

A QUEST FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF WRITING CONFERENCE DISCOURSE

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Writing centers have a culture all their own. They have both individual cultures peculiar to their schools and histories and a common intellectual culture that has evolved over the past century. I entered this culture as a newly hired writing associate for Swarthmore College's Writing Associates Program. In the culture of our program, as well in the larger culture, a major topic of conversation and debate is directive and nondirective tutoring styles. The lore of our program and of the wider community has tended to encourage, if not expect, a nondirective style. The focus on peer collaboration, embodied by nondirective tutoring, as opposed to classroom hierarchy, embodied by directive tutoring, has been a backbone of writing centers' philosophy and existential justification (Boquet). But the expectation of nondirective tutoring is questioned both at Swarthmore and by recent empirical research (Thompson).

The conversation about directive/nondirective tutoring gets to the heart of what we care about in writing tutoring: First, what characterizes successful tutoring? Second, how do we achieve successful tutoring once we know what it is? Research studies often look for answers to these questions by asking tutors and students to evaluate their own conferences and methods. As a linguistics major, however, I was interested in a different approach for this study.¹ I sought to identify categorizable linguistic units that were associated with tutoring success, look at how they functioned in actual conferences, and evaluate how well they worked as indicators of success from a third-person perspective. Because I did not want to lock myself into the directive/nondirective framework, I defined tutoring success in the more general terms of student engagement.

Defining student engagement can, however, be challenging. Although tutors generally have an intuitive understanding of what student engagement is and how to identify it (when the student pays attention, contributes agenda items, listens closely), there are many situations where it is unclear whether a student is engaged, or whether he/she could be more productively engaged. Even when a tutor does find that a student is engaged, he/she may not know how or why it happened, and therefore will not necessarily be able to repeat what he/she did right in the future. This study is based on the conviction that tutors will better be able to elicit student engagement if they have more linguistic information about how student engagement manifests and how tutors elicit it. My intent was to analyze how a linguistic conception of student engagement might complicate the dichotomy of directive/nondirective tutoring.

Data Collection

In spring 2008, I solicited volunteers to participate in this study by e-mailing about thirty writing tutors to ask if I could videotape their writing conferences. The tutors I contacted constituted a diverse sample that included men and women from various academic majors and with different levels of tutoring experience. About half of those tutors I contacted were willing to participate. In total, I videotaped fourteen writing conferences, three of which are featured in this article. All partici-

pants were told that the project was intended to study writing tutor discourse, and they all consented in writing to participate with the understanding that they would be identified by pseudonyms.

Coding Development and System

The goal in using a linguistic frame to analyze student engagement was to build the frame from the data itself, thereby avoiding confusing or narrow predetermined conceptions of student engagement. Coded conversational analysis of writing conferences gave me a way to look for structural regularities in discourse related to student engagement and thus to analyze student engagement from the bottom up. The basic unit of my analysis is the conversational *move*. A conversational move is an utterance or set of utterances performed with a particular intent within the conversation, bounded either by a course-changing move by the other interlocutor or by a change in conversational direction by the speaker him- or herself, as I will show in examples at the end of this section.

The work of Ross MacDonald, who has a similar focus on conversational moves as the key unit in writing conference analysis, provided the foundation from which I constructed my coding system. MacDonald begins with a model common in classroom discourse (e.g., Mehan; Cazden) consisting of three basic conversational moves: initiation, reply, and evaluation (IRE). He expands this model to the MacDonald Tutoring Interaction Codes (MTIC), which adds two moves, marker and addition. Their definitions are, in his own words:

An initiation is an utterance which intends to elicit a verbal or nonverbal response from another interactant. A reply is an utterance which is directly occasioned by a previously occurring initiation. An evaluation is an utterance which by inflection, tone, or word rates as positive or negative the accuracy or utility of a previous reply. . . . An addition move is an utterance, which has not been initiated, which clarifies, illustrates, extends, or elaborates the current topic. A marker is a one or two-word utterance (“um hum,” “OK,” “right”) which indicates one’s on-going attention to utterances of the other or indicates a boundary between topics. (4)

These definitions provided the basis for my own coding system. Although my system has some significant differences from MacDonald’s, the core is the same, which gives me the benefit of retaining his conclusion that student-dominated addition-marker sequences are indicative of successful student engagement.

