Power and empowerment in writing center conferences

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POWER AND EMPOWERMENT IN WRITING CENTER CONFERENCES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by

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B.A., Mississippi College, 1997
M.A., Mississippi College, 1999
May 2003
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My most sincere thanks go out to those whose support has been invaluable—during this project and beyond. To Sarah Liggett: I am ever in awe of your ability to manage an unmanageable schedule with grace and tact; I’ve learned so much from watching you teach and work. As I pursued this project, you offered a perfect balance of sharing advice and fostering independence: always just what I needed, when I needed. I simply can’t thank you enough. To Katy Powell: Thank you for sharing your work with me and for encouraging me to share mine with you. Through words and through example, you have helped me along the way to becoming the kind of researcher I most want to be. To Jack May: Thank you for kind words and affirmation, always, and for inspiring me simply through your spirit and presence. To Irvin Peckham: Thank you for taking an interest in my project when you barely knew me; your advice and expertise helped tremendously. And to Nancy Nelson: Thank you for your quick responses and extremely useful suggestions. A better committee couldn’t be had.

Special thanks also to another amazing group: to Judy Caprio, for sharing her ideas, experiences, and space, and for baking the world’s best brownies; to Valerie Hudson, who is simply incredible in every possible way; and to Scott Gage and Kit Smoot, who have been supportive well beyond my ability to thank them. I see your influences daily on my life. I am grateful, as well, to all of the tutors and tutees who participated in this study.

Finally, thanks to Jim, my husband, who has for years been good-naturedly tripping over the mountains of books and papers that clutter our home. And to Puddy, our cat, who dependably keeps me company while I work at all hours—and who only occasionally steps on the “delete” key.
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ABSTRACT

This study explores power and empowerment in writing center peer conferences. Arguing against the notion of “hierarchical” and “collaborative” conference categories, it suggests that because both participants enact power in conference interaction, conferencing power dynamics exist on a continuum. Issues of ownership are also placed on a continuum (and associated with enactments of power); this study argues against idealized notions of tutees “owning” their texts and conferencing goals. It distinguishes between empowerment in a practical sense (associated with improving writing skills) and in a political sense (associated with increasing critical awareness).

The research involved ethnographic methods: it followed two peer tutors through a 3-credit-hour, semester-long preparation course and through their first year working as writing tutors; also, 48 conferences involving the two tutors were audio-recorded. Additional methods involved discourse analysis of 8 complete conference transcripts, as well as analysis of several audio tapes and partial transcripts. The two tutors were involved extensively in data analysis; this study emphasizes their involvement, their perceptions of power and empowerment, and their influence on data analysis and coding procedures.

Political empowerment was rare in the conferences examined; however, practical empowerment was encouraged within a range of conferencing dynamics. Empowerment, however, could also be hindered within a range of dynamics: more hierarchical exchanges sometimes gave tutees little opportunity to practice concepts or demonstrate learning, while more collaborative exchanges sometimes seemed confusing and frustrating to the tutee. Thus, the study suggested the importance of tutor flexibility in employing and adjusting conferencing approaches. It also suggested that tutors are empowered by conferencing; both tutors planned to become teachers and felt their tutoring experiences would strongly affect their teaching. The writing center’s ability to empower students may lie especially in its ability to expose potential teachers to political issues associated with teaching, writing, and language.
INTRODUCTION

“Conferencing is something we do, but unexamined, it remains something we do not understand and thus cannot improve.”

Laurel Johnson Black, *Between Talk and Teaching*

My first writing center experience was as a graduate student/teaching assistant/composition teacher/writing center tutor at a small, private college whose writing center existed almost exclusively on paper. In fact, our center practically was a stack of paper: our resources were a box of handouts in the English department’s copy room. The eight or so tutors were TAs and faculty members, each of whom covered “The Writing Center” in her or his office for a couple of hours each week.

Although our composition teaching practicum was exemplary, we TAs were never instructed in tutoring writing. If we were bad tutors, though, most students never knew it; few were aware we even had a writing center, and fewer still actually came by for a conference. During my year of tutoring, I met with only a handful of tutees. Each was concerned about passing the Writing Proficiency Exam, a graduation requirement for all students at the college. Our practicum had, in part, emphasized process and liberatory pedagogies, but in these conferences, I resorted to a trusty standby: the five-paragraph formula. Figuring that a five-paragraph essay would get students through the exam, I gave them the old, familiar mantra. “It’s simple,” I said. “You just tell them what you’re going to tell them, and then you tell them, and then you tell them what you told them.”

In those conferences, I was the expert: a pseudo-teacher with all the answers. I labeled my tutees as presumably incompetent writers and possibly incompetent students in general. And I thought I was doing them a favor by spelling out the simplest, most watered-down version of how to write timed essays; there was little reason for them to talk when I could easily tell them what to do. I don’t remember feeling my advice was inappropriate as I tutored those students, and I recall our meetings as cordial and pleasant. But my approach coincided little, if at all, with current writing center theory.

Of course, those first conferences differed immediately from typical writing center conferences because they lacked a real student text or a real assignment as a focus. While some students do come to writing centers for help developing timed-writing or other general writing skills, much writing center literature assumes tutees will bring to their conferences either a draft of a paper in progress or at least an assignment they’re beginning to respond to. Regardless, however, of our lack of a (tutee-generated) text, our meetings deviated from more ideal conferences in several significant ways.

First of all, I controlled the focus of the conferences. While I felt I was responding to my tutees’ needs—after all, they did want to improve their timed-writing skills—I decided what they most needed to know, and I limited our discussion to only that material. Writing center theory, in contrast, maintains that tutors should adhere more strictly to tutees’
goals and concerns by allowing tutees to choose the topics for discussion. Second, our discussions weren’t really discussions at all. Rather, they were my own extended monologues. According to writing center literature, as well as to composition theory concerning conferencing in general, I should have allowed my tutees more time to talk, more time to ask questions and explore their own ideas about the topics they proposed. Ultimately, I broke a golden rule of conferencing by embracing a “banking” approach to teaching and learning in those conferences. By simply telling the tutees what they should know and do, I prevented opportunities for their participation and active learning. And even though they did smile and thank me, they likely did not experience the empowerment that writing center literature associates with good conferencing.

Unfortunately, I behaved similarly in conferences I held with my own students during that first year and in semesters to follow. Some things were different: while my tutees came of their own volition, my students conferenced with me because I told them they had to. Also, we focused on real assignments and their drafts, and on process and content. Finally, I knew what sorts of essays—what “ideal” texts—I was looking for in response to my assignments. For a long time, I admit, I thought my responsibility was to help my students create texts as similar as possible to my ideal ones. After all, I knew what they needed to get an “A.” I dominated my students’ conferences, just as I did my tutees.’ Often, I told students how to reorganize their work, how to refocus their topics, or how to develop their content. I even remember saying, at times, “I’m not supposed to just tell you what to do, but we don’t have much time, so here are my suggestions.” I’d frequently add, “Of course, this is your paper. You don’t have to follow these suggestions if you don’t want to.” And while students might respond, “Oh, I know I don’t have to,” they generally always did—or tried to do—what I suggested. What savvy student wouldn’t? After all, I graded their papers.

I knew I wasn’t doing a good job conferencing with my students. Yet, I still liked conferencing and thought it a potentially effective way to help them improve as writers. And my students, too, seemed enthusiastic about conferencing and pleased to have time to talk with me one-on-one about their work. (Their attitudes, though, could have been more savvy student performance than actual sentiment!)

Conferencing became one of my research interests after I had the good luck to encounter Laurel Johnson Black’s Between Talk and Teaching: Reconsidering the Writing Conference during a pedagogy course in my doctoral program. Black’s text helped me recognize and understand some problems I’d had with conferencing—problems that centered on issues of power. While my gut-level reaction to my own conferencing told me I was retaining too much control, Black showed me that other teachers do the same. By studying the taped and transcribed writing conferences of fourteen students and seven teachers, Black demonstrates that no matter how well-intended our conferencing approaches might be, struggles for power permeate our actions. According to Black, a teacher’s power in the classroom can easily carry over into her conferencing; the result can be the teacher’s domination over students and their texts, even in these (theoretically
less hierarchical) situations. Although Black deals with teacher-student writing conferences rather than peer writing conferences, her work, the most extensive current treatment of power in conferencing, offers a rich context for my project.

While I might have expected my “teacher power” to carry over into conferences with my own students, I’m not sure just who or what my first tutees thought I was. None were English majors, so they wouldn’t have seen me around the department, and we were all relatively close in age. I didn’t mention that I was a teacher as well as a tutor, and little about my office would have alluded to the fact. TAs shared two rooms filled with remnants of furniture from years past: broken-down desks with drawers that jammed, and sagging chairs with squeaky rollers. Thus, my first tutees could have perceived me as their peer.

Though my performance as a new peer tutor was far from stellar, peer writing tutors in general have been often and highly praised in writing center literature, and their frequent employment in centers nationwide speaks to the writing center community’s confidence in their abilities. In part because of their relative equality in status to their tutees, peer tutors have been thought to effectively promote student writers’ empowerment. Lacking a teacher’s inherent authority, they are thought to contribute to a non-threatening environment for their tutees; after all, a peer tutor assigns no grades. The peer tutor’s “peerness,” however, has recently come into question. Some argue that the peer tutor’s position, like the teacher’s, is laden with power, regardless of similarities between peer tutors and their tutees.

This study builds on the premise that in conferences, peer writing tutors indeed perform in powerful ways. In the following chapters, I explore power—associated with both tutors and tutees—in peer writing conferences at the Southern State University (SSU) Writing Center. I consider not only how conference participants negotiate power, but also how power dynamics influence the empowerment of the student writer. To help the writing center community better understand “power” and “empowerment” in conferences, this project is oriented toward the following research questions:

- How might we define “power” and “empowerment” for writing center work?
- How do peer tutors perceive power and empowerment?
- How is power evidenced in conferences, and what forces determine the power tutors and tutees display in conferences?
- How is empowerment evidenced in conferences, and in what ways are conferences empowering for tutees?
- What power dynamics are present during moments that are or are not empowering? (How do power dynamics seem to affect the tutee’s empowerment?)
Finally, perhaps my most important question is this:

- What are the implications of this study for improved tutoring, for improved tutor preparation approaches, and for writing center work in general?

Using discourse analysis and ethnographic methods, this qualitative study follows two new, undergraduate writing center tutors through their three-credit-hour, semester-long preparation course (English 3015), and through their first year tutoring in the SSU Writing Center. Among my data, gathered during three semesters, are research journals in which I recorded observations of and reflections on the preparation course and events in the Writing Center, including many casual conversations with the tutors involved in the study. I also collected tutors’ written reflections on conferencing and on specific conferences, as well as much of their written classwork from English 3015. Some of my most important data, though, are audio tapes and transcripts (or partial transcripts) of many, many conferences; I recorded 48 of the two tutors’ conferences.

The inclusion of my research subjects’ voices, which is most evident in chapters four and five, is an important part of this study. I involved tutors not only as sources of data but in data analysis as well. I am grateful to the International Writing Centers Association who, by awarding me a Graduate Research Grant, helped make possible the tutors’ participation in data analysis. In part because of this grant, I was able to reimburse tutors for the time—almost 100 hours combined—they spent working with my data. I was thus more able to elicit thoughtful, extensive input from them.

In the upcoming chapters, I present critical contexts for this study, followed by my methodology, findings, and conclusions. Chapter One is devoted to one-to-one writing conferencing in general and to peer writing center conferencing in particular. In it, I briefly discuss Black’s exploration of power in teacher-student writing conferences alongside traditional goals and methods of peer conferencing in writing centers. I conclude the chapter by considering issues that complicate conferencing and by speculating about the applicability of Black’s work to peer conferences. Although the terms “power” and “empowerment” appear in Chapter One, there, I use them casually; my goal is to offer a general orientation to writing center conferencing that will inform my explorations and definitions of those concepts in the following chapter. In Chapter Two, then, I focus specifically on power and empowerment as they have been depicted in literature relevant to this study. I also build operational definitions of those terms for writing center work and for this study in particular; accompanying my definitions are speculations concerning how power and empowerment might be evidenced in conferences.

In Chapter Three, I discuss in detail both my methodology and the contexts of my study: Southern State University, the SSU Writing Center, and English 3015, the tutor preparation course. Because of the recursive nature of ethnographic research and of our transcript coding approaches, my methodology spills over into Chapter Four. There, I
present preliminary findings concerning the case studies’ perceptions of power and empowerment. I also describe our collaboration in constructing analytical approaches and in our implementation of those approaches. Chapter Five includes discussion of our findings; finally, in Chapter Six, I connect those findings with implications for tutor preparation and for effective conferencing. My ultimate goal is that this text promotes empowering writing conferences, and that it helps peer tutors and tutees create power dynamics that are conducive to such conferences.
CHAPTER ONE: 
CONFERENCING BASICS AND COMPLICATIONS

Before moving into this study’s key issues—power and empowerment—I offer here a general context for this project: an exploration of the whys and hows of writing conferencing. Writing center and other conferencing literature generally presents relatively clear goals for conferencing and relatively clear methods for accomplishing those goals. However, some literature suggests that conferences are more complex than they might initially seem. My goal for this chapter is to show how conferencing has traditionally been perceived and to point out some potential complications for (particularly writing center peer) conferencing. In Chapter Two, I link these issues more explicitly to power and empowerment; hopefully, however, the general context below will enable me to better explain those concepts. I begin by describing arguments supporting the usefulness of writing conferences, in general, and the effectiveness of peer writing tutors, in particular.

WHY CONFERENCE? AND WHY WITH PEERS?

Roger Garrison, one of conferencing’s early proponents, suggested in 1974 that “traditional methods of freshman composition instruction” were “grossly inefficient” (56). Lamenting the time teachers spent talking about writing–time during which students were “not learning how to write” (56)–Garrison proposed a new model for composition teaching in which the classroom became a kind of writing workshop. In Garrison’s model, students come to class to write, not to discuss textbook readings, and the teacher spends much class time conducting mini-conferences, meeting briefly with individual students to discuss their texts-in-progress. More recent literature focuses on conferencing in a more supportive role: not as the major instructional approach for courses but as an accompaniment to other teaching approaches. Nonetheless, writing teachers and scholars have cited many reasons for conferencing.

In the passage below, Black summarizes several reasons writing teachers use one-to-one conferences:

We conference with [students] because it is efficient: we can say more about a paper than we can write in the same amount of time, and we can deal individually with the problems of a student. . . . We conference because we believe it is effective: students learn more from oral responses than written ones; if a conference is timed appropriately, the teacher can intervene in the writing process at the points where help is most needed; it gives students . . . a chance to discuss their writing with the real audience for it; and it provides motivation. We conference because we believe it will help our students discover “things” about themselves and the world around them. . . . Conferences also make more visible process that are usually hidden from teachers or students. We ask students what they were
thinking about when they wrote this line, when they suddenly switched to a new topic or changed their writing voice. Conferences help demystify the process of evaluation for students. (13-14)
The teacher-student conferencing interaction Black points to has been explicitly linked with teaching process approaches to writing; Muriel Harris explains, “Talking with students as they write or prepare to write indicates that we view writing as a process of discovery in which we can help the writer learn how to shape a piece of writing as it is taking form” (Teaching 5). Harris also suggests the significant link between conferencing, audience, and the notion of writing as a social act: “since the writing teacher talks with the students and reacts as a reader, students can see that writing is primarily an act of communication in which the needs of the reader are crucial considerations” (5).

Conferencing is also thought both to reflect and to help create improved teacher-student relationships. Harris claims that “by the time they get to college, most freshmen fear composition teachers,” and, citing Dean Memering, she adds that “the only way to overcome this fear . . . is through informal talk between teachers and students” (Teaching 21). Indeed, perhaps most importantly, conferences have been thought to promote more equal power relationships between teachers and their students than are possible in traditional classrooms; conferencing, according to some, essentially amounts to a conversation between writers/equals.

While teacher-student conferences have been thought to improve power dynamics associated with traditional classrooms, peer conferences, some believe, increase possibilities for creating even more equality in teaching/learning relationships. Much writing center literature praises peer tutors for their ability to deal with clients on relatively equal terms; scholars especially emphasize the peer tutor’s lack of a “real” teacher’s traditional authority. For example, Kenneth Bruffee claims that peer tutoring “provides a particular kind of social context for conversation, a particular kind of community: that of status equals, or peers” (“Peer” 8). Harris does not quite affirm tutor-tutee equality, but she claims that the peer tutor is “a middle person . . . who inhabits a world somewhere between the student and the teacher” (“Talking” 27). Harris adds that the tutor’s position “below the teacher on the academic ladder” means that “the tutor can work effectively with students in ways that teachers can not. Tutors don’t need to take attendance, make assignments, set deadlines, deliver negative comments, give tests, or issue grades” (27).

Indeed, Harris maintains that the tutor’s status results in the tutee’s positive perception of the tutor and in productive interaction between the two. She writes, “Students readily view a tutor as someone to help them surmount the hurdles others have set up for them, and as a result students respond differently to tutors than to teachers” (“Talking” 28). Harris seems to suggest that the tutee-tutor relationship is much more positive than the teacher-student one:
Tutors’ questions can lead students to offer information they didn’t know was needed and to clarify their answers through further questioning. Students can also offer other useful information they would be less willing to give teachers. Sitting with a student for a half-hour or an hour, a tutor is able to work primarily with the writer as a person, even when the paper is on the table between them. (28-9)

Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner agree that peer tutors “have the opportunity to accomplish work that most teachers cannot do”; addressing prospective tutors, they write, “You’re not going to give a grade to a writer’s essay, you have great insight into what it means to be a student, and you’ll have many things in common with many of the writers you meet. You need to trust these great advantages; the rapport you can create with writers is one of your best assets as a tutor” (8). Finally, Harris also suggests that working with a tutor can be less stressful to a student than working with a teacher (“Talking” 35). But if peer writing tutors are so well qualified to help other students improve their writing, how do they go about that task—and what, exactly, do they try to accomplish?

PEER WRITING CONFERENCES: GOALS AND METHODS

Teachers and theorists have applauded writing conferences for practical and pedagogical reasons, some of which are socially and politically motivated. Writing center literature suggests fairly clearly what should (and should not) happen in writing conferences, and two major categories of writing conference goals appear in the literature: the improvement of the tutee’s writing abilities and the promotion of her or his critical awareness. (The “demystification” of academic discourse seems to fall under both of these categories.) To achieve these goals, writing center scholars suggest that tutors should converse with the tutee on the tutee’s terms, that tutors should avoid taking over the conference and should help the tutee maintain ownership of his or her writing. At the same time, however, that tutees are expected avoid directive tutoring approaches, they are also generally expected to orient conferences toward higher-order concerns, such as organization and content, before lower-order concerns, such as grammar and mechanics.

IMPROVING WRITERS

Inevitably, some students who come to the writing center—at least for the first time—seem to expect little more than a quick-fix for their current paper. But the overwhelming goal of writing centers remains, as Stephen North proclaimed in 1984, “to produce better writers, not better writing” (438). John Trimbur agrees: “Peer tutoring is more interested in the long-term development of a tutee’s writing ability than in the short-term results of any writing assignment” (117-8). The focus, then, is not simply on helping the student to improve the document before her, but to promote skills that will help her write effectively on later occasions, as well. “The teacher’s [or tutor’s] goal here,” as Harris explains, “is to work him- or herself out of a job, that is, to make the student independent” (Teaching 28). Gillespie and Lerner add, “Tutors don’t fix texts; [they] teach writers how to fix texts” (22).
As mentioned above, part of teaching writers how to “fix texts” means helping them grasp and implement processes of writing; in ideal situations, this translates, at least in part, into an initial focus on higher order concerns, with proofreading-type work fitting in only near the end of (preferably a sequence of several) conferences. Also crucial is helping tutees learn to effectively direct their writing toward various audiences and purposes. And, of course, producing better writers in academic settings often means that writing centers specifically help students move toward fluency in various genres and styles of academic discourse.

PROMOTING CRITICAL AWARENESS

Goals of writing conferences—beyond the “nuts and bolts” of writing—are also sometimes political. In 1984, Tilly Warnock and John Warnock described the “liberatory” nature of writing centers; they suggested that writing center work can “restore to students the sense of their own authority and responsibility,” so that students “develop a critical consciousness” about both their writing and the world (18-9). More recently, Nancy Maloney Grimm has criticized writing centers for not achieving liberatory goals; she writes, “As they presently operate, writing centers are more often normalizing agents, performing the institutional function of erasing differences” (xvii). Grimm maintains that writing centers should emphasize critical literacy as a major goal of conferencing; the writing center, she declares, should be held “responsible not only for granting students membership to the academic literacy club but also for changing the gates of that club when change is necessary” (xvii-xviii). In part, Grimm believes that the writing center can help student writers both understand and question the rules of academic discourse, which might potentially enable them to influence (presumably democratic) changes in academic and other communities. Just as composition theory has turned to focus on pedagogies promoting critical awareness of—and questioning and challenging of—political climates and hierarchical relationships in classrooms and universities, and in various other social contexts, writing center literature acknowledges the need to work toward similar goals in conferences.

TALKING ABOUT WRITING

Although students do occasionally bring a draft to the writing center and declare, “I need someone to proofread this; when can I pick it up?” conversation between tutors and tutees is key to the peer writing conference. As Bruffee writes,

What peer tutor and tutee do together is not write or edit, or least of all proofread. What they do together is converse. They converse about the subject and about the assignment. They converse about, in an academic context, their own relationship and the relationships between student and teacher. Most of all they converse about and pursuant to writing. (“Peer” 10)
In the writing conference, then, the tutor generally tries to promote productive discussion about the tutee’s writing, thus serving the function North describes:

Nearly everyone who writes likes–and needs–to talk about his or her writing, preferably to someone who will really listen, who knows how to listen, and knows how to talk about writing too. Maybe in a perfect world, all writers would have their own ready auditor–a teacher, a classmate, a roommate, an editor. . . . A writing center is an institutional response to this need. (439-40)

Talk, then, whether it resembles causal conversation or classroom discourse, is at the heart of writing conferences.

**ASKING QUESTIONS**

Just as talk is integral to conferencing, questions are integral to that talk–at least in theory. North explains that writers’ auditors should ideally “not only listen but draw [writers] out, ask them questions they would not think to ask themselves” (440), and Gillespie and Lerner add that one thing a tutor must “be an expert in” is “knowing how to ask questions” (24). One goal behind questioning in conferencing is to model questions tutees can return to later; effective questioning has been thought to help students become better writers via a process labeled “scaffolding.” Thomas Newkirk writes that scaffolding is “a term originally used to describe the support given children by their mothers during early language development and applied by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) to the study of tutoring and problem-solving”; he explains the concept:

Scaffolding is usually seen as a paradigmatic illustration of Vygotsky’s (1978) claim that thought is the internalization of social interactions. The child becomes able to produce a narrative because she has internalized the prompts (e.g. “What did you do next?”) of the mother or caregiver. In a similar way the writer comes to internalize and anticipate the questions that experienced readers will ask. (195)

In writing conferences, then, tutors ask questions and tutees respond; through this process, tutees presumably become better able to think through writing tasks independently.

The concept of scaffolding can be linked to Emily Meyer and Louise Z. Smith’s concept of the writer’s critical inner voice: “experienced writers have developed an inner monitor, another ‘self,’ that comments and questions as the writing self sets down ideas,” and “this voice . . . helps the writer specify and connect his ideas” (27). They cite Donald Murray’s assertion that “‘The self proposes, the other self considers. The self makes, the other self evaluates. The two selves collaborate: a problem is spotted, discussed, defined; solutions are proposed, rejected, suggested, attempted, tested, discarded, accepted’” (27). “This process,” Meyer and Smith write, “resembles conversation,” and some believe we gain the ability to write–and think–according to this process “by internalizing the linguistic structures of conversation” (27).
Meyer and Smith explain that for inexperienced writers, the “‘other self’” is, at best, only emerging “and must be stimulated if the writer is to mature” (28). Such stimulation can occur in conferences:

By commenting and asking questions, a tutor can temporarily stand in as an experienced writer’s questioning self. The writer hears and responds to the kinds of questions he should be asking himself. The conversation provides practice that will help him internalize dialogic linguistic structures and thereby develop his critical faculties. Conversation, then, is a preparation for independent thinking and writing. (28)

Harris similarly suggests that questions work to help writers internalize the ability to “critique their writing”; she argues that writers who lack the “ability to draw back from what has been written— to question its content, consider alternatives, or wonder what’s missing— . . . are less apt to revise in any meaningful way” (Teaching 22). Harris cites Deanna Gutschow, who, she says, “promotes the growth of this critical stance by engaging in dialogue with her students during conferences, a technique students then learn to internalize and use when writing alone” (22). Harris reports a quote from one of Gutschow’s students, who affirms,

“Once I started my paper, I found myself ‘writing for my conference,’ and trying to interpret what [my teacher’s] questions . . . would be. . . . I’m questioning what I write much more now than I ever did before. That’s really slowing me down, making me think a lot harder about what I’m trying to say.” (22)

Ideally, then, questions—as well as other aspects of conference conversation—help move the tutee toward self-sufficiency as a writer.

Sample questions abound in tutor-preparation texts and other writing center literature, and practically all (of the “good” ones) seem likely candidates for productive scaffolding. Harris cites several that Murray commonly uses in his “approach to helping students become independent writers”; some of them include “What did you learn from this piece of writing?” “What do you intend to do in the next draft?” “Where is this piece of writing taking you?” and “What do you like best in this piece of writing?” (Teaching 29). Such questions, Harris explains, are potentially useful in starting a conference, and they are “designed to place the responsibility for analyzing and evaluating writing in the student’s lap” (29).

Indeed, questioning is thought to promote positive conferencing interaction by encouraging tutees to participate actively in the conference. Connecting questioning to the writing center goal of promoting equality between tutors and tutees, Irene L. Clark writes that to achieve the most effective conferences, “Writing Center teachers and tutors

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1 As a tutor and as an experienced writer, however, I wonder whether better candidates for scaffolding might be more focused questions, such as the following: Who is the audience for this document? How is the document geared appropriately toward that audience? What is the purpose of this essay (or paragraph, or sentence, or word, or punctuation mark)? How does it achieve its purpose (or not)? Why are paragraphs organized the way they are? How do they connect to one another? How might they fit together better?
must learn to discard their traditional roles as information givers and allow students to become equal participants. This shift in emphasis necessitates their learning to ask ‘open’ questions, those designed to generate a wide range of response, maximizing student involvement” (27). In short, questions can increase the chances of the tutee being an active learner, and they—at least hypothetically—help the tutor avoid dominating the conference.

MAINTAINING TUTEE OWNERSHIP; AVOIDING DIRECTIVE TUTORING

Other major goals of conferencing have been maintaining tutee ownership of learning and avoiding directive tutoring. Although he focuses on classroom rather than on conference dynamics, David Dillon succinctly details what ownership involves. Ownership, according to Dillon, is achieved via language and is based on constructivist theories of learning, such as are associated with Piaget. Through language, learners “reconstruct” new knowledge in light of their own prior personal knowledge; to do this “effectively and well, learners must actively play with, and hypothesize about, the new information, particularly through exploratory and heuristic use of their language” (190-1). Dillon summarizes, “If learners have basically made their new understanding through their own constructivist efforts, then—the thinking goes—their learning ‘belongs’ to them. Hence, the notion of learners’ ownership of their learning” (191). Conferencing, with its focus on acquiring new information and new abilities through verbal explorations of writing, reflects such a theory of ownership.

While conferencing emphasizes ownership as active learning accomplished in part through conversation, it also emphasizes tutee ownership of her or his text. Writing center theory adamantly maintains that tutors should never take over texts and tell tutees what to write; as a result, one of the most consistent themes in writing center literature is the warning against directive tutoring. Jeff Brooks explains that in an ideal conference, the tutor assumes “a secondary role, serving mainly to keep the student focused on his own writing”; it is the tutee who “should ‘own’ the paper and take full responsibility for it” (2). Similar statements appear almost as mantras in tutor-preparation texts; for example, some of Toni-Lee Capossela’s initial advice to tutors reminds them that “a peer consultant isn’t the author this time around” (2). She explains, “For one thing, if you get carried away, the paper WILL become yours, . . . Second, . . . you may misinterpret or warp the author’s ideas in the process of reshaping them. Third, although the paper may be improved by your efforts, the author won’t be” (2). Likewise, Gillespie and Lerner declare, “We don’t tell writers what to write; we ask questions about and react as readers to what writers have already written or are thinking of writing. In these ways, writers ‘own’ their texts, and writing center workers respect this ownership just as we would want it for ourselves” (22). Tutors, then, should help tutees explore possibilities, but they should not tell them what to write.

Like writing center literature’s emphasis on questioning, the emphasis on avoiding directiveness and on maintaining student ownership of learning and texts is connected to
the desire for equality between conference participants. Movements toward equality can be blocked especially when a directive tutor orients a conference toward an “ideal text.” Lil Brannon and C.H. Knoblauch, discussing teacher response to student papers, link problems with student ownership and teacher (or, plausibly, tutor) directiveness to a focus on ideal texts:

By making elaborate corrections on student writing, teachers appear to be narrowing the discrepancy between what the writing has actually achieved and what ideal writing ought to look like, perhaps with the conviction that any student who perceives the difference can also narrow it. But this correcting also tends to show students that the teacher’s agenda is more important than their own, that what they wanted to say is less important than what they should have said. . . . Teaching from the vantage point of an Ideal Text is paternalistic. (214-15)

Their assertion easily applies to peer writing conferences, as well; tutors who become overly directive risk communicating a similar message to their tutees.

Finally, a study by Carolyn P. Walker and David Elias suggests that students may actually prefer conferences in which they maintain ownership of the paper and of the direction of the conference. In the study, Walker and Elias focus on discourse analysis and qualitative descriptions of recorded conferences, which had been rated by the participating teachers and students according to their levels of satisfaction with the conference. Walker and Elias find that participants are most satisfied with conferences which “[focus] on the student and the student’s work and not on the tutor and his or her agenda” (281). Some problems in low-rated conferences, they note, are a “focus . . . on the tutor, rather than on the student” and an “agenda” oriented toward “the tutor’s expertise (and the student’s lack of expertise)” (282). Tutees, therefore, may respond more positively to tutors who avoid taking control of conferences.

**PEER WRITING CONFERENCES: COMPLICATIONS**

Even if peer tutors’ “peerness” and relative equality to their tutees may help them conference effectively, tutors need a variety of skills and tactics—and thus some preparation—to accomplish writing conference goals. They need to be able to diagnose writing problems, to distinguish higher- and lower-order concerns, and to model responses and approaches of experienced writers. They need good listening skills, and they need to be skilled at formulating helpful, productive questions. According to most literature, they must know how to avoid being directive, taking control of the tutee’s paper, and becoming a proofreader or editor. Most importantly, perhaps, according to writing center theory, tutors must orchestrate the conference so that the tutee maintains ownership of her or his learning and text, and so that the tutee improves as a writer; simply improving the paper is not enough. Further, they should help the tutee become a critical participant both in various academic discourse communities and in the world. The peer tutor has a broad and difficult job, which is complicated by various issues. Recently,
conference approaches, conference dynamics, and even the peer tutor’s “peerness” have come into question.

**QUESTIONING CONFERENCE APPROACHES**

The highly collaborative peer conference, in which the tutor assumes a non-directive role and the tutee maintains ownership of her or his text, may be the ideal, but substantial scholarship points to potential problems to achieving this ideal. A major issue is that some students inevitably prefer—and even expect—to be told what to do. For them, a non-directive approach may be off-putting or frustrating; indeed, it may even be threatening.

Susan Blalock discusses the problem of tutees’ desire for tutor control and direction in terms of authority. Blalock maintains, “collaboration requires that both participants in a one-to-one relationship have authority” (85), and this expectation meshes with the emphasis on relative equality between participants in writing center peer conferences. Her study shows, however, that even “good” students don’t always seem to bring authority into the writing conference. Via three brief case studies, she focuses on how authority issues affect tutor-student relationships in conferences involving non-traditional student writers. Blalock explains that the students were “academically successful”; regardless of their success, however, “all [of the students in the case studies] accord the tutor authority” (80). “The problem,” she continues, “is usually to give students the power to take chances and make choices among cultural alternatives that require managing conflicting claims to authority” (80). Her case studies demonstrate that although the student writers became more comfortable with themselves as authorities of their writing over time, students often want the tutor to perform as an authority and to take charge in conferences.

Other studies show that even advanced students resist ownership of their learning. Dillon, along with several of his students from a graduate-level teacher education course, reflects on his attempt “to foster students’ ownership of their own learning” (190). Comments from his students show that, although some of them eventually came to appreciate Dillon’s efforts to help them maintain ownership, students often disapproved of his methods and responded to him and his course with “various degrees of frustration and even anger” (210). If even advanced students and “academically successful” students feel uncomfortable maintaining ownership of their writing and learning, and if even they sometimes desire tutors and teachers to assume more control over their learning, it seems likely that tutees in peer writing conferences might feel the same way.

Because of the link between student ownership of learning and the social construction of knowledge, younger—or less experienced—students might seem particularly likely to feel frustrated in a collaborative conference. That is, it seems likely that such students may not yet perceive knowledge as constructed or learning as collaborative, and they might accordingly feel uncomfortable in a non-directive teaching environment. Although
their study does not involve a writing center or conferencing context, we might look to Ann M. Penrose’s and Cheryl Geisler’s “Reading and Writing Without Authority” and to Janet, the freshman involved in their study. Focusing on “how . . . differences in authority are played out in the academic sphere,” Penrose and Geisler examine “how the lack of authority shapes the writing and reading practices students adopt” (507). Their research involves Roger, a doctoral student of philosophy, and Janet, the freshman; each are given the task of reading several articles on paternalism and asked “to write a paper for an educated general audience ‘discussing the current state of thinking on paternalism’” (506-7). Penrose and Geisler find that Roger “seems to operate with an awareness that texts and knowledge claims are authored and negotiable”; Janet, on the other hand, does not yet understand knowledge as socially constructed, and she reads and writes according to “a more traditional information-transfer model in which texts are definitive and unassailable” (507). That many writing center tutees (and even tutors) might operate from an epistemological framework similar to Janet’s seems plausible; they might accordingly expect not only texts but also tutors to present them with definitive “truths.” We might, then, anticipate conflict in conferences where tutors adopt a knowledge-as-constructed position, but the tutee expects her or him to have “all the right answers.”

Finally, some research suggests that directive approaches aren’t always bad. Exploring tutor-student relationships through linguistic analysis of conferences, Susan Blau, John Hall, and Tracy Strauss distinguish between hierarchical and collaborative power relations evident in transcripts of sessions. They find, interestingly, that “an undue—or misdirected—emphasis on the collaborative approach resulted in tutorials that seemed to waste time and lack clear direction” (38). They explain, “We saw too many examples of tutors dancing around a direct question, when they clearly knew the answer, wasting the already too short time they had to spend with their clients” (38). While they do not “suggest that collaboration should be discarded as a goal of tutorial relationships,” they do argue that “collaboration, like any other teaching/learning mode, has to be used judiciously and appropriately” (38). Emphasizing the need for tutor “flexibility,” they clarify:

It makes sense to use a non-directive approach for dealing with ideas, structure, and voice, to help students figure out for themselves what they are trying to say and how best to say it. But it also makes sense to instruct when necessary, particularly on formal rules of grammar and mechanics. . . Generally speaking, a directive approach seems better suited for the content, non-directive for the process. (38)

Not only do some tutees like directive tutoring, then, such tutoring may actually have a place in conferencing.

Whether or not tutors embrace directive moments in conferences, even our non-directive approaches and best intentions likely involve more tutor control than much writing center scholarship has suggested. Specifically, the use of questions—so highly recommended in our literature and especially in tutor-preparation texts—complicates the issue of tutor non-directiveness and tutee ownership in writing conferences.
Harris, again quoting Murray, writes that questions like “What’s the single most important thing you have to say?” or “Where do you hear the voice coming through the strongest?” are useful because they “can reorient students to the natural hierarchy of editorial concerns” (Teaching 61). She explains, “Such questions are effective because they direct the student’s attention in early drafts away from the minor distractions of sentence-level editing to the major concerns of a writer” (61). Indeed, the tendency to shift a conference’s focus away from lower-order concerns, which often appear as tutees’ choice topics, to higher-order concerns suggests that tutors might direct conferences from the beginning; perhaps unintentionally, Harris and Murray implicate questions in such direction.

Other scholars intentionally bring the question as a conferencing tool under scrutiny. For example, using evidence from a study of writing center conferences, JoAnn B. Johnson describes the question as a tool that puts power in the hands of the questioner, generally the tutor. She concludes that “asking questions has traditionally been a major component of teaching strategies; however, if the student is to become involved with the learning experience in a productive manner, the questions must come from the student” (40). Similarly, Black questions the question’s role in conferences; citing Duke’s 1975 article “The Student-centered Conference and the Writing Process,” Black recaps Duke’s position that “Rogerian reflection and questioning” is thought to, in a “truly student-centered and non-directive” conference, “help a student see where she should go next” (15). Black views such an approach less positively: “Somehow, the non-directive teacher has retained all the agency in this conference; he structures it . . . [and] gives [the student] a task to focus on” (16). Both Johnson and Black, then, suggest that the use of questions in conferences can put the tutor (or teacher) in control.

Other scholars, too, offer critiques of the scaffolding that supposedly accompanies effective questioning and conference talk. In a <wcenter> listserv exchange, Jim Bell replies to Leslie K. Yoder’s critique of a conferencing scenario in which, she writes, “the tutor is entirely determining the course of the conversation—it moves from one question to the next, like a quiz. The tutee’s only role is to respond to these prompts, thus becoming dependent on the tutor’s questions to generate ideas” (10/26/2001). Bell responds:

Your criticism that the exchange makes the student “dependent on the tutor’s questions for ideas” is thought-provoking. Generally, tutors—citing Vygotsky directly or indirectly—claim that guiding the student through a series of scaffolded questions once will make the student more independent, able to do it him- or herself. I have always believed that, but it may be more wishful thinking than reality. I don’t know. (10/27/2001)

Newkirk, too, questions whether scaffolding works as effectively as many have claimed. He argues that “the metaphor of scaffolding has been used almost exclusively to foreground the way complex cognitive tasks are made manageable for learners,” and that “it is likely that there are competing scaffolds in many institutional encounters” (195-6).
The role of scaffolding in writing conferences, then, may have been idealized and over-simplified.

Finally, (and as Newkirk also mentions) Dennis Searle offers a critique of scaffolding that, although oriented to classroom teaching and younger students, seems important to writing center conferencing as well. In “Scaffolding: Who’s Building Whose Building?” Searle writes,

I am concerned about how scaffolding is interpreted and about what happens when teachers and consultants apply this notion to classroom teaching. At this base of my concern is the fundamental question of who is in control of the language. . . . Schools . . . are rarely effective in allowing children either to initiate topics or to shape the experience for themselves. As a result, scaffolding can more often become the imposition of a structure on the student. (185-6)

Searle argues that “the adequacy of the metaphor implied by scaffolding hinges on the question of who is constructing the edifice”; he believes that “too often, the teacher is the builder; the child is expected to accept and occupy the predetermined structure” (188). Citing Wells, Searle claims that, in school, children infrequently “initiate language activities” and receive little response when they do; school environments, therefore, are often not conducive to scaffolding (188). Searle concludes, “Only when teachers are ready to turn over more control to students can scaffolding be an effective classroom strategy for language development” (188). The applicability of Searle’s article to writing center work hinges, I believe, on one major issue: whether or not tutors “turn over control” to their tutees. We must ask ourselves, then, to what extent do writing conference dynamics actually differ from classroom dynamics?

QUESTIONING CONFERENCES DYNAMICS

Conferencing is intended to create more comfortable and more equal tutor-tutee dynamics. However, Black’s research suggests that traditional classroom dynamics, in which the teacher retains control, spill over into teacher-student conferences. According to Black, conferences might represent “a genre of talk which supposedly reduces the tension of the classroom . . . and pushes against . . . traditional student-teacher power relationships” (4), but, as she demonstrates, good intentions don’t necessarily equal good writing conferences. Rather, traditional power relationships do permeate student-teacher conferences. Studying her own conferences, Black realized that “the academic patterning of the classroom and the cultural patterning which the classroom reinscribes carried over . . . and undermined my efforts at equalizing power and engaging in real conversation and cooperative learning” (11). Her subsequent study of other writing teachers’ conferences suggests the same: teachers’ power remains a factor in one-to-one interaction, just as it does in the classroom.

Focusing on power as it is evidenced in conference talk, Black specifically challenges the long-standing concept of “conference-as-conversation” (21) and argues that conference
talk, unfortunately, lies somewhere between the talk of casual conversation and the more power-laden talk of teaching. “Warning bells,” she says, “should go off as we read about conference ‘conversation.’ But our desire to meet on more equal ground with our students muffles the sound” (21). The result is confusion from an “asymmetrical language interaction” in which participants must negotiate the rules of both classroom discourse and conversation (13); teachers struggle with this negotiation, she explains, and “often find ourselves caught, unable to balance teaching and talking, either unable to leave the platform and step out onto the tightwire or rushing because our lives depend upon it to the safety of the opposite end of the wire” (9). The teacher-student writing conference, then, seems more a partial reflection of classroom power dynamics than a relaxed discussion between writers who, in Murray’s words, “most of the time . . . will be remarkably close to peers” (qtd. in Black 21). Black’s work leaves unanswered, though, the question of whether more equal dynamics might be achieved in conferences between peers, rather than between teachers and their students.

**QUESTIONING TUTORS’ “PEERNESS”**

Although students might have trouble negotiating conference talk as conversation with their teachers, and although they might still feel the power dynamics of the classroom at work in teacher-student conferences, some writing center literature suggests they might conference more productively with a peer tutor. However, the “peerness” of peers may be more a wish and ideal than a reality. The peer tutor’s position as peer has come under question and further complicates conferencing.

The idea of tutee and peer tutor as essentially equals is problematic for several reasons. First, simply because of their role as tutors, peer tutors are in a position different from their tutees’. As Trimbur writes, “Appointment to tutor, after all, invests a certain institutional authority in the tutors that their tutees have not earned,” and “tutors’ success as undergraduates and their strengths as writers single them out and accentuate the differences between them and their tutees—thereby, in effect, undercutting the peer relationship” (119). Although Trimbur goes on to suggest that a peer tutor’s dual role can be negotiated in a balanced way, he acknowledges the complexity of the peer tutor’s position. Second, some argue that tutor preparation programs take away from a peer tutor’s “peerness.” Bruffee warns that if tutors “are too well trained, tutees don’t perceive them as peers but as little teachers, and the collaborative effect of working together is lost” (“Training” 446); implied is the tutor’s potential to be perceived as something other than peer. And as Jason Palmeri, a peer tutor himself, explains, “while [being a] student . . . prevents me from truly taking on the authority of the professor, my position as a tutor who has been empowered to help students master the writing skills which I have ostensibly already mastered prohibits me from functioning as a peer as well” (9). Because of their position as tutors and because of their preparation programs, then, peer tutors seem likely to occupy different positions than their tutees.
In a more extreme argument focusing on the “typically unacknowledged component” of “the peer tutoring dynamic,” Julie A. Bosker argues that “an emphasis on ‘peerness’ disguises the inherent aggression in tutoring relationships” (21). She explains,

Words like peer (and our efforts to walk such talk) attempt to evade the fact that . . . power is never absent from a rhetorical circumstance, and it is to our detriment to believe it might be. In the highly charged rhetorical situations of writing and learning which our writing center conferences comprise, the potentially aggressive relationship between tutor and student is dangerously obscured by an egalitarian pose of peerness. Peerness, in fact, is a complicated relation that involves power and aggression as well as equality. (21)

Bosker presents a far different image of peerness and tutoring than the idealistic versions that suggest peer writing conferences amount to simply conversations between peers.

Finally, scholars such as Capossela fervently maintain that “[a] peer consultant isn’t a surrogate teacher” (2), but certainly the tutor’s position is complex and leans in the direction of teacher. While peer tutors may not be teachers, their tutees likely still perceive them as being similar to teachers, because peer tutors—whether they act like teachers or not—are both sanctioned by the university and taught to tutor. And if, in their conferences, tutors do perform similarly to teachers, Black’s findings concerning teacher-student conferencing may indeed carry over into the writing center. Considering how a peer tutor is and is not like a teacher will be, accordingly, important to this study.

Because they occupy the position of tutor, because they are usually instructed in tutoring, and because they bring to the tutorial skills that the tutees generally lack (why else would students come for tutoring?), peer tutors’ “peerness” is undermined: they are likely never really equal to their tutees, regardless of possible similarities in age or experience. Consequently, “peerness” cannot be considered a given in writing center conferences. On the other hand, the peer tutor certainly isn’t a “real” teacher, either, and therefore would seem to lack a teacher’s power. What remains to be explored, then, is what sort of power dynamics are evident in peer conferences, what contributes to those dynamics, and what accomplishments are produced within those dynamics. In addition to “peerness,” all of the issues discussed in this chapter—improving the writer, promoting critical literacy, maintaining student ownership of learning and texts, avoiding directiveness in tutoring, asking questions, and so forth—relate to issues of power and of empowerment.
CHAPTER TWO:
EMPOWERMENT AND POWER

The terms “empowerment” and “power” appear frequently in writing center literature; unfortunately, however, we have not always made clear how we intend readers to understand those terms. In the two sections below, I discuss the various ways that “empowerment” and “power,” respectively, have been depicted in writing center–and other relevant–literature. I conclude the section on each term by compiling an operational definition appropriate to writing center work and, more specifically, to this project; I also suggest how empowerment and power might be evidenced in writing center conferences.

EMPOWERMENT

EMPOWERING PEDAGOGIES AND MANIFESTATIONS OF EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment–within and beyond writing center literature–has involved a variety of issues. Empowering student writers has meant helping them become more effective and more confident writers, helping them find their own authentic, personal “voices,” and helping them gain fluency in academic discourse. Empowering students has also meant helping them develop a critical consciousness; in this sense, empowerment suggests the understanding of language as symbolic action, of truth, self, and world as social constructs, and of writing as social activity. With such critical awareness, student writers can emerge as active presences within the social structure: they can work toward social justice in both academic and non-academic contexts.

Creating Effective, Confident Writers

In much writing center literature, concepts of empowerment reflect the long-standing goal of creating “better” writers. Muriel Harris writes that “long before ‘empowerment’ became a coin of the composition realm, tutors basked in the glow of hearing students leave a tutorial saying, ‘OK, so now I know what I want to write. It was there in my head, but I just couldn’t get it out’” (“Talking” 32). Harris explains that “a tutor [can] help the student see how it feels to turn off that internal editor, which rejects avenues of thought before they are fully explored, or how to take brainstorming notes before an idea evaporates from memory, or how to let threads of an argument or analogy continue to play themselves out in various directions” (33). Additionally, Harris writes,

Tutors can help students learn how to proofread, how to let go and brainstorm, how to capture a flood of ideas in the planning stage, how to take all those scraps of paper and notecards and organize them, how to insert revisions into a text, how to draw back and figure out if the organizational structure is appropriate, or how to check on paragraph development. (33)
In short, says Harris, tutors can “[help] students get the feel of some aspects of writing” (33). The result of such help is that “frequently, students who come in nervous, apprehensive, defeated, or eager to get any help they can emerge from their sessions feeling more positive, more in control of their own writing”—feelings, Harris says, with “enormous power” (29-30).

Empowered students, of course, should not simply feel “more in control of their own writing”; they should be more in control of it. In part, this control involves learning to select and implement useful writing strategies. As Warnock and Warnock state, “in general, writing is defined as the ability to read a particular situation critically and to decide what kind of symbolic action will work best, given the specific context and motives” (21). Empowering students, therefore, involves helping them learn to evaluate writing strategies and to select their own best approaches for a particular piece of writing. “Tutors can,” Harris writes, “suggest a few possible strategies, any one of which might be more appropriate for this particular writer who writes in his or her particular way” (“Talking” 33). Citing Linda Flower, Harris explains:

[The] recognition of possible strategies is part of . . . the kinds of knowledge writers need. Such knowledge, [Flower] explains, “involves reading a situation and setting appropriate goals, having the knowledge and the strategies to meet one’s own goals, and finally, having the metaknowledge of awareness to reflect on both goals and strategies.” (33-34)

Harris uses Flower’s term, “strategic knowledge,” for this kind of knowledge, and she asserts that in writing center contexts, such writing “strategies are easy to learn” (34).

As Harris suggests, writing centers empower students, in a basic sense, by helping them learn how to write, by helping them understand what writers do and how it feels to do those things. Tutorials empower students, too, by helping them develop more positive feelings about themselves as writers and about their abilities to write; surely students who feel less nervous, less apprehensive, or less defeated after conferences have been empowered in some way. Thus, empowerment in the writing center context might basically mean helping students feel confident that they have something worthy of saying and the ability to write it down—and enabling them to do that.

Promoting Authority Through Voice

Other discussions of empowerment in composition have focused on promoting the student writer’s authority, although authority means different things to different scholars at various points in composition history. For expressivist critics such as Peter Elbow, a student writer’s authority comes from her or his voice. Elbow argues that “the basic subtext in a writer’s text is likely to be ‘Listen to me, I have something to tell you,’” because “writers can usually write with more authority than their readers” (498). Writing for teachers, however, generally leads student writers to produce a “basic subtext” that wonders, insecurely, “Is this okay? Will you accept this?” (498-99). For Elbow,
empowering students means establishing “the essential dynamic,” the ability to write with the writer’s subtext, not the student’s. Students should be encouraged to write with authority and convey the sense that they are worthy of being listened to. According to Elbow, students demonstrate writerly authority by writing with voice.

Quoting Elbow’s assertion that “everyone, however inexperienced or unskilled, has real voice available; everyone can write with power,” Peter Mortensen and Gesa E. Kirch explain, “Here ‘voice’ corresponds with self, ‘power’ with authority. Writers can claim authority if their writing has voice, and if that voice allows readers access to the writer’s ‘mind’ and ‘experience’” (563). Mortensen and Kirsch add that “the effect of Elbow’s expressive approach is to create an autonomous self: a private subjectivity defined, for better or worse, by how arresting a voice it can ‘breath’ [sic] into accounts of lived experience” (563). In the expressivist sense, then, a writer’s authority lies in the ability to tell a convincing story through “real” voice; a student’s empowerment would thus be reflected in that ability.

**Promoting Fluency in Academic Discourses**

Obviously, expressive writing is not the only—or even the most common—writing that students are asked to do, and the personal, expressive voice is not the only voice students are encouraged to adopt. Rather, professors urge students to write according to the rules of various academic discourse communities, and in voices acceptable in those communities. Thus, empowering students can mean helping them become fluent in academic discourse conventions to gain authority as writers. As Joseph Harris explains in his introduction to a collection of papers from a 1989 CCCC’s symposium, one way “we might try to empower our students as writers . . . [is by] teaching students how to write within the academy, . . . helping them become more aware of and adept at the kinds of talk and thinking that characterize the various branches of the university” (par. 2). Harris adds that “such teaching tries to empower students by making them, in effect, insiders at the university, familiar with the conventions, commonplaces, and habitual turns of argument that make up the talk of our disciplines” (par. 2). Similarly, David Bartholomae suggests that “students can establish their authority by mimicking the rhythm and texture, the ‘sound’ of academic prose” (612). To empower students, then, we might teach them discourse conventions to help them gain entrance into academic circles.

**Encouraging Critical Consciousness**

Concepts of empowering student writers often reflect Paulo Freire’s notions of liberatory education, in which critical consciousness is key to empowerment. Thus, an empowering education encourages students to revise their understandings of knowledge, the world, and themselves, so that they understand these as socially constructed and therefore capable of being transformed. That is, students come to realize that their world is the way it “is” not because of some fixed reality but because those with status have influenced the way that world is perceived. For Freire, students who understand the power of social
construction to define “reality” also come to understand their abilities to change those realities; this results in their working for social justice to create more democratic societies. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire explains, “In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of the oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (49). Liberatory pedagogies, therefore, “[enable] people to overcome their false perception of reality. The world–no longer something to be described with deceptive words–becomes the object of . . . transforming action by men and women” (80). As a result, students no longer accept reality as unchangeable; they recognize the injustice and arbitrariness of social hierarchies, and they (theoretically) work to create a more equitable world.

Warnock and Warnock’s article on liberatory writing centers reflects Freireian ideas of empowerment. Linking critical consciousness explicitly to writing and language, they agree that empowerment means changing the way students understand language, themselves, and their worlds. Empowerment begins with “writing center teachers,” who are “empowered with a critical consciousness which comes from understanding language as symbolic action, as having the power to revise the self and the world” (18). Such teachers (or tutors) help students develop a similar critical awareness and understanding of language; therefore, students become able to see themselves not just as authors of texts, but as potential authors of their worlds and lives. Thus, for Warnock and Warnock, empowering students requires that writing centers should “restore” to students the “authorial nature,” the “power of revision” they have “in and of themselves” (22).

The “authorial nature” Warnock and Warnock describe involves, in part, modifying students’ attitudes about writing. “The best and perhaps the only way to change student writing,” they claim, is “help[ing] students revise their attitudes toward themselves as writers and towards writing” (20). “Crucial” in revising attitudes “is to restore to students the sense of their own authority and responsibility”; writing centers, therefore, “must create a situation that helps to give a new sense of options and authority to the writer” (20). Specifically, student writers’ authority depends on their development of a critical awareness that allows them to “become authors of and authorities on their own texts” (18). Empowerment, therefore, involves helping students understand themselves as creators of and experts on their writing.

