

Relationship-Building as a Means to Navigating Genre in the Writing Center

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The current literature on genre and best practices for writing center tutoring is mixed: some studies support a genre specialist model while others support a generalist model. However, these studies have not explicitly examined how the tutors handle different genres in their sessions, nor how relationships between the tutor and tutee can impact this navigation. This essay explores relationship-building and the use of empathy by tutors to better understand how tutors might negotiate genre during a tutoring session. A short survey was administered to tutors at the Goucher College Writing Center. Responses revealed that the tutors saw relationship-building as a higher priority in their sessions than the genre of the text. Specifically, when confronted with unfamiliar genres, tutors overwhelmingly communicated that they instead focus on the rapport they have with their tutees in order to work with them successfully. More detailed findings focused on the importance of the tutor-tutee relationship within the generalist tutoring model, and their implications are further discussed.

An Introduction to Genre in the Writing Center

In the writing center, a tutor's goal is to give their tutee the most meaningful feedback possible. Although a tutor is not expected to understand everything about a tutee's text, they cannot give helpful advice or responses if they are unclear about the main idea or argument within the text. It is also the tutor's responsibility to understand where the tutee stands in the writing process and how the tutor can best fit their needs. Accordingly, the genre of the text may serve as a barrier between the tutor and tutee if the tutor is not familiar with or does not understand the conventions and rhetorical ecology of the genre. It is possible that feedback is enhanced when tutoring strategies implemented by the tutor differ by genre. In this case, it would be the obligation of the

writing center staff to train tutors to recognize and address a variety of common genres. In turn, tutors would structure their sessions in response to genre.

It is important to note that the construct of genre is often vague. While some genres are very distinct, with their own conventions, many genres also draw on related functions. For example, a literary analysis and a lab report are clearly different genres of writing with their own intended audiences and goals. Yet they may both include summary: the literary analysis might summarize previous scholarship on the topic, or the original work being analyzed, and the lab report might summarize research proceedings or results. In this way, writing within these distinct genres, despite being a part of completely different disciplines, requires similar activities. Because of such

overlaps, a potentially practical method for tutoring would be for tutors to rely on such general knowledge to address all genres.

This resulting divide between tutoring philosophies is pertinent in writing center scholarship; some believe tutors should be “specialists” in their genre, while others, such as Melissa Ianetta and Lauren Fitzgerald, argue tutors should have a “generalist” approach. However, scholarship focusing on genre tends toward silence about a more universal and important aspect of the tutoring session: the relationship between the tutor and their tutee. While genre is of course a critical aspect of the tutoring session, I suggest that a positive relationship is ultimately more essential to a successful tutoring session.

In this article, I explore how writing center tutors deal with texts of different genres, how they vary their approaches to tutoring accordingly, and how their approach to genre ultimately relates to relationship-building. Since my research is specifically based on the Goucher College Writing Center, the results may not be directly generalized, but they will likely have aspects that can be adapted in the writing centers of other colleges and universities. While I originally intended to study the effect of genre on tutoring styles, my data suggest that what truly matters is the impact that relationship-building and empathy have on tutoring unfamiliar genres. This is not to undermine the importance of considering genre in a successful tutoring session, but rather to emphasize just how significant is building a relationship and rapport between the tutor and tutee. For this reason, scholars in genre studies may need to adopt a more fluid understanding of genre by considering it in light of relationship-building.

Literature Review: Generalist and Specialist Tutoring Styles

Throughout early schooling, students are taught a small set of genres: from book reports in elementary school and five-paragraph essays in middle school, to argumentative research papers and lab reports in high school. While curricula differ, generally high school students are not asked to compose a particularly wide variety of genres. And because genres are so often specific to discipline, even the most talented and experienced writers, those who may go on to staff college and university writing centers, cannot be deeply experienced with all genres. Tutors may be uncomfortable or nervous to tutor texts from disciplines in which they are inexperienced.

