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UNEXPLORED CONCEPTIONS: WHAT WRITING CENTER TUTORS THINK
ABOUT WRITING

by

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B.A. Oakland University, 2016

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ABSTRACT

Writing center tutors enact their conceptions of writing in every tutoring session, and yet their conceptions of writing have not yet been systematically researched. This thesis researches the conceptions of writing of writing center tutors at the University of Central Florida's University Writing Center.

To uncover tutors' conceptions of writing, I interviewed three tutors by asking them open-ended questions about their experiences with writing and tutoring. After coding and analyzing the transcripts of these interviews, I found seven shared conceptions of writing. These conceptions are the basis of my argument. Because these conceptions are shared but not taught, I turn to legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as a possible explanation for how tutors have arrived at similar conceptions of writing. This thesis also responds to Adler-Kassner and Wardle's (2019) call for the integration of threshold concepts into writing studies research by comparing tutors' conceptions of writing to the threshold concepts revealed in their edited collection, *Naming What We Know* (2015).

Ultimately, this thesis is exploratory. It begins to uncover tutors' conceptions of writing, and could be of particular value to writing center administrators who wish to better understand what their tutors think about writing by conducting their own, similar research.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

> Part of the issue with history is that it's not full of facts, it's full of people's firsthand accounts. Primary source analysis is learning how to interrogate a source for information, identify bias, put it in historical context, identify audience, figure out why it was written and what it can say to us, and see what we can extrapolate from what was explained. So a simple example for how you can extrapolate is that if someone makes legislation about something, that means that somebody was doing something that they don't want them to do anymore. So if you have a lot of legislation about bakers having to bake things at certain sizes, that means a lot of bakers were baking small pieces of bread.

In the preceding quote, Angela, one of the participants in this study, describes some of the purposes and constraints for writing in the discipline of history, specifically within the activity and genre of primary source analysis. Identifying biases, audiences, contexts, exigencies, and implications is one way of understanding the work that a piece of writing does. This quote might offer a glimpse into one of the ways that Angela thinks writing works, at least in a disciplinary context: writing is an expression of the implicit beliefs, values, and goals of an author. One might also say that this quote demonstrates a belief that writing is something that can be analyzed, or that writing can be an instrument for enforcing the will of the state. In isolation, her statement cannot be used to form a strong argument about her ideas about writing. This manuscript considers more of Angela's stories about writing, along with the stories of other writing center tutors, to begin illuminate the conceptions of writing most prevalent in her writing center. As an undergraduate writing center tutor, I often got the sense that the other tutors and I thought similar things about writing. We shared ideas about how writing worked, and how it might best be done and taught. The ideas we shared were not the ones that writing teachers taught us, or that we learned in the tutor training class. At the time, I did not have the tools or the language to describe what I noticed. In graduate school, I worked at another institution's writing center and noticed that the tutors' still seemed to share beliefs about writing, but not the exact beliefs as my past coworkers from my

prior institution. I did not realize until the middle of my thesis defense that the exigence of this study was that I wanted to listen to tutors' talk about writing to see what they really think about it, and along the way, find out if my assumption about shared beliefs was correct.

The purpose of this study is to identify the conceptions of writing held by tutors at the writing center of a large public research institution in Florida. In this study, conceptions of writing means what tutors think writing is, how they think it works, and how they think it can be taught and learned. Before I can introduce and summarize the most relevant threads from the research conversation about conceptions of writing in my literature review, the following point must be made: very nearly all the scholarly activity of writing studies concerns somebody's conceptions of writing. Ideas and research about rhetoric, genre, audience, literacy, discourse, and every other area of inquiry in writing studies are about writing. As a part of my theoretical framework, conceptions of writing offers a means of examining tutors' existing ideas about writing while minimizing the degree to which I insert my own, discipline-molded ideas about how writing works.

There is no writing center studies research about tutors' existing conceptions of writing. The nearest writing studies research to my topic focuses on threshold concepts. Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2015) applied Meyer and Land's (2003) theory of threshold concepts to writing studies in their edited collection, *Naming What We Know*. In effect, threshold concepts are particular conceptions of writing that are regarded as highly useful for learners by many writing studies scholars. In writing center studies, this theory was taken up by Nowacek and Hughes (2015) in their chapter of *Naming What We Know*. The authors argued that threshold concepts are a useful framework for preparing tutors to work with writers in different stages in the writing process as

they write in different genres and for different audiences, without teaching them about each new genre and rhetorical situation individually.

Tutors encounter more types of texts and writerly needs than they could learn about one at a time, and so some heuristic for tutoring is necessary. The particular value of threshold concepts compared to other tutoring frameworks, according to Nowacek and Hughes (2015) and also according to the Meyer and Land's (2003) original vision of threshold concepts, is their potential for transforming the tutor's views on how writing works by disrupting their existing ideas with troublesome new ones. Nowacek and Hughes (2015) advocated for teaching tutors about the idea of threshold concepts as a theory of learning and also introducing them to the particular threshold concepts proposed in *Naming What We Know*.

The idea that writing center administrators ought to teach particular conceptions of writing to their tutors is not new. Stephen North, a major figure in the history of writing center studies, wrote "Training Tutors to Talk about Writing" in 1982. That article is about how his tutor training course teaches would-be tutors to adopt particular conceptions of what writing is and how it works so that they can tutor effectively. More recently, Dinitz (2018) responded to Nowacek and Hughes' (2015) call to implement Adler-Kassner and Wardle's (2015) collection of writing studies threshold concepts into tutor education. Dinitz (2018) shared her observations about the ways in which tutors' views of both writing and tutoring are fundamentally altered after learning these writing studies threshold concepts.

Meyer and Land (2003) conceded that if one considers the disciplinary power, status, and influence of those who determine what a field's threshold concepts are, "*Whose* threshold concepts then becomes a salient question" (p. 13). This thesis considers some of the existing conceptions of writing that discipline-backed threshold concepts would replace. I address the following research

question: what conceptions of writing do experienced writing center tutors hold? The tutors in this study hold conceptions that mirror and build on the threshold concepts put forth by Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2015). Further, their shared but not taught conceptions of writing suggest that practice, not formal education, is the mode through which conceptions of writing are learned.

Overview of the Study

The first chapter of this thesis introduces the purpose and theoretical framework of my research. The second chapter is a literature review that focuses on writing center research methods, conceptions of writing, threshold concepts, and legitimate peripheral participation. Chapter Three discusses my methodology for choosing interview subjects, determining what questions to ask them, and coding and analyzing the interview transcripts. In Chapter Four, I present the results of my research. I analyze and discuss the implications of those results in the fifth chapter.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This literature review discusses writing center research, conceptions of writing, threshold concepts, and legitimate peripheral participation. I focus first on writing center research to situate this thesis within that sub-discipline's call for replicable, aggregable, and data-driven (RAD) research. I then review some recent studies of conceptions of writing, trace the integration of threshold concepts into writing studies, and introduce legitimate peripheral participation as a potential means of understanding this study's results.

Writing Center Scholarship

This section of the literature review summarizes scholarship concerning the historic and contemporary state of writing center studies research. In the first chapter of Gillespie, Gillam, Brown, and Stay's (2002) *Writing Center Research*: *Extending the Conversation,* Gillam (2002) synthesized the talk about research generated by writing center scholars from the middle 1980s through the 1990s. Writing center researchers were talking about the wave of writing center scholarship that followed North's (1984) call for writing center research that tested the field's assumptions about how writing centers worked. Some research had unsuccessfully tried to identify guiding principles of writing center work. Other research studied writing centers at a local level, but did not purport to produce generalizable knowledge and therefore seemed to be of little practical application. Gillam (2002) focused on the consistency with which writing center scholars called for other writing center scholars to reexamine the methods and theories that guided writing center research. Gillespie et al.'s (2002) book both captures and is part of a long-running debate in writing center studies -- a debate about the methods and methodologies of writing center research.

The aim of this debate is to ensure that writing center studies research can establish and contribute to a disciplinary body of knowledge. Without such a body, Gillespie et al. (2002) and many others have argued that writing center administrators can neither define the work of their discipline nor defend their often precarious institutional status.

Today, writing centers scholars continue to debate the value and purpose of different forms of writing center research. Still echoing today is North's (1984) call to get out of the 'lore,' or unsupported claims about how writing centers work, and into research-driven practice. One disciplinary trend has been an increase in replicable, aggregable, and data-supported (RAD) research. In Haswell's (2005) words, RAD research "is a best effort inquiry into the actualities of a situation, inquiry that is explicitly enough systematicized in sampling, execution, and analysis to be replicated; exactly enough circumscribed to be extended; and factually enough supported to be verified," (p. 201). Haswell (2005) wrote about RAD research in his critique of the decline of such research, and the consequent loss of interdisciplinary credibility, in the scholarship produced by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). Haswell (2005) argued that instead of moving towards evidence-based practice alongside other academic disciplines, these institutions of writing research had been warring with it.

