and outside of the classroom—is “hybridizing these parent genres that make up CBT,” bringing together insights from various fields to explore how writing tutoring can play a central role, in various forms, in the developmental writing classroom (21). Drawing upon research and pedagogies in these parent genre fields, Corbett examines CBT through a centralizing question: How does the directive/nondirective tutoring dichotomy, a foundational approach in writing center pedagogy, influence how we think about writing tutoring and how we do writing tutoring across contexts? In short, Corbett writes, “CBT contexts demand a close reconsideration of our typically nondirective, hands-off approach to tutoring” (48). Corbett's text primarily explores this model of CBT in action, using case studies of one-to-one and peer group tutoring in embedded, classroom tutor contexts. Using a mixed methods approach, Corbett analyzes transcripts from one-to-one tutoring sessions and his own notes from tutor-facilitated peer review writing groups and classroom interactions from two institutional contexts, a “large west-coast R1 (University of Washington, Seattle) and a medium, east-coast master's (Southern Connecticut State University, New Haven)” (9). From his analyses of the case studies, Corbett derives practical suggestions for making CBT work in various spaces, while highlighting the importance of context-dependent adaptability. This flexibility is a hallmark of Corbett's findings, and I think it represents an important take on writing tutoring generally that speaks to current circumstances in significant ways—what works now in

writing tutoring is being adaptive and responsive to the contexts that shape our classrooms, centers, and other pedagogical spaces. Corbett's text further demonstrates that what remains important to writing tutoring and CBT is an ability to respond to change, to adjust practices and pedagogies to meet the needs of students, and to find new ways of building upon what we already do well to find what we can do next.

Accordingly, I think a significant takeaway in both projects is that writing tutoring has to happen on a spectrum, no matter the context and no matter the location. These authors continue to advocate for student-centered approaches, as has long been a pedagogical foundation in writing center studies and related fields. What's different now, as these authors show us in their projects, is what we need to do to achieve the student-centered standard. Whereas writing center practices may have once argued for hands-off, nondirective tutoring only, Rafoth's work shows us how such approaches privilege a native-speaker stereotype just as Corbett's demonstrates that such approaches might fall flat depending on contexts and students' needs.

Synergy, a key concept in Corbett's text, threads through both of these projects, further demonstrating the importance of being adaptive and responsive to the local contexts that shape writing tutoring at different institutions and within various pedagogical spaces. The ideas of synergy and *negotiation*—from negotiating various fields of study, student and tutor perspectives and insights, and multiple approaches to writing tutoring—are answers to a question I think guides these studies: what should writing tutoring be *now*? And I find the concepts of negotiation, synergy, adaptivity, and responsiveness particularly helpful as I try to understand not only what writing tutoring should be now, such as in light of changing student populations as Rafoth showcases, but also how writing tutoring and its attendant concepts and ideas can be usefully applied in a variety of contexts, including the classroom as Corbett demonstrates. As Corbett and Rafoth show us, writing tutoring remains a complex activity, requiring more than reading aloud and asking Rogerian-style questions of a client

and waiting silently for an answer. Both Rafoth and Corbett call for much more interactive give-and-take in writing tutoring, wherever such work happens. This includes being open to the type of work a traditional, nondirective session might avoid—from discussing lexical issues in-depth to taking extensive notes by hand to share with the client.

Negotiated interaction plays an important role in Rafoth's project, and I think the concept is noteworthy especially for its usefulness across writing tutoring and pedagogy. Although Rafoth focuses on working with multilingual writers, I see negotiated interaction as a useful concept for working with writers in various contexts, within and beyond the writing center. Rafoth argues for negotiated interaction to take primacy as tutors work with multilingual writers; he notes that research from SLA shows that negotiated interaction works especially well as "the back and forth of conversation is not merely an opportunity to practice using the language but is itself a source of learning" (48). Conversation, a foundation practice of writing tutoring (see Bruffee, for instance), takes on a new valence as a result: negotiated interaction is especially beneficial because, as Rafoth writes, "it enables the simultaneous focus on form and meaning" (48). Conversation that allows for negotiation and back and forth exchanges between tutors and writers can be extremely productive, as long as tutors are aware of what makes "effective conversational interactions" and the importance of their roles as "authentic listeners" (48, 52). Alongside fostering these interactive engagements, Rafoth also emphasizes the importance of helping tutors to learn nuanced approaches to discussions of academic writing in tutoring sessions, from interpreting assignments and feedback from instructors to helping advanced multilingual writers learn to avoid stylistic traps—passive voice and heavy nominalization, for instance—that may complicate the reading experience of accented writing as well as finding ways to negotiate issues of error correction in consultations, honoring writers' concerns over errors while also developing effective strategies for addressing these issues in tutoring sessions. Again, although Rafoth applies these ideas to

