Tutoring, Jouissance, and Correction Static

Daniel Lawson, Central College, IA

Daniel Lawson, Ph.D., is the Writing Center Director at Central College

Abstract
After conducting interviews with writing tutors, the author discovered contradictions between knowledge and actual practice, particularly regarding the role of correction in the tutoring session and in tutor use of peer review. The author examines the interview transcripts with a neo-Lacanian lens to argue that these contradictions are the result not of a philosophy of correction but rather of symptomatic belief.

Introduction
In a 2001 article in *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, writing center director Kathleen Welsch describes the contradictions between writing center theory as it was taught to her tutors and their actual practice. She observes that

> At meetings, the staff members themselves talk about their frustrations with faculty who send students to the center to be 'fixed'…And yet—in actual, daily practice, the magnetic pull of correction is a powerful force that still manages to hold peer consultants in its grasp despite their training and ability to articulate theory and policy (4).

Put another way, her tutors have been explicitly instructed on writing center theory--which is enforced via policy set by the director--yet they fail to incorporate that instruction and those policies into their practice so fully as to purge themselves of somewhat naïve and disruptive positivist notions of language (as exemplified through their emphasis on correction). Welsch characterizes this preoccupation with error as a "static" that interferes with the real work of the session, which is to assist in the development of writers rather than their just their papers.

Conducting an assessment of writing tutors at my own institution (a small, private midwestern liberal arts college) in 2012, I encountered many of the same sorts of contradictions that Welsch describes. I interviewed eleven tutors to assess their sense of their strengths and weaknesses as writers and tutors, their general sense of the writing center, common issues they encountered, and more. Of the eleven tutors interviewed, only three completely abstained from correction-oriented talk. While all of them spoke

fluently about "proper" writing center pedagogy and concepts such as socio-epistemic rhetorics, most also succumbed to the language of correction—frequently in the same breath that they decried the idea of the center as a "fix-it shop." They claimed to wish that students knew what the center had to offer and that it could help writers of any level of expertise, but then confessed they themselves never used it.

While my experience is very similar to Welsch's, I want to entertain the possibility that the static she describes occurs not *despite* their ability to articulate theory and policy but rather (at least in part) *because* of it. In this essay, I use a neo-Lacanian lens lent by composition scholars such as Marshall Alcorn and Thomas Rickert to re-describe the interference of correction talk not as a philosophical static (as Welsch describes it) but rather as affective symptom. To do so, I will first explore the relationship between *joissance*, correction, and symptomatic belief as it is revealed in some sample tutor responses. I will then describe the discrepancy between theory and practice as a form of cynicism and how it necessarily results from the Oedipalizing tendencies of direct instruction and policy. Finally, I will raise pedagogical implications for tutor training based on engaging affect and desire because, as Alcorn explains, "Instruction in the *proper use* of a language, which one already *uses* as a native speaker, unlike other university subjects, is a training of desire" (58).

Joissance, Correction, and Symptomatic Belief
In Lacanian theory, subjects derive *joissance* from attempting to transgress the pleasure principle: to gain satisfaction in dissatisfaction, to enjoy their symptoms. As Rickert characterizes it, "Desire seeks satisfaction in the Other--through words, signs, people, objects. It is an attempt to recapture the Thing, the piece of the Real that embodies the *joissance* that would make up for what has been lost" (63). Of course, because the Lacanian Real (and hence what is lost to it) always exceeds symbolization, desire is perpetual; it cannot be satisfied in any final sense, only deferred. The Thing is sought but never fully realized. Like the habit of picking at a scab, *joissance* is thus painful and unproductive, yet there is also something disquietingly pleasurable about it as well.

To explain how this relates to tutoring more fully, I share now an extended example from one of the interviews. When talking about student participation in tutoring sessions, one tutor said,

> "some of them are just like 'I don't wanna do anything. Just fix my paper.' So it's always harder to draw them out...I let them talk more, talk through their problems...I don't always jump in with my correction but let them sit there and talk through it themselves."

Similarly, when asked about her weaknesses as a tutor, she responded,

> "Struggling with the impulse to correct for them--just do that, because it would be the easier way to go: to do it for them."