Writing center scholars responded with particular vigor to Haswell's (2005) arguments in favor of RAD research. I believe those arguments resonated with the ongoing search for a research methodology that could create research to defend the institutional value of writing centers to outside stakeholders. Perdue and Driscoll (2012) searched for RAD research in *Writing Center Journal* articles from 1980 to 2009, and found very little work that fit the definition, though they did notice that articles that qualified as RAD started to become more prevalent in the late 2000s. I

did not conduct my own investigation of the RAD-ness of recent writing center scholarship; that could be its own thesis. However, in the past few years, the work of authors who claim that their research is RAD and whose work appears to me to meet the criteria for RAD research has been published in the *Writing Center Journal* with increasing frequency. Pleasant, Niiler, and Jagannathan (2016) studied the ability of writing center tutorials to actually improve students' writing ability. Wells (2016) studied the efficacy of required writing center tutoring sessions via carefully explained and constructed surveys and interviews. There are other writing center studies that implement the methodology of RAD research (Driscoll & Perdue, 2014; Driscoll & Powell, 2017; Giaimo, 2017; Lerner, 2014; Lerner, 2017; Nordstrom, 2015). The goal of these studies is not to uncover the universal Truths of writing center studies. That was the overambitious goal of the initial response to North's (1984) call for more rigorous writing center research. These studies offer glimpses of the local, but they also provide context for their results so that other researchers can determine what to make of them.

In designing the methodology of this thesis, I endeavored to implement these principles. In this manuscript, I have worked to write clearly and thoroughly about the actions I took and the decisions I made throughout the research process. The conceptions of writing that I argue the tutors in this study display are not meant to be representative of all writing center tutors. However, in making my methods and findings clear, I have made it possible to replicate and aggregate the results of my study. Research does not become replicable due only to the method it employs; I also carefully and thoroughly described my research methods in order to make this study replicable. By coding and categorizing tutors' talk and explaining my process for doing so, I created a data-driven argument. RAD research is an increasingly popular approach for generating

knowledge in writing center studies, and I wanted this thesis to employ the knowledge-making

practices of the sub-discipline in which it is situated.

Conceptions of Writing

Conceptions of writing is an umbrella term for all the ideas, schema, knowledge structures,

and beliefs about writing that writers possess. Because there is no research on writing center

tutors' conceptions of writing, this section of the literature review focuses on other researcher's

methods and motives for identifying a given population's conceptions of writing. The three studies

summarized here represent a common approach to studying conceptions of writing, one which I

have implemented into the design of this study. Typically, one small group is used to study a

larger population. Colombo and Prior (2016) were interested in Latin American students in

general, and focused their efforts at a single Uruguayan university. This does not mean the sample

is taken as a uniform representation of the whole. Instead, the sample is a glimpse into a larger

pattern of the population's interactions with writing. The researchers then typically either survey

or interview the participants in order to understand their conceptions of writing. When surveys are

used, quantitative analysis is performed on the data. When interviews are used, researchers

transcribe and analyze the participants' talk in order to identify their beliefs about writing. Finally,

the gathered data is typically analyzed as a whole, but only after each participants' individual

beliefs has been isolated. Lonka, Chow, Keskinen, Hakkarainen, Sandstorms, and Pyhältö (2014),

for example, broke their survey responses down by student discipline, age, working status, and

research group participation. Based on trends in this individualized data, the researchers make

arguments about the subjects' conceptions of writing and the implications of those conceptions.

Colombo and Prior (2016) conducted a study to better understand professors' common belief that Latin American college students write poorly in their coursework. Their method was to survey and interview professors from a private Uruguayan university about their beliefs on first year students' reading and writing problems, the causes of those problems, and the solutions the university was trying to implement to address them. They also asked professors about the sorts of reading and writing tasks their students were expected to perform, and about how and what they thought students learned via reading and writing. They identified a dichotomy in professors' thoughts about writing. Some professors thought of writing as a means of representing student knowledge, and others thought of it "as a complex decision making process," (Colombo & Prior, 2016, p. 118). By analyzing the results of each interview individually, Colombo and Prior (2016) were able to map out profiles of conceptions that tended to appear alongside one another. They concluded that professors who recognized the generative power of writing were also more likely to teach students how to adopt academic literacies, whereas professors who thought of writing as a product usually left students to figure out how to write on their own.

Villalón, Mateos, and Cuevas (2013) studied the effects of high school students' conceptions of writing and their writing self-efficacy on their writing performance. Their 111 participants attended eight high schools in Madrid, Spain. The researchers were concerned with three aspects of students' conceptions of writing: the use and function of writing, how students plan and carry out their writing process, and how students revise and edit their work after a first draft is completed. The students' responses could lean towards either the writing-as-reproductive or the writing-as-epistemic ends of the researchers' 29 scale-of-agreement questions. The researchers categorized the students into those who thought of writing as the act of representing what they already knew, and those who thought of writing as a process of learning. Students also

completed a brief essay so that researchers could compare their conceptions to their writing performance. The students who viewed writing as epistemic performed notably better than their writing-as-reproduction counterparts.

Lonka, Chow, Keskinen, Hakkarainen, Sandstorms, and Pyhältö (2014) studied the relationship between PhD students' conceptions of writing and their well-being. Their research focused on writing because of the nature of doctoral programs, in which students learn how to produce and share knowledge through writing in accordance with disciplinary norms. They surveyed PhD students at a Finnish university on their conceptions of writing in six categories: "blocks, procrastination, perfectionism, innate ability, knowledge transforming, and productivity," (Lonka et al., 2014, p. 245). Based on their analyses of the survey data, Lonka et al. (2014) found that conceptions of writing play a critical role in the writing process for PhD students. For example, students who saw writing as an innate ability were more likely to struggle with writing blocks than students who saw writing as a learned skill. Their conclusion was that helpful conceptions of writing should be integrated into doctoral education so that students could more easily maintain their well-being throughout the dissertation-writing process.

There is an apparent trend in conceptions of writing literature that connects a conception of writing as a knowledge-generating process with more productive attitudes about writing and better performance in writing tasks. This trend is not evaluated in this exploratory study. I wanted to allow the tutors' talk to speak for itself, and so I coded the conceptions about writing that I saw in their stories about writing and tutoring. In this thesis, the localized, interview-based approach to studying conceptions of writing was replicated. The tutors at one university's writing center are taken as a sample of writing center tutors. In keeping with other studies of conceptions of writing which rely on either surveys or interviews, they are interviewed, not observed in the practice of

tutoring or writing. Finally, their responses are broken down individually. I did not develop tutor

profiles in the style of Colombo and Prior (2016), but by breaking down the results individually, I

was able to identify which conceptions of writing were shared by all participants.

<center>Threshold Concepts</center>

In Meyer and Land's (2003) article introducing their theory of threshold concepts, the

authors explain that a threshold concept represents "a transformed way of understanding, or

interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress," (p. 1). Threshold

concepts are not simply important details in a body of knowledge, they are by definition

"transformative," "irreversible," and "integrative," (Meyer & Land, 2003, p. 5). This means that

once a learner grasps a threshold concept of a particular subject, they will forever understand the

subject differently. Further, that new understanding will be integrated into their perspective on the

topic, and previously held information will be viewed in this new light. In the quote that begins

this article, Angela identifies what I believe to be a threshold concept of the study of history. To

study history as if all historical accounts are factual is impossible, as conflicting accounts will

bring any research to a standstill. Instead, historians have to examine and cross-reference their

sources to construct a narrative about one part of history, Now, every time Angela reads a primary

historical source, she reads it with this truth in mind -- she cannot undo this realization.

As editors, Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2015) synthesized the voices of contributing

authors to propose five primary threshold concepts central to writing studies:

1. "Writing is a social and rhetorical activity," (p. 17);

2. "Writing speaks to situations through recognizable forms," (p. 35);

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3. "Writing enacts and creates identities and ideologies," (p. 48);

4. "All writers have more to learn," (p. 59); and

5. "Writing is (also always) a cognitive activity," (p. 71).

Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2015) position these threshold concepts as "final-for-now definitions of *some* of what our field knows," (p. 5). Their argument for the necessity of naming what the discipline knows was that an agreed-upon core of disciplinary knowledge was critical if the discipline was to shape outsider's understandings of what it means to write well. Adler-Kassner and Wardle's (2019) *(Re)Considering What We Know* continued the conversation of the role(s) of threshold concepts in writing studies research and pedagogy, and while they ultimately advocated for the continued use of the concept in general, their book did not revisit the place of threshold concepts in writing center studies specifically. In the context of writing centers, Dinitz (2018) writes that, before being introduced to the threshold concept that "Writing speaks to situations through recognizable forms" (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015, p. 35), many new tutors are eager to help other students learn how to write well. Dinitz (2018) argues that this happens because the tutors are operating under the misconceptions that, first, there is only one good way to write, and, second, that they know what it is. She further explains that after learning about how writing varies by genre and discipline, her tutors were more aware of the myriad forms of academic writing and thus simultaneously less sure of their own knowledge and more empathetic to writers struggling with creating academic texts. While some research has considered the effect of these threshold concepts in tutor education, my study searches for conceptions of writing already present in the minds of writing center tutors.