My framework for analysis was also influenced strongly by several other sources. First, the particular attention I pay to initiations was sparked by the work of Joann B. Johnson and informed by later work in a similar vein (Blau, Hall, and Strauss). Johnson brings together literature challenging the use of questions in educational contexts and invites further investigation of initiations in the form of, for example, statements or commands, specifically in writing tutoring. Her work encouraged me to look at initiations as key places to evaluate student engagement and, in particular, student structuring of the conference. Blau, Hall, and Strauss provided me with guiding questions for question analysis: Who asks the question, student or tutor? What type of question is it—open-ended, closed, rhetorical? What is its purpose? To move the conference forward? Get information? Elicit student participation? Couch a statement in question form? Though these are specifically about questions, modified versions of this list generally guide me in my analysis of all initiations.

Based on the above considerations, I developed the following coding system by coding and recoding the transcripts by hand and modifying the categories until they best fit the data:

Initiation (I): a move that directly solicits a response or overtly changes the direction of the conversation

Subcategories: request evaluation (req-eval), clarification (clar), suggestion (sug)

Syntax tags: question (ques), statement (stat)

Reply (R): a direct response to an initiation

Marker (M): a short utterance or gesture signaling continued attention, encouragement, or a boundary between conversational moves

Addition (A): an uninitiated move that may clarify, extend, or evaluate a previous move

I added subcategories to *initiation* for the purpose of being able to more specifically identify what kinds of initiations set up different types of exchanges, particularly those associated with student structuring of the conference. I could have added similar subcategories to the other categories (e.g., *evaluation*, *clarification*, and *related point* for *addition*), but these subcategories are not critical to my analysis, and therefore I have considered them encompassed by the definitions of the larger categories. I could also have added more subcategories to *initiation*, but these three alone captured almost all of the data, and so I decided to keep my subcategories as simple as possible.

Notice my removal of *evaluation* from the list of MTIC moves. *Evaluation* in MTIC and in IRE is a move directly following a reply that evaluates in some manner that reply. In my data, this very rarely happened. I decided instead to consider *evaluation* as an aspect that could manifest in several types of moves (e.g., *initiation*, *reply*, *addition*) rather than as a crucial element to my analysis.

The boundaries between additions and markers were difficult to decide sometimes, but that distinction is not terribly important to my analysis; it is the boundaries between initiations and addition-marker sequences that matter, and those are relatively easy to pinpoint. When I made that boundary, I asked myself these questions: Is this a new point? Could the speaker have stopped here?

To illustrate my coding process, here are several examples with explanation:

Heidi: I just kinda like wanted your comments mostly on, on like the argument and like if there's anything that you went, "Wow, that's problematic." (SI-ques:req-eval)

This is a student (S) initiation (I). Syntactically it is a question, and because the student is looking for an evaluative response, whether her argument is good or bad, it is a request for evaluation.

Derek: Um, so I think it might work best if we just go through the paper. (TI-stat:sug)

This is also an initiation, as it changes the direction of the conversation, but it is a statement (stat) by a tutor (T) and as it gives possible options for how to structure the conference, it is a suggestion (sug).

Lidia: So in this paragraph where you're talking about like the one Darly study and you're also talking about like the Lyson and Darly like sort of conceptual. (TI-ques:clar)

Marsha: Mhmm. (SM)

Lidia (*nodding*): Steps, right? (cont. prev. move)

This is the last kind of initiation, clarification (clar). It is the kind of initiation that asks for more information on the same topic or, as in this example, repeats back some information to check that the information was understood as intended.

Marsha: Yeah, it definitely does (SA) and um, also, I just don't know if like the kind of you know. (SA)

Lidia nods. (TM)

Marsha: I thought I had you know. (cont. prev. move)

Lidia nods. (TM)

Sometimes moves are punctuated by, but not ended by, other moves. I represent this by a tag, (cont. prev. move), meaning that the move is a continuation of the previous move by that speaker.

This coding guided my analysis of the conferences in my working model of how student engagement manifests linguistically: I looked for the addition-marker sequences favored by MacDonald as indicative of engaged tutoring interaction, and I focused on different kinds of initiations, particularly initiations representative of student agenda-setting. In the discussion below, I analyze three conferences that illustrate different manifestations of student engagement.