“Authorial nature” entails more than a student’s sense of authority over her or his writing; it also involves critical awareness in an explicitly political sense. Warnock and Warnock maintain that when students “develop a critical consciousness toward their own writing,” they also gain “critical consciousness toward . . . the world they live in” (18). Declaring that “it is not enough to provide students with what some call ‘survival skills’” (19), they believe that students should be helped to develop a critical consciousness that will allow them “to happen to”–that is, to influence or change–“their worlds” (18-19). Warnock and Warnock write that “teachers, particularly in the liberal arts, sometimes speak of developing students’ abilities to reshape their human universes”; “these abilities,” they
say, “turn out to be not skills in the usual sense, but attitudes that invite revision— 
revision of the self... revision of the language by which the self comes to terms with the 
universe, revision of the methods which put these terms into action, and finally revision 
of the world which in turn defines the self” (17). When students begin to grasp their 
abilities to construct meaning through writing—to participate in and understand writing 
as a social act—they also begin to perceive their ability to reconstruct their worlds and 
their selves through language. Therefore, for Warnock and Warnock, empowering 
writing centers should help change students’ attitudes not only about their potential to 
revise and author texts, but about their ability to participate in shaping selves and 
societies.

Liberatory Pedagogies

Freire’s and Ira Shor’s models of liberatory pedagogies are useful backdrops against 
which to consider empowering writing center practices. For Freire, empowering 
education must never involve traditional “banking” methods of education, in which 
students are perceived as empty vessels to be filled with the teacher’s unquestionable 
knowledge. Such pedagogies prevent students from understanding either the social 
construction of knowledge or their own transforming potential. “The more students work 
at storing the deposits entrusted to them,” Freire writes, “the less they develop the critical 
consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of 
that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed upon them, the 
more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality 
deposited in them” (73). Thus, traditional “banking” models of education maintain the 
status quo in inequitable societies; students absorb and accept as absolutes the realities 
and knowledge their teachers pour into them. Liberatory pedagogies, in contrast, involve 
students in the construction—rather than in the absorption—of knowledge and create 
possibilities for change. Indeed, as Shor defines it, empowering education is “a critical-
democratic pedagogy for self and social change. It is a student-centered program for 
multicultural democracy in school and society” (15).

Shor details the differing effects of the two pedagogical models, which he labels 
authoritarian and empowering (or democratic). Education, Shor explains, “can enable or 
inhibit the questioning habits of students, thus developing or disabling their critical 
relation to knowledge, schooling, and society” (13). While democratic education “can 
socialize students into critical thought” and “into autonomous habits of mind,” 
authoritarian, “banking”-style education “socialize[s] students . . . into dependence on 
authority, . . . into passive habits of following authorities, waiting to be told what to do 
and what things mean” (13). When students are taught according to “banking” 
pedagogies, they simply absorb information, but when they experience empowering 
education, they learn to co-construct and to question knowledge.

According to Freire, a liberatory pedagogy requires abandoning “banking” methods of 
education completely (79). As an alternative to “banking,” Freire proposes “problem-
posing” education, by which he means education that, instead of “deposit-making,” involves “the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world” (79). Such education, Freire maintains, “embodies communication” and “consists in acts of cognition”; further, it “respond[s] to the essence of consciousness,” embracing not only consciousness but “consciousness of consciousness” (79). Education in this sense, then, happens through talking and thinking, and with an awareness of one’s awareness, and it specifically explores how people function in and perceive their worlds.

**Revising Teaching Relationships and Encouraging Active, Student-Owned Learning**

If a consensus exists concerning the empowerment of student writers, it is this: empowering students means dismantling the traditional teacher-student hierarchy. According to Freire, “education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students” (72). He explains, “to exchange the role of depositor, prescriber, domesticator, for the role of student among students . . . undermine[s] the power of oppression and serve[s] the cause of liberation”; empowering education is thus based on partnership (75). Freire goes on to describe this partnership:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teachers cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teaches. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. . . . Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are “owned” by the teacher. (80)

Freire describes more specifically how education functions within these new relationships:

The problem-posing educator constantly re-forms his reflections in the reflection of the students. The students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and re-considers her earlier considerations as the students express their own. (80-81)

Freire concludes that “the role of the problem-posing educator is to create, together with the students, the conditions under which knowledge at the level of doxa is superseded by true knowledge, at the level of the logos” (81).1

Problem-posing education thus breaks down traditional teacher-student hierarchies and creates environments in which participants are co-builders of knowledge; the teacher is no longer the ultimate source of fixed, indisputable knowledge. Such education

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1 Here, doxa would correspond with the traditional teacher’s dispensed “knowledge”; logos would correspond with knowledge created in dialogic exchange.
Empowers students by helping them develop the critical consciousness described above; it encourages an understanding of knowledge as constructed, and it promotes student responsibility for making (and thus student ownership of) knowledge.\footnote{Shor similarly explains that “the empowering educator transforms the teacher’s unilateral authority” and “offers a participatory process to students” (20). Such participation, Shor maintains, can awaken students to learning in a way impossible in the traditional classroom: “Participation challenges the experience of education as something done to students. . . . Participation . . . is needed . . . to shake students out of their learned withdrawal from intellectual and civic life” (20).}

Empowering pedagogies like Freire’s connect readily with writing center ideologies; and much writing center scholarship suggests that empowering students requires a renegotiation of traditional teacher-student hierarchies. Warnock and Warnock contrast their liberatory writing center pedagogies to “traditional teaching,” in which “the students’ sense of their own authority in learning is irrelevant, even counterproductive because students must feel themselves void of knowledge in order to accept that which is being given or driven into them” (20). Moreover, praise of peer tutors’ “peerness”—as making them potentially better able than teachers to work with student writers—perhaps most strongly reflects the writing center’s desire to level teacher-student hierarchies. Indeed, peer tutors’ and tutees’ roles are strikingly similar to Freire’s student-teachers and teacher-students: peer tutors are “students among students.”

Empowering students in writing conferences also involves promoting student ownership of learning. This means, in part, that students retain control of the focus and direction of learning encounters. David Fletcher, in a study of authority in writing conferencing, describes empowerment as the granting of “authority and ownership” to student writers (50); he suggests that part of “accomplishing the empowerment of the student” requires that “the writing instructor should . . . take the intentions and the aims of the writer seriously and, in doing so, . . . acknowledge the writer’s authority through writer-instructor dialogue” (41); Black agrees that “it is empowering to be taken seriously” (57). Warnock and Warnock, too, encourage student writers’ authority; emphasizing student responsibility, they write that “students take an assertive role in deciding what happens to them and to their texts when they come to the center. They determine when they will come, what they will do, whether or not they will return. In short, students evaluate their own learning processes” (20). Further, “students come and go at will, and they even determine the use of time and materials in the center. In fact, they bring the materials, their own writing, which immediately establishes their authority” (21).

Finally, empowered students (ideally) sift through, discard, combine, and refine their own and others’ ideas, and they make their own decisions about what to think or what and how to write. As Warnock and Warnock state, “In liberatory centers, students . . . read their drafts aloud to others and listen to responses, often conflicting responses, and decide what they will have to do on the basis of the responses. They do not follow criticism obediently, but act on their own critical consciousness” (20). Such responses suggest that
student writers–having developed a critical consciousness–see knowledge as something negotiable that changes from context to context and person to person. Critical consciousness, in “both students and staff,” produces “the capacity to entertain seriously each other’s viewpoint, confident that other views can be accepted, rejected, or modified” (21). Empowering students therefore means helping them “feel confident enough about themselves that they listen to others and evaluate what they learn, transforming some of what they hear into their own purposes, revising their own views in light of the new learning, rejecting what they do not value or believe might have value for them in the future” (19-20). Thus liberatory writing centers empower students to make their own decisions about others’ ideas and others’ responses to their writing.

Conclusion: Manifestations of Empowerment

Empowerment in writing conferences has been depicted in many ways: learning better writing skills can be empowering; so can be feelings of confidence accompanying such learning. Accordingly, developing various voices, both personal and academic, and gaining fluency in academic discourses can be empowering. Students are also empowered by developing a critical consciousness, which allows understandings of knowledge, self, and society as social constructs; such an awareness enables them to perceive the world as changeable and themselves as capable of changing it, and to perceive themselves as constructors of knowledge and as owners and authors of texts. Some feel empowerment occurs when students take control of their learning, setting their own educational goals and being taken seriously by teachers or tutors, who act as co-learners rather than as dispensers of absolute knowledge. Finally, students can be empowered by constructing knowledge with others, whether with teachers or peers, whether verbally or through the writing they have come to perceive as a social act.

ACADEMIC DISCOURSES, ACCULTURATION, AND CRITICAL LITERACY

As I mentioned above, a common goal of writing center work is to help student writers understand and implement various conventions of academic discourses. However, some writing center scholarship suggests that such instruction can have negative implications. Grimm explains that “although we Americans pride ourselves on our diversity, we have yet to figure out how to live with differences. Too often writing centers are expected to ‘manage’ those differences, to bring them under control, to make students with difference sound as mainstream as possible” (xii). Similarly, Anis Barwarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski maintain that writing centers in general are involved “ultimately in the business of acculturation,” in “transform[ing] the student and his or her texts into the acceptable standard of the university” (46).

Critics like Barwarshi and Pelkowski point out that, in writing conferences, the teaching of academic discourses often fails to encourage questioning of academic values. Arguing that “the writing center has traditionally been and continues to be generally unconcerned with critiquing academic standards, only with facilitating students’ participation within
them” (46-7), Barwarshi and Pelkowski suggest that “mainstreaming or acculturation appears to neglect that meaning is constituted, interpreted, and valued differently in different discourses” (48). Similarly, Joseph Harris writes, “In trying to get students to learn certain habits or practices of mind, we may also discourage them from criticizing those practices, from trying out (or holding on to) other ways of thinking and writing about the world” (par. 3).

Peter Vandenberg, describing a “dark cloud [that] has been gathering over writing center work,” writes of the ease with which writing center tutors, already steeped in institutional values, may uncritically transfer those values to their tutees (59). Tutors, he suggests, sometimes serve simply and without reflection as extensions of values and desires written deeply into the institution, into us. . . . We typically expect student tutors to replicate dominant institutional and literate values and to reproduce them in others. . . . Comparatively speaking, they accomplish this with little or no resistance at all; they arrive at the writing center door with commitments to academic discipline and a belief in the transformative potential of literacy, but what they often lack is an awareness of the institutional function of the “tutor position,” its implication in what Grimm identifies as regulatory power. (60)

Peer tutors, then, often embrace academic discourses; they may not recognize anti-democratic implications of promoting those discourses, much less encourage in their tutees critical attitudes toward those discourses. Therefore, according to Vandenberg, peer tutors, too, help perpetuate the academic status quo.

Conferencing scholarship has also pointed to specific negative effects of the acculturation associated with academic discourses. Such effects involve feelings of loss, of inferiority, and of being silenced. Grimm, for example, writes that “when we learn the discourses we need in order to be accepted in certain groups, we don’t always know what to do with the language and knowledge we leave behind” (xvi). She argues that “Because writing centers are places where assimilation into the discursive system of the university is facilitated, one rarely hears stories about the erasures: the loss of motivation, the compromise of creativity, the silencing of family stories, the impediments to agency, the suppression of other literacies and worldviews” (xvi).

More specifically, Black considers how academic discourse might further marginalize students by devaluing their personal discourse styles, thus detracting from their feelings of personal worth. Black writes of the conferences in her study:

Over and over in these conferences, students are informed of the conventions of college writing. . . . My concern is whether the uncritical presentation, enforcement, or acceptance of them results in a form of oppression, inequality, or marginalization. When we accept a rule as “right” or “good,” when a convention is “just what is done,” then we have set off a whole group of words or thoughts that are “not right.” Thoughts that are not spoken, knowledge that does not count, acts that cannot be
committed. And students who have not mastered the conventions are silenced, their papers lying in the pile of bad writing that a teacher can no longer bring himself to read. (51-52)

Thus writing conferences might lead students to perceive their own writing, and even themselves, as inadequate and inferior in some contexts.

Barwarshi and Pelkowski agree that “marginalized discourses [can] be silenced by academic discourses” (48-9); however, they argue that academic discourses significantly impact marginalized students’ subject positions, as well. They argue that “what has been overlooked . . . are the epistemological demands that . . . academic writing places on [marginalized] students’ ways of experiencing, ordering, and making sense of the world—in short, the subject positions and habits of mind that such academic discourses force them to adopt when they become acculturated into the cultures of the university” (44). “Such consequences,” they say, “are rarely if ever made explicit to students who find themselves labeled ‘basic’ or, what amounts to the same thing, ‘Other’” (44); they further argue that “the university and its discourse become dangerously hegemonic when they refuse to make explicit this change in the subject position” (49):

Instead, they force marginalized students . . . to consent to the discursive practices of education by first reminding them that they are Other and in need of remediation, and then convincing them that being academically literate is the most prestigious, most civilized state of being—that, in fact, the university is a place that emancipates them from their familiar subject positions by teaching them a universal, objective discourse which provides them access to culture, knowledge, and truth. (49)

Barwarshi and Pelkowski, then, implicate the writing center in “impos[ing] on students one more subject position to which they ‘willingly’ consent because they are not conscious of it as being a subject position, a particular, politically embedded, and discursive way of experiencing and articulating knowledge and reality” (49).

Writing centers, of course, do not aim to harm students. Grimm describes mentalities underlying the teaching of academic discourse: “writing center people . . . generally . . . believe that students need to learn academic literacy because . . . well, because if they don’t . . . it will hurt them in the long run . . . because that’s the way things work . . . in the real world” (29). Writing center staff reason “that the more a student thinks, talks, writes, reads, and values like the dominant culture, the more rewards he or she will reap”; accordingly, they believe, “the ‘right’ thing to do is to prepare students for the way the world operates. If an advanced level of literacy guarantees access to professional positions, then tutoring literacy must be a naturally helpful activity, innocent of implication in politics or ideology” (29). Similarly, Barwarshi and Pelkowski speculate that “many writing teachers have an understandable fear that students will not survive or succeed if they completely reject [academic discourse]” (52). Therefore, they say, “fear usually leads teachers . . . to concern themselves with . . . acculturation” (52).
According to some, however, problems lie in that such teaching is based on the “literacy myth.” Grimm explains, “The literacy myth teaches us to think of literacy as an unequivocally good thing, something that improves a person’s position in life. The achievement of advanced literacy is supposed to make us better people, better citizens, and better workers” (39). Calling the literacy myth “a peculiarly sanitized and popularized symbolic narrative,” she adds that it “serves a protective function, covering social tensions with a warm blanket of common sense” (38). As such, the literacy myth causes people to believe that with advanced literacy they will move ahead in the world.

Of course, literacy does not guarantee advancement. Citing Harvey Graff, Grimm explains that literacy is not the cure for but the result of economic, cultural, and social conditions” (22); “in the Western world . . . the literacy myth is a tool of hegemony” through which “the dominant group secures consent for its practices by virtue of its social and intellectual prestige and its superior economic position” (39). Grimm’s summary is worth quoting at length:

According to Graff, the literacy myth works as a hegemonic (and therefore political) tool because it calls us to assent to a meaning system that appears innocent and is sanctioned by our social institutions. Through the work of our institutions—churches, schools, hospitals—we become accustomed to accepting the views of the dominant class. In school we learn that speaking and writing Standard English is a sign of intelligence, so as adults we are confident we are doing “the right thing” when we deny those who speak a nonmainstream or “nonstandard” discourse the jobs or the good grades or the promotions we give to those who speak standard discourse. In college classrooms and writing centers, the writing of American minority students who are bidialectical or bilingual is described as incoherent and nonstandard because it doesn’t conform to mainstream worldviews and language patterns. Mainstream rhetorical strategies are imagined as culturally neutral. (39)

Discourse labeled “mainstream” is, of course, not neutral at all. But, as Grimm argues, because we lack better—that is, more comfortable—explanations, “we use literacy to explain. . . away” problems associated with unfair societal practices, such as “working-class people earn[ing] less because they speak a nonstandard English, or working-class students get[ting] lower grades because their writing is undeveloped” (40).

The teaching of academic discourses in writing centers is a complex issue; however, writing centers would do students a great disservice were they to refrain from such teaching.³ That is, we might question the potential negative effects some critics have linked with acculturation and academic discourses. For instance, we might ask whether students who embrace academic discourse must necessarily “give up” other discourses; they might, instead, learn to negotiate among discourses—to select and use a variety of

³ In some literature, the concept of academic discourse conventions seems almost conflated with Standard Edited English. In my own general references to academic discourses, I intend to suggest a much broader conception, including conventions associated with, for example, genre, style, and even modes of thought.
discourses within a variety of contexts. We might also examine our positions concerning the “literacy myth.” While I generally agree with critiques that improved literacy does not, for example, guarantee advancement in socio-economic status, I also feel that low levels of literacy almost guarantee that those “less literate” will not advance. Inequality in communication skills may be the result of an unjust society, but society nonetheless judges its members according to those skills.

Teachers, too, judge students according to their writing; thus, to be academically successful, students need to be able to use academic discourses. As Joseph Harris argues, “To allow students simply to ignore or transgress the conventions of academic writing would be to teach them to fail” (par. 3). Critics such as Catherine DuCharme, Mary Poplin, and Sally Thomas agree: they maintain that already marginalized students are further disempowered when their writing instruction avoids teaching academic conventions. Drawing on the work of Lisa Delpit, they claim that because academics so value authorship and ownership, and the individualism championed “inside the dominant culture,” they “fail to help students not in the dominant class enter the power arena” (153-4). Connecting disempowerment with not teaching writing conventions accepted by the dominant culture, DuCharme, Poplin, and Thomas quote Newman:

“It’s precisely the notion of ownership that’s keeping teachers from raising clarity and correctness with students. I understand why a number of researchers have argued for children’s ownership of their writing—it was to keep us teachers from doing what we’ve done a lot of: leaving our bleeding red marks all over students’ pages. But the notion of ownership undermines the development of students’ writing because it leaves it at the level of fluency without helping children, or older writers, tackle the complex business of bringing clarity and correctness to their texts.” (155)

DuCharme, Poplin and Thomas maintain that giving students from non-dominant cultures “an understanding of the power codes of written language in this country” will enable them to “have access to all things” (155).

Finally, I previously mentioned Black’s lamentation of “silenced” students whose “papers [lie] in the pile of bad writing a teacher can no longer bring himself to read” (51-2). We might move from her comments to the notion that no writing is “bad”—perhaps especially if that writing simply fails to adequately demonstrate academic conventions. But to embrace such a notion would also mean doing disservice to students. In various contexts, some writing is bad writing; some writing does not communicate effectively. Surely we do not want to convey to student writers that the reverse is true.

I should not, of course, remove Black’s “pile of bad writing” from its original context; Black also maintains that she does not “wish to argue that [the] rules and conventions of college writing] are right or wrong, useful or trivial—I can see them as being helpful within this community” (52). The problem, Black indicates, is “the uncritical presentation, enforcement, or acceptance” of discourse conventions (51-2). Similarly, it is
the “uncritical acculturation” that Barwarshi and Pelkowski “reject . . . as both ethically and . . . pedagogically unsound” (44).

Ideally, in empowering education, students become more fluent in academic discourses, but they learn to critique and question those discourses, as well. As Grimm argues, “writing centers should hold themselves responsible not only for teaching [writing conventions], but also for acknowledging their arbitrary nature and for teaching them in the context of students’ writing” (106). She explains, “I am not recommending that tutors tell students to repudiate all routine practices and authority. Rather, I am recommending that they tell students how these authoritative practices work without automatically and unconsciously endorsing them” (79). Grimm believes that tutors should help students “make decisions about the extent to which they want to conform to the design, to acknowledge the norm encoded in the design, and even depart from it or create a new design” (79). Joseph Harris confirms, “The goal for both students and ourselves must be to speak from within a discourse and yet to remain in some ways outside of it, to be able not only to execute but to argue against its claims and practices” (par. 3).

Finally, although some might essentially equate critical consciousness and critical literacy, writing centers might find useful the distinction between the two Xiu Lin Gale describes. Citing Aronowitz’s and Giroux’s discussion of “‘critical and politically astute’” dropouts, Gale reminds us that critical consciousness “divorced from its means of expression, will only lead the outsiders to their final exclusion from the academic world and a more fulfilling life” (103). Gale emphasizes “the importance of critical literacy, which consists of not only an awareness of the domination and oppression of mainstream culture and normal [privileged] discourse but also an ability to carry out ‘discursive resistance’” (103). Quoting Fredric G. Gale, Gale explains, “‘Critical literacy grants people the power to think critically about language, to recognize its opacity, and to use language for their own liberation. Critical literacy grants both the power to recognize structural contradictions and the power to represent oneself effectively in a political transformation’” (103).

We might, then, think of two major goals of empowerment: promoting students’ critical consciousness to perceive the social constructedness and transformability of reality, and promoting critical literacy, which involves promoting the ability to effectively use language in efforts at transformation. Such a notion reflects Grimm’s belief that the writing center should be “responsible not only for granting students membership to the academic literacy club but also for changing the gates of that club when change is necessary” (xviii).

**ZONES OF EMPOWERMENT**

Even if the writing center community, thus far, has not composed for itself a unified concept of empowerment, there appears to be growing consensus concerning where student empowerment might take place: multiple critics suggest that empowerment
happens in “border zones,” where teacher culture and student culture meet and are re-
constructed, where discourses influence one another, where subject positions are 
explored, and where the formerly dominant becomes “other.”

For Shor, such a zone creates an opportunity for student and teacher cultures to be 
transformed. He writes that in empowering education, “empowerment . . . cannot mean 
the teacher unilaterally delivering the Great Books or the King’s English to students. 
Neither does it mean uncritically praising or using the everyday speech and thoughts of 
students”; rather, “empowerment means teachers and students both reinventing the 
cultures they learned in an unequal status quo” (203). He explains,

In that mutual reinvention, they create a critical culture, . . . [a] new 
culture [that] is a two-way discourse, a democratic achievement of 
dialogue that I call the third idiom. With a new language for learning and 
mutual communication, they can begin transforming their alienation from 
each other. When critical-democratic teachers lead a transformative class, 
they invent what Vygotsky (1962) called a zone of proximal development. 
This border culture is a learning area between students’ speech and 
understandings and those of the teacher. The critical paradigm of 
empowering education, then, calls for inventing a zone of transformation 
where the cultures of students and teachers meet. (203)

According to Shor, “empowering education thus takes place in a symbolic frontier, a 
developmental borderland between the teacher’s and the student’s existing cultures. As a 
place of mutual communication, this meeting ground of teachers and students is not 
owned exclusively by academic culture or by the culture of everyday life” (203-4).

Focusing specifically on the writing center, Muriel Harris echoes Shor’s concept of 
empowering students through a new frontier where student and teacher cultures meet. 
She begins by describing the trouble students have in communicating about their writing 
problems: “student writers,” she says, “cannot easily translate their problems into the 
discourse of composition or make meaning of the language about writing” (“Talking” 
36). Citing Flower, she adds that “when students recognize problems, they normally do 
not have the metaknowledge . . . or the metalanguage to locate the appropriate section of 
a textbook, ask a teacher, or tell a tutor” (36). According to Harris, students often resort 
to “saying that they ‘need help’ or that the paper ‘doesn’t flow,’” and students “likely . . . 
[hope] the tutor can give names to their internal sense that something is needed” (37). 
“Student language,” she reminds us, “is not the language we [composition teachers] use” 
(37). Drawing on Pratt’s concept of contact zones, Harris maintains that “tutors live in 
this contact zone somewhere between teachers and students”; in this zone, “tutors,” who 
“are . . . other than teachers . . . inhabit a middle ground where their role is that of 
translator and interpreter, turning teacher language into student language” (37). For 
Harris, the writing center can be a zone in which students learn the language of academic 
discourse —with the help of a translator.
In more detail, Barwarshi and Pelkowski also apply Pratt’s (and Anzaldua’s) concepts of contact zone to the writing center. To prevent the writing center from becoming implicated in essentially “traditional colonialist practices” (49), they “propose . . . a writing center-based pedagogy that allows basic and other marginalized students to become aware of how and why academic discourses situate them within certain power relationships and require of them particular subject positions” (44). Their “goal,” they maintain, “is not to subvert academic discourse or to suggest that students reject it, but rather to teach students how self-consciously to use and be used by it—how rhetorically and critically to choose to construct their subject positions within it” (44).

Barwarshi and Pelkowski suggest that such empowerment can occur if the writing center becomes “a ‘contact zone,’” which, citing Pratt, they call “a place in which different discourses grapple with each other and are negotiated” (42). Drawing on Pratt’s language, they explain that in contact zones, “subordinated subject[s] learn how power relations get played out in culture and how they can use the ‘the colonizer’s language and verbal repertoire’ to ‘single-handedly give [themselves] authority’ to recreate their subject positions” (52). To prevent the writing center from being a colonizing force, Barwarshi and Pelkowski argue,

[It] should become a site in which marginalized students can become critically conscious of how and why academic discourses construct various subject positions so that students . . . recognize and contend with the threat to their home subject positions—their racial, class-based, gendered points of view and experiences—resulting from their mastery of academic discourses. (50)

According to Barwarshi and Pelkowski, the writing center should be a place where students “[assess] what happens to their experiences—what happens to them—when they become ‘contact zones’”; again drawing from Pratt, they say that “the writing center thus becomes not just a place in which students are introduced to academic discourses and taught how to function within them, but also how to ‘describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them’” (52-3).

Finally, Grimm, to date, offers the most extensive vision for empowering writing center practices. She argues that writing centers should move from a modernist, autonomous model of literacy to a postmodern, ideological model. Writing centers generally work from the former view, in which literacy is seen as a neutral skill that individuals need for success, and lacking literacy is seen as an individual problem. According to this “autonomous model [of literacy],” she explains, “writing center work appears innocent and helpful. Writing centers are supposed to support nonmainstream students so that they can learn the skills necessary to be successful” (30). Grimm calls on writing centers to “negotiate more socially just literacy practices” by working from a “conceptualization of literacy as ideological work rather than as a neutral skill” (29-30). The ideological view of literacy is based on “postmodern conventions” that “undermine modernist beliefs about the freely choosing rational individual, the neutrality of academic literacy, and education as a progressive and liberating process” (8). Grimm explains that working from
"an ideological model of literacy, writing center people would deliberately call attention to the ways that literacy practices carry cultural knowledge, ideology, and values. Academic literacy would not be imagined as an individual skill but instead as a set of cultural practices" (32). Writing centers would, then, “stop locating literacy problems in individuals and instead locate them in cultural constructions”; this would involve “abandon[ing] positions of innocence guaranteed by the literacy myth and com[ing] to terms with the political implications of writing center work” (29).

Grimm shows that working within an ideological model of literacy, writing center practices would become much different than they currently are. She, too, envisions the writing center as a kind of contact zone; there, we “reckon with the realization that literacy learning is often far from the liberating experience that we like to imagine” (55-6). Grimm envisions writing centers not as “places where errors are fixed and differences are erased,” but as “places where students learn to negotiate and understand the contact and conflicts of differences” (13-4). She explains,

Rather than helping the Other become more like us, the work of the writing center might instead include developing the ability to see ourselves as the Other, to recognize the limits of our worldviews and our critical assumptions and to regard our discursive practices from the perspectives of those outside the mainstream discourse. (14)

In such a writing center, “workers would talk about the beliefs encoded in [academic literacy] practices, making the tacit understandings explicit, offering students more choices and more information about how these practices work” (32). Centers would be “sites of participatory research into students’ literacy practices and . . . sites of knowledge about the ways that discourse regulates who we are and who we can be” (xvi).

**DEFINING EMPOWERMENT FOR WRITING CENTER WORK**

Concepts of empowerment vary among writing center and other scholars, and the most useful definitions of empowerment for writing center work are likely multifaceted. Naturally, we can think of empowerment in two senses: as “the state of being empowered” and as “the action of empowering,” or, correspondingly, what we want tutees to attain and what we want tutors to do. Below, I describe more specifically what such empowerment entails; in general, however, I suggest that we understand writing center empowerment as falling into two categories: practical empowerment, associated with improving writing abilities, and political empowerment, associated with increasing critical awareness.

**Practical Empowerment: Enabling More Effective Writing**

As products (and producers) of a decidedly consumer-oriented culture, students who come to the writing center—at least, those who come voluntarily—do so for a reason: there, they believe, they will find someone to help them improve their writing. Empowering students in a practical sense, then, means enabling them to do just that.
Being an effective writer means being able to control one’s writing so that it achieves the rhetorical purposes the writer (or others, such as teachers) desire. To do this, writers must develop multiple writing and thinking skills, and they should be able to select and implement writing strategies useful in achieving their documents’ purposes. Writing effectively also requires that they move toward fluency in conventions of the discourse communities they are writing for; included in those conventions are, for example, such issues as clarity and correctness, and appropriate uses of style, voice, format, and genre.

Gaining fluency in academic discourses not only enables students to gain entrance into academic communities, it helps student writers present themselves as experts of sorts. Indeed, tutors empower tutees by enabling them to see themselves as experts—of, for example, their own lives, texts, and the knowledge they create. Such feelings contribute to their sense of being writers, of having, as Elbow would have it, something worthy to say. Understanding themselves as experts, and having the means with which to communicate what they know, students are enabled to participate effectively in the social activity of writing—as Gillespie and Lerner state, “to use writing to make meaning . . . [and] to share that meaning with others” (21). Hopefully, too, they come to understand writing as a social act. Ultimately, effective writing reflects intellectual autonomy; therefore, the writing center should not only help students gain approaches to their immediate writing tasks but also help students develop transferable skills to apply to later tasks.

I argue that empowerment in a practical sense enables students to have control over their writing—and to have confidence in their abilities to do so. We must remember the “nervous, apprehensive, defeated” students Harris describes. Students do often come to writing centers feeling like failures, feeling, perhaps, that college is not for them—that maybe they should just pack up, go home, and get a job, any job. Students who leave the writing center feeling that writing is something they can do have been empowered by their visit—even if their confidence is only in their ability to better perform some small writing task, or to try one new writing strategy. Such confidence is empowering because it contradicts other voices that may whisper—or even shout, perhaps in red, angry ink: “Your writing is not good enough. You are not good enough.” Of course, the confidence should be warranted. Conferences should be productive, not mere cheerleading sessions, and students should be able to continue feeling confident—hopefully even more confident—after they try out that new strategy, or after their teachers return the papers that show (even some slight) improvement.

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4 Students can construct knowledge without an awareness of knowledge as construction; I locate the development of such an awareness in the section on political empowerment, below. Similarly, they can participate in the social act of writing without understanding it as such.
Political Empowerment: Moving Toward Critical Literacy

Coordinate with the goal of creating more effective and more confident writers are goals associated with political empowerment. To empower tutees in a political sense, writing centers might help tutees develop a critical consciousness through which they understand knowledge as a social construction and themselves as participants in that construction. Such an understanding would inform their perception of academic discourses as constructed: thus empowerment would go beyond enabling writers to implement various discourse conventions; it would allow them to understand where those conventions come from and how using those conventions may affect them.

Critical consciousness, combined with abilities in and understandings of academic discourses, can enable students to move toward critical literacy. That is, students recognize their abilities to participate in social critique and to take potentially transforming action via language. Accordingly, they have the tools with which to write within, or if they wish, against, the academy—as well as a critical understanding of the implications (personal and political) of either choice. In addition, by gaining critical awareness, they develop the potential to reconstruct themselves and their worlds.

An Operational Definition for Empowerment in Writing Center Work

In summary, I offer the following definitions of empowerment for writing center work:

In a practical sense, empowerment enables students to effectively control their writing, so that they can make their writing accomplish goals they—or others—set for it; empowered students also gain warranted confidence in their abilities. In short, practical empowerment results in a writer’s increased intellectual autonomy over her writing. In a political sense, empowerment enables students to develop a critical consciousness, through which they understand knowledge (including academic discourses) as social constructs, worlds (including university practices) as transformable, and themselves as potential creators of knowledge and transformers of worlds. Empowerment in perhaps its strongest sense enables critical literacy, in which students draw on their language skills to work toward social justice.

As I explain in subsequent chapters, empowerment in writing centers is also associated with several other issues I mentioned earlier. For example, empowerment is linked with tutees’ maintaining ownership of texts and ideas, rather than having someone else tell them what to think or write. Similarly, it is linked with tutees’ maintaining ownership of learning: establishing learning goals and having those goals taken seriously. And empowerment is linked with tutees’ collaborating to co-construct knowledge rather than simply receiving dispensed knowledge. Further, as I show in Chapter Five, these issues are also inherently associated with power dynamics in conferencing.

Finally, for a definition of empowerment to be useful for writing centers and for writing center research, we must also determine what empowerment might “look like.” That is, if
we want to locate empowerment in peer conferences, what clues or evidence might we look for?

**EVIDENCES OF EMPOWERMENT**

If empowerment, in part, involves helping students become more effective writers, surely we can find evidence of empowerment in writing conferences. In conferences, we can see students apply strategies, try out new terminology, correct grammatical errors, and even create meaning. We can watch them come up with their own words—rather than writing down tutors’ words—and we can see them learning about and matching their writing to various discourse conventions. We can detect gains in confidence as they nod and say, “Oh, yeah. Now I understand. I can do that.” And as they set goals and control the focus of their conferences, we can observe them maintaining ownership of their learning as well.

Empowerment in other senses may be less easy to detect, although I argue we can discover it (or its absence) if we look closely. We can observe tutees participating in the construction of knowledge when, rather than listening to tutors simply lecture, they dialogue with tutors: agreeing, disagreeing, exploring ideas—in short, conversing. As tutors show how they understand (or misunderstand) tutees’ writing, or how the audience might respond to a piece, we can see tutees in the process of understanding writing as a social act. Through their conversations, we can watch as tutees come to realize that academic discourse rules are constructed; and we might even hear evidence that tutees are beginning to understand how academic discourse affects them. In short, if we listen closely, we may hear tutees coming to understand social construction and developing a critical consciousness.

If absolutely everything falls into place, we may suspect that they have achieved critical literacy—although the nature of the writing center beast is that often, we never know precisely what the final draft looked like, or how the teacher responded to it, or what effects it had. And, beyond the occasional cover letter and resume or graduate school statement of purpose, we rarely see tutees using their writing beyond the classroom. In short, evidence of empowerment in terms of overtly political effects is likely to be difficult to detect in writing centers. Some scholars, though, point out potentially useful possibilities for locating such empowerment.

Although Grimm maintains that her work is highly theoretical and that she does not “believe that theory has direct application to practice” (xvii), she does, however, offer useful speculations of what empowerment for social change might look like. Grimm offers the example of Mary, whose “difference revealed itself” in the writing center “in her unusual prose, which was . . . overlaid with religious beliefs that seem strange in the academic world” (23). Mary’s extremely conservative background conflicted with the assumptions of her pop culture assignment; acknowledging that “negotiating between Mary’s religious tradition and the academic tradition is very delicate business” and might
“make many tutors uneasy” (32) Grimm suggests how a tutor might productively respond to Mary:

A tutor might . . . talk with Mary about how the assignment constructs her as a media-literate, urban, religiously uncommitted person, all of which she is not. This approach shifts attention away from Mary and onto an artifact of academic literacy—the assignment sheet. With this shift, Mary and her tutor can talk about the options for engaging with the way the assignment constructs her and speculate about the consequences of resisting, negotiating, or accommodating the tacit cultural expectations of the assignment. If Mary wants to write a paper that resists the construction of the assignment, a tutor can propose strategies. For example, to convince the teacher that she understands the construction of the assignment, Mary can begin her paper by calling attention to the kind of student invoked by the assignment and announce her intention to write from an alternate subjectivity. The focus of the writing center session would not be on what is lacking in Mary but on how she is being constructed by an academic literacy practice and how she wants to negotiate with that construction. (32)

Although Grimm’s example is speculative, and there is no guarantee that Mary’s teacher would respond favorably to such a response to the assignment, this scenario—as well as others in her book—suggests how politically empowering writing conferences might “look.” We can imagine, at least, that such a response from a tutor might help Mary define herself within, rather than be defined by, the university. As a result, Mary’s teacher might even reconsider the way she constructs and evaluates her assignments. (I maintain, however, that Mary’s teacher is much less likely to respond favorably if Mary is unable to write according to academic discourse conventions.)

Other research points toward actual evidence of the kind of political empowerment we might hope to achieve in writing centers (as well as in classrooms). Although not dealing explicitly with empowerment, Katrina M. Powell’s study of student self-representation across genres is useful here. Powell presents a case study of a student named Freeman, who, in a class focused on critiquing pop culture, often resisted participation in classroom genres such as discussion and oral presentations. His written assignments, however, led his teacher, Dr. Hassan, to “[conclude] that his refusal to participate in class was consistent with his overall critique of popular culture, a critique she valued in his written assignments” (218). Powell explains that at the end of the course, Freeman received a low grade because, in part, of his lack of participation. Subsequently, Freeman emailed his teacher and argued against “‘being graded so much on class participation’” (217). Ultimately, “because Freeman was willing to participate in the written genres of the course, his resistance was taken seriously” and “produced critical reflection on Dr. Hassan’s part about how to evaluate class participation” (218).

Freeman’s achievement here is significant, especially considering the tenacity with which teachers often cling to and defend their grading procedures. Further, I imagine Powell
would agree that part of Freeman’s ability to be “taken seriously” by his teacher stemmed
not only from his “willing[ness] to participate in the written genres of the course,” but
also from his ability to do so effectively—that is, to formulate and communicate to Dr.
Hassan the ideas she found so valuable. If writing centers can help other students to be
similarly able to participate in their courses’ written genres, they may accordingly
increase students’ abilities to negotiate for social change as Freeman did. The change
Freeman effected is obviously small; however, such change is also observable, as
Powell’s study affirms. And small starts are, after all, places to begin. Perhaps by
searching for similar small acts of social change initiated by tutees, we may detect the
effectiveness of our attempts to politically empower students who come to the writing
center.

POWER

Writing centers are steeped in power issues: they exist within university hierarchies
where writing center directors often have little power; they have been implicated in
perpetuating the “culture of power” Delpit describes (and they exist within that culture, as
well); their goals are to help students gain power in various senses; and they work against
pedagogies associated with traditional classroom power. Writing center research, then,
might consider power from any number of angles. My goal here, however, is to better
understand how peer tutors and tutees demonstrate and negotiate power during their
conferences, where their power might come from, and what sorts of power negotiations
promote empowerment.

In this section, I survey explorations of power in conferencing theory and research
(involving both peer and teacher-student conferences). Briefly recapping some contrasts
between conferencing and traditional pedagogies associated with teacher authority and
power, I describe how power is thought to function in writing conferences. I then discuss
research that focuses on how actual conferencing practice fits within our theories. I point
to the move in conferencing literature toward seeing conferencing as either collaborative
or hierarchical, or as moving on a continuum between those two poles.

Next, I explore the terms “power” and “authority” in composition literature; I suggest that
they have been conflated and thus confuse our understanding of power—or at least
contribute to our tendency to use inconsistent terminology in discussing power. I suggest
that we should try to untangle our notions of authority, authoritarianism, power, control,
and domination, and that we should attempt to understand power and authority in more
positive senses than we generally tend to. I point to the contradiction our literature hints
at: power and authority in the hands of teachers (and tutors) has been viewed as
extremely negative and oppressive, but in the hands of students (and tutees) power and
authority have been viewed much more positively.5 I suggest that because conferencing

5 Barbara Sherr Roswell offers a similar assertion in her dissertation; however, she makes the
claim only for power—not for power and authority (29).
appears to be neither completely hierarchical nor completely collaborative, we need to understand power, too, as a negotiation on a continuum, rather than as something absolute a teacher or tutor can use to dominate students and tutees. Drawing on Foucault, I suggest that power is not the same as authority, nor is it truly the possession of conference participants. Rather, power is evident as conference participants act upon one another’s actions; their negotiation of power is an inevitable fact of conferencing, rather than power being a liability for tutors. Authority, though separate from power, contributes to how tutors and tutees enact power; their perceptions of their own and of each other’s authority influence the way they respond to one another in conferences. Just as a tutee demonstrates power, he or she also has authority in various senses; therefore, like power, authority in conferences cannot be associated only with the tutor.

Finally, after constructing an operational definition of power in writing center conferences and for this project, and after showing how authority differs from but contributes to that power, I briefly explore possibilities for examining power in conferencing.

POWER IN WRITING CONFERENCE THEORY

In this text, I have not yet focused explicitly on power, but my discussion of empowering versus traditional pedagogies in the previous section points toward the basic premise of power in writing center conferences: In traditional classrooms, the teacher is the authority—in the authoritarian sense; he or she controls what happens in the classroom and what counts as knowledge, gives grades, and operates from a privileged position above students in the classroom hierarchy. In writing centers, on the other hand, peer tutors are thought by some to lack the traditional teacher’s power, to be instead facilitators who help tutees explore their own ideas and discover their own approaches for writing tasks.

In “Teaching, Classroom Authority, and the Psychology of Transference,” James S. Baumlin and Margaret E. Weaver draw on theories of psychoanalysis to contrast the dynamics of peer writing conferences with traditional classroom authority. Citing Lacan, they relay how students generally perceive the teacher as the “subject supposed to know” and project authority onto the teacher as part of the process of transference. Unless teachers refuse to mirror the images students project onto them, they promote hierarchical learning relationships in which the teacher is the “sole . . . authority” (77-9). Baumlin and Weaver explain that better teaching practices would require teachers to disrupt the transference:

If the psychoanalytic model has any relevance to teaching, it should convince us that transference—students’ projections of trust and authority onto their teachers—is . . . most effective only so long as teachers themselves remain unseduced; teachers must ultimately repudiate the role of inviolate authority and refuse to remain . . . the “subject supposed to
know.” For self-knowledge, as psychoanalysis suggests, begins only when an analyst at some appropriate moment breaks the transference. (82) According to Baumlín and Weaver, the breaking of transference involves “the teacher encourag[ing] dialogue”; for example, instead of solving a student’s problem, a teacher would invite a student to “talk your way through this one” (83). Such a pedagogical move, they say, emphasizes that “neither the student nor the teacher possesses knowledge in the absolute sense” and reflects Freire’s goal of student-teachers and teacher-students (83).

Baumlín and Weaver go on to suggest that writing center pedagogies involving peer tutoring have broken the model of transference. They write that in writing center peer conferences, “the hierarchy characteristic of the teacher-student relationship disappears, since neither collaborator is perceived to be the sole authority” (84). And, in a description reminiscent of counseling sessions, they add, “using nondirective teaching strategies (such as open-ended questioning), the tutor simply prompts the student to discover his or her own answers” (84).

Although he focuses on teacher-student rather than peer writing conferences, David Taylor similarly suggests that a “counseling approach” is useful in helping teachers “surmount many of the problems that their authority causes” (25). Taylor describes several similarities between counseling and conferencing; for example, in both, the teacher’s (or counselor’s) “job [is] . . . to put the student-client back in control so that she or he can move forward with a clear sense of direction” (25). 6 Other similarities involve the fact that counseling sessions and conferences are working toward “long-term goals” (25). Finally, Taylor writes,

Taylor goes on to explain the conditions for a helping relationship necessary for the teacher to “shift from authority figure to collaborator” (27). Among them is “creating a mood of understanding,” which requires that the teacher be a good listener and provide useful—especially open-ended—questions (30-32). Such an approach “narrows the gap between powerless student and powerful teacher,” and in such an environment, “the student must seriously consider a teacher’s questions about the piece of writing and must assume responsibility for answering them” (32). Taylor adds, because the teacher will not

6 Taylor’s reminder that “beginning writers lack” the “power to take charge of writing,” and his suggestion that conferences should help them gain that power, reflect the notions of empowerment I described in the previous section.
simply tell the student what to do, “the only alternative for the student is to think, write, and inquire until he or she discovers a solution” (32). The counseling approach, like the approaches Baumlin and Weaver associate with writing center pedagogies, neatly summarize major tenets of writing center theory: tutors do not tell tutees what to think or write; rather, they prompt tutees to explore their own ideas. Thus, theoretically, power differences in conferences are less marked than in teacher-student classroom relationships.

Because I relied heavily on writing center theory to explain the basic assumptions of writing center pedagogy in chapter one, and because the empowerment section in this chapter dealt rather extensively on concepts of power dynamics associated with collaborative versus hierarchical learning situations, readers will no doubt by now have a solid grasp of the ideal power relationships theoretically achievable in writing conferences. Therefore, I will move on to discuss research exploring how well writing conference theory concerning power matches with actual practice.

POWER IN WRITING CONFERENCE RESEARCH

While much conferencing scholarship portrays both teacher-student and peer writing conferencing in an extremely positive light, some research suggests that tutors (and teachers) can bring to writing conferences the kind of power associated with teachers in traditional classrooms. Indeed the teacher/tutor dichotomy points toward a movement in conferencing literature to view conferences according to two categories: hierarchical or collaborative. The latter category is associated with non-directive tutoring approaches by tutors who successfully avoid acting with teacher-like power; the former is associated with directive tutoring, in which traditional classroom power relations persist. Thus the counseling-style approaches would reflect collaborative, dialogic conferences, but conferences that might reflect the transference model Baumlin and Weaver associate with traditional classroom pedagogies would be considered hierarchical.

Several researchers have examined power in writing conferences (either between teachers and their students or between peer tutors and tutees); they have generally focused on conference talk. Polly Ulichny and Karen Ann Watson-Gegeo, for example, examine conferences between sixth-grade teachers and their students. They explain that those “writing conferences demonstrated features similar to other instances of teacher-student classroom talk in which the teacher controls access to the speaking floor and monitors contributions to the content of discourse” (311). To “conceptualize the power differential that exists between teacher and student,” they analyze conferences according to the “dominant interpretive framework” (DIF) (312). The DIF “refers to two aspects of the teacher’s authority and control of knowledge and communication in the classroom: 1) control of participation structures” such as “form, content, and distribution of discourse; and 2) control of the interpretation or evaluation of the intended meanings of the talk” (312). Ulichny and Watson-Gegeo find that teachers respond more favorably to students who perform in a manner compatible with the teacher’s interpretive framework. While
their focus is on the teacher’s power in conference interaction, Ulichny and Watson-Gegeo also connect their study with broader issues of power and empowerment:

Literacy, especially being able to write effectively, means having a voice that reaches larger audiences and is preserved over time—a prerequisite for social empowerment. When education processes distribute that voice unevenly, they inadvertently perpetuate the inequalities of established power relationships between classes and society. When students resist the teacher’s DIF, they . . . have effectively turned off what benefits the school has to offer. (325-26)

Students who do not interact with the teacher in a way that maintains her authority, then, may decrease their opportunities for learning.

Based on her study of the construction of authority in writing center conferences, Barbara Sherr Roswell presents a similar idea. She argues that tutors conduct conferences according to an “unarticulated participation structure or ‘ideal text’”; tutees who “anticipated and conformed” to the tutor’s “‘ideal text’ [for] the conference were accorded subject positions of greatest authority” (176). Roswell also offers three categories of conference discourses associated with authority. According to the “discourse of proficiency,” the tutee is “positioned as answerable to . . . authority,” the conference focus is often “correctness,” and “the rules for writing were represented as absolute” (174). In contrast, within the “discourse of construction” the tutee “shape[s]” knowledge and the tutor “act[s] as an interested reader, assisting the writer in choosing rhetorically effective strategies” (174). The third discourse, the “discourse of craft,” falls somewhere in between; in it, the tutor and tutee engage in a kind of “master craftsperson” and “apprentice” relationship (147, 150-52). The discourse of construction most often occurs when the tutee shares the tutor’s notion of an appropriate “conference text” (176).

Other researchers have pointed specifically toward the dichotomized view of power in conferencing that I mentioned earlier. In their linguistic analysis exploring tutor/client relationships in several tutorial sessions, for example, Blau, Hall, and Strauss suggest that two categories of conferences—“collaborative” and “hierarchical”—can be associated with non-directive and directive tutoring, respectively (22). For their study, they explain:

We will use “collaboration” to suggest the emphasis on creating solidarity in relationships, often between two people who feel equal in status, usually reflected by a non-directive tutoring style. Hierarchy, on the other hand, suggests a relationship based on one person having more power than the other, and is often coupled with a directive tutoring style. (22)

Blau, Hall, and Strauss go on to examine conferences within this framework and according to three topics: questioning, echoing, and qualifying. Contrasting one tutor’s move toward a more directive, hierarchical style with another tutor’s use of “open-ended questions . . . that elicit thinking and help the client come to his own conclusions about clarity and wording,” they maintain that the latter partially evidences a “leveling of power” (23-4). They suggest that echoing in conferences can indicate that tutors and
tutees are “on the same wavelength, working together in an easy camaraderie” (32) and that qualifying can “make tutors’ suggestions sound less directive” (37).

Importantly, Blau, Hall and Strauss do not find that using qualifiers or open-ended questions is always useful. Rather, they argue, for example, that “too many qualifiers may make the tutor sound indecisive or inarticulate, and may, in fact, frustrate the client” (37). Pointing out that tutors’ questions can be similarly frustrating to tutees, Blau, Hall and Strauss conclude that both hierarchical and collaborative approaches can be appropriate in writing conferences (38).

Blau, Hall, and Strauss’s position is echoed in a recent article by Jane Cogie, who proposes that “countering the polarization of directive and nondirective tutoring” might have positive effects (48). Examining a single tutorial session in terms of power, Cogie sets up her article by explaining her tutor preparation approaches. Because she “felt it important to complicate views of the tutor’s role,” she included “articles that disrupt a simplifying opposition of nondirective and directive tutoring” (38). However, she adds, “in our role-playing activities, the polarization of the extremes crept back in. Role plays of restrained tutor power left space for student discovery of power, whereas role-plays of direct tutor power enforced student powerlessness” (38). These models, she hoped, might serve as “touchstones to ward off tutor dominance . . . and to foster student engagement” associated with directive and nondirective tutoring, respectively (38).

Cogie attempts to “combat a stereotyped view of the location of power in one-on-one work by analyzing how power functions in actual settings” (38); specifically, she attempts to “analyze” the tutor’s “strategies” according to “the range of power issues they reflect” (41). Cogie points to several different power issues. In one instance, the tutor struggles to negotiate among differences in the tutee’s knowledge and “his own greater knowledge,” which involves views different from those the tutee’s teacher holds (42). Cogie shows that the tutor, “though himself in a position of power relative to [the tutee], must struggle with institutional standards different from his own” (44). Later, the tutor “asks a question” with “an agenda”; it “reveals the tension of withholding knowledge so as to involve [the tutee] and live up to the peer aspect of their relationship” (44). He also uses language that “serves to soften . . . hierarchical impact” (44). In short, Cogie suggests that successful moments in the conference are “hard won, gained through a range of strategies that carry for [the tutor] the tension of balancing student and tutor authority” (45). Thus Cogie complicates directive versus nondirective stereotypes of power; she hopes that tutors might “become more willing to risk a variety of strategies with the awareness that authority expressed by tutors, a given in any approach, need not preclude students’ discovery of powers of their own” (48). While her study is limited in scope and points to only a few ways that “power functions,” it does begin to move research on power in conferences away from binary paradigms.

Black also works from the binary hierarchical/collaborative paradigm, to which she adds the concept of teacher talk versus conversation. She writes that “while the structure of
talk in teaching mirrors Freire’s ‘banking concept’ and indicates a hierarchy, conversation corresponds to the concept of collaborative learning” (24). Because she believes that conference talk moves back and forth between these two poles, Black, too, hints at a shift away from binary labeling of conferences. However, her study focuses heavily on the hierarchical/teacher-talk pole as a reality for much teacher-student conferencing. Black maintains that “many of the problems that occur between students and teachers in conferencing arise because of the difference in power between participants” (39). She reminds us that “in classrooms, that power difference is indicated in many ways—for example, in the geography and use of physical space”; in both classrooms and in conferences, however, “‘teacher talk’ is also an indicator of power difference” (39).

Black demonstrates several ways that language in conferences reflects the traditional power of classroom teachers. For example, of the conferences she studied, she writes, “overwhelmingly, it is the teachers who talk”; “in sheer volume, talk is distributed in a radically uneven manner, one which falls clearly along the lines of status, generally reproducing in the conference the kind of teacher control that characterizes most classrooms” (41-2). In conferences, teachers’ power is also evidenced in their use of discourse markers to “dominate the talk” (42-3); citing van Dijk, Black implicates such markers in teachers’ “subtle manipulation” of students into conflicting roles of assimilation:

Most effective power is cognitive, not physical; the power elite set out to change the minds of others in their own interests. Such change may not be openly manipulative but very subtle, part of the “naturalizing” process that makes the inequality of power appear “right.” Look at the weight of you knows and I means as teachers speak to students. . . .While you know can focus the attention on upcoming speech (for example, “You know, I never thought about that until now, but...”), it can also mark shared knowledge, subtly forcing another speaker into a cognitive relationship that becomes a linguistic relationship that marks and cements the social relationship. If the penalties are too great for challenging that shared knowledge (it’s a rare student who could or would say, “No, I don’t know. What ARE you talking about?”) and the options for other responses are slender, then we shape by force.

Black goes on to say that “the basic power structure remains untouched”: although “a teacher’s you know forces a student into at least appearing to assent to shared assumptions, the use of I mean acknowledges the lack of shared knowledge, the teacher’s ability to construct and reconstruct knowledge as the student struggles to follow” (47). Finally, teachers’ power is evident when they “shape by cooperation—and force” by “creating the ‘other’ and then marginalizing that other” (49). As an example, Black shows how a tutor “sets up two communities” in a conference: those who agree with her and those who don’t” (49); the student, then, feels compelled to agree with the tutor, although that means marginalizing “his friends and classmates” (50). According to Black, teachers’ power complicates conferencing in many ways.
Black affirms that “the teachers . . . did not go into conferences intending to dominate and control. They did not think that they would shut out a student’s perspective” (54). She quickly adds, “I have often felt, like them, that somehow, my power as a teacher would melt away miraculously when I sat down alone with a student” (54). While her indication of good intentions is important, the language she uses points to a major issue in defining power for writing center conferencing.

