



The Absent Professor

Rethinking Collaboration in Tutorial Sessions

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Abstract: This article examines the relationships among the student, tutor, and professor as played out in tutorial sessions. It is an extension of our interactive presentation “The Absent Professor” at the 2010 Center for the Improvement of Teaching conference. This presentation discussed the different perspectives that students, tutors, and professors bring to the table; participants engaged in mock tutorial sessions to explore the complexities of this relationship. Using tutors’ experiences from the conference and actual tutorial sessions, the article draws on both practice and theory in an attempt to arrive at an understanding of how the complicated and often complicating presence of the professor affects the tutorial session. The article illustrates how professors’ comments, assignment sheets, syllabi, and in-class discussions inform the meeting between student and tutor. We rely on Andrea Lunsford’s (2008) definition of collaboration to take into consideration all three perspectives. We conclude with an analysis of potential tools that can result in more productive tutorial sessions.

INTRODUCTION

Megan T.

“I don’t think I’m coming back to school next semester.”

I was shocked. My tutee, who was saying this to me, was a non-native English speaking student who, on top of trying to

master a new language, had to take care of her child, hold a full time job, and struggle against her learning disability. I had been tutoring her in the Reading, Writing, and Study Strategies Center at UMass Boston for about a year and had seen significant improvement in the clarity of her writing. But she didn’t; all she saw was red pen on an essay she had been working on with me for a few weeks. As I inquired as to why she didn’t

All seven writers are tutors in the Reading, Writing, and Study Strategies Center at UMass Boston. We are, in addition, Freshman Composition instructors, Critical Reading and Writing instructors, First Year Seminar instructors, Graduate Writing Center tutors, Master’s of English students, Doctoral students in Education, and/or post baccalaureate pre-medical students. We acknowledge the participants in our presentation at the 2010 CIT Conference, without whose excellent discussion contributions, and role playing, we could not have written this article. We direct special thanks to a professor from a neighboring university, whose question regarding whether or not we considered ourselves teachers provided a basis for our inquiry. We also thank the co-directors of UMass Boston’s Reading, Writing, and Study Strategies Center, Mark Pawlak and