Discussion

Conference 1

This first conference, a drop-in writing center conference, took place between two senior writing tutors and lasted thirty-one minutes. My expectation going into the analysis of this conference was that it would show a particularly high level of student engagement and student structuring of the conference, considering the strong emphasis on those qualities in the writing program and the experience level of the participants both as students and writing tutors. After explaining what the paper was for, a women's studies class, Heidi, the student, makes the first initiation, a request for evaluation in statement form:

Heidi: I just kinda like wanted your comments mostly on, on like the argument and like if there's anything that you went, "Wow, that's problematic." (SI-ques:req-eval)

Derek, the tutor, continues in a manner that encourages Heidi to keep control of the conference's agenda:

Derek (*nodding*): Okay. (TM)

Heidi: Yeah. (SM)

Derek: Um, well, do you want to talk about like where you're kind of like at and like your concerns or do you just want to go through the paper and see kind of how it's going? (TI-ques:sug)

Heidi: Um, okay, um, let's start with my concerns. (SR)

He gives her time and encouragement to continue that first marker, and then, when Heidi doesn't seem to know where to go next, he gives her two options for how to start the agenda of the conference. Notice that Heidi picks the option that will require her to direct the conference more, as opposed to following the paper.

For the next five and a half minutes, neither participant makes an initiation that changes this initial agenda. Heidi initiates one request for evaluation. Derek asks one clarifying question, but after answering, Heidi immediately continues with her concerns, with which they spend about seven minutes. Then, at a natural pause, Derek directs the conference towards the other option he initially offered:

Derek: Um, so I think it might work best if we just go through the paper. (TI-stat:sug)

Heidi (*nodding*): Let's do that. (SR)

Derek follows with a fairly indirect initiation:

Derek: Um, so the first thing: terminology. I really like it when people like define their

terms. Um, it struck me, though, that you didn't define gender. (TI-stat:sug)

Heidi: Oh, right. Good point. (SM)

Both of these initiations are statements, and the second is a particularly good example of how a statement can be a more inviting initiation than a question. One could imagine Derek, with the best of intentions, asking at this point, "I was wondering, why didn't you define gender?" In the form of a question, this initiation might have several negative effects: (1) Heidi feels pressed to respond directly to the question, without understanding it better. (2) Feeling pressed, Heidi may try to construct an answer defensively such that it may be harder to convince her to consider the suggestion. (3) There is a sense of judgment and negativity—Heidi feels she missed something that is obviously important. (4) Heidi doesn't get the benefit of working out for herself why she didn't define gender and what she should change. In the conference as it unfolded, though, Derek continues to explain he had expected such a definition until Heidi offers a proposition for what her definition might be, and then herself decides to revise that definition.

The conference continues with exchanges of a general form, Heidi explaining her arguments and requesting evaluation on certain points, and Derek mostly asking questions to help her clarify her position and offering suggestions on structure. Every time one participant loses steam, the other picks up the conversation, each adding and explaining without prompting. The conference ends on a final request for evaluation and a transition into friendly chat.

In this conference, there were two major structuring moves with respect to the agenda. From the options Derek offers, Heidi first chooses to start with her concerns. The following conversation consists almost entirely of Heidi explaining her concerns, and Derek encouraging her to talk them out. This part lasts for seven minutes, so about a fourth of the entire conference. When Heidi ends with a request for evaluation, Derek suggests going through the paper as a way to structure the agenda. From that point on, topics of conversation are pulled either from Derek's written comments on the paper or the text itself. But it is important to note that when there was a lull in conversation, it was not always Derek who brought the conference back to the agenda. Once they settled on going through the paper, I counted twelve distinct topics of conversation. Five were initiated by Heidi and seven by Derek, so the structuring in this conference seems to be fairly equally distributed to both participants, although still slightly in favor of the tutor. The domination of addition-marker sequences was also fairly equal; sometimes Derek would explain his perspective and sometimes Heidi would talk out their ideas. Each encouraged the other to continue regularly, and each immediately picked up the thread of conversation when the other lagged. This conference seemed exemplary of a nondirective conference, where student and tutor interact as peers having a conversation as writer and reader. However, considering the unusual qualifications of the participants, this is probably not the most typical model for a Swarthmore conference.