In genre studies as discussed in relation to writing centers, one of the most frequent debates is whether specialist or generalist methods of tutoring are more effective. Writing center scholars who advocate for specialist tutoring argue that the specialist approach allows tutors to feel more comfortable with the texts they interact with, and enables them to give more specific feedback. Sarah Andrew-Vaughan and Cathy Fleischer, for example, discuss the stubborn genre biases held by graduate students studying education, and the connection to writing center tutors is clear: when a tutor finds difficulty in connecting to or writing within a certain genre, they may be discouraged from working with that genre overall (39). Similarly, researchers Hazel Francis and Susan Hallam performed a two-part study where one group of students read texts from an unfamiliar genre, another group read challenging texts from a familiar discipline, and both answered questions about their texts. They found that the first group exhibited “some difficulty in grasping

an overall theme or argument” (284), while in the second group “[t]here [was] a sense that the text difficulty [was] an integral part of the kind of learning required, that it [could] be dealt with, and that the effort [was] worthwhile” (287). These results are easily applied to the writing center, as tutors might not be able to deeply understand texts from unfamiliar genres. While they might similarly experience difficulty with a challenging text from a familiar genre, they are less discouraged by struggle to understand the genre itself. This makes a case for specialist tutors, as tutors may feel more connected and motivated to understand texts from their own disciplines. However, this study has students reading challenging texts in isolation; the introduction of a real person with a text from an unfamiliar genre might change a tutor’s feelings towards the difficult text.

Neither of these studies consider empathy as a way of overcoming these difficulties for a student. Kyle Arnold argues that empathetic listening and responding “can offset places where writing consultants do not have as much expertise to respond to cognitive aspects of consultations ... [tutors] can ask more about process and student engagement with texts, rather than focusing on content or even structural questions” (McBride et al.). From this perspective, the genre bias discussed by Andrew-Vaughan and Fleisher can be reassessed by a tutor and seen in a new way; even if they do not have “expertise with the forms, norms, and stylistic elements” of the unfamiliar genre, they can practice empathy towards the tutee and relate to their emotional engagement or process (McBride et al.). Similarly, the feeling expressed by Francis and Hallam’s students that it is only “worthwhile” to expend effort

to understand familiar genres might be seen as a lack of empathy. Of course, Francis and Hallam’s study did not involve tutors, but if a similar situation was to take place within a writing center, then the tutors might find that seeing their tutee empathetically changes their view of trying to understand the unfamiliar genre.

Writing center tutor Nicole Finocchio explains how the tutors from Hofstra University’s writing center collectively expressed discomfort in tutoring creative texts, as they felt their skills were inadequate. Not only did tutoring unfamiliar types of texts make tutors insecure about their own skills, but they felt reluctant to tutor these texts and suggested specialist tutors: that “creative writing students work with [tutors] more familiar with the genre” (19). Finocchio hints at the relationship the tutors experience between them and their tutees, as the tutors fear disappointing the tutees, but she does not acknowledge the relationships with tutees as a way to combat tutors’ discomfort. Here, also, is an opportunity for empathy: as writing center director Noreen Lape writes, once tutees express a “core message,” or the main aspect of their writing they might want a tutor’s help with, the tutor “can then practice framing an empathetic response and articulating their understanding of what the writer has communicated” (4). Expressing empathy in this way only strengthens the tutor’s understanding of the tutee’s needs, despite any unfamiliar genre conventions, and this understanding “better enabl[es] the tutor to strategize about how to intervene in the writer’s process” (4). So, if the Hofstra University tutors fear disappointing their tutees, this strategy of employing an empathetic response might help to better understand the needs of the tutees.

On the other hand, writing center scholars who advocate for generalist tutors argue that there are inherent similarities between different genres, and that the feedback given by a generalist tutor, although less specific to the conventions of the genre, is equally helpful for the tutee. Melissa Ianetta and Lauren Fitzgerald urge tutors to see the tutees themselves as a source during their sessions; even if the tutor is unfamiliar with the genre, they are able to enlist the tutee for information regarding conventions and organization. This helps the tutor gain understanding of the genre, as well as enables the tutor to feel in control of their own work (148). As Finocchio argues, despite not being comfortable or experienced with the specific nuances of a certain genre, writing tutors are experienced with writing in general, and can give feedback based on their thoughts in that way, as “the writing strategies for all genres are similar” (19). That is, tutors should be equipped with a variety of strategies, and their knowledge of genre is enough to enable them to adjust the strategies to writing of all genres.

