Promoting Student and Tutor Success: Adapting Writing Center Observation Theory to

Best Practices for General Subject Tutoring Observations

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Tutoring session observations allow tutor trainers and center coordinators to assess how tutors foster independence in student learning, uphold center philosophies, and incorporate effective tutoring techniques. In order to contribute more to the field of general subject tutoring, this paper will explore some of the practices and expectations that have become a part of observations in tutoring centers. Best practices for conducting general tutoring observations are adaptable from writing center theory and practices in order to help tutoring coordinators utilize this practice in the most effective ways.

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Observations of live tutoring sessions are some of the most valuable tools to help tutor trainers and learning center coordinators understand what is actually going on within their centers. Because supervisors cannot be present at every tutoring session, live observations can provide a snapshot of the interactions between tutors and students, allowing the observer to get a glimpse of how tutors are incorporating and applying their training to real student scenarios. With this type of information, trainers can adjust their plans, or re-iterate specific practices in trainings. Moreover, observations allow coordinators to see how tutors are representing and furthering their center's mission and goals. In order to contribute more to the field of general subject tutoring, this paper will explore some of the practices and expectations that have become a part of observations in tutoring centers. Best practices for conducting general tutoring observations can be adapted from writing center theory in order to help tutoring coordinators utilize this practice in the most effective ways.

Adapting Writing Center Observation Techniques

While much academic literature on observation best practice has been written in reference to writing consultations (Devet, 1990; Gillespie & Lerner, 2008; North, 1984), little can be found in reference to general subject tutoring, which can vary in topic from accounting to biology, or sociology to Spanish. The purpose of a writing consultation is to help students become better writers by emphasizing the development of the writing process and the student as a writer (North, 1984). Consultations are not proof-reading services, and consultants are trained to help students reflect on their approach to prompts and the process of writing in general, from brainstorming to reviewing a draft.

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Similar to writing center theory and practice, peer tutoring in any subject focuses on

helping students develop into better learners through collaboration with trained peers

who have succeeded in the classes or subjects they tutor. The specific techniques

employed by a biology tutor helping a student to understand mitosis will be quite

different from the way in which a writing consultation helps a student review a draft.

However, the goals of promoting independence, self-regulation, and self-reflection, and

helping students understand the expectations of a college curriculum are present in

both sessions.

In order to find out if these goals are indicative of a typical tutoring session,

observations can be used to assess each tutor's adherence to and understanding of the

philosophy of the tutoring center (Devet, 1990). Devet began her observation practice

by adapting Ned Flander's tool, "Flander's Interaction Analysis Categories" (FIAC), a

system designed to observe teachers in a classroom setting in order to better evaluate

the relationship between the teacher and the students (p. 76). Flander's classroom

analysis was adapted to the relationship between the tutor and the client in a typical

writing consultation at a university. Specifically, Devet wanted to use her observations to

ensure that tutors were not writing for the students, a practice warned against by

Paulette Scott (Scott, 1987, p. 9). She hoped that this would emphasize "to [tutors] the

philosophy of tutoring itself" (Devet, 1990, p. 81), so that they could help the students

improve their writing process.

Devet's observation form consists of ten simple questions based on how often

the tutor performs certain actions or employees certain techniques (which represents

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seven of the questions), as well as how often a client is involved in the session in

various ways (p. 77). She suggests using general indicators (such as almost always,

sometimes, etc.) rather than numerical values so as to "allow room for variation among

tutors without causing rancor when one tutorial scores 60% and another 50% (p. 77)."

This suggestion is in line with Devet's goal to emphasize the development of skills

within the philosophies of the writing discipline, rather than concern tutors with a grade.

This form is a starting point for those designing observations to begin by asking

themselves how these essential questions can be adapted to their centers.

Devet offers some advice for observation coordinators on structuring the session.

For instance, she encourages observers to sit off to the side of the session in order to

make the tutor and student feel more relaxed (p. 81). She also suggests that

coordinators allow tutors to decide which session they would like to have observed so

as to alleviate undo pressure to perform well in a stressful session (81). The assumption

is that tutors may feel more comfortable being observed in a session with a student they

know well, as they can jump right in to the material or paper without having to spend

time on introductions. However, observing sessions with students who are working with

a tutor for the first time can also be informative. Observers can see how well tutors build

rapport and what strategies they use to make students feel comfortable and to start a

discussion. Setting a positive tone and creating an inviting atmosphere for students is

an important first step in both the MacDonald Tutoring Cycle (MacDonald, 1994, p. 25)

and the Appreciative Tutoring Cycle (Grogan, 2011, p. 83). Thus, it is important for

observers (who may also be trainers or coordinators) to know if tutors are exercising

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what they have learned in training. Uncomfortable or unproductive climates may

discourage students from using tutoring services in the future, a detriment to the center

and the students who need assistance.

