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Notes from the Grey Space: An Open Letter to Instructors Participating in Course Embedded Tutoring Programs

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Much has been discussed about course-embedded tutoring (CET) and its role in the writing center, in the classroom, and within the university setting—from the assessment of course-embedded programs (see Dvorak et al.), to the importance of the role discipline and content area knowledge plays (for example, see Kiedaisch and Dinitz; see Cambridge), to the ways in which course-embedded tutors ("writing fellows") also serve as "reading fellows" (Bugdal and Holtz). However, there is a persisting gap in this ongoing conversation: discussion about course-embedded work within first-year writing courses from the perspective of the tutor. As noted by Francesca Gentile, "Tutors…bring an important perspective to pedagogy courses, perspectives that are not necessarily represented in the relevant literature."

Taking into consideration my experience as a CET and as a researcher, in this paper I will address three core tenets for instructors to consider before taking part in a course-embedded project. Establishing clear expectations, developing course

architecture well in advance, and recognizing complicated relationships between tutors, instructors, and staffers allow for a more robust experience for all involved.

Along with eight other writing center staffers at Transylvania University (TU), I took part in a semester-long pilot pairing tutors and instructors from across the disciplines to teach in our required first-year research seminar (FYRS) course. Like many student learning assistance centers (SLACs), TU's FYRS program echoes Gladstein et al.'s description of "a program of writing-intensive, topic-based seminars that are explicitly labeled as the institution's writing requirement…an approach long associated with small colleges" and intends to "introduce students to the research community in the context of an interdisciplinary theme, generally coupled more or less tightly to the instructor's own area of research" (Gladstein et al.). Each section of the course is themed-based on the instructor's discipline area; however, it is primarily a general introduction to academic writing with shared assignments across sections. Along with participating in the pilot, I interviewed fellow CETs at midterm and during finals week to discuss successes, concerns and observations in their respective sections. At the conclusion of the program, I also took part in an independent study focusing on scholarship discussing course-embedded tutoring.

To be clear, there are a range of CET programs, each with different emphases, course landscapes, and exigencies. The purpose of this research is not to suggest that all should walk lockstep or that they even face the same challenges. However, given my experience as a staffer and researcher, I assert that there are a few necessary

overarching concepts for faculty and instructors to consider when looking into participating in such work. These concepts are not fixed variables but more like permeable membranes: components that are both fluid and inextricably bound. By connecting my interview work with moments from existing scholarship, I offer a grassroots, ground-level approach to the successes and challenges of course-embedded pedagogy.

1.   Making the implicit explicit:

In research conducted at California State University Channel Islands, DeLoach et al. assert that "…most, if not all, of the problems that arise generally are rooted in incongruous expectations: student expectations of ICTs [in-class tutors] and faculty, ICTs expectations of faculty and students, and/or faculty expectations for their students and ICTs." Like other first year writing courses at SLACs, our instructors came from different disciplines and subsequently tend to see writing through different lenses. Scholars Lori Salem and Peter Jones examined faculty attitudes towards writing instruction courses, noting that certain faculty "have stronger commitments to their disciplinary identities and knowledge than they do to teaching, particularly when they have to teach 'skills' like writing" (71) and that these faculty "simply don't believe teaching writing should be part of their jobs in the first place" (72). Although each faculty instructor is aware of and committed to the goals of our course overall, this pedagogical difference and the "incongruous expectations" related to it played into some of the challenges in our own pilot.

In particular, the pedagogical worldview of one professor in our CET pilot (a seasoned and well-respected professor by student and administration standards) did not match that of his paired tutor, a student of music technology. The interviews I conducted with the tutor at midterm and during finals week indicated that the course was not as successful as it could have been, largely stemming from a lack of explicit expectations concerning the role of writing (and subsequently, the role of the CET) in the course. While other sections kept a fairly standard pace in assignments and consultations with students, this particular class section seemed to focus more on content and literary texts and lagged behind the agreed schedule for peer responses and other supports that are common to the CET experience as described by Severino and others. Throughout the interview, this staffer reported being "lost and confused" – a warning sign for any troubled CET relationship (Raleigh, 22 February).

On the other end of the spectrum, expectations of writing, writing instruction, and course planning were made explicitly clear from the beginning of my CET work, largely because of the collaboration between the instructor, a professor of neuroscience, and myself. My partner was new to this course; I was a relatively seasoned tutor. She consistently conferred with me for help navigating the terrain of the assignments and writing concerns and was explicitly open in her desire to become a better writing instructor.

This brings me to a critical cornerstone of such a project: each pairing will look different, and that is okay. However, it is equally true that key elements must be established, beginning with

deliberate course architecture, including the rhetorical positioning of the tutor in relation to course content and the balance and distribution of authority between instructor and tutor. With the pressure of additional due dates, given that students are required to submit assignments to tutors two weeks prior to final submission to the instructor, consideration of course architecture is an imperative cornerstone in the success of a collaboration.

