

BOOK REVIEW

Student Writing Tutors in Their Own Words: Global Voices on Writing Centers and Beyond

Reviewed by René LeBlanc

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND BOOK

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Book Information

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In *Student Writing: Tutors in Their Own Words: Global Voices on Writing Centers and Beyond* (2022), editors Max Orsini and Loren Kleinman provide a metaphoric forecast for their book with poet and scholar Helen Sword's "Foreword: A Play in Three Acts." Sword's composition parallels the structure of the book and echoes its content. It provides a forum for "discursive vulnerability" (2022, p. 2) for writing tutors and those in similar work—graduate and undergraduate, professional and student—to share their experiences and voices as writing tutors before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

But Orsini and Kleinman do more than provide space and compile: they provide a

critical frame for what writing tutors, writing centers, and all tutors and learning centers do as constructed from pivotal earlier scholarship. In their introduction, they explicate North (1984) and Harris' (1995) understandings of what makes tutoring effective. First, they reference North's essay, "The Idea of a Writing Center" (1984). Here, North shares his belief that writing centers are a "hosting-space" for writers at every stage of the academic growth cycle, a space safe that encourages tutees and tutors to grow and change as writers, not an "academic fix it shop" focused on mending grammar in particular papers, as tutor contributor Sleiman termed it (Orsini & Kleinman, 2022, p. 85) when describing her own earlier beliefs about tutoring. As the authors share, North (1984) posits that this change comes about through dialogue with other writers, here tutors, in communal spaces over writing in progress, whether at the stage of invention or of rhetorical framing and structures. Far from the construct of tutoring as editing, the focus of the change is not the tutees' written work but their growth as writers. Referencing another critical piece of writing center scholarship, Harris' 1995 essay, "Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Writing Tutors," Orsini and Kleinman share Harris' (1995) belief that the main purpose of writing centers is to provide "tutorial interaction . . . where writers gain kinds of knowledge about their writing and themselves that are not possible in other institutionalized settings" (p. 2). But Orsini and Kleinman expand upon this idea by stressing the importance of tutors' growth as well. The authors suggest that tutors as well as tutees learn through the "vessel" of tutorial interaction—here accessing "their own burgeoning writerly and human identities as global tutors and . . . citizens" (p. 2) to create and grow, amongst other things, "their own crafts, ideas, voices, visions" (p. 2).

The book's introduction locates the editors' initial impetus in their own work in extant and emergent writing centers, but especially through the "Graduate Writing Meetups" at Drew University, where Orsini and Kleinman were professional staff (p. 3). In particular, the authors identify their own and other writers' creation of writing communities, here represented as global—in terms of tutors, their centers, and tutees—and located temporally in the pre-COVID and Pandemic Era. From this point, the focus of the book expands somewhat linearly in

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three parts focused by shared topics amongst their writers: tutors' conceptions of what they do and for whom ("How We Help"); how tutors' own writing and thinking (their voice) has been affected by their work and identities ("A Voice of One's Own"); and, last, how writing centers, and learning centers by extension, become community ("How Writing Communities Are Made"). Each section includes experiences of tutors before and during COVID and specifically addresses challenges to interaction, including the mandatory use of virtual platforms and the weirdly concurrent closeness created by seeing a person in their personal space as well as the sense of loss and separation resulting from the pandemic's strictures on physical proximity.

Sections in the collection are preceded by short editorial essays situating the lives, identities, and communities of the tutor writers within them, and are followed by grouped questions for discussion, two per contributor essay. For example, part one is preceded by an essay describing the work of two of its tutor contributors, one an undergraduate at University of California, Davis, Dominique Duque, and the other a former tutor and current PhD and faculty member in graduate studies at Drew University, Liana Piehler. Piehler reflects on the different communities a writing center serves but also upon commonalities for all of them: tutors as receptive yet active listeners to the student writers and tutors' reflection upon how the student writers' personal reflections can be entangled *and* embodied in their writing. Writing from the Pandemic years, Piehler meets most of her clients on Zoom and notes the personal atmosphere produced by sharing from one living space to another and how more tutees seem willing or need to share personal details of their lives and emotions. Piehler also stresses the possibilities this sharing presents to tutors to become mentors, focused and present to those with whom they work. At the other end of the spectrum of appreciation for the pandemic's online spaces, MA graduate student and tutor at Georgia State University, Dylan Maroney, shares their concern for how the online writing center has negatively affected older graduate students, many of whom were part of Georgia State's GSU 62 program, meant to give adults 62 and over access to education at a reduced cost. Maroney notes that many of their former GSU 62 clients have as much difficulty navigating technology as writing papers