Another suggestion she provides is that observers review the forms with tutors

immediately after the session. The ideology behind this is that the tutor will be relieved

for the observation to be over and will be more open in a conversation about tutoring

skills and techniques that were effective or not in the session, helping them gain new

ideas for future sessions (Devet, 1990, p. 81). Not all centers may choose to have

observers talk to tutors immediately. Observations may be tied to a more formal and

comprehensive job evaluation, which may be done at another time. Trainers and

coordinators should decide what works best for their centers based on their goals for

tutor development. They should also look at other resources for ideas of structure for

their observation practice and the building of a universal observation form for their tutors.

In *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring*, authors Paula Gillespie and Neal

Lerner (2004) outline helpful tips for structuring an observation of writing consultations.

While Lerner and Gillespie are referring to tutors observing other tutors in the Writing

Center as part of their student staff development, their practices, along with Devet's

form, can be helpful for setting up a system of observations. They advocate getting

permission of the tutor and the client (Gillespie & Lerner, 2004, p. 62), taking notes

during the session (though these are more opened ended than Devet's form) (p. 64),

and discussing the session with the tutor afterwards (p. 65). They also provide a list of

questions for reflection, ranging from communication skills to student autonomy, and the

rights and responsibilities of the tutor and student (Gillespie & Lerner, 2004, p. 65-66). These questions may be used by coordinators as a starting place to decide what other parts of the tutoring cycle or goals of the center should be included in the observation. For instance, some centers have a strong focus on critical thinking techniques in sessions. Observers should have a guideline for what types of categorized or specific techniques tutors may use to promote critical thinking during sessions. This is also a good resource for those designing observations forms for tutors to observe their peers, which may be part of a training program. Peer-to-peer observations can help new tutors learn from the styles and techniques of more experienced tutors.

Gillespie and Lerner (2004) remind observers to be open-minded about how one person approaches a problem with a student, or how a tutor may interpret a student's response (p. 64). It is important to remember that one tutor's approach may not always be the most correct one; it may be the inclination for some observers to assume that their approach is only correct one. Observers should be aware that the tutors may know their students better (if they have met before) and may have a better understanding of how to get that student to participate and be productive in a session. Each tutor's approach to explaining a concept will also vary depending on their experience in the class and their learning preferences. Therefore, it is important to have overall expectations for all tutors based on best practice and well-documented theories—such as the Tutoring Cycle—but observers should allow for variation and individual adaption within these parameters. Observations can provide insight into the innovative ways in which tutors are working with students. Effective techniques can be documented and

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shared with other tutors, while ineffective techniques can be corrected, either with the

individual tutor or in a larger training session if the problem is more widespread among

the tutoring staff.

While considering the advice given in these resources about observations, it is

important to remember that the questions that writing observations seek to answer vary

from those for general tutoring sessions. Tutors not only help students understand

course content, but show them new tools and strategies to master material in order to

further their independence in the learning process (Grogan, 2011). Therefore, the

approach a writing consultant may take to helping a student outline a paper will be

distinct from the techniques a tutor may use to help a student understand a biology

concept, figure out how to study for a history exam, or solve a math problem. Observers

in either a general tutoring or writing center must structure their policies and procedures

so as to allow for a diverse number of techniques and approaches, depending on the

style of the tutor, the course content, and the individual needs of a student.

Coordinators of tutoring programs, however, may choose which learning processes they

want to emphasis in their observations.

Implementation and Importance of Observation Practice

Writing center literature and research provides a basis on which best practices

for observations in a general subject tutoring center can be designed. Trainers and

coordinators should evaluate their needs and what they want to accomplish with their

observations. Some potential questions that coordinators should ask when designing

their observation programs and forms may include:

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- What is the center's mission statement? What is the university's mission

  statement?

- What is our purpose in observing the tutors? What do we want tutors or

  students to take away from these observations?

- What are we looking for in observations: what specific techniques,

  processes, skills, etc. do we want to see tutors incorporating?

- How are observations set up now at this institution? OR How and when can

  observations be conducted at this institution?

- What resources (both in terms of staff and theoretical framework) do we

  have when designing the observation process?