Having considered what such a course should look like in terms of planning, it is also critical to rhetorically situate the CET within the course with deliberation. Gentile suggests that "specialist knowledge" of a tutor is a major component of success in CET programs, arguing that "disciplinary knowledge empowered [tutors] to push back against student misunderstandings about the assignment or material or attempts to gloss over faculty expectations." In agreement, Susan M. Hubbuch notes that a knowledgeable tutor "knows the appropriate questions to ask" (Hubbuch 25). However, the successful CET pairings from our pilot illustrate the importance of recognizing (particularly within the framework of a first-year writing program) that the background knowledge of each pairing will strike a different balance, which can either serve as an advantage or a challenge.

For example, the partnership between a professor of philosophy and his CET, who was his advisee and a student of philosophy, held true to Gentile's and Hubbuch's sentiment. The philosophy CET described his relationship with his faculty partner as such: "We are able to play off of on another very well…I think this is largely attributed to him being my adviser and in my area of study. He allows me to give subject feedback as well, which I think places

me in a weird almost TA position sometimes" (Cunningham, 9 March). Although this CET was successful in his situation as a self-assessed "TA," he was deliberate about delegating authority to his partner. This delegation of authority is the most tangible line to maneuver—other lines are grey, subtle, slippery. What works for one pairing will not work for others. The role that one CET plays may not be the same as the role of others. For example, another pairing in our pilot demonstrated the potential for the CET to act as a "role model" student as a result of the deliberate negotiation of her role within the course. In her interview, the CET noted: "…they also—and this makes me happy—have grown in email etiquette…I've noticed they've starting writing emails like me" (Burton). She modeled for students not only writing techniques within this particular course but also served as an example of how to navigate and communicate within the university setting.

2. Good Things Come in Threes:

Gentile writes of the "'symbiotic relationship' that emerges from writing fellows' efforts to bridge specialist/generalist and WAC/WID discourses for the mutual benefit of students, faculty, and departments" and asserts that "tutors act as agents of change to the degree that their movements facilitate increased contact" between "multiple discourse communities that constitute a writing program." She nods to the necessity of nurturing all legs of the triadic relationship, conceding that while there is a certain authority embedded in a tutor's position as just that, a tutor, the students within the program identified the "personal relationships" and "intimate connections" made with tutors as the

During the interviews, most tutors expressed an increased level of comfort and trust that had developed between themselves and the students in their section throughout the course. One CET referred to the comfort generated through his consistent relationship with students both during his midterm interview and final interview. For example, during the CET's midterm interview, he noted that he perceived a "different way of interacting with students…compared to traditional WC appointments," specifically that students were "more comfortable talking about their writing" (Cunningham, 9 March). By finals, the tutor noted that many of the students in his section were "much more comfortable…outside of the course even to ask questions or look at drafts…after conferences" (Cunningham, 19 April). This staffer's experience illuminates what the relationships formed between student, staffer, and instructor make possible.

3. Building Bridges:

The ideas of course-embedded programs as ambassadors of the writing center and as vehicles for "building bridges between writing programs and classrooms" are not new ones. Scholars such as Carol Severino assert that CETs have a window of opportunity to serve as "ambassadors" of the writing center—to the student body and to faculty instructors alike. Carpenter et al. contend that the students in these programs' "willingness to participate (or not) in course-embedded initiatives—from classroom instruction to outside-of-class consultations—impacts relationships and the ongoing development of programs," a sentiment which is echoed throughout Spigelman and Grobman's On Location: Theory and Practice in Classroom-Based Writing Tutoring. As Carpenter et al.

suggest, one considering participation in such a program must not only take into account the perceptions and future encounters of the particular students enrolled in such a course but, particularly in such a small school as Transylvania, must also think in terms of seven degrees of separation (or, realistically, two or three degrees). The students within the course inevitably shape the perception, discourse, and utilization of the writing center space. And for this reason, the writing center both in practice and in physical location must be carefully and deliberately heeded.

4. Conclusion:

From my point of view as a CET and researcher, establishing expectations, developing relationships with deliberateness, and recognizing the writing center both in its physical and ideological space makes all the difference in the success of a program. This was further illuminated through a final discussion I had with my faculty partner after the close of the program. Her feedback on having a "phenomenal ally that was there to augment the writing part" of the course was, honestly, gratifying. She also recognized that the pilot "allowed [students] to see…I can do this" and an increase in the students' "confidence in their own abilities" (Jurs). The end goal, then, is not only to assist students with individual writing tasks but also to establish a culture of writing in the university—a goal that calls for a strong relationship with the writing center, through all departments and courses.

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