**DEFINING POWER FOR WRITING CENTER WORK**

Power is often mentioned in writing center literature, and we are familiar with the term. We understand it to mean, generally, either a sort of negative authority by virtue of which teachers control and dominate students, or a positive sort of authority or control students might gain over, for example, their learning or writing in a collaborative setting. In discussions emphasizing social or political activism, we associate power with the ability to influence society in some way. But we have been less than careful in our use of the term. Indeed, in much conferencing literature, “power” and “authority” (and often “control,” as well) seem to have become synonymous, although composition scholars such as Andrea Lunsford emphasize a need to divorce “power” and “authority” from one another (75). In the index to Thomas Flynn’s and Mary King’s *Dynamics of the Writing Conference*, for example, “power,” “authority,” and “control” are cross-referenced—as if the terms were interchangeable. Similarly, Cogie shifts from “power” to “authority” in the article mentioned above; in the beginning of the article she writes of “tutor power” and “student powerlessness” and “discovery of power,” although at the end these seem to be equated with tutors “express[ing] authority” (48) or “fostering student authority” (47).

Also interesting is the ease with which the term “power” may slip out of discussions ostensibly with power as their foci. Blau, Hall, and Strauss, for instance, maintain that “focusing on language in the tutorial allowed us to analyze the power relationships reflected in actual conversations between tutors and clients” (22), but after they use “power” twice to clarify the link between it and hierarchical conferencing, the term appears only twice more in the entire article (22, 24, 37). Similarly, Ulichny and Watson-Gegeo write that they constructed the DIF “to conceptualize the power differential that exists between teacher and student” (312), but most of their analysis focuses on “authority,” “dominance,” and “control” (317) and “authority relations” (319). They refer explicitly to “power” again only at the end of the article, when they link classroom and conferencing practices to the “perpetuat[ion of] the inequalities of established power relationships between classes and groups in society” (325).

I should clarify that I am not criticizing any of these authors for their casual use—and sometimes abandonment—of the term “power.” Rather, I argue that they point to a significant trend in writing center discussions: when we talk about collaborative versus hierarchical and nondirective versus directive conferencing, we understand that power is so deeply involved that we hardly need mention it by name. Further, power and authority
are so closely connected—and so largely associated with dominance and control—that we often feel comfortable using them almost interchangeably. My goal in the following section will be to distinguish between the terms so that we may focus on power more carefully and more systematically.

**Distinguishing Between Authority and Power**

Writing center and conferencing literature are not the only places the terms “authority” and “power”—especially in their ugliest, most dominating senses—have been conflated. Citing the *OED* Mortensen and Kirsch remind us that “since the fifteenth century, authority has designated both the “power to enforce obedience” and the “power to influence action, opinion, belief” (559). They continue:

> The theoretical distinction between power to enforce and power to influence is key here, a distinction that maps onto two functional categories: the authority of office and the authority of expertise. In either case, authority channels power. It acts as a conduit to translate power into effect, at times to traduce power as enlightened, rational behavior. This conduit often materializes in discourse, and thereby discourse legitimates the enforcement of obedience and the containment of action. (559)

Mortensen and Kirsch go on to explain, “Obedience and containment are crucial to keeping order in the discursive universe of institutions. In hierarchical institutions (e.g., the academy) authority is the legitimate force that attenuates raw power: authority conditions the power to persuade, the power to coerce, the power to initiate or mandate action” (560). According to Mortensen and Kirsch, then, authority has been equated with power and has been used to direct and justify power—in the sense of manipulative control.

Calling authority “a troubled term today,” (65), Andrea Lunsford offers a more positive interpretation. In “Refiguring Classroom Authority,” Lunsford suggests that we should separate our notions of authority from our (overwhelmingly negative) notions of power. Lunsford explains that, “unless we can recuperate the positive associations with authority—as a source of knowledge and experience we can and should respect, we may be better off to eschew the term altogether” (66). Arguing that a more productive understanding of authority might link authority with responsibility—“responsibility in the sense of taking responsibility for words and actions and positions in the classroom, and in the sense of the ability to respond” (74), she suggests that “such responsibilities can become the basis for or sites of ongoing negotiation for the construction of an ethical classroom community” (75). Finally, she suggests that “at the very least, . . . perhaps we can . . . succeed in disentangling [the term ‘authority’] from power” (75). Lunsford goes on to quote Russ Hunt’s statement:

> “I think it important—for students and for ourselves—to distinguish between power (that is Hitler and the cops) and authority (which is the weight experience and knowledge give). If they hear us and blindly obey, it’s power and they learn nothing. If they hear and are persuaded (or not),
it’s authority, and maybe something can be learned. I want to help my students learn to understand authority rather than to fear power.” (75)

Hunt suggests that the exercise of power depends on the reactions of those over whom power is potentially exercised. That is, he suggests a positive view of authority and a negative view of power, but the meanings seem similar: the teacher affects students in some way, either because students decide for themselves that the teacher is convincing, or because students unthinkingly accept the teacher’s position or knowledge simply because it comes from the teacher. In short, the distinction between power and authority appears to hinge on the student’s response.

Lunsford quotes from a personal communication from Kenneth Bruffee, who poses the question “‘Where does academic power leave off and academic authority begin?’” He suggests that the difference may depend on students’ experiences, in which “‘authority is constructed by social processes of voluntary association, whereas power is constructed by social processes of involuntary association.’” Lunsford adds, “Which is to say . . . that power and authority . . . are often experienced in dramatically different ways” (75). I concede that Lunsford and Bruffee make good points here; I would add, however, that whether students experience power and authority differently depends greatly on how we define our terms—and students are largely left out of those attempts at definition. Further, Lunsford is doubtful that we can “disentangle authority [from] power” (75). I argue, on the other hand, that because we know power and authority are social constructs, we are potentially able to reconstruct concepts of those terms, which we can more usefully apply to students’ (and teachers’ and tutors’) experiences.

While Lunsford’s concept of authority as responsibility may well be helpful in the classroom—and even in conferences—I find most useful Lunsford’s and Hunt’s suggestions to separate, in general, authority from power. However, we might distinguish between the terms more usefully than does Hunt, especially in the context of writing center work. That is, we should not only separate authority from power but also separate power from such extreme associations as “Hitler and the cops.” A more solid definition of power will help clarify my argument: below, borrowing from Michel Foucault, I develop the idea of power in conferencing as a series of negotiations in which each party acts upon the other’s actions. Afterward, I discuss authority as the knowledge and expertise (real or perceived) that influences conference participants’ potential abilities to perform such actions.

**Power**

Movements toward seeing conferences not on collaborative or hierarchical poles, but instead on a collaborative-to-hierarchical continuum, suggest that we might also view power as existing on a continuum. That is, unless we find that tutors dominate
conferences absolutely, and that tutees never display power, we should move away from notions of absolute (or almost absolute) power. But what do we mean by power?

Frequently, power appears as a sort of possession. For example, Mortensen and Kirsch write that “power in academic communities may be possessed, conferred, and exercised by individuals at many levels” (560), and in pedagogical discussions, we often hear teachers described as “having power” over students (and, too, as lacking power within the institution or department). Similarly, we speak of attempts to “give” power to or “share” power with students. Even though we understand power as an abstract concept, it seems something almost tangible: a heavy nugget we might hold in our hands and that we might pass along to or snatch away from someone else. Often, too, we seem to conceptualize power as a dichotomy; either one has power or is powerless: teachers over students, men over women, wealthy over poor. And if the possession of power is not completely dichotomized, the action of power tends to be. If, for example, a teacher exerts power over a student, that act often seems perceived as rendering the student completely devoid of power—at least at that moment.

However, as Foucault reminds us, power does not exist as an entity one possess or uses to make another utterly powerless. Power is not a tangible possession; “something called Power, with or without a capital letter, which is assumed to exist universally in a concentrated or diffused form, does not exist” (219). Rather, “power exists only when it is put into action” (219), but that action does not definitively obliterate the acted upon’s power. Foucault explains, “there is no face to face confrontation of power and freedom which is mutually exclusive”—in which “freedom disappears everywhere power is exercised” (221). Instead, he says, power involves “a much more complicated interplay” (221); “human subject[s]” are “placed in power relations which are very complex” (209). But within those relations, power is not possessed. It is acted.

Foucault’s exploration of power as based on relationship informs this study. Orienting a definition of power toward the questions “How is power exercised?” “By what means is it exercised?”, and “What happens when individuals exert (as they say) power over others?” Foucault explains that power “brings into play relations between individuals (or between groups)” (217). He adds, “let us not deceive ourselves; if we speak of the structures or the mechanisms of power, it is only insofar as we suppose that certain persons exercise power over others. The term ‘power’ designates relationships between partners” (217). The “specific nature of power,” Foucault maintains, is that its “exercise . . . is not simply a relationship between partners, individual or collective; it is a way in which certain actions modify others” (219). In summary, Foucault argues that “what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly

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7 Tutees are, after all, always free to leave—at least if we assume a model of voluntary writing center conferencing. Further, regardless of whether the tutor dominates the conference, tutees have the ultimate power: they can choose to revise a paper or not, to use a tutor’s advice or not, to ask for another conference or not. Therefore, it seems safe to assume that both the tutor and the tutee are capable of demonstrating power.
and immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or in the future” (220). Therefore, power does not affect a person per se; rather, power affects how a person behaves or what a person does. Finally, everyone is involved in power relations. Foucault declares that “a society without power relations can only be an abstraction”; thus, “to live in society is to live in such a way that action upon other actions is possible—and in fact ongoing” (222-23).

In power relations, the person whose actions are acted upon is key; relationship of course requires more than one person, but the other person must also be capable of action. Foucault believes that in true power relationships, “‘the other’ (the one over whom power is exerted) [must] be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts” (220). Thus freedom—namely, the freedom of “the other”—is essential, according to Foucault’s definition of power:

Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments may be realized. Where the determining factors saturate the whole there is no relationship of power; slavery is not a power relationship when man is in chains. . . . Freedom may well appear as the condition for the exercise of power (at the same time its precondition, since freedom must exist for power to be exerted, and also its permanent support, since without the possibility of recalcitrance, power would be equivalent to a physical determination. The relationship between power and freedom’s refusal to submit cannot therefore be separated. (221)

Exercising power, therefore, requires not simply a subject but a subject capable of acting in response. Also essential to a true power relationship is the vast variety of potential actions involved. Foucault maintains that power relations may involve both violence and consent, but these “are the instruments or the results,” not “the basic nature of power” (220). Rather, power “is a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action” (220). Real power relations “[may open up] a whole field of responses, actions, results, and possible interventions” (220). Power relationships, then, potentially involve multitudes of possible actions and reactions.

Foucault’s description of power seems readily applicable to the examination of writing conferences. His focus on the “how” of power is useful for obvious reasons. That is, working from a definition of power as an abstract possession would make the observation of power impossible. If we think of power as existing in tutors’ and tutees’ actions, on the other hand, power becomes a potentially observable force. Further, Foucault’s qualifications that power necessarily involves relationships among participants, both of
whom have the capacity to act, is useful in that it allows us to recognize the tutee’s potential power (and to remember that even in a conference with the most dominating tutor, the tutee enacts power, as well). Thus, a model based on Foucault’s theory of power as action on action helps us move away from too heavy an emphasis on tutors’ (and teachers’) domination in conferences and toward the idea of participants enacting and negotiating power on a continuum. Such a model will, therefore, involve the concepts of hierarchical and collaborative extremes of conferencing prevalent in the literature, but it will encourage us to perceive conference activities—and power negotiations—as constantly shifting between those two poles as the participants enact power and react to one another.

Authority

Muriel Harris quotes “Dave Healy, who both tutors and teaches,” and who describes his lack of authority in peer writing conferences: “‘In the center, writers may try to invest me with authority, but I can resist their efforts. In the classroom, I can try to resist, but as long as I’m going to be assigning my students grades, my nonauthoritative pose is simply that: a pose’” (“Talking” 28). I see Healy’s point: he probably has less authority in the writing center than he does in his classroom, but I doubt that he can completely resist tutees’ efforts to “invest” him “with authority.” As Grimm argues:

Whether or not a writing tutor feels she is in a position of institutional power, the students who walk into a room institutionally labeled “Writing Center” automatically construct the tutors sitting inside the room as having institutional authority. Establishing a peer relationship within that construction is difficult, if not dishonest and impossible. (113)

Having also tutored and taught, I tend to agree with Grimm: by virtue of being labeled a writing center tutor, tutors do have authority, although it is perhaps not as clear-cut as that attributed to teachers. Further, as both Healy and Grimm suggest, tutees often promote tutors’ authority.

I agree with those who feel that teachers and tutors generally bring more authority than do tutees to writing conferences—and that they often control or dominate those conferences. In short, pretending that tutor authority does not exist is just that: pretending. However, we should not be disheartened by the fact. That is, we need not perceive tutor authority negatively.

One problem from which conferencing literature suffers is that we operate under a dual—but not always clearly articulated—concept of authority. That is, we seem to perceive authority as positive if the student/tutee exhibits it but negative if the teacher/tutor exhibits it. Part of the problem with authority, I argue, is that when we associate it with teachers and tutors, we sometimes inadvertently conflate it with authoritarianism—and thus with domination and control (and, in a general sense, power). Whether or not we choose to color authority with “responsibility,” as Lunsford suggests, or with an “ethic of care,” as Mortensen and Kirsch suggest, we must at the very least distinguish authority
from authoritarianism—and from “Hitler and the cops” notions of power. Doing so can allow us to understand authority in a more consistent (and positive) light.

Emphasizing that teachers should indeed have authority, Freire distinguishes between authority and authoritarianism. In *We Make the Road by Walking*, a dialogue with Myles Horton, Freire explains that “the teacher as a teacher is not the student. The student as the student is not the teacher” (61). Although teacher and student “are different,” he says, they are “not necessarily antagonistic”:

The difference is precisely that the teacher has to teach, to experience, to *demonstrate* authority and the student has to experience freedom in relation to the teacher’s authority. . . . The authority of the teacher is absolutely necessary for the development of the freedom of the students, but if the authority of the teacher goes beyond the limits authority has to have in relation to the students’ freedom, then we no longer have authority. We no longer have a freedom. We have authoritarianism. (61-2)

Freire believes that “authority is necessary to the educational process” and that “the teacher is absolutely necessary”; “what is bad,” he says, “what is not necessary, is authoritarianism, but not authority” (181).

Freire describes the authoritarianism that results when authority “goes beyond” its “limits”; he maintains that a mistake in education is “to exacerbate the authority of the teacher”:

Then you no longer have freedom but now you have authoritarianism, and then the teacher is the one who . . . does everything. And the students, precisely because the students must be shaped, just expose their bodies and their souls to the hands of the teacher, as if the students were clay for the artist, to be molded. The teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves. And in doing that, he or she lives the experience of relating democratically as authority with the freedom of the students. (181)

Further, Freire emphasizes that teachers must have a command of the content they teach (104-107), and he suggests that if teachers do not embrace an appropriate degree of authority, they may “generate license” among their students rather than “accomplish [the] responsibility of teaching” (181). Thus, for Freire the teacher’s authority is crucial, but it must not be distorted into an all-controlling domination that leaves no room for students to participate meaningfully in learning.

Freire’s notions correspond with Shor’s depiction of teachers’ authority: “Because our faculty are experts in knowledge, they are expected to take charge in class; they begin with the authority that comes from their professional training, their expertise in a field, their place in the school hierarchy, and their position in society as cultural workers who help others develop” (235). Both Shor and Freire thus allude to the authority of position
and the authority of expertise Mortensen and Kirsch describe; those categories are appropriate and useful to understanding authority in writing center work.

We might begin by acknowledging that authority is far from inherently negative: possessing or demonstrating authority does not equal authoritarianism. Further, if we return to the notion of the authority of expertise—and even of the authority office—but if we extract from those notions the connection with domination and control, we might have less trouble admitting that tutors do have authority and that their tutees do often want them to have authority. We should also remember, though, that tutees bring authority to their conferences as well—which further encourages us to rethink our notions of inherently negative teacher/tutor authority. But how does that authority work in conferences?

First of all, neither the tutor’s nor the tutee’s authority equals power. Rather, I suggest we understand authority as a set of resources from which participants draw in order to negotiate power. For example, if we return to the idea of power determining what “happens” in a conference, as actions on actions, we might see a tutor drawing on her authority to explain what a teacher’s comments mean or to request that a tutee draw on her own authority to clarify what her teacher asked her to do. Rather than equaling predetermined domination, authority enables both participants in a conference to negotiate power; tutors and tutees enact power by virtue of their authority. Thus authority contributes to a person’s (potential) power, but authority is not power or the enactment of power.

Many sources of authority seem potentially influential in enabling conference participants to enact power. Among them are:

- Authority of institutional position: (For example, the teacher has more authority than the tutor, who has more authority than the tutee.)
- Authority of language: (For example, a native speaker has more authority than the non-native speaker, except, perhaps, in terms of grammar/rules. Also, a tutor may understand a teacher’s language—such as appears in marginal comments, for example—more than the tutee does.)
- Authority of gender: (The tutor or tutee performing a traditionally masculine role might seem to have more authority than a tutor or tutee performing a traditionally feminine role.)
- Authority of expertise/knowledge/experience: (The tutor might have this in terms of knowledge of writing or of academic discourse conventions; the tutee might have this in terms of the paper’s topic or the teacher’s instructions, likes, or dislikes. Authority of expertise, knowledge, experience might also reflect a sense of self as writer.)
- Authority of age: (Older participant might have more authority than a younger participant.)
Tutees might also draw from:
- Authority of their text
- Authority of their teacher
- Authority of others: (“My mom/dad/sister/brother/girlfriend/boyfriend/friend/roommate looked at my paper and said it’s fine.”)

Tutors might also draw from:
- Authority of the tutor preparation course
- Authority of other tutors
- Authority of their director
- Authority of their writing center’s policies
- Authority of their tutee’s text
- Authority of teachers

This list of sources of authority is obviously not exhaustive. Nor do I suggest we can examine conference talk and determine all—or even most of the sources of authority factoring into moment-by-moment power negotiations. Rather, I simply suggest that we acknowledge both participants have authority; the tutor’s authority does not necessarily negate the tutee’s potential authority. Similarly, we should remember that both participants’ perceptions of their own and of each other’s authority influence how they enact power in conferencing.

**An Operational Definition for Power in Writing Center Work**

For writing center work, we can borrow from Foucault and operationally define power as acting upon another’s action, as always existing within relationships, and as depending on both (or all) parties’ maintaining the capacity for action. I add to Foucault’s definition the idea that tutees and tutors enact power in part because of their perceptions of their own and of each other’s authority. Accordingly, we must understand power as action and negotiation rather than as being demonstrated absolutely by one participant or another. That is, even though one participant may seem to demonstrate more power at one moment or another, the other participant—for whatever reasons—is complicit in that enactment of power. Power, then, exists in actions, derives (at least in part) from perceived authority and constantly shifts during conferences.

**EVIDENCES OF POWER**

While it may not be useful to think of power as something one participant or another “possesses” more of, or as something that one participant tries to “give” or “take” from another, we may more usefully consider power in terms of participants giving up or taking more control of conference directions at various moments. I suggest that exploring power negotiations in conferences—even according to this definition—will lead us in
some of the same directions researchers have already taken: to examine the control of conference directions and focus.

In examining conferences for power, I draw heavily from Richard J. Watts’ socio-linguistic study *Power in Family Discourse*. In Chapter Four, I explain several of Watts’ major tenets informing this study; I then show how Watts’ work influenced my analytical approaches and coding strategies. In general, Watts encourages me to consider enactments of power as being reflected by initiation, acceptance, and refusal of conversational topics, as well as by contribution of conversational material that helps develop topics. That is, we can observe participants acting on each other’s actions, in part, when they suggest topics for discussion and then respond to—and perhaps even ignore—those topics.

**CONCLUSION**

“Power” and “empowerment” are complex terms, and in our writing center scholarship, we have not always used them with consistency or with clearly articulated definitions. My goal in this chapter has been to show how these concepts have been perceived in our—and in other relevant—literature and to suggest definitions appropriate to this project and to writing center work.

I suggest that we understand empowerment in both practical and political senses. In the former sense, empowerment enables students to have intellectual autonomy over their writing. Empowered students can effectively control their writing; they can make their writing accomplish goals they—or others—set for it, and they have warranted confidence in their abilities. In the latter sense, empowerment enables students to develop a critical consciousness, through which they understand knowledge as social constructs, worlds as transformable, and themselves as potential creators of knowledge and transformers of worlds. Empowerment in perhaps its strongest sense enables critical literacy, in which students draw on their language skills to work toward social justice.

We can understand power—as it applies to conferencing dynamics—not as an abstract possession but as action upon another’s action, as always existing within relationships, as depending on both parties’ maintaining the capacity for action, and as constantly shifting during conference interaction. Power is enacted in part because of tutors’ and tutees’ perceptions of their own and of each others’ authority; thus, it derives from perceived authority, which is not the same as power.

In Chapter Four, I return to “power” and “empowerment.” There, I explain how the tutors perceived those concepts before we began data analysis, how their thoughts informed our coding approaches, and how we implemented those approaches. First, however, I discuss in Chapter Three this study’s contexts and general methodology.
CHAPTER THREE: 
CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

Because context is significant to all ethnographic research, I describe below Southern State University and, more specifically, the SSU Writing Center. For the latter, I discuss a variety of features such as history; location; layout and resources; administration, staff and clientele; philosophy; and policies and procedures. I also offer a general overview of English 3015 (the tutor preparation course) because much of my initial data derive from that class. Next, I explain my methodology, including processes of data collection, organization, and analysis.

CONTEXT

SOUTHERN STATE UNIVERSITY

Southern State is a comprehensive Research I university whose sprawling campus lies in the heart of a large southern city (population ca. 500,000). Over 30,000 students attend Southern State; while most are in-state students, the university catalog cites the ethnic and religious diversity of SSU students, who represent “48 states and more than 120 foreign countries.” The catalog also explains that women students outnumber men by about five percent, and that, although the average undergraduate age is 22, many older students also attend SSU. The university’s admission standards are the highest of all public institutions of higher learning in the state.

The mission of SSU “is the generation, preservation, dissemination, and application of knowledge and cultivation of the arts for the benefit of the people of the state, the nation, and the global community.” Strongly related to this mission are the Strategic Goal of retaining students and the Strategic Objective of “help[ing] students achieve personal and academic goals through outstanding academic and professional advising, counseling, and career services.” The SSU Writing Center, as an academic support service for students, promotes this goal and objective. Similarly, by offering some students the chance to tutor their peers, the Center promotes the Strategic Objective of “provid[ing] extensive internship, service-learning, and community service opportunities.”

THE SSU WRITING CENTER

History

According to “A History of the [SSU] Writing Center (1974-2001),” written by the Writing Center Director, the Center started in 1974 as a “Proficiency Lab” staffed by “composition faculty member[s]” whose duties were to help students who did not make at least a B in second-semester freshman composition improve their writing skills so that they could gain admission into their senior colleges. Over the years, the Center has come to serve students ranging from freshmen to doctoral candidates; in general, it has
progressed from being a place for remediation to a place for writers with diverse degrees of proficiency. Since the late 1990s, the Center has branched out with an electronic presence, with community outreach programs, and with university outreach involving collaboration with faculty and students in fields such as Agriculture, Business, Social Work, and Kinesiology. As is common in writing center histories, the SSU Writing Center has been known by various names, has been located in various basements, and has been funded by various sources. During the late 1980s the Center closed due to budget cuts. Except during that period, it has employed paid peer tutors since 1978.

**Location**

The SSU Writing Center enjoys a central position on campus: bordered by the campus’s two quadrangles, its building faces the Student Union in one direction and the building housing the English Department in another. Also nearby is the campus’s main library. While the Center’s location is convenient to many students, the Center itself is, unfortunately, situated in a basement. Thus the SSU Writing Center lacks the visibility encouraged in writing center literature.

**Layout and Resources**

Not including offices for administrators and support staff, the SSU Writing Center consists of one main room and two smaller tutoring rooms. At the entrance of the main room is a receptionist’s desk, where the appointment book, brochures, time cards, and other materials are located. Adjacent is the computer used to enter and store records in the Center’s database. In the center of the room stands a large, round table used for tutoring; arranged along the walls are seven computer workstations with internet access and a variety of software, including multiple word-processing programs. All computers are connected to a laser printer behind the receptionist’s desk. In addition to computers, the main room holds a variety of other resources. A large bookshelf displays grammar handbooks, textbooks, style manuals and dictionaries. Binders on one shelf include articles related to tutoring, as well as back issues of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*. Perhaps because the main room is often noisy as the telephone rings and as clients come and go, many tutors prefer to work in the two smaller rooms across the hall. Both rooms have two tables, several chairs, and bookshelves for overflow resources. And, thanks to the efforts and artistic eye of the director, each room seems cozy and inviting with creative decorations and tasteful (non-institutional) paint jobs. Finally, all three rooms are equipped with large dry-erase boards, and one of the smaller rooms even boasts a microwave.

**Administration, Staff, and Clientele**

The SSU Writing Center is administered by the Director: a Career Instructor who also teaches undergraduate English courses, including 3015. Assisting her is a Graduate Assistant Director, whose position involves both administrative duties and tutoring. A
nine-month Office Coordinator offers continuity to the Center; among other responsibilities, she trains and manages the three to five students who, for federal work-study funding, work part-time as receptionists. A Professor of English, responsible for grant writing and assessment, is also affiliated with the Center. Most of the paid tutoring staff are undergraduates; since 1998 they have been selected from the pool of students in English 3015, the tutor preparation course offered each spring. One long-time tutor is a Career Instructor who holds a Ph.D. in linguistics and specializes in ESL teaching and tutoring. Additionally, some graduate students occasionally volunteer as tutors.

During the 2001-2002 school year, the SSU Writing Center employed a somewhat diverse group of ten to twelve tutors. In addition to the middle-aged, white male Career Instructor mentioned above, two white female graduate students—the Graduate Assistant Director and myself—tutored in the Center. Many of undergraduate tutors were traditional-aged juniors and seniors. Of them, four (in the fall) and three (in the spring) were white females. Three (in the fall) and two (in the spring) were white males. Finally, one white and one African-American female non-traditional student tutored in the Center. In terms of scholarly interests and majors the tutors were fairly homogeneous: most were English majors or minors, and many had foreign language interests and experience. At least six had plans to become teachers, and some others were considering teaching careers.

These tutors worked with many students; records show that 926 individual students attended the Writing Center for a total of 1867 conferences. Of these students, 163 were designated as ESL students; they account for 469 of the total appointments (WC-D Spreadsheet A). Except during the summer term, freshman tutees consistently outnumbered other groups; during summer, however, graduate students—many of whom were working to finish theses and dissertations—claimed slightly more appointments than freshmen. Both groups combined accounted for approximately 65% of all summer tutorial sessions (Spreadsheet A). In the fall, just over half of all appointments were with freshmen, and in the spring, over one-third were with freshmen. During both semesters, the remaining appointments were distributed fairly evenly among sophomores, juniors, seniors, and graduate students (Spreadsheets B, F).

Philosophy

Like many writing centers, the SSU Writing Center cites North’s goal of “better writers, not just one better piece of writing” in its philosophy statement (see Appendix A) and in its brochure. Rather than offering proofreading or editing services, or operating as a skills lab, the Center focuses on interactive conferences that help students work through pieces of writing at any stage in their writing processes.

1 I collected SSU Writing Center documents such as the spreadsheets mentioned here as part of my data. See the “Organizing Data” section (pp. 70-73) for an explanation of parenthetical references to my data.
Policies and Procedures

With the help of a computer database program, the SSU Writing Center keeps track of tutees’ demographic and conference attendance data. Specifically, the Center records in its database identifying information such as the tutee’s name and student identification number, her year and college, whether English is her first language, and the conference date, time, and tutor. Records are also kept on paper; after each conference, the tutor fills out a conference report form including her or his name, the tutee’s name and student number, and the conference date and time. Tutors also respond to a prompt asking them to “briefly describe the conference” (WC-D Tutor Report). The report forms are kept in tutees’ individual, confidential files. The Center adheres to the Buckley Amendment and, unless explicitly requested by the student, does not inform teachers or others of Writing Center attendance or conference participation.

Appointments in the SSU Writing Center are generally one-half hour long. Walk-ins are welcome, but the Center encourages students to schedule appointments in advance, especially during busier times of the semester. Students are allowed only one conference per day, and, so that they have time to revise between visits, the Center requires that they skip a day between conferences. To keep as many appointments as possible available to as many students as possible, scheduling of multiple conferences is not allowed; students must wait until after their first conference to schedule their second, and so on. Only if a student is writing a long paper, such as a seminar paper, thesis, or dissertation chapter, is scheduling multiple conferences allowed. The SSU Writing Center’s “Long Paper Policy” asks students to submit longer drafts in advance, so that tutors can read them before meeting with the writer for a scheduled series of one-hour long appointments.

When a tutee stops by or calls the SSU Writing Center to make an appointment, she usually speaks to a student-worker receptionist, who writes the tutee’s name and telephone number in a large appointment book. When a tutee arrives for an appointment, the receptionist asks for the demographic information mentioned above and enters the information into the computer. She then pulls the tutee’s file, if the tutee has attended a conference earlier in the semester, or she creates a file for a new tutee. Just before the appointment, the receptionist introduces the tutee to her tutor, who then accompanies her to a table in one of the three rooms (or to a computer station, if the tutee prefers to work with a document on disk).

Although conferencing procedures vary in the SSU Writing Center, tutors generally begin conferences by asking about the assignment and about the tutee’s goals for the conference. Tutors then usually request that the tutee read the paper aloud; some conferences do focus on brainstorming and exploring ideas for an undrafted paper, but most conferences deal specifically with a draft the student brings to the conference. The tutors’ preparation encourages them not to focus on grammar or editing too early in a paper, so they often try to orient conferences toward issues such as content and development. However, if they learn a paper is due in only a few hours (or minutes!),
they sometimes do basically help the tutee proofread. Conferences often end with an invitation for the tutee to return; sometimes tutees schedule another appointment immediately following a conference. Finally, after the tutee leaves the Center, the tutor fills out the conference report form in the tutee’s folder, and the receptionist files it.

Often, tutees arrive early for conferences or stay late. Although the Center is not an open computer lab for general use, tutees are allowed to use the computers as long as they want on days they have an appointment. Further, tutees—as well as tutors—are allowed to print up to ten pages of material per day. Some tutees take advantage of the computers and free printing, and tutors use the computers even more frequently. Many tutors do their own writing, check email, and browse the internet during slow times, and some often return to the Center to do their own work—or just to relax—even when they are not scheduled to be there. In the SSU Writing Center, conferences take place in a comfortable environment; a casual glance around the room almost always suggests a community of writers.

**English 3015**

English 3015 is the semester-long, three-credit-hour preparation course for potential SSU Writing Center tutors. Usually offered in the spring semester, the course is a prerequisite for undergraduate employment as tutors. Successful completion of the course, however, does not automatically result in employment; the Writing Center Director, who teaches the course, warns students early in the semester that not everyone is likely to work in the Center. Rather, the director selects new tutors, based on their performance in the course and her observations of some tutoring sessions, from the pool of English 3015 students who wish to be considered. While many do become tutors, some choose not to apply for Writing Center positions. Some base this decision on their busy schedules or on changes in their career or educational goals; others seem to feel they will not be effective tutors or that tutoring will not be enjoyable. Still others take the class as seniors, with no intention of working in the Center, sometimes because they plan to teach after graduation.

While portions of the course are lecture-oriented, English 3015 is largely interactive and requires extensive student participation. The text used in the spring 2001 section of English 3015 was Gillespie and Lerner’s *Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring*; students read from and discussed the text and also composed brief written responses to some of the material it covers. Indeed, students responded to various journal prompts throughout the semester. Students also participated in many role-playing exercises; they began the semester by peer reviewing each other’s writing and then moved into more elaborate hypothetical tutoring situations. Other coursework included a mid-term exam, and group research projects with end-of-the semester presentations. The research topics covered such issues as faculty and student perceptions of the SSU Writing Center as well as gender issues in conferencing.
Finally, during approximately the second half of the semester, English 3015 students were required to observe multiple tutorial sessions in the Center and to reflect in writing on their observations. Near the end of the semester, English 3015 students actually tutored a few sessions each and added their written reflections on those experiences to their journals.

**METHODOLOGY**

In *Ethnographic Writing Research: Writing It Down, Writing It Up, and Reading It*, Wendy Bishop comments, “Too often, research using a single ethnographic technique (case study, life history interviewing, participant observation, and so on) is claimed as ethnography” (13). She goes on to say that “to avoid misapplication, ethnographic data analysis must derive its reliability and validity from a fully developed scheme of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification which takes place recursively, with steps being repeated and refined until conclusions may safely be presented” (13). Although this project is not strictly an ethnography—it employs discourse analysis methods as well—I have attempted to implement such a “fully developed scheme.”

Below, I explain my data collection and analysis methods. Readers will recognize my attempt to collect data from a wide variety of sources and using a wide variety of approaches (Lauer and Asher; Moss). Also evident is the extensive involvement of my subjects in many aspects of the study; I did, in Gesa Kirsch’s words, “[open] up the research agenda to subjects, listening to their stories, and allowing them to actively participate, as much as possible, in the design, development, and reporting of research” (257). Indeed, I argue that the tutors’ involvement allows this project to border on the kind of dialogic collaboration Duane H. Roen and Robert K. Mittan associate with teams of “junior” and “senior” scholars.

Reflective of ethnographic research’s recursive nature, as well as the recursive nature of other qualitative methods involved in this project, data and analysis categories begin to overlap significantly, especially near the end of the study. Further, the complexity of recursive data analysis caused difficulty in constructing a traditional methodology chapter. Findings during some rounds of analysis influenced methods of analysis later; therefore, following this methodology chapter, I explain additional methodology—namely coding approaches—in the subsequent chapter, which focuses also on preliminary findings.

**COLLECTING DATA**

I gathered data for this study over three semesters: spring 2001, fall 2001, and spring 2002. During the first semester, I collected data while observing English 3015, the SSU Writing Center tutor-preparation course. During the two subsequent semesters, I collected data in the SSU Writing Center itself, as I followed new tutors through their first year
working there. Finally, during summer of 2002, I extensively involved tutors in data analysis; as I show later, the process of analysis also produced a new and pertinent collection of data.

Data Collection in English 3015

I began collecting data when I entered English 3015; I attended the course not only as a researcher, but because I planned to volunteer as an SSU Writing Center tutor. After an independent study of writing center literature the previous semester, I was interested in writing center theory, practice, and administration—as well as in tutoring. And after tutoring elsewhere at a center only in its infancy, I wanted to learn more about the functioning of SSU’s fully-developed center.

Ten undergraduate students were enrolled in the course; they included three traditional, white male students; four traditional, white female students; and three non-traditional, female students: two African-American, and one white. Including myself, two graduate students observed the course; the other was the newly-appointed Graduate Assistant Director. Both are white females in our late twenties. The second graduate student observing 3015 made my presence in the course less conspicuous, and my research especially benefited from my position as a participant-observer in a very real sense. That is, I was truly “a member of the classroom”—and later, of the Writing Center—“being studied” (Lauer and Asher 39); my multiple goals of tutoring and researching enabled me both easy access to the environment and data, as well as the ability “to interfere as little as possible with the daily routines in the community” (Moss 158).

I would begin tutoring when the students hired from 3015 would, and although I did not take the course for credit, I was there in part for the same reason as the others: to prepare to tutor. Accordingly I presented myself as just another student, and as a potential colleague in the Center, which helped me “fit in” with the other students. Shortly into the semester, I began shaping and conducting this study. After the students in English 3015 learned I was working on a writing center research project, I perceived no difference in their responses to me. I speculate that entering the class as essentially just another student helped me maintain a comfortable research environment.

Like my participation in English 3015, my role as an observer seemed natural. Because the Graduate Assistant Director and I had prior teaching and tutoring experience, we were encouraged to perform differently than the undergraduates. For example, the Director (and 3015 teacher) heavily emphasized collaborative learning. Although she always invited the Graduate Assistant Director and me to participate in class discussions and exercises, she often asked us to observe small-group and role-playing activities. Simply observing helped prevent our prior experience from influencing the undergraduates’ discussions and discoveries. Finally, because the director encouraged such observation from the first class meetings on, I was easily able to move more toward the observer role after I shaped my research plans—and after the undergraduates seemed comfortable with
my presence as a participant. While I was more vocal in class discussions at the beginning of the semester, I began speaking less and taking more copious notes after I began data collection in earnest.

Being encouraged to observe, however, also signaled a difference between the English 3015 undergraduates and the graduate student observers. Indeed, the 3015 students knew several things about the Graduate Assistant Director and me that suggested differences between us and them: for example, they knew we both were graduate students, had experience teaching and tutoring writing, and were not required to complete written coursework. And the Director did occasionally ask us to discuss our experiences and insights in class. Thus the English 3015 students likely received the message that the Graduate Assistant Director and I had more knowledge about tutoring writing than they, and that we had more of the authority of expertise and experience I described in the previous chapter.

While the Graduate Assistant Director may have benefited as an administrator by being perceived as knowledgeable and experienced by the future tutors, my being similarly perceived was not always an asset to me as a researcher. In short, the English 3015 students seemed comfortable with my presence, and I was able to observe the course fairly unobtrusively because I was, to an extent, a true participant. However, the advantages I gained due to my relatively comfortable role as participant/observer were clouded, if not so much by my identity as a researcher, as by my experience as a teacher and tutor. I will discuss the evidence and implications of this issue later in this chapter.

Finally, even though the English 3015 students knew that I had teaching experience, I believe I benefited as a researcher because I had no teaching obligations during this study. I was, I think, more convincingly “a student” in part because I felt free to wear jeans and carry a backpack to English 3015 and, later, to the Writing Center. Further, because of the relative diversity of the class, I was able to blend in with the other students, some of whom were my age or older. While I don’t mean to suggest that a good researcher must be similar in age to or must look like her subjects, I do believe that the English 3015 students were more comfortable with me as I presented myself than if I had come to class wearing a suit and heels and carrying a briefcase, or if I had been the only one (besides the teacher) moving from group to group, watching them work.

Indeed, as a participant-observer I collected a variety of data. Initially, data collection involved keeping a research journal of English 3015 class notes, assignments, and handouts, as well as documents such as the SSU Writing Center Philosophy, which appears in Appendix A. I also included my observations and reflections concerning the course and its participants. I noted extensively the students’ responses during class discussions and in role-playing exercises, and I also reflected on their oral presentations—one of which focused on gender in conferencing and dealt, in part, with Black’s study.
During the second half of the semester, the English 3015 students observed and reflected in writing on several tutorial sessions per week. Later, near the end of the semester, each was scheduled to work in the Center three hours per week. Most of the English 3015 students permitted me to audio record—and, in some instances, to observe—some of these early conferences. When my schedule allowed, and when their tutees also permitted, I taped sessions. Therefore, my initial collection of data includes audio tapes of conferences, as well as written observations of some conferences. The Director encouraged those who felt less comfortable conferencing one-on-one to team conference, either with a current tutor or with a classmate; some tapes in my collection therefore involve multiple English 3015 students working with one tutee.

Because I hoped to draw as little attention as possible to my research, and to prevent my research from influencing the course and students, I did not ask students to share their work or writing with me during the semester. However, when the course ended, I asked several students likely to be hired as tutors to retain coursework (such as journal entries) for me. I also asked the Director to retain copies of essay exam responses (with grades removed); we agreed that I would gain the student’s permission before including her or his exam in my data. Later, when I determined the subjects of my study, I requested copies of their written work to add to my collection, as well as their permission to use it.

Data Collection in the SSU Writing Center

For a year in the SSU Writing Center, I collected data associated with the new tutors hired from the class I observed. I maintained my position as participant-observer, both conducting research and volunteering as a tutor. While I continued extensive journaling and added some formal and informal interviews of the new tutors to my data, my most important data were audio tapes of conferences. With the tutors’ and their tutees’ permission, I recorded multiple conferences involving each tutor. However, as my project progressed, two case studies emerged, and I eventually began recording only their conferences. Additionally, by chance, I sat in on a composition theory course in which one case study was enrolled; I included as data my observations of that course and her participation in it, as well as copies she provided me of much of her written work for that course. Below I describe my data collection methods, including the basis for my case study selections, in more detail; I also further discuss my role as researcher and how that role affected my methods of gathering data.

Each of the five students from English 3015 who were hired as tutors agreed to participate in this study and allowed me to tape record his or her conferences. Of them, two were traditional male students, one was a traditional female student, and two were non-traditional female students. One non-traditional female was African-American; the other four new tutors were white. By the final third of their first semester tutoring, I narrowed my focus to two case studies. Very early I realized that I would need to be careful concerning “data overload” (Sadler, qtd. in Lauer and Asher 46); I knew that continuing to study all five new tutors would give me rich but over-abundant resources,
which ultimately might not lend themselves to the sort of detailed, collaborative analysis I hoped to achieve. By focusing on fewer tutors, I could solicit more detailed reflection from them concerning their work.

I selected Kate and Sam to continue as case studies for several reasons. First, studies such as Black’s suggest that gender is an important factor in conferences. I therefore wanted to include one male and one female tutor. Observing Kate and Sam in the Writing Center led me to perceive them as each generally performing the gender role traditionally associated with her or his sex.

After I decided to choose one male and one female case study, my selection was, in part, simplified when I learned that Sam was the only male tutor available to continue in the study; however, he was indeed my first choice. First, he seemed extremely comfortable being recorded (and observed); in a written interview he completed at the end of his first tutoring semester, he explained, “Being taped and/or observed does nothing to affect my comfort level while conferencing. I ignore tape recorders and/or observers when they’re there” (WI C6).2 Also, his extroverted, friendly nature has enabled us to maintain a comfortable rapport. He willingly discusses his conferences, and he has seemed interested in my project since I first invited him to participate. Knowing that Sam would add much to this project, I was pleased when he agreed to be a case study.

I was similarly pleased when Kate accepted my invitation. I chose Kate, too, in part because she seemed more comfortable being recorded than did the other two women. In addition, Kate tutored more hours per week than they and planned to do so in the spring, so I assumed I could gather more data by focusing on her. Kate, too, seemed interested in my project, and we also enjoyed a friendly rapport; she readily shared with me her thoughts about conferencing, and we often chatted during a meal or walking across campus. Most important in my selection of Kate, however, was her extremely reflective nature; because I realized that she thought deeply and long about her conferencing, I knew she would contribute greatly to my study.

Although I suspected that Kate would make an excellent case study, I did have some hesitations in choosing her. The first dealt with her peerness. Kate was one of the non-traditional students; she had returned to college to earn a second bachelor’s degree after being employed as a social worker for several years and after living and working overseas for two decades. But Kate often affirmed her peerness: she told tutees who asked what she taught that she was not a teacher at all, and she often lamented all that she (in contrast to her teachers) did not yet know. Therefore, I felt Kate was, in many ways, a peer to her tutees. Finally, race factored into my hesitation in selecting Kate. Both male tutors were white, so I had no opportunity to involve racial diversity with my male case

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2 See the “Organizing Data” section (pp. 70-73) for an explanation of parenthetical references to my data.
study, but one female tutor was African-American. However, on tape, her soft voice essentially disappeared, so I eliminated her as a potential case study.

While much good research is planned, some seems serendipitous. Kate proved an excellent case study. I discovered an additional source of rich data when, by chance, I decided to audit a course (English 3301) on composition history, theory, and pedagogy in which Kate had enrolled. In the class, I often observed Kate making connections between course readings and discussions and her work in the Writing Center; I, therefore, added to my data material from the course and observations of and reflections on Kate’s participation in it. Further, at the end of the semester, she provided me with copies of much of her written coursework, including responses to readings and exams. In them, she positions herself within much of the scholarship that informs this study (Mortensen and Kirsch, Elbow, Bartholomae), as well as within scholarship from which I do not explicitly draw but which deals with issues related to mine (Shaughnessy, Williams, Lu). Often, she connected the readings to her tutoring experiences. The additional data I collected from Kate and the 3301 course served my project well.

A final reason for selecting Kate and Sam as case studies stems from comparing them to each other. Ethnographic research, as Bishop suggests, invites recursive processes; because I analyzed data—albeit less systematically than later in the study—as a collected it, I quickly noticed general trends in Kate’s and Sam’s tutoring approaches. I perceived Sam’s conferences as usually more directive and Kate’s as more non-directive; therefore, I selected them in part because their conferences might represent more possible patterns than might some other combination of tutors.

Before and after I narrowed my focus to two tutors, my volunteering as a tutor enabled me to maintain my position as a participant-observer; because I worked there, my ability to blend in continued. Always noticeable, of course, were my frequent requests to record conferences; however, the tutors spoke candidly with me and we enjoyed an easy camaraderie. Spending several hours in the Center almost every day it was open made me privy to conversations among tutors; further, I was also able to converse casually with them about their tutoring in general and about specific sessions from which they returned particularly frustrated or excited.

While tutors sometimes asked about my project, I intentionally withheld the most specific details about my study. In response to their questions, I generally replied that I wanted to “see what really happens in conferencing” or to “look at whether our theory matches up with our practice,” both of which are true. Not until I stopped recording conferences and started involving tutors in data analysis did I clarify that empowerment and power were the specific topics of my study. My initial evasiveness was based on my desire not to influence the actions—or words—of those I studied.

My desire not to influence my participants—as well as the fact that no matter how well I “blended in,” I was still a researcher—also caused me to abandon one data collection
method. Although I realized that audio-taping conferences would produce much of my richest data, I also initially planned to observe conferences whenever possible. Doing so, I thought, would help me gain a feel for each conference’s mood and tone and could help me better pinpoint tensions when I listened to the tapes. However, I rather quickly stopped observing conferences for several reasons.

First, some tutors—as well as some tutees—seemed uncomfortable being observed. I realized that relying only on recordings would cause me to lose some perspective, but I felt it more important that tutors and tutees feel as comfortable as possible, so that recorded conferences would be as close to normal (unobserved and unreCORDED) conferences as possible. Second, I noticed that the new tutors, who knew I had taught and tutored before, often asked for my input during conferences. I neither wanted to respond to their questions nor to request that they not ask; I realized that through the former I would influence their conferences and through the latter I would undermine the Center’s collaborative environment, in which tutors were encouraged to draw from one another when they felt uncertain. Also, by either answering or avoiding tutors’ questions, I would have unearthed yet another layer in the already complex power dynamics. Thus, I ultimately opted to only tape-record conferences. I did so both to promote my subjects’ and their tutees’ comfort, and to keep myself from either potentially influencing conferences or from undermining collaborative environments.

Much of the data I collected in the Center consisted of audio tapes of conferences. Additionally, however, I recorded notes of and reflections about conversations among tutors (sometimes including myself) in the Center. I also conducted casual oral interviews with the tutors; sometimes a question as simple as “So, how did it go?” prompted interesting discussions, which I also noted in my journal. Finally, at the end of their first semester tutoring, I asked tutors to complete a written interview involving general questions about their tutoring, their preparation, and some topics related to this study, such as directiveness, questioning, ownership, and authority. I piloted the interview questionnaire and revised it based on an experienced tutor’s feedback; the final version, to which the new tutors responded, is included in Appendix B. To encourage thoughtful responses, I voluntarily tutored two scheduled appointments for each tutor. The tutors used those appointment times to compose their responses; thus, tutors were paid for the time they spent completing the interview.

While some researchers, such as Cogie and Roswell, have video-taped writing conferences for analysis, I opted to audio-record conferences for several reasons. First, I speculated that while videos would enable me to capture more conference dynamics, the presence of the equipment might be overwhelmingly intrusive to conference participants. I thus feared that video-taping might create unnatural conferencing conditions and could affect conference interaction. One tutor later confirmed my suspicions; she wrote, “Observation tends to make me a little nervous, because I’m always scared that the session someone observes will be the worst ever. I can forget about the recording like it’s
not even there, but having a person watch me does make me a little tense” (WI B6).3 I also worried that by requesting to video-tape I might deter from participating in my study some tutors and tutees who might agree to be audio-recorded. In addition, audio-recording equipment was readily available to me, which made data collection more affordable.

Several steps were involved in recording conferences: selecting tutees to request recordings from, gaining their written permission to record, taping conferences, and labeling tapes in a manner both meaningful to me and protective of tutees’ privacy. At the beginning of the semester, I received permission from all five new tutors to record their conferences.4 Also, before the Center opened for the semester, I designed the “Permission to Record” form included in Appendix C. I used this form to explain my study and to record tutees’ written permission to tape conferences and to use the recordings in my research.5 Although the form does not emphasize that tutees were under no obligation to participate, that they would receive their conference regardless of whether they participated, and that they could stop recording at any time, I verbally explained these points to each tutee I approached. My reason for explaining this information, rather than asking students to read it, was simple: tutees often arrived for their half-hour appointments almost exactly at the starting times, and I wanted to use as little of their conference time as possible. I could present verbal explanations quickly, and because of its brevity, the form appeared less daunting.

Because I felt strongly that I should promote the non-threatening environment the Director hoped to maintain, I selected carefully, though intuitively, the tutees I asked for permission to record. Although my almost-constant presence in the Center would have allowed me to request conferences from practically all tutees, I solicited tapes only from students who seemed reasonably comfortable coming to the Center—or who, at least, did not seem extremely nervous or angry about being there. While conferences with nervous or particularly unhappy students would have made interesting and useful data, I felt that to be ethical I should promote the Center’s non-confrontational, welcoming atmosphere—especially for those students—rather than risk making them feel even more uncomfortable. Still, not all students agreed to be recorded; sometimes even the seemingly most comfortable tutee would decline permission to record. When tutees seemed at all hesitant, I reiterated they should feel no obligation. I emphasized that I much preferred they feel comfortable in their conferences than participate in the study. Because many tutees—approximately one-fourth of those I approached—did decline, I

3 See the “Organizing Data” section (pp. 70-73) for an explanation of parenthetical references to my data.
4 Cogie’s video, after all, involves a tutor and tutee who have prior experience working with one another; I knew many of the conferences I hoped to record would involve tutors and tutees who had likely never met.
5 Most tutees requested a week or two of tutoring without being recorded, so that they could become more comfortable with their roles. I readily complied.
6 Just as I refrained from making explicit to tutors the focus of my study, I also avoided the terms “power” and “empowerment” in my permission to record form. Instead, as the form indicates, I focused on my project as geared toward assessing the SSU Writing Center, for which it was indeed intended.
believe they understood the non-obligatory nature of my request. Many students, however, agreed to have their conferences recorded.

After gaining tutees’ permission, I taped conferences with two recorders belonging to the Center and with standard-sized, ninety-minute cassettes. (Although conferences were scheduled to last only thirty minutes each, I quickly learned that the shorter, sixty-minute tapes—with thirty minutes on each side—sometimes ended just before the conference did.) For convenience, I left a recorder in both of the two small conferencing rooms; tapes recorded in the larger room were difficult to hear due to background noise. As most tutors preferred working in the two smaller rooms, the noise in the larger room had little negative effect on my project. Further, using the two smaller rooms, I believe, likely helped me record more “normal” conferences; that is, I speculate that in the more private settings, tutors (and tutees) may have felt less need to perform for an audience.

After conferences, I labeled tapes with the tutor’s initial, or a similar designation, and the date. When I recorded multiple conferences for the same tutor on the same day, I added conference times. I also indicated the conference tutor, by initial, (and conference time, when necessary,) on the tutee’s permission form, after she or he signed and returned it to me. Finally, I filed permission forms according to tutor and I sorted and stored tapes similarly.

I added yet another element to my data collection after selecting Sam and Kate as case studies. During their second semester tutoring, I arranged with the Director to stagger their schedules so that instead of tutoring back-to-back sessions they each had free time immediately following every appointment; during their free time slots, tutors reflected in writing on the sessions they had just completed. For example, when Sam was scheduled to work from 10:00 until 12:00, he might tutor at 10:00 and at 11:00, and he could reflect on those sessions at 10:30 and 11:30, respectively. He was paid, however, for working the full two hours. I continued voluntarily tutoring to make up for the time for which tutors were paid but were unavailable for sessions. In keeping with my decision not to inform the case studies of my specific research focus, I asked them to respond to general prompts concerning what went well in the conference and what could have been improved. Although their new schedules significantly reduced Sam’s and Kate’s tutoring opportunities, I still collected tapes of 8 of Kate’s and 13 of Sam’s conferences during this semester, and their initial written responses to these conferences were useful to my study.

ORGANIZING DATA

Because collecting ethnographic data can be extremely messy, I knew that keeping my data well organized would be crucial to my project’s success. Initially, my organizational system involved storing all data (except tapes) in a large (three-inch), three-ring binder with several labeled dividers. All data I accumulated from English 3015 were included there, as were notes, handouts, and reflections from the composition course Kate and I
attended, and my observations and reflections from my time in the Writing Center. As my data increased, I added a second large binder, and then a third. However, I later found that dividing my data into separate groups and placing each group into its own smaller binder made accessing (and transporting) my materials much easier. (I continued using this method of organization for materials accumulated during data analysis, as well.) As I began writing up my findings, I realized my organizational method served another purpose: giving a title to each binder of material and using page or document numbers within it enables me to easily cite references to that material.

The following list summarizes the data I gathered, and it indicates the binder (by title) in which each kind of material is located. Along with the list are examples of the in-text citations I’ve created for use in later chapters.

**3015Journal**

Includes handouts from teacher and from student presentations, class notes, and my reflections/observations from English 3015. References look like this: (3015Journal).

**3301Journal**

Includes handouts, notes, and my reflections/observations from English 3301. References look like this (3301Journal).

**Writing Center-Documents**

SSU Writing Center Philosophy, SSU Writing Center History from 1974-2001 (both documents composed by the Writing Center Director involved in this study), FAQ sheet, brochures, etc. Also spreadsheets compiling pertinent numbers from database information. Spreadsheets are labeled with letters. References include names, and numbers or letters where applicable, as in (WC-D Spreadsheet B).