- What do we want to change or improve in our current observation practice?

- What sets our observation process apart from other institutions? What

  innovations have we implemented that we can share with others? How can

  we learn from what other institutions are doing?

By determining goals or outcomes for what development opportunities or feedback

observations should provide for tutors, coordinators can more accurately assess their

tutors' use and understanding of tutoring techniques, implementation of training, and

understanding of the center's philosophy.

Coordinators may choose to use specific training topics or resources to build a

universal form to use in any subject tutoring session. This allows them to evaluate each

employee on the same criteria. They may choose to look at the tutor's incorporation of

the Tutoring Cycle, for example, the traditional MacDonald Tutoring Cycle (MacDonald,

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1994), or even the Appreciative Tutoring model (Grogan, 2011). Other training topics

that may be incorporated into the form include the usage of strategic questioning or

active listening techniques to help students understand material, communication skills,

or the incorporation of critical thinking strategies that foster independence, such as the

Paul and Elder Intellectual Traits (Valuable Intellectual Traits, n.d.) and Bloom's

Taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002). The coordinator or trainer can decide how best to

evaluate each technique or skill depending on the training given to the tutors.

The benefit of building topics like these into the observation form is that trainers

can assess how effective their training was in these areas. These are common training

topics which are often required for training certification programs, including the

International Tutor Training Certification Program through the College Reading and

Learning Association (International Tutor Training Certification Program, n.d.). Trainers

can adapt their activities or lectures based on how the tutors use what they have

learned, allowing for more effective training. As new research and resources become

available, trainers can incorporate them into their lessons, as well as their observation

forms, to see how effective they are for the students at their centers.

Another resource for supervisors is the Peer Consultant Evaluation form created

by Nicole Magee and Carley Reynolds (Magee & Reynolds, 2015), which breaks down

the consultant's behaviors and skills into categories such as effective listening, critical

thinking, and overall effectiveness. Jennifer B. Ellis and Angela Grimaldi (2015) provide

information on how tutors can provide more effective feedback to students. However,

their design principles of specificity, supportiveness, strategies, and significance can

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also be applied to providing feedback to tutors as employees. Only with specific

directions and within a supportive environment can a tutor continue to develop their

skills within their position. Without guidelines for design, feedback can have a negative

impact on those being evaluated or observed (Ellis & Grimaldi, 2015, p. 278).

Another benefit of observation practice is that it is a communication tool to open

up a dialogue among tutors and trainers about tutoring practices and philosophies. One

of the primary skills tutors must have is the ability to communicate clearly and effectively.

Studies have shown that speakers have a tendency to overestimate their impact on

listeners (Keysar & Henly, 2002). Just like the speakers, tutors are not always aware of

their own effectiveness, and they may underestimate or overestimate how much a

student is really understanding or gaining from a session. This curse of knowledge, or

talking in subject-specific jargon that is unknown to the tutee, is a habit which every

tutor and writing consultant must be aware of. An observation of a tutoring session by

an outsider allows for an alternative perspective, and this can spark meaningful

conversations about tutoring techniques. They can help tutors see what skills that have

mastered, and where and when they can modify their techniques in order to get

students to think on a deeper lever, or get them more engaged in their own learning

process.

One necessity when setting up observation procedures is to understand what

resources are available in one's center. Some centers use more experienced tutors

(perhaps those with advanced certifications or additional training) to observe less

experienced employees, while in other centers the coordinator observes the majority of

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the tutors. Coordinators and supervisors should assess the amount of work required to effectively observe their employees and determine how to distribute the workload. This is perhaps the most important part of designing an observation procedure; these should be a part of best practices in any center, and they should not be a burden or inconvenience for coordinators or tutoring staff.

Tutoring observations benefit both students and tutors in the learning center. Tutors can improve their skills, get advice, and ensure that they are promoting the goals of their employer. Students benefit from tutors who are well-informed, well-trained, and experienced. Writing center practices for observations provide examples for how to organize the observation process, and these practices can be adapted to be accommodate a broader range of topics covered in general subject tutoring. Observations of live tutoring sessions are effective tools to help tutors improve their customer service skills and tutoring techniques. Trainers and coordinators can use them to assess training and adjust it as needed. They can also use them as tools to have conversations about best practices within their unique center, and as evaluation tools to help improve the quality of services, a benefit for both the tutors as professionals. The development of live observation practices for each types of learning center in the university center will be unique to that center, but the practice outlined here are a starting point for coordinators to start thinking about how to make their observations effective and constructive for all involved.

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