Legitimate Peripheral Participation

Lave and Wenger (1991) posit that social participation is the mechanism through which all learning occurs. I focus heavily on their text in this section of the literature review because their understanding of how learning works is central to my analysis and its implications. Their name for the process of learning in a given community is legitimate peripheral participation. Their definition of legitimacy is straightforward. If a learner actually participates in the social structure of a community, then the learner's participation is legitimate (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 35). If the learner does not enter a community's social strata, then the learner is not an illegitimate participant; they are not a participant at all. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that because communities' means of enculturating and teaching newcomers vary so widely, there can be no specific criteria for the actions that are required for or conducive to legitimate peripheral participation. Instead, for participation to be legitimate, learners must genuinely engage in the social practices that happen in the community they wish to learn from. Over time, learners often take on increasingly varied and difficult tasks as they engage more fully with a particular community. For example, in the writing center I studied, it is only after some face-to-face experience that tutors can learn how to tutor online. Some writing centers also invite experienced tutors to serve as mentors to new tutors or as members or heads of internal committees on various aspects of writing center operations.

The other aspect of Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory is the peripherality of participation. Because learning happens only via participation, there is not one central repository of knowledge within any community that members can learn from directly. Rather, all participation, and thus all learning, is situated within the periphery, within the daily practices of a given community. In a

writing center, though an administrator might sit at the head of a hierarchy, the work of tutoring takes place at consultation tables, in break rooms, and wherever else tutors and administrators engage with one another to tutor or talk about tutoring. Lave and Wenger (1991) further clarify that neither condition can exist without the other. There are no illegitimate peripheral participants or legitimate non-peripheral participants. There are only learners who genuinely take part in the work and social structure of a community, and outsiders who do not. The mechanisms of learning works and how pedagogy can incorporate learning theory remains an active research topic, and one potentially relevant strand of scholarship is research on transfer (Ambrose, Bridges, Lovett & Norman, 2010; Robertson, Taczak & Yancey, 2012; Yancey, Robertson & Taczak, 2014). Because I could not systematically isolate the various knowledge that tutors brought to the writing center, I could not incorporate transfer research in a meaningful way in this thesis. Instead, I draw on Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of legitimate peripheral participation because it is the most useful framework I have found for understanding the findings of my research.

Writing and Self-Efficacy

In research on writing, emotion is often accounted for under the label of self-efficacy: a writer's belief, or lack thereof, in their ability to write well. Brand (1985) and McLeod (1987) both argue that emotions are inextricably linked to *all* cognitive activities, and that writing scholars ought to therefore recognize how emotions can shape writing. Both lament the tendency of writing studies professors to stubbornly refuse to recognize the role of emotion in writing, and instead conceive of writing as a strictly rational process. They call for further research that complicates

disciplinary understandings of writing by recognizing, researching, and theorizing the role of affect in the writing process.

Recent scholarship connects writing and emotion to self-efficacy (Brooks, 2016; Burke, 2018; Henderson, 2016; Mulugeta, 2018). These scholars consider self-efficacy because there is a connection between how students conceive of themselves as writers and how well they write. This is connected, too, to the ways in which students' conceptions of writing shape their writing outcomes. Students' beliefs about writing and about themselves as writers are at play as they compose and revise texts. In the discussion section, following these and other writing studies scholars, I argue that understanding how affect shapes the writing process is fundamental to the effective teaching of writing. Over the course of my data analysis, it became evident that the emotional aspect of writing cannot be put aside while any other aspect of writing is attended to. Emotions are omnipresent; they shape writers' interactions with texts and writing tasks, and the tutors in this study all recognize that writers require appropriate handling in tutoring sessions.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Participant Selection and Participants

In order to understand the conceptions of writing that were prevalent among undergraduate tutors in the university's writing center, I chose to recruit tutors who had worked there for at least two semesters. The reasoning behind this decision was that these tutors would have worked at the writing center long enough for it potentially affect their conceptions of writing, whereas newer tutors would primarily display conceptions of writing that had not yet been shaped by writing center work. Two semesters may not sound like a significant amount of time, but anecdotally, writing center tutors do not usually work in writing centers for very long. Few tutors are freshmen, and most undergraduate programs last four years, so the pool of possible participants who had worked for longer amounts of time would have likely been very small. The only other grounds for exclusion from this study was age; tutors who were not at least eighteen years old were not asked to participate.

My advisor and I did discuss some other potential exclusionary criteria. One option was to exclude tutors who were rhetoric and composition majors because of the potential for their exposure to the disciplinary knowledge of writing studies to lead them to recite their knowledge of threshold concepts rather than give genuine answers. By structuring my interview questions as prompts for students to share their writing and tutoring experiences, and consequently not using disciplinary language that might sound familiar to rhetoric and composition students, I felt that this problem could be avoided. Writing and rhetoric majors were therefore *not* excluded from the potential participant pool. We also discussed several means of dividing the participant pool, such as gender, major, and number of semesters employed in the writing center. However, we

ultimately concluded that the variables and demographics that could be used to categorize the participants were so many in number, and the potential effects of each variable so hard to connect to any particular conception of writing, that this would not be a fruitful line of analysis. Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality was something I considered working into my analysis, especially in light of Nash's (2008) call for the application of intersectionality research beyond feminist scholarship and with subjects other than black women, who were frequently the focus of intersectionality research to that time. I was interested in the ways that writing center students dual roles as students in one discipline and tutors in a writing studies-based writing center shaped their work, but ultimately, I felt that there were too many demographic and individual differences than my research could possible account for. How could I know if a tutor's belief was due to his or her gender, age, class, religion, major, race, or experience as a writing center tutor, or anything else? Though a sensitivity to these factors can be useful for writing center work (Ballingall, 2013), I ultimately decided that I could not isolate any one factor and that attempting to do so would be more likely to lead the analysis into speculation than to improve it.

After establishing the participant pool, I spoke briefly about my study at the writing center's biweekly professional development seminar during the fall of 2019. Eleven undergraduate tutors indicated that they would be willing to participate in the study. Three of those eleven, in this manuscript given the pseudonyms of Angela, Stella, and Chris, completed an in-person interview. Angela is a history major who was in her third semester as a tutor at the time of our interview. Chris, a film major, had worked in the writing center for three years and had begun to serve as a mentor whom new tutors could observe and learn from. The final participant, Stella, was a communications major who was in her second year of writing center work. The stories that they shared in their interviews are the focus of the analysis, which follows.

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<u>Data Collection</u>

A qualitative method was necessary for this research project because I did not have any standards against which I intended to measure the participants' conceptions of writing. I did not want to impose my own beliefs about writing onto the research process, and just as importantly I wanted to give the participants the opportunity to really share their thoughts and experiences in a more thorough manner than is permitted by a survey. Quantitative data on conceptions of writing, like the data gathered from the 27-question scale-of-agreement questionnaire used in Lonka et al.'s study (2014) on PhD students' attitudes on toward writing, is useful only if a researcher is willing to ask students about particular conceptions of writing. The open-ended goals of this study mandated a qualitative approach.

To maintain an environment in which tutors did not feel threatened or pressured to provide a 'correct' answer or to align their thoughts with their supervisor's vision of writing, I focused on asking about the tutors' experiences with writing and tutoring. I avoided disciplinary language, and invited tutors to tell stories rather than asking about their conceptions of writing directly. The interviews consisted of the ten prompts or questions listed below, plus occasional follow-up or clarifying questions:

1. Tell me about a tutoring session that you think went particularly well.
2. Why do you think that session went as well as it did?
3. Tell me about a tutoring session that did not go well.
4. Why do you think it did not go well?
5. Tell me about a piece of your own writing that you're particularly proud of.
6. Tell me about a time you struggled with writing.
7. Part of your work is helping students write in writing situations they aren't familiar with. Tell me about a session where that happened.
8. How do you approach being asked to write in an unfamiliar writing situation, like writing in a new genre or for a new audience?

9. Is your writing process now any different from your writing process before you worked in the writing center, and if so, how?
10. Do you use the writing center yourself, and why or why not?