Conference 2

This conference lasted only five and a half minutes—significantly shorter than other conferences in this sample. It also took place in the drop-in writing center. The participants were two sophomores: Lily, the writing tutor, and Wally, who had brought in an economics paper. In a move that seems like it could set up the kind of student agenda-setting seen in Conference 1, Lily begins with a solicitation of Wally's input on the agenda:

Lily: Um, is there anything in particular you wanted to start off with talking about, about this paper? (TI-ques:req-eval)

Wally explains vaguely that he is confused, ending with a general question for Lily:

Wally: I guess a lot of it is just kind of like, does it sort of make sense? (SI-ques:req-eval)

Lily *nods*. (TM)

Wally: And flow? And like . . . I don't know. (cont. prev. move)

Lily responds with fairly general but very positive feedback:

Lily (*nodding*): Okay, sure, um, I mean, I thought it was actually really well written. (TA)

Wally *nods*. (SM)

Lily: And I thought it flowed and your organization was really good. (TR)

Wally *nods*. (SM)

Lily: To be honest, I really didn't have much to say about it, cuz I just thought it was so well written as it was. (TA)

Already, thirty seconds into the conference, it seems clear that it is going to be a short conference—very different from Conference 1. Wally, though he doesn't seem terribly confident about his paper, does not volunteer any specific issues to work on, and Lily has minimal criticism. She does give him one substantive criticism:

Lily: Um, so you have a very coherent argument, but you don't have a thesis. (TA)

The next move of Lily's framing is particularly interesting, though:

Lily: Um, but to be honest, reading it, it didn't seem like it would, um, be . . . (TI-stat:sug)

Wally *nods*. (SM)

Lily: . . . like, I mean, like it seems like maybe just kind of, you know, reread it for yourself . . . (cont. prev. move)

Wally *nods*. (SM)

Lily: . . . and then . . . (cont. prev. move)

Wally (*nodding*): Mhmm. (SM)

Lily: . . . just summarize in a couple sentences. (cont. prev. move)

Wally *nods*. (SM)

Lily: Um, I don't know, to be honest, I thought it was a really good paper. (TA)

Wally *nods*. (SM)

Lily: So I don't really have all that much to say about it, I'm afraid, um. (cont. prev. move)

Unlike Derek, Lily does not engage the student in talking through her criticism, either by soliciting his opinion or by trying to get him to come up with a solution, but rather just expresses confidence that he will be able to fix it on his own. Notice, also, that she gives one very specific suggestion; she does not enlist the student's help in identifying or understanding the problem. Lily then reiterates that she doesn't have much to say. Wally now expresses some confidence:

Wally: Well, no, that's fine, I felt, I actually felt pretty good about it. (SA)

He talks through what his writing process was for a while, and then Lily raises another concern, a lower-level concern about citations and sources. Wally ends up deciding that he needs to talk to his professor about this issue and the conference, with respect to talking about writing, ends. Lily summarizes the content of the conference and then apologizes for how short the conference was and repeats that she didn't have much to say.

This conference shows very little student engagement. Wally does not come to the conference with any specific agenda. Lily comes with a very limited agenda, does not elicit any further agenda items from Wally, and does not engage him in addition-marker sequences of any length. Thus, neither of the two factors of student engagement I was looking for appeared in this conference.

Conference 3

This conference involved Lidia, a senior writing tutor who worked as the writing associate in the psychology course in which Marsha, a sophomore, was enrolled. The conference lasted thirty-one minutes. After some clarification about which parts of the paper to address, Lidia begins the conference by asking Marsha how she feels about the paper. Marsha responds at length:

Marsha: Um, mhmm, let's see, I don't . . . it's hard because I've read plenty of like articles, you know, journal articles. (SR)

Lidia *nods*.

Marsha: I've just never written one. (cont. prev. move)

Lidia: Yeah, yeah. (TM)

Marsha: So I thought it was a weird thing to write, I don't know. (cont. prev. move) I'm, I guess also, one, I'm not sure if I did enough in my results section. (SA)

Lidia (*nodding*): Mhmm. (TM)

Marsha: Or if I reported it correctly (cont. prev. move), cuz I like had like intro stat but . . . (SA)

Lidia: (*nodding*): Yeah. (TM)

Marsha: . . . but, you know, it kinda starts to . . . (cont. prev. move)

Lidia: Well, it helps a lot. (TA)

Marsha: Yeah, it definitely does (SA) and um, also, I just don't know if like the kind of you know. (SA)