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and, as such, are disabled by the online environment, even a synchronous, visually and auditorily supportive one. Maroney supports their contention by addressing the gradual disappearance of a GSU 62 tutee, "Bob," with whom Maroney had worked frequently before the isolation caused by the pandemic. Maroney argues that the core of the tutor/tutee relationship has been adversely affected by distance, both physical, technological, and emotional, created by COVID. Though Mahoney's point of view proves the exception to the rule here (for the most part), it is important for its recognition of how writing spaces can be unintentionally exclusive.

While other contributors also cite negative experiences in writing center work, most do so as they recount their vulnerability as beginning and even advanced writers getting writing feedback as perhaps the most vulnerable member of the tutoring exchange, the tutee whose work is under scrutiny. In part one, international students Chen and Ti discuss their transformation from writers being tutored—Chen after a disastrous first session with a tutor who led him to feel he couldn't write in English and Ti after being tutored by Orsini at Drew—to tutors and mentors for others.

Part two focuses on tutors' growth in understanding and as writers, as heralded by the section's title, "A Voice of One's Own," referencing Woolf's (1929) famous text of a similar name. Here the editors precede the essays by pointing to how writing centers can build confidence, self-efficacy, and authority in the student writers they help and hire. The emphasis on identity here importantly includes the intersectional nature of many students' experiences by emphasizing how race, place of origin, age, and academic status can affect the lives of tutees and tutors. A notable exception to the editors' efforts at inclusion and diversity is the lack of representation of disabled and nonnormatively gendered students. In the face of growing awareness of how students' identities have an overwhelming effect on their learning and life, people from both groups warrant inclusion.

Despite this omission, the editors include other voices from persons whose identities place them on the margins of education and society. One of the most notable of these contributors is Rios, who writes about how his own life was changed by being a tutor and writer in a correctional facility.

Rios stresses the inequity of a society where persons of color and from minoritized populations make up the majority of those represented in the penal system, sharing how he was funneled there in part because of being raised in a Mexican American community where gangs and violence were an almost unavoidable consequence of maturation. Rios points to how he and others not in the power majority are negatively positioned by society. He discusses how “the slaughter of mass incarceration” (p. 58) led to the usurpation of his identity by the imposed identity of an “inmate, [a] murderer”—until he became a writing tutor in the institution’s college program and himself an influential, now-published writer (p. 58). Another contributor, Natasha Cooper, references DuBois in her essay, “The Effect of Double Consciousness on a Black Writer in White Academia.” From the point of view of a black woman in a predominately white institution (PWI), she shows how bias can affect both those getting tutored and those tutoring, describing how being tutored by a respectful supportive tutor who was white aided Cooper in finding and using her voice. From this experience, Cooper shows how tutors have the power to positively change their tutees’ perceptions of themselves, especially by encouraging the use of story as a tool. Cooper makes the important point, especially post-affirmative action, that cultural competence and deliberate learning about minoritized populations need to be part of every tutors’ training as they can aid in the creation of a space of healing and growth. Another writer and tutor, Clare Wongwai, focuses even more on the affective elements of tutoring, describing how a training focusing on gratitude and tutoring affected her recognition of the importance of valuing the tutor/tutee interaction. She shares that even not knowing the results of one’s tutoring can bring a “lasting smile” if one tutors with deliberate good intention (p. 72). She includes her thankfulness for “the dual nature” of tutoring and how persons can be vulnerable both as tutees and tutors (p. 74). Wongwai shows how tutors can be affected by their efforts to create positive, powerful social interactions, saying that interacting with others and growing relationships with them “allows us to bring meaning to ourselves” (p. 75). Wongwai emphasizes how tutors and others are positively affected by gratitude, benefiting from

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its practice socially and psychologically. This is an especially salient point during the latter part of her essay, which focuses more on tutoring during the pandemic.