**Southern State University-Documents**

Copies of documents such as the SSU Mission Statement and pages from the SSU website. References to these documents are embedded in the text.

**Writing Center-Observations and Reflections**

My research journal entries based mainly on experiences in the SSU Writing Center. Pages are numbered. A sample reference is (WC-OR 48).
3015Kate

Kate’s journal, observations, and exam responses from 3015. Journal entries and observations use the number designations Kate gave them. Sample references are (3015Kate J 4) or (3015Kate OB 2).

3301Kate

Kate’s responses to readings and exams in 3301. Documents are numbered. A sample reference is (3301Kate 7).

3015Others

Other students’ responses to assignments from 3015. Documents are numbered. A sample reference is (3015Other 5).

3015Sam

Sam’s journal, observations, and exam responses from 3015. Journal entries and observations use the number designations Sam gave them. Sample references are (3015Sam J 9) or (3015Sam exam).

Kate-Responses

Kate’s written responses to conferences during her second semester tutoring. Each is labeled so that its respective cassette tape (of the conference she’s responding to) is easily identifiable; responses are also numbered. The reference (Kate-Resp. 10) refers to her tenth response. (Some responses do not correspond to tapes; tutors often reflected on conferences with tutees who declined to record.)

Sam-Responses

Sam’s written responses to conferences during his second semester tutoring. Each is labeled so that its respective cassette tape (of the conference he’s responding to) is easily identifiable; responses are also numbered. The reference (Sam-Resp. 23) refers to his twenty-third response. (Some responses do not correspond to tapes; tutors often reflected on conferences with tutees who declined to record.)

Written Interviews

Tutors’ responses to the questionnaire appearing in Appendix B. These are labeled with letters and question numbers. The reference (WI C6) refers to Sam’s response to the sixth interview question, for example, as his response is labeled “C.”
Conference Transcripts

Complete transcripts of all conferences formally analyzed by Kate, Sam, and myself; partial transcripts of some other conferences. Each transcript is labeled so that its respective cassette tape is easily identifiable; transcripts are also labeled with an identifying letter (the tutee’s initial) and page numbers. The reference (TS-A4) refers to page four of Sam and Abe’s conference transcript. The reference (TK-F12) refers to page 12 of Kate and Frances’ conference transcript.

Analysis Material

As I explain later, I included Kate and Sam in data analysis, and we audio taped many hours of discussion about our data. Kate also contributed taped comments analyzing a series of conferences we did not transcribe. I compiled full and partial transcripts of many of these analysis tapes, and I stored them in a binder labeled “Analysis.” Transcribed passages are labeled with tape numbers, and the entire “Analysis” collection is labeled with page numbers. The reference (Ana. 134) refers to page 134 in that binder.

Finally, while I don’t include them by title above, I found a subsequent use for the large, emptied binders, which originally contained my research journal: In them I stored the earlier drafts of this text, along with comments and suggestions from committee members and other scholars who had read and responded to my work. Keeping these materials organized was extremely useful to my process of revision. Other binders include prospectus drafts, another includes permission to record forms, and still another contains the “scraps”: drafts of documents that proved not very useful, price quotes from professional transcribers, notes concerning discarded or revamped analysis approaches, and other odds and ends that seemed not quite to fit anywhere else but which I wanted to keep. And a smaller, more hopeful notebook contains ideas I hope to pursue later on.

SUMMARY OF DATA

The data I collected is extensive; it includes (but is by no means limited to):

Tapes of 92 conferences involving all of the new tutors; of them, tapes of 48 conferences involve either Sam or Kate. Most conferences lasted around 30 minutes, although some were quite a bit longer. The total collection includes approximately 3000 minutes of conference talk; Sam’s and Kate’s conferences make up approximately 1600 minutes.

Written responses by Sam and Kate to 37 conferences. (These documents range in length from less than a page to five pages.)

Tutors’ written interview responses, their class and exam writings from 3015, and Kate’s writings from 3301, totaling almost 200 typed pages.
My own journal material from English 3015, English 3301, and the SSU Writing Center: several hundred pages, including handouts, notes, and reflections (some handwritten and some typed).

**ANALYZING DATA**

As seems appropriate to ethnographic research, my processes of data analysis for this study began early in the data collection stages and were extremely recursive. Below, I describe the various methods of analysis I used, including preliminary, informal methods and the more systematic methods I implemented in later stages. I also explain the case studies’ extensive participation in data analysis—one of the major strengths of this study. In addition, I describe methods of sorting and preparing data to be analyzed: I especially focus on the selection and transcription of audio tapes for analysis.

**Preliminary Analysis**

I conducted preliminary, informal analysis throughout the data collection process. As they became available, I listened to conference tapes with several issues in mind.

First, I wanted to verify that my taping procedures were producing audible data that could be easily transcribed. Listening to tapes early in the project revealed several problems: I quickly realized that tapes recorded in the large writing center room were often too cluttered by background noise to be of much use. While I could fairly easily avoid the large room, I also noticed another noise problem that would plague my research for the remainder of the semester. The SSU Writing Center is tucked away in a basement, but the door to each room is within a few feet of a staircase leading to drink and snack machines. The snack machine closest to the stairs often fails to dispense its products, and students frequently bang on and rock the machine to free their snacks. The sound thunders into the basement and interrupts many conference tapes; often, tutees and tutors even stop mid-sentence to wait for the noise to subside. Although I knew of this problem, I could not prevent it. Nor could I ask tutors to work behind closed doors, which is against SSU Writing Center policy.

In these early stages, I also learned that one tutor’s soft voice was difficult to hear on tape; I subsequently tried recording her at the tables furthest away from doors. Finally, I realized that tutees who spoke English as a second language were also often extremely difficult to understand on tape; therefore, I began selecting even more carefully the non-native speakers I asked to record. Tutees who were native speakers of English were, of course, also sometimes difficult to hear and understand; however, I knew that the sheer amount of data I collected would allow me to eliminate unclear tapes.

In addition to analyzing tapes basically as a quality-control process, I also kept issues of power and empowerment, as well as potential coding procedures, in mind. Even before extensive, systematic analysis, I began to see patterns in conferences and to recognize
issues I thought might be important later on. For example, I noticed that tutors generally controlled conference logistics, requesting that tutees read their papers aloud, that tutors often seemed to talk more than tutees, and that tutors sometimes offered explanations that seemed difficult to understand. I also noticed, however, that tutors frequently asked tutees to explain what the assignment was about and what they wanted to work on. Tutees often acknowledged their lack of expertise, claiming that they were not English majors or were not “good with grammar,” although some seemed confident about writing. And I began to see patterns in individual tutor’s conferences: Sam, for example, frequently explained organization using specific, recurring examples and in a way reflective of teachers’ lecture-style talk, and Kate usually asked many open-ended questions and couched directives with hedging language.7

Other preliminary data analysis involved simply reading and rereading passages in my research journal and marking selections I suspected might be important later on—especially those touching on issues of power and empowerment. From this data I began forming ideas about how the tutors understood their positions and their work. In addition, reading their responses to the written interview I described above informed my perceptions.

Finally, one source of data I omitted from this preliminary, informal analysis was my collection of the case studies’ written reflections about their conferences. I did not read these as I received them; instead I simply filed them away for later use.8 I knew I would likely use several of the conferences they wrote about as data for more systematic analysis, and I did not want their thoughts to unduly influence my readings of those conferences or my attempts to create approaches for analyzing them. Rather, I returned to these reflections only after the tutors and I formally analyzed the conferences.

**Selecting and Transcribing Conference Tapes**

Before the tutors and I could analyze the conferences, I needed to transcribe them. I dealt with several issues as I began: I had to determine not only which tapes to use and which transcription conventions would best capture them but also whether I should pay a transcriber or do the work myself.

The expense of hiring a professional transcriber was prohibitive; however, I decided to transcribe conference tapes myself for several other reasons. As a tutor and teacher, I was familiar with the language of conferencing, and I suspected an outsider might have trouble understanding portions of even relatively clear tapes. Also, listening to tapes helped me gain a feel for the tutors’ vocal patterns; therefore, unclear portions of tapes became easier to understand. Furthermore, transcribing tapes helped me become even more familiar with each conference, enabling me to work with them more efficiently.

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7 This early, informal analysis thus contributed to my selection of case studies; as I mentioned above, I chose Kate and Sam in part because I perceived them as using different tutoring styles.
8 I did read the first two or three reflections, to check that my prompts were working as I had planned.
during analysis. Transcribing conferences was, however, extremely time-consuming, and when two tutors—one of whom was Kate—volunteered to transcribe for a reasonable rate, I let them do so. I did, however, give them only tapes I was already extremely familiar with, and I double-checked and edited their transcripts for correctness.

To transcribe the tapes, I purchased a Panasonic Standard Cassette Transcriber for around $200. Basic features include a pedal attachment, which allows a transcriber to play, stop, and rewind tapes by pressing pedals with her feet, leaving her hands free for keying. The variable speech control allows the listener to adjust the pitch; a tape can play at a slower or faster speed, according to the transcriber’s keying skills, without otherwise altering how the voices sound. Also useful was the tape counter, which allowed me to record the locations of interesting tape segments.9 I could transcribe tapes more than twice as quickly using the transcription machine instead of a standard tape player, and the machine’s price was substantially less that what I would have paid a professional to transcribe the conferences.

To make transcripts as useful as possible, I created and implemented the following format: I headed each transcript with the tutor’s name, a pseudonym or first initial for the tutee, and the conference date (and time, when appropriate). For better readability of the transcript’s dialogue, I used only the first initial, followed by a colon, to indicate speakers; including names, I found, simply made transcripts longer and often harder to read, especially when one participant’s name included several more characters than the other’s.

The format I used for the conference dialogue, specifically, was relatively simple and also geared toward readability. Some writing center researchers incorporate many conventions of formal discourse analysis in their transcripts; for example, Black designates such linguistic characteristics as “sudden cessation of speech with a glottal stop,” “interruption[s],” “stressed word[s],” and pause length in half-second increments (Black Appendix B). Others, such as Cogie, Fletcher, and Blau, Hall, and Strauss use few formal transcription symbols. My method falls in between.

Because my analysis would focus more on the content of conferences than on word-level nuances, and because I knew that if those nuances became important in analyzing a transcript section I could return to the tape, I generally avoided signaling such features as elongation, stress, and volume.10 I did, however, use a question mark to signal the rise in pitch at the end of a word or phrase—suggestive of a questioning tone. I also used three question marks side-by-side to signal unintelligible utterances; to designate uncertainty in the transcription, I followed the possibly misunderstood word(s) with a question mark and enclosed them in parentheses, such as (this?). I also signaled overlapping speech, as Black does, by bracketing the beginning of the overlap. However, I felt that designating

9 This feature was especially useful for tapes I chose to transcribe only partially.
10 If a participant’s words were particularly animated, I did indicate that; see for example Ken’s “Ohhh” on page 196 of the sample transcript in Appendix E.
interruptions was both difficult to do with consistency and unnecessary to my analysis, as I explain later. Rather, if a speaker appeared to have completed his or her intended utterance, indicated by falling intonation and a brief pause, I ended her or his line with a period—or with a question mark, where appropriate. On the other hand, if speech was contiguous, but I could only speculate whether the first speaker had completed an intended utterance, I used no punctuation after the final word. Additionally, within a speaker’s turn, I used a period to designate falling intonation followed by a brief pause, and I used commas within turns to capture the speech’s rhythm. Also, I designated by using all capital letters the passages being read from tutees’ texts.

Finally, in discourse analysis, multiple periods often designate pauses of specific lengths. However, precise pause length seemed unimportant to my data analysis. Therefore, I documented only very obvious pauses (approximately four seconds or more), and I signaled them with the word “pause” enclosed in parentheses. I signaled very long pauses (approximately ten seconds or more) with the phrase “long pause” in parentheses. My method of signaling pauses allowed me to use ellipses to mark omitted material when quoting my transcripts. A representative sample including explanations of my transcription conventions appears in Appendix D. A complete sample transcript appears in Appendix E.

Evident in the appended transcript are the color applications I used in the transcripts the tutors and I analyzed. By applying one color to one participant’s speech and another color to the other’s, I improved transcript readability. Such use of color is also useful in other ways. Even though I determined that precise tutor and tutee word count would not be important to my project, the different colors allow me to glance at a page to determine, in general, whether one participant talks more than another or whether speech amounts are fairly balanced. Similarly easy to see are segments in which, for example, one person speaks for an extended passage, or offers only one-word or back-channeling responses. Finally, the color format also makes clear general trends in some conferences; for instance, briefly flipping through several transcripts shows that, in many, the tutee speaks much more than the tutor prior to reading her or his paper, but that afterward, the tutor speaks much more. The act of transcribing conferences might seem more a precursor to than a method of analysis. However, listening to the tapes, transcribing tapes and applying color to the transcripts, and thumbing through transcripts after they were printed allowed me to notice important features of conferences.

In addition to determining who would transcribe tapes and which conventions to use, I also had to select the conferences to transcribe. Because of the sheer volume of my data, my desire to analyze conferences in depth, and my realization that in-depth analysis of too many conferences would be impractical, I began eliminating tapes from my pool of potential conferences.

I started by eliminating conferences according to strictly practical grounds. First, I pulled conferences involving tutors other than the two case studies; this reduced my tapes by
about 47%. Next, I eliminated conferences that were particularly difficult to understand, and I that I knew would be hard to transcribe. Several of these were conferences involving non-native speakers of English. Listening to these tapes, and to more easily understandable tapes involving ESL students, I was reminded of significant differences between tutoring native and non-native speakers of English, and I decided, for this study, to discard all tapes involving ESL students, as well.11

My collection was significantly reduced, but I still had many more tapes than the case studies and I could analyze in-depth, so I began more systematically listening to the remaining tapes. This time, I made brief notes concerning several issues: the apparent race and gender of tutees and whether they seemed to be traditional or non-traditional students; whether they attended and whether I recorded more than one conference (and whether or not they had worked with the same tutor); the types of writing they were working on; and whether they were writing for freshman-level courses or higher. I also noted interesting moments in their conferences, especially in light of my focal issues, and I noted whether the conferences seemed typical or not, considering the many conferences I had listened to involving the two tutors.

With these notes in hand, I sorted the tapes once more. My goal was to compile a group of tapes that demonstrated both diversity and representativeness. Ultimately, I selected for intensive analysis tapes involving African-American and white, and male and female tutees, some who came to the Writing Center only once, and some who came for multiple appointments. I chose students working on assignments for freshman composition, business writing, upper-level literature, and even for one course in another discipline. Aside from my omission of non-native speakers, the breakdown I selected was—in terms of academic levels—generally representative of the SSU Writing Center’s clientele.12 My selections also included conferences that seemed representative of each tutor’s general style as well as at least one conference in which the tutor’s approach seemed unusual for him or her. Finally, my selections were based, in part, on my feelings that something interesting was happening. For example, I selected some conferences, in part, because my journal indicated the tutor had felt strongly about her or his success (or failure). I selected others, in part, because of the sense of camaraderie I felt was present (or absent), or because of the conference’s relative successfulness. Finally, I chose conferences in which tutees’ responses varied from apparent enthusiasm to frustration, from profuse thank-yous to near tears.

My final collection of tapes included six of Sam’s and four of Kate’s to be transcribed in their entirety. I completely transcribed fewer of Kate’s tapes because of an interesting sequence of an additional six conferences I thought important to include. Instead of transcribing those tapes, which involved the same tutee, in detail, Kate and I employed

11 I realized throughout the process that I was not discarding tapes into the trash; I could return to unused data in later projects.
12 See the Context: Administration, Staff and Clientele section (pp. 58-9) for a general description of students using the SSU Writing Center.
other methods that seemed more useful for analyzing such a large amount of data, as I explain later. Also, because I thought they might be useful to the study, I transcribed passages from other interesting tapes I opted not to use in their entirety.

Transcripts of conferences ranged from approximately nine to fifteen typed, single-spaced pages. Including additional partial transcripts, this study involved 179 pages of transcribed conference talk. As mentioned above, transcripts are cited in this text according to a letter and to page number designations.

**Systematic Analysis**

Because I wanted this study to reflect the collaborative nature of writing center ideals, and because I admire Kate and Sam as incredibly intelligent, insightful colleagues, I asked them to play a major role in my data analysis. A Graduate Research Grant from the International Writing Centers Association helped me to compensate them for working with my data. For analyzing data, I paid tutors an hourly rate similar to what they earned for tutoring. (Kate and Sam worked with my data for just under 100 hours combined.) To make their participation most significant and most useful, however, I had to orchestrate it carefully. For example, because one goal was to learn how tutors perceived power and empowerment in conferencing, I could not simply impose upon tutors my own operational definitions and coding schemes. I needed to listen to and learn from, not influence or direct, Kate and Sam.

I wanted to give each of us opportunity to think about and construct our individual concepts of power and empowerment and to allow all of our ideas to contribute to this study. I wanted them to help build my working definitions of power and empowerment, and to inform the transcript coding procedures we would use. Finally, I wanted to encourage Kate and Sam, from the very beginning, to feel free to offer interpretations of conferences different from mine. That is, while I hoped to code transcripts with a high degree of consistency, I felt that opening my data to multiple interpretations would give a fuller picture of the complexity of writing center work and of power and empowerment in conferencing. I hoped the tutors would help me shape and reshape my questions (Moss 157), and I hoped to make the study as relevant to them as possible and to “break down the rigid hierarchy . . . between the observer and the observed” (Kirsch 256-58).

Because of these goals, the first data analysis task I gave Kate and Sam overlaps substantially with data collection. I gave both of them copies of several transcripts, and I asked them first to read the transcripts simply “to get a feel” for how conferences look on paper. I also asked them to keep the concepts power and empowerment in mind. I explained that those issues were the focus of my project, but that I wanted to know what they thought of them without me influencing their ideas. I asked them to do some informal writing on those issues, and I subsequently interviewed both of them concerning their personal views on power and empowerment, as well as their initial responses to the transcripts. Tape recording these interviews was an efficient method of gathering
information; my initial discussion sessions with Sam and Kate produced approximately 110 and 125 minutes of audio recordings, respectively. I transcribed these recordings; including the written responses Sam and Kate had produced, they added 70 typed, single-spaced pages of hybrid data/analysis material to my collection. (This material is stored in the “Analysis” binder I mentioned earlier.)

After their initial period of informal transcript examination and discussion, I compared Kate’s and Sam’s thoughts concerning power and empowerment with my own research and thinking, and, as I discuss in the next chapter, I discovered striking similarities. Combining this information with much of my prior data allowed me both to build on and clarify my concepts of power and empowerment; similarly, I was able to begin answering my research questions related to tutors’ perceptions of power and empowerment.

In the next rounds of analysis, Kate, Sam, and I devised and implemented (and revised and re-implemented) coding approaches. We first examined the transcripts for evidence of power, and we developed a topic-based coding approach, in which we examined conferences to see which participant initiated topics for conversation and whether those topics were accepted or rejected by the other party.13 Next, we added a resource-based element to our coding, in which we attempted to determine moments where each participant contributed information that helped develop the topic being discussed.

With a tentative grasp on understanding the demonstration and negotiation of power in conferences, we moved back to discussions of empowerment. Having discussed various theoretical ways empowerment might happen in conferences, we brainstormed ways empowerment might be evidenced in the transcripts. We then devised a scheme for coding such evidence. Finally, we once again looked at transcripts and attempted to pull together our approaches: we wanted to see which power dynamics seemed present during empowering (or seemingly unempowering) moments.

Thus, the coding of transcripts happened in “layers”; it also happened as the result of individual and collaborative work. The cycle of coding involved—generally for each “layer”—meeting with the tutor, then examining and coding transcripts alone, then meeting with the tutor again to discuss and compare our results, and to plan the next “layer.”14 Analyzing first alone, and then discussing our work together, enabled me to judge the relative consistency with which we were able to implement our coding methods.

Coding so many pages of transcripts was, however, an incredibly messy undertaking. I again found audio recordings tremendously useful. When I met with Sam or Kate to discuss coding and analysis, I recorded our sessions. This added approximately 26 more

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13 The coding approaches I mention here are explained in detail—with examples—in the next chapter. There, I also explain more thoroughly how Kate’s and Sam’s thoughts contributed to our coding methods.  
14 Of the time I paid them for working, approximately one-third was spent one-on-one with me; they worked individually for the other two-thirds.
hours of material to my collection. Later, I found it unnecessary to transcribe each of these tapes in its entirety. Rather, I made notes from them and did spot transcriptions of the most useful. While taping allowed me solid records of our systematic processes of data analysis, the tapes also captured the informal responses to transcripts I encouraged the tutors to explore.

Finally, one last round of analysis—focusing on a series of six conferences with Pearl, a traditional, African-American female—involved only Kate (and myself).\textsuperscript{15} Rather than transcribing and formally coding the approximately four hours of conference tapes, Kate and I opted for a more holistic approach. After listening to (and taking notes on) the tapes, we each reflected individually on the issues we perceived to be important. While I typed my responses, Kate taped her thoughts and gave me the tapes (135 minutes), along with her notes. Transcriptions of the tapes filled 26 typed, single-spaced pages, and her handwritten notes added another 16 pages of material to my collection.

In total, the analysis sessions Kate, Sam and I conducted together produced approximately 30 hours of audio tape. I transcribed over 200 pages of material from these tapes, and the tutors also contributed 24 pages of written material. For ease in using and referencing this material, all transcripts and other written material are stored in a binder labeled “Analysis.” Pages are numbered, and each passage is labeled to indicate the tutor speaking and the cassette source. As I mentioned earlier, references to this material appear as (Ana. 14), for example. Imbedded in the text is a clear reference to the speaker.

After I finished working with Kate and Sam, analysis remained unfinished; compiling valid findings and conclusions required that I return—many times—not only to our analysis discussions and documents, but to hundreds of pages of other data as well. My method of analysis then became simple but time consuming: reading, listening, and writing, and searching for patterns and connections. I describe this process further in the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{15} I would have gladly included Sam in this analysis as well; however, my funding was dwindling. I also realized, though, that I had already gathered much data from Kit concerning these conferences, and I felt triangulation would be relatively easy with those sources.
CHAPTER FOUR:  
PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND METHODS OF ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I begin to answer two of my major research questions: (1) How do tutors perceive power in conferencing? and (2) How do tutors perceive empowerment in conferencing? Because I wanted to incorporate their perceptions into my data analysis procedures, I offer below general findings concerning Sam’s and Kate’s perceptions of power and empowerment as we began analysis. Each “perceptions” section is followed by a description and examples of the coding procedures we ultimately adopted for that issue; I also explain how Kate and Sam contributed to the development of our coding schemes. Before I discuss how Kate and Sam perceived tutors’ (and tutees’) power when we began data analysis, I offer brief depictions of the two tutors in general.

THE TUTORS: SAM AND KATE

Sam is a traditional, white male English major. He participated in English 3015 as a junior, and his stint as an SSU Writing Center tutor spanned his senior year. An aspiring creative writer, Sam was recently accepted into the MFA program at SSU. He was also recently hired as the new Graduate Assistant Director of the SSU Writing Center. With his athleticism and close-cropped hair, Sam could pass for a baseball player rather than a writing tutor. Casual and friendly, Sam generally greets his tutees—new and old alike—with a genuine smile and a handshake, and he consistently sends the message that the center is a comfortable, welcoming place. Indeed, Sam once commented that “making a connection with the clients” is one of “the easiest thing[s] about tutoring” (WI C1).1

Kate, a student of classical studies, is a middle-aged white female. She returned to college to complete a second undergraduate degree, and she plans to become a high school Latin teacher. Because she is an older student, some tutees automatically assume Kate is a teacher; she is, however, quick to explain that she is a student, too. For sixteen years, Kate worked overseas as a secretary for an oil company; prior to that, she worked in the United States as a Department of Family Services social worker. Having lived in another country for many years, Kate’s first-hand knowledge of struggling to communicate informs her ideas about conferencing, as do her social work experiences (Ana. 93-4). Kate brings to her conferences a quiet calm and a soothing, clear voice—as well as a deep desire to help students become better writers and thinkers.

THE TUTORS’ PERCEPTIONS OF POWER

In Chapter Two, I suggested that we understand power—as it applies to conferencing dynamics—not as an abstract possession but as action upon another’s action, as always existing within relationships, as depending on both parties’ maintaining the capacity for

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1 In English 3015, students were encouraged to use the term “client.” Hereafter, for consistency, I replace “client” with “[tutee]” when quoting the tutors.
action, and as constantly shifting during conference interaction. Further, I suggested that we separate notions of authority from notions of power. Instead of conflating authority and power, we might consider authority as a set of resources from which one draws to enact power; conference participants’ perceptions of their own and each other’s authority therefore influence their enactments of power. Both participants in a conference have authority, and both enact power. Accordingly, we might understand power as existing along a continuum; as power is enacted rather than possessed, neither participant has “absolute” power.

My own understanding of power developed throughout the course of my research. However, part of my research interests lie in how tutors perceive power in conferencing. As mentioned in the previous chapter, much of the immediately following material is gleaned from interviews with Kate and Sam, prior to and during which they received only minimal input from me concerning the foci of my study. Although the tutors knew we would discuss power and empowerment, I initially refrained from sharing my ideas of those concepts. Nor did I share my method of distinguishing power from authority. Below, I discuss how Kate and Sam seemed to perceive tutors’ (and tutees’) power as we began analyzing data. Because I had not discussed with them my operational definitions of key terms, this section suffers from the conflation of words like “power,” “authority,” and “control” I described in Chapter Two. (Later in this chapter, I do employ those definitions.) Especially obvious below is the suggestion of power as a kind of possession. Indeed, I asked tutors where their power “comes from” (in part to determine whether they cited any of the elements I associate with authority). Some responses, then, are constructed like this: I have power because of my age. Interestingly, however, tutors also readily associated power with actions—consistent with my conception of power in Chapter Two. Finally, some of the material below is closely linked with power but lacks that specific terminology.

That both tutors thought about power issues in conferencing was evident beginning with their work in 3015. Sam, for example, participated in a group project and presentation focusing on gender in conferencing. The project exposed Sam to texts such as Deborah Tannen’s You Just Don’t Understand, Francine Frank and Frank Anshen’s Language and the Sexes, and even Black’s Between Talk and Teaching. Sam’s group presentation dealt with ways these authors suggest men dominate women in conversation; specific foci were such issues as women being interrupted by and having their topics ignored by men (3015 Journal). Sam acknowledged that his project affected his tutoring, making him “more conscious of what I’m doing and saying so as not to fit the expectations surrounding male and female interactions” (WI C3).

Kate’s 3015 work, too, suggested an interest in and awareness of power issues. For example, her reflections on conferences she observed during 3015 often deal with tutor

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2 In a class discussion, Sam pointed out that sex is a biological quality and that gender is a social construct; he demonstrated more of an awareness of those issues than did many of the other students.
directiveness and control; in one entry, Kate wrote, “While the [tutee] was listening hard and writing down everything she could about [the tutor’s] ideas, the [tutee] was also trying to add her thoughts to the discussion, but [the tutor] seemed to have the most control in this session and the [tutee] didn’t have a chance to say much” (3015K OB 4). Later, Kate added, “‘How much control should the tutor have in the conference?’ . . . I wonder if the [tutee] should not have been allowed to talk more about her own ideas” (OB 4). Kate also, however, acknowledged a complexity associated with directiveness. One conference left her “frustrated” by a tutee’s thesis, which although improved as a result of the tutor’s questioning approach, “still didn’t seem perfectly clear” (OB 3). Kate explained,

I wanted to suggest that the [tutee] rephrase her thesis [in a certain way], but I remained silent. [The tutor] realized too that the thesis statement was not worded to achieve the best organization within the paper, but she was doing her best to get the student to figure this out for herself. I realize that sometimes there is a barrier that cannot be overcome in a conference without some directive interjection. Should I have made my suggestion, or would that have been going too far? (OB 3)

Thus, both tutors began developing their awareness of power early in their tutoring careers.

When asked specifically to discuss power in conferencing, tutors shared interesting, insightful, and often similar thoughts.³ Both tutors offered several suggestions concerning the sources of their power. Each mentioned, almost immediately, that the position as tutor—as well as their tutor training—gives them power (Ana. 23, 67-68). Both also cited their experience and success as writers and as students of English and writing. For example, Sam (while resisting the terms “expert” and “expertise”) cited his “experience.” He speculated that his power comes in part from just how much I’ve studied English. . . . I was an English major; I took [around] 40 hours of English classes in college, much less all the honors and AP stuff I took in high school. . . . I’ve always read. . . . I think that has a lot to do with it. My interests. . . . [make me] knowledgeable about the subject, and . . . that may give me some power. (Ana. 67-8)

Later, Sam added, “I’ve been writing essays for a long time now” (68). Kate offered similar comments (5, 22-3), and she added that tutees “wouldn’t be here if they thought we were just like everybody else” (5).

Both tutors also dealt with issues of peerness in exploring their power. Kate often acknowledged that her age takes away from her peerness: “Peer? I’m not a peer, I think more than maybe the younger tutors. They don’t see me that way” (5). Often closer than Kate in age to tutees, Sam, however, also came to see himself as something other than a peer. When asked, after his first year tutoring, whether he perceived himself more as peer or as teacher, Sam responded: “If you’d have asked me this a year ago, I would have said

³ Our conversations were one-on-one; I met with Kate and Sam at different times.
a peer, but now that you ask me this now, I say a teacher. . . . I feel like more of a teacher now than I was before” (69). He explained this as a result of becoming “better at recognizing things and seeing problems” in tutees’ work (69).

Kate and Sam also explored the implications of their relative “peerness.” Kate explained, “I think sometimes they listen to me because they think, ‘Oh, she reminds me of my teacher; she’s maybe the same age; . . . my teacher might have a reaction like hers over [a younger tutor’s]. So sometimes I’m a little worried that [tutees might] listen too much” (5). (Kate notes elsewhere that some tutees seem more confident in tutors whose comments reflect those by the tutees’ teachers [3015 K OB 2]). Sam, on the other hand, suggested a different perspective. Writing, “As a ‘peer tutor,’ I think that I establish a good atmosphere for the conference,” Sam also admitted, “I sometimes tend to take a greater position of authority, especially when I’m thinking of myself in terms of future teacher” (WI C4). He continued:

I’m not sure what my authority does to the conference. I would like to say that it generally helps the conference run [more smoothly] while simultaneously getting something accomplished. I try not to be too authoritative, as I can be very wrong in some of the things that I suggest. On the other hand, I let my so-called authority go wherever it wants to when I work with a client who either doesn’t listen to what I’m saying or doesn’t want to listen to what I’m saying, or tries to come in and establish [himself or herself] as the “alpha dog.” (C4)

While Kate worried that seeming like a teacher might cause her to unduly influence tutees, Sam seemed to embrace his authority as a means of control. (And, for Sam, the problem with authority seemed not to be that tutees might follow his advice, but that it might be the wrong advice they follow!) Finally, Sam acknowledged feeling more like a peer during conference moments when he did not feel knowledgeable about the assignment or did not feel he could pinpoint an effective approach (Ana. 84-5, 89-90).

Indeed, Sam sometimes joked about trying to be the “alpha dog” in conferences (WC OR 11/12/01). While such a comment from a tutor might sound alarming, I should note that it originated after Sam worked with a series of students whose teacher had required them to come to the center. Sam had appeared frustrated by their lack of interest and participation. Similarly, Sam had seemed frustrated by tutees–also required to come–who were uninterested in conferencing because, for example, a parent had already “looked over” their work. Finally, his reiteration of the “alpha dog” idea above followed a few conferences in which tutees demanded they focus on issues Sam felt were unimportant. Later, Sam suggested that calling himself an “alpha dog” was “kind of really absurd” (Ana. 71). Important, however, is that Sam recognized his own dominant behavior–and that he associated it with control of the conference and with the “teacherly” aspects of his tutor role. Interesting, too, is that Sam also tended to view his power in a fairly positive light: as something through which he could empower tutees, as I explain later.
As Sam and Kate discussed power, tutors’ control and direction of conferences quickly became an important topic. When I asked them what “shows” their power in conferences, they again had similar responses. Sam described controlling a conference’s direction as “definitely a show of power”; he explained, “I can’t think of one conference that I’ve had where if I wanted to go over organization, but the client wanted to go over grammar, that we didn’t end up going over organization” (71). He added, however, “I don’t have that in mind when I’m helping someone; I’m not sitting there thinking ‘I’m in so much control here.’ It’s like . . . you kind of see what you need to do and you help them out with it” (71). Kate likewise declared, “I’m always exercising power. . . . Because I’m going to direct that half hour” (5), and her elaboration is strikingly similar:

First thing is, I set up the whole ground rules. I say, “Welcome, here you are, this is the way we do it. You’re going to read your paper to me,”. . . because I’m setting it all up. And then they read it, and if they tell me what they want to work on, and I don’t agree with it, I win. It’s true. I win. (24)

Kate and Sam, it seemed, were well aware of their power to direct conferences.

Both Sam and Kate also implicated questions in their directing conferences. Sam explained, “I think the way I show my power is, gosh, one is through the questions. . . . I don’t want to say like the power of suggestion, but . . . suggesting and asking questions, I think that’s a show of power because it’s obvious that I’m seeing something [that needs improvement]” (70). Similarly, in a spontaneous comment following a series of conferences, Kate exclaimed, “I’m exercising power by the questions I choose to ask. I’m leading her—what to think—by the questions I choose to ask. . . . We’re shaping them by the questions we ask. It’s an awesome power you have as a teacher over someone” (WC OB 11/16/02). Later, she explained, “I’m pressing [tutees] with questions. I told you once, you know, the fact, not just the fact that I’m asking the questions, but the fact that I’m deciding which questions to ask is my power. . . . I mean, every question I ask implies that it’s more important” (Ana. 27). Kate added that, in some cases, “it’s almost like to quiz them; to ask questions is adversarial. Because it’s implying that you’ve go the answer already, and you’re asking them to guess at it” (32). And while many tutors’ questions are intended to allow the tutee, by supplying the answer, to be the expert, Kate suggested that even encouraging students to be experts can be an act of power (7). She also mentions that tutors demonstrate power by acting as experts themselves (7).

Finally, tutors mentioned other issues they associate with power; both, for example, discussed writing on tutees’ papers (3, 26, 70). Sam also pointed to a “certain air” associated with collecting of student ID numbers and other material prior to conferences (70), and Kate discussed soliciting from tutees “an agreement about what they’re going to do” after conferences as powerful (27).

In addition to the tutors’ thoughts concerning their own power, their ideas about tutees’ power are also interesting. About this topic, again, each had much to say. Sam stated, “I think the client has power, too. I don’t think that it’s all in the hands of the tutor” (67). Likewise, Kate said, “I like to think that it’s there all the time, whether I’m
acknowledging it or not. I don’t think I have got it all. And even if it’s that they’re just listening to me, I like to think that they’ve still got it. It’s just that maybe at that point in the dialogue they’re not expressing it. . . . I don’t think I ever have it all” (28). Kate argued, however, that “it’s too easy for us to forget that [tutees] have power, too” (9); she reminded “that authority doesn’t sit in any one place because it only exists as long as it’s acknowledged” (9). “You only have power as long as others acknowledge that power,” she explained; “If you ignore them, even the most powerful [person] has no power” (4).

Kate offered several other evidences of tutees’ power, including actively participating as an expert in the conference (8). Other evidences suggest less ideal participation: “[Tutees] can get up and walk out if they want to. . . . If I ask a question, they have the opportunity to say whatever they want [and to] interrupt whenever they want” (28). Tutees can put up resistance, she affirmed (21-2), and even very passive students demonstrate power:

They’ve got the power to sit back and let someone else [take charge], and have somebody tell them what to do or make their marks for them on the paper. That’s power, too. [Manipulation] is involved there. . . . I hate to say it, some of them are doing it because we probably have a reputation of doing more than we should sometimes, proofreading too much or whatever. So, I would say that some of them expect that they can come here and walk out with a better paper that they might not have thought of themselves. They have the power to do that. (9)

Finally, Kate explained, “They also have the power to sit there and listen and then walk out the door and do nothing. They don’t have to make those changes. They don’t have to do that” (9). “Making choices” about their writing, according to Kate, gives tutees “the final power” (11).

When asked to expound on tutees’ power, both tutors again brought up controlling the conference and asking questions. While both admitted sometimes overriding the focuses and goals tutees suggest, they also pointed to the importance of tutees making known and working on their goals. Said Kate, “After they’ve read [their texts], I’ll try and give up the power after I’ve got the ball rolling, . . . I try to let them decide what they’d like to do, unless it’s just so overwhelming” (24). Sam agreed, “If you completely disregard [what the tutee wants to focus on], I don’t think that accomplishes too much. . . . They have things they want to go over. . . . I always try to at least save ten minutes to go over whatever it is they wanted to. So I think that’s a certain bit of [tutee’s] power in conferences, too” (71). Sam went on to explain that tutees can use questions to focus on their goals and to keep the tutor on track: “A lot of times there’s a lot of power in their questioning because sometimes they’ll ask you questions and you’ll go into a different direction [or perhaps discover a problem with the paper]”; he mentioned a specific example in which the tutee’s questions “exert[ed] power” and “moved [Sam] in the direction [the tutee] wanted [Sam] to go” (71-2). Kate, too, suggested that a tutee can maintain control by asking the tutor questions—sometimes even in order to avoid the tutor’s questions (8).
Both tutors also cited the power of tutees’ questions to work through confusion. Sam explained:

Their questions help out a lot, because sometimes I’m wrong, just flat out wrong, and if they didn’t exert some sort of power, they would have left it with me telling them the wrong thing. But by them being able to say like “wait, okay, do you really think,” “okay, I’m confused,” and so on. . . . Because sometimes either the client will not understand or they’ll see that something I said is really kind of screwed up, they’ll ask me a few questions, and I’ll be like wait, yeah, right, I was wrong. And I think that’s an obvious display of a certain amount of power or control in the hands of the client. (72)

Kate agreed that such questions are useful: “Sometimes they’ll say that I still don’t understand this, you know. . . . And so I don’t want them just to be agreeing with me, or swallowing what they took like medicine” (28).

Finally, Kate suggested that tutees have power even through criticizing their work and themselves as writers. She explained, “That’s how I prepare myself for someone to tell me my writing’s bad, spit it out before they do. It’s almost like part of the dance. It’s almost like a submission to authority” (21). But she added that such a move also involves tutee power because “you’ve shot yourself down; you don’t need anybody else to do it, and that message is coming out subtly, so that you’ve still got control. You haven’t lost control” (20-1).

Even though they often used the terms “power,” “control,” and “authority” interchangeably, much of what Kate and Sam said during our initial interviews corresponded with my notions of authority and power. For example, they mentioned that their power “comes from” their position as tutor, and their experience, and their knowledge or age. They also perceived power as being evidenced through actions: asking questions or controlling the conference direction. Thus they suggested the authority deriving from being a tutor, or experienced, or knowledgeable, or older underlies their enacting of power. At the same time, however, they frequently spoke of power as something both parties “have”—an idea that conflicted with my own sense of power. I argue they likely did so in part because of our failure to distinguish between “power” and “authority.” That they suggested both parties “have” power, though, supported my notion of a continuum of power and indicated that the tutors perceived tutees to have authority, too. As we seemed to be thinking similarly about power, we then oriented our discussions toward analyzing power in our conference transcripts.

**CODING POWER**

Hoping not only to examine conceptions, but also evidences, of power in conferencing, I realized immediately the complexity of the task. The tutors’ ideas supported my own, but they did not simplify the job of locating power—or rather, evidence of power being
acted—in conferences. The issue is almost overwhelmingly complex, for if we assume both parties have authority and enact power, and thus that power exists on a continuum, there are many potential evidences of power upon which we can no longer rely. Below, I discuss some such problematic evidences. I then discuss one scholar’s useful theoretical approach, from which I borrow, for examining power in conversation. Finally, I describe our development and use of our coding schemes for examining power in conference transcripts.

Some popular frameworks for thinking about power in conferencing are decidedly problematic. For example, much writing center literature—including tutor training texts—suggests that tutors show power by giving mini-lectures to tutees, and that by asking questions, tutors enable tutees to show their own power. (Of course the terminology conveying such suggestions is not always consistent: some might say the tutor controls, dominates, takes charge, or owns the conference by lecturing, and that the tutee owns or even controls the conference when answering questions.) Similarly, tutors are thought to show power by answering tutees’ questions, because tutors then act as knowledgeable teacher-figures. However, tutees are thought to show power by asking questions, thus allowing them to direct the conference toward issues they consider important. Arguably, they might also show power by refusing to ask questions—perhaps because they feel the tutor lacks the knowledge or authority to answer, for example.

These ideas point to an interesting complexity in conferencing: in a perfect conference, it seems, tutees would both ask and answer their own questions; the tutor would, as Baumlin and Weaver suggest, act as a sort of therapist who encourages the tutee to do just that. Power is complex in all of these approaches, however. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, recent attention to questioning perceives questions more realistically: as potentially powerful tools. And, like asking questions, refusing to answer questions involves power. Thus the teacher or tutor, who, in a counseling-style manner, refuses to mirror the expert image the tutee expects and who turns the tutee’s questions back on the tutee, also enacts power.

A few hypothetical examples show the complexity of assessing power as associated with questioning—and thus with the taking, maintaining, or giving up control in a conference.

For example, a tutor, Frank, asks a question: *How might you clarify your thesis?*

In doing so, Frank enacts power—based in part on his authority as a tutor—and takes charge by offering a focus for the conference. The move might be perceived as extremely innocent: Frank’s attempt to let the tutee “be the expert” and “own” the conference. Thus, Frank enacts power to solicit a reciprocal power enactment by the tutee (who might draw on her own authority to offer a solution).
Elise, the tutee, answers: *I might cut that thesis and use the third sentence in my conclusion paragraph, instead. I think that’s what I really meant to say, but I just didn’t figure that out until the end.*

Elise, then, enacts power in return. Is Elise’s enactment of power stronger, or is Frank’s? Even if we understand power on a continuum, I argue, determining degree is essentially impossible. Consider, for example, other possibilities for Elise and Frank’s exchange.

Frank asks, *How might you clarify your thesis?* Elise refuses to respond, or responds only, *I don’t know. What do you think?* Frank continues asking questions, and Elise continues resisting.

Who enacts more power? What if Elise resists because she simply does not know what to say? On the other hand, what if Frank’s wait-time is inadequate?—What if Elise wants to answer, but can not formulate her answers quickly enough? Finally, what if Elise resists because she wants Frank to tell her what to do? And what if Frank finally offers a mini-lecture on how Elise might improve her thesis? Does Frank enact more power by offering his answer, or does Elise enact more by encouraging him to do so? (After all, she gets what she wants.)

Other possibilities complicate the issue further: Suppose Frank asks the thesis question, Elise answers, and then Frank asks and Elise answers more questions concerning other issues, such as the content and organization of Elise’s essay. Suppose Elise leaves the conference having offered much information concerning her thoughts and paper, and she seems to know exactly how she might improve her paper—even without Frank explicitly telling her what to do. Frank demonstrates much control, though, simply by choosing and posing questions. Elise, though, encourages that control by choosing to answer. Finally, suppose Elise initially said she wanted help with comma splices, which her teacher always marks. And suppose her paper is due in an hour.

Or suppose, alternatively, that Elise asks the question: *How might I clarify my thesis?* If Frank responds, *I don’t know. What do you think?* his answer seems strikingly similar to Elise’s response above: a refusal to answer based on the desire to have the other person answer his or her own question. A powerful move, certainly. But such a response might result in Elise’s answering the question herself—another enactment of power. On the other hand, it might frustrate Elise and make her feel manipulated: suppose she guesses that Frank knows the answer but refuses to share it with her. Suppose he does. Or suppose he gives her the answer, with which she disagrees, so she ignores his response.

The dynamics of asking and answering questions in conferences are steeped in issues of power. However, as the above hypothetical scenarios imply, we can not depend simply on looking at questions to explore or explain power in conferencing. We can, however, use the complexity—suggested above—of question and answer interaction as evidence of
power’s complexity, that both tutors and tutees participate in powerful ways in conferences, and that, therefore, a continuum of power enactment exists in conferencing.

Scholars like Black, Roswell, and Blau, Hall and Strauss have also turned to issues such as word count and hedging when exploring power. These approaches, too, I argue, are problematic. If high word count for tutors indicates a more hierarchical conference, for example, what if many of a tutor’s words come in response to a tutee’s request for explanations? What if the tutee manipulates the tutor into doing most of the talking? And what if the tutor’s explanations prevent the tutee from feeling made to guess at something a tutor already knows? Similarly, Blau, Hall, and Strauss argue that tutors use qualifiers to soften the hierarchical nature of their suggestions (44). I speculate, though, many tutees are savvy enough to recognize that a tutor’s suggestion, I think maybe you might need to clarify your thesis, carries much the same meaning as You need to clarify your thesis. (And, interestingly, there seems little difference in both of these statements and the question: Do you need to clarify your thesis? This, again, points to the dangers of focusing too heavily on questions as we examine power in conferencing.)

I argue that understanding power is highly associated with understanding motives, and we can not read each participant’s mind to learn them. Further, each participant’s perceptions of the other’s motives and actions are factors. (For example, what if Frank, above, gives Elise an explanation because he thinks her incapable of her own answer? What if she is simply slow to formulate her answer or, alternatively, is trying to solicit Frank’s explanation?) As Watts, citing Fairclough, writes, “Because . . . it is anchored in and helps to determine what the individual perceives to be social reality, no language can ever be ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’” (2). He continues, “There will always be a point of view, a stance, a hidden or open agenda of assumptions according to which the participants will interact verbally. By the same token, therefore, no discourse can ever be free of power or the exercise of power” (2). And often, we have no way of understanding those stances, agendas, and assumptions.

Examining power in conferencing, then, seems an almost impossible task, and one that can likely never be done exhaustively. We can, however, focus usefully on some specific evidences of power by examining transcripts of conferences. These evidences, I suggest, involve the goals and topics tutees and tutors initiate and are interested in, as well as whether attempts to control conference direction are successful. Finally, as I explain later, exploring power dynamics alone offers little insight: only when we combine evidences of power with evidences of empowerment are our examinations truly useful.

Our coding strategies for evidence of power in conference transcripts draw from Watts’ Power in Family Discourse. His socio-linguistic study involves “the verbal behavior of a close-knit social group, [Watts’] family” (viii), and it stems from his discomfort with researchers’ tendencies to mis-perceive “interruptions”:

The term “interruption,” it seemed to me, was being used almost indiscriminately to refer to occurrences of simultaneous speech caused by
incoming speakers not waiting for current speakers to finish . . . before beginning their turns at talk. I was not worried about such occurrences being defined as interruptions, but rather about the tendency of almost all researchers to evaluate them as speech dysfluency and unacceptable social behavior and to use them as a variable with which to identify and quantify asocial speech behavior. . . .This . . . meant that most of the naturally occurring data that I had collected from social interaction among family members would have to be evaluated negatively. The assessment . . . would automatically be that we are all chronic interrupters. It would also make nonsense of Grice’s principle that, by and large, those engaged in conversation try to remain cooperative. I was loth either to accept this assessment or to do away with the principle of cooperation. (vii-viii)

Watts begins with his idea of “what constitutes power for this type of close-knit group”; he speculates that power “resides in the status an individual is able to establish during the ongoing discourse and that status in this type of group is always negotiable and very frequently negotiated” (3). Watts believes that participants achieve “status . . . during the ongoing discourse by controlling the current topic and manoeuvring oneself into a central position in the structure of social relationships among the family members, which is in the process of being negotiated and developed” (3).

Usefully, Watts redefines terms to clarify his treatment of interruption—a crucial aspect of his study. Specifically, he discusses problems surrounding notions of turn, floor, and topic. Suggesting that “there has been some confusion as to how a turn at talk should best be conceptualized,” Watts explains:

On the one hand, [the turn] appears to be an empirically observable structural unit in conversation, i.e. as a stretch of talk by a participant before and after which there is silence on the part of that speaker. The criterion of silence, however, is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, it may be . . . that a speaker has been prevented from continuing by the intervention of a second speaker, so that we would wish to ask whether or not the first speaker’s stretch of speech constitutes a fully completed turn. Secondly, the second speaker may latch his/her speech onto that of the first speaker and in effect continue what that first speaker was saying, so that we need to ask whether we are dealing with two turns or one. Thirdly, silence may be required before the second speaker begins talking, so that we have the difficulty—from a structural point of view—of deciding whether the silence belongs to the prior turn or the upcoming turn, or whether it has to be divided between them. Fourthly, the second speaker may project the end of the first speaker’s talk and enter shortly before the first speaker has finished talking. (34-35) 4

4 Watt’s concept of interruption encouraged me to transcribe tapes relatively casually; before reading his work, I felt unable to conclusively determine where “real” interruptions occurred in conference talk, and after reading his work, I realized those moments were essentially impossible to determine.
Watts goes on to argue that “one of the most confusing aspects of conversation analysis . . . is the tendency to equate a turn at talk with possession of the conversational floor”; citing Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferis, he explains that “talking rights” have been thought to be transferred by “either the first speaker explicitly (or implicitly) select[ing] the next speaker . . . or not designat[ing] the next speaker at all, whereupon any speaker has the right to continue” (36-7). Watts claims, “to suggest that the ongoing speaker actually vacates the floor by finishing her/his turn at talk is a mistaken way of conceptualizing the term floor in conversation analysis, since in this way no real difference is made between carrying out a turn at talk and occupation of the floor” (37).

Quoting Edelsky, Watts suggests using the term “turn” to refer to “‘an on-record [thus, ‘meant to be heard by all participants’] ‘speaking’ . . . behind which lies an intention to convey a message that is both referential and functional’” (40). Subsequently, he offers the “notion of a floor as temporal space in which participants are ratified by the participation framework to take one or more turns at talk” (44). Watts, again quoting Edelsky, calls the floor “the acknowledged what’s-going-on’ within a psychological time/space” (44). He explains, “Being on the floor means participating in the ‘what’s going on,’ and participation itself is also part of the ‘what’s going on’” (44). Because “true participation involves . . . speaking and . . . listening,” Watts argues we should “consider all the participants who are in one way or another active during the course of the ‘what’s going on’ as being on the floor” (45).

Watts makes the concept of floor so inclusive, in part, to distinguish it from the concept of topic, with which floor has sometimes seemed “equivalent” (44). Topic, he complains, “has been given rather short shrift in the literature,” but it moves “into the centre of the stage” in Watts’ study (47). Watts writes, “Control of the topic, either in tabling topics, selecting and ratifying topics, shifting the perspective of topics, etc., entails activities in which participants are continually involved and for which credit is given or withheld. Thus topic control is a crucial factor in measuring the status of a [participant] and in judging how power is distributed” (47-8). Citing Keenan and Shieffelin, Watts defines topic, in part, “as the ‘question of immediate concern’”; he acknowledges, however, that within the complexity of “free verbal interaction such as we have in the family” the “topics are potentially endless” and sometimes difficult to pinpoint (49).

Watts explains his understanding of how topic functions in conversation; when a topic is “initiat[ed],” he writes:

It will be rated on a scale of relevance for the [conversation participants]. The more relevant the proposition, the greater will be the readiness of the [participants] . . . to develop the topic sequentially through the interaction. In addition, the [participant] who is successful in producing a maximally relevant proposition . . . and having it accepted as a topic will gain in status within the group. Controlling the development of the topic, tabling a new topic, or redirecting the old one relevantly are thus ways of increasing positive face, or one’s status. (50)
Thus when a conversation participant proposes or changes a topic and the others take it up, the initiating participant’s status increases.

Contributors to the topic at hand, however, can also improve status. Watts adds, “Collaborating in the topic (i.e. in Keenan and Schieffelin’s terms making one’s utterance relate in a maximally relevant way to propositions uttered immediately prior to that utterance) is a way of supporting the topic controller’s status in the group and not losing positive face, i.e. maintaining one’s own status” (50). Such a contributor, as well as the topic initiator, can serve as “resource persons,” who Watts defines as “that member from whom relevant information regarding the topic may be sought or who is invested, or invests her/himself, with the authority to provide relevant information” (5-6). He adds, “assuming the position of resource person for a particular topic creates a position of power” (9).

Finally, Watts offers a revised definition of “interruption,” or rather “interruptive behavior,” which he suggests is a type of “intervention behavior” (7). He argues that in research the term interruption “in general . . . has not corresponded to the commonsense, first-order conceptualizations of interruptive behavior by participants in the discourse, who perceive the act of interrupting to be a face-threatening act in the sense of Brown and Levinson (1978), i.e. an act impeding [conversation participants’ freedom] . . . to make full use of the interactional territory they have been granted on taking the floor for a turn at talk” and “endanger[ing] the perceived fabric of interpersonal relationships” (7). Therefore, an interruption no longer simply involves overlapping speech, but is more usefully characterized and functions thus:

Assume a participant in a verbal interaction engaged in developing some aspect of the topic and being prevented from continuing by the intervention of another participant. The intervention may occur prior to the end of the current speaker’s turn, it may occur in a pause in the current speaker’s turn which causes the current speaker to discontinue, or it may occur after the completion of a tone unit and be followed by the original speaker’s turn. If that intervention is perceived by the current speaker to show total disregard for what s/he was saying at the moment of intervention, then the current speaker’s positive face has been threatened and her/his status in the group has been significantly weakened. In other words, power has been exercised over her/him. (106-7)

The effect of an interruption, then, is to lessen the interrupted speaker’s status.