Lidia *nods*. (TM)

Marsha: I thought I had you know. (cont. prev. move)

Lidia *nods*. (TM)

Marsha: I was kind of going on the, with my lit review, kind of like the right direction, but I just wasn't sure. (cont. prev. move)

Lidia (*nodding*): Yeah. (TM)

Marsha: So yeah, I don't know. (cont. prev. move)

Lidia: Okay. (TM)

Marsha: I mean, I also definitely like stylistically I have a lot of like, like where I am, mhmm, I have to go back . . . (SA)

Lidia *nods*. (TM)

Marsha: . . . and like make this sound better. (cont. prev. move)

Lidia *laughs*. (TM)

Marsha: But I'm like okay, this is like mainly like . . . (cont. prev. move)

Lidia *nods*. (TM)

Marsha: . . . put my ideas out there . . . (cont. prev. move)

Lidia (*nodding*): Yeah. (TM)

Marsha: . . . and then have time to go back . . . (cont. prev. move)

Lidia (*nodding*): Yeah, totally. (TM)

Marsha: . . . make it stylistically better. (cont. prev. move)

Lidia: Yeah, so are those the things that you're kind of like most interested in fixing?

Like, or like looking at? Like making sure that the lit review flows and like? (TI-ques:req-eval)

Marsha: Yeah. (SM)

Lidia: And that the results are right, that kind of stuff? (cont. prev. move)

This exchange is the first of several that reveal Lidia's tutoring style relies on encouraging markers and repeating the student's words back to her. The exchange contains several examples of places that Lidia could have jumped in, but instead used markers to encourage Marsha to continue. Many tutors might feel compelled to reply with feedback after statements such as "I'm not sure if I did enough in my results section," "I thought . . . I was kind of going on the, with my lit review, kind of like the right direction, but I just wasn't sure," and "So yeah, I don't know." One could imagine Lidia jumping in with an evaluation of Marsha's results section, her literature review, or just starting in on the concerns Lidia herself wants to address at any of these points. Lidia, however, does not reply, except with encouraging markers, to any of these, and Marsha comes up with another substantive concern, about the stylistic elements of her paper. At the end of the exchange, Lidia both repeats back specific concerns she heard, "making sure that the lit review flows," "that the results are right," and verifies with Marsha that these are the concerns she wants to address, "are those the things you're kind of like most interested in fixing?"

Next, they turn to the paper, and Lidia starts with what Marsha does well:

Lidia: Um, so, just as like an overview, like basically like, um, I thought like you obviously like had a lot of really good studies that you'd found, and like I think you talk about those really well. (TA)

Marsha: Okay. (SM)

Lidia (*nodding*): So like that's like, that's really great, yeah. (TA)

Marsha: I wasn't sure, because I just, I had the model . . .

Lidia *nods*. (TM)

Marsha: . . . I wanted to work off relying on Darly . . . (SA)

Lidia (*nodding*): Mhmm. (TM)

Marsha: . . . and I'm like, okay, like they talk about this in my social psych textbook . . . (SA)

Lidia: Yeah. (TM)

Marsha: . . . and I don't just want to be like, you know . . . (SA)

Lidia *nods*. (TM)

Marsha: . . . it is the studies that are supporting the concepts . . .

Lidia (*nodding*): Yeah. (TM) (cont. prev. move)

Marsha: . . . but I don't want to just like reiterate what they say. (cont. prev. move)

Lidia (*nodding*): Yeah. (TM)

Marsha: I want to like, you know, so, I . . . (SA)

Lidia: Yeah, definitely. (TM)

Marsha: I had to rewrite that a couple times. (cont. prev. move)

Lidia (*nodding*): Uh huh, yeah, so I think like, maybe like the direction you could go in then is like moving from the studies towards explaining your study . . . (TI-stat:sug)

Marsha (*nodding*): Okay. (SM)

Lidia: . . . which is something that you like, you sort of like, you do like talk about in the introduction. (TA)