Andrew-Vaughan and Fleischer agree that a broad knowledge of genre can lead to a better understanding of specific genres. They introduced a project to their students to show how general genre awareness can enable a student to look past genre, and instead focus on the writing itself. They asked students to pick a genre foreign to them from a list of different genres: flash fiction to cookbooks to college applications. The students’ tasks were to break down the genre, finding the commonalities between different works, the language used, and how different writers composed the genre in different ways. Afterward, in reflecting on the project, the researchers found that the

students were able to “internalize” their findings, letting it “empower” them as they encountered new genres later (42).

There are also writing scholars who fall somewhere in between on the generalist versus specialist tutoring debate. Layne Gordon explains this perspective: “In a writing center session, the tutor can simulate a variety of discourse communities for students in order to educate them about their own positions in those communities and the ways in which they can exercise agency within them” (n. pag.). She further explains that a tutor may not need specific knowledge of a genre to be able to hold a discussion about it with a tutee, and the tutor can serve as a “guide” rather than a mentor. This method falls in between generalist and specialist methods, and also highlights the value of a more integrated approach, as it allows the tutee to have more autonomy, and the tutor to facilitate a more guided discussion during the session.

While many scholars have written about how genre makes writing tutors feel, or about the differences between generalists and specialists, I have yet to come across scholars who specifically explore which specific tutoring practices might be matched to specific genres. In chapter six of their book *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors*, Ianetta and Fitzgerald overview best practices for dealing with unfamiliar genres; however, they only explore creative writing and personal statements, and a tutor will interact with many more genres on a regular basis (155). Similarly, Irene Clark supplies questions a tutor can ask a tutee about their genre, such as “What are the features of this genre?,” “How is this genre similar to and different from other text genres?,” and “What creative variations on this genre are

likely to enhance its effectiveness?” (26). These questions may be extremely helpful for a tutor, but they rely heavily on the knowledge of the tutee, and therefore may be less effective with a tutee who is unresponsive, equally unfamiliar with the genre, or unable to express the conventions of the genre clearly. In the same way, Gordon finds an effective approach to be introducing a few conventions she knows about the genre, and then asking the tutee how they wish to apply them. She explains, “Although this language is more explicit, and perhaps more directive, it nevertheless maintains the writer’s agency and empowers the student by fostering an understanding of the genre itself and providing a platform to discuss creative options” (n. pag.). However, this approach also assumes that the tutor has some prior knowledge regarding the conventions of the genre.

While all of these scholars address the general role of genre in the writing center, none of them specifically explore how or if tutoring practices should be changed. They also do not discuss the application of empathetic listening, for instance that if the tutor feels lost in how to successfully tutor a specific genre and cannot rely on their rhetorical understanding of it, “[f]ocusing on the emotional aspects may help the [tutee] with clarity concerns and also strength of argument” (McBride et al.). In other words, taking an empathetic approach to understanding a tutee’s writing is a blanket strategy, which can be utilized in tutoring contexts for all genres.

In the end of her essay, Gordon acknowledges this research gap, explaining that certain applications for genre theory in the writing center “have not yet been widely considered.” She urges “that more research should be done on how genre is currently

used in writing centers so that both administrators and tutors can gain a better understanding of how to further implement genre theory and genre-related pedagogical strategies” (n. pag.). For this reason, I wanted to explore more deeply how tutors address genre in their writing center sessions. Therefore, I surveyed tutors at the Goucher College Writing Center, both to hear directly how they use genre in their sessions and how they feel about genre as a concept.

Methods and Institutional Context

To collect data, I sent an anonymous survey to all current Goucher College Writing Center tutors, asking about their interactions with genre and how they treat it within their sessions. The survey had seven questions (plus statement of consent):

1. Which discipline(s) do you identify with most? (This doesn’t have to be your major, but it can be.) Do you find that it is easiest for you to tutor texts from this/these discipline(s)?
2. Which discipline(s) do you dislike tutoring the most? Are these genres that you are unfamiliar with?
3. How do you feel when tutoring a text from a genre that you are unfamiliar with?
4. Which genres of writing do you find to be the easiest to tutor?
5. Which genres of writing do you find to be the most difficult to tutor?
6. Do you change your tutoring practices based on the genre of text brought to a session? How?
7. Any other thoughts on addressing genre in the Writing Center/while tutoring?