While Watts focuses on conversations involving several participants, his concepts are applicable to one-on-one tutorial dynamics, as well. Watts goes on to complicate his theory with a quantitative approach I find unconvincing, but I borrow from his basic premises: especially his concepts of topic establishment and of resource person (and the significance of those to conversation participants’ demonstrations of power). I also find useful distinguishing between turn and floor; thus, for my purposes, floor is essentially the conference as a whole, and turn becomes a concept I can apply, with justification,
loosely. Finally, Watts’ definition of interruption encourages me not to focus on all overlapping—or almost overlapping—speech moments, many of which seem supportive and can not be conclusively determined to have prematurely ended the initial speaker’s turn. Instead, I more usefully look for moments when, no matter where the second speaker’s talk occurs, the first speaker’s talk seems to have been ignored or dismissed and discontinued.

I designed, tested, and discarded several different coding schemes for power in the transcripts. Interestingly, the one I adopted appeared almost spontaneously, as the result of collaboration with Kate. In one of our initial analysis talks, she discussed some preliminary observations about a conference segment in which the tutor proposed several questions, but the tutee did not respond. She explained, “It’s a discussion, and it’s the [tutee’s] turn. It’s like hitting a tennis ball to an opponent, and the other guy would put it in his pocket” (Ana. 35). Several times before, Kate had mentioned her idea of conversation as a kind of tennis match (3015 J). However, this time, she and I collaborated—adding other elements—to develop a coding schema for power based on that metaphor (Ana. 34-7).

Having realized that coding for all possible evidences of power would be impossible, I planned to begin coding simply according to the instigation of shifts in topic. Kate and I discovered such coding was possible if we thought of the tutor and tutee as players in a tennis match. The scenario works as follows:

On each side of the court are different colored tennis balls, sorted by color into separate bags. For example, red balls are in a bag, yellow balls in another, green balls in another, and purple balls in another. Each player has a bag of each color, and each color corresponds to a topic the conference participants deal with: a different color for each topic. (So instead of four different colors of balls, there are likely many more.)

When a player initiates a topic, he chooses a ball and serves it. That color represents that topic for the rest of the conference.

For example, Frank suggests Elise work on clarifying her thesis. He serves her a yellow ball (which, for the remainder of the conference, represents the thesis topic).

If the other player accepts the topic, she hits the ball back. This goes on until another topic is proposed.

For example, Elise agrees to work on her thesis. Thus, during the subsequent conversation about thesis, Elise and Frank hit the yellow ball back and forth.

If the other player declines the topic, she does not hit the ball back, but rather grabs it and places it into one of her bags.
For example, Elise does not want to work on her thesis, so instead of hitting Frank’s yellow ball back to him, she puts it into her bag.

If the other player proposes a new topic, she serves a different colored ball. This color, again, represents that topic for the rest of the conference.

For example, after placing Frank’s yellow ball in her bag, Elise serves a purple ball: she proposes they work on comma splices.

If the other player accepts the new topic, he hits the served ball back.

For example, Frank agrees to work on comma splices. He hits the purple ball back. He and Elise hit the purple ball back and forth during the exchange about comma splices.

If the other player does not accept the new topic, he grabs the ball and puts it in his bag.

For example, Frank does not want to focus on comma splices, so he puts Elise’s purple ball into his bag.

If the player wants to return to a different topic, he serves a ball representing that topic again.

For example, Frank wants to try again to establish Elise’s thesis as the topic. He serves another yellow ball. Elise may take up his topic (and hit the ball back) or she may bag his ball and serve another of her own. (She might, for example, try hitting another purple ball, or she might try something else—let’s say a red one, representing a particular sentence she’s worried about in paragraph three.)

At no point during the match, however, must the back-and-forth turn-taking continue. Some balls might be ignored, or some balls might be continuously served by the same person without a response from the other.

For example, Frank may want to establish Elise’s thesis as the topic. Since she tends to bag the yellow thesis ball, he may serve yellow balls continuously (perhaps without seeming to give her a chance to speak). Alternatively, he may serve yellow balls, and she may be unresponsive: neither returning those or serving a different ball. An unresponsive tutee might sit back and let the tutor serve ball after ball after ball.
The ball changes color each time the topic shifts.

For example, Frank might serve Elise the yellow thesis ball, Elise might hit it back, Frank might serve a green assignment due date ball, Elise might hit it back, and so on. Just because a ball is served is no guarantee the server will want to continue playing with the ball.

An additional element we added as a result of discussing tutees’ goals in conferences is that whoever initiates the topic gets some credit for the play of that color ball throughout the conference.

For example, assume Elise initiates a purple comma splice ball, and Frank bags it, declining her topic. Later, however, Frank decides working on comma splices is a good idea. He raises that topic again—using a purple ball—and Elise agrees to play with that ball for a while. Although Frank acts powerfully by starting a “new” topic, the fact that Elise was the first to propose that topic is important, as we will see later on.

The first element of coding for power involved identifying shifts in topic (balls served), identifying who initiated the topic (who served the ball), and identifying where turns carrying each topic end (usually just before a new ball was served). While we didn’t physically color-code all portions of all transcripts, we kept track of whose ball was in play by labeling the line starting the new topic with “T” (for “Topic”) next to the speaker’s initial. We also indicated shifts in topic simply by drawing lines across the page between the end of a topic and the beginning of a new one. We could then visualize the ball color changing at each line. (Some transcript portions were actually colored; however, this proved time consuming and less useful than the colored-tennis-ball concept itself.) Finally, we especially paid attention to moments in which a participant abruptly “bagged” another’s ball—that is, dismissed or ignored another’s topic (or attempted resource contribution) in a face-threatening manner.

In a subsequent round of coding, we incorporated a version of Watts’ “resource person” concept. We labeled with “RP” (for “Resource Person”) passages in which a participant offered significant information contributing to the development of the topic underway. We did not consider backchannel talk a resource contribution; rather, we read for more substantial contributions to the conversation. A more specific explanation of resource contributions follows each of the following two coded transcript excerpts. In general, such responses contributed to the conversation some material that the listener presumably did not know and/or was interested in hearing from the speaker. Additionally, reading one’s text allowed one to serve as resource person. 

5 Sam and Kate disagreed on this point. Kate felt that reading one’s text indeed counted as a resource contribution, while Sam felt the act more neutral. During analysis, I honored both of their perspectives; I encouraged Kate to code those passages as resource contributions, and I encouraged Sam not to. So that I could compare our responses, I coded both ways. In the end, I sided with Kate; however, I agree with Sam.
A sample section coded for power, and with color-coding clarified in parentheses after the speaker’s initial, is included below. “S” refers to Sam, the tutor, “K” refers to Ken, the tutee, “T” indicates the proposal of a topic, and “RP” indicates the speaker acts as a resource person. The participants are discussing Ken’s literary analysis assignment; his essay is about Kate Chopin’s “Story of an Hour.” For ease in reading, a line as well as a “T” marks each topic shift. Also for ease of reading, I have not signaled minimal overlaps in speech. (A complete transcript of this conference appears in Appendix E.)

T  S: (serves yellow ball) Okay, so before we get started, let me ask you, um, like what was the assignment? What did you have to do with ???

RP  K: (returns yellow ball) Okay, we’re supposed to read, we get to pick, we actually picked a story out of what we’ve been reading. We’ve read like, I’d say fifteen stories, and so I picked this story to write an essay on. Analytical. To analyze the story and, um, which is pretty much, you know, go through line-by-line or whatever and pick out some things that you think and analyze ???

T  S: (serves red ball) Okay so what things did you choose to analyze?

RP  K: (returns red ball) I chose a lot of like metaphor kind of things and um
S: (returns red ball) Okay, so what do you mean by metaphor kind of things?

RP  K: (returns red ball) Like, well, like for instance when she’s looking out the window and she’s looking at the clouds and they’re all um, they’re going towards the west, and they’re kind of like stacked on top of each other. I kind of looked at that as something like her husband’s death and the dead people, all the dead soldiers going towards heaven, kind of, because the sun sets in the west, you know, so if the clouds are over towards the west and they’re stacked up, you know, I don’t know but and some other things, um
S: (returns red ball) Okay, so, well, well basically you analyze it in, in light of metaphor.
K: (returns red ball) Right.

T  S: (serves purple ball) Okay, so, so what is your overall, like, like thesis or, what is your overall idea?

RP  K: (returns purple ball) See, I don’t even know if I’ve got a thesis.
S: (returns purple ball) Okay
RP  K: (returns purple ball) That’s probably why this is a bad paper, but um

T  K: (Serves orange ball) Do you want me to read it to you?
RP  S: (returns orange ball) Yeah, yeah, if you don’t mind.

that simply reading one’s text aloud does not necessarily constitute a particularly strong enactment of power. (After all, some tutees resisted, but tutors convinced them to read.)
Sam and Ken’s interchange, then, shows Sam as the initiator of topics; in this case, his questions direct the conference. But Ken agrees to answer Sam’s questions, encouraging Sam in that control. Finally, Ken proposes his own topic: whether he should read his paper, and Sam agrees. Therefore, Ken also enacts power, taking control of the conference’s direction. (Of course, we might also point out that Sam could have said “no,” and the conference might not have taken Ken’s direction.)

Ken also serves as a significant resource person: in each interchange he readily contributes information that develops Sam’s topic (and that proves useful to the conference). For example, Ken offers a description of his assignment, his approach to the assignment, and even an assessment of his lack of thesis as reason for his paper’s being “bad.” Sam, on the other hand, proposes topics but does not serve as resource person.6

Although this coding method is relatively straightforward, it was not always easy to implement. We sometimes struggled to determine what constituted a topic shift. Why, for example, did we mark as a topic shift Sam’s question “Okay, so what things did you choose to analyze?” but not his later question, “Okay, so what do you mean by metaphor kind of things?” Sam and I worked through that issue together, deciding that the first question marked a shift in topic from what Ken’s assignment had been to how he approached the assignment (even though Ken mentions analysis in his explanation); the second question, however, merely asks for clarification of or elaboration on a point Ken already made—and does not constitute a topic shift. As we coded, however, we found other similarly tricky passages. We also began to realize that subtle shifts, such as the one Sam signals with his analysis question, were more difficult to pinpoint than major, more explicit shifts (such as the shift to the thesis/purple topic and the subsequent shift to the reading/orange topic above). Ultimately, the tutors and I found that we could code major topic shifts with strong consistency. More subtle shifts, such as the analysis shift, were easier to overlook. However, they also seemed less crucial to distinguish: they generally involved statements or questions, by the topic initiator, which contributed to the development of (and to subtle shifts in) her or his topic. Thus, we began to consider these shifts “internal topic shifts” and to focus our attention more on major shifts. Later in our process, we might accordingly have labeled the red section above as a continuation of the yellow.

A second, more complex example follows. In the passage, “S” stands for Sam, the tutor, “B” stands for “Belle,” the tutee, and other coding markers are as above. I have added an additional element to the coding, however, in that all passages in which Belle initiates the topic (or in which Sam revives a topic Belle initiated) are italicized. The passages in normal font involve Sam’s topics. Belle’s conference focused on polishing several

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6 Sam suggested that in instances such as this, Sam might make a resource contribution by agreeing that Ken should read the paper. That is, Sam knows the logistics of conferencing and, in a sense, he contributes to the conversation by pointing to those logistics. In the sense of contributing to the conversation, though, Sam’s utterance here is obviously less substantial than most of Ken’s comments earlier in the passage.
business documents. Rather than completely reading her texts before discussing them, Belle frequently reads passages (indicated in all capital letters) and pauses to work on specific issues. The segment below is from the beginning of the conference; Sam has just offered Belle a seat.

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**T** B: *(serves yellow ball)* I’ve had almost everyone, this is my first time with you, so

**S** *(returns yellow ball)* Okay, well

**RP** B: *(returns yellow ball)* It’ll be the first time of many, as long as I’m taking English

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**T** S: *(serves green ball)* What can I help you with?

**RP** B: *(returns green ball)* We had to write, this is, I’m in business English

**S** *(returns green ball)* Okay

**RP** B: *(returns green ball)* And we had to write a memo where we were like um corporate managers for Blockbuster

**S** *(returns green ball)* Okay

**RP** B: *(returns green ball)* And we had to write a memo and then we had to write a survey

**S** *(returns green ball)* Okay. So you’re pretending as though you’re the corporate manager?

**RP** B: *(returns green ball)* Right

**S** *(returns green ball)* That’s what you said? Okay

**RP** B: *(returns green ball)* And we’re sending a memo telling all corporate, let’s see, like these are the corporate headquarters and we’re just and we’re sending it to all the retail managers, we’re sending them a memo to tell them about the survey

**S** *(returns green ball)* [Okay, okay, so it’s to inform them of the survey]

**RP** B: *(returns green ball)* Right and we attach the survey to the memo

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**T** S: *(serves purple ball)* Okay, well if you’d go ahead and read the survey, I mean the memo for me

**RP** B: *(returns purple ball)* CORPORATE HEADQUARTERS HAS ASKED ME

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**T, RP** B: *(serves orange ball)* this is rough, I haven’t proofread it

**S** *(returns orange ball)* [Alright] [That’s fine, that’s fine]

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**T, RP** B: *(serves purple ball)* CORPORATE HEADQUARTERS HAS ASKED ME TO CONTACT ALL RETAIL MANAGERS TO TAKE PART IN A SALES PERFORMANCE SURVEY. THIS PROJECT WILL HELP OUR SALES DEPARTMENT UNDERSTAND
B: (serves pink ball) That’s not spelled right, is it?
RP S: (returns pink ball) No, it’s, that’s correct.
B: (returns pink ball) CUSTOMER

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T S: (serves purple ball) Actually, um, okay well, we’ll come back to that go ahead
RP B: (returns purple ball) UNDERSTAND CUSTOMERS’ INTAKE, PROMOTIONS, RETAIL PRODUCTS, and RETAIL FIGURES. THE SURVEY WILL COVER SIX QUESTIONS TO PROVIDE THE NECESSARY INFORMATION FOR MARKETING, ADVERTISING, AND SALES. EACH QUESTION WILL ALLOW RETAIL MANAGERS THE OPPORTUNITY TO PERSONALLY ANSWER EACH QUESTION. PLEASE RESPOND TO EACH QUESTION AS ACCURATELY AS POSSIBLE, BECAUSE YOUR RESPONSE IS VITAL TO US. RETURN THE ATTACHED SURVEY NO LATER THAN NOVEMBER 29, 2001.

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T S: (serves brown ball) Okay. And, let’s see, (long pause [Sam seems to be reading]) internal memorandum ??? Blockbuster, isn’t it one word?
RP B: (returns brown ball) I think so.
S: (returns brown ball) Okay. I’m just gonna do like that.

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T S: (serves white ball) Okay so with the memo you’re just suppose to as you’ve done here like just let them know that they’re sending the surv, that you’re
RP B: (returns white ball) [Right
RP S: sending the survey, what, the purpose of the survey, like what it’s gonna help out, and that you request that they do it as accurately as they can. You cover all that.

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T, RP S: (serves beige ball) As far as this little thing is concerned right here, you would put the s apostrophe, say like um, like if it would be intakes instead of intake
RP B: (returns beige ball) You use customer intake
RP S: (returns beige ball)Yeah (pause) ??? intake, exactly. Or, or you could’ve like you could say our customers’ intake, or intakes, I should say, but
RP B: (returns beige ball) I like our customers’ intake
S: (returns beige ball) Okay
RP B: (returns beige ball) Can we put our, that’s a good idea, our customers’ intake (writing?)
RP S: (returns beige ball) Mm-hmm.

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T S: (serves olive ball) Okay, okay and then right here in this sentence, can you tell me if you see anything?

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T B: (serves teal ball) Is she recording our session?
RP S: (returns real ball) Yeah.
B: (returns teal ball) Okay good, cause I thought, I was wondering

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RP  S: (returns teal ball) Yeah, yeah she is, she’s recording our session  
B: (returns teal ball) Okay

T  S: (serves olive ball) Uh, I mean, do you see anything, or what would you say about that sentence?

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T  B: (serves maroon ball) If you, if you, okay, if you were one of the retail managers and you just saw the memo, would this clearly explain to you?

RP  S: (returns maroon ball) I would say yes, I mean, I mean, okay look you say CORPORATE HEADQUARTERS HAS ASKED ME TO CONTACT OUR RETAIL MANAGERS TO TAKE PART IN A SALES okay, so that says like right there from the get-go what you’re doing. Okay then, and then THE PROJECT WILL HELP OUR SALES DEPARTMENT UNDERSTAND and blah blah blah blah blah and  
B: (returns maroon ball) Our customers’ intake

RP  S: (returns maroon ball) Yeah, and so forth and so on, and what that’s saying is like you know that like it’s saying the purpose of the project, so you, when you start off saying like what you have to do, two, you’re saying the purpose of the project, okay, and then three you’re describing the the survey itself.

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T  S: (serves lavender ball) Okay, I’m not sure if you have to, if you would need to capitalize survey, okay, what do you think of that?

RP  B: (returns lavender ball) I’d have to put the title of what it is, the Sales Performance Survey so like you’re saying I wouldn’t have it capitalized if it just said survey  
S: (returns lavender ball) Okay so you want to change that  
B: (returns lavender ball) Mm-hmm

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T, RP  S: (serves maroon ball) Okay, and then you say you know the survey will cover the questions, okay ??? it is, and then you get even more specific and talk about the questions, and then you, you know, request that they respond accurately and give them the date that they need to respond by.  
B: (returns maroon ball) So it’s okay?

RP  S: (returns maroon ball) I would say so.  
B: (returns maroon ball) Okay.

RP  S: (returns maroon ball) Like if I was a manage, if I was a manager at a Blockbuster and I received this, I would, I would know what to do.  
B: (returns maroon ball) Okay

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T  S: (seems to serve olive ball again) Um, but there is a grammatical problem with this sentence.  
(TS-B1-2)

What is easy to see is that Belle and Sam both initiate topics, and both contribute to the development of each other’s topics. However, both sometimes decline or switch quickly away from the other’s topics. For example, when Belle wants to look at spelling/serves
pink ball, Sam answers her question, but quickly encourages her to continue reading, which she does. Later, however, Belle “bags” Sam’s olive ball—his question about a particular sentence—twice. Each of the topics she serves instead, however, receives progressively more attention by Sam. Both Sam and Belle, then, participate in controlling the conference direction via their topics—Belle sometimes especially strongly, as she serves her own topic rather than responding to Sam’s.

Further, both participants often serve as a resource person, offering significant information that helps develop topics. Useful here is an explanation of what earns the participants the “RP” label—that is, why some lines are coded “RP” and others are not. In the first extended topic (green), for example, Belle is labeled “RP” because she offers important information: an explanation of the assignment. Sam is never the resource person in this interchange because he only makes statements and asks questions soliciting confirmation of his understanding. As in later sections, Belle is the resource person when offering that confirmation.

Next, Belle becomes the resource person (in several interchanges) simply by virtue of reading her text.

Both parties serve as resource by offering information concerned with “corrections”—that is, by drawing on their own knowledge to offer useful information. Sam offers a resource contribution when he responds to Belle’s question about spelling and when offering corrections, such as the apostrophe. Belle is the resource person when offering her own ideas about corrections, such as how to use capital letters with her document title. Similarly, she is the resource person when affirming that “Blockbuster” is one word.

Assessments of texts were also labeled as resource contributions. Sam is resource person as he explains, in response to Belle’s question, why her text is understandable (maroon sections). Also, in the white section, Sam does not get credit for resource contribution simply by repeating what Belle said she was trying to do. However, near the end of the white section, Sam becomes a resource person as he assesses the text; he affirms that it has achieved what Belle has confirmed it should do.

Finally, topics could also serve as resource contributions, depending on whether significant information one party possessed was offered within the topic. For example, in the beige section above, Sam proposes a topic: “As far as this little thing is concerned right here, you would put the s apostrophe.” He offers not just something to talk about but also information (based on his knowledge) to develop that topic. Conversely, Belle’s topic in the teal section, “Is she recording our session?” merely offers a topic—and invites Sam to make a resource contribution.

Thus, at this point in our coding, we understood resource contributions in a broad sense; many utterances—almost anything that offered significant information to the conversation—could be considered resource. Mainly, items not considered resource were
statements and questions simply reiterating what another participant had said or asking for confirmation that an utterance had been correctly understood. Similarly, backchannel talk—casual, supportive, “yeahs,” “rights,” and “okays” for example, were not considered resource contributions. (In Chapter Five, I discuss the strengths and weaknesses we discovered in this approach.)

As is easily evident from this passage, in Belle and Sam’s conference, both parties influenced the conference direction, and both contributed significantly as resource persons. Accordingly evident is that both Belle and Sam enact power, to varying (and unquantifiable) extents, throughout the session.

Finally, when coding for power, we focused mainly on topic and resource contributions. However, as I explain in Chapter Five, our explorations of empowerment also strongly influenced our understandings of power. Further, not emphasized in this chapter are the less formal transcript analyses I invited the tutors to engage in. That is, as they studied and as we discussed the transcripts, I encouraged them to articulate observations and reflections not relating explicitly to our coding procedures but to any thoughts they wanted to share concerning power (and empowerment) in the conferences. They readily did so, offering significant contributions that were audio recorded as we worked.7

THE TUTORS’ PERCEPTIONS OF EMPOWERMENT

I also collaborated with Kate and Sam to develop coding approaches for empowerment in the transcripts. First, however, I wanted to understand how they perceived empowerment. Therefore, empowerment was also a topic of our discussions (as well as of some writing I asked them to compose) prior to our formal analysis sessions. In our one-on-one talks, the tutors again shared interesting and insightful comments. Before I present them, however, a reminder of my operational definition of empowerment may be helpful.

In Chapter Two, I operationally defined empowerment significant in writing conferences according to two categories: practical and political. Practical empowerment refers to tutees’ ability (and sense of that ability) to control their writing—to make it achieve the goals they and others set for it. Thus to empower tutees is to enable them to have that control; tutees achieve practical empowerment through a combination of learning, developing transferable skills they can later implement independently, and gaining confidence in their abilities. Thus practical empowerment is reflected in intellectual autonomy over one’s writing.

Political empowerment, on the other hand, refers to tutees’ ability (and sense of that ability) to impact the world. Empowering tutees thus means helping them to develop a critical consciousness, through which they understand knowledge as social construct,

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7 A good example of this more casual—but highly useful—analysis is Kate’s “car-driving” metaphor, which involves both power and empowerment. It appears in the following section.
worlds as transformable, and themselves as potential creators of knowledge and transformers of worlds. Finally, empowerment in perhaps its strongest sense combines the practical and the political; it enables critical literacy, in which students draw on their language skills to work toward social justice.

Through our discussions, I realized that Kate and Sam again shared many of my thoughts concerning empowerment—especially in the practical sense. That is, both pointed toward learning, toward developing transferable skills, and toward confidence-building as associated with empowerment. Although they did not quite connect these aspects into an overall definition of empowerment, their verbal and written explorations of the term did point, without my direction, to those ideas. As I show later, Kate brought to our discussions a stronger sense of political empowerment than did Sam; she focused especially on giving students a sense of control over their lives and their worlds. Sam, with minor prompting, also began to make connections concerning the political nature of writing center work. In general, though, Sam seemed to enter the data analysis part of our work with a stronger sense of power dynamics in conferencing than of empowerment; Kate demonstrated a strong sense of both.

In a way that reiterates the fact that neither the enactment of power nor the authority underlying it are inherently negative, both tutors immediately linked tutor power with tutee empowerment. Sam even partially defined power as “the ability to empower” (Ana. 87); he initially stated, “I think that I really show my power when students do become empowered . . . But . . . not every conference is as successful as other conferences” (70). As I mentioned earlier, he considered power something through which he could help others learn—by explaining a concept, for example. And he recognized that not feeling like an expert seemed to diminish his power (84-5, 89-90); that is, when Sam felt less like an authority, he felt less able to enact power. Kate, too, felt that “with your power you can empower others”; she offered a different explanation, however: “I think that even if someone comes in feeling insecure they can go out feeling more empowered. . . . The person, when they come in and they perceive that you have more power and more knowledge than they do, they need affirmation from you that they’re okay. So they need, you have to maintain some position of power in order for that to mean anything” (4).8

Kate’s and Sam’s comments above point to some of their concepts of empowerment, which they articulated fairly clearly during our analysis period. Again, they often offered similar ideas. Sam initially defined empowerment simply as “learning” and as “what the client gains from his or her conference” (87). Acknowledging that “empowerment’s a tricky word,” Sam explained that tutees could be empowered by accomplishing specific, tutee-generated learning goals or by coming without specific goals to conferences and learning something they find useful: “Empowerment . . . depends on what the client’s

8 As in the previous sections, we were working from the tutors’ perceptions of power; thus these comments continue to use key terms casually and to suggest power as possession. I argue that authority is the “possession” underlying power enactments; thus Kate might have instead said “they perceive that you have more authority and more knowledge than they do. . . . You have to maintain some position of authority.”
looking for at the beginning of the conference. Like, ‘My teacher nails me on commas. Okay, I need to learn what I’m doing wrong because [she’s] just putting comma comma comma comma comma. I don’t know what I’m doing wrong.’ You can empower them [by helping them learn to use commas]” (74-5). On the other hand, Sam added, “Lots of times . . . they’ll come in knowing that they need help, but they don’t know what they need help with. And then I think that’s when real empowerment, or real learning, so to speak [can happen]. . . . They’re just like, ‘Man, I keep getting these grades. I don’t know what to do.’ . . . And then you teach them . . . how to go about writing a literary analysis [for example], and they’re just like ‘wow, I never knew that before’” (75).

Kate, too, identified empowerment as—in part—learning: “Ultimately, what I consider most empowering for anyone is learning a skill that he/she can later perform independently” (93). Kate’s idea is reflected in Sam’s suggestion that real empowerment involves acquiring transferable skills (75-7). Sam proposed that we might divide empowerment into two categories: “temporary” and “permanent” (76); for example, tutees who “learn” something to improve a particular piece of writing but who can not later apply that learning to other tasks have experienced only “temporary” empowerment. On the other hand, tutees who gain a transferable skill they can apply later on, he suggested, experience “permanent” empowerment (74-6).

Finally, Kate perceived increasing tutee confidence as an especially significant aspect of empowerment. Offering a personal narrative as an analogy, Kate explained:

At some point, all of us have to interact with some thing or someone to overcome some confidence barrier that holds us back from becoming more autonomous. For example, I always feel inadequate when it comes to mechanical skills. After contemplating my clogged bathroom sink drain for many months and moaning because I couldn’t do it myself and didn’t have the money to hire a plumber, I got a tremendous boost in confidence when I finally dared to get out my single pair of pliers, take the pipes loose under my bathroom sink, clear the clog, AND put it all back together again. Yes, the job took me 2-3 times longer than it would have taken a professional, but the fact that I did it, made it that much easier for me to try to fix other things that I had always told myself I was too inept to tackle. (94)

Connecting her story with writing center issues, Kate added, “I suggest that all of the students who come to the WC lack some sort of confidence in themselves as writers and maybe as communicators. . . . If students were truly confident that their ideas were valid and their writing was perfect, they wouldn’t come to the WC to get feedback from other individuals” (94); thus, Kate suggested we may empower tutees in conferences by helping them gain something “very diffuse and immeasurable: confidence that their ideas are important and that they can achieve something without someone deciding everything for them” (93).
In short, Kate and Sam pointed to the three issues I incorporate in my definition of practical empowerment: empowerment involves learning, acquiring skills tutees can put to later use independently, and gaining confidence. I was also interested, however, to learn how Sam and Kate thought such empowerment might be accomplished in conferences. Although they both acknowledged questions as powerful tools, both tutors also generally associated questioning with non-directive tutoring, and approaches such as giving mini-lectures with directive tutoring. Our initial discussions of empowerment focused generally on these categories of approaches.

Sam maintained that empowerment could happen through both direct and indirect techniques; he summarized his position: “If I had to choose between the two I would say maybe indirect might result in more empowerment, but I think that we need some direction”; “I think it has to be somewhere in the middle, . . . you can only do so much with this one, and you can only do so much with this one” (77). Sam cited possibilities for tutees to discover their own knowledge via a tutor’s non-directive, questioning approach; however, he also cited the difficulty of formulating questions conducive to that discovery:

Say they don’t have a thesis. I’ll ask them, “What are you trying to say? What are you trying to argue?” And they’ll answer. . . . Sometimes in situations like that I feel like they’re the ones with the answers; they just don’t know they have the answers. That’s what I was talking about asking the right questions: it’s a matter of doing that because sometimes I just ask the wrong questions, and we don’t get anywhere, but sometimes you can ask the right questions, and the next thing you know, they’ll tell you the thesis, what they think supports it [things they didn’t even seem to know they knew]. (79-80)

On the other hand, Sam suggested that some tutees become frustrated with questions and seem to prefer directive approaches, which sometimes seem effective (64-6, 77-9). He also acknowledged, however, that by avoiding questioning approaches he risks “taking over the conference and . . . telling [tutees] everything, rather than giving them a chance to think and make a decision about what’s going on with their paper” (65).

Kate seemed to hold less value than Sam in directive conferencing approaches. She oriented her position around this question: “Is the purpose for [the tutor] to tell the [tutee] what [the tutor] knows, or is the purpose to draw out of the [tutee] what the [tutee] can do?” (1). Offering a metaphor—driving a car—for tutoring, she explained that the tutor might “decide, and not consciously”: “We’ve got one half hour. We’ve got to drive this car over the finish line. And we both can’t drive it. I’m better at it than you [the tutee], so I’m going to drive the car, and you just sit back and relax” (1). Kate went on to explain that a more useful approach is to let the student drive, even though it risks the student “driving into the ditch” (1-2). In short, she argued that non-directive approaches—letting the tutee drive—enable the tutor to “draw out of the [tutee] what the [tutee] can do,” a more empowering experience than having the tutor simply share his or her knowledge (1-2). She added, however, that tutors often work differently under pressure: “But you know
with only half an hour, you’ve just got to get that car over the finish line, and who can do it better than me? I mean, that’s sort of what happens a lot. I [sometimes decide to drive the car] . . . But I wonder if that’s really satisfying to the [tutee]” (2-3). Indeed, Kate strongly connected empowerment—especially in the sense of gaining confidence—with the tutee’s active participation in learning. At the same time, though, she acknowledged that tutors may opt to “drive the car” out of good intentions: “There’s that thing about authority where you want the person to be a success; they haven’t got to learn to flounder, and the best thing to do is just to physically pick them up, put them on the track” (3).9

Finally, obvious during our initial discussions was that Kate had a much stronger conception than Sam of the political nature of writing instruction. Her ideas come out clearly in writings she composed for English 3301; in them, she engaged with a variety of texts relevant to this study’s foci. For example, in a mid-term essay exploring Mortensen and Kirsch’s “On Authority in the Study of Writing” in connection with course readings by, among others, Faigley, Bartholomae, Elbow, Perl, and Bizzell, Kate concludes:

From the class readings so far, it is possible to see why Mortensen and Kirsch have raised the discussion of the need for some alternate model of authority that shares the power between students and teachers. Writing only self-expressive discourse seems to be a dead-end street if the writer keeps all the authority to him-/herself and does not connect to an audience or the community at large to create rhetoric that is significant to others. At the same time, traditions imply that the status quo is sufficient, and I must question whether conforming to the authority and traditions of a discourse community can stifle writers and inhibit possibilities to create something new and different. (3301K E5).

In discussions of empowerment in a political sense, Kate drew on her experiences working in a welfare office as well as living overseas and adapting to a different language. Although acknowledging the tension above, she encouraged the teaching and learning of mainstream (in our case, academic) discourses for all tutees for several reasons. First, she suggested that such instruction is important because our language influences how others perceive us:

There’s a place for slang and there’s a place where you don’t use slang because it’s not just going to be a matter of personal choice; people are going to make judgments about you. And people do make judgments about sloppy writing without grammar. And you can always say you don’t care about it, . . . but in some situations, . . . if you’re oblivious to what other people think, then you might as well go live in a cave somewhere. Because we’re all subject to what other people think. (Ana. 16)

9 In English 3301, Kate had written an essay in response to Mortensen and Kirsch’s “On Authority in the Study of Writing”; in that essay and in other conversations and writings she embraced their notion of “caring authority” (3301K Essay).
Kate also found such instruction empowering because she perceived value in the ability to communicate among various groups and communities. While she agreed (with critics of the literacy myth) that this ability did not necessarily guarantee increased success or status, she associated it with increased personal autonomy and feelings of self-worth:

Well look at me, I’m not a millionaire. . . . [But] I’m empowered by my knowledge I have. It’s not having a big basket of knowledge, but I have more control over my life. I can influence what happens to me. I saw that when I was working at the welfare department. . . . If you get a nasty letter from an insurance company or the IRS and you can’t comprehend it and you can’t respond to it, and you can’t defend yourself, . . . if you can’t communicate effectively and keep control over things yourself, . . . it’s like the whole universe can come in on your head. (16)

On the other hand, she suggested, learning could help people feel more positively about themselves and more in control of their lives and futures. For example, she reminisced:

I remember one particular client who was a young black woman . . ., who had two small children and could not read or write. She could only sign forms with an “X.” But one day she came into the office . . . and she was beaming . . . . She told me that her daughter . . . had taught her how to write her own name, and she was genuinely proud to sign the documents in front of me to show me her new skill. She told me that she wanted to learn more so that she could help her children with their schoolwork. While working as a social worker, I saw many times that a large portion of my clients felt that their lives were totally out of their own control, and a lack of education was a huge contributing factor to their feelings of helplessness and frustration, their inadequate ability to express themselves, and a general lack of confidence that they could impact their surroundings and make changes to their own lives. (93)

Similarly, Kate offered a personal example from her overseas experience. Beginning, “people do not feel like they have control in a situation if they haven’t learned different types of discourse, and their self-esteem suffers,” Kate recounted: “It’s like another language. How did I feel in a situation with a language that I didn’t know? I felt [small]; I felt paranoid. . . . Then I felt withdrawn. . . . When I first moved to another country, I couldn’t even raise my hand to tell the bus driver, ‘You’ve missed my stop’” (17).

Because people are “not isolated” and are “social animals,” Kate maintained, “you can never be totally autonomous without [another person] to acknowledge you” (17). And if differences in discourse use may prevent one person from acknowledging another, the inability to communicate in other discourses may trap a person in communities in which he or she is fluent (17). Therefore, Kate asserted, teaching discourses is essential: “That’s oppression, to me, if you tell a person oh, well you don’t need it. . . . That’s almost . . . a method of control if you don’t teach people how to operate in different groups. . . . If we say that all that’s not important, we’re lying” (17). She concluded, “I’ve read some things you know, where it’s sort of like the resistance model. Okay, we don’t have to talk like white middle class to be heard. Well, oh, yes you do. It hasn’t changed yet” (17).
In contrast to Kate, Sam initially seemed not to have considered writing center work as political. When asked whether he saw it as such, Sam requested further prompting. I briefly described criticism that writing centers acculturate students into university practices that are hierarchical and elitist, partly because they involve academic discourse. Sam immediately suggested that academic discourse might be “political . . . because the language of it favors one particular culture” (80). He continued, “You never think about that when you’re doing it, . . . but . . . I think it’s true to a certain extent, that we’re teaching these people from these different cultures to all write and speak the same way” (80). When I mentioned Grimm’s notion of “changing gates to the academic literacy club,” Sam responded,

I’m all for it if there’s something that needs to be changed, and I’m not being unsympathetic to other people or where they’re coming from, but it’s like, you choose your battles. But how much are you really going to accomplish . . . [for example by] trying to change the language? . . . If they’re not going to use the mainstream language, it seems to me like all they’re going to do instead of changing the gate is create a completely different academic club . . . Until academic discourse changes—that’s not going to change any time soon—are you helping or hurting your students by teaching them things . . . that aren’t [mainstream]? (82)

Near the end of that segment of our conversation, Sam concluded, “My position right now, just off-hand initially, is that I think they’re right to a certain extent. I think that the English language is an offshoot of white males . . . but how much of, how connected is colonization to speaking modern English? Okay, there’s an obvious connection between the two. I have to think more about it” (83). Thus, Sam’s initial (and developing) position seemed similar to Kate’s, and Sam appeared interested in grappling with political issues associated with empowerment in writing centers.

Next, although Sam’s response again seemed spontaneous and Kate’s seemed more carefully thought-out, both tutors reached similar conclusions concerning whether learning academic discourse might be harmful: namely that learning or using a new discourse does not necessarily mean the loss of a former discourse. Kate argued, “That kid on the street [who is not fluent in white, mainstream discourse] isn’t going to be able to deal with bureaucracy. He’s not going to be able to communicate in the language of the power. And he doesn’t have to give up being in that group to do that” (17). Kate clarified, “It doesn’t mean [someone] has to give up what [he or she has]; it’s just to teach them a variety of responses so it’s no longer so confining” (17). Later, Kate reiterated, “It’s not making someone to give up what they have or say that what they have is less; it’s just the wrong situation for it . . . It’s not a compromise; it’s getting rid of fears and anxieties and a lot of things . . . I think that it empowers people to be able to [communicate in other circles] (17-8). Sam’s immediate position was similar, but reflected different reasoning: “I don’t think that changing the way someone conveys something is necessarily going to change the way they think about something. If
I become fluent in Spanish, that’s not going to change the way I think about [a text]” (83).

Finally, drawing on a reading from English 3301, Kate added an additional element to her argument favoring the writing center’s promotion of academic discourse. She explained that tutees “have to decide [whether using academic discourse is] beneficial to them” (10). She continued:

That’s what it was saying in that article. I think it was [by] Patricia Bizzell, was that the teacher has the responsibility—and I think that tutors should look at themselves as a form of teacher—that the teacher has the responsibility to explain to the student possible benefits of using academic discourse. They don’t have to conform to academic writing, but there’s the cost you might pay for not doing it. You know, you have to inform. And then it’s the student’s ultimate decision whether they’re going to join a consensus group or whether they’re going to resist. (10)

Thus instruction in academic discourse, Kate suggested, is especially empowering when students understand the potential effects of, and make their own choices about, using it.

Although their responses did not always mirror each other’s, I could see from our initial discussions that Kate and Sam conceived of practical empowerment in much the same terms as I: as learning, developing transferable skills, and building confidence. They also thought it possibly best encouraged by non-directive conferencing methods. Further, I realized that Kate had already given significant thought to political issues of conferencing and writing instruction. With only minor prompting, Sam also demonstrated a developing position on (and apparent interest in) the issues significant to this study. Thus, we were ready to move further toward coding transcripts for empowerment.

CODING EMPOWERMENT

Encouraged because the tutors’ ideas about empowerment were similar to my own, I began working with them to develop a coding scheme. However, during our conversations, I had tried not to influence their comments and had avoided directing them toward other terminology important to this study. That is, they did not mention, nor did I initially introduce, terms such as critical consciousness or social construction or intellectual autonomy, although we often “talked around” those subjects. (Similarly, I did not share my distinction between power and authority until later in the project.) In short, I thought it more fair to invite Kate and Sam to explore their thoughts and then later introduce to them other concepts and language I wanted us to be able to deal with.  

10 My reasoning for this approach was to prevent myself from becoming a “traditional teacher”—telling them what to know. Further, through this approach I was generally able to avoid “guess-what-I’m-thinking” type questions in our discussions. In retrospect, however, I realize I basically only put off the “teaching” until later. Asking Kate and Sam to share with me their thoughts on what such terminology means would have been both appropriate and useful. I seem to have been working from an unfair assumption that they lacked a working knowledge of this more advanced terminology, although they very likely did not.
I gave Kate and Sam a list of topics associated with empowerment, and I explained to them my definitions of terminology we had not previously used but that appeared on the list. We then worked from the list to create coding approaches; the tutors collaborated with me to speculate about potential evidences of empowerment. Perhaps because I worked with him first, but also because of his meticulous attention to detail, Sam was especially integral to developing and refining our coding scheme, as I explain later. Through our work, we revised the list—sometimes rewording, sometimes rearranging, and sometimes adding or cutting. A final version appears below; I discuss each point in more detail later. To clarify between “topic” in the sense I employed in coding for power, I call each of the entries below “events,” as all are possible occurrences in conferences. The numbering and ordering of events is not intended to suggest hierarchy or ranking of importance; rather, the numbers were useful in coding, as I explain.

Empowerment happens when tutees:

1) Maintain ownership of text and ideas, rather than having someone else tell them what to think or write.

2) Maintain ownership of learning: participate in establishing learning goals and have those goals taken seriously.

3) Gain warranted confidence in writing abilities—in ability to improve writing, to have something to say, etc.

4) Gain transferable skills for other writing tasks (including decision-making skills); move toward intellectual autonomy as a writer.

5) Become (or begin to become) fluent in academic discourses.

6) Understand writing as a social act, as having potential to make and communicate meaning.

7) Collaborate to co-construct knowledge rather than simply receiving dispensed knowledge.

8) Develop a critical consciousness; that is, begin to understand knowledge as a social construction and themselves as participants in that construction.

9) Understand the socially constructed and political nature of academic discourse. Understand how using academic discourse may negatively affect them.

10) Move toward critical literacy—in the sense of using writing/language for political activism. Requires understanding of knowledge, self, and world as social
constructs and as transformable, and of self’s potential to change their own circumstances, universities, societies, etc.

11) Gain an approach to the writing task at hand.

To make certain that we shared understandings about the events, the tutors and I discussed each in detail. Additionally, we explored and recorded potential evidences for each that we anticipated would enable us to code for empowerment. Below, I briefly explain our concepts of the events and of the potential evidences of empowerment we associated with each topic. Afterward, I present sample sections from coded transcripts. First, however, I clarify one major point that Sam discovered as we worked (and that significantly influenced both our coding approaches and our conclusions).

As we began working with our list, Sam pointed out that although the event list seemed useful, there appeared to be two different categories of events. Namely, events 1, 2, and 7 were, at least in part, methods or means of empowerment—and highly associated with power dynamics—while the remaining events seemed to be things tutees gain from empowerment. Sam likely noticed this, in part, because the idea of tutees “gaining” something corresponded with his original definition of empowerment. Thus, although we were already too involved with coding to revise our event order (and thus revise the numbering system we were already familiar with), we added an additional element to our coding. I explain this element in my treatment of events 1, 2, and 7, later; for clarity and ease of explanation, I begin with events 3-6 and 8-11.

Importantly, events 3-6 reflect practical issues and events 8-10 reflect political issues. Therefore, for more logical organization, event 11 should have been located somewhere nearer events 3 and 4, rather than following the more politically-oriented 8, 9 and 10. However, we modified our list as we went along, and we added this event after coding had begun—and after our numbering system was familiar to us. (I incorporated it after both tutors pointed out my oversight in failing to mention what many tutees seem most to want from their conferences: immediate approaches for immediate tasks.)

Finally, the three of us agreed that one important issue complicated our determining potential evidences of empowerment for coding: Much evidence of empowerment—if empowerment is something one “gains” from a conference, and especially if it involves gaining transferable skills—is difficult to detect with certainty. Such empowerment is more readily observable in the tutee’s actions after the conference, as he or she revises the paper at hand— or even months or years later as he or she puts her skills to use for another task. Another problem in finding immediate evidence of empowerment is, of course, that the gains tutees make in conferences are often the cumulative result of many different interactions—not just of one thirty-minute session.

Knowing that we generally lacked information concerning what tutees actually did (or became able to do) with their writing as a result of conferences, we resorted to other
evidences of empowerment we could pinpoint in the transcripts. However, we often found such evidence scarce. Similar problems held true for empowerment associated with developing various understandings: we could speculate, for example, that a conversation had promoted a tutee’s understanding of, say, writing as a social act, but definitively concluding that the tutee had achieved such an understanding was often impossible. Thus we added yet another element to our coding: the idea of potential empowerment versus evidenced empowerment.\textsuperscript{11}

**CODING EVENTS 3-6 AND 8-11**

In coding, we used a simple number system in which each number corresponds to an event. We used these numbers to indicate potential empowerment—places where that sort of empowerment possibly occurred or were encouraged—and we added an “E” to mark moments where we perceived relatively conclusive evidence of empowerment. Finally, during coding we began to think of events 3, 4, 5, 6, and 11 as kinds of “practical” empowerment, and of events 8, 9, and 10 as kinds of “political” empowerment. This distinction becomes useful later, as it also separates the events into two categories: empowerment that did not happen in the conferences we studied (political) and empowerment that did happen (practical).

**Event 3**

Empowerment happens when tutees gain warranted confidence in writing abilities—in ability to improve writing, to have something to say, etc.

The tutors and I agreed that improved confidence is a good indicator of empowerment; tutees who come to conferences feeling confused or defeated, for example, but who leave feeling (even a little) more competent, more able to handle a writing task, are empowered. The term “warranted,” however, is crucial: conferences should be more than cheerleading sessions; if the tutee gains confidence but does not gain any ability to later affirm that confidence, she may be more damaged than empowered. Thus, it was often useful to consider confidence alongside events 4, 5, and 11; confidence most clearly suggested empowerment when the tutee seemed to have gained a transferable skill, an understanding of academic discourse, or an approach for the text at hand.

Evidences of confidence would surely have included non-verbal cues, had those been included within the scope of this study. However, evidences identifiable in the transcripts included the tutee’s comments about her perception of her ability or successful understanding, such as: “Oh, yeah, I can do this,” or, “Okay, now I understand what I need to do.” Each indication of this event we labeled with “3” in the transcript margin.

\textsuperscript{11} Sam, who also distinguished between “permanent” and “temporary” empowerment, offered the “potential” and “evidenced” distinction.
Event 4

Gain transferable skills for other writing tasks (including decision-making skills); move toward intellectual autonomy as a writer.

This event was perhaps one of the most difficult to pinpoint. To know if the tutee had truly acquired a transferable skill, we needed to seem him transfer it, and that rarely happened in conferences. In some cases, however, the tutee spontaneously applied a concept which she had practiced with the tutor. For instance, a tutor might have explained a grammar rule early in the conference, and the tutee might spontaneously use it to correct her text later. On the other hand, a tutee might make a good decision about cutting unnecessary material from her current text, but we could not know whether she could do that in later writings, on her own. Finally, drawing on scholars who suggest students “own” learning when they can put a concept into their own words, we did consider such verbal confirmation as potential evidence of transferable skills and growing intellectual autonomy.12

Each indication of this event we labeled with “4” in the transcript margin.

Event 5

Become (or begin to become) fluent in academic discourses. (Pertains to conventions and to the language used to talk about those conventions, including language teachers use in assignments and comments for students’ papers.)

Potential empowerment in terms of acquiring academic discourse happens when participants discuss issues of genre, of grammar and mechanics, or of any other expectations associated with academic discourse. Like evidence of transferable skills, however, evidence of increased fluency in academic discourse is often difficult to pinpoint. We labeled as evidence tutees’ demonstration of academic discourse principles: implementing a concept or rule, for example, or correctly using terminology.

Each indication of this event we labeled with “5” in the margin.

Event 6

Understand writing as a social act, as having potential to make and communicate meaning.

Potential empowerment for this event occurred when tutors and tutees explored issues of clarity and audience—and audiences’ understandings of their texts. Again, concrete

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12 While some scholars describe such verbal confirmation as “ownership of learning”—and while I do not disagree with that designation—I reserve the phrase “ownership of learning” to designate the category dealing with establishing learning goals: Event 2.
evidence of such an understanding generally involved the tutee explicitly adapting—or planning to adapt—her text to its audience.

Each indication of this event we labeled with “6” in the margin.

**Event 8**

Develop a critical consciousness; that is, begin to understand knowledge as a social construction and themselves as participants in that construction.

The tutors and I agreed that tutees can participate in the social construction of knowledge without actually understanding that participation and construction. Thus, constructing knowledge was potentially empowering, but knowing whether the tutee was aware of her actions was difficult. The best evidence of a developing understanding involved explicit discussion concerning, for example, the tutee’s ability to create unusual, original arguments and interpretations—to create her own knowledge.

Each indication of this event we labeled with “8” in the transcript margin.

**Event 9**

Understand the socially constructed and political nature of academic discourse. Understand how using academic discourse may negatively affect them.¹³

The best evidence of this event is explicit discussion focused on these issues. Other indicators of potential empowerment, however, include statements (generally by tutors) acknowledging that academic discourse rules are constructed, for example: “Someone made these rules, and now we’re stuck with them.” Similarly, suggestions that different writers (and teachers) value different rules and conventions might help a tutee recognize them as constructs rather than as absolutes. Finally, political understanding might be encouraged by discussions concerning discourse fluency as a measure by which people and writing are judged, or by comparisons of academic and non-mainstream discourses. Each indication of this event we labeled with “9” in the transcript margin.

**Event 10**

Move toward critical literacy—in the sense of using writing/language for political activism. Requires understanding of knowledge, self, and world as social constructs and as transformable, and of self’s potential to change their own circumstances, universities, societies, etc.

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¹³ I should probably have added another component: understanding how using academic discourse may positively affect them. It seems, however, that students generally have a feel for that without discovering it during a conference.
The best evidence of this event involves a tutee’s writing, planning, or discussing a text that could influence change, and grasping, acknowledging, and exploring in the conference that potential. Especially because we often do not know the life of a text beyond our conferences, confirmation of a tutee’s developing critical literacy during conferences is difficult. As some service-learning courses at SSU involve writing for political activism, we speculated that discussions of those texts might coincide with a tutee’s move toward critical literacy. Indeed, such empowerment is probably often topic-dependant and thus most likely to occur in the context of writing about some topics but not others.

Each indication of this event we labeled with “10” in the transcript margin.

**Event 11**

Gain an approach to particular writing task. (Includes a modeled approach.)

Because tutees often attend conferences hoping to improve their current text—and because increased confidence reflects empowerment—gaining an approach for their current writing task is empowering. Of course, the best evidence of empowerment requires that the tutee demonstrate his ability to implement the approach. (This suggests that evidence of event 11 might correspond with evidence of event 4.) Other, less conclusive evidence involved tutees’ comments affirming their grasp of an approach. (Thus, event 11 and event 3 also sometimes occur simultaneously.) Finally, empowerment can happen even when a tutor simply models or explains an approach, but it remains potential empowerment unless the tutee shows that he can use it.

Each indications of this event we labeled with “11” in the transcript margin.

**CODING EVENTS 1, 2, AND 7**

As Sam originally pointed out, events 1, 2, and 7 “seemed different” from the others. He felt, and I agreed, that these events seemed less oriented than the others to tutees’ tangible gains: confidence, approaches, skills, and understandings, for example. Rather, they seemed means or methods to those empowering gains. Further, events 1, 2, and 7 seemed more inherently associated with power than did the others; I discuss this point more in Chapter Five.

We also coded events 1, 2, and 7 according to a slightly different system. Rather than looking for evidence of gains, or moments in which those gains might potentially occur, we were looking for nuances in tutors’ and tutees’ conversational actions. We needed to distinguish, for example, between a tutee’s owning her text and a tutor’s taking over that text, so we added to our numerical labels + and -, as I explain below. Finally, I do not suggest that participating in these events could not actually be empowering for tutees. Rather, I suggest that such participation is not necessarily empowering, although it can be
linked to gains associated with feelings of competence and confidence. I also discuss these points in more detail in the next chapter.

**Event 1**

Maintain ownership of text and ideas, rather than having someone else tell them what to think or write.

When coding for event 1, we marked passages in which tutees explicitly acted to own their texts or ideas with +1. Examples are tutees making their own decisions about revision strategies or presenting their own thoughts about their topic or some other issue. On the other hand, if the tutor told the tutee what she should write or how she should revise, or what she should think, we labeled the moment with -1. In short, -1 moments were those in which the tutor seemed to be taking control of the tutee’s text or trying to influence the tutee’s thinking.

**Event 2**

Maintain ownership of learning: participate in establishing learning goals and have those goals taken seriously.\(^{14}\)

We coded event 2 in much the same way. If, in a particular conference segment, the tutor and tutee were focused on the tutee’s goals, we labeled the segment +2. If, on the other hand, a segment resulted from the tutor imposing her own goals, we labeled it with -2. Thus, if a tutee requested help with transitions, but the tutor brought up a discussion of thesis statements, the thesis discussion would be labeled -2.

**Event 7**

Participate collaboratively in co-construction of knowledge rather than simply receiving dispensed knowledge.

Although coding event 7 began as a relatively straight-forward process, it quickly took on a complexity, which Sam, again, was first to notice. We began marking with -7 those segments in which the tutor took over in a traditional-teacher manner: that is, tutors who proffered mini-lectures or otherwise simply “told” the tutee information the tutor already knew received -7. This task remained easy enough throughout our analysis. However, our initial goal of finding and labeling with +7 moments when the tutee collaborated with the tutor to co-construct knowledge proved more difficult, as I explain in the following

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\(^{14}\) As I mentioned before, some would include under the “ownership of learning” designation moments in which learners are able to articulate on their own a concept they have newly grasped. I include such moments under event 4—as potential evidence of transferable skills. For clarity and consistency, I use the “ownership of learning” designation to refer strictly to the issue of establishing learning goals.
chapter. In general, however, -7 indicated that a passage involved more hierarchical conferencing approaches, and +7 indicated more collaborative approaches.

SAMPLE CODING

Below are sample sections of a coded transcript. While we labeled specific lines where it was useful to do so, we often bracketed passages that reflected, in general, a specific event. Some transcripts we also marked holistically; if for example, we found that a conference consistently focused on academic discourse and on the tutee’s goals, we labeled the top of that transcript with 5 and +2. Below, the coding labels are indicated and briefly explained immediately following the complete passage. In the transcript, K=Ken, the tutee, and S=Sam, the tutor.

S: I think that what we need to work on with this particular paper is . . . like kind of like your overall idea, like you said, you kind of felt that you were lacking a thesis
K: Right
S: Yeah . . . and you are. So you need to have, like with all of these things that you’re saying, okay, which I think are pretty good observations of the story, you know? Things
K: [Um-hmm] [Um-hmm]
S: that not many people would maybe, you know, pick up on.
K: Alright
S: But, like, what are you really saying with that, though? You know? And I think that we see a little bit of that throughout the paper, but it needs to be established in the introduction. Okay? And it needs to be established like with a thesis. So like with your
K: [Mkay]
S: thesis, like what you need to wonder once you read through the paper and you go to revise it, you need to like, kind of figure out what am I trying to say with this paper, you know?