These samples are fairly representative of the other interviews. Here the tutor indicates a

frustration with students who want her to "fix" their papers, but in nearly the same breath she describes the work as "correction." Although she asserts that the task of the tutor is not to correct *for* them, it is clear in her formulation that the task of writing *is* indeed to correct. If the task of writing is to correct, what is implied is that language is an imperfect rendering of reality and that there can be only one (correct) way of rendering it. Accordingly, writing is merely an instrument in the same sense that an odometer or an altimeter is: a description of an external reality. And in the case of the writing brought to the tutor, the instrument is broken and in need of repair.

What's more, despite their protestations, she and the other tutors derive a fair bit of pleasure in fixing. Despite our center's "better writers, not better papers" mantra, several of the tutors alluded to the vindication they felt when students brought "A" papers back to center after working with them. Even in the frustration of working with students who want their papers "fixed," the tutors often evinced a certain noblesse oblige that would accompany the sort of superior vantage point necessary to correct others' supposedly imperfect renderings of reality. After all, as the example tutor above demonstrates, it would have been easier for her to simply correct for the student; instead, she took the more difficult path in having the student correct himself (with all of the Foucauldian overtones which that implies). As these responses reveal, the tutors' sense of identity--at least insofar as it applies to language and writing--is often predicated on positivist notions of language and consequently on correctness. And given the frequently moralistic tone of talk about grammar, it is little wonder that tutors have cultivated a very positive sense of identity in this regard. Of course, social constructivism and the sorts of postmodern pedagogies that they had been exposed to in tutor training challenge this epistemological stance. In a sense, their training has taken from them the stable and describable world as they know it. The act of correction thus serves as a stand-in for the lost object: the *objet petit a*.

The normalizing presence of correction talk in the midst of complaints about the student expectation of correction hence indicates a symptom--a sort of "slip" which for Lacan signifies blocked speech that wants to be deciphered (*Ecrits*). They know and can explain why correction is ultimately unproductive (particularly in the earlier stage of drafting). Still, even after repeating the tropes associated with their training and that knowledge, their talk is riddled with indicators of a symptomatic belief at odds with that knowledge.

Alcorn contrasts symptomatic beliefs with rational truth claims. Whereas rational truth claims are based on empirical evidence and/or sound reasoning, "The symptom is an expression of desire that supports a knowledge in a tenaciously nondialectical manner" (38). The tutors have been exposed to discourse based both on empirical evidence and sound theory, and yet they cling to previously held beliefs and practices. Because symptomatic beliefs cannot be changed by knowledge alone, as the interview responses demonstrate, knowledge presented with the intention of dispelling symptomatic beliefs can often instead lead to a form of cynicism.

Cynicism
Of the eleven tutors I interviewed, all but one of them wished that students and faculty

knew the writing center was for writers of any level at any stage in the writing process. In our practicum, they had discussed and read a great deal about process, peer review, and revision. However, when asked if they themselves used the center, most replied that they had not, even though they felt they should. Like the disconnect between knowing center theory and acting in spite of it, this response indicates a sort of symptomatic belief: despite repeating what they had learned in practicum--that they too could benefit from the writing center--in practice they did not use it. This in turn demonstrates a certain cynicism about that knowledge.

This cynicism manifested in the tutor responses in other ways as well. For example:

> ...It is not unusual for writers to procrastinate and only begin writing a paper a day or two before it has to be turned in. I am guilty of this more often than I'd like to admit...

> ...I never want to revise my things. I always write them and just turn them in. I feel like I should probably do more of that. I just don't ever want to...because I know they would be better if I went back and looked and read through them. And I would catch a lot of little mistakes and things like that that I get nailed for on it, but…

As Rickert explains, "Cynicism is reflexively defensive, the very product of the knowledge generated in the attempt to teach or transform. Cynicism, then, springs from the bad faith of knowledge compromised by accommodation" (12). What they experience every day--as students and writers subject to regulatory power and presumptively as agents in a foundational and positivist world--is in conflict with the knowledge we hope to impart. Their prior practices and beliefs make negotiating the discursive terrain of that world easier, and as a result, they privilege those practices and beliefs over our knowledge.

Alcorn, Rickert, and others describe the frequently discouraging results of ostensibly liberatory pedagogies. Rickert, for example, refers to his critique-oriented approach helping students to write competent essays about ideology, but often leading to cynicism in actual practice: "'Yeah, I know I don't need these seventy-five-dollar designer blue jeans, but...' [spending ensues]" (2). In the case of my tutor training, the tutors were capable of articulating theory very well and writing engaging response journals. A semester later, however, they implicitly argued that "Yeah, we are not a fix-it shop, but..." [correction ensues]. In short, university discourse may impart knowledge (as defined by facts, reasoning, etc.), but there is no guarantee it will inform practice. In fact, it has the potential to do worse.

