

Julia Avila

ENG 298H

R. Garabedian

4 May 2018

Collaboration Is Not Always Collaboration

When it came time to think about pursuing a pilot project, I had a lot of big ideas. Over the past year I have become so passionate about the complexities that underlie the university's Writing Center, that I had come to envision myself tackling academic hegemony in an undergraduate pilot study. This, I soon realized, was a massive overestimation of my capabilities. So, the hardest part of this study was narrowing down some of my largest questions to a small enough sample that could be explored within the guidelines of the assignment at hand. I started the semester thinking widely about how tutors come to develop their philosophy, as I was noticing a difference between how I thought about tutoring in theory and how I executed these theories in practice. After doing some self-exploration, I decided to further examine how Writing Center literature addresses the tutoring practice and if there was a resulting gap between the two phases of tutor education. I had hoped to extend this admittedly broad question into my pilot study, but it didn't provide an opportunity for productive exploration within the restraints of the project. Therefore, I decided to limit the scope of my assignment by focusing exclusively on how the collaborative theory is translated into one's tutoring practice, as our university's Writing Center emphasizes collaboration among tutors and tutees in its mission.

To conduct my pilot study, I had to consider what I thought I knew about collaboration and what I still wanted to learn more about. During the proposal process I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to frame a question that sought to explore a gap that I thought divided

collaborative theory and collaborative practice. Eventually I decided that the best way to approach this question would be through a one-on-one interview, as this method would allow me to record elaborate answers and direct examples from a tutor's practice. When selecting a tutor to interview, I thought it would be best to talk to an undergraduate tutor who had been working for at least one year, as they would have ample experience and a well-developed understanding of their own philosophy. This led me to Amy, a senior tutor who began as an intern during her sophomore year at UMass.

When I went into my interview with Amy, I brought several prepared questions that I had developed during the proposal process. These questions dealt primarily with how Amy viewed collaboration, how she had come to acquire this understanding, and how she translated it into her tutoring practice. My goal with these questions was to remain as unbiased as possible and to try to avoid any questions or phrases that might be leading. Throughout the interview I referred almost exclusively to the questions I had prepared and did not stray very far from these prompts. The answers I received for these questions surprised me a bit. I went into the interview with some preconceived notions about the data I was going to collect. However, after spending about ten minutes talking to Amy, it became clear that the data I had collected was going to skew my expectations.

From my interview with Amy, I gathered that in her experience, theory has had a hand in informing her philosophy; but since graduating from the program at the end of her sophomore year, her tutoring philosophy has developed as a result of her practice rather than learned theory. I was able to gain this understanding from her responses to questions that referenced the collaborative model and collaborative theories, as she failed to recall what she had been taught in the classroom regarding various theorists and readings. This, as stated by Amy, "tells [me]

something about [the longevity of learned theory].” Instead, Amy excelled in speaking about the collaborative philosophy that she has acquired during her three years of tutoring. When asked about how she came to understand collaborative tutoring, Amy said that her practice was the primary tool in her development of collaboration. She said that her practice has helped her to understand the many different ways people can collaborate, such as “working side-by-side...[the tutee could be] reading over their paper for second and [the tutor could be] taking notes.” Many of these methods Amy referenced push the boundaries of the examples presented in theory. When asked about how the course work prepared her for her role as a tutor, Amy said that she valued the time taken to discuss tutoring sessions and the practice of tutoring above all else, demonstrating the importance of practice over learned theory. Through these questions, and a handful of others, I was given some insight on how Amy, a more experienced tutor, came to negotiate collaborative theory and practice to curate a philosophy that both embodied and expanded on the collaborative model.

What was most impactful about the preliminary conclusions I drew from my interview with Amy was how they differed from my preconceptions. When I approached my pilot project I already had a well-developed opinion about the question I was posing. I believed that there was a chasm between what I had been learning in collaborative theory and the way I conducted collaborative sessions in the Writing Center. I was insistent on exploring the gap and discovering a way to close it, so that theory and practice could more closely resemble one another. However, through an analysis of my conversation with Amy it became clear to me that my assumptions about the connection between theory and practice may have been inherently misguided. In the time I spent reviewing the data I began to reshape my ideas surrounding this issue, and most importantly became more comfortable acknowledging its various complexities.