I wanted the results to be useful for the future of the Goucher College Writing Center, so I limited participants to writing tutors only. The survey was anonymous, as I wanted to ensure that honest responses were given. In administering this survey, I sent an email to the entire staff proposing my research and informing the tutors how their responses would be used within my study. The email urged tutors to respond to the attached survey. This research was approved by Goucher College's IRB.

At the time of the survey, the writing center had 19 tutors, juniors and seniors of diverse backgrounds. Goucher's student body numbers about 1,500, a majority of whom are Caucasian, and about 25 percent being Pell Grant recipients. To become a tutor, a student must be referred by a college faculty member who can speak to the student's outstanding writing skills and rhetorical understanding. Candidates then participate in a 4-credit course about writing and tutoring theory, such as history of the writing center theory and practice, genre awareness, and tutoring within different minority groups.

Of the 19 tutors invited to take the survey, 10 responded. Each individual surveyed was trained as a generalist tutor. Therefore, my results may not apply to all tutors, especially those trained as specialists.

Results

Data from the survey suggest that respondents seemed uncomfortable tutoring genres with which they are unfamiliar. Most respondents to the first question, regarding disciplines tutors identify with, have strong backgrounds in the humanities—one majors in biology, but also studies philosophy and literature. Given

their familiarity with the humanities, I assumed respondents would feel most comfortable with texts from the humanities, which survey responses confirm. Five of the eight responses to question 2, on uncomfortable genres, stated discomfort tutoring STEM texts. Discussing the most difficult genre of texts to tutor had the same overwhelming response, with six out of ten responses mentioning lab reports as the most difficult.

Many tutors wrote about how other disciplines have writing structures with which they are unfamiliar: one tutor said they dislike Peace Studies papers, as “[t]he essay format is way too formula-based.” Interestingly, two respondents also commented on how difficult it is to tutor creative writing, which relates to Finocchio's statements about her writing center's reluctance to tackle creative texts. Preference for the humanities persisted in responses to which genres the tutors find easiest; all listed humanities-based writing such as analytical and research papers. However, this bias might be due to the fact that texts brought into the Goucher College Writing Center are frequently from humanities disciplines.

Similarly to how Finocchio's tutors felt reluctant to tutor unfamiliar genres, eight of my ten respondents discussed how uncomfortable they feel when presented with texts from genres they do not know. When asked how tutors change their practices based on genre, one responded, “It depends much more on the tutee/piece than it does on the genre.” This tutor emphasizes the tutee as a writer, an individual, rather than the genre. It is obvious that tutors care about how their feedback, or lack thereof, will affect the tutee on an emotional level when tutoring texts of unfamiliar genres.

One tutor said they feel “like I have to work 1,000 times harder to focus on understanding the content in order to verify that the tutee’s writing is making sense.” Another said, “I feel like I might be letting my tutee down because they came to me for help, but I feel like I can’t help them with the content of their writing.” One tutor even hinted at specialist tutoring, saying they felt “like the help I have to give is less valid or helpful than it would be coming from a tutor who is familiar/comfortable with the subject matter. I feel like I may miss something important.” None of the tutors said they felt comfortable with unfamiliar genres; there were two responses in which the tutor did not explicitly say they felt uncomfortable, yet these responses gave advice on how to handle these situations, such as “use the tutee as a resource,” rather than stating how they felt within the situations. Although the sense of discomfort tutors feel when tutoring unfamiliar genres is predictable, I was pleasantly surprised to note that tutors see their interactions with tutees as relationships, in which disappointing the other person (the tutee) has emotional repercussions.