For this passage, the tutors and I agreed on following coding labels:

Event 3: Ken may develop confidence. He may be encouraged because Sam agrees with his assessment that the missing thesis is the problem. He may also be encouraged because Sam compliments his observations—that Ken has noticed “things that not many people would pick up on”.

Event 5: Because of the focus on thesis and introduction, there are possibilities for Ken to learn about academic discourse conventions.

Event 11: Ken may gain an approach for current task; he may actually go home and try to figure out what he’s trying to say in this paper.
Notice that 3, 5, and 11 are all practical events; nothing in terms of political empowerment (events 8, 9, or 10) is happening here. Further, we have no solid evidence of empowerment here; we can point to only potential empowerment.

We also coded the passage with these labels:

Event (-)7: Sam is acting as a “traditional teacher” and using a relatively hierarchical method.

Event (+)2: Focusing on the thesis seemed to be one of Ken’s original goals.

Event (-)1: If we want to be relatively critical, we might say that Sam owns the text a bit here. He is not telling Ken what to write just now; however, it seems likely the thesis would not make it into the paper had Sam not explained the concept to Ken. (As I show later, text ownership in conferences becomes a very grey area.)

Later in the conference, Ken attempts to create a thesis based on Sam’s modeling; we labeled that passage with “11” because it suggested Ken gained an approach for his current writing task. We also tentatively labeled that section with “4”—for transferable skill—in part because Ken seemed likely to try creating a thesis in later papers. (His current essay had no thesis, and he was clearly embracing the idea of using one.) As I mention, for a later conference Ken had composed an improved thesis; this suggested he had indeed, to some degree, gained a transferable skill.

Finally, a later passage evidences confidence such as Sam might have encouraged in the above segment; in it, Ken affirms, “Yeah. Okay. I got it. Yeah. Yeah. I got it. . . . I can work it now” (TS-K11). The tutors and I also considered that as evidence that Ken at least perceived himself to have a good approach for revision.

In closing, our collaborative efforts resulted in useful approaches for analyzing data; our “layered” system of coding enabled us to delve recursively, and increasingly more deeply, into conference dynamics. Further, as in our analysis of power, I encouraged Kate and Sam to articulate their thoughts—unrelated or only peripherally related to our coding procedures—about empowerment in the conferences. The result of our efforts was a variety of useful and interesting findings, to which I now turn.
CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I seek to answer two questions: (1) In what ways are conferences empowering for tutees? and (2) What power dynamics accompany empowerment? (That is, what dynamics seem to promote or to hinder empowerment?) Because most conferences involved many potentially empowering moments, but demonstrated little concrete evidence that empowerment had actually been accomplished, the first question proved rather difficult to answer. In general, though, the conferences we studied showed clear trends: all conferences were potentially empowering in each of the more practical senses (Events 3, 4, 5, 6, and 11), but essentially none was even potentially empowering in a more political sense (Event 8, 9, or 10). In the first section below, I describe those trends in greater detail.

I then attempt to answer the second question. I begin by discussing findings (and problems we experienced) during our examinations of power. I also present the complexities we discovered associated with methods of empowerment (Events 1, 2, and 7); I critique the association of each of those concepts with empowerment and with dichotomized categories, and I locate each along a continuum. Next, I explain our conclusion that we could combine notions of topic and resource with Events 1, 2, and 7 to inform our explorations of power in productive ways. Finally, I argue that power dynamics matter most only in conjunction with the conference’s results. Thus, I suggest an answer to the second question above by presenting our findings concerning how power dynamics and evidences of empowerment (or its absence) coincide.

FINDING EMPOWERMENT IN CONFERENCES

In this section, I show how the conferences we studied were empowering for tutees. To do so, I work from the ends/gains-oriented concepts associated with empowerment I described in the previous chapter (Events 3-6 and 8-11). As before, I divide empowerment into two categories: practical and political.

PRACTICAL EMPOWERMENT

Potentially empowering moments of all types occurred in each of the conferences we studied. That is, moments—sometimes including essentially the entire conference—existed in which tutees might have increased control over their writing by gaining:

- warranted confidence in their writing abilities/in having something to say
- an approach (or approaches) for their current writing task
- a degree of fluency in academic discourse
• transferable skills / a degree of intellectual autonomy
• an understanding of writing as a social act.

However, determining the extent, if any, of actual empowerment was extremely difficult.

In general, each tutee seemed to gain an approach (or approaches) to the writing task at hand. Some conferences focused on genre expectations and appropriate content; in them tutees seemed to leave with an idea of how to revise their texts; others focused more on sentence-level issues, and tutees seemed to leave with ideas for editing. (Some focused on both, or other, issues.) All dealt, in some way, with conventions of academic discourse, and though we often had no certain proof, we speculated that some tutees were building transferable skills and moving toward intellectual autonomy. We were encouraged by moments in which tutees verbalized confidence or attested to their understanding; however, we lamented the scanty amount of substantial proof that students had actually gained what they might have. In short, to avoid unsubstantiated claims that tutees had been empowered, we often had to qualify: tutees might have been, to some degree, empowered.

For instance, Ken, one of Sam’s tutees, appeared to have been empowered. Ken was writing a literary analysis of Kate Chopin’s “Story of an Hour” for an upper-level literature course. He seemed to lack confidence in his writing and explained that his teacher recommended he come to the center: “She makes comments and then we’re supposed to go back and go over it, but she told me on here that I should come to the writing center and show them this and see what kind of changes, because I, okay, I’m not an English person at all” (TS-K1).

Ken’s paper indeed had several problems, including a missing thesis; when Sam asked what his thesis or “overall idea” was, Ken replied, “See, I don’t even know if I’ve got a thesis. That’s probably why this is a bad paper” (TS-K2). Perhaps as a result of his missing thesis, his paper consisted of random ideas on various parts of the story. The only apparent organization was chronological: he had worked through the story from beginning to end, but without making a clear, supported argument for anything in particular.

During their conference, Sam explained to Ken the generic expectations for a literary analysis: Ken needed a thesis, he needed to use examples from the text as support, and he needed to exclude textual material that did not back up his point. Sam also helped Ken understand his teacher’s comments; for example, Sam clarified that the teacher wanted a traditional introduction, in which the title and author were named almost immediately, and which ended in the thesis they had discussed.

Ken did not compose during his conference; therefore, it was impossible for us to know how completely he grasped the concepts Sam had explained. Ken did, however, frequently make comments suggesting his understanding. For example, with minimal prompting, he concludes their discussion of the introduction with: “And then that’s where
I hit a thesis, right there” (TS-K7); at the very least, he seems to grasp the format. Ken also appeared to have a plan for revision when he left, but without seeing him implement it—or seeing a revised draft—we could only confirm potential empowerment. Therefore, we could only speculate that he had gained transferable skills or moved toward intellectual autonomy. However, Ken stated near the end that he had been “just pretty much going chronologically through the story” (TS-K8), although Sam had never explicitly stated that. Accordingly, we speculated that if faced with a similar writing task, Ken might work toward a more structured organization based on direction from a thesis. He seemed confident in his ability to do so; as Sam recapped the idea of thesis and support paragraphs, Ken affirmed: “Yeah. Okay. I got it. . . . I got it. I can work it now” (TS-K10). Further, his confidence as a writer may have increased as he discovered he had correctly diagnosed his missing thesis problem.

As we analyzed Ken’s conference, Sam remembered that Ken had returned with a much-improved draft; according to Sam, the thesis and focus had become clearer—but not perfect. Thus we concluded that Ken had actually been empowered, to a degree. However, we only knew that because of information gathered after the conference we studied. Lacking similar information from other tutees, we often had to settle for pinpointing moments of potential empowerment.

Other conferences involved many such moments. A freshman named Frances, who was writing a narrative about a significant event, seemed to gain much during her conference with Kate. Frances’ narrative was ostensibly about how her life had changed after her daughter, Elizabeth’s, birth. However, the lengthy essay covered in meticulous detail many pages of information—much about her boyfriend—that did not belong. Elizabeth appeared only in the final paragraph. Kate offered Frances an opportunity to talk about her story, and she encouraged Frances to elaborate on anecdotes—missing from the essay—about how Elizabeth had changed Frances’ life. Kate explains what Frances seemed to “get” from talking through issues during her conference:

I think that she knew before she came to the Writing Center that she had a problem focusing on the event she wanted to write about, that is, the birth of her daughter. One thing that doesn’t come out in the conference transcript is that Frances had entitled her essay “Elizabeth.” . . . [She knew] that the focus of her essay [on the boyfriend] was incorrect. . . . [But she] had cut out the part about Elizabeth because the essay was too long. So if I were to say what Frances “got,” . . . I would say that she mostly received confirmation from me as an audience about what she already sensed—that she had condensed the wrong part of her essay. Also, I think that I gave her confidence that she had a story worth telling about her child. Sometimes there is a perception that talking/gushing about children is boring, but by talking about the meaning of Elizabeth’s existence in terms of Foster’s own growth as a person, I think that Foster had a good direction to go with the story. . . . Perhaps she also got a sense that the writing process can mean starting out to write down everything (i.e.
freewriting) and then through the process of several rewrites, refining and sorting out what is important for a particular purpose and what is no longer needed in a particular essay. (Ana. 94)

Again, while we cannot know how effectively Frances could implement her approach, she seemed likely to improve the next draft. Further, she might have begun to improve her process for future writing; if Kate is correct that Frances already sensed her paper’s problems, Frances may have moved toward intellectual autonomy: she might trust herself more to make decisions about her writing because her conference confirmed her suspicions. At the very least she appeared to gain confidence both that her story was worth telling and that she could tell it more effectively; she left the conference saying, “I can’t wait to get home and start writing. I love to write” (TK-F14).

Similar instances of potential empowerment also occurred in conferences focused more on sentence-level issues. Noting that in two conferences, tutees frequently paused while reading their texts to ask questions concerning grammar, mechanics, and usage, Kate and I speculated that a tutee gains confidence when tutors confirm that problems indeed exist where the tutee senses them. Such confidence could help tutees move toward intellectual autonomy in editing their work; they might trust themselves to find trouble spots. Additionally, evidence of tutees’ acquiring transferable skills was sometimes more concrete in conference segments focused on sentence-level issues. For example, tutees sometimes spontaneously implemented in their writing a rule they had discussed earlier, thus suggesting a developing fluency in that aspect of academic discourse.

While we need to see skills in use to know whether a tutee has fully grasped them, verbal feedback from tutees also offers a degree of evidence. We associated ownership of learning exclusively with establishment of goals, but others, as I mentioned earlier, link ownership of learning with the ability to verbalize what has been learned. Such verbalizations we opted to categorize as potential evidence of developing transferable skills and intellectual autonomy. Several examples occur throughout Frances’ conference, where she confirms understanding of her essay’s problems, her plan for revision, and her reasons for thinking that plan appropriate. For example, after discussing her essay’s lack of examples to show how Elizabeth’s birth had changed her, Frances comments, “That would kind of help explain where I’m coming from better and what I achieved and, and how, how I got to the point where I am, not just that I got to the point that I’m at” (TK-F8). We can not know how successfully Foster might implement her plan, but she seems more aware of narrative generic expectations. We can speculate then, that when working on “Elizabeth”–and hopefully on other pieces as well–she will incorporate specific supporting evidence. Even though we did not see Foster rewrite her text, her comments suggest her developing grasp of new concepts. Therefore, her conference may have helped her develop transferable skills and move toward intellectual autonomy.

Also included in the transferable skills/intellectual autonomy category were the questioning sequences intended to help tutees develop a writer’s inner voice. Sometimes questions lead to tutees’ explorations of ideas; other times questions seemed a coaxing
tool to elicit sentence-level changes from tutees. However, both kinds of questions were potentially empowering in forming the kind of scaffolding I described in Chapter One. Again, however, it was impossible for us to know to what extent that scaffolding had been set in place for later use.

Finally, we tried not to overlook even small, potentially empowering events. Kate suggested, for example, that offering the tutee a pencil to mark his text as he read aloud might result in transferable skills in two senses: first, the tutee might learn to read his work aloud during revision and editing, and second, he might mark his draft to remind himself of concerns. Again, without knowing whether tutees implement these approaches later on, we declared such moments only potentially empowering.

Throughout the conferences, we discovered many potentially empowering moments associated with tutees’ gaining understanding of writing as a social act—as having the ability to make and communicate meaning, and to achieve the desired effect on audiences. Participants often explored issues of clarity and of audience expectations and responses. A focus on audience concerns was especially evident in Sam’s conference with Mack, a freshman working on a Rogerian argument. Mack’s text was a letter to a co-worker, with whom he hoped to reach a compromise concerning a fairer distribution of the best shifts. Mack’s draft, however, did little to encourage a favorable response. During his conference, Mack seemed to grasp that his letter needed to be more empathetic; accordingly, he planned to revise it to appeal more to his audience by including what Sam called “basically . . . a kiss-butt paragraph” (TS-M2). Opportunity, then, existed for Mack to increase his understanding of writing as a social act.

While Mack’s awareness of audience seemed to increase during his conference, other students brought to their conferences a similar awareness. Although Ken’s essay draft neither made nor communicated much meaning, in some moments he did demonstrate an awareness of audience. For example, he explained that not immediately mentioning Kate Chopin or “Story of an Hour” in his introduction had been a conscious decision: “Now see, I thought to do that, because I thought it would be more interesting to the reader, like instead of just saying this is an essay about blah, blah, blah” (TS-K6). Others voiced concern about whether texts were clear: Belle, a sophomore working on correspondence pieces for her business writing class, sometimes requested that Sam imagine himself as the assignment’s hypothetical audience. She then asked whether he understood her texts: “If you were one of the retail managers and you just saw the memo, would this clearly explain to you?” (TS-B2). Discussions about audience issues, then, were potentially empowering moments in which tutees might also build on a pre-existing awareness of writing as a social act.

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1 Mack—and other tutees—seemed to appreciate Sam’s candid, casual language.
POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

While conclusive evidence of any kind of empowerment was scarce, all of the
conferences we studied involved potentially empowering moments representing each
practical category above. Unfortunately, however, moments of even potential
empowerment in a more political sense were essentially absent from all of the
conferences. Rarely were there indications of tutees’ developing critical consciousness,
understanding academic discourse as constructed and political, or moving toward critical
literacy.

Empowerment as gaining critical consciousness—as understanding knowledge as a social
construction and self as a participant in that construction—generally did not happen.
Arguably, collaboration might have lead to gains in critical consciousness as tutor and
tutte constructed knowledge together; however, participating in constructing knowledge
does not equal an understanding of that participation as such. (Nor does collaboration
guarantee the construction of knowledge; as I explain later, tutees sometimes participated
in relatively collaborative exchanges in which little or no knowledge was actually
constructed.)

In the conferences we studied, a rare moment of potential political empowerment as
increased critical consciousness occurred in Ken’s conference. As they explored possible
directions for Ken’s paper, Sam explained, “You can say . . . anything you want. You can
come up with the craziest ideas, like Kate Chopin’s writing about aliens here, you know?
I mean, it’s completely asinine, but like, . . . if you have your evidence to back it up, and
it relates to the story, and if you can bring in examples from the story to illustrate what
you think it says or what your thesis is, it will work” (TS-K7). Sam was pointing toward
the possibility for diverse interpretations of literature; further, perhaps his comment
helped Ken understand that he could build his own knowledge about the text—that literary
analyses do not involve right or wrong answers.

Other tutees seemed to bring a degree of critical consciousness to—rather than gain critical
consciousness during—their conferences. For instance, Abe, a freshman and talented
writer who conferenced with Kate, brought in a daring (and insightful) text exploring
social commentary in a song by Maynard James. He commented during his conference
that the essay was his own “interpretation” and that he “made [his] own conclusion” (TK-
A3,5). Abe appeared well-aware of his ability to construct knowledge; perhaps, too,
exploring his ideas with Kate may have increased that awareness.

Arguably, each tutee with a degree of originality in her or his text participated in
constructing knowledge; however, they generally offered little evidence that they were
aware of the fact. Tony, an upper-classman who conferenced with Kate, had been asked
to link a study of little league baseball teams with concepts his sociology class had
studied. Tony apparently had done some original thinking, and he criticized the author for
not using discipline-specific terminology the class had studied. Even so, however, Tony
seemed to lack an awareness of his own role in constructing knowledge; he simply labels his essay a “book report” (TK-T1). Participants in knowledge construction, then, are not necessarily aware of their actions; tutees brought their texts and ideas—their constructions of knowledge—but whether they understood them as such is difficult to say. Further, except for the brief moment in Ken’s conference, the conferences we studied did not explicitly encourage such an awareness, although they did often encourage students in their construction of knowledge.

Also overwhelmingly absent were moments dealing with the political and constructed nature of academic discourse. Grammatical and mechanical rules were presented more or less as absolutes; there might be many ways to revise a sentence, but some were correct and others not. Similarly, various genres used various conventions, but each genre had specific—and required—conventions. Rules were not made to be broken, and in the conferences they were treated as strikingly neutral.

Only in a few instances did the tutee possibly gain a stronger awareness of academic discourse as constructed. In one conference we did not study in detail, Sam suggested that his tutee’s paper did “work,” even though it did not fit a traditional format. Sam also asked whether the tutee’s teacher had seen the paper and whether she was concerned with this, and the tutee responded that his teacher had not questioned his format (TS-D2-3). Thus that tutee might have begun to see generic expectations as flexible and subject to preferences. Also from my original, larger group of tapes, I learned that tutors did, on occasion, ask tutees how their teachers felt about certain rules—such as the use of “I” in formal writing. Such questions, too, might have helped tutees begin to perceive academic discourse as constructed. In the conferences we focused on, however, such questions were absent; only in one instance was a rule debated. Victoria, a freshman, wanted to eliminate wordiness in her remembered event essay. While helping her understand how to subordinate sentence clauses, Kate suggested she reword a sentence to begin with the word “because.” Victoria replied, “My teachers used to tell me never to start a sentence with because”; then she added, “well, I mean it was usually my elementary school teachers” (TK-V14). Later, Kate pointed Victoria to a resource showing sentence constructions beginning with “because” (TK-V15). Accordingly, Victoria might have grasped that different people find different “rules” acceptable. (On the other hand, however, she might simply have decided that the rule Kate showed her was correct and that her teachers were mistaken.)

Just as tutees generally failed to explore academic discourse as social construction, they also failed to explore its political nature. In the conferences, academic discourse seemed more or less a neutral entity; tutors presented it and tutees appeared to perceive it as such. Although political issues were evident in some conferences, they were not discussed. Later, when I deal with missed opportunities for empowerment, I discuss in detail some of these conferences; they involve Kate and Pearl, an African-American student revising an essay about *The Great Gatsby* and the American Dream. Although the politics of
academic discourse were largely unmentioned, some students—such as Pearl—are likely well-aware of, if often silent about, such issues.

Finally, in none of the conferences we studied could we pinpoint even potential moves toward critical literacy. Students simply did not discuss their writing—or otherwise evidence perceptions of it—as able to influence change, even on a small, local level. Some topics, such as Victoria’s focus on her experience volunteering with under-privileged children, suggested the tutee perhaps had some degree of critical literacy; however, the conference itself did not promote critical literacy. Similarly, Abe’s essay attested to his awareness that texts—such as song lyrics, as well as his own text—can influence culture. Further, his earlier essay promoting a city-funded extreme sports facility had been published in a local newspaper; in it, he argued against stereotypical negative depictions of extreme-sports enthusiasts and showed that such a park could be as cost-effective as existing parks catering to other special interests. Abe’s critical literacy was therefore evident in his conference, but conferencing did not seem to promote it. (Prior conferences not recorded for this study, however, might have contributed to his awareness.) With these exceptions, evidences of critical literacy, or of moments that might have encouraged its development, were markedly absent.

CONNECTING POWER DYNAMICS AND EMPOWERMENT

One goal of this study was to explore what power dynamics are present during moments that are or are not empowering for tutees and to consider how power dynamics might promote or discourage empowerment. However, in order to do that, I must first return to the complex issue of power and our findings as we examined it in conferences. I then connect power dynamics with occurrences (and absences) of practical and political empowerment in the final two sections, respectively.

“FINDING” POWER IN CONFERENCES

As we attempted to examine power dynamics in conferences, the tutors and I quickly realized the complexity of our task. Specifically, we found that looking for topic and resource contributions was a useful, but not wholly adequate, approach and that the problematic events (1, 2, and 7) we came to associate with methods of empowerment during data analysis were potentially more useful in exploring power than as evidences of empowerment.¹ Below, I describe some of the difficulties we faced as we attempted to pinpoint power dynamics. I also describe discoveries we made concerning the complex

¹ As Sam suggested early on, each of these three events differs from those discussed above in that they involve methods or actions more than gains or ends. That is, while a tutee might gain an understanding of academic discourse, she maintains ownership of her paper or ideas. She establishes goals; she collaborates and co-constructs knowledge, or the tutor dispenses knowledge and she receives it. Arguably, of course, each of these actions ends in some result (an “owned” text or a collaborative learning experience, for example); however, as I show later, those results are not always empowering.
nature of those methods of empowerment (the owning of texts, ideas, and learning goals, and participating in collaborative rather than hierarchical learning exchanges). Finally, I discuss our conclusion that we could use events 1, 2, and 7 to inform the way we perceive and examine power.

Discovering Problems and Complexities

As the tutors and I discussed and coded transcripts for power, some problems became evident. Coding for topic was relatively easy and seemed consistently useful; we believed determining whose topics were proposed, accepted, and declined was key in our attempt to observe power as actions on others’ actions. In the simplest terms, participants were constantly in the process of raising topics and of gaining or losing status by having their topics disregarded or embraced. Especially in moments where topics were established or dismissed, it was easy to understand the participants as acting on each others’ actions.

Coding for resource, however, was more problematic. In Watts’ study, several conversation participants generally share the floor at once, and having one’s utterance deemed relevant by the group seems to happen less consistently than in one-to-one interaction. That is, if four people are talking, it is much easier for one’s comments to go unattended to than in one-to-one talk between a (generally polite) pair. Thus the tutors and I found ourselves almost constantly marking utterances as resource contributions, as is evident in the sample in Chapter 4. In other words, coding for resource almost became an alternative version of a word-count approach, as it allowed us easily to see who dominated in terms of frequency of substantial conversational contributions. As I suggest in Chapter Six, additional approaches could do much to help sort through the significance of various types of conversational contributions—to consider, for example, whether all utterances are equal in terms of power enactment. (Certainly they are not.)

However, we also determined that we could draw on our coding for events 1, 2, and 7 to inform our examination of power. That is, we could consider alongside our coding for resource and topic contributions several other issues involved in those exchanges. Specifically, we could consider whose learning goals were being dealt with and/or who was “owning” the text or ideas during a given interchange. Similarly, we could consider whether the resource contributions reflected hierarchical, traditional teacher-style “teaching” or collaboration, and, accordingly, whether knowledge was being dispensed or constructed via the contribution. I show the results of combining those approaches later in this section; first, however, I explain important findings concerning those “method of empowerment” events. In general, we found them to be much more complex than they have seemed according to writing center literature.

Reconsidering Methods of Empowerment

Early in this study, I (mis)perceived several key issues. I thought that tutees’ maintaining ownership (of learning goals, texts, ideas) would essentially equal empowerment. I also
thought that hierarchical conferencing moments would undermine that empowerment and that collaborative moments would encourage it. Finally, I believed that determining ownership, as well as pinpointing hierarchical or collaborative approaches, would be relatively easy, black-and-white tasks (either the tutee owned the text/goal/idea or the tutor did; either the tutor lectured or both participants collaborated). Over the course of this study, I discovered none of that was necessarily true. Below, I explain several important findings concerning ownership of learning goals, ownership of texts and ideas, and participation in hierarchical or collaborative learning exchanges. Most importantly, although they have often been linked with empowerment, none of these necessarily results in tutees’ empowerment. Further, none falls easily into its dichotomized categories; each, we realized, is located on a continuum, just as the power dynamics in which they all are involved.

Maintaining Ownership of Learning Goals

While some writing center scholarship links empowerment with focusing on tutees’ goals, we found that such a focus does not guarantee empowerment. To determine whether empowerment occurs, we must consider the results of taking the tutee’s goals seriously. The potential (empowering) result might be the tutee’s sense of competency: her confidence in herself as a writer. That is, the tutee whose goals are attended to in conferences may leave feeling she can make good decisions concerning what to work on in her writing. However, simply focusing on the tutee’s goals does not necessarily empower her. As tutors know, such a focus may prevent the conference from taking more productive turns. That is, the tutee may make poor decisions about what to work on: the classic example in tutor training texts is the tutee who wants to edit when her essay needs substantial revision of content and organization. If the tutor attends to her goals, she is likely to improve her essay only minimally. If her essay then earns a poor grade, her sense of competence is likely to be shattered. Thus she might feel empowered during and after her conference, but may later feel less so. Conversely, tutors’ goals, if they help the tutee gain some of the “ends” discussed earlier, may prove more empowering.

Further, having even extremely appropriate, useful goals “taken seriously” does not automatically guarantee empowerment. Perhaps because of the tutor’s approach or of communication breakdowns, even the most consistent focus on a learning goal may not result in any solid gains for the tutee. That is, the tutee’s goals of reorganizing her paper may be attended to throughout the conference, but she may leave feeling just as confused and frustrated with her organization as she was prior to the conference. Much depends on the successful treatment of useful goals.

Finally, although it seems like a clear enough concept, goal ownership is inevitably complicated by several issues. First, the tutee’s goals are often actually the teacher’s goals, especially if a student brings a draft her teacher has marked. Further, tutees—perhaps out of desperation—sometimes present such general goals that their real goal seems to be having the tutor determine a focus. Both such instances are evident, for
example, in Ken’s conference. He is concerned with his teacher’s comments, but he also adds, “anything that could help me out with it, you know, would be great” (TS-K1). And tutees are often unable to articulate clear goals; many suggest they work on “flow,” although they generally do not convey a clear sense of what they mean. Finally, some articulate every goal they can think of (and many of those are unclear). Mack, for example, wanted help with organization; he also told Sam, “You know, if anything you have to add like I guess like punctuational problems, you know, if something’s not working, structure, stuff like that” (TS-M1).

Like power, goal ownership exists on a continuum. Although some goals seem specifically tutor- or tutee-initiated, for many goals that ownership is blurred. And, although the tutor and tutee, logically, each have a position at her or his end of the continuum, hovering behind each are other figures as well: behind the tutee her teacher(s), or perhaps her peer-review respondents, and behind the tutor likely also teachers—including the tutee’s teacher (whose goals the tutor can probably guess) as well as the writing center itself, its policies, and its administration. All of these forces, then, complicate goal ownership—as well as power and empowerment—in conferences.

Maintaining Ownership of Texts and Ideas

Tutee ownership of texts and ideas is a similarly complex issue. Although it has overwhelmingly been considered a major goal of conferencing, maintaining tutee ownership also does not guarantee empowerment. Again, the issue is the result of the action. The goal of allowing tutees to maintain ownership is that tutees leave the conference with a text or ideas they still “own”; no one told them what to write or think. Such ownership, I imagine, is also intended to inspire feelings of competence: tutees who are not told what to write or think may feel more competent to write and to think. Again, however, when tutors promote their tutee’s ownership of texts and ideas, the results may be negative. For example, hoping not to “take over” the tutee’s paper, the tutor might allow her to leave the conference feeling confident about a text that will receive a low evaluation, perhaps because of a flaw in logic or because of an argument inappropriate to the audience. As a result, the tutee’s feelings of competence may decrease later on, even though she “owns” her paper.

Perhaps even more likely to detract from empowerment are questioning games that can accompany attempts to encourage tutees to maintain ownership. Both Kate and Sam acknowledged that questions can sometimes turn into powerful guess-what-the-tutor-is-thinking games, which Sam appropriately labeled “quizzing.” That is, trying to help tutees discover problems and solutions, tutors may pose questions, and the tutee may realize—or suspect—that the tutor knows the answer. As a result, the tutee may retain some ownership, but she may also feel manipulated by the tutor. Similarly, tutees may feel manipulated and frustrated by tutors who avoid answering tutees’ questions, or who simply turn the question back on the tutee. Thus simply “owning” a text or idea is not necessarily empowering (although it can be). Instead, empowerment depends, again, on
whether the act of maintaining ownership promotes gains in other areas, and possibly on whether it promotes feelings of competence rather than of manipulation and frustration.

Finally, I suggest that we should also understand ownership of texts and ideas as existing on a continuum. During conferences, texts are constantly being influenced by both participants. Even when the tutor conscientiously avoids directing the tutee or suggesting what she write or think, the tutor still impacts the text. For example, even by asking the most open-ended questions, inviting the tutee to explore her topic, the tutor initiates thinking about that topic that the tutee otherwise might never have performed (or would have performed differently). Thus the paper is changed as a result of the tutor’s interaction with the tutee; even if the tutor does not tell her what to write, he has participated in the text’s construction and thus in its ownership. Similarly, by sharing a grammar rule or generic convention—even without implementing it for the tutee—the tutor influences the text. Even if a tutor simply responds to a tutee’s question of whether a comma is correctly placed, he influences the text. In short, each paper, unless the tutee opts not to make any revisions, is influenced by the conference and is, at least to some extent, jointly owned. Further, behind the tutor-tutee interaction lie the same forces that complicate ownership of learning goals: teachers and writing center directors, for example, who also share in textual ownership.

The complexity of ownership—and of the empowerment associated with it—is evident in the following passage from Belle’s conference with Sam. Having written a memo to accompany a survey, Belle was not happy with this sentence: “If there isn’t enough room provided, attach a letter with your response.” Belle knew she wanted to phrase the sentence differently; the dialogue follows:

B: I was trying to think of another word besides letter, because I mean if you’re a manager you’re so busy you’re not going to want to write a letter. So I mean, like, I’m trying to say if you don’t have enough room you can put it on a sheet of paper.
S: Okay um, (pause) I don’t know if you need to like necessarily say sheet of paper because it sounds a little bit less professional.
B: Right.
S: But what do you think you could substitute with letter?
B: I don’t know.
S: I mean, what’s gonna go on the letter?
B: Their response if they didn’t have enough room, like for the one that says “other.”
S: Which would be additional comments?
B: Mm-hmm.
S: Okay, maybe you could say that. “Attach any additional comments with your response.”
B: Perfect. Thank you.

Belle knew what she wanted: an alternative phrasing for “letter.” Her initiation of the topic, then, colors the issue of ownership: Sam did not simply notice a problem and tell
her what to write. On the other hand, he gives her the phrasing, so in a sense that part of
the paper is indeed his. It seems, though, a potentially empowering moment. He did not
require Belle to guess the answer, and she learned (or was reminded of) a phrase she will
likely use in future writing. Had he pushed her further, she might still have not come up
with a satisfactory phrasing—or she might have; we have no way to know. She might also
have felt frustrated with Sam for withholding information; his “guess-what-I’m-thinking”
questions elsewhere seem to have made her uncomfortable. Obviously, though, they
share ownership of the text.

A similar moment occurred in Kate’s conference with Abe; he brings up the issue of
whether to cut a portion of his text:

A: This statement right here, it sounded almost like I could take it out, but, because I had
two quotes from the two different parts, I put that in. Do you think it should stay or be
taken out?
K: (Pause) I think your instinct is right.
A: Okay
K: It’s, doesn’t it sound good without it? (pause) [Kate reads line] . . .
A: Mm hmm
K: I think so.
A: So leave it in or take it out?
K: No. I think your instinct is right, to take it out.
A: Okay. (TK-A4-5)

Kate, at first, tries to avoid the question—though she goes on to hint that one option is
better than the other. Abe, though, wants to be sure he knows what she thinks, and he gets
her to respond more conclusively.¹ Thus Kate has taken part in owning the paper.
However, Abe might still have been empowered by this moment; perhaps especially his
confidence increased when Kate confirmed his suspicion that the segment could be cut.
He might have retained more ownership had she avoided or returned his question, but he
also might have felt manipulated by such a response.

Conferences are full of small moments like these: moments in which lines of ownership
are especially blurred. As a result, maintaining the tutee’s exclusive ownership of text or
idea seems an unrealistic and even impossible goal; although the tutor may not
intrusively take over, she—like the tutee’s teacher—always shares ownership to some
degree. However, as I show later, empowerment can happen even when the tutee does not
completely own her writing or thoughts.

¹ Both participants obviously enact power in this exchange; Kate tells Abe what to do, but Abe brings up
the issue and encourages her to do so.
Co-constructing Knowledge vs. Receiving Dispensed Knowledge: Collaborative vs. Hierarchical Approaches

Hoping to explore moments in which conference participants collaborated to co-construct knowledge or dispensed and received knowledge the tutors and I began coding by dividing this event–event 7, on our list–into two possible categories. Passages in which the tutor behaved as a traditional teacher, dispensing knowledge to the tutee, would be labeled -7, and passages in which the tutee and tutor collaborated to co-construct knowledge would be labeled +7. However, we discovered two major problems with this approach almost immediately.

The first problem involved terminology. Our understanding of co-construction was that both participants created new (to them, at least) knowledge through a process of exploration and learning from one another. Additionally, our understanding of collaboration was that the tutee and tutor both participated actively in the exchange, rather than the tutor simply sharing her ideas and knowledge with the tutee. However, we began with the idea that collaboration and co-construction went hand-in-hand. Indeed, I argue that these terms have become blurred, if not conflated, in our literature; it seems we often think of conference participants who collaborate as co-constructors of knowledge. Sam pointed out the problem: a segment–or an entire conference–could appear highly collaborative, but whether or not it involved true co-construction of knowledge was often debatable. That is, conference talk frequently appeared as dialogue in which the tutee made significant contributions; often, too, however, the tutee contributed information the tutor already knew (and was specifically trying to get the tutee to say). We doubted that could be considered as true co-construction of knowledge.

For example, Kate’s conference with Victoria, in which Victoria’s goal was to work on wordiness, includes the following passage:

V: LONGING FOR A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF MAKING A DIFFERENCE, I CHALLENGED MYSELF TO DEVOTE MY ENTIRE SUMMER TOWARDS VOLUNTEERING AT A LOCAL CHILDREN’S HOMELESS SHELTER. . . .
K: You know, like this expression here LONGING FOR A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF MAKING A DIFFERENCE. Well, how could you say that a little more simply? With fewer words and just say the same thing?
V: Um, longing for a better understanding
K: No
V: Longing to make a difference?
K: Yeah, why not. Wouldn’t that be just as well?
V: Yeah, it really would be. I make life difficult. (TK-V10)

In the segment, Kate focuses on Victoria’s goal of decreasing wordiness, and she coaxes Victoria through revising the sentence. The segment seems quite collaborative: Kate does not improve the sentence for Victoria; rather, Victoria works through the sentence with
Kate’s help. However, that they are co-constructing knowledge—in the sense I described above—seems doubtful. Later, Kate remembered that she had in mind the phrasing Victoria arrived at (Ana.), and Kate, after all, learned nothing from Victoria. Could we really label such an interchange as evidencing co-construction of knowledge?

Similar instances occurred in conference segments focused on broader issues as well. For example, Kate’s conference with Frances was highly collaborative in the sense that Frances contributed much to the discussion. However, many of the conclusions Frances draws—for example, that her paper had focused too much on the background of the event rather than on the event itself—are conclusions Kate already understood. They collaborated, but did they co-construct knowledge?

In response to Sam’s observation, we revised our coding process. We removed the notion of co-construction from collaboration, and we worked from a clearer understanding of event 7: this time, we continued to label with -7 the moments in which tutors employed hierarchical methods, and we labeled with +7 moments in which tutees actively and substantially participated in the exchange—in short, moments that seemed collaborative, though not necessarily indicative of co-constructing knowledge. We still looked for evidence of co-construction; we also looked for evidence of construction, which implied to us an individual’s making meaning that might or might not involve the other participant learning something new. Later, however, we found that we needed to revise our understanding of the hierarchical/collaborative dichotomy.

Although coding according to our schema seemed relatively simple, a second problem quickly became evident: the hierarchical/collaborative conferencing dichotomy did not hold. As we labeled +7 and -7 moments, we found that in even the most hierarchical exchanges, tutees often participated in collaborative ways, and that in even the most collaborative exchanges, tutors often demonstrated hierarchical teaching tendencies. Thus, we realized that hierarchical and collaborative conferencing categories are far from discrete; rather, like ownership of learning goals and of texts and ideas, conference dynamics generally perceived as either hierarchical or collaborative actually exist on a continuum, as well.

The examples below demonstrate the impossibility of conclusively identifying even part of a conference as completely “hierarchical” or “collaborative.” In the first, Sam is conferencing with Cassie, whose thesis did not fit the evaluative argument her assignment requested. Cassie had observed a group of school children, and her original assertion was, “Even though all students in one classroom receive the same inputs, they do not necessarily produce the same outputs” (TS-C1). Cassie explained her teacher’s assessment of her draft: “My first problem was, she told me that I was observing too much, I didn’t have a claim, and I didn’t have criteria” (TS-C1). The passage begins just after Cassie has finished reading her paper:
S: Okay, like, this is basically what you’re looking at doing. You’re gonna have your one overall argument. Or slash argument slash claim slash thesis. Okay? And then that’s, that is what your whole, entire paper is gonna be about. Okay?
C: Okay
S: And then everything that follows, okay, is gonna support what you’re saying, okay, so let’s say for example, this is a stupid example
C: No, that’s okay
S: Let’s say for example, if I’m gonna write an . . . essay on, uh, the best candy in the world, okay, and let’s say, I’m gonna argue that M&Ms are the best candy in the entire world, okay? Then, that’s my claim slash thesis slash argument whatever. Uh, so okay, so M&Ms are the best candy in the world. But then it’s not enough just to make the claim. You have to support your claim, so I would go a step further and I would say okay, so I’m gonna answer why are they the best candy? And I’m gonna do that by saying, let’s just say they’re chocolatey, they have a nice sugar coating
C: Yeah
S: And there’s a lot that come to a bag, okay, so there’s my reasons for making my claim. So, therefore, each paragraph is gonna be about each of those reasons. Okay, so say paragraph one is gonna be about they’re chocolatey. And I’m gonna show in that paragraph how M&Ms being chocolatey makes them the best candy in the world. Okay, cause every point that you make has to prove your thesis and relate back to the thesis. Paragraph two I’m gonna go into detail about the sugar coating, and I’m gonna show how that makes M&Ms the best candy in the world, and then something for the third point. Okay. So are you following me so far?
C: Yeah
S: Okay, so
C: Then how do you like, even though all students in one classroom receive the same inputs, so they have like the same teacher, the same responsibilities, the same nanana, then I would go into um (pause)
S: See what I was about to say though is that uh
C: How would that
S: This, even like the uh after having read all this
C: It doesn’t have anything to do with even though the inputs and outputs, right?

Although Sam performs much like a traditional teacher, telling Cassie “what [she’s] looking at doing” and then explaining how to go about it, Cassie is not simply a passive recipient. First, she tries to adapt what Sam has told her to her original assertion, and then she concludes—correctly—that her paper should not focus on inputs and outputs. Nowhere does Sam specifically tell her this; rather, it seems a discovery she arrives at through listening to his description of a sample evaluative essay. Thus a clear element of collaboration exists in this hierarchical-seeming exchange; further, Cassie appears to construct knowledge (that Sam may or may not have known) as a result of Sam’s mini-lecture.
Kate and Frances’ conference offers more evidence supporting a hierarchical/collaborative continuum. The passage picks up during a discussion of how Frances changed because of her daughter’s birth; Frances has already mentioned overcoming fears and becoming more confident. She and Kate have also discussed the lack of direction at the beginning of the essay; it is difficult to tell what the main point will be until the very end of the essay, and Frances senses her narrative has no real climax (TK-F2-4).

K: Ask yourself, uh, if you could just make a, say in one sentence, what is the birth of your daughter, how has it changed your life? Or changed who you thought you were? What would you say?
F: Uh (pause) well, it uh, golly, in one sentence?
K: I mean . . . what does she mean, you know? At least fear hasn’t
F: Yeah at least being with [my boyfriend] for so long, and having, I guess, that kind of stability and finding out I was pregnant, and just our relationship dissolving completely, and turning into something that, that we’re not even friends now, has really made me realize that I don’t need anybody to do what I want to do or to be happy, or to have, to have a good life, you know, I can do it
K: I guess you look inside yourself for it, huh?
F: Yeah. And I don’t need to have a relationship, and you know, not being with him is not the end of the world, and you know, it’s actually better
K: Well, maybe what you’re saying with all these things, what I hear you saying, is at least, that the birth of your daughter opened up the doors for you to understand a lot more things about life
F: Yeah
K: Yeah, and then, so if you built an introduction just in general terms, you know, saying “And I’m going to tell you how” . . . and then the body of your essay, will explain
F: Yeah, will lead up to, yeah, yeah. I think if I do an introductory paragraph something like that, it kind of summarizes the last part, my paper will have a beginning, a middle, and an end, instead of just a middle and an end.
K: Yeah
F: Alright
K: Because, what else do you say. Often you begin with your conclusion and you find ideas for your beginning. It’s not always that you think of these in that order, so, uh, let’s see what do you say there, that you might want to, you know, use as part of your introduction
F: Uh, I like what you said, is that having Elizabeth, really opened me up to understanding life better and just to have a better understanding of who I am and of what I want my life to be
(TK-V4-5)

The dialogue Kate and Frances share appears highly collaborative. However, Kate offers the suggestion that Frances build an introduction. (And, although earlier in the conference Frances sensed problems with her climax, Kate also initiated the topic of a different
introduction). Further, Kate offers a (very short) lesson about finding material for introductions in the conclusions of drafts, and she points Frances toward her conclusion to look for material. Finally, even Kate’s “reflective listening” feels a bit teacher-ish; she summarizes Frances’ position in phrasing Frances herself might never have used—and Frances adopts that language, rather than looking to her conclusion for her own words. Thus, even this highly collaborative session involves elements of hierarchical teaching.

While this excerpt demonstrates that conference dynamics can not be categorized simply as hierarchical or collaborative—rather they are always both—it also reflects other issues I mentioned above. For example, have Frances and Kate participated in co-constructing knowledge? It seems possible. Frances appeared not to have articulated to herself, before her conference, exactly what the birth of her daughter meant; she may have shaped her interpretation through talking with Kate. And Kate, of course, could not have known that meaning, either. Thus, it seems both might have contributed to the making of new knowledge: Frances by exploring her thoughts, and Kate by asking questions and reflecting Frances’ responses.

If they did co-construct knowledge, however, significant implications concerning ownership arise. Interestingly, Frances does not look to her conclusion for introductory information, as Kate suggests. Rather, she embraces Kate’s summary: “I like what you said, is that having Elizabeth, really opened me up to understanding life better and just to have a better understanding of who I am and of what I want my life to be” (TK-F5). Indeed it seems that was what Francis had suggested; however, it also seems Kate has, to some degree, put words into Frances’ mouth. Does Frances retain ownership of her ideas? And if she incorporates those words—as well as the introduction Kate suggests—into her paper, does she retain ownership of that paper, as well? Or might co-construction of knowledge automatically decrease the tutee’s ownership of her ideas? Further, Frances seems heartily to embrace Kate’s suggestion that a new introduction is in order, but the introduction seems somehow linked to her own feeling that her paper lacked a climax. Whose goal, then, is being dealt with?

**Examining Power Alongside Methods of Empowerment**

As I suggested previously, each of the issues above—hierarchy versus collaboration, ownership of learning goals, and ownership of texts and ideas—exists on a continuum. Thus, using these events to help inform our understanding of power enactment is far from a simple or definitive approach. However, combining them with our examinations of how conference participants present, accept, and dismiss topics and of how they contribute significantly to conference talk can help us both explore and grasp the complexity of power dynamics in conferences. In short, our best efforts seem likely only to scratch the surface of conference dynamics; however, the tutors and I discovered that by systematically considering all of these we could do at least that. In summary, we realized that we might ask ourselves the following questions—always acknowledging the
complexities of the issues involved—to holistically explore power in a particular conference or conference moment:

(1) Whose topics receive attention, and how much? Whose are discarded, and how quickly? As I mentioned earlier, power is involved not only in proposals and rejections of topics, but in acceptances of topics, as well, so this concept also fits appropriately along a continuum: even if one party proposes all topics and has all topics accepted, the other party enacts some power in accepting and perhaps encouraging those topics. Consequently, the topic initiator may seem to enact more power than the other participant, but the latter also enacts power to some degree. If both participants present, accept, and decline topics relatively equally, a more equal power dynamic may be suggested.

(2) Similarly, who performs as resource person, and to what extent? As with topic acceptance, the party who chooses to listen to a resource contribution also enacts power; after all, even within our broad application of “resource,” an ignored contribution would never be regarded as resource. Even if one person serves consistently as resource, then, other enacts some degree of power by allowing (or encouraging) her to do so.

(3) Next, to the extent that we can determine goal ownership, whose goals receive attention during the conference?

(4) Similarly, to the extent that we can determine, who most owns the text or ideas?

(5) Finally, does the conference seem more hierarchical or more collaborative? (We must remember that an exclusively hierarchical or collaborative dynamic is essentially impossible.)

I offer the following example to show the extent to which we were able to draw conclusions about power in conferencing. The passage again involves Sam’s conference with Ken; they have just finished discussing the text and author information his teacher wants in the introduction, and they turn to a new issue: Ken’s thesis.

S: Okay now see what [your teacher is] saying, okay now, what she’s trying to get out of you whenever she asks you these questions right here, is she’s trying to get that thesis out
K: [Mm-hmm
S: of you
K: Ohhh. Okay.
S: Okay, so SHE IS NOT GOING TO CRY ALL DAY ABOUT HER HUSBAND.
K: Okay?
S: Yeah, that’s leaving it, that’s leaving it open. You have the right idea, it’s pretty much like traditionally where the thesis will go, okay, but you say she’s not gonna cry all day
K: [Uh-huh
about her husband. Okay, that’s a good point, that’s good, but like she said, because . . . why is she not gonna cry about her husband?

K: Okay?

S: Okay? And then your response

K: And then that’s where I hit a thesis right there

S: [That’s where you hit the thesis. So, like you would, what she’s trying to get you to say is like, she’s not gonna cry about her husband because she is this like independent woman who’s free of oppression now]

K: Okay. Okay.

We can describe Sam and Ken’s interaction as follows:

• Sam tends toward hierarchical instruction; however, Ken interjects comments that suggest a degree of collaboration.

• Sam initiates the topic–the only major topic at hand. However, the topic reflects Ken’s goals: to work with his teacher’s comments and to work on a thesis.

• Both men make resource contributions, Sam more so than Ken.

• Finally, ownership of the text is complicated: earlier in the conference, Sam pointed to women’s oppression as a possible focus; however, he noticed ideas in Ken’s draft that would potentially support such a focus. Arguing that both he and Ken are involved in ownership, Sam summarizes the issue:
  
  I’m feeding off of the examples that he has. So I thought that his examples best related to the idea of women’s oppression. So in that way, I’m working off of his ideas. But, he didn’t recognize that his examples were related to women’s oppression, until I told him. So the issue is, here, is he maintaining ownership of his text and ideas, or is he working off of mine? . . . In a way it’s both. Originally it was his idea. But it’s almost like I had to translate his idea to him. (Ana. 116)

  Thus it seems fair to say that Ken maintained ownership to a degree, but Sam seems to have helped him discover ideas Ken did not realize were in his text. Further, Sam is imposing the paper’s (albeit correct) format. Thus, for this segment, Sam’s ownership of the text is significant.

A holistic overview of the passage, then, might suggest that Sam enacts much power, but Ken is far from powerless. After all, his goals are being attended to, and he is actively participating—if a less than Sam—in the exchange.

The dynamics suggested in the passage above are similar to those evident in Ken’s conference overall. The main difference is that, in the conference as a whole, Ken contributes several topics, but his resource contributions are few in contrast to Sam’s. In general, the conference seems even more hierarchical than the segment above: Sam generally acts as a teacher, posing topics, having them accepted, serving as resource, and, to a degree, owning Ken’s text. However, Ken sometimes serves as a resource, too, and Sam also accepts the topics Ken posed. Further, the conference consistently focuses on
the goals Ken articulated most clearly: he wanted help with his teacher’s comments, and he sensed that his thesis needed work. Therefore, Ken, to a strong degree, owns his learning goals. Sam might seem to enact more power, but Ken enacts power as well.

Finally, although explorations of power may be interesting in themselves, I suggest that power dynamics in writing conferences matter most only as they promote or hinder the tutee’s empowerment. In an attempt to show what power dynamics are present in conferences or conferencing moments that are to varying degrees empowering (or not), I present below some of our most significant findings.

FINDING CONNECTIONS: POWER AND PRACTICAL EMPOWERMENT

Although I argue that conferences are never completely hierarchical or completely collaborative, we can, of course, determine that some are more collaborative or hierarchical than others. And while much of our literature has suggested that “collaborative” conferences are more desirable, I argue that conferences across the spectrum are potentially empowering. In short, the hierarchical/collaborative distinction is blurry, and we can not usefully employ such a distinction alone to assess the relative merits of a conference. Nor can we make such assessments based on ownership of texts, ideas, or goals. Three examples from the conferences in our study confirm this point; each suggests a different power dynamic, and in each, tutees were to some degree empowered (although determining who was most empowered seems both impossible and irrelevant).

Though very different, both Belle’s conference with Sam and Frances’ conference with Kate leaned toward collaboration. In the latter, both Frances and Kate seem to enact power relatively evenly, in part because Kate initiated many topics, but Frances contributed extensively and substantially to the conversation. In the former, Belle seems to enact power to perhaps even a greater extent than Sam (or Frances). Belle’s goals were generally the focus, and Belle frequently contributed topics and served as resource person. Further, Belle sometimes even declined Sam’s topics and dismissed his attempted resource contributions. On the other hand, Sam also proposed topics and served as resource, although not as frequently as Belle. In some instances, Sam performed as a traditional teacher, quizzing Belle, but there is a generally balanced mix of more hierarchical and more collaborative passages, perhaps because of Belle’s success in establishing her topics, making resource contributions, and ending or avoiding Sam’s topics.

In contrast to Belle’s and Frances’ conferences, Ken’s conference is more hierarchical; although Ken also enacts power, Sam appears to do so to a greater extent. Therefore, we might consider this group as demonstrating a range of power dynamics: Belle seems to enact power more strongly than her tutor, Frances and her tutor seem to enact power more evenly, and Ken seems to enact power less strongly than his tutor.
All three conferences, however, appear to result in significant gains, as I have discussed. In general, each conference met the tutee’s goals: Ken left with a plan for his essay and a better understanding of his teacher’s comments, Frances left with an understanding how to create the narrative structure she wanted, and Belle left with ideas for polishing her drafts. In addition to an approach for his or her current writing task, each gained or seemed to gain confidence, a degree of fluency in academic discourse, and possibly even transferable skills. Further, each also experienced moments that potentially heightened his or her awareness of writing as a social act. Who was more empowered, we cannot know. Further, we cannot know with certainty whether a different approach—for example, a more hierarchical approach for Frances or a more collaborative approach for Ken—would have resulted in the same degree of empowerment. Accordingly, we must conclude that conference dynamics vary, and that conferences of many varieties can empower tutees.

We should not, however, conclude that conference dynamics are always productive or even neutral. Even in relatively empowering conferences, some approaches hinder, and perhaps even prevent, the tutee’s empowerment. These approaches, too, range from more hierarchical to more collaborative.

Ken’s conference is an excellent case in point. Sam returned from that conference feeling particularly enthusiastic about its accomplishments, and later, Kate, Sam, and I all agreed that even though Sam generally used more hierarchical approaches, Ken benefited from the conference. Kate, however, raised the question of whether Sam should have encouraged more interaction from Ken. She sympathized with Sam, who, suggesting a direction for the paper, had hinted at a thesis involving women’s oppression. His actions, she felt, indicated the concept of “caring authority” she embraces:

Sam took over . . . pretty much, trying to explain what a thesis was and everything, and even suggested what the thesis was, which I think is fine because . . . if they don’t have a thesis, if they don’t understand what the story is about, it doesn’t matter what you talk about. They haven’t got a paper to write, you know? So I mean, I would do . . . the same thing, . . . and I think at some point you have to do that. . . . That’s what I call caring authority. You want them to be a success, right? (Ana. 1-2)

Kate also, however, pointed out that Ken “parroted back” Sam’s suggestion that the paper might focus on women’s oppression; she felt that even though Sam might have offered that simply as an example of a thesis, Ken “picked up, okay, that was going to be his thesis” (Ana. 2). Later, she explains, Ken stumbles through an aborted attempt to compose his own thesis:

S: We have a little bit over five minutes left, after talking about all this, do you have any idea about what you might want to say as a thesis?

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1 On page 140 I discuss the complicated nature of text ownership here: Sam gleaned from Ken’s text the idea Ken appears to take from Sam.
K: Uh, maybe about (pause) that (pause) that she doesn’t need a man, maybe, in her life, or that, um, (pause) or maybe a woman is just as capable of getting along in the world as a man, or something along those lines. I’d have to reword (TS-K7)

Finally, near the end of the conference, Ken summarizes his plan: “So, just take it, like, get a thesis, and then work from there. Right?” (TS-K9).

Other moments in the dialogue suggest that Ken has grasped the concepts he needed, but, as Kate pointed out, he never actually articulated a workable thesis (even one inspired by Sam’s interpretation). The result reflects one of the major problems in the conferences we studied: we often felt tutees gained some sort of empowerment, but little solid evidence attested to the fact. Had Ken worked through an articulation of a thesis during his conference, we could say with more certainty that he understood the concept, as Sam also later suggested. Therefore, Sam’s conference might have been even more successful had he offered Ken more opportunities to talk (and to participate more significantly as resource person) or had he encouraged Ken to practice writing a thesis statement or two. Of course, requesting Ken to write a thesis might have made Sam appear even more like a teacher, but, as I argue in the next chapter, that is not necessarily a bad role for him to play.