The interviews took place in my staff office, which was occupied only by myself and the participant for the duration of each interview. The privacy afforded by this arrangement was intended to help the tutors feel comfortable enough to speak freely about their experiences. In the planning phase of this project, my advisor and I also discussed the possibility of interviewing the subjects at an unoccupied table in the writing center, since they might be more comfortable in a familiar environment. However, due to the reduced privacy and anonymity for the participants, coupled with the potential noise interference from nearby tutoring sessions, we decided that the private room would be most conducive to the study's aims and the participants' comfort.

I began interviews by reviewing the privacy protocols approved by the university's institutional review board and confirming the student's willingness to participate in the study. At that point, I turned on the recording device and I read the questions off of a printed copy of the interview instrument. I occasionally interjected to ask follow-up or clarifying questions, but otherwise simply read the questions aloud and occasionally indicated my understanding of what the participants were saying. While a participant spoke, I jotted notes on the sheet in front of me when I thought he or she said something that might be relevant to the study. I also typically wrote down the time in the interview at which I wrote a note, so that I could later more easily cross-reference these impressions with the interview recordings.

The three interviews yielded roughly ninety minutes of audio recordings. I transcribed each tutor's response to each interview question, leaving out only any small talk that occurred after the interview had ended but before I had turned off the recording device. By playing the interviews at one-half speed, I was able to manually transcribe the interviews without a burdensome time

investment. As I transcribed the recordings, I did not write down interjections like "erm" or "umm," but all other words in the participants' responses were included. I also included parenthetical notes of my own thoughts on the interviewees' responses as a way of memoing during the transcription process.

Coding and Data Analysis

There were three primary phases of data analysis. I began by coding the transcripts to identify passages that could arguably reveal a particular conception of writing. I added each instance to a spreadsheet in which I recorded the tutor's pseudonym, the line number of the passage in the transcript, the conception of writing I thought the passage revealed, and either the passage itself or a quick summary of the passage. Across the three transcripts, I identified 112 passages that evidenced a conception of writing. This was an imprecise process, in that any one passage could be taken to represent different conceptions of writing if someone else were coding the data. In the following example of how the data could be coded in different ways, Angela is describing her experience working with a writer who did not know how to write a primary source analysis, a genre with which Angela is familiar. She said, "I kept wanting to share my analysis of the text, ostensibly to help her, but also because I knew I'd gotten a perfect score on that assignment." I coded this passage as a demonstration of Angela's conception of school writing as graded. She clearly wants to help the writer by directly sharing her own ideas, but recognizes that this desire stems partially from her assumption that the student wants to earn a good grade on the paper. Readers might examine that same quote and conclude that it reveals an entirely different conception of writing. Perhaps Angela is demonstrating that she believes writing can lead to

learning, since she is hesitant to insert her own ideas when the student should be generating their own arguments. My arguments in this manuscript are inevitably shaped by my own conceptions of and experiences with writing, and in cases like this one, I coded for the conception of writing that I believed most accurately described the tutor's language.

In the second phase of data analysis, I refined the initial codes into eight final conceptions of writing by combining very similar codes. During the coding process, I did not check each new conception against the existing set of codes for fear of incorrectly grouping conceptions together. Once the transcripts were coded in full, this meant that some codes were practically identical or could be grouped together into a broader conception of writing. The latter happened talk about the ways in which writing can be emotional. Initially, I had codes including "writing can make you feel frustrated," "writing can make you feel vulnerable," and other, similar language. Because of the exploratory nature of this study, I decided to condense conceptions together where possible. In this instance, I categorized all the talk about emotions into the codes for writing causing positive or negative emotions, though I do go into more detail about the types of emotions in the analysis below. After condensing the categories, I was left with the eight conceptions listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Conceptions of Writing Displayed by the Tutors

Conception of Writing	Number of Instances
School writing is graded	22
Tutors know how writing works	20
There are transferable strategies for writing	18
Writing causes negative emotions	16
Writing causes positive emotions	14
Writing involves conventions	12
Writing is recursive	7
Writing requires technological literacy	3
Total	112

This data was originally going to be the foundation of my analysis. It showed the conceptions of writing demonstrated in the interviews of all three subjects. I tracked this information in Microsoft Excel using the Pivot Table feature. To do this, I selected the entire spreadsheet, created a pivot table, and set the conceptions of writing as the "rows" and the instances of conceptions of writing as the "values." Creating this table using this feature saved time, and allowed me to correct mistakes in the coding by without having to re-count and update the final counts of each conception of writing by hand.

Next, I individualized the interview data. Without splitting up the conceptions by tutor, this data would not be a valid means of expressing the tutors' shared conceptions of writing. By adding the tutors' names as a "columns" variable in the pivot table, I was able to identify how many times each tutor had demonstrated each conception of writing, as displayed in Table 2, below.

Table 2: Conceptions of Writing Broken Down by Tutor

Conception of Writing	Angela	Stella	Chris	Total
School writing is graded	10	6	6	22
Tutors know how writing works	8	4	8	20
There are transferable strategies for writing	5	3	10	18
Writing causes negative emotions	8	5	3	16
Writing causes positive emotions	7	4	3	14
Writing involves conventions	5	4	3	12
Writing is recursive	3	2	2	7
Writing requires technological literacy	1	0	2	3
Total Conceptions per Tutor	47	28	37	112

If the conceptions of writing were not split up by tutor, I would have no way of knowing if a conception of writing was only demonstrated by one or two tutors. I cannot present the one conception of writing that fits this description (writing requires technological literacy) as representative of the tutors' shared conceptions of writing, because it is not shared among all the participating tutors. I was also concerned that one tutor repeatedly bringing up a conception could

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make it appear prevalent even if the other two tutors did not mention it often. The conception that "there are transferable strategies for writing" displays this pattern to some extent. One tutor, Chris, accounts for ten of the eighteen instances. However, I do not want to get too caught up on numbers in this qualitative study. Having divided the threshold concepts according to each tutor, I saw that seven of the eight conceptions were represented by all three tutors to at least some degree, and made those the focus of my analysis.

At this stage in the data analysis, Excel's Pivot Table feature was again critical. By clicking on any number, I could see each instance that the number represented. Clicking on the number "3" in Angela's column and in the "writing is recursive" row generated a new table in which all three instances could be viewed in isolation, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Each of Angela's Instances of "Writing Involves Conventions"

Instance	Line	Transcript
Talks through her process for substantively revising a 12-page conversational analysis in her tutoring class	180	Angela
Angela summarizes Sommers' article on student vs. professional writer attitudes about revision	290	Angela
A first draft helps you get your ideas out, then they can be refined	292	Angela

This allowed me to speedily review my own coding process and catch any mis-labelled entries. It was also crucial for the final phase of analysis. To find patterns in the data to write about, I created one new table for every conception from my dataset (see Table 4 for an example). I then categorized the instances into smaller categories that I could analyze over the course of a few paragraphs. In Table 4, I have taken the seven instances of talk about how writing involves conventions and grouped them into one of four categories: talk about the tutor's own revision practices and beliefs about revision, their tutees' revision practices and beliefs about revision, and

one general comment on revision. The patterns I found through this process were the beginnings

of each individual conception of writing subsections in the results and discussion section.

Table 4: Every instance of "Writing is Recursive," Categorized

Category	Instance	Line	Transcript
Tutee's practices	Trying to hold onto a bad first draft will "compromise whatever good is going to come of it later"	28	Chris
Tutor's belief	Talks about how, after writing center work and other influences, he believes "writing *is* rewriting"	230	Chris
Category	Instance	Line	Transcript
Both tutor and tutee	Writer wanted to 'fix it,' Stella knew that she needed to "just rewrite the thing"	6	Stella
Tutor's belief	"Most professors aren't taught writing pedagogy, so they say rewrite but don't know what they mean"	21	Stella
Tutor's practices	Talks through her process for substantively revising a 12-page conversational analysis in her tutoring class	180	Angela
General point	Summarizes Sommers' article on student vs. professional writer attitudes about revision	290	Angela
Tutor's belief	A first draft helps you get your ideas out, then they can be refined	292	Angela

In addition to analyzing the tutors' conceptions of writing in their own right, I compare the

tutors' apparent beliefs to the threshold concepts proposed by Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2015).

Though I cannot assume that their threshold concepts represent the views of writing studies

scholars, I chose to make this comparison because I wanted to compare the tutors' conceptions of

writing to some disciplinary perspective on how writing works. Adler-Kassner and Wardle's

(2015) is both recent and relevant in that threshold concepts are codified conceptions of writing, so

I used their work as a point of comparison for the tutors' talk.

