# NOT CHOOSING SIDES: USING DIRECTIVE AND NON-DIRECTIVE METHODOLOGY IN A WRITING SESSION

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In most writing centers, tutors are encouraged to have confidence-building, collaborative exchanges with the writers they serve. In other words, a tutor is not supposed to be an editor who simply tells the writer what is wrong with a paper and how to fix it; instead, the tutor should foster a collaborative learning experience in which both parties equally contribute to what Kenneth Bruffee terms the "conversation of mankind." For Bruffee, writing is a displaced form of conversation—thought is internalized conversation, while writing is thought re-externalized. Because of this, writers should be encouraged to engage "in conversation at as many points in the writing process as possible"(210). If they are involved in conversation, Bruffee argues writers will be able to become masters of a normal discourse, and thus participate—understand and be understood—in the conversations of the academic and professional worlds. Still, Bruffee does not believe the traditional classroom effectively helps students become members of these discourse communities because it is hierarchical, not collaborative in nature. This is why Bruffee is such a strong proponent of peer tutoring—he believes peer tutoring is valuable "because it provides the kind of social context in which normal discourse occurs: a community of knowledgeable peers" (212).

Many writing center theorists have embraced Bruffee's argument and claimed that a minimalist tutoring approach is the best way to create this peer conversation. In his seminal article, "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work," Jeff Brooks states that a writer who passively receives knowledge from a tutor "may leave with an improved paper, but he will not have learned much" (220). Thus, tutors should not be teachers who simply pass down information by telling writers how to fix their papers, but should instead be equals who make the writer do as much of the thinking and work as possible: "The tutor's activity should focus on the student. If, at the end of the session, a paper is improved, it should be because the student did all the work" (Brooks 224). Proponents of minimalist tutoring argue that open-ended, non-directive questions are the best way to engage the student because they encourage a conversational session that will help writers become masters of normal discourse: "If, as Bruffee suggests, tutor talk should resemble the way we want our students to approach the writing process, then we must ensure that our tutors talk in open-ended, exploratory ways and not in directive, imperative, restrictive modes" (Ashton-Jones 32).

While current writing center orthodoxy tends to favor a minimalist approach, some theorists express reservations with this methodology. Linda Shamoon and Deborah Burns, for example, believe that a directive approach can be just as effective, if not more so, than a non-directive approach because it shows or models the normal discourse for the writer. In other words, once writers are shown how to do something, they will be able to express themselves more effectively because they better understand the discourse expectations of a particular knowledge community:

> Directive tutoring displays rhetorical processes in action. When a tutor redrafts problematic portions of a text for a student, the changes usually strengthen the disciplinary argument and improve the connection to current conversation in the discipline. . . . Thus, directive tutoring provides interpretive options for students when none seem available, and it unmasks the system of argumentation at work within a discipline. (237)

That said, Shamoon and Burns do not believe a directive approach should be used uniformly. Instead, they argue that writing center practices should be broadened to include both directive and non-directive tutoring, resulting in "an enrichment of tutoring repertoires, stronger connections between the

writing center and writers in other disciplines, and increased attention to the cognitive, social, and rhetorical needs of writers at all stages of development" (239).

## PROBLEMS WITH CHOOSING SIDES

I agree with Shamoon and Burns—I believe that writing center orthodoxy and practice should allow for both directive and non-directive approaches. However, this allowance should not only be made within writing center orthodoxy as a whole, but also within each tutoring session. In other words, instead of conducting either a directive or non-directive session, tutors should feel comfortable conducting a session that is uses both in a complementary manner. As a tutor, the more I read tutor theory, the more I felt pressured to choose between the directive and non-directive camps.[1] Making such a decision was very difficult for me because I strongly believed in the merits of each approach. Expectedly, when I tried to exclusively use a single approach in a session, I became frustrated when I could not use the other, more appropriate approach. But the Shamoon and Burns article inspired me to try using directive and non-directive approaches in a single session. In other words, instead of a single approach, I decided to do both in an upcoming session with Jackie (actual name changed), a standing appointment I had previously met with twice. Jackie worked hard at writing – particularly for her Composition I class—but she often struggled with "not knowing what to do." Consequently, I felt that a more directive approach might be appropriate because I could show her the discourse expectations of academic writing.

## THE SESSION

The beginning of our session consisted of Jackie telling me about the assignment and where she was at in her writing process. After I had a good understanding of both, I asked Jackie what her goals for the session were, and she replied that she "mostly wanted to work on grammar." Recalling what we had worked on in our previous sessions, I suggested that we read through the paper and check its organization, development, and support before looking at grammar concerns. After agreeing that this was a good plan for the session, Jackie proceeded to read the paper aloud.