Lidia begins with positive feedback, but Marsha interrupts with a concern. Again, there are several places where Lidia could reply with feedback, but chooses not to, such as “I wasn’t sure, because I just, I had the model I wanted to work off relying on Darly,” and “I don’t just want to be like, you know, it is the studies that are supporting the concepts, but I don’t want to just like reiterate what they say.” Like several examples above, these are all expressions of the student’s uncertainty, which often prompts some kind of (usually positive or encouraging) feedback from the tutor. Lidia, however, encourages Marsha to continue explaining her concern with markers. When Marsha loses steam, Lidia does give her a suggestion, but in doing so, she points to a specific place where Marsha is already going in the right direction: “which is something that you like, you sort of like, you do like talk about in the introduction.” By giving this kind of specific, relevant positive feedback, Lidia accomplishes several things: First, she gets the general benefits of giving positive feedback, such as improving the student’s self-confidence, morale, and general goodwill towards the tutor and the conference. Second, she is able to give a concrete example of what she is talking about, one that the student understands. Finally, she frames her suggestion in a way that implies that the student already can and has done to some extent the suggested task, that it isn’t a radical change or a completely new idea, but rather builds on what the student already knew to do.

Just as in the first exchange above, in which Lidia repeated back to Marsha what she heard Marsha say, Lidia explains her concern by repeating what Marsha does in her paper:

Lidia: So you’re sort of going through like the different things that can get in the way of helping, um, and then you start saying, like um, that you might, like here are like other things that could be risks . . . (TA)

Marsha: Mhmm.

Lidia: . . . and then you say like in this situation the researchers hypothesize (TA) and then all of a sudden like I think you’re talking about your study, right? (TI-ques:req-eval)

Marsha: Uh huh.

Lidia: Did I interpret that correctly? (TI-ques:req-eval)

Marsha: Yeah, yeah.

Lidia: Okay, yeah, so like, so I’m reading this and I’m like, oh wait a minute, like, now you’re not just talking about like general principles, all of a sudden you’re talking about like your study . . . (TA)

Marsha: Yeah.

Lidia: . . . and it, I was just, it just took me a second to like process like, oh wait a minute. (TA)

Marsha (*nodding*): Okay. (SM)

Lidia: Like that’s where you are now. (cont. prev. move)

Marsha (*nodding*): Mhmm. (SM)

Lidia: Um, so maybe like, there might be some way to like structure it so that it’s making it clearer that that’s what you’re moving toward. (TI-stat:sug)

Marsha: Mhmm. (SM)

Lidia: Um, so that might be something like here’s the literature I’ve summarized so far, but here’s a gap in that literature . . . (TA)

Marsha: Okay. (SM)

Lidia: . . . and, which is, which is like kind of . . .

Marsha Yeah. (SM)

Lidia: . . . which is the sort of thing you're saying here.

Lidia starts by giving a summary of what Marsha did: "So you're sort of going through like the different things that can get in the way of helping . . . and then you start saying, . . . here are like other things that could be risks, and then you say like in this situation the researchers hypothesize and then all of a sudden like I think you're talking about your study." Next, she verifies that this is what Marsha thought she said in the paper as well: "Did I interpret that correctly?" Then Lidia explains the issue by giving her personal reaction to the structure: "so I'm reading this and I'm like, oh wait a minute like, now you're not just talking about like general principles, all of a sudden you're talking about like your study." By giving her personal reaction, rather than just a direct suggestion, she invites Marsha to see her writing through the eyes of her audience (the specific audience of Lidia) and thereby see the problem for herself. This, assuming it is successful, helps Marsha understand the suggestion and give it more credibility. Again, then, when Lidia gives her suggestion, she points out that some of what Marsha has written already emulates Lidia's suggestion when she says, "which is the sort of thing you're saying here." This again implies that Marsha is already partially on the right track, and that she just needs to continue in that direction.

In terms of initiations, this looked like a very tutor-directed conference; Lidia had almost all the initiations (thirty-three for Lidia, only two for Marsha). This looks very different from the nondirective conference between Derek and Heidi. However, the kind of initiations Lidia used, usually clarifying questions and statements of her reaction to the writing, tended to set up long addition-marker sequences of the kind above, which involved Marsha working out her ideas in a very engaged way. Thus this style shows a way to evoke student engagement even within the framework of a tutor-directed and tutor-structured conference. One potential advantage of the control Lidia maintains in this conference is that she retains her agenda and is able to prioritize issues; although they do address the concerns Marsha brings up in the beginning (her literature review and results sections), the majority of the conference is spent discussing the introduction, which Lidia raises as her first concern. Thus, as a tutor, Lidia neither completely leaves the direction of the conference to the student, nor does she steamroll the student's concerns. Instead, she maintains the prioritization of her agenda in the conference, but integrates the student's concerns. This approach is also less dependent on having a proactive student, which probably contributed to Derek's ability to be nondirective in Conference 1.