While all of the survey responses about how tutors handle unfamiliar texts are important to recognize, most of these data were predictable. However, the responses to the sixth question, which asked how tutors change their tutoring based on the genre brought to them, was truly surprising. Whereas I thought tutors might have special insight about how to address specific genres, most tutors responded that they do not drastically change their tutoring styles. Rather than looking at the genre, most tutors said they ask the tutee for what they need help with the most and direct the session based on that. This is a similar strategy

to Lape’s suggestion of referring to the tutee’s “core message.” Many tutors said they become less directive if they do not know the genre, and ask the tutee many questions about their writing. One tutor said that they only change their tutoring style if they have taken the course the paper is being written for, as they can then offer specific advice.

In this way, it seems like the tutors do not see genre as essential to their tutoring sessions, as they focus more on the needs of the tutee rather than the conventions of the genre. One tutor’s response stood out the most:

Every paper is a different genre per se so it is really about adapting to the tutee’s needs and what they have than specific categories of papers ... honestly genre doesn’t seem like something that important to me because even if a paper’s in a similar genre as something I’m familiar with, it could be a weird topic, so just be adaptable and do what the tutee needs, and be kind and empathetic.

This response raises a different and essential idea about tutoring: expressing empathy toward the tutee. In their responses, many tutors discussed the well-known strategy of using the tutee as a resource, yet being empathetic and kind toward a tutee is not only an aspect of tutoring, but a way of building relationships during a tutoring session.

From these responses, I was forced to re-adjust my perspective of the importance of genre in the writing center. Clearly, for the Goucher College writing tutors, their relationship with the tutee is more important than the genre of the text. The tutor’s understanding of the text may not be pertinent, as their primary goal is to respond to the needs of the tutee, as well as

build a trusting and meaningful relationship throughout the session.

It is important to note that my research suffers typical limitations of survey research, as it is representative of the tutors who recorded their thoughts. I sent out the survey close to final exams, so many tutors were likely busy and lacked sufficient time to write detailed responses. Additionally, my results don't necessarily invalidate Francis and Hallum's conclusion that tutors may not be able to tutor as specifically with texts outside their own discipline. Their study put students directly into contact with difficult texts, whereas tutors at the writing center may not come in contact with the same difficulties. Moreover, my survey results are based on the individual reflections of tutors, and they may not feel comfortable in admitting shortcomings they experience in tutoring, or have not realized that they cannot offer as in-depth feedback to unfamiliar genres.

Practical Implications for Writing Center Administrators and Tutors

My study suggests several implications. First, writing centers should focus on helping tutors build trust between them and their tutees. Tutors should be well-versed in interpersonal relationships, which can be built in a tutoring session through interactions as simple as asking the tutee how they are feeling at the beginning of the session, or checking in with them throughout the appointment. While some tutors or scholars in the field might see this as trivial rather than an essential aspect of a tutoring session, I believe that relationship-building should be an ongoing process throughout the session, as evidenced by my data. Lape recommends that during training, administrators encourage tutors to practice

empathy in “unstressful encounters ... so that it becomes internalized ... using scripted scenarios, improvisational role-playing techniques, and reflective journaling, directors can instill a pedagogy of empathy that tutors can employ with every writer” (3). She also qualifies that “there is no single, fail-safe plan when it comes to dealing with a writer’s (complicated) emotions”; therefore, “directors who adopt a true pedagogy of empathy nurture emotional intelligence in tutors through heightened awareness, practice, and reflection” (6). I strongly encourage practicing and emphasizing the importance of empathy in the writing center until it becomes second-nature to tutors, as empathy is a muscle that must be trained and a skill that can benefit tutors in all tutoring contexts.

Writing center administrators should also consider outreach and the way they are promoting the work of the writing center in relation to genre. For example, administrators and tutors should encourage tutees to see tutors of any genre specialty or major, rather than only those from the tutee's own field. Many writing centers provide a biography of each tutor for tutees to view; these biographies typically discuss the tutor's major and the types of genres within which they are best suited to tutor. However, if the tutors are well-versed in genre conventions and are able to tutor within any genre, then the focus should be less on sorting biographies by genre skills, and instead on promoting tutors as being able to handle tutoring all texts. Of course, a tutee who is seeking tutoring in relation to a certain citation style or professor may want a specialist tutor from their discipline.