Limitations

The phrasing of my interview questions also creates some limitations on the usefulness of

my data. In crafting the questions to elicit answers that could help me understand how tutors think

writing works, I did my best to avoid any language that implied a particular conception of writing. In hindsight, my beliefs about writing are visible in some questions. For example, the eighth question reads "How do you approach being asked to write in an unfamiliar writing situation, like writing in a new genre, or for a new audience?" This question would have been less leading if the examples about genre and audience were omitted. As this question was asked in the interviews, it structured the responses to fit my own view of how writing works by focusing on genre and audience. This may have constrained the interviewee's own answers. There is also a problem with my ninth question, which was: "Is your writing process now any different from your writing process before you worked here?" The phrasing of this question implies that the writing center may have affected the writing process, but that is a faulty line of reasoning. Any number of factors, such as learning how to write in their discipline or in new non-academic contexts, could have altered the subjects' writing processes in the time in which they worked in the writing center. By pointing to the writing center as the cause of that change, this question fails to account for the breadth of the participants' literate experiences inside and outside the writing center.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

In this section, I describe the conceptions of writing evidenced by the tutors' talk. They see writing as a rhetorical, social, and recursive process through which individuals can express their ideas to a community, using the rhetorical strategies and genres that that community values. They also recognize that writing can cause positive and negative emotions, both for themselves and for the writers they tutor. They value writing assessment, but frequently see grading become the foremost concern in the minds of student writers -- and see themselves in those students. Finally, the tutors all displayed confidence in their knowledge of how writing works, and said that this metaknowledge informs their approach to tutoring.

Conceptions of How Writing Works

My analysis begins with the conceptions of writing that describe how Angela, Stella, and Chris think writing works. These are that writing involves the use of transferable strategies, that writing is guided by conventions, and that writing is recursive.

Writing involves the use Transferable Strategies

Collectively, tutors share the conception that writing is a generalizable skill that transcends any one writing task or writing context. Tutors are, of course, not subject matter experts on a wide range of topics, so it was not surprising to find evidence that Chris, Angela, and Stella all think that writing works this way. I describe their beliefs in the following paragraphs.

In this analysis, it is important to discuss how exactly the tutors believe writing skills can be generalized into new writing situations. A useful construct here is Perkins and Salomon's (1992) differentiation between near transfer and far transfer. Perkins and Salomon (1992) describe near transfer as the transfer of learning between two very closely-linked situations, and far transfer as transfer that occurs between contexts that do not initially seem to be related. This is a somewhat muddy distinction because, as Perkins and Salomon (1992) point out, there is no definite way to distinguish between near or far transfer. Based on the data, it is evident that the tutors thought that writers get better at writing by learning strategies that they can later transfer into similar writing situations; this is near transfer.

Perkins and Salomon (1992) positioned transfer as the act of applying skills learned in one task to a different task. Recent writing studies research disputes the usefulness of transfer as skills application and instead connects transfer to rhetorical genre theory and uptake by emphasizing that writing is more complex than a task-based understanding of transfer can recognize (Driscoll, Paszek, Gorzelsky, Hayes & Jones, 2020; Fiscus, 2017; Rounsaville, 2017). These theorists would understand the transfer that the tutors describe as a constant negotiation between the sum of their experiences in previous genres and the conditions of the new genres in which they are learning to write. I cannot hypothesize about how tutors really transfer knowledge between contexts based on their interview statements. However, those statements indicate that their understanding of how writing skills transfer between contexts aligns most closely with Perkins and Salomon's (1992) vision of transfer as skills application.

The tutors' belief in the viability of near transfer writing strategies was noticeable when they talked about helping writers learn something new about writing. Angela, when asked about a tutoring session that she believed went well, described a time when she helped a student add

transitions to a rough draft of a personal statement for a job application. Angela explained that she demonstrated the process by connecting the first two sentences for the writer, who then took over more and more of the work until she was independently identifying parts of the draft that needed transitions and adding them herself. I coded instances like this as evidence of the conception that writing involves transferable strategies because Angela was not teaching this student how to add transitions for the sake of this single situation. Angela explained that as the writer learned about transitions, Angela saw "a large transformation of her realizing that there were identifiable features of sentences that she could reincorporate to add transitions." Similarly, Chris talked about how he had started internalizing the strategies described in the center's concision checklist and other editing and revising handouts. He spoke about applying them to his own writing, both in and out of school. He explained that "concrete proofreading practices, reading aloud, we do that at the writing center. I've been doing that for two and a half years and it definitely sticks with you." The conception of writing at play here is that Angela and Chris believe learning about transitions or concision is useful for editing one draft, but is then *again* useful when the writer sits down to write again. I categorize these as near-transfer oriented strategies because they concern a writer's approach to putting words on paper or editing words on paper.

Model papers were another aspect of how the tutors, in this case Chris, believed that writers could transfer strategies between different writing problems. Chris was quick to point out that his interest in film studies led him to want to read and write in new genres like screenplays and scripts from a young age, when he knew he wanted to be involved in film but did not know how to participate in that community. He would go out and find models of these genres so that he could, in his words, "know how to format the dang thing." He described how writing his first literature review also was made much easier by building from the model his professor provided. I

asked Chris how the model was helpful, and he said that "[the professor] is saying here's what you need to do. Even if they don't say how it's supposed to look but they provide a model, I can be like, ok, here's how professionals do it." He uses models as a way to understand the formatting and organization of new genres, irrespective of what those genres are. This is why I categorize this under transferable strategies. When Chris is faced with a new writing situation, or encounters a tutee in the same predicament, he searches for models because that is a way of understanding what the solution to the writing problem looks like.

This conception was also visible when I asked tutors to talk about whether or not they visit the writing center themselves. Angela and Stella both stated that they rarely visit the writing center, but when they do it is typically because they are having trouble getting started on a paper. It does not matter what the paper is about, which speaks to their belief that writing involves transferable strategies; there is a writing process that transcends particular writing contexts, and so talking to peers is a useful prewriting strategy regardless of what the tutors are working on. Stella also stated that other tutors use the writing center for the same reason. Based on their responses, it is evident that the writing center tutors I talked to believe that there are transferable strategies for writing.

Writing is guided by conventions

All three tutors talked about the importance of helping students understand the conventions of the writing tasks they faced. Chris's sole instance of talking about this conception of writing occurred when he was describing the same session from the previous section, in which he helped a student figure out how to write an annotated bibliography. He said:

> It wasn't "I need help getting started," even though I think that's what she said at the beginning. It wasn't "how do I start it out?," it was "how do we start the process of writing it? What the heck even is an annotated bibliography supposed to be?"

What Chris is describing is the student's unfamiliarity with the conventions of an annotated bibliography. He evidently believes that talking about how to do an annotated bibliography would not be productive until the student had some understanding of the conventions of the genre. One might speculate that Chris is enacting rhetorical genre theory by insisting a student understand the work a genre does before they can understand how to write in it, but Chris does not go into enough detail for me to make that claim based on the existing data.

Stella talked about this conception in the context of students who did not grow up in the U.S. education system. She shared an anecdote on one session in which a writer had to work with an assignment sheet that was "long-winded, one of those assignments that has the native English speaker in mind and not the multilingual speaker, those really long, very confusing, 20 questions in one paragraph kind of assignments." While part of the problem is that the assignment is simply unclear to Stella and the writer, Stella went on to describe how this disadvantaged students who were not already familiar with the conventions of U.S. academic writing in general: "some non-native speakers [...] feel like everyone seems to know how to write a research paper, but they don't understand." Stella is acutely aware of the conventions that inform academic writing in discipline-spanning genres like the research paper.

Angela, whose perception of writing as a history student begins this manuscript, talked about conventions within academic disciplines. Angela talked about how learning to write in a style appropriate for the history major was difficult because:

you're supposed to distance yourself as much as you can from your own writing
– it's this whole thing. It makes it so difficult to say anything, because you can't
be like 'well I think Julius Caesar deserved to be stabbed,' it's too biased.

Angela is not blind to the disciplinary forces at play behind these writing conventions; she said that historians have to practice what might, to the untrained eye, look like avoiding making an argument because "history isn't full of facts, it's full of people's firsthand accounts." Later, she described how working in the writing center had led her to write with more first-person pronouns and express her opinions more clearly, and that she was still getting good grades on her history writing assignments. Angela recognizes the disciplinary conventions that guide writing in her major, and that those conventions are tied to the epistemic stance of historians today. She is cognizant of her developing mastery of writing according to these conventions.

Similarly, Angela reflected on how confusing it was to work with the American Psychological Association (APA) citation style for the first time as a writing center tutor, and not just because of the mechanical differences between it and the Chicago citation style she was used to as a history major. APA, she said, focused so much more on the recency of published information and did not include nearly as many footnotes with additional information for the reader. Based on these examples, Stella, Chris, and Angela all conceive of writing as being guided by conventions. Angela's answers point toward an understanding of writing as a social process in which audience expectations are what define 'good' writing

Writing is recursive

There was little variance in the ways tutors seemed to understand writing as a recursive process. None of them saw writing according to the process model of brainstorming, then drafting,

then editing and submitting. Instead, they all indicated that revision plays an important role in their understanding of how to write well and how to tutor writing. When talking about helping writing center tutees improve their first drafts or revise a paper, Stella said that writers often persist with a bad draft and try to "fix it" one sentence at a time rather than accepting that they are better off with substantive revision. Chris echoed this sentiment, saying that tutees' tendency to doggedly hold onto too much of a first draft can "compromise whatever good is going to come out of it later." Angela also summarized some disciplinary reading on the topic. She described Sommers' (1980) article on the revision strategies of student and professional adult writers, framing students' aversion to substantive revision as a consequence of never having been taught what revision really entails.