Considering contributors’ reflection on the importance of social interaction to writers, the editors did well to focus on “How Writing Communities Are Made” in the third part of this collection. This section consolidates what earlier contributors such as Elizabeth Myers observe about the necessity of involving others in one’s writing—for Myers, her dissertation—no matter how much writing is cast as a solitary endeavor. What’s more, this last section makes this point with stories pulled mostly from the isolated and isolating spaces of academia during the Pandemic era. One tutor contributor, Timóteo Pereira Neves, addresses the need for connection to a community when describing his years tutoring at a university in Lebanon before and during the pandemic. Here he shows how both before and during the pandemic, his confidence and dedication was built by his work tutoring members of the Haigazian University community, and how he learned to make the uncertain and distancing space of the virtual world work for him as a tutor by employing inductive questioning and silence. This is especially remarkable given how silence was sometimes more difficult to use in the face-to-face juxtaposition of virtual space. However, like Neves, many if not most contributors focused on the positive qualities of tutoring during the pandemic, pointing to how seeing *tutors* in their personal spaces seemed to make some tutees more comfortable confiding fears and asking questions.

Cassidy Rempel acknowledges how sharing her own anxieties about an online academic system with tutees affected such a shift in her role, leading student writers from seeing her as a near-teacher tutor in the physical arena of the writing center before COVID to viewing her as a peer during virtual consultations. At the same time, she observes the limitations of the virtual platform when it comes to sharing work and how she feels the difficulties of transferring control of a paper on virtual platforms led to tutors having more power than the tutee, tilting the session from peer-to-peer, back to peer-to-authority. Finally, most of the contributors moved from lament to energetic determination when faced with the changes wrought by the pandemic. In the final essay of the collection,

Zachary Smith reconciles his reminiscing and feeling depressed after losing his ability to interact with others in a writing center's physical space by ending his narrative with a determined belief that writing centers are "embodied in those that maintain them" and realized in "their love of writing and the joy it brings" (p. 113).

In a recent interview, Orsini and Kleinman (2023) explained their inclusion of discussion questions addressing contributor's essay after each of the book's three parts—and of a broad list of questions for discussion at book's end. Along with providing helpful directions and perspectives, the questions serve to further the editors' goals that this text be used by a variety of persons involved with writing, tutoring, mentoring, and teaching. Orsini and Kleinman use the questions not just to focus their collection but to highlight areas of current and vital concern in writing and learning center scholarship as well as other newer areas. The sections of questions allow the editors to address their audiences, whether comprised of tutors, writing center administrators, or faculty scholars, as well as their contributors' enthusiasm and qualms about technology and tutoring. The questions following the book's sections include less predictable areas of focus for training, incorporating affective concerns such as gratitude and humility along with providing insight into some of the most marginalized students, such as those caught up by the prison pipeline, those from non-Western cultures, and those whose linguistic backgrounds are not rooted in English. Necessarily, this involves the issue of lack of access to services many nonmajority groups experience. The "holistic" (p. 117) questions at the book's conclusion are meant to elicit interaction between writing and, ostensibly, learning center personnel as well as between tutors and students.

As I prepare for another learning center training involving tutors across multiple disciplines, I can see the relevance of this collection to my work in a learning center and to tutors of multiple disciplines. Particularly resonant now are Orsini and Kleinman's revisiting North and his determination that the tutee should be the focus of the tutoring interaction. As the editors include story after story of tutors learning the importance of questioning as a tool for tutoring and of the concomitant need for silence and peace with it, I can't help but think of upcoming trainings and tutors. Though I will continue to advocate for the inclusion of some notably absent voices amongst those I encounter here, including those of disabled and nonnormatively gendered people amongst both tutors and tutees, I see that Orsini and Kleinman have put together a valuable resource for writing and other discipline-specific tutors, tutor trainers, writers, teachers, and administrators.

Most important, however, especially as we rebuild and restructure our learning centers post-pandemic, Orsini and Kleinman have captured the importance of people's working together, with gratitude and humility, to foster diversity, inclusion, and a plurality of voices, especially those most marginalized, and upon embracing those we work with as part of our own communities.

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