Marsha also volunteered a significant amount of positive feedback. First, after they finish talking about the introduction:

Lidia: Okay, um, let's see, yeah, okay, alright, um, was there anything else from the introduction that you'd had a question about or . . .? (TI-ques:req-eval)

Marsha: No, I think you did a really good job. (SR)

Then again at the end of the conference:

Marsha: Thank you so much for your help. (SA)

Lidia: Sure, no problem, great. (TA)

Marsha: It was really, you really went through well . . . (SA)

Lidia nods. (TM)

Marsha: . . . the issues that I had questions about. (cont. prev. move)

Of course, giving positive feedback may just be Marsha's personality, but it may also reflect that the conference was genuinely successful from her point of view, which is significant if the ideal tutoring style is intended to evoke student satisfaction and empowerment. If this conference was a genuine success from Marsha's point of view, it corroborates the Thompson's findings in that Lidia both addressed Marsha's concerns and incorporated a lot of positive feedback into the conference.

Summary of Results and Conclusions

In Conference 1 Derek's nondirective style and Heidi's active participation style made for a conference in many ways exemplary of student engagement, such as Heidi's control of the agenda, frequent initiations, and addition-marker sequences. Conference 2 was an example of a conference that did not show much student engagement. Wally's lack of specific concerns and Lily's insistence that she did not have much to talk about quickly ended the conference, leaving little room for student engagement. In Conference 3, Lidia took a much more directive approach than Derek had done in Conference 1, but she evoked student engagement in a different way. Her style included summarizing Marsha's writing, offering her own reactions, and then rephrasing and focusing Marsha's spoken ideas. This approach did not allow for or elicit as much student-directed agenda-setting as the nondirective style of Conference 1, but it did regularly elicit addition-marker sequences in which Marsha talked her ideas out.

The vision of student engagement that emerges from these results is a bit different from the idea I started out with. Initially, I had a fairly nondirective expectation of what student engagement should look like; the goal is to get the student to set the agenda and talk through his/her concerns, a vision reflected in the two linguistic patterns I was looking for: student agenda-setting manifested in initiations and student-dominated addition-marker sequences. I still think those patterns are a good place to start when looking for engagement, but the concept is more complicated. Student agenda-setting as a model of student engagement probably works only with the kind of students who are able and willing to set the agenda and with tutors who are comfortable with that style. When considering addition-marker sequences, it matters not only who dominates them, but also what the content is and how much those sequences actually reflect student investment and understanding.

While Conference 1 is a model of how nondirection can elicit student engagement, Conference 2 shows how nondirective student engagement can fall flat if the student does not bring his own concerns to the table and the tutor is not able to otherwise draw the student into conversation. Conference 3 shows how a more classically directive style of conferencing can also be very effective in eliciting student engagement, and particularly how certain kinds of addition-marker sequences allow students to very constructively talk their thoughts out. These observations point towards a philosophy aimed not only at encouraging student engagement overall, but at considering the different ways student engagement can manifest and ways conferencing styles need to be individualized for particular students as well as take into account the strengths of particular tutors.

Directions for Further Research

As a sole researcher, I was limited in what I could do in this study, and I hope to see larger-scale research take these questions in several directions. First, it would be useful to be able to combine breadth of kinds of conferences and tutors with breadth of detailed analysis. Ideally, a future

project would have the time and resources to analyze in detail a large body of data for more general trends and conclusions. Examples of specific and significant factors I was unable to incorporate include intonation, laughter, interruptions, pauses, and a more detailed analysis of nonverbal communication. My conclusions further suggest that it will be important to study not only what tutors do, but how students differ in the way they react to tutoring and how tutors see their own tutoring. It is quite unlikely that there is some kind of blanket method of tutoring that always successfully elicits student engagement. Rather, the success of the approach depends on how well it matches the style of both the tutor and the student. My hope is that others will continue to take the conception of student engagement beyond the directive/nondirective debate and look instead at how the particular context of each conference can give rise to particularized manifestations of student engagement.

Note

¹ This study, with full IRB approval, was done for my senior thesis in linguistics at Swarthmore College.

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