One moment that I found to be important in my analysis was when we were talking about how one knows they are being collaborative in a session. Amy said that she believes true collaboration may not always be a 50/50 split. Instead, she stated that she has found her most collaborative sessions to be when she can encourage the tutee to rule the majority of the session. She told me that “outside the Writing Center collaboration is [often seen as] 50/50, but in a session, [she] wants the tutee to be talking more than [her].” This is something that distorts elements of the theoretical collaborative model, of which values equality, but makes sense in the practice of tutoring. Drawing from my own experiences, I can agree with Amy in recognizing that due to the power structures the collaborative theory is insistent on dismantling, the truest forms of collaboration often come from sessions that are heavily dictated by the tutee. From instances like these, I have been successful in further exploring the gap that divides Writing Center theory from the tutoring practice. However, what I have discovered through this pilot study has pushed me to challenge my assumption that the gap must be closed, as the data I collected suggests that it may indeed be necessary.

Given the small scale of this project, it is impossible for me to draw any definitive conclusions. With only a single interview to analyze and a limited scope for the implications of collaborative theory in the diverse demographic of the Writing Center, I can only hope to further my thinking about this question. If I had more time and resources, I may have continued to interview tutors and a Writing Center director to vary the perspectives at hand. I may have even tried to reach out to a theorist to determine their goals when writing their essays. However, I do not want the limitations of this study to obscure the significance of conducting my pilot project. Instead I would like to highlight what this project was successful in discovering.

In the Writing Center discourse, my study is useful in identifying how the tutor themselves comes to develop their tutoring philosophy as a result of the accumulation of learned theory and experience. For tutors, like myself, I think this research will help them in better understanding how many elements go into developing one's philosophy, as we often tend to rely heavily on theory in the first year. Meanwhile, for directors and educators, this study may be helpful in demonstrating the different skills learned in theory and practice, and urge professionals to reconsider the emphasis placed on collaborative theory. Hopefully, my pilot project will at least get all Writing Center staff to think more complexly about how we learn to peer tutor collaboratively.

After thinking about my project and my data, I have come to develop some new questions based on what I have learned. I have been thinking a lot about the gap between collaborative theory and practice, as I still think there is one, but I've been reconsidering the implications of it. Are theory and practice just inherently different? Do we need to concern ourselves with making them more alike, or should we instead shift our focus to making them more complementary and equally important within Writing Center curriculum? Ultimately, the completion of my data collection has led me to question not how we can better link theory and practice, but instead if we should further explore the importance of practice and experience in the development of one's tutoring philosophy. If I were to continue exploring these questions, I could certainly continue this research. However, I think the most beneficial way to think about these inquiries would be to do so in my own tutoring by being more conscientious of how my practice is fulfilling collaboration outside of the theoretical model.

On a more personal note, my pilot study has also had me thinking about the kind of tutor I will be in a year or more. Talking to Amy made me recognize the importance of time in

forming my tutoring philosophy, and I have become more accepting of the fact that my tutoring style will be subject to change as I continue working in the Writing Center. Hearing her speak freely and intrinsically about how she has formed a collaborative practice throughout her three years as a tutor makes me excited for the skills and insight I will come to learn in time. The experience has encouraged me to slow down and appreciate the value of a tutoring practice grounded in experience. It has called on me to be patient with myself and the process, and to further value the time I spend learning from my tutees in each session. This is something I don't think I could have ever gathered from a Writing Center theory, thus further emphasizing that there is something incomparable to be gained from practice.