Supporting the idea that Ken needed to participate more actively, Kate used Ken’s conference to develop the metaphor of conferencing as driving a car across a finish line I mentioned earlier. She summarized her assessment, “I think that Sam missed some golden opportunities to let the guy get behind the wheel and drive. But a couple of times he did let Ken get behind the wheel and drive. And Ken drove the car into the ditch” (Ana. 1). That is, when Sam invited Ken to articulate a thesis, Ken was generally unsuccessful. Kate goes on to explain, “I’m not saying that Sam doesn’t care. He did care, . . . but [there were] opportunities where he maybe could have stopped and maybe dialogued and let Ken struggle, let him go in the ditch a lot of times until he could at least get out a thesis on his own, you know?” (Ana. 2). Kate also admits difficulties in doing that: “That’s so hard. So you know, you’ve got a half an hour, you know, Sam mentioned we’ve got five minutes left, so you’ve got the pressure on you to have a result” (2). However, benefits in terms of ownership might result; Kate concludes, “I thought that maybe if the power had been shared more, the trial and error thing, but let the person talk as much as they can, and you know, . . . it could have been more of a power sharing thing to get that result, so that it was Ken’s result and not the tutor’s result” (2). Encouraging Ken to participate more in building a thesis, then, might not only have confirmed his ability to do so, but might also have allowed him to maintain more ownership of his text.

Similarly, Sam’s conference with Cassie (who realized her focus on inputs and outputs was not useful for her evaluative essay) reflects potential problems with limited tutee resource contributions in generally hierarchical conference moments. In the passage I
quoted earlier,¹ for example, Cassie breaks in with attempts to apply what Sam has explained about evaluative thesis statements:

S: Okay so
C: Then how do you like, even though all students in one classroom receive the same inputs, so they have like the same teacher, the same responsibilities, the same nanana, then I would go into um (pause)
S: See what I was about to say though is that uh
C: How would that
S: This, even like the uh after having read all this
C: It doesn’t have anything to do with even though the inputs and outputs, right?

Cassie’s comments show her attempt to apply the concept Sam explained, the failure of that attempt, and then—as she discovers her old thesis will not work—evidence that she indeed grasps the concept. Important here, however, is that Cassie’s comments are unsolicited; they come just as Sam’s speech seems about to continue. Cassie was a talkative, engaged tutee, and she seemed relatively comfortable jumping in with comments and questions. However, not all tutees have such a high comfort level; therefore, in a similar situation, many tutees might remain silent, perhaps never working through an application of the concept. Consequently, more opportunities for tutees to demonstrate their understandings of conference material might indeed contribute to their empowerment, especially in more hierarchical conference moments.

Because our literature has so strongly warned against hierarchical conferencing approaches, we may not be surprised to see moments when such approaches potentially hinder tutees’ empowerment. However, more collaborative approaches can do the same.

Interesting in some conference moments was the possibility for frustration and confusion within extremely interactive tutor-tutee dialogue. Kate’s conference with Abe offers a good example. Abe’s essay argued that a Maynard Haynes song with graphic lyrics describing anal fisting actually presents a commentary on American society. Abe’s argument was two-fold: he suggested that the lyrics depict a tension between an “external force” and an “internal struggle,” with the external force referring to the graphic media influences on society, and the internal struggle referring to society’s ever-growing boredom with and numbness to those influences.

Much of the conference was oriented toward Abe’s goals; he was concerned about organization and transitions, and he also wanted to do some editing.² However, a substantial section of the conference involved an extended discussion that confused Sam and me. In it, Kate questioned Abe about the internal struggle in a way that initially

¹ See page 135-136.
² This conference was his second with Kate about this essay; his draft had also been peer reviewed and revised, and Abe was working toward another draft to show to his teacher.
seemed intended simply to get him to explore or elaborate on his ideas. Later, however, Kate seems to have a deeper—though, in Sam’s and my opinion, unclear—agenda. The passage follows:

K: But, in the way you explain it though, Abe, the internal struggle—the struggle is what? To deal with, to deal with the things we hear, huh? See and hear?
A: Yeah
K: Uh
A: To deal with the fact that things are getting more liberal, or progressively worse, or something.
K: Right, that we, people, you think, what, people are accepting it too easily, or?
A: Right
K: What was it?
A: Right
K: Did you say?
A: Just kind of going with the flow, maybe. Like not realizing that this is happening.
K: Yeah
A: That people are blind to the fact that things are getting worse maybe. Or, uh
K: What do you think could change that? Does the song point to anything that,
A: Not really, but I kind of made my own conclusion that,
K: Yeah, right
A: That it’s public’s responsibility to pay close attention to what is being viewed or heard, and think about it seriously before overlooking it.
K: Yeah. What do you mean about overlooking it?
A: Hmm. Good question. (pause) Like if you see something on the news—it’s a big deal to the people that it’s affected or whatever, but it hasn’t affected me, so you just kind of like blow it off to the side and don’t really pay attention to it or take it into consideration.
K: Right. Just see it and blow it off, to use that expression, so
A: Right
K: So just tune it out, or what?
A: Do you think that’s a good way to say it though, about uh, because that’s really the only thing I say in here about what can be done about it, about this internal struggle.
K: Well, I think it’s fine to draw your own conclusion about that, you know,
A: Yeah
K: Uh, it would be, I guess, a shame in a song that criticizes that people are being spoon-fed, or being told what to think, if they told you what to think at the end of the song.
(laugh)
A: Right
K: So that wouldn’t have fulfilled his purpose either.
A: Yeah.
K: But what you’re saying, you could elaborate or maybe use different wording, I think, for that overlooking it,

1 Abe gave substantially more attention to the external force than to the internal struggle.
A: Okay.
K: Either they’re becoming, maybe it’s something they can’t cope with, so they turn their back on it? Or, uh
A: I think it’s just stuff that doesn’t affect them anymore.
K: Yeah, or it doesn’t affect them personally? Or
A: [??? or they see it as just common, so they don’t care about it]
K: Yeah, yeah. (pause) I think you could develop that idea of the internal struggle a little more because you have a lot of ideas about it,
A: Mm hmm
K: To where it would be clear to the reader that it’s (pause) Are all people passive?
A: What do you mean?
K: When they are exposed to, say for example, media, or are they passive about it and just accepting it, or are they shutting it off, are they getting angry, are they, you know. You think the majority are passive?
A: Yeah.
K: Yeah
A: Yeah, it’s not a big deal to them or something.
K: Right, I know what you’re saying. But if you’re going to suggest changes, you may have to talk about the active ones, the ones who aren’t passive, if there are, if you see any, if you’re going to talk about a change. Just some thoughts there.

(TK-A3-4)

Sam and I both suspected that in this section, Kate wanted Abe to clarify his idea of the internal struggle; however, we were confused by the passage in general and especially about her questions concerning passivity. After all, it seemed obvious that Abe perceived the people about whom he wrote as passive. Further, although Abe did mention his own solution—that people needed to be more aware—we were also confused by Kate’s assertion at the end that Abe needed to “talk about the active ones” if he planned “to talk about change.” Although we did not understand what Kate was trying to accomplish, we sensed something odd; as Sam explained, “It’s almost like she wants to prove the guy wrong. . . . I think it’s obvious that she disagrees with him” (Ana. 122-3). But we did not know where she wanted the conversation to go.

Kate’s response to this conference segment helped us understand. She felt that the idea of “passive” people did not fit with the idea of an internal “struggle”; that is, those who struggle can not be passive—because “struggle” suggests action. Part of my conversation with Kate follows; in it, Kate both explains and critiques her approach:

Kate: See, because it doesn’t feel like a struggle. It still seems passive to me.
Now, I could have told him that. I could have told him that, but I didn’t tell him that. So see maybe I failed because I never would tell him that. I figured, you know, he’s gonna have to figure this out and change his thesis. . . . I never [told
him] that, because he’s a smart guy. He thought a lot. So I figured, you know, this will work it out if I ask him questions.

Kerri: I didn’t think about that, that you were getting to the fact that it was

Kate: That it was all passive, wasn’t it?

Kerri: I mean you talk about this, are all people passive . . . .

Kate: But that was what I was after. And so I really, you know—why was I beating around the bush? [It] was only because I thought he was smart enough

Kerri: To get it

Kate: Yeah, I wasn’t gonna take away from him owning it, but then I probably let him down in the process, by not doing it. But still it was his paper. . . . Maybe after he left he really thought about it. . . . I think, you know, everything he said was really confirming that it was passive, [that] people just didn’t care anymore. But it just didn’t jive with the word struggle. But I never said it because I figured

Kerri: He’d figure it out

Kate: Yeah. (Ana. 129-30)

The problem, of course, is that Abe seemed not to figure it out. The rest of his conference, though, dealt with more clearly articulated issues, and he left on a positive note. However, the segment above demonstrates problems with non-directive methods: like Sam and me, Abe may have felt confused by the discussion, or he might have felt frustrated because it seemed not to accomplish anything specific. Further, my perception is that Kate’s questions attempted to mask a directiveness—Kate even calls her approach “devious” (130)—inherent in much conferencing. That is, tutors seem to think phrasing ideas as questions diminishes directiveness, but the directiveness (though not necessarily negative) remains—unless the question distorts it beyond recognition. Had she responded, “I’m confused by how a passive person can undergo a struggle. Can you explain that?” might she have accomplished more? Would she have been any more (or any less) directive? Would the discussion have been any more (or any less) collaborative? Such a response by Kate might sound like a teacher’s question; thus, tutors may hesitate to respond with such questions. But Abe would likely have been glad to consider that issue before his teacher raised it in response to his final draft. A danger of more hierarchical methods may be that tutees have few chances to practice a concept or demonstrate their learning. On the other hand, a danger of more collaborative methods may be that tutees do not understand what the talk accomplishes, and, therefore, that talk may not accomplish much.
A similar—and almost amusing—incident happened in Kate’s conference with Tony, the
tutee working on a paper for his sociology course. Tony was writing about a book called
*With the Boys*, and as Sam and I discussed the conference, we were befuddled by Kate’s
repeatedly asking whether the book was fiction (TK-T3,5,7). Each time, Tony confirmed
that it was not fiction. Why, we wondered, did she continue to ask? We also wondered
whether Tony felt Kate was not paying attention to his responses. Later, Kate too seemed
puzzled and exasperated with herself, until she remembered what her goal had been. In
his introduction, and throughout his essay, Tony simply called *With the Boys* a “book”;
Kate was hoping he would offer more precise terminology, such as “sociological study,”
instead. Joking about her questioning being “obsessive,” Kate laughed, “That lousy damn
word ‘book’ was bugging me, wasn’t it?” (Ana. 149-50). While the issue was small (and
humorous in retrospect) it suggests significant implications for our practice: sometimes
sounding directive—“Maybe you should call it a study, instead”—may be more effective
than asking questions geared toward the same result. At least that segment of Tony’s
conference seemed likely not to empower him: those questions may have frustrated him.
And he may even have misperceived from them that Kate was not paying him much
attention. In this case, as in Abe’s passage above, Kate offered the tutee ample
opportunity to make resource contributions. However, she might have accomplished
more by simply sharing with him her thoughts.

In other instances, tutors also seem potentially able to accomplish more through the more
directive approaches generally associated with hierarchical teaching. Focuses on
grammatical and mechanical rules, for example, sometimes went awry when the tutor did
not offer adequate explanation of the concept. For example, in Abe’s conference, Kate
makes a suggestion to help Abe with the sentence he’s trying to rephrase:

K: I wonder if you make it more active, like, uh, for example, (pause) if you started like,
“In Maynard’s song, the innocent character being manipulated and violated is
struggling,” you know, you could make it active, or, I don’t know. I’m just thinking, like
you can reword it in a lot of different ways. What do you think?
A: (long pause) I should be able to work off of that active thing. (TK-A2)

Also useful would be an invitation for Abe to rephrase the sentence using a more active
construction; however, unless he already understands active and passive voice, his ability
to do so seems unlikely. In short, he probably needed more explanation of the concept.

A similarly confusing passage occurs in Belle’s conference, when Sam also brings up the
issue of active voice. In this conference, Belle generally chose to work on sentence-level
issues. Involved here is a sentence in an adjustment letter responding to a pet-store
customer’s complaint that her new monkey destroyed her apartment: “One reason this
incident occurred was included in the care instructions given with the pet” (TS-B9).

S: Okay. INSTRUCTIONS GIVEN WITH THE PET. (pause) It’s in, um, this is a really
hard thing to explain, and I, I’m not very good at explaining it, but I think the reason why
this sentence is coming across kind of weird to me as a reader is because it seems to be in passive voice.

B: Mm-hmm

S: [Reads sentence aloud] So you’re trying to say that the instructions given with the pet
B: Explain, what you shouldn’t do, but she didn’t read them, that’s why I (told?) that.
S: Okay, so, so, but you don’t want to say “but you didn’t read them,” so, so, but you do
want to say
B: About the pamphlet
S: Yeah, okay, so you, so what were you saying? You, it was, it sounded good for right
there.
B: Well, um (pause)
S: The pamphlet you said
B: The pamphlet
S: Explained
B: Explained
S: Um, explained how the, how Binky [the monkey]
B: Mm-hmm
S: Then you said
B: How he might react, like any odd thing can cause him to react to the environment. I
forgot what I said.
S: Okay, well, you could say, the pamphlet given to you, or the pamphlet we gave to you,
explained how Binky should be properly treated
B: Oh, the pamphlet given with the pet explained how certain idiosyncrasies or whatever
could cause problems in the wrong environment
S: There you go. (TS-B9-10).¹

Although Sam tries to coax an appropriate response from Belle, it seems likely that she,
too, did not grasp the concept of active voice from this passage. In fact, we might
question whether she gained anything from the entire exchange; her statement following
Sam’s “There you go” was “Okay. I’m gonna continue reading, cause I’ll keep that in my
head” (TS-B10). Later, Sam good-naturedly laughed about the segment; we discussed the
difficulties of explaining active and passive voice, and Sam pointed out Belle’s powerful
move in dismissing his contribution and changing the topic (Ana. 98). Discussions of
grammar were often much more productive, of course—generally when a tutor’s good
explanation (a relatively hierarchical move) was accompanied by the tutee’s
implementing the rule in her text—sometimes in response to the tutor’s (also relatively
hierarchical) request.

Yet another area in which power dynamics sometimes hindered empowerment involved
ownership of learning goals. While potentially empowering conferencing often focused
on the tutee’s goals, such a focus did not guarantee empowerment. Often, focusing on the

¹ Here, Sam seems to be putting words in Belle’s mouth; however, Belle does rephrase her sentence with
better wording.
tutee’s goals was empowering to some degree; however, it sometimes seemed other goals would have produced better results. For example, Kate, Sam and I agreed that Kate consistently focused on Victoria’s goal of eliminating wordiness. However, a more significant problem was that Victoria’s teacher had asked for a remembered event narrative, and Victoria’s paper was extremely general. Sam even hypothesized that were he Victoria’s teacher, he would “give [her] an F . . . because she missed the assignment and made claims without support” (Ana. 119). In retrospect, the tutors and I wondered whether Kate had done Victoria a disservice by enabling her to establish the conference’s goals. Kate explains,

This was supposed to be a narrative. And what got me is that everything she said was generalizations. And I wanted to hear a story. And that was what the teacher said; she should have a moment or an example. I think maybe somewhere I asked her about an example, but I’m not sure. That’s what sorta got me: I’m not sure she got the assignment. . . . So I’m not so sure in those terms that this was a successful conference at all. . . . Although I addressed her thing, . . . I could only attack individual sentences [to work on wordiness]. . . . So in a way I failed. (Ana. 158)

Although Victoria generally owned her goals, she might have been more empowered had Kate imposed other goals on the conference.

On the other hand, replacing the tutee’s goals can backfire. For example, Tony, who said he wanted help with “punctuations,” maintained ownership of much of his conference’s goals; he stopped to work on sentence-level issues throughout his reading of his paper. However, like Victoria’s essay, Tony’s essay had larger problems. Near the end of the conference, Kate turns toward a discussion of major organizational and content issues. After examining the transcript, she commented, “My first instinct, . . . at the end of the conference, I got the feeling he was dissatisfied, as if I hadn’t met his goal. . . . I felt like I disappointed him somehow” (Ana. 141). She also speculated, however, that Tony might have been dissatisfied with her approach even when she did focus on his goals; perhaps, she thought, he expected her to simply make corrections for him. Regardless, the tutors and I perceived that Tony was not overwhelmingly pleased with his conference. We sensed that he had simple goals: to have the tutor help him correct his sentences, and it seemed he preferred not to deal with issues that might show a need for substantial revision. Thus, Tony’s goals likely resulted in only minimal empowerment.1 However, promoting more empowerment would have involved more than simply replacing his goals with Kate’s; he likely would not have responded favorably to such an action.

My assertions here are simple: power dynamics anywhere along the continuum from relatively hierarchical to relatively collaborative, and the accompanying enactments of power to varying degrees by tutors and tutees, can accompany empowerment. Those dynamics, however, can also hinder empowerment. Collaborative-seeming “questioning”

1 As Kate suggested, Tony might have been encouraged by having his suspicions confirmed that problems existed in areas of his writing to which he could point.
approaches can become confusing and frustrating for tutees; similarly, more hierarchical approaches can leave little room for tutees to confirm grasps of and to practice concepts. Thus, simply in implementation, no dynamic is inherently empowering or disempowering. Further, power dynamics are colored by issues of ownership (which also always exists along continuums). However, promoting tutees’ ownership of texts, ideas, or learning goals also does not guarantee empowerment. Such promotion can even hinder empowerment, especially when, for example, the tutee’s goal establishment—which reflects her enactment of power—results in a focus on issues that are not as useful as goals the tutor might have set. (Of course, the reverse can also be true.) Thus far, however, I have connected power dynamics only with empowerment in a more practical sense. I turn now to power and political empowerment in writing conferences.

MISSING MOMENTS: POWER AND POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

As I mentioned earlier, evidence of even potential empowerment in a political sense was strikingly absent in the conferences we studied. Therefore, based on my data, I can draw few conclusions about how power dynamics might affect political empowerment. Generally, I can say only that within a broad range of dynamics, political empowerment did not appear to happen.

In some instances, however, tutees brought to conferences a pre-existing sense of issues associated with political empowerment. Abe (who interpreted the Maynard James song as social critique), for example, seemed to strongly recognize his ability to construct knowledge. Similarly, both Abe and Victoria (who wrote about volunteerism) evidenced a degree of already-existing critical literacy. In all conferences, though, the rules were the rules: with the exception of Victoria’s discovery that sentences could indeed begin with “because,” no tutee seemed to question the legitimacy or origin of discourse conventions. Finally, probably all tutees sensed benefits of using those conventions—a higher grade, if nothing else—but none addressed or acknowledged potentially negative effects of embracing academic discourses. Empowerment in a political sense, then, was most noticeable only in its absence, no matter what the power dynamics. However, in the case of one tutee, we could learn much from that absence.

Pearl’s Story

Although she did not explicitly discuss political issues as such, one tutee, Pearl, participated in a series of six conferences in which issues concerning political empowerment (and disempowerment) abounded. Kate (Pearl’s tutor) and I studied this series of conferences in depth. At this point, some background information about Pearl and her conferences will be useful.

1Kate reflected extensively on these conferences even before I asked her to. Several pieces of her writing she shared with me dealt with Pearl’s conferences, and my own research journal included many pages recapping conversations with Kate about Pearl and her struggle with Dr. Anderson’s assignment.
Pearl, an African-American junior, brought to her conference an essay she had written about *The Great Gatsby* for a literature course with Professor Anderson. Dr. Anderson had graded the paper an “F”; however, he offered Pearl the opportunity to revise her paper for a higher grade. He gave her no specific deadline. Instead, with the requirement that she work consistently with a writing tutor, she could turn her paper in any time before the end of the semester, a few weeks away. Pearl met with Kate for six different appointments, several of which extended beyond the normal thirty-minute blocks.

Kate describes the multiple problems with Pearl’s paper, as well as Pearl’s initial attitude: When she first came in she was really quite shaken, because she had a paper on *The Great Gatsby* that she’d gotten an F on, and Dr. Anderson had written a lot of comments on it. Mostly it was marked in many places that her conclusions were illogical, she wrote in generalizations, basically she had interpreted *The Great Gatsby* as a love story, and she didn’t define the American Dream, and he wanted a definition of the American Dream, and she had no thesis, so she hadn’t started out with any conclusion about the question that Dr. Anderson was asking. . . . So during the first conference, I really just had to calm Pearl down, because she was on the verge of tears. (Ana. 38)

Further, Kate speculated that “a lot of what was wrong with the essay . . . was really that Pearl didn’t know how to interpret the book” (Ana. 38).

In their conferences, Kate not only had to work with difficult and numerous writing problems; she also had to deal with significant ethical issues. Kate’s role as expert in the conference was potentially heightened by an interesting twist (especially considering the size of the campus): Kate had taken the same class with Dr. Anderson in a previous semester, and she had written an essay based on the same prompt. In short, she knew precisely what Pearl’s essay needed to do to meet Dr. Anderson’s approval. During the first conference, Kate made some quick decisions. She explains:

It was a sticky situation, because I had had Dr. Anderson for two semesters of American literature. . . . So I decided first of all that I wouldn’t tell Pearl that I had even had Dr. Anderson, I wouldn’t tell her I had written an essay on this very same topic, I wouldn’t, I really wouldn’t even let her know that the book was that familiar to me. . . . I told her I had read it a long time ago. It was rather deceitful, but I realized that she’d gotten an F on a paper, that was hard enough to–it’s a big put-down to get an F on a paper. The least I could do would be to let her be an expert on the plot, on the book, as much as she knew, and just try and keep guiding her. . . . I just thought that she at least deserved to say that she had worked hard and thought a lot about this before she wrote it. So it was sort of, the only way that I thought I could help her build some confidence in herself was to make her think that she knew something about it. (38-9)
One problem, however, was that Pearl seemed to know very little about the text; Kate even wondered whether she’d missed class (39); she knew Dr. Anderson repeatedly emphasized key passages in his lectures, so it seemed Pearl should have been more able to approach his question.

The series of conferences demonstrate many frustrations alongside little victories. Kate asked many, many questions encouraging Pearl to come up with ideas about the text. Sometimes Pearl seemed to progress, articulating potentially useful thoughts; other times, though, she seemed to have forgotten the important points she had made. The conference tapes show Kate and Pearl struggling together, Kate trying hard not to put ideas into Pearl’s head and Pearl usually trying hard to come up with some ideas. Not evident on tape, though, is just how intense the struggle was for Pearl: Kate remembers, “One thing that does not come through on the tapes is that Pearl was breaking out in a cold sweat when I asked her these questions. It was like the hardest thing this poor girl ever had to do was to think about this book” (40).

Much of their conversation focused on relationships among the characters and on abstract terminology relevant to the essay question. Kate recalled that the question asked whether the novel was “a critique of materialism, or a critique of the American Ideal as well”—and whether that critique also involved Gatsby’s dream (38). Pearl had much difficulty defining concepts like “success” and “prestige”; more importantly, she also had trouble coming to terms with Dr. Anderson’s concept of the American Dream. Kate summarizes:

- Dr. Anderson had made a definite comment in the margin that she needed to define the American Dream, which was a reasonable request, since his thesis question was this a criticism of American materialism or a criticism of the ideal of the American Dream. . . . So she had to define it, and that was really difficult for Pearl. . . . She said that the definition of the American Dream was gaining success honestly, working hard, being true to yourself, being dedicated to becoming successful in the right way, not criticizing others who aren’t as fortunate as you are. (41)

Later, Pearl offered a rather profound insight; Kate recounts, “So, I questioned her a little bit more . . . and she stopped and told me during this interview, and I quote this, ‘my opinion interferes with what the book is saying. Like the values I was taught growing up. My mom said the sky’s the limit, set high goals and work hard to achieve them’” (41).

Kate adds, “you know, she said more about how she couldn’t agree with Dr. Anderson’s interpretation that this book was criticizing—she didn’t agree with criticism of the American Dream if it meant working hard and having money, because she didn’t, I gather, didn’t come from a wealthy family, and she asked me once, ‘What’s wrong with having money?’ ‘What’s wrong with having these things?’ ‘Why should they be criticized?’” (41).

From her experiences in Dr. Anderson’s class, Kate knew he expected students to argue that Fitzgerald was indeed critiquing American materialism and the American Dream.
However, that interpretation conflicted with Pearl’s own worldview. Kate explains how she handled this discovery:

I went back and I listened to [the tape] several times just to hear what I had said to her when she told me that she didn’t agree with the interpretation of the book, and she didn’t agree that the American Dream should even be criticized if it meant having money and being successful and working hard and so forth. And I told her, if your view of the American Dream is different from the book’s, I wonder, if you follow the analysis of the book, should you focus on what the book says about the American Dream and how it defines it, or should you make it into something else that might interfere greatly with how you interpret the book. And, I, I asked her if she understood what I meant, and she said she did, and I just, I realize, . . . I knew what I was doing when I said it, you know, I was more or less telling her that if you’re going to interpret it differently . . . it was just going to interfere with her writing a successful paper. And that’s how I saw it at that particular time, and knowing Dr. Anderson and knowing how many people got shot down in class if they had a different interpretation than he did, I suppose if one could back it up, he would accept a good argument if it were backed up properly. But I don’t know that Pearl could back up a different argument. (41-2)

Thus, Kate encouraged Pearl to move away from her personal worldview to write a more successful essay.

Listening to Kate reason through her approach with Pearl in her analysis tapes was particularly interesting. I quote here another extended passage, in which Kate closely links Pearl’s conference to issues associated with political empowerment. In the passage, Kate ponders whether and how Pearl might have written a different essay—one based more on Pearl’s own beliefs. However, she concludes that neither was Pearl’s thinking at a level that would result in a successful essay of the type, nor would such an essay actually answer Dr. Anderson’s question. Thus, Kate justifies her approach with Pearl:

It was in the following semester, long after I tutored Pearl that I took a course in modern literary criticism, and when I read Althusser’s writing on ideological state apparatuses [isas], and, which is really an elaboration of Karl Marx’s ideas, but, that school is one of the main isas there are for reinforcing the dominant state ideology, I realized that I was doing very well in reinforcing what Pearl should think and what she should support, and what she should write about. However, I don’t think Pearl was able to take her ideas to another level, and that is probably the key to it all. Because I actually wrote anonymously about my conferences with Pearl in my journal for modern criticism, because I realized that if Pearl could have reasoned it out, that, that F. Scott Fitzgerald was not a poor man himself, and therefore it was very easy for him to criticize materialism and so forth, because he had it all, so therefore, by making other people buy into the idea that materialism is a bad thing, then it makes them happy to
be poor and keep them that way, and keep them as good workers, working their butts off for the rest of their born days. But Pearl didn’t understand all this; she wouldn’t understand I don’t think, where she was at that, that if she could’ve supported that argument, um it . . . still wouldn’t even have been answering [Dr. Anderson’s] question. He was asking, was the book a criticism of materialism, or was it even a criticism of the ideal itself of an American Dream, was there, is there such a thing as an American Dream? I still don’t think that that really even totally touches on the fact that Pearl may not have liked that Fitzgerald was criticizing materialism and the American Dream; however, I could understand where she was coming from. I could understand that she didn’t think that what Fitzgerald was going after was such a bad thing. And if she could have understood, more or less, Althusser and Marx, and that Fitzgerald could just be manipulating people to believe in an ideology that these things are bad, then, he was really manipulating the working class, that would have been a whole different essay. So, I think that I handled it as tactfully as I could. Number one, she needed to get through the course; she needed a better grade on the essay. If she had said no the book was not a criticism of materialism, then I don’t know what she would have said. She, I don’t think anything that I had heard so far had lead me to believe that Pearl could support that [opposing] point of view either. So I think that she just had generalized opinions about it, and really rather simplified, because when I questioned her about if the American Dream was about working hard and . . . gaining success honestly in the right way and so forth, you know, when I questioned her about whether Gatsby was honest or whether he worked hard, you know, she couldn’t answer those questions, because, well she had to even admit that Gatsby, well he wasn’t such an honest fellow really, and, and well, we never saw Gatsby work, whatsoever, so I don’t know where that kind of thinking would have lead her if that’s all she defined the American Dream to be, was hard work. But I understand that from her socioeconomic background that those values were important. And she wanted to see Gatsby as someone like herself, or maybe her family, who had gotten wealth and everything was just fine. (42-3)

Finally, Pearl’s (relatively successful) attempt to deal with the text based on her own identity and perceptions was evident in on particular area. Throughout her conferences, a paragraph about Nick Caraway, which did not relate to her argument, never went away. Kate encouraged her to explore how (and whether) it fit with a criticism of the American Dream, but the paragraph stayed—and stayed. Kate describes that it was about Nick’s father telling him “when he feels like criticizing, remember that all people in this world haven’t had the same advantages that you’ve had” (47). Kate adds, “this is something that she mentioned spontaneously as part of her definition of what the American Dream is, and that was not criticizing others who haven’t been as fortunate as you have. And she really identified very strongly with Nick Caraway” (48); she continues, however:
But that paragraph never left the essay. I think I probably mentioned it in every interview. Now what about Nick Caraway? I think I even asked her do you really need this paragraph about Nick Caraway? And, it just always got left hanging, and nothing ever changed in that paragraph, and it just didn’t relate to the thesis the way it was written. But it was obvious that it was something in there that she identified so strongly with that statement that she just couldn’t let it go. (48-9)

That paragraph, it seems, may be the only part of her text that Pearl really owned; we might wonder whether it was later marked in red as lacking usefulness or being out-of-place.

**Pearl’s Writing Center Experiences: What Was . . . and What Might Have Been**

Even though moments in her conferences seemed extremely uncomfortable, Pearl seemed to have been empowered in many practical ways. Happily, the end result was a more successful paper. Through conferencing about and re-writing her essay, Pearl increased her ability to use academic discourse: her new paper was better focused, better organized, and better supported. Also, Pearl owned her text to a degree—and she spent much time “driving the car” (though sometimes “into the ditch”) in her conferences. Kate was quick to note, however, that her questions had lead Pearl to conclusions she would likely never have made on her own; further, Kate assessed that while Pearl had done much of the decision-making about her paper, Kate had essentially pulled her own thesis out of Pearl. (We might question whether doing so was inappropriate; after all, in light of the essay question, the thesis really belonged to Dr. Anderson.) Easy to understand from the tapes and from Kate’s analysis of the conferences is that ownership was incredibly blurred and that Kate strongly enacted power even as she encouraged Pearl to explore her own ideas. After all, in the name of “letting” Pearl “be the expert,” Kate withheld (or disguised) her own knowledge of *The Great Gatsby* as well as of the “ideal text” Dr. Anderson was looking for. Of course Pearl, too, enacted power—sometimes especially strongly. For example, by keeping her “Nick” paragraph, she resisted making changes Kate clearly approved of.

In general, though, Pearl made some relatively substantial gains. Especially important is her evidence of critical thinking; describing how Pearl finally compared her ideas about Gatsby and the American Dream, Kate observed: “Actually, sometimes you know it looked like she understood that she was contradicting herself and that her own knowledge was growing in the process” (49). Gatsby might not have worked hard for his achievements, but Pearl certainly did. Significant political issues, however, cloud the effectiveness (and/or appropriateness) of Kate’s approaches in Pearl’s conferences.

Kate knew that to succeed in Dr. Anderson’s class, Pearl needed to write the essay he expected—even if it reflected a viewpoint to which Pearl did not relate. Kate encouraged Pearl to do just that. Thus, Kate served as Dr. Anderson’s powerful proxy, and Dr. Anderson himself seemed to loom constantly in the background of the conferences. As
Kate notes, Pearl was “robbed” of something by being encouraged to abandon her interpretation of the world in order to write the paper her teacher wanted. Pearl experienced first-hand the negative effects of writing according to particular academic discourse conventions—in this case not only textual conventions but also conventions of thought.

While I feel strongly that some things could have been better handled in Pearl’s conferences, I also sympathize with Kate, and I do not intend to sound overly critical of her approach. After all, Pearl apparently wanted to succeed in Dr. Anderson’s class; she wanted to write an essay he would approve of. However, Pearl might have been more empowered had Kate embraced some other approaches, as well.

First, Pearl might have been more politically empowered had she indeed been encouraged to draw on, rather than discard, her own worldview. However, Dr. Anderson wanted Pearl to explain Fitzgerald’s critique of the American Dream rather than Pearl’s critique of that critique. Thus, Kate likely came to the correct conclusion that encouraging Pearl to work from her own, more positive concept of the American Dream would not result in a paper Dr. Anderson would find acceptable.

However, Pearl might have been empowered by discussing more extensively why such an approach would not work. That is, in the exchange cited above, Kate indicates to Pearl that she should be careful bringing in her own views, and Pearl agrees, but in the conference very little discussion takes place exploring the issue further. They might have talked at more length about, for example, the differences between Pearl’s and Fitzgerald’s (and presumably Dr. Anderson’s) worldviews, and they could have considered where those worldviews might come from. Kate might have encouraged Pearl to think about, for example, the kind of knowledge Dr. Anderson wanted Pearl to present and where that knowledge comes from. They might have talked about whose/which discourses are reflected in literary writing assignments, whose/which discourses are left out, and why. They might also have discussed what might happen if Pearl failed to write the essay Dr. Anderson wanted, the reasons she might want to write “his” essay, and the reasons she might not want to. Similarly, they might have discussed the possible repercussions of both. Finally, they might even have contrasted Dr. Anderson’s approaches with those of other teachers who, for example, might want Pearl to draw on her own perspective and experiences—on her own authority, we might say.

In short, even in encouraging Pearl to write the essay Dr. Anderson wanted, Kate could have helped Pearl explore the social and political natures of academic knowledge and discourses. Pearl was obviously in the middle of experiencing pressures from all of these; Kate might have helped her articulate and understand those pressures, even if she did not necessarily encourage Pearl to resist them at the moment.

On the other hand, Kate might indeed have brought up the issue of resistance. Kate withheld her own critique (informed by Althusser) of Fitzgerald in part because she felt
Pearl was not yet an advanced enough thinker and writer to deal effectively with such complex ideas—additionally, those ideas wouldn’t be Pearl’s. But that act makes Kate seem a lot like Dr. Anderson encouraging his one approach, which also was not Pearl’s. Even if she thought Pearl not yet able to produce a convincing argument based on such ideas, and even though she would indeed have been “giving” Pearl ideas, Kate might have shared her knowledge and application of social theory with Pearl. Pearl might have been hungry for—and might have benefited from—such information, even if she did not choose to use it to write “against” the academy. Discussing that possibility, though, could have encouraged Pearl to move toward critical literacy.

In many ways, I agree with Kate’s approach: I, too, would likely have encouraged Pearl to write the paper Dr. Anderson wanted; after all, Pearl’s success in doing so would likely empower her in a practical sense. However, Kate seems to have missed prime opportunities to help Pearl move toward empowerment in a political sense. Further, few tutees come to the Center as frequently as did Pearl; therefore, Pearl seems an especially good candidate to engage in the kinds of discussion I suggested above. (That is, our attempts to empower students are limited by time, but the frequency of Kate and Pearl’s contact would have helped decrease the time factor.)

In general, for more empowering conferencing, Kate might have embraced more strongly the notion of writing centers as border zones where various (academic and non-academic) cultures meet. For Pearl, the SSU Writing Center probably did not seem a place where cultures and discourses interacted; rather, it was more a place of acculturation where she was invited to discard her own and adopt the ones her teacher (and tutor) encouraged. In a sense, we might say Kate and I participated in a border zone experience with Pearl; in retrospect, we agreed that she strongly influenced us both. However, Dr. Anderson—though he seemed very present in the conferences—was largely left out of that experience. That is, he likely never came to understand Pearl as we did or was influenced by her as we were. Had we somehow been able to invite him into our “border zone,” he might have discovered things not only about his student but about himself; he might at the very least have considered how his assignment created a particular subject position for his students and how some students might be uncomfortable with that position. Thus he might have been empowered, too—perhaps resulting in revised attitudes, assignments, or teaching methods.

We are left with the issue of what sorts of power dynamics might promote or discourage political empowerment; unfortunately, I am left to do little more than guess. I speculate, though, that as with practical empowerment, political empowerment might result from the tutor’s conscientious efforts within all sorts of dynamics. It seems likely that tutees might gain much from relatively collaborative exchanges in which they explore, for example, some of the issues I mentioned above. However, even more hierarchical instruction might be useful: tutors might explain the notion of knowledge as construct, for example, or relay the possibility for tutees to impact their worlds through critical literacy.
indeed, part of our job might even be to help tutees gain the language with which they can articulate those concepts.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I first summarize the premises underlying this study, followed by my findings. Next, I discuss the implications of this study for writing center work; specifically, I offer recommendations to promote empowerment through effective tutoring, effective writing center policies, and effective tutor preparation. I then suggest useful directions for future research. Finally, through the course of this study, I discovered that Kate and Sam were likely much more empowered by their writing center work than were their tutees; therefore, in the closing section, I discuss the ways in which tutors are empowered. Some of my most important conclusions relate to that issue.

SUMMARY OF PREMISES AND RESULTS

Based on my findings, whether a tutee is empowered by a conference is difficult to say. Two factors are important in determining empowerment: how we define empowerment and whether we see evidence of it. Writing center literature has been less than clear about what, exactly, we mean by the term; concepts of empowerment suggest a general, positive outcome of conferences, sometimes vaguely political, and attainable via the right methods. Indeed, in some instances, empowerment has seemed equivalent to participating in those methods. One of this study’s strengths is that it distinguishes between means and ends of empowerment: empowerment does not equal participation in potentially empowering methods; rather, empowerment is something tutees gain from their conferences. Further, empowerment can be thought of in practical and in political senses.

Practical empowerment, as defined earlier, enables tutees to effectively control their writing, so that they can make their writing accomplish the goals they—or others—set for it. Such empowerment is encouraged in several kinds of gains: approaches to current writing tasks; transferable skills; increased fluency in academic discourses; awareness of writing as a social act (and of the writer’s ability to make and communicate meaning to an audience); and confidence. We can say a tutee is empowered if she develops intellectual autonomy over her writing; that autonomy involves a combination of learning, developing transferable skills, and building confidence.

Political empowerment, on the other hand, involves a deepening critical consciousness: it enables tutees to understand that knowledge, self, and worlds are social constructs—not absolutes—and that they participate in that construction. Similarly, it promotes an understanding of academic discourse as constructed and political, not neutral. In its strongest sense, political empowerment enables tutees to gain critical literacy: an ability to use language skills to work for social justice, if they so choose.¹

¹ Although I have associated intellectual autonomy with practical gains, I realize that a deeper level of intellectual autonomy may be achieved by tutees who experience significant political empowerment.
Writing center literature associates—and sometimes even equates—several concepts, which I deem methods of empowerment, with empowerment itself. Among them are maintaining ownership of texts and ideas, maintaining ownership of learning goals, and participating in collaborative rather than in hierarchical learning exchanges. Each of these methods can be empowering for tutees; however, simply experiencing them does not guarantee empowerment. For example, owning a text may not be empowering if the text goes unimproved and later fails to achieve its purpose. Similarly, establishing learning goals and having those goals taken seriously may not be empowering if the goals are not useful or appropriate. On the other hand, maintaining ownership sometimes does result in empowerment.

Similarly, participating in collaborative rather than hierarchical conferencing does not guarantee empowerment. Collaborative methods seem intended to empower tutees by allowing them to be “experts” (and thus, perhaps, by increasing their confidence); however, collaboration is not always a positive experience. Collaborative exchanges can be frustrating and confusing, and they can leave the tutee feeling less confident than before her conference. On the other hand, more hierarchical exchanges are not always the negative experiences some conferencing literature has made them out to be. From them, tutees might gain, for example, a better understanding of academic discourse or a new approach for their writing task—and possibly warranted confidence, as well. Participating in a certain conferencing method, then, does not mean automatically becoming empowered.

Finally, notions of ownership and of hierarchical vs. collaborative conferencing approaches are more complex than they have seemed in our literature. Like power, each is most appropriately thought of as existing on a continuum. Further, these empowering “methods” are perhaps more useful in informing examinations of power dynamics than in pinpointing the achievement of empowerment. I have defined power as action upon another’s action, as occurring within relationships in which both parties retain capacity for action, and as influenced by both parties’ perceptions of their own and each other’s authority (which underlies but does not equal power). Thus the methods above are inherently connected with power. That is, maintaining ownership of text, ideas, or goals, or participating in a more or less hierarchical or collaborative exchange, involves power enactments: for example, in a more hierarchical exchange, the tutor might enact power and own the tutee’s text by telling her what to write, or, in another scenario, a tutee might demand attention to her learning goals. (Empowerment, though, may or may not happen in either case.)

We can begin to examine power dynamics in conference talk by considering these methods alongside other factors, such as whose topics are proposed, accepted, and declined, and who makes substantial conversational contributions that appear to be

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2 Another strength of this study is that it distinguishes power from authority; further, it attempts to remove from both the negative connotations with which they have become associated.
deemed significant by the other participant. Because ownership, hierarchical and collaborative approaches, and power all exist on continuums, we can easily point to the complexity of power in conferencing, but we can never hope to fully explore or adequately quantify it. We can, however, glean a holistic analysis of power in a conference (or conference segment).

Power dynamics in conferences, though, matter most only as they promote or hinder conference accomplishments. Accordingly, examinations of power are best undertaken in connection with examinations of empowerment. Determining whether a conference empowers a tutee, however, is difficult. Such determinations could likely best be made by observing the tutee at work revising her paper, or by meeting with her concerning a subsequent draft. But tutees do not always return for another conference, and we often do not have a chance to see their texts again. Thus, we must turn to evidence of empowerment available within the conference.

Unfortunately, in the conferences we studied, conclusive evidence of empowerment was often scanty. Although participants frequently dealt with issues that, if truly grasped, would empower tutees, hard evidence that concepts were indeed being grasped was sparse. On a more positive note, however, conferences with a range of dynamics (from more hierarchical to more collaborative) offered potential opportunities for empowerment. Within a range of dynamics, too, though, the conference dynamics sometimes appeared to prevent or minimize empowerment. Finally, of the empowerment that did seem to happen or that might potentially have happened, almost none was political. All of the conferences we studied dealt in some way with issues conducive to practical empowerment. But moments of even potential political empowerment were markedly absent.

When I began this project, I speculated that the more collaborative a conference, the more empowering it would be. However, I quickly discovered many complications of conferencing that led me to question that position. Some of those complications are reflected in the “ideological dilemmas” Roswell described in 1992:

the tensions tutors [experience] between the constructionist goals emphasized in their training and the pressures to correct and normalize student writing; . . . between images of tutoring as conversation and tutoring as instruction; between tutors’ solidarity with their peers and their status as paraprofessionals; between the mandate to follow the student’s agenda and the mandate to establish an agenda; and between the long-term goals of improving the writer and the more immediate goals of improving the text. (175)

Roswell argues that in response to these tensions, tutors fall into the role of “‘hunched-shouldered authority’ . . . at once responsible for exercising and masking authority” (175). In such a role, “for example, the tutor attempts to establish an agenda for the conference while maintaining the illusion that the student writer’s agenda is being followed”; the tutee is “both active and receptive, engaged and compliant” (176).
More than ten years later, the notion of tutor as “hunched-shouldered authority” still rings true, and writing center work continues to involve similar and complex tensions. Recently, for example, Grimm pointed out what she calls “the contradictions at the heart of writing center work”:

Why . . . are writing center tutors not supposed to write on students’ papers yet the students’ teachers are supposed to write on them? . . . Why are writing centers worried about “appropriating” students’ text when assignments require “appropriate” genres, “appropriate” citation styles, and “appropriate” supporting material? Why is the “best” writing center approach considered non-directive, especially when students come to writing centers seeking explicit advice? Why is collaboration such a buzzword and plagiarism such a serious offense? . . . Why is writing center pedagogy called collaborative if its purpose is individualized instruction?

(5)

For improved writing center work, we must grapple productively with such questions. As Roswell concludes, in part, “it is only when writing center theorists, researchers, and practitioners acknowledge the tensions surrounding writing center work . . . that writing center practitioners can best empower writers” (177). We should, however, of course do more than acknowledge the tensions; we should work from those tensions to build theory and inform practice.

One place we might begin is by encouraging tutors to “un-hunch” their shoulders—and to escape from the confines of the “ideal” conference “text.” I suggest that the key to productive conferencing is not to avoid one kind of approach in favor of another (idealized) one, but to draw from a variety of approaches. Toward one extreme tutors may feel more like peers collaborating, and toward the other they may feel more like teachers teaching. Either extreme—and points anywhere in between—can be appropriate and useful, whether our goals are practical empowerment, political empowerment, or both. Black argues that teacher-student conference interaction lies somewhere between talk and teaching; the same is true for peer writing conferences. However, rather than lamenting the fact that conference talk is never really simply conversation—even with peer tutors—I suggest that a writing tutor’s ability to move back and forth along that spectrum can contribute greatly to a conference’s potential effectiveness. While we can applaud more collaborative approaches (when they are productively employed), we need not necessarily feel guilty when tutors enact power, embrace their own authority, and sit up straight.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WRITING CENTER WORK

This study points to multiple implications for writing center work. Below, I offer suggestions for empowering tutees through effective tutoring, through effective writing center policies, and through effective tutor preparation.
PROMOTING EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EFFECTIVE TUTORING

More ethical and more productive tutoring may require that we rethink our goals, our approaches, and our notions of ownership. To give tutees the help they need, tutors must find a balance between collaborating and “teaching,” between our goals and theirs, between encouraging tutees to “own” their texts and sharing with them the information they need to improve those texts (and their writing abilities). To work toward more ethical, more effective, and more empowering tutoring, I offer the following seven recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Re-evaluate Text Ownership

To empower tutees, writing centers should reconsider notions of maintaining tutee ownership of texts. If we are realistic, we will recognize that the tutee is rarely the sole owner of a text about which she conferences (especially if her teacher or peers comment on that text). Although the ideal of tutee ownership of texts is intended to promote ethical conferencing, recognizing that text ownership is inevitably shared in conferences may actually help us conference more ethically and more productively. That is, such recognition may encourage us to share with tutees the information they want and need to know, as I explain shortly.

Recommendation 2: Re-evaluate Hierarchical and Collaborative Methods

To improve conferencing, we should also come to terms with concepts of hierarchical and collaborative approaches. Our commonsense notions of conferencing suggest these styles do not reflect a true dichotomy; rather, conferences always reflect a blend of hierarchical and collaborative dynamics. However, in our literature the two often do seem discrete; further, one generally seems desirable, and the other seems dangerous. In real conferences, though, the blurring of those categories quickly becomes evident, as does the fact that neither automatically results in or prevents empowerment. Breaking away from either/or thinking can help open conferences to a broad spectrum of dynamics, so that tutors may choose from a wider variety of approaches the ones most suited to a particular task. In general, tutors need to un-learn the idea that collaborative approaches are always best (and even always possible).

Further, we should consider the potential benefits and downfalls of various approaches and dynamics. Relatively hierarchical, teacher-style explanations, for example, can be extremely useful in exposing tutees to concepts—such as how a thesis works, what belongs in an introduction, or where a semi-colon might be appropriate. Similarly, time restraints on conferences may practically demand that the tutor diagnose and explain problems. On the other hand, collaboration is probably more appropriate for soliciting a tutee’s thoughts about her topic or clarifications of her points. In some instances, though, either approach can fail. Hierarchical “teaching” in conferences can leave little room for tutees to demonstrate that they have grasped the lesson; collaboration, on the other hand,
can sometimes seem frustratingly pointless—perhaps especially when the tutor has a certain response in mind and the tutee fails to produce it.

**Recommendation 3: Embrace a Variety of Approaches and Come to Terms with Authority**

The best conferencing will involve a mixture of dynamics—sometimes more collaborative and sometimes more hierarchical—functioning as a kind of checks and balances system. Within those dynamics, tutors must make strong efforts to grant tutees opportunities to demonstrate learning, and to make certain they understand the reasoning behind and results of less straightforward segments. Such efforts may mean that they blur the hierarchical/collaborative categories even more. That is, requesting that a tutee like Ken practice creating thesis statements to show that he grasped the concept Sam explained makes the interchange a bit more collaborative. Similarly, explaining the point behind, or summarizing the results of, a series of questions and answers—as Kate could have done with Abe—may cause a more collaborative interchange to seem more hierarchical.

As suggested above, collaborative approaches can sometimes fail. Therefore, to empower tutees, tutors may sometimes need to act more as teachers than as peers. Perhaps in the name of maintaining tutee ownership, tutors sometimes hold back good advice or specific information the tutee needs—about the teacher’s or generic expectations, for example, or about mechanical or grammatical conventions, or about flaws in the tutee’s text. Withholding information, too, is a powerful move on the part of the tutor—and one that Grimm indicates can be part of hegemonic control. As she writes,

> Many modernist assumptions about individual autonomy get in the way of providing authentic support to the students who come to writing centers. The collaborative talk of the writing center always has to be qualified so that it doesn’t appear that writing center tutors are telling students what to think. Writing center tutors are trained to take a “hands-off” approach so that they do not appear to be doing the work for students, undermining individual autonomy and responsibility. Writing center tutors are supposed to use a nondirective pedagogy to help students “discover” what they want to say. These approaches protect the status quo and withhold insider knowledge, inadvertently keeping nonmainstream cultures on the sidelines, making them guess about what the mainstream culture expects or frustrating them into less productive attitudes. (31)

Grimm suggests that we have valued “ownership” in the writing center so much as to sometimes prevent students from learning things they need to know. Tutors should, of course, not take over texts in the sense that they simply “fix” them for the tutee, while the tutee looks on. However, tutors should be willing to explain to tutees concepts they need to have explained. Tutors should not play “guess-what-I’m-thinking” games, or ask questions simply for the sake of asking questions, when offering explanations (and even
offering directives) may help tutees more readily understand and/or implement a concept.³

It may be that we embrace non-directive approaches in part because we feel directiveness will only improve the one paper, not the writer. (Our strong sense of intellectual property rights and our wariness of plagiarism probably also influence our methods.) However, being more directive may help tutees improve a text and take a step toward becoming a better writer. Crucial, of course, is that we make certain that tutees truly grasp approaches, so that improving the writing may actually lead to improving the writer—who thus becomes able to independently implement skills and approaches she has learned.

Indeed, if tutors want to empower tutees, they need to confirm that tutees are “getting” what we think they are getting. Although such an act generally requires tutee participation—and thus can look like collaboration—it can also require that the tutor act as a sort of teacher. For example, for tutees to confirm understanding of some concepts, tutors may have to do some quizzing, and they may look like teachers in the process. Consider, for example, Sam’s “teacher-ness” had he requested that Ken practice writing a few thesis statements.

Finally, to empower tutees in a more political sense, tutors will likely need to explain to them the ideas we hope they will grasp (and probably share with them the language to help them achieve that grasp). In other words, building a critical awareness might well involve the tutor “teaching” the tutee about the social construction of knowledge, or the potential for language to create change, or the arbitrary and constructed nature of academic discourse. In doing so, tutors may give tutees the terminology and understanding needed to “own” those concepts. In many instances of effective and empowering tutoring, then, tutors may seem much like teachers.

Indeed, our literature points out that tutors already tend to see themselves as something more than their tutees’ peers; that is, tutors perceive themselves as having authority. Further, it follows that if tutors are sometimes to behave like teachers in conferences, they may sometimes need to enact power relatively strongly. I explained our tendency to conflate authority and power in Chapter Two, and I encourage maintaining a clear distinction between the two terms. I understand authority as a set of resources from which a conference participant draws to enact power; as the tutor enacts power (by acting as a teacher, for example) he might draw on the authority of knowledge or expertise and of his institutional position as tutor.

I realize that by, for example, explaining concepts and methods or by offering tutees choices, tutors will blatantly demonstrate their authority in enactments of power. We ³ Our time with them, after all, is limited. And if they feel we are not giving them what they need, they might understandably opt not to spend any more time in the center.
should remember that in many instances, such a display can be quite positive; indeed, many tutees likely expect and appreciate it. In short, by removing from authority negative senses of control and domination, we may understand authority more positively—as something tutors can use in empowering tutees. The tutor’s authority, then, especially in the knowledge/expertise sense, can be a resource to which tutors should not deny their tutees access.

We must remember, too, that tutees bring their own authority to conferences. They also have authority resulting from knowledge or expertise; they are potentially experts concerning their assignment and their teacher’s expectations, for example. Their authority also derives from their (relative) ownership and knowledge of their text; authority thus results from their being “authors.” Tutors are not simply free to enact power based on their authority; they should encourage tutees to embrace, draw on, and develop their own authority, as well. By doing so, tutors can achieve in tutoring the balance Freire suggests is necessary to avoid authoritarianism.

Recommendation 4: Help Tutees Understand Why We Do What We Do

We should always consider the power we enact by employing various methods, regardless of whether more collaborative or more hierarchical. Indeed, we do tutees perhaps the greatest injustices (and enact power in our strongest and most negative fashion) when we implement approaches they do not understand, with results (or intended results) they do not perceive (or accept). Whether tutees ask us to proofread and we refuse, whether we offer a brief lecture on how to create transitions, or whether we question (or quiz) them about their ideas or about the intended meaning of a text, any of these actions, in some contexts, might frustrate or confuse tutees and undermine empowerment. Ethical conferencing approaches must allow tutees to understand what tutors are doing and why.4 Certainly, this applies to writing center policies as well; tutees should understand the rationale behind our rules, our forms, our surveys, and the like.