Up to this point, I was very non-directive, asking a few questions and letting Jackie do most of the talking (including reading the paper aloud). True, I was directive by suggesting we look at global issues before local ones, but I was not overly-directive because I was not sure what we needed to work on. Soon after she began reading the paper aloud, however, I realized that we indeed needed to work on global issues. Consequently, when she paused to ask a question about integrating quotations, I was fairly directive in telling her what our session should focus on:

> Jackie: Am I tying in these quotes, you know, with my own words? 'Cause I'm quoting from the book, certain parts, and then I'm trying to tie it in with my own words. And I don't know if I'm doing it right because it's not sounding right to me.

> Tom: Okay, but before we get to that, we want to, you know, make sure we are answering the question and doing what the assignment calls for and that we are doing that logically and in an organized manner. And then we can kind of look at things like that; you know, if we are explaining the quotes and tying it in right with our own words.

Despite my directiveness, Jackie still believed local issues were the main problem with her paper. For example, when she finished reading her paper aloud, Jackie felt that her tense usage needed to be addressed:

> Tom: So what are you thinking? What do you think?

> Jackie: [pause] Um, now that I've read it, um, for some reason, um. I don't know; it doesn't sound right to me.

> Tom: What doesn't sound right?

> Jackie: Maybe it's the grammar in some places where, you know, sometimes I'm hearing pres-

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ent tense and then past tense. [She examines a sentence fragment and fixes it; then brings out a graded philosophy paper to show me the problems she has with prepositional use.]

After reading the entire paper, I was convinced that Jackie's paper needed to be reorganized so her argument was stated more clearly and effectively. She had a lot of good points, but they were hidden in between plot summaries and off-topic ramblings. So, after briefly discussing prepositions, I told her to put the philosophy paper away and began discussing the main problem with her paper we were working on:

Tom: Who do you think your audience is, who are you writing for; who's going to read this?

Jackie: [laughs] I guess I haven't really thought about it, but I guess it's the teacher.

Tom: [laughs] Okay, that's right; that's true. Has your professor read the article?

Jackie: Yes.

Tom: So, your audience knows what the article is about?

Jackie: Yes.

Tom: The reason I bring that up is that you, like, you use a lot of good examples and points to explain how labels identify and divide us. But right now, the paper is set up, and this is probably why you were wondering whether or not you use your quotes appropriately. The paper is set up more as a plot summary, and then you have a tendency to just enter a point randomly.

Jackie: [pause] Yeah, I see that[2].

Tom: And that's okay because that's how you thought this through, but now we can set it up so it more, so that our examples, our points, are more prominent instead of hidden in the text, or in your plot summary.

While I was supportive and encouraging, I was also very directive in telling Jackie what was wrong with her paper, an assertion that concluded my gradual transformation from non-directive to directive tutor. Initially, in determining the goals of the session, I asked and considered what Jackie wanted to work on. When I realized that other issues needed to be addressed first, I offered my opinion as a suggestion. But when she still failed to recognize the problem, I became more directive.

William Macauley disagrees with this approach, claiming that it's a mistake for tutors "to presume that [they] understand better than the writer what the session needs to be about" (6). Although he admits that tutors can offer suggestions, he believes the writer should basically dictate what the session is about. Still, as a member of a knowledge community, I knew the global issues of the paper were much more significant and pressing. In other words, if I had adhered to a non-directive approach, Jackie and I would have ignored the main obstacle preventing her from communicating effectively in this particular discourse community.

Once we agreed that the session should focus on global issues, Jackie and I needed to decide how to proceed. Judging from the success we had in our previous sessions, I suggested we use an outline to organize her argument. She agreed, but since she wasn't completely comfortable with outlining yet, she asked me to record. I was comfortable with this because it was one less thing for her to worry about, and it gave me another opportunity to show or model outlining for her. In addition to outlining, however, I needed to show Jackie how to organize her argument better because she did not know how to do so herself. Although I did not directly tell her how to do this, I was directive in the sense that I coached her along by guiding her thoughts and keeping her on track. When she struggled to identify a point, I directed her to the appropriate point she seemed to be getting at:

Tom: Okay, you say labels identify us. What is one type of label that the author discusses in the essay?

Jackie: [pause] Well, one is that, for herself, that she considers herself a professional, a professional woman.

Tom: A professional woman, okay . . . Do you want to talk about being professional and non-professional? When you say professional, do you mean professional versus criminal?