When it came to their own writing, the tutors said these same things. Angela and Chris both said that understanding rewriting and revising as part of the writing process had reshaped their composition practices. One of my interview questions asked writers to explain how, if at all, their writing process had changed since beginning to work in the writing center. Chris responded by saying that before he worked in the writing center, after he finished a first draft,

> I'd say "ok, I think I had a pretty good experience writing that, I think that came out well." Then I'd do one quick look and then I'm like "okay, good! I don't see anything glaring, let's turn this baby in." And I would. And I'd do fine. I was happy with my results. But from the writing center, I think I learned that writing *is* rewriting.

I want to draw attention to the last bit of that quote: "writing *is* rewriting." Angela shared a similar viewpoint when describing the process of writing her first long paper as an undergraduate. Initially, she wanted to just fix it as quickly as possible before turning it in, but after reviewing her first draft she came to realize that her conclusions and arguments did not match the ideas she was presenting at the beginning of the paper, and so substantial revision was necessary. Her view of

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revision changed from seeing it as the polishing of a final product to seeing it as part of an overall effort to create a meaningful text. The tutors evidently believe that revision is central to writing.

The uniform views of the tutors on this topic are intriguing. When I began working as a writing center tutor, the temptation to simply read a writer's work, fix their grammar, and send them on their way was strong, because that task seemed so easy in comparison to figuring out how to genuinely engage with a writer and their work. I have since seen many new tutors struggle with that same choice. The experienced tutors in this study appear to have adopted the latter strategy as second nature.

Conceptions of Writing as an Emotional Process

The participants talked frequently about the negative and positive emotions that surround writing. Based on their talk, emotion is not a separate part of the writing process that can be partitioned off from the cognitive work of writing. Stella, Angela, and Chris talked about the presence and impact of emotions on their own writing and on the writers who visit their center. In this section, I am less concerned with the particular emotions the tutors talk about than with the ways in which they believe emotions influence writing. They recognize this in their own experiences and share their strategies for working with emotional writers.

Writing Causes Negative Emotions

After splitting the responses up by tutor, a few patterns emerged. One was that, in the eyes of Stella and Chris, writing center visitors sometimes stubbornly resist the advice of writing

center tutors and feel defensive about their existing work. Chris describes one online session in which a writer asked for help making her paper longer, but refused all of Chris's suggestions about revisiting the assignment sheet or further developing her arguments; she simply wanted her existing draft to take up more space. Tension grew over the course of the session, until the new tutor observing Chris began to talk with the tutee and offer more suggestions. Chris explained that this tutor suggested the same strategies that he did, but that the tutee responded to the new tutor's suggestions eagerly. He speculated that "maybe the way I was saying it wasn't coming off well." He seemed to remain troubled by this session, and was not sure why the tutee had a negative response to his suggestions but then opened up to his trainee's ideas.

In describing another session, Chris talked about how writers often arrive stressed for a variety of reasons. They are struggling with new writing tasks and often do not have much time to work on their paper before it has to be handed in. The time-crunch and the associated stress could contribute to the tension in some of the sessions described in this section. Tutees might feel they do not have time to act on the conceptions of writing that shape the advice tutors give them. In any case, Chris evidently believes that a writer's emotions and a tutor's attunement to those emotions can play a role in the effectiveness of a tutoring session.

Stella also talked about how emotional tension can lead tutee's to be defensive of their work or to refuse to entertain a tutor's suggestions. One strategy that Stella talked about for circumventing this resistance was to introduce outside resources that said what she might be hesitant to say herself. A student had visited her for help with a personal statement, but the student's mother and sister had already read and approved of her draft. Based on the prompt, Stella thought that the draft needed to focus much less on the writer's childhood experiences, but was hesitant to say so herself. Describing this predicament, Stella shared her thought process: "how am

I going to usurp her mom?" Rather than making her point directly, Stella attempted to manage the

tutee's emotional response by finding a model personal statement and a resource on writing in the

genre to share with the writer. Stella explained that through this strategy the changes are suggested

by an outside power rather than by Stella herself, and the tutees often become more amenable to

the changes. Stella believes that emotions can play a role in writing, and modifies her tutoring

practices to suit that belief.

Another common topic in the talk around emotions was professor feedback on writing

assignments. In describing a tutoring session that went poorly, Angela spoke about a writer who

visited the writing center after having received harsh feedback and instructions to rewrite her

paper. The student was shaken by the feedback and felt unsure of how to proceed. Angela

explained that because she was unfamiliar with the discipline the student was writing in, she did

not realize that the student's work actually followed the instructions of the prompt quite closely.

Instead, she took the professor's feedback at face value and tried to ask the writer about it, only to

be met with a steady stream of responses like "I'm unsure, I don't know, I can't be sure." Angela

said that because she incorrectly assumed that the student really did not know the subject matter:

> I basically ended up leading the session far too much, assuming too much,
> failing to realize all the things she was saying, and when she would say things to
> me, I would pick out certain things and repeat them back to her, and oftentimes
> the things that I repeated back were not completely accurate. But she still said
> that they were, and that led us down a rabbit hole [...]. I failed to build up her
> confidence and recognize what the actual problem was.

In Angela's description, the writer's emotional state was impacting her writing ability.

Angela believes that because she did not recognize this early enough, she reinforced the writer's

lack of confidence.

This conception of writing is not something that tutors think applies only to the writers that visit the writing center. Angela and Chris both described being upset about professor feedback that they felt was unjustly harsh toward writing that they had put a good deal of work and vulnerability into. Angela had written about something very personal, and Chris was trying out a genre for the first time. They both said that the feedback first angered them, and then left them feeling uninvested in the rest of the writing they completed for their respective classes. Both explained that even though the criticism they received was probably valid, its delivery caused such a negative emotional response that they did not get anything out of it. Chris, Angela, and Stella recognize the emotions that affect their own writing processes, and account for those emotions when they work with writing center visitors.

Writing Causes Positive Emotions

The tutors described feelings of either fulfillment or fun when they talked about writing tasks that they were invested in. Their investment in writing tasks stemmed either from the difficult tasks they had accomplished and readers' recognition of their hard work, which led to fulfillment, or the creativity they had employed while writing, which led to fun. I recognize that my interview question, "Could you tell me about a piece of your own writing that you're particularly proud of?" is leading in that it assumes that the writers think about their past work in this way. However, none of the tutors hesitated to share stories of writing experiences that they were pleased with. I did not get the impression that they had to come up with something to suit the question; it allowed them to speak about experiences with writing that were relevant to this study.

This analysis first focuses on fulfillment. When I asked Chris about a piece of his own writing that he was proud of, he spoke about a term paper that tasked him with sharing his thoughts on ten different movies that the class had viewed. Chris, being a film major and taking the class seriously, wanted to do more than simply write up a series of short reviews and turn the result in as a finished product. Instead, he chose to synthesize: "I basically organized around three common themes of these films and then went into some analysis of each [them] and tied them together." He was proud of the finished product in its own right, but he was also eager to share his professor's positive reaction towards the essay. Stella, in response to the same question, also described a school paper in which she synthesized. Writing her first literature review, she said, was difficult because "you can't summarize, you have to analyze, and it's so easy to fall into summary. You have to synthesize." After she did well on the assignment, she was very proud of herself for having completed a difficult task. Angela's response was about the first paper that she had substantively revised, despite the difficulty she had with removing large chunks of her first draft. The theme in these tutors' stories is that they genuinely engaged with difficult tasks that they saw value in, and then felt a sense of accomplishment when their work got a positive reaction from its audience.

Tutors also talked about times they had had fun while they were writing. Angela said that she writes fan fiction:

> I enjoy writing it because I enjoy strict adherence to canon and characterization.
> I like being able to see a character in fiction, to look at their mannerisms, the
> way they talk, the way they act, and be able to replicate that in my own stories
> about them and feel as if I've characterized them a lot or characterized them
> well.

I was struck by the very clear motivations and goals Angela had in writing for pleasure. She also explained that the writing was fun on its own, especially because it was something she

chose to do of her own free will. Further, her enjoyment was reinforced by the positive responses she got from the communities she shared her work with. Chris returned to his experience of writing a short story that got negative feedback to say that he still enjoyed being creative and trying out a new genre, the short story, for the first time.