Numerous recent studies in psychology, neuroscience, and political science have demonstrated the "backfire" effect that insulates a subject against facts and reasoning which threaten that subject's affective beliefs and ideological commitments (Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, and Braman; Haidt; Strickland, Taber, and Lodge). Consequently, confronting tutors with oppositional university discourse (particularly in the context of

the writing center, where theory is often enforced with policy) can potentially configure them into an Oedipal relationship with the director. That is, the director enters into a rivalry with yet another of the tutors' parent figures: other faculty who explicitly endorse correction-based models of language. As Dylan Evans explains the second 'time' of the Lacanian view of the Oedipus complex, "The father imposes the law on the mother's desire by denying her access to the phallic object and forbidding the subject access to the mother...The subject now sees the father as a rival for the mother's desire" (128-129). The tutors perceive (accurately or not) that faculty desire correctness, and they wish to act--as Welsch points out--on that impulse. However, the director intervenes by denying both the desire of the tutors and the tutors' perception of what faculty desire. The director does so through instruction that threatens the stability of tutor identity and through (quite literally) the law as enacted through policy. Since it is not susceptible to dialectic—and in fact, sometimes dialectic merely strengthens it—this correction static is not (as Welsch asserts) due to a philosophy of correction (4). Instead, that static is the very result of knowledge and policy: in denying tutor (and perhaps faculty) desire, we only strengthen the certitude upon which that desire is premised.

Toward A Pedagogy of Affect
Rickert and Alcorn each offer some advice to take affect and desire into consideration in the writing classroom, though it is largely conceptual and sometimes ambivalent. Given the specificity of individual desire, I also refrain from offering any prescriptive practices here but instead seek to raise some possibilities for a training pedagogy that takes affect and desire into account.

In the case of the writing classroom, Alcorn advocates a pedagogy of mourning--the work necessary to dislodge the libidinal attachments subjects have to particular discourses. Transformational pedagogies must offer students not only new subject positions to inhabit but also a way of parting with and grieving for prior subject positions, particularly if students perceived those positions as foundational to their sense of identity. Alcorn does not argue for writing teachers to act as therapists, but rather to become more open to the circulation of desire in the writing classroom. As Lacan himself says, "It is only once it is formulated, named in the presence of the other, that desire, whatever it is, is recognised in the full sense of the term" (*The Seminar* 183).

Alcorn relies on Jeffrey Berman's *Diaries to an English Professor* as a way to look at the work of self-guided reflection as opposed to reflection imposed by an authority. In response to student writing, Berman does not make judgements, opting instead for comments that ask students to elaborate on what they have written. As a result, Alcorn argues, "If students change, it is not a response to the demands of a teacher but because of a journal and the student's relation to the journal" (119). Moreover, in elucidating their own desires and anonymously sharing them, the students become more attuned to the desires and needs of others; they gain insight into other potential subject positions.

The interviews with the tutors lend this notion some credence. For example, of the eleven tutors interviewed, the three who abstained from correction talk were the only tutors who had used the writing center as clients. In other words, they know what it's like to be

subject to correction and the sort of regulatory pressure it enacts. They have inhabited more identities than solely "tutor" or "successful student." Correspondingly, they may be more empathetic to the needs and desires of the student writers they assist. This implies that part of the task of training tutors should involve providing subject positions for tutors to explore and perhaps occupy, whether through journals (like Berman's) or other, more tutoring-specific, means.

For example, one promising method that we only briefly delved into in our own practicum involved role-playing. In one practicum session, I asked half of the trainees to take on the roles of student writers in a variety of rhetorical and personal situations and the other half to take on the roles of different sorts of tutors. They simulated tutoring sessions based on how these personas might interact. They then discussed how the sessions made them feel and what the implications of those feelings might be. Most of the tutors responded well to this activity in the interviews and wished to have engaged in more like it. In retrospect, I suspect this was one of the more successful activities because it allowed them to safely "play" with identity and engage in best practices in a way that did not threaten their sense of self.

In closing, writing center practitioners know the epistemic power of writing and of talk about writing. We have all had peer review sessions where we set aside the draft and collaboratively let our talk create new knowledge. But as long as tutors focus primarily on correctness, they cannot create this knowledge. And as long as directors do not attend to the role that affect and desire play in this focus, it cannot itself be corrected.

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