Jackie: Yeah. I mean I didn't think about that. But yeah, in the sense that here she is a professional, and she's entering this, you know, this facility where everyone is the criminal. [pause] The two worlds are in contrast; professional and criminal.

Tom: Okay, good. So that's one label that identifies and divides us.

Despite our progress, Jackie was still unsure about what to do next, so I explained that we needed to use examples to support and show how the labels of professional and criminal divide humans. Once again, although I did not directly tell Jackie what these examples where, I was directive in the sense that I guided her along—she came up with ideas, and I told her if they worked or not:

Tom: Now, can you think of a quote we can use to support this statement? That relates to her being a professional and how that labels and divides her?

Jackie: Uh, yeah. [pause] Well, in this paragraph here [reads a passage], but, I guess that doesn't really explain or support my claim.

Tom: No, you're right; I don't think it does either.

Jackie: [pause] How about this? [Reads another passage]

Tom: Yeah, but that has to do with being a woman. We want something about professional and criminal . . . You want to have an example that because she was a professional, she was divided or separated from the inmates. Where was she separated?

Jackie: Oh you know, there is one point here [reads a passage].

Tom: Good, yeah. I think that's a great quote because you have the professionals in suits, ties, and blazers, and they are being stared at because this is the opposition and this is something different.

Although it is couched in what Ashton-Jones calls nurturing language, I was fairly directive in showing Jackie how to organize her paper and argument. By doing so, I gave her the opportunity to work at, or practice, something with the comfort of knowing I was there to guide and correct her. As Shamoon and Burns write, "We take this to be a version of directive tutoring at its best, with periods of observation and protected practice focused upon important skills development" (235). By the end of the session, my approach had paid off—after laboring through the professional versus criminal topic, Jackie suddenly displayed an understanding of how to organize her argument. In fact, she surprised me by quickly coming up with a number of points and examples she could use in her paper:

Jackie: Okay, so I think I get the idea. So, one label and division is professional and criminal, and I just thought of another, black and white.

Tom: Perfect!

Jackie: Um, [pause] male and female.

Tom: Okay, black and white, male and female.

Jackie: [pause] I think those are the main ones that I can think of.

Tom: Yeah, and that tells me that you understand what the labeling issues are. Now, with this black

and white, when you go back and work on this, what are you going to use.

Jackie: Oh, there's lots of good stuff. Well, an example of that, let's see. [pause] Well, the fact that she mentions that the inmates in there are black, and the people that come to see them, mostly lawyers are white.

Tom: Okay, so there's a division there that when they see a white or black person, they assume that the white person is not the criminal and the black person is.

Jackie: Right. And also, there's segregation within the prison; that the white guys are separate from the black inmates.

Once Jackie began to understand "how things work," I was able to use a much more minimalist or non-directive approach because she didn't need to be shown or told what to do.

## CONCLUSION

My session with Jackie shows that a writing center orthodoxy that allows for both directive and non-directive approaches is beneficial—if not necessary—in helping students become masters of a normal discourse. As Jeff Brooks writes, "Fixing flawed papers is easy; showing the students how to fix their own papers is complex and difficult" (224). To help negotiate this complexity, tutors need to be able to utilize both directive and non-directive approaches. In this session, when a minimalist approach did not work with Jackie, I was comfortable with using a more directive approach.

Some minimalist theorists may argue that I limited Jackie's voice and authority as a writer by being directive, but by showing her the discourse expectations of a knowledge community, I gave her more freedom and control as a writer: "Rather than assuming that this imitation will prevent authentic self-expression, the tutor and the student assume that imitation will lead to improved technique, which will enable freedom of expression" (Shamoon and Burns 232). By having the option to be directive and non-directive, I was not restricted in choosing the best method to help Jackie improve her writing. Not only was this in Jackie's best interest, but it also relieved the pressure I had been feeling as a "theory-conscious" tutor. Now, when deciding the best way to help a student, I am comfortable trusting my intuition. I am comfortable being both directive and non-directive. ✦

### Endnotes

1. I want to note this pressure was in no way imposed through training or from my director. Instead, it was something I sensed as I began to read more and more articles on writing center theory and practice. Many of the articles I was reading seemed to endorse a purely non-directive approach to writing sessions, and I felt that any use of directive tutoring was a transgression against writing center orthodoxy. In other words, I felt that being directive—even for a moment—was the equivalent to being an editor.

2. At this point, I probably should have made sure that Jackie really did understand before continuing. In the end, I think she did understand, but at this point in the session, I made an intuitive assumption, which is not always the best strategy.

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