Tutors did not talk about tutees who enjoyed writing, but Angela did talk about investment. Angela gave a succinct description of the connection between investment and effort when she talked about why she thought the session where she helped a writer learn to transition between ideas went as well as it did:

> I remember that the writer was very invested. Oftentimes, writers who are very invested in their writing are going to put more effort into it and care more about what they do. But also, if it was the situation I'm thinking about where it was a job application, she also had more riding on it than usual.

Positive emotions do not seem to factor into the tutors' approach to tutoring like negative emotions do.

Conception of School Writing as Graded

I began this study intent on unearthing the tutors' conceptions of writing. However, in asking them to share their writing and tutoring experiences, I found that they also had a conception about school writing in particular -- it is graded. In their interviews, they all talked about how the graded nature of school writing affects how they write and shapes their work as writing tutors. Obviously, professors and students know that writing is graded; that is a fact, not a conception. But the tutors' talk about grading demonstrated that it plays a role in their writing process and in their approach to tutoring.

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Each tutor talked about how their strong writing skills had previously made it possible for them to put very little effort into an assignment and still get a good grade. Stella explained that she still only visits the writing center with high-stakes assignments because she can otherwise "fly by" by turning in rough drafts for As and Bs. Chris and Angela talked about how this used to be their standard procedure, too. Angela described her experience reading Sommers' (1982) article on the revision strategies of students and of experienced adult writers as part of her tutor training class:

> Reading that piece made me feel very seen, because, I'm like "yes, that is me, that is how I got through two years of gen eds." And part of it is that I'd never been harshly criticized for the flaws in my writing via losing grade points. I hadn't been forced to face those things in a way that I maybe would've improved my writing faster.

Now, she said, she is more open to reorganizing or rewriting large parts of her papers. Chris and Angela's conception of writing as a fundamentally recursive activity appears to have led them to change their writing practices. Before this shift, they were simply enough good writers that they could turn in rough drafts and score well. Today, according to their self-descriptions, they write in accordance with the way they believe writing really works; they are not just writing for a grade.

The tutors also seemed to evaluate their own writing according to their own perception of how writing works, rather than in accordance with the grades they received. Further, they said that their grades came from professors who had their own biases and views, and who might therefore assess a piece of writing differently than the tutors themselves. This nuanced view could come from working in the writing center, where tutors themselves regularly work with writers as they develop their ideas and arguments. Angela, who lamented the conventions imposed by writing for her history classes, said near the end of her interview that she had recently begun to do less hedging and use more first-person pronouns and an active voice as she wrote history papers. She

evaluated this change according to her professors' response: "I haven't faced any repercussions for it in my history class." It does not sound like Angela thinks she is simply writing in the way she thinks her professors would like; rather, she is experimenting with writing and seeing what works in different writing situations. Stella talked about how she was developing a greater sense of being able to evaluate her own work the longer she worked in the writing center. She knew she was improving because she was catching her own high-level mistakes, like a confusing organization or a weak conclusion. She did say that her writing was also getting better grades, but this was clearly not the root cause of her improved opinion of her own writing.

Only one tutor focused deeply on her own grades, and only when she was talking about being upset with a grade. Earlier, I shared Angela's story about being upset with harsh feedback on a creative writing paper, but I bring this story up again because it also reveals something about how Angela thinks about grading. Angela, reflecting on why she had responded so strongly to the professor's negative feedback, said "to be fair, most of the time when I was graded, I was getting Bs as a minimum, so this is me coming in and thinking I'll be getting a relatively good grade." It may be that, as Angela said about herself, most tutors are confident writers who are used to getting high marks, and so low grades stand out and are more likely to upset them.

Another manifestation of how tutors think about writing as graded is that, as tutors, they frequently see students whose primary concern is with the grade their assignment will recieve or has received. Stella started both of her writing center anecdotes by saying that a student had visited the writing center after receiving a bad grade. After a student did not return for a scheduled follow-up visit, Stella assumed that she must have gotten a good enough grade that she saw no reason to return. Chris's session with a writer who was just trying to reach a word count and Angela's desire to share her own analysis to help a confused writer also point to the same

conclusion. In the minds of these writing center tutors, and perhaps in reality, grade concerns are the exigence for many writing center visits. For tutors who have begun to focus less on grades in their own writing, this makes for a rhetorically tricky tutoring situation. This study does not focus on tutoring directly, and so I cannot speculate on how this affects their tutoring practices. However, the overall trend in this talk was that tutors do not focus very much on the grades they receive, even though they think grades are foremost in the minds of most writing center visitors.

<div align="center">Conception of Metaknowledge About How Writing Works</div>

This conception of writing was difficult to identify and write about because, to some extent, it is wrapped up in all the other conceptions the tutors hinted at in their interviews. Beneath their talk about how certain parts of writing work, about emotions in writing, and the peculiarities of school writing was an undercurrent of metaknowledge. The tutors' language indicated that that they were aware of their own belief that they know how writing works. This was demonstrated through their perspectives on tutoring, where it became evident that they conceived of knowledge about writing as something they were privy to that the writing center's visitors were not.

One way in which this metaknowledge manifested was that the tutors believed they could identify the most important problems in a writer's draft. Chris told a story about a writer who was struggling with her first annotated bibliography. On how he handled the writer's existing draft, Chris said:

> She might have had an intro or something, but it wasn't going to fly, so instead of trying to salvage it, let's just work on the core fundamentals, which is how do I do it and what do I do, instead of work from what you've got. That's been a helpful tutoring practice sometimes too, especially if the original is in shambles.

Chris evidently believes that he knows how this genre works well enough to say that the writer's existing introduction is not a useful foundation to build from. Whether or not this conception is useful in tutoring is contingent on how effectively Chris can predict whether a draft is in fact in shambles, but it is part of Chris's tutoring practice. It is not surprising that the writer agreed, given that she readily admitted she was not sure what to do. Neither is it surprising that tutors believe they can accurately identify problems student writing, given that they work with student writers so often. Angela talked about a similar tutoring session, but not in the context of a particular genre. Instead, she believed she had identified a general problem in a student's writing. She explained her decision to focus a session on adding transitions between a writer's thoughts:

> Oftentimes, especially because writers are writing from their own points of view, they understand the logic of their argument and they fail to introduce to the reader when they're going to change topics. In her writing, it was very clear this had occurred.

This language indicates that Angela believes she knows how writing works. In this recollection, Angela gave no indication that the writer questioned the plan of focusing on transitions.

In another instance, a tutor acted on her self-assessed knowledge of how writing works even when a writer disagreed with her assessment. When I asked Stella to tell me about a tutoring session that did not go well, she talked about an unproductive experience with a writer whose draft did not feature any topic sentences, a feature which she felt was necessary. She did not think the session went poorly because they got hung up on this topic. It went poorly, she said, because the writer would not acknowledge or address the issue of her missing topic sentences. Stella described the session as follows:

> Even when I explained to her that she didn't really have a topic sentence in any of her paragraphs multiple times, she still couldn't understand one, why she

needed it, and two, she thought it was there. It's a 45-minute session and we spent like 30 to 40 minutes of me explaining two instances where she did this. So we really got nowhere in the session because it was a lot of us arguing back and forth about who's right.

Though it led to an unproductive session, Stella clearly had faith in her metaknowledge -- she knew that she knew how writing worked. Tutoring seems to impart a belief in a tutor's metaknowledge about how writing works, though this intuition could be counterproductive when it is incorrect.

Chris and Angela also spoke about the importance of not letting their metaknowledge get in the way of a writer's own experience with writing. Angela's responses focused on not inserting herself into the writer's own invention process. She said that, even as an experienced tutor, she finds herself nearly suggesting changes to a student's paper before asking herself "is that just how I would write it?" This is especially true when she is familiar with the subject matter the student is working with, and it can be hard not to talk to fellow history students about the content of their papers rather than their writing. She has developed a strategy to avoid this, which is to write down a writer's ideas verbatim so that she does not slip her own ideas into their work. Chris also works to avoid giving writers his ideas, and he had a specific reasoning for his approach: "the goal is to find opportunities for learning within that conversation about the assignment." Chris seems to conceive of writing tutoring as the act of helping people learn about how writing works, without explaining it himself. He elaborated: "what they really want to work on is the assignment and you're like, what you need is to work on the assignment and learn from it, but the paper is not the most important thing." The positioning here is interesting. Chris does not claim to know *what* students can learn from any given assignment, but does recognize the knowledge-building potential of writing activities and makes that potential the focus of his tutoring sessions. There is

more to this than a simple desire to not be over-directive or give students the answers; Chris and Angela conceive of writing as learning and do not want to short-change their tutee's by treating any one assignment as an end in its own right.