working with multilingual writers, I believe they have much potential for helping writers and writing tutors and instructors across pedagogical contexts. Throughout the text, Rafoth makes practical suggestions for directors and advanced tutors. Importantly, Rafoth avoids prescription, acknowledging that resources one institution may have will not necessarily be replicated at another. But he also notes that being adaptive and open to change in our approaches and pedagogies can mean looking beyond what we know and practice everyday to new areas and fields: “By looking outside the center at scholarship and research, as well as looking inside their own writing centers with a critical eye, directors and tutors can outline the issue facing their writing centers and find ways to deal with them” (135). This ability to look beyond the confines of our own writing centers—or classrooms—is an important skill to foster, especially as we pursue best practices for helping and responding to the needs of the students and writers with whom we work.

Corbett’s focus on CBT demonstrates the flexibility and fluidity of writing tutoring across contexts and for multiple purposes, inside and beyond the writing center. Corbett’s emphasis on synergy, like Rafoth’s interest in negotiation, suggests again the importance of looking beyond our everyday practices and pedagogies to adapt to the needs of the tutors and students with whom we work, in and out of the classroom. From his case studies and research at two universities, Corbett provides practical suggestions for making CBT work in a variety of contexts. Again, emphasizing adaptivity and highlighting that writing tutoring can occur on a spectrum, Corbett’s suggestions are given as starting points that can be adjusted as needed for the context in which they are being applied. Corbett argues that instructors and tutors first need to be “made aware of the different models of CBT.... Then they should be allowed to choose ...which model they feel might works best for them” (125). This advice seems particularly apt, especially in light of the changing face of writing tutoring described in both Rafoth and Corbett’s projects. As the forms and locations of writing tutoring change

and evolve, instructors, tutors, and program directors must be made aware of the many different options and configurations for creating opportunities for writing tutoring. Research like Rafoth's and Corbett's illustrate some of the possibilities for what writing tutoring can be now, and what it might become, and Corbett's emphasis on locating options and developing approaches that suit different contexts and needs again demonstrates the necessity of adaptivity and flexibility. Corbett's pragmatic suggestions to readers include mixing directive and nondirective approaches in sessions, aligning with Rafoth's negotiated interaction approaches, to create space for "negotiating when to be more directive and when to be more facilitative" (Corbett 126). Corbett argues for synergistic approaches to writing tutoring and writing pedagogy that highlight the continuum of writing tutoring across contexts and spaces; I believe the multiplicity of approaches that he advocates can encourage our fields to "stay open and curious.... And when the chance arises...to embrace the multi-perspectives that multi-method research can deliver" (129). I see Corbett's call potentially providing new approaches and pedagogies to address our field's concerns and challenges.

As writing tutors, writing center directors, and other interested parties face changing curricular landscapes and student populations, Corbett and Rafoth's advocacy of adaptive practices is significant. We can, and should, expand writing tutoring to truly engage with the students and contexts that we encounter in our roles as instructors, directors, and tutors, and Rafoth's and Corbett's projects make negotiation and adaptivity an activity that merges multiple parties' concerns, from programs, teachers, and tutors to students. As Rafoth asks, "The question is, what are writing center directors doing to listen to students, tutors, and faculty about what students need and want to take on?" (58). With Rafoth and Corbett's perspectives in mind, I again return to the question I see guiding these texts, and one which I engage with as an instructor invested in writing pedagogy and writing tutoring: what is writing tutoring now? What should writing tutoring become? I take cues from these scholars, beginning to imagine

approaches that emphasize flexibility, adaptability, and negotiation first, as I listen to students to understand their needs and think creatively about the research and insights I can incorporate from writing center studies and beyond.

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