The process of completing a pilot project was entirely new to me when I took on this assignment. I had never been in charge of curating my own questions, and then actually pursuing them, in any of my prior academic endeavors. However, I found the experience to be incredibly insightful, both in a pedagogical sense and in my personal exploration. While it was challenging to narrow the scope of my study and find footing on a topic that was both manageable and true to my original idea, the project brought forth results that made me think even more widely than I had before. It encouraged me to reconsider my assumptions and broaden my horizons regarding the various diversities in experience I had yet to consider. The act of interviewing forced me to further consider and value the perspective of someone other than myself. My conversation with Amy showed me how much there is still to be learned beyond one's own conclusions, and how true collaboration arises from sharing ideas to produce new ones. This process put a great deal of meaning to my study that had nothing to do with the material I was researching.

Therefore, while the results of this study may not revolutionize Writing Center discourse, the value of undergraduate research can be found in the way that it transforms the mindset of the student and implores them to engage with the complex world that surrounds them.

Interview Transcription

Amy; Senior Undergrad Tutor. 2 years of experience (was trained as a sophomore).

Interview:

J: So, my first question would be how do you define collaboration, or collaborative tutoring?

A: I'd say I define it as any way where you're really working with the tutee, including working side-by-side. So maybe like they're reading over their paper for second and you're taking notes. I think that still counts as collaborative. You're doing work at the same time and will at some point in the session confer with each other. Reading aloud is collaborative, anything like that. Really anything that needs to happen through interaction with the other person.

J: What brought you to this understanding? do you think it was more of your theory or your practice?

A: Definitely more practice because I think if you had asked me before I tutored, when we had just done theory, I would be like; oh, if we're discussing analysis, or if you're with the tutee and you read the section and talk back and forth. I think I would've been less inclined to include some of the other ways to tutor collaboratively, like the ones I mentioned earlier. By mentioning them I'm specifically noting they are the less common ways to collaborate, and that's all learned in practice.

J: Do you find yourself drawing from collaborative theory during your sessions? If so when?

A: What did we read that was collaborative?

J: Um, like Lunsford and Harris.

A: I'm just going to say no, because I don't remember it. Maybe some of the readings and writings were implanted in my brain, but it's not something I think about when I'm tutoring at all. So more or less; no.

J: How do you know whether or not you're being collaborative in a session?

A: It's hard to say, I feel like I just know haha. I see it kind of as how much the writer is responding and speaking. I think outside the Writing Center collaboration is 50/50, but in a session I want the tutee to be talking more than me. I think that's more collaboration. When I'm able to just lead, and help a student talk about their ideas.

J: So, in the Writing Center, collaboration may not always be equal?

A: No, I think the tutee would be talking more in a collaborative session. I find that my most collaborative sessions are the ones where both of us feel really comfortable. Especially on my

end, in sessions where I'm uncomfortable the tutee usually isn't responding to me, and that isn't collaboration. The more comfortable I am, the more likely it is that there's some collaboration.

J: How did class prepare you to implement collaborative tutoring theory? Or how did it not?

A: I just don't remember what we did in class at all. Basically, I remember we did Moodle posts and I remember thinking I learned rhetoric and I thought I got it and in retrospect I totally didn't. I think nothing prepares you like actually tutoring. The most helpful thing, in the class and outside, was being observed and talking about it after. That really helped me develop a collaborative practice. Also, talking with other tutors, it's always been really helpful to debrief your sessions with someone else. I can't speak for when I was an intern, but I definitely don't think about what we learned in class now.

J: Do you use any specific methods to promote collaboration in a session? If so, what?

A: A lot of my class was focused on how to handle the 45 minutes. When I started, we didn't even take walk ins after the 15 min mark. There was a lot of focus on time and the 45 minutes specifically when I started. I always ask tutees if they have a specific place they want to sit. I always try to use warm-up questions, like "how's the semester going" or "how was spring break", to get the tutee to be as comfortable with me and the space as possible. In the session, I ask a lot of broad questions, sometimes leading, to try to promote collaboration. Like "where do you want to go from here" to try to get the tutee to talk more than the tutor. Because we're not teachers, we're something different.

J: Do you think that the collaborative model, from whatever you remember of it, is achievable?

A: What is the collaborative model? I really don't remember. I have zero recollection at all. So I guess that tells you something about it.