Taken together, the tutors' statements about writing illustrate an awareness of several aspects of how writing works and of the emotional impact it can have. They have a heightened awareness of the particularities of school writing, perhaps because of their constant exposure to it. Their understanding of writing does not seem to be tied to their area of study, though they do apply their conceptions of writing to the work they do within their majors. Finally, they firmly believe that they know how writing works, a belief that is visible in their talk about tutoring.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Though the possible implications of this study are limited because it only involved three tutors in one writing center, it does offer a starting point for examining writing center tutors' conceptions of writing. The data here is generalizable to some extent because the situations these tutors faced are replicated in writing centers everywhere. Any undergraduate writing center tutor will face tensions between the writing practices of their own major and the various disciplinary writing standards of writers with whom they work. Heuristics for tutoring are necessary because most writing tutors do not work for writing centers for very long, so they do not build up extensive repertoires of strategies for tutoring in different disciplines and genres. Further research in different writing centers is needed to understand whether these conceptions of writing are widespread or are the product of the circumstances of one particular writing center.

Writing Center Tutors Grasp Writing Studies Threshold Concepts

The tutors' conceptions of writing align with four of the five main threshold concepts from Adler-Kassner and Wardle's (2015) *Naming What We Know*. Specifically, the tutors' talk shows that they have taken up the first four main threshold concepts from that text: "Writing is a Social and Rhetorical Activity" (p. 17), "Writing Speaks to Situations through Recognizable Forms" (p. 35), "Writing Enacts and Creates Identities and Ideologies" (p. 48), and "All writers have more to learn" (p. 59). The quote from Angela that began this thesis is the most effective summation of my claim:

> Part of the issue with history is that it's not full of facts, it's full of people's firsthand accounts. Primary source analysis is learning how to interrogate a source for information, identify bias, put it in historical context, identify

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audience, figure out why it was written and what it can say to us, and see what we can extrapolate from what was explained. So a simple example for how you can extrapolate is that if someone makes legislation about something, that means that somebody was doing something that they don't want them to do anymore. So if you have a lot of legislation about bakers having to bake things at certain sizes, that means a lot of bakers were baking small pieces of bread.

In this example and in many others, the tutors clearly recognize that writing is defined by the community it happens in. They believe that students are fledgling members of the community of their major and of the academic community writ large, and that in order to better understand the genres and knowledge-building practices of those communities, the students need to receive feedback and revise their writing. As far as their own role in this process, tutors believe that they can teach transferable strategies for writing that can help writers solve new complex writing problems and fulfill the learning potential that their writing assignments offer. This belief is reinforced by their perception of their metaknowledge of writing -- because they believe they know how writing works, they are able to help others become better writers. While their talk did not capture Adler-Kassner and Wardle's (2015) final threshold concept, that "Writing is (also always) a cognitive activity," (p. 71), none of their conceptions of writing ran counter to the ideas about writing presented in that text.

It is interesting that the tutors shared seven of the eight conceptions of writing identified in this study. There is no single identifiable source from which these shared conceptions of writing originate. Their majors are history, communications, and film. While they all work in the same writing center, their training and professional development activities focus on how learning works, not on how writing works. I believe that one possible means of explaining these shared but not taught conceptions is Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of legitimate peripheral participation.

Based on Lave and Wenger's (1991) definitions of legitimate and peripheral participation, it is a matter of fact that the tutors in this study are members of a community of tutoring practice in which they are legitimate peripheral participants. The participants in this study are legitimate participants in the work of their writing center. They tutor and reflect on tutoring as part of their job. They tutor groups of students, and hold online tutoring sessions, and reflect on video and audio recordings of one another's tutoring. The learning that takes place through these activities is generated through their gradually fuller participation. No writing center administrator, or tutoring textbook, or readings on how learning works has taught these tutors the conceptions of writing that they share. Through the lens of legitimate peripheral participation as a theory of learning, their understanding of how writing works stems from their gradually fuller participation in a community of practice devoted to helping people become better writers. It must also stem from their participation in other communities in which they write. However, they share many beliefs about writing that do not seem to come from their writing outside the writing center. Their shared conceptions of writing and meta-understanding of those conceptions points to writing center participation as a possible shaping force on tutors' conceptions of writing.

If writing center administrators put stock in legitimate peripheral participation as a mechanism of learning, then tutor training ought to involve participation in the actual writing center. A tutor training course in which readings and theories are discussed but not practiced, or only practiced in mock tutoring sessions, is not a place where tutors in training can legitimately participate in the work of tutoring. It may feel strange to release trainees into the writing center quickly, but if Lave and Wenger (1991) are correct, then the only way that tutors can really learn to tutor is through working in the writing center. Asking trainees to observe practiced tutors, talk to practiced tutors about the work of tutoring, and begin to conduct their own tutoring sessions

under the watch of experienced tutors are a few ways to get new tutors involved in the actual community of practice without asking them to immediately begin tutoring independently.

What I cannot see from the data in this study even if legitimate peripheral participation *is* the learning mechanism at play is how participation in the community might lead to particular conceptions of writing. This data helped me understand what tutors think, but it does not explain the connection between learning and doing, and tutors themselves may not be consciously aware of this connection. Further research into the activities of a writing center community of practice could reveal connections between what tutors do and what tutors know. For writing studies researchers, studying the activities and participants of a writing center could be a way of understanding the learning about writing that takes place within. Further, writing center tutors often learn about tutoring and learning, not just writing. Further, just as intersectionality recognizes that there are many aspects of who a person is, the expansion of communities of practice to encompass what Wenger (2010) calls landscapes of practice. Everyone participates in and is thus shaped by the many communities of practice in which humans participate in every day, and this added layer of complexity makes this research more meaningful by standing in the way of simplistic conclusions. Because nobody is just a writing center tutor, nobody's conceptions of writing are shaped solely by writing center work.

"Writing is Emotional" as a new Writing Studies Threshold Concept

This thesis argues that Angela, Chris and Stella's talk not only captures but also expands on the writing studies threshold concepts put forth in Adler-Kassner and Wardle's (2015) work. Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2015) did not intend for their work to be dogmatic. In their own

words, threshold concepts are "presented here not as canonical statement, but rather as articulation of shared beliefs providing multiple ways of helping us name what we know and how we can use what we know in the service of writing" (p. xix). In Adler-Kassner and Wardle's (2019) book, they called for a continued exploration of the threshold concepts of writing studies. I argue that the tutors' conception of writing as an emotional process is in fact a threshold concept critical for understanding how writing works.

According to Angela, Stella, and Chris, writing is an emotional process for all writers, including themselves. Here, I argue that the idea that writing is an emotional process fits Meyer and Land's (2003) criteria for threshold concepts. I can recall, as a new tutor, the transformative and irreversible realization that the texts that came into the writing center were the products of living, emotional beings. I believed I would be a good tutor because I knew how to fix 'bad' papers, but I quickly realized that tutoring was about working with writers, not papers. In hindsight, this seems obvious, and it fits the threshold concept criteria of being integrative. Other threshold concepts of writing, especially the social and identity-constructing nature of writing, make sense *only* because writing is not just the act of putting words on paper, but is also made up of all the cognitive and rhetorical decisions writers make as they decide which words to put on paper. Writing is a cognitive task, and so it is shaped by a writer's affective state.

I believe the importance of the affective state is easy to overlook as a writing instructor. Once I stopped working in writing centers and started teaching, students stopped telling me how frustrated, upset, and annoyed they were with their writing assignments. This was not, of course, because they were not experiencing these emotions. The power dynamic of the classroom silences what the near-equality of the writing center invites. I believe this is how this threshold concept fits Meyer and Land's (2003) final criteria, which is that threshold concepts are potentially

troublesome. That the work of my class caused frustration and difficulty quickly became a sort of ritual knowledge. I took for granted that writers have feelings, and assumed that their affective states were separate from the production of their written work. This ritual knowledge was disrupted through the work of this thesis because it allowed me to hear from tutors who see the emotional process of writing play out in their tutoring sessions. As writing studies continues to define the activities and processes that constitute writing, it is important that affect does not take a back seat. More research, particularly with writing center tutors to whom student writers often express their emotions, can develop an understanding of how emotion is part and parcel of the work of composition. More broadly, other research into tutors' conceptions of writing could reveal entirely different conceptions tied to different local circumstances.

APPENDIX: IRB ADDENDUM

Institutional Review Board
FWA00000351
IRB00001138
Office of Research
12201 Research Parkway
Orlando, FL 32826-3246

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

September 23, 2019

Dear Andrew Petrykowski:

On 9/23/2019, the IRB determined the following submission to be human subjects research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Initial Study, Exempt Category
Title:	Unexplored Conceptions: What Writing Center Tutors Think About Writing
Investigator:	Andrew Petrykowski
IRB ID:	STUDY00000911
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made, and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request so that IRB records will be accurate.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or irb@ucf.edu. Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Kamille Chap

Kamille Chaparro
Designated Reviewer

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