Recommendation 5: Re-evaluate Goal Ownership

Empowering tutees also requires that we come to terms with the idea of tutees’ maintaining ownership of goals. To work toward more effective and more ethical conferencing, we must deal with a complicated tension associated with goal ownership. Both tutors in this study acknowledged that they sometimes allow their goals to override the tutee’s goals—especially when the tutee’s goals reflect lower-order concerns. Further, tutors’ preparation likely encourages them to do just that. Tutors are in a complicated position: they are expected to focus on tutees’ goals and to allow tutees to “own” their

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4 Included in explaining the hows and whys of conferencing would be explanations of conference logistics and protocols. In the conferences I studied, tutors did not always make clear, for example, why tutees needed to read their texts aloud— one of the approaches strongly encouraged in the SSU Writing Center. Tutors must help tutees understand not only genres of writing, but also the generic expectations of writing conferences themselves.
conferences, but at the same time, they are expected to focus on higher-order concerns, such as content and organization, before dealing with lower-order concerns. Often, focusing on higher-order concerns means that tutors must replace tutees’ goals with their own, which can rob tutees of their ownership of goals. Therefore, while goal ownership is always, to some degree, shared, tutors’ replacing tutees’ goals can also reflect a particularly strong and potentially negative enactment of power by the tutor.

The issue becomes even more complicated, however, when we realize that tutees frequently lack the language to articulate their goals clearly. Perhaps even more frequently, they do not know which goals would be most useful and appropriate—because, for example, they do not know where their writing problems lie. Further, tutors realize that pursuing the tutee’s goals sometimes results in a less productive conference than could otherwise be possible, so the temptation for tutors to instate their own goals—especially when the tutee does not seem to have clear ones—may be great. What should tutors do?

**Recommendation 6: Communicate and Negotiate Goals Effectively**

Tutors do tutees a disservice both by accepting less useful goals tutees propose and by overriding tutees’ goals. The danger of the former was evident in Kate’s conference with Victoria, who worked on her goal (wordiness) but generally missed the assignment. One problem with the latter was evident in many conferences, as well: in most of the conference tapes I examined, tutors asked, at some point, when the assignment was due. However, sometimes that question came too near the end of the conference to be of much use. That is, sometimes a tutee wanted to polish her paper, but the tutor would turn the conference focus to higher-order concerns. Later, the tutor would learn the paper was due very soon, and that the tutee did not have time to revise significantly. Thus, the tutee might leave with the idea that her text needed much more work, but she would not have polished the draft she would, inevitably, turn in.

The occurrences above speak to the need for better communication and more effective negotiation of goals. Just as tutors should inform tutees of writing center philosophies and of the intentions underlying various conferencing approaches, tutors should explain to tutees the concept of higher- and lower-order concerns. Rather than overriding tutees’ goals, tutors should offer tutees choices and should enable tutees to make informed decisions concerning what to work on in a conference. An effective instance of such an approach occurred in one of Sam’s conferences (which was not transcribed for the study). In it, the tutee wanted to edit his paper, which was due soon, but not that same day. Sam recognized bigger problems: the paper did not fit the assignment. Sam explained that they could focus on polishing the paper, but he also suggested the paper had other problems, and he mentioned them very briefly. He then asked the tutee to choose what he preferred to work on. The tutee thought for a moment, then said he wanted to work on the bigger problems. A productive conference ensued.
We should perhaps focus less on tutees’ maintaining ownership of their goals—in the sense that tutees can propose goals and have tutors work toward them—and focus more on negotiating productive and mutually-agreed-upon goals. Negotiating goals involves several different approaches. First, we must listen carefully to the tutee’s response when we ask what her goals are, and we must make sure that we understand her. Some tutees are able to ask for what they want; others are not. Therefore, tutors must be willing to help tutees articulate what they want—to give them the language to say what they mean. After the tutor and tutee clarify the tutee’s goals, they can work together to decide whether those goals are useful or not. If the tutee’s goals conflict with goals the tutor finds more appropriate, the tutor should not simply redirect the conference. Rather, the tutor should explain why other goals might be more useful, and then should allow the tutee opportunity to select what she prefers to work on.

Other approaches may be in order if the tutee lacks her own specific goals. As I mentioned earlier, some tutees are only too happy to confer goal ownership upon tutors; those tutees simply want to work on what the tutee wants to work on. Even those tutees, though, can maintain ownership—to a degree—if the tutor handles the situation appropriately. In such an instance, the tutor may need to suggest possible goals (perhaps after having read or briefly discussed the text, and after having discussed the assignment and its due date). In a sense, then, the tutor might offer the tutee a kind of menu of goals from which to select; the decision would lie with the tutee.

In many conferences, tutees became disengaged when the tutor imposed goals tutees did not particularly want to work on (or did not seem to understand). Such an action by the tutor, then, decreases the likelihood of a productive conference. Rather than risk the tutor overriding the tutee’s goals, the tutor and tutee should discuss possibilities. The tutor’s job should be to make sure the tutee understands various potential goals, but the tutor, if at all possible, should not choose the goals. Accordingly, goal ownership—which is always shared anyway—is shared explicitly and productively. Instead of possibly creating tension between participants, conference goals reflect the mutual wishes, so that both parties are more likely to work toward those goals.

Naturally, some tutees may still select goals the tutor disagrees with. However, the tutor should honor those informed decisions. This may be especially true, for example, if the tutee brings a text, due soon, for polishing, and the tutor notices more significant problems. If time constraints (or even the tutee’s attitude) make significant revision unlikely or impossible, the tutor may indeed do well to help the tutee polish the paper. At the end of the conference, the tutor can—and should—reiterate that other problems could have used attention, had time permitted. In that way, the tutor may encourage the tutee to schedule appointments earlier in her writing process for other assignments.

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5 For example, often in the conferences I listened to, tutees responded that they wanted to work on “flow,” by which they seemed to mean a variety of things. Rarely, though, did the tutors pursue what tutees meant by that term. If pressed, the tutees would probably have struggled to explain what they meant.
Recommendation 7: Work to Establish Long-term Relationships with Tutees

One of the best things writing centers can do is to establish long-term relationships with tutees. Further, doing this may require that we rethink our “better writers, not one piece of better writing” philosophies—which, I argue, tutees often do not know about, anyway. My sense is that some tutees, who perhaps did not understand or approve of a tutor’s goals or methods, were unlikely to return for subsequent appointments. If tutees, on the other hand, understand what we are doing and why—and if they take part in selecting what to do—they may feel their time and efforts are well spent. Further, with common—and clear—goals, conference participants may be more likely to make noticeable progress with their writing. Surely this, too, might encourage them to return. In fact, one dangerous possibility of writing center work may be that we become too focused on creating better writers, rather than on improving one text. That is, in the name of creating better writers, tutors sometimes do impose goals and use methods that may leave their tutees confused or frustrated. And many tutees may need to see improvement in one text before they will decide to conference about another. Helping tutees improve a text, then, may be a first step to building a relationship through which we can help them become better writers. Further, a major problem with identifying conferences as empowering or not is that we do not always know what a tutee does with her text after the conference. Accordingly, building relationships with tutees who attend multiple appointments may help us better determine whether and how her conferences are empowering.

PROMOTING EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EFFECTIVE POLICIES

My study also pointed to significant implications for writing center policy. Specifically, to empower tutees we need to make our policies visible to tutees; policies should also be designed to encourage tutees to return. Below, I offer three recommendations for empowering tutees through writing center policies.

Recommendation 1: Expose Tutees to the Writing Center’s Philosophy or Mission

This recommendation corresponds with “Help Tutees Understand Why We Do What We Do” in the previous section; part of more ethical, empowering conferencing involves making explicit for tutees the assumptions that underlie our work. At least in the SSU Writing Center, conferences are often based on the “better writers, not one piece of better writing” philosophy, but tutees do not always understand that philosophy. That is, tutors may engage—or refuse to engage—in many activities in the name of creating better writers. However, those activities may not coincide with what the tutee had planned to work on. (For example, a tutee who wants to work on sentence-level concerns may be puzzled by questions inviting explorations of her content, or by directions or suggestions for more substantial revision.) In the conferences we studied, tutees sometimes seemed off-put during conference segments in which improvements for the current text were not immediately evident, and such unfavorable responses are likely not very conducive to
building empowering moments. If creating better writers, rather than improving a single text, is our goal, we must make that clear to tutees.

**Recommendation 2: Help Tutees Understand Conferencing Procedures**

Not only should we encourage tutors to be open with tutees concerning the methods they employ in conferences, the writing center should also be open concerning what tutees should expect to happen in conferences. For example, some tutees in conferences I listened to seemed off-put by having to read their papers aloud; others seemed surprised when the tutor declined to proofread for them. To create situations most conducive to empowerment, writing centers might emphasize letting the tutee know ahead of time precisely what she can (and cannot) expect from her conference. For example, writing centers might post notices informing tutees they may be asked to read their text aloud (and why), that they will be expected to propose learning goals, that they will be expected to participate actively in the conference, and so forth. Alternatively, writing centers might post the pertinent information on a website, or they might require a brief writing center orientation during a first visit.

**Recommendation 3: Encourage Multiple Appointments**

In the SSU Writing Center, tutees are allowed to make only one appointment at a time, and they must skip a day between appointments. This policy is intended to allow the Center to serve a large number of students. However, a more productive policy might encourage the scheduling at one time of multiple appointments—perhaps even same-day appointments, if the tutee has time to work on her writing in between visits. After all, key in empowering tutees is developing relationships with them. We should do all we can to encourage frequent visits through which we are more likely to significantly empower tutees.

**PROMOTING EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EFFECTIVE TUTOR PREPARATION**

In keeping with the recommendations I mentioned earlier (and with issues that have been consistently important in this study), tutor preparation should help and/or encourage tutors to understand a few basic concepts: text ownership is inevitably blurry; goal ownership is also complex and is, at its best, productively shared; ownership, along with hierarchical/collaborative tutoring and power exists on a continuum. Additionally, it bears emphasizing that tutor preparation should encourage and enable tutors to share writing center assumptions, philosophies, and procedures (including the reasoning behind various tutoring approaches) with tutees. Below, I discuss seven recommendations for tutor preparation in more detail.
**Recommendation 1: Encourage Tutors Explicitly (and Carefully) to Work Toward Political Empowerment**

If we hope to politically empower tutees, we must prepare tutors with that goal in mind. Even tutors may not have a strong sense of writing center work as political in nature—or of knowledge as social construct—unless we help them understand it as such. We might, for example, point out injustices associated with teaching and requiring students to use academic discourses. However, we must find appropriate ways to expose tutors to fundamental ideas underlying political empowerment; we must be careful in our instruction, or we risk indoctrinating tutors in a sense similar to that we would ask them to work against. That is, even the most benevolently-intended positions concerning empowerment are also social constructions and also reflect political agendas—as much as does, for example, the teaching of academic discourse. Therefore, we must consider to what extent we wish to determine tutors’ goals and political positions for them, and to what extent we are willing to encourage them in forming their own informed positions about issues such as empowerment.

**Recommendation 2: Encourage Flexibility in Tutoring Approaches (and Teach Tutors How to Teach)**

If we are to empower tutees, a major goal in tutor preparation must be to help tutors develop flexibility and balance in their tutoring approaches. The conferences in this study suggested that tutors sometimes ask questions simply because they are taught to do so in the name of collaboration, not because they had particularly useful questions to ask.\(^6\) Specifically, tutors sometimes fell into “guess-what-I’m-thinking” type questions, which tutees sometimes struggled to answer. (On the other hand, in some instances more—and better—questions would have been useful.) We should encourage tutors to think carefully about the effectiveness of various approaches, and we should coach tutors in implementing them. We must encourage tutors to embrace the role of teacher as well as peer—to share, when appropriate, information tutees need and want, and to offer clear explanations of useful concepts. As Grimm argues, “Writing centers should hold themselves responsible not only for teaching [conventions], but also for acknowledging their arbitrary nature and for teaching them in the context of students’ writing—which for most of us will feel a great deal more like editing and proofreading” (106).

Rather than compelling tutors to embrace a certain method, we should encourage them to develop a broad repertoire of tutoring approaches, and to move among them as seems appropriate to particular moments in each conference. In general, tutors may improve more hierarchical approaches by asking questions of the tutee, who may (or may not) confirm understanding. Likewise, tutors may improve more collaborative approaches by

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\(^6\) I believe our emphasis on collaboration, questioning, and ownership perhaps unintentionally encourages tutors to avoid any approach that feels like “teaching.”
explaining conferencing methods and summarizing points made in discussion—or by moving toward more hierarchical approaches if collaboration seems to be failing. Preparation should help tutors understand the appropriateness and potential benefits of using a variety of conferencing techniques; it should also encourage tutors to evaluate their methods constantly during conferences and to make adjustments as necessary.

**Recommendation 3: Teach Tutors to Communicate and Negotiate Goals Effectively**

To enable tutors to empower tutees, we should prepare them to negotiate appropriate conference goals with the tutee. Specifically, we should help them realize that clear and agreed-upon goals are the best goals, that both creating better writing and better writers are appropriate goals, and that focusing on higher-order concerns may not be the best approach for some tutees, in some conferences. Further, we should help them understand that tutees are not always able to articulate or evaluate their goals and that part of the tutor’s job is to help tutees become able to do that.

**Recommendation 4: Teach Tutors to Assess Conference Results**

We should help tutors understand, specifically, what sorts of results their approaches might lead to. If we want to empower tutees in a practical sense, we need to help tutors firmly grasp what ends they might reach, and we should encourage tutors to be more conscious of whether those ends are achieved. Tutors should be taught to conference with an eye toward whether the tutee is gaining confidence, or an approach for her paper, or a transferable skill, or an understanding of audience or of academic discourse, for example. The same holds true for political empowerment; we should enable tutors to look for evidence of its presence or absence. Accordingly, we must encourage tutors to offer tutees opportunities to articulate, practice, and confirm what they are learning.

**Recommendation 5: Teach Tutors to Listen**

To encourage empowerment, we must teach tutors to listen carefully and to respond consistently to tutees’ comments. In some cases—perhaps especially when tutors asked token questions—tutors in the study did not follow up on the tutee’s remarks. Indeed, sometimes they did not give tutees adequate time to respond. Such a move obviously sends a negative message to the tutee. (However, if tutors feel less compelled to embrace a certain kind of approach, perhaps they will interact more productively with tutees.) Similarly, if tutors are to communicate and negotiate goals effectively, and if they are to assess conference effectiveness consistently, they must be good listeners.

**Recommendation 6: Use Real Conference Transcripts in Tutor Preparation**

To promote better understandings of how various methods, in various conferencing contexts, do and do not work, studying transcripts of real conferences may be especially useful in tutor preparation programs. As Sam, Kate, and I discovered, conference talk and
dynamics are incredibly complex and messy—much more so than role-playing and textbook scenarios suggested. Even observing and reflecting on conferences, I believe, failed to give tutors a strong sense of the intricacies of conferencing. Therefore, it seems that asking potential tutors to read and discuss (and possibly even formally analyze) conference transcripts could be extremely useful in tutor preparation.

**Recommendation 7: Recruit Tutors Wisely**

Many traditional undergraduate tutors, by virtue of their youth and relative inexperience, may lack perspectives such as Kate’s. Further, many of them will not have studied political, critical, or composition theory, as Kate had. (Indeed, I do not suggest they must; studying tutoring is already a significant undertaking, and preparation time will likely be limited.) We cannot always choose tutors with what we perceive as particularly useful educational backgrounds. However, writing centers can, at least, market their preparation courses and jobs to students with exposure to scholarship that may help them develop informed positions concerning tutoring. Kate and I attended English 3301—the course on composition histories, theories, and pedagogies—the semester after our tutor-preparation course. Several students from English 3301 went on to take the next offering of English 3015, and some were hired as tutors the year following Kate and Sam’s first year in the Writing Center. Their study of issues in composition seems likely to positively inform their tutoring, and recruiting tutors from such a course certainly seems a good idea.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

During this study, I discovered many implications for further research. The simplest, but possibly most significant, deals with the richness of writing centers as sites of research. Writing centers have operated within a kind of “we just know it works” mentality; however, possibilities for serious research in writing centers are endless. By exploring these possibilities, we can continue to move beyond anecdotal support for the value and effectiveness of our writing center work.

Next, I offer a general suggestion concerning the key issues in my study. If we want to “empower” tutees, we must first consider what we mean by that. That is, if we want to determine whether or not conferences result in empowerment, we have to know what we believe empowerment to be. We have used the term too loosely in our literature to be of much use; by conceiving clearer definitions of empowerment, we come nearer being able to accomplish and perceive it. I do not think complete the definition of empowerment that Sam, Kate and I worked from. Rather, I see that definition as a starting place—open to revision—for further thought. Similarly, my definition and understanding of “power” is certainly not exhaustive. However, to talk about and to study power in conferences we must be careful to work from a clearly articulated position concerning what that means.

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7 Understandably, tutor-preparation texts generally do not include lengthy conference transcripts in their entirety.
At the very least, though, we should move away from general conceptions of power as in the tutor’s hands and negative; we must remember that both parties in conferencing encounters have authority and enact power.

As we pursue other research projects in our centers, however, we might usefully retain some elements and approaches of this study. Specifically, performing data analysis as a truly collaborative effort benefited my study greatly. As I demonstrated earlier, encouraging the tutors’ input helped me to improve analysis methods, and extensively involving tutors in analysis often enabled triangulation. It also encouraged me to keep my data open to multiple interpretations; discussing conference segments about which our opinions differed often seemed just as productive as confirming consensus.

The next step, of course, would be to involve tutees’ voices in data analysis. Ideally, we might even involve their teachers’ voices as well; I can only imagine how this study might have benefited had Pearl and—had we arranged an ethical way to involve him—Dr. Anderson worked with us during analysis. Further, involving tutees in analysis might have helped me explore questions I never quite came to terms with: Even though I imagined tutees were potentially empowered by moments in their conferences, I was left wondering whether empowerment lies mostly—or even entirely—in the tutee’s perception. That is, can someone be empowered even if he does not sense his empowerment? How explicitly must tutees understand the gains they make during conferences? Can we ever really make claims for a tutee’s empowerment without hearing her thoughts on the issue?

Though I did not yet move toward involving tutees in data analysis, a major strength of this study lies in the tremendous amount of data I was able to collect. Other researchers, though, might modify my approach. For example, I was consistently impressed by how candidly Kate and Sam discussed their conferences; further, both were incredibly good-natured even when dealing with conferencing moments that seemed to go all wrong. Had I considered the issue more carefully beforehand, however, I would have offered them the opportunity to cull any tapes they felt less comfortable sharing.

Similarly, other research could focus on significantly different collections of conferences. As I mentioned earlier, I opted to approach tutees who seemed relatively comfortable. Conferences with less willing tutees, though, would also make excellent research data. Still others might focus on ESL tutees; had I done so, my project would likely have gone in much different directions. My project might have gone in other directions, too, had I chosen to focus on power issues through a specific lens, such as gender.

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8 Yet another useful step might be to collect the work tutees actually turn in after conferences and to compare that to the texts they focused on during conferences.

9 I should clarify that I do not believe empowerment always happens during a particular moment or conference segment; it obviously also builds over time.

10 Kate frequently posed questions concerning the influence gender might have had on the conferences we studied.
Further, many conferencing moments I opted not to thoroughly explore or to discuss extensively here were also steeped in power issues. In the SSU Writing Center, tutors are encouraged to ask tutees to read their complete texts at the beginning of conferences; however, some tutees resist, although they generally do read after the tutor urges them to do so. Evident, then, is that the genre of the writing conference itself—and the actions expected and accepted within it—assumes that the tutee will go along with what the tutor wants her to do. Next, I noticed that, in the event of overlapping speech, tutees tended to invite tutors to make their points first, as if tutors’ ideas were more important. I also did not adequately account for enactments of power in directives and requests corresponding to physical actions. For example, in one interesting case the tutee asked the tutor to make a note on the tutee’s text (suggesting that the tutor holding the pencil does not automatically equal an inappropriate taking of control).

Also, I noticed Sam’s tendency, when interpreting teachers’ comments along with diagnosing problems in texts, to make assertions such as “Your teacher says you need a thesis, and she’s right.” Such comments suggest an interesting—if probably unintentional—move to build authority by assessing the teachers’ ideas. That is, claiming that a teacher is right suggests an alternative possibility: the teacher might have been wrong, and the tutor might have known it. Indeed, Kate was once in the tricky position of having to explain that a teacher’s marginal comments were incorrect; the teacher had labeled as “comma splice” errors that were not comma splices. Finally, another interesting moment occurred when a tutee came to the center to check whether a tutor would confirm her teachers’ comments and assessments. The tutee conferenced with a clean copy of an already graded essay—apparently in hopes of determining whether her low grade had been fair—without making that goal clear to the tutor until late in the conference. The intricacies of power dynamics are suggested in each of these moments.

Other research might certainly improve upon my method of examining conference transcripts for power. As I mentioned earlier, my version of Watts’ resource approach almost suggested more questions than answers. Other studies might delve more deeply into the nuances of various conversational contributions. Particularly useful, for example, might be a consideration of how conversation contributions reflect knowledge a participant already possesses before coming to the conference, knowledge a participant gains from teaching and learning interaction, and knowledge a participant arrives at or “discovers”—that is, perhaps, knowledge being constructed as it is being spoken.

In short, my explorations of power (and empowerment) only touched the tip of the proverbial iceberg. More and extensive research is needed before writing centers can effectively come to terms with either issue. However, we should remember that even smaller, less-involved research projects are also useful. Just as I encourage other scholars to understand—and to use—writing centers as rich sites for in-depth research, I encourage research on more casual levels, too.
Finally, whether we involve writing center tutors in extended projects like this one or in smaller, less involved research projects, we should be sure to involve tutors as much as possible in writing center research. Doing so can be beneficial in many ways. It can help encourage in tutors a sense of the writing center as a place of continuous assessment and of themselves as evaluators of their own tutoring. It can enable researchers to create richly collaborative projects such as this one and to make the research as meaningful as possible to the subjects involved. And involving tutors in writing center research can be especially empowering for tutors, as I explain below.

HOW THE TUTORS WERE EMPOWERED

Throughout this project and especially as Kate, Sam, and I became immersed in analyzing data, I began to wonder how tutors are empowered through their writing center work and through their participation in studies of that work. That is, I discovered that even though their tutees’ empowerment was often questionable, Kate and Sam seemed increasingly empowered by both their tutoring and by their working with my project. To explore the ways in which the tutors were empowered, I again divided empowerment into two categories: practical and political. We might think of practical empowerment, for tutors, as enabling them to become more effective at tutoring, as well as at writing. Political empowerment, on the other hand, we might associate with enabling a tutor to impact her or his world—perhaps especially through teaching.

Both Kate and Sam seemed to improve as tutors and writers during my study. Interesting to observe, for example, was Sam’s development of specific approaches he honed and then often used to explain generic expectations; he also emphasized his improved ability to diagnose and explain tutees’ writing problems (Ana. 69). In addition, Sam felt that his tutoring had helped him improve his own writing: “I was always able to spout off essays, but I don’t think my essays were ever as solid or as intricate as they have become after taking 3015 and tutoring. But not just that; it’s surprisingly really helped me out with my creative writing, as well. . . . I think it’s helped my writing tremendously” (68). As is evident here, tutoring experiences resulted in various gains, including increased confidence in tutoring and writing abilities.

In a more political sense—certainly teachers impact worlds—Kate and Sam also linked their tutoring to potential benefits for their intended teaching careers. While discussing her conferencing, Kate often drew connections to how she might handle her future teaching. Later, Kate described how her conferencing informed her “developing philosophy of teaching”; she maintained that “although tutors are not ‘teachers’ in name, we are potential ‘teachers’ in practice” (93). Similarly, Sam described in detail how his

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11 For tutors, even a small project such as taping, transcribing, and analyzing one of their own conferences— even once a year—may be an extremely productive endeavor. To this end, I suggest that practically many writing centers would benefit from purchasing some basic equipment, such as tape recorders, audio cassettes, and, if budget allows, a transcription machine.
tutoring would influence his upcoming teaching; he emphasized his exposure to other teachers’ comments and tutees’ reactions to those comments:

I’ll tell you what’s more affected . . . the way that I’ll teach; [it] is not having taken the class and tutored, but having taken the class, and tutored, and having seen first hand the comments that teachers are making. Not just the assignments that they’re giving, but the way that they’re giving the assignments. The grades that they’re giving. Having seen all that has definitely made me think about . . . if I was the teacher and I got this paper, what would I do? . . . I think [that experience] is going to affect the way I teach. . . . It’s almost like having a little bit of insight before going into teaching, you know, because I’ve [seen the] students’ side. So now when I teach I’ll be able to have that in mind. I’ll be like okay, I remember when I was tutoring that the students were frustrated with this, or they really liked this, or so forth. (68-9)

Sam also suggested that his tutoring had helped him begin to negotiate an appropriate persona for his classroom interaction with students (69). Thus, just as tutees sometimes learned transferable writing skills from the tutors, the tutors gained knowledge and approaches they could apply in their classrooms later.

That dedicated writing tutors might, with experience, improve their tutoring seemed obvious to me, as did their likelihood of improving their own writing. Further, practically any potential teacher might benefit from tutoring experience. Therefore, that Kate and Sam seemed empowered—in these senses—came as no surprise. As my project progressed, though, I wondered how participating in my study might also have empowered them.

Participating in the study, and especially participating in our recursive process of data analysis, appeared to help tutors perceive more fully the complexity of conferences. Tutors also developed a stronger awareness of their conferencing approaches; Sam, for example, initially suggested that he “tr[ied] to make questions some of the only things [he says] in conferences” (WI C5); however, he later acknowledged he no longer felt that was true. I hope and suspect that their participation increased their likelihood of conferencing more ethically and more productively, in part because of their increased awareness of their approaches—and of the results of those approaches.

Participation in the study also encouraged Kate and Sam to spend many hours thinking and talking about the issues we explored. At the end of the project, I am certain, they both had strong ideas concerning what it might mean to be empowered—in many senses—and about what it might mean to enact power (and to experience power enacted by another) in teaching and learning contexts. Thus, I speculate that like their tutoring, their participating in my project will also inform their future teaching. Indeed, through our work together, Kate, Sam, and I created a kind of border zone for ourselves; though we shared some similarities in backgrounds, we each brought different knowledge and experiences to our interactions, and we each learned from and were influenced by one another.
I agree that students should be encouraged to understand themselves as makers of meaning and academic discourses as political and constructed. Ideally, writing centers might indeed move tutees toward critical literacy; we might encourage them to try to change their worlds. But often we have more than we can do simply to help tutees improve their writing. Further, even though I realize high levels of literacy do not guarantee advancement in society, I feel strongly that low levels of literacy essentially guarantee the impossibility of advancement. We should, therefore, focus on enabling tutees to control their writing in ways that will promote its mainstream acceptance. That may leave us little time for advancing tutees’ critical consciousness and critical literacy.

Perhaps we might focus with more resolve on promoting critical literacy among our tutors, and on encouraging them to develop informed positions concerning issues such as those we studied. Although Kate’s and Sam’s tutees generally did not experience political empowerment, Kate and Sam will be teachers soon themselves. Maybe as teachers, informed by their tutoring experiences (and by participating in this study), they will work—from a sense of their own political empowerment—toward fairer literacy practices.

Finally, while I have the highest hopes for Kate and Sam, I am likely the tutor most empowered by this study. With writing center tutees and with my own students, I have improved at conferencing: I am more aware of my approaches—of what I am doing and why—and at the end of the conference I (usually) feel more ethical and less guilty. As a researcher, I have been empowered by my experiences with Sam and Kate; they have affirmed my belief in qualitative methods, in productive collaboration, and in our abilities to build important and useful knowledge. As a teacher, I am empowered by how this study influences what my students and I do in our classroom; just as I suggest Sam and Kate might draw on their experiences to empower their own students, I see myself trying to do the same.

Somewhere in the middle of the boxes of tapes and piles of transcript pages, I realized I very much enjoy the recursive nature of my research. Similarly, I appreciate the fact that I have come full circle: I have returned to the same Writing Center and composition teaching program where my notions about tutoring and teaching writing first began to develop. I’m no longer the “tell-them-what-you’re-going-to-tell-them” tutor, (but I still recognize her sometimes). My role now is to prepare writing tutors and Graduate Teaching Assistants for their conference and classroom work. I want to empower them. And I think that I can.
WORKS CITED


Johnson, JoAnn B. “Reevaluation of the Question as a Teaching Tool.” Flynn and King 34-40.


APPENDIX A:
SSU WRITING CENTER PHILOSOPHY

Writing centers exist on most campuses, public and private. The most successful writing centers are those where the emphasis is on helping students become better writers by providing helpful, non-judgmental readers who can teach strategies applicable to diverse writing tasks. In writing conferences, the consultants speak for the "inner voice" that successful writers already have—the voice that reminds them, for example, to consider audience in their word choice, to think about the most effective organizational pattern for the assignment, to evaluate sources and consider logical problems.

The [SSU] Writing Center works to be that kind of center. Free of charge, trained consultants help anyone from first year students to graduate students develop the perspective that will enable each to become a better writer. Rather than concentrate on cleaning up one particular piece of writing so that it is better, consultants use a client's writing to individualize the teaching of writing skills.

We approach writing consulting with long-term goals in mind. A student who brings a math problem to a math tutor should not be satisfied with the tutor taking the paper, doing the problem, and handing it back. The client has one assignment with the correct answers, but s/he has not acquired any transferable learning. Unless the tutor will also take each of the student's future math tests, s/he has done the client a disservice. Writing consulting is the same. Writing Center staff who edit or rewrite a client's draft may produce one assignment that is better written than it had been. However, the writer-client will not have learned any long-term strategies for solving future writing problems.

[SSU] Writing Center consultants are experienced writers who provide feedback on clients' writing. Our goal is "better writers not just better pieces of writing." To that end, we use students' writing to teach them strategies for producing ideas and for organizing them, finding their patterns of error and proofreading more efficiently and effectively. At the Writing Center, we respect our clients and their texts.
APPENDIX B:
WRITTEN INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Interview Questions: End of Fall 2001 Semester

Please respond to the following; the more detail you can give me—by referring to specific conferencing moments, perhaps—the more helpful your responses will be. Just number your responses and either write or type them and put them in my B-18 folder, or email them [my email address]. In exchange for your time, I’ll cover two tutoring sessions for you. Thanks!

1. Tutoring expectations and experiences:
   In 3015, we all formed ideas, I think, about what tutoring would be like. How has this semester met (and/or not met) your expectations? What’s easy about tutoring, and what’s difficult? What strengths and weaknesses have you discovered in yourself as a tutor?

2. Tutor training:
   When you think back to 3015, what stands out as being especially helpful? Not helpful? What else should we have done in 3015? That is, if [the Director] were to revise her course plans, what might she add or take out?

3. Influences on your tutoring:
   It seems that many forces might influence our tutoring. How do you think your identity (for example: gender/race/age/writer/student/future teacher/anything else you choose) affects your tutoring? Do you think your 3015 group project influenced your tutoring? If so, how? What about your other courses (or other experiences) this semester?

4. Position as peer:
   Some writing center literature claims that peer tutors are effective in part because they are about equal to clients in terms of position/status/authority. How do you see your position or role as a peer tutor? How do you perceive your authority?

5. Issues:
   Drawing on your tutoring experiences, please give me your thoughts on:
   A. Using questions in conferences
   B. Being directive in conferences
   C. Student “ownership” of the paper

6. Recording and observation:
   Briefly, please tell me how (or how much) being taped affects your comfort level while conferencing. What about being observed (by me or someone else)?
APPENDIX C:
PERMISSION TO RECORD FORM

Request to Tape Record Writing Center Conferences

My name is Kerri Jordan, and I’m working on a study to determine how well the SSU Writing Center meets its clients’ needs. I’m especially interested in the effectiveness of different conferencing styles used by our consultants.

Your Writing Consultant, Sam, is participating in the study and is allowing me to tape-record his conferences. Would you also be willing to have your conference recorded?

Please know that if you agree to have your conference recorded, your privacy will be carefully protected:

1. The tape will not be made public. It will be used for research purposes ONLY. Only those closely involved in the study will have access to your tape.

2. Your name will not be connected with the recording. I will label your tape with a number, and I will use a pseudonym instead of your name if your tape is discussed.

3. I will also use a pseudonym to cite any quotations from your conference used in a written document.

Thank you for considering to help, and good luck in your conference today!

Sincerely,

Kerri Jordan

PLEASE CHECK THE APPROPRIATE BOX BELOW AND SIGN YOUR NAME.

______ You have my permission to tape-record my conference today. I understand that my name will not be connected with this study.

______ I prefer not to have my conference tape-recorded today.

Signature: ___________________________________ Date: __________________
APPENDIX D:
TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

The left-hand column contains a transcribed portion of a conference; the right-hand column contains explanations of the conventions used. “K”=Kate, the tutor, and “T”=Tony, the tutee.

T: So we kinda had to,?? I kinda got it, a little bit I guess but, I don’t know, I mean, I need some help ???. . . .
K: Did your professor give you any kind of a format?
T:  No. Three pages, one-inch margins, and double-space

K: Okay, well why don’t you read to me? And then if you want to, I don’t know if you want to mark on this copy, are you turning it in at 4:30?
T:  No, I’m not turning it in, no, I’m this (isn’t until 4:30?)
K: Oh, okay well then just if you need to mark something you can use my pencil. How about that?
T:  Okay, cause I don’t know, like grammar I’m terrible at. Can you help me out on grammar? Like my punctuations
K:  Okay [Well if you read it out loud and we’ll try to go through it first because we can see then if you have a pattern of error. And then I’ll help you look through and find all the similar errors.
T:  Okay
K: How’s that?

(TK T1)
APPENDIX E:
SAMPLE CONFERENCE TRANSCRIPT

SAM and KEN 10-19

S: Just go ahead and have a seat, man. Okay, so what can I help you with?
K: Okay. I had to write an essay on The Story of an Hour. Have you read that by Kate Chopin.
S: No, I haven’t.
K: Oh, okay
S: [Wait, is that the one, whenever her husband or whatever, she thinks that he dies
K: [Yeah about the war and all uh, let me see what page it’s on, actually
S: [Actually, I might be thinking about the wrong one.
Like, she thinks that he’s dead, and he goes in her room and
K: Right, yeah
S: Okay
K: And she’s sitting in the rocking chair, looking out the window
S: [And she starts to feel relieved
K: Right, and then he apparently comes back and she dies
S: Yeah
K: Which, it’s very weird. I can’t remember what page it’s
S: Three-thirty-three.
S: [Yeah, it’s a very short story.
K: Yeah, see it’s like this, and I wrote a paper on it and
S: Okay
K: Um, we get to revise, and our teacher revised it already, but
S: [Er, I mean, or just made comments? ???
K: Well, made comments. She didn’t revise. She doesn’t like revise it, she just
S: [Okay
K: makes comments and then we’re supposed to go back and go over it but she told me on here that I should come to the writing center and show them this and and see what kind of changes cause, I, okay, I’m not an English person at all
S: [Okay
K: Okay well, I mean, don’t worry about anything like that. Okay. So you’re concerned about, so you want to address the things that your teacher says and any additional things
K: [Well that we see or
K: Um, anything that could help me out with it, you know would be great
S: [Okay
S: Okay, so before we get started, let me ask you um, like what was what was the assignment? What did you have to do with ???
K: [Okay, we’re supposed to read, we get to pick, we actually picked a story out of what we’ve been reading. We’ve read like, I’d say fifteen stories, and so I picked this story to write an essay on. Analytical. To analyze the story and, um, which is pretty much, you know, go through and line-by-line or whatever and pick out some things that you think and analyze ???
S: [Okay, so what things did you choose to analyze?
K: I chose a lot of like metaphor kind of things and um
S: Okay, so what do you mean by metaphor kind of things?
K: Like, well, like for instance when she’s looking out the window and she’s looking at the clouds and they’re all um they’re going towards the west, and they’re kind of like stacked on top of each other. I kind of looked at that as something like her husband’s death and the dead people, all the dead soldiers going towards heaven, kind of, because the sun sets in the west, you know, so if the clouds are over towards the west and they’re stacked up, you know, I, I don’t know but and some other things, um
S: Okay, so, well, well basically you analyze it in, in light of metaphor.
K: Right.
S: Okay, so, so what is your overall, like, like thesis or, what is your overall idea?
K: See, I don’t even know if I’ve got a thesis.
S: Okay
K: That’s probably why this is a bad paper, but, um, do you want me to read it to you?
S: Yeah, yeah, yeah, if you don’t mind. I was just trying to you know ???
K: [Okay
S: Alright, so go ahead.
K: (Reads paper)
S: Okay. I was uh, while you were reading along, I was kind of, actually, I mean I started here and I looked at a few of the things your teacher said.
K: Um-hmm.
S: And I think that, uh, some of your teacher’s comments would be a good place for us to start off.
K: Okay.
S: Um, I think that like, well before we go to that, let me think about saying, like, I think that um, like, what we need to work on, um, with this particular paper is uh, is more so, like, like kind of like your overall idea, like you said, you kind of like felt that you were lacking a thesis
K: Right
S: Yeah, an, and you are. So you need to have, like, with all these things that you’re saying, okay, which I think are pretty good observations of the story, you know? Things
K: [Um-hmm
S: [Um-hmm that not many people would maybe, you know, pick up on
K: Alright
S: But uh, but like, what are you really saying with that, though? You know? And I think that we see a little bit of that throughout the paper, but it needs to be established in the introduction. Okay? And it needs to be established like with a thesis. So like with your
K: [Mkay
thesis, like, like what you need to wonder once you read through the paper and you go to revise it, you need to like, kind of figure out what am I trying to say with this paper, you know? Like okay, so the clouds represent this, but what does that really mean? What does that relate to? Okay?
K: Right.
S: So, uh, it seems to me that like maybe you’re trying to say something, that maybe you’re trying to say something, in relation to like maybe the theme of the story?
K: Right.
S: About like uh, yeah, yeah. The overall picture?
K: [The overall, the overall] [Yeah
S: Okay, well then, uh
K: But how, how would I be able to make a thesis from saying the over—I mean—like I give a lot of, like examples here, I just don’t see how I can form like one big concept to fit all these, you see?
S: It’s um, ok. I mean, we’re gonna have to go through, okay, the ideas, and see exactly like what you’re trying to say with all these things you pointed out.
K: Uh-huh
S: But like to answer the question that you’re asking, say for example what you want to say with this paper is like say you want to say something like what you think the theme is. Okay, um, and this is just an example
K: Uh-huh
S: Okay, so let’s say “The Story of an Hour,” the theme is that women are imposed upon by men’s will, okay? And because of that women feel oppressed.
K: [Okay
K: Right.
S: And then um, what happens in the story is, her husband dies, and she’s sad, but then like, you know she starts to kind of, like you point out in your paper, her heart starts to beat fast, and it’s kind of sad but then it becomes more of an excitement and she’s
K: [Uh-huh
starting to feel free for the first time
K: Ooohhh
S: Okay
K: I could take it that route.
S: Yeah.
K: Like as a thesis I could say, like, women’s, um, women’s oppression, or maybe I
S: [Yeah
could say like, um, the feelings of women that, something to do with the feelings could be like a thesis.
S: Yeah, like, and see like so that’s what you would want to do. You want to take, like a big picture like that, like the big statement, your big idea, which could be that, could be what we just said, or could be something else, and then what you’re gonna want to do with your examples that you use, and like I said we’ll go through each example to see if we could relate it to something

K: Um-hmm

S: Um, and then you, you go through the examples that you want to use and you want to make sure that each of your examples, that each of the things you talk about prove, or not so much prove, but illustrate the overall picture. So like, say for example if I’m writing a, an analytical paper on Huckleberry Finn, okay, and you know, my overall theme, or my overall thesis is that Huckleberry Finn uh, I mean, just to put it plainly, racism’s bad,

K: [Right okay, and I would want to say with my thesis, Huckleberry Finn shows that racism’s a bad thing. It does so through this scene, this scene, this scene, and this scene, okay?

K: So

S: And then, oh, I’m sorry, go ahead

K: So, um, a thesis should be a broad thing, it should be a broad like thing and then you

S: [Yeah like get narrower and

S: [Yeah, like, and I wouldn’t think of it so much in a broad sense, but think of it as like what you’re trying to say, like your idea about it. Like, say for example, like we’re talking about in the “Story of an Hour” here, okay, her big, Kate Chopin, like what she’s

K: [Uh-huh talking about is women’s oppression, like that’s what the story’s about, how women are

K: [Uh-huh oppressed by men. That’s her theme, that’s her idea, basically, like that’s her thesis in a way. Okay? And then what she does is she takes the story and she like, you know, like makes the story around that idea, you know? So that everything in her story, like her husband dies and she feels excitement for it, it all illustrates her main idea. You see what

K: [Okay I’m saying? So, in your, in your paper, you’re gonna want to choose what you want to

K: [Right talk about, like the big idea that you get from this story, and then you’re gonna want to pick examples, each paragraph is gonna be an example that illustrates your thesis. In

K: [Okay other words it’s just like arguing with someone. You can’t just say okay, well, you know I like M&Ms better than, or no, you can say something like M&Ms are better than Reeces’ Pieces. Okay

K: Okay

S: That’s fine. You just stated an opinion. But why? So then you have to give examples

K: [Yeah of why. Because you can’t have an argument with just the argument itself, you have to have things that back up your argument. So that’s how a thesis works. You have like your
thesis which is like your theme or your argument and your examples that back up or support what your thesis says.

K: Okay
S: Okay, so, you kind of getting an idea of how that functions?
K: [Yeah, yeah, I am.
S: Okay, so, uh
K: Well, see in this paper I kind of think I’m getting the, like the, the examples I’m getting, that I’m using here, are kind of along the lines that she used, that with the women’s, with the women’s like, oppression or whatever.
S: [Yeah, yeah, I think so to, and that’s why I used that as an example. The only thing is is that it doesn’t really start, like you, that kind of, that idea, like it kind of starts right here where you know, you talk about uh
K: Um-hmm
S: See like right here, like right here right here in your first paragraph, you’re talking
K: [Right about, it’s almost like you’re talking about style
K: Uh-huh
S: Or not so much style, like you say, like you’re talking about the metaphor, you know?
K: Right
S: And you’re talking about the clouds and then everything and then here, you talk about her heart racing, and then, you see, how, and then you pull out and you extract an idea
K: Right from it. You say the reason it relaxes, the reason it relaxes is that she knew that she could be an independent woman, now that her husband died. You see, you that idea out of that example.
K: Okay
S: Okay um, you know, once again, you go on and, you see, here you know, so it seems like after the first paragraph you start to have these examples
K: Mm-hmm
S: Of, of you know what can be related to an overall thesis of say like if you would want K: [Right to say that Kate Chopin is saying that women are oppressed
K: Okay
S: Now that would be up to you, though, I’m not saying that you should use that idea, but K: [Right, right I mean
K: I could probably turn this paragraph into something like an example for women’s oppression.
S: Mm-hmm. I mean, if you can think of a way to do it, then I say definitely do it. I mean, if not, as of the way it stands right now,
K: That’s like
S: It’s almost kind of in there unnecessarily
K: Unnecessarily
S: Okay?
K: Yeah
S: But if you can figure out a way to, like, once you come up with a thesis, and we’ll get to that in a second,
K: Uh-huh
S: Um, but if you can figure out a way to manipulate this idea in this paragraph to work with your thesis
K: [Okay
S: Right
K: Mkay
S: So let’s see, you know your teacher says wow, okay, wow, where is the introduction to the story and author. Okay. So. Okay, so she is right, is it a she or a he?
K: It’s a she.
S: A she. Okay, so she’s right in this regard. Okay? You need to like kind of introduce the story like, like
K: [So like “The Story of an Hour” and I gotta author
S: Yeah, so you’d like go in “The Story of an Hour” by Kate Chopin, that’ll let the reader know, like what it is you’re talking about.
K: [Okay
S: Cause it’s like, your first sentence is HEARING ABOUT HER HUSBAND’S DEATH MIGHT CAUSE OUTRAGE AND GRIEF FOR MOST WOMEN. Okay
K: [Now see, I thought to do that, because I thought it would be more interesting to the reader, like to instead of
S: [Yeah
K: [Mm-hmm
S: No, I mean, I mean, you’re right, and what I was gonna say is like, this sentence could definitely work as part of an introduction, but then it alters when we get to the second sentence where you say but not this woman, so, okay not this woman. Not knowing that you’re talking about “The Story of an Hour,” yeah, and so the question is, and see and
K: [Oh, like who’s the woman involved, okay
S: [Aaahhhhh
K: Yeah
S: You see
K: Okay
S: So, so uh, you know, hearing about her husband’s death would cause outrage and grief for most women, okay, however, not the main character of Kate Chopin’s “Story, Story of an Hour” And then period and you go on as you’re talking, Mrs. Mallard is a gentle and
K: [Ohhhh.
S: Strong-bodied woman
K: So that introduces the story and author
S: Yeah.
K: Okay.
S: As well as, and you can leave that in, cause like you said, I think it, it’s not just beginning with like you know this, I mean essays especially in literature, have gotta be, you know, they’ve gotta be redundant for professors when every essay begins with the actual name of the book or the story, you know.

K: [Right] [Right]

S: So that can be a thing you do right there okay.

K: [Okay]

S: Okay now see what she’s saying, okay now, what she’s trying to get out of you whenever she asks you these questions right here, is she’s trying to get that thesis out of you.

K: [Mm-hmm]

S: Okay now see what she’s saying, okay now, what she’s trying to get out of you whenever she asks you these questions right here, is she’s trying to get that thesis out of you.

K: [Okay]

S: Okay. So, she is not going to cry all day about her husband. Okay?

K: So that’s just leaving it open, I guess.

S: Yeah, that’s leaving it, that’s leaving it open. You have the right idea, it’s pretty much like traditionally where the thesis will go, okay, but you say she’s not gonna cry all day about her husband. Okay, that’s a good point, that’s good, but like she said, because . . . Why is she not gonna cry about her husband?

K: Okay.

S: Okay? And then your response.

K: And then that’s where I hit a thesis right there.

S: [That’s where you hit the thesis. So, like you would, what she’s trying to get you to say is like, she’s not gonna cry about her husband because she is this like independent woman who’s free of oppression now.]

K: Okay. Okay.

(SAVE)

S: And then, um, so after having talked about all this, we have a little bit over five minutes left, after talking about all this, do you have any idea about what you might want to say like as a thesis?

K: Uh, maybe about (pause) that (pause) that she doesn’t need a man, maybe, in her life, or that, um, (pause) or maybe a woman is just as capable of getting along in the world as a man, or something along those lines. I’d have to reword.

S: [Okay] [Okay] [Yeah, yeah reword it, okay, but then like, once again, you have to like look at this, okay]

K: Because?

S: And, and so in, not so much in your, okay, we’re gonna look at this part, because, and it’s fine to say that, okay, like, okay, a woman doesn’t need a man, or whatever. Or uh, is that what you said? A woman doesn’t need a man? Okay so, it’s fine to say that, but once again, you have to go a little bit deeper, a little bit deeper.

K: Okay.

S: Like, okay, sure a woman doesn’t need a man, but like, why doesn’t a woman need a man, and not only that, but how does the story, because what you’re analyzing is the
K: Ahhh okay
S: So you can, you can say, like anything you want. You can come up with the craziest ideas, like, Kate Chopin’s like writing about aliens here, you know, I mean, I mean it’s completely asinine, but like, if you have, if you have your evidence to back it up, and if it relates to the story and if you can bring in examples from the story to illustrate what you think it says or what your thesis is, it will work
K: Okay
S: Okay? So uh
K: Now, about the ending, real quick
S: Oh, yeah, yeah, I mean
K: What kind, like, a lot needs to be changed at the ending, or?
S: I think that, okay I think that as far as the ending, and even like the rest of the paper itself, like, when is this due, by the way?
K: Ah, Wednesday.
S: Next Wednesday?
K: Next Wednesday.
S: Okay. I think that like, a lot of these are the problems with it, okay, let’s see. (pause) I think that if you read your teacher’s comments
K: They explain themselves pretty much?
S: Yeah, in a way they explain themselves, but I think also that, and I’m not, I’m not, I’m not gonna say every problem here, because there are some like, a few little grammatical things that she’s circled
K: Right
S: But I think that the majority of the problems that you have, that you end up having with the rest of the paper is because
K: Of the thesis?
S: Yeah. And not just the thesis, but, like, see without a thesis, you have like—your thesis is like your blueprint, you have like your idea, you have your examples that support your idea, then that’s what the rest of your paper is based upon, and if you don’t have that, then you’re just talking, and you’re not, and you’re talking without a direction, like
K: [Ohhhhhh]
S: [Yeahhhh] without like, you know, you don’t really, you’re not too sure where you’re going, so I think that that’s where a lot of these other problems come from
K: Okay. Yeaahhh. So I was just pretty much going chronologically through the story, pretty much, but
S: [Yeah, which, which isn’t necessarily, like it’s not in and of itself a bad thing, but what makes it bad is that you’re just going through it without any direction, you’re going]
K: [Yeaahh]
S: through it without relating it back to any overall idea
K: Okay, yeah, I see what you’re saying, yeah
S: So I would suggest like, over the weekend, I don’t know what you’re planning on doing, if you’re planning on working on it or not
K: [Yeah, oh yeah]
S: But uh, I mean, if you plan on working on this over the weekend and revising it, I would suggest, cause I mean, our time is about up, to come up with, come up with what you want to say, like your thesis, come up with like, you understand what the thesis is now?
K: [Right]
S: So like, I would suggest like you come up with your thesis, and once you come up with your thesis, even if you have to, I mean it’s not a long story at all
K: Right
S: Even if you would have to say read the story again
K: Yeah
S: Okay, come up with your thesis, and then come up with as many things from the story that you can find that illustrate your thesis, okay
K: Okay
S: And then list those, I mean and you, and like I think with the exception of this first paragraph
K: Right
S: I think that a lot of the other paragraphs, a lot of things that you say, like right here, you talk about her heart, how she got excited about after her husband died, okay
K: [Uh-huh]
S: And over here you talked about how her husband forced her to do things and so forth
K: [Right]
S: And so on, um, I think that all of this is like a good foundation from which you can like turn these into all examples relating to the overall idea, depending on what you want your thesis to be.
K: Right
S: So I think if you do that and you know get your thesis, decide what to do with this paragraph, and relate the ??? relate the rest of these paragraphs to your thesis, I think that you’ll have a significantly, I think that your paper will be improved significantly.
K: Okay
S: And um, if you if you would like to, since it’s not due till Wednesday, you’re more than welcome to come back and maybe like once you get this written over the weekend, K: [Yeah]
S: if you want to make an appointment for Monday or Tuesday, you know I would, you’re more than welcome to come back and work with, work with what you have then.
K: [Okay]
K: Yeah, that’s fine. Yeah, that would be, that would be good, you know. So just take it,
like, get a thesis, and then work from there. Right?
S: Yeah.
K: Instead of just working straight from like the story
S: Yeah, yeah, instead of working, cause you, I mean you are gonna be working from the story, but not, like you said you have it in chronological order
K: Yeah
S: But, I mean, but like I said, but that’s fine, that can work, because I mean you can have your examples in, you can have your examples in any order you want them to be in, as every example relates to the thesis and is, and, oh, and I may not have mentioned this, whenever you list, state your thesis
K: Uh-huh
S: Okay, you’re not just gonna state your thesis and then begin your paper. Okay, like remember I said with the Huckleberry Finn example
K: Yeah
S: Yeah, Huckleberry Finn example, okay, Huckleberry Finn says that racism is bad. Period. That’s my thesis. Okay. Huckleberry Finn does this through scene one, scene three. And like, you see what I’m saying like I would pick whichever scenes from the novel I think illustrate Twain saying that racism is a bad thing. Okay, so Huckleberry Finn shows that racism is a bad thing. Period. Huckleberry Finn does this through this scene, this scene, and this scene. And then paragraph one is going to be about scene one, paragraph two is gonna be about scene two, paragraph three is gonna be about scene three, and so forth and so on until you, until you’ve made your argument.
K: Okay. So in the first paragraph, you don’t just want to end with the thesis, you want to like end with like a, cutting to the other paragraphs
S: Yeah, yeah, yeah like you’re, cause the thesis, cause that actually is part of the thesis in a way. Cause a thesis like, cause like say you can’t just have your thesis like I told you, it’s like an argument you can’t just have like your argument, you have to have things to support your argument, you know like why are you saying what you just said, okay, and like that’s kind of part of the thesis, okay so, you know, like I said, Huckleberry Finn shows that racism is a bad thing. It does this through these scenes, scene one, scene two, scene three. You specify. And then, and that’s also, that’s gonna help you out with your organization of a paper because that’s gonna let you know what you’re writing about, and it’s gonna let the reader know what they’re reading about.
K: Yeah.
S: You could, theoretically, a person can read a thesis statement and not have to read the
rest of, I’m not gonna say not have to read the rest of the paper, but they could read a
thesis statement and know exactly what the paper’s gonna be about. Like they could like
stop reading, and they could go okay the paper’s about this, paragraph one is about this,
K: [Ohhh paragraph two is about this, paragraph three is about this. But of course, they’re gonna
read, because in your paragraphs is when you’re gonna give details and show like, and go
line-by-line and break down exactly what you’re talking about.
S: Alright?
K: I can work it now.
S: Alright man.
K: I’m gonna come back uh probably Tuesday
S: Tuesday? Do you want to make an appointment while you’re here?
K: [Yeah,] [Yeah, I definitely want to.
S: Alright, cool.
VITA

Kerri Stanley Jordan received her Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts degrees from Mississippi College in 1997 and 1999, respectively. She attended Louisiana State University as a Board of Regents Fellow, and she will receive her doctorate in English in May 2003. She is currently an Assistant Professor of English at Mississippi College, where she also directs the Writing Center.