Furthermore, writing center staff training and pedagogy should correspond with this new promotion of tutors as capable generalist

tutors. During staff education, writing center administrators should emphasize genre analysis overall, in addition to providing skills applicable only to certain genres to ensure that all tutors have a deep understanding of genre conventions. They may have tutors undergo a process similar to Andrew-Vaughan and Fleischer's genre project, enabling tutors to explore unknown genres deeply to better understand the basis of genre in general. In being exposed to new genres and making connections to genres they are familiar with, tutors may feel more comfortable in their tutoring sessions. Writing center administrators might also enhance rhetorical education, training tutors about context, purpose, audience, and additional rhetorical aspects present in all genres of writing. All such preparation should specifically emphasize adaptability, and how such in-depth understanding can apply across writing disciplines.

Despite feeling unprepared to tutor within certain genres, my data show that for tutors, the most essential skill is cultivating a meaningful relationship with the tutee, and showing flexible skills in relation to genre awareness. If a tutor is unsure how to give a tutee specific advice for their piece, they should return to their fundamental knowledge of genre structure and purpose. Since the foundational elements are similar across many genres, a tutor's understanding of rhetoric in writing will usually be sufficient for tutoring purposes. This knowledge should be reassuring for tutors, as my data show that they are much more capable in their tutoring skills than they feel. Of course, with a new emphasis on empathy in tutor training, empathy will also be a strategy that tutors can utilize in all tutoring contexts.

Lastly, future research might benefit from closely exploring the relational aspects of

writing center sessions, and how generalist and specialist tutors might address these aspects in different ways. There is little research on the connection between empathy and genre, especially on how empathy can help tutors navigate difficult situations. A future study might look at tutors' current awareness surrounding empathy, as well as their usage of it, as they tutor.

Conclusion

My research shows that in the writing center, responding to the needs of the tutee is a primary concern above mastering genre conventions. This conclusion was difficult for me to deduce—if the genre of the text is not essential, according to surveyed tutors, how does that comport with existing scholarship in genre studies?

These research findings fit into the relational aspect of tutoring: the non-tangible part of a session. Sometimes, the process of writing allows any piece, no matter how academic, to be deeply personal. These feelings may transfer to a tutor during a session, as the tutor bears witness to this process, with all its complexities and the emotional turmoil of being invested in a text and navigating genre. For this reason, a connection that scholars should acknowledge is that empathy and relationship-building in a tutoring session are not necessarily separate from the genre of the text. As Lape, McBride, and others all emphasize, the tutee is not just a writer but a human, and tutors should see them first and foremost in this way. This is a research gap that may have not been explored by scholars as of yet: the association between empathy, the personal relationship between writing and its writer, and the important connection built during a tutoring session is an essential finding from this data.

Again, the tutors surveyed are all generalists. Tutors at the Goucher College Writing Center interact with genre in many different ways, as although addressing conventions within unfamiliar genres clearly requires genre knowledge, helping a tutee think rhetorically about audience and purpose shows attention to genre as well. While every tutor listed a specific genre they feel uncomfortable tutoring within, and none wrote about feeling completely confident when tutoring unfamiliar genres, many expressed that they use the same tutoring strategies despite the genre. Yet being able to adjust and bend the same strategies to fit a variety of structures and rhetorical contexts is a display of genre awareness in itself. In this way, the tutors show flexibility and understanding when it comes to genre without even being aware of the skills they're employing. The tutors also expressed that the most important aspect of a session is the relationship with the tutee, as attention to their learning and needs matters more than the genre of the text they bring to the session.

The opinions presented by these tutors speak to a larger truth about the purpose of a writing center, emphasized by Stephen North in "The Idea of a Writing Center": "Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing" (438). If tutors are basing their feedback solely on the text brought to them, then they are tutoring towards the text, not towards the writer. However, if the tutor responds to the needs of the tutee, the tutor is assisting the tutee in becoming a better writer by helping with specific issues the tutee identifies.

With all of this in mind, while I agree that genre should not be ignored, I do suggest it not be the main focus of a tutoring session. Despite the vast scholarship on the importance of genre in the writing center, genre should not be thought of as a separate construct in a tutoring session, but rather be perceived as connected to the relationship-building process that takes place during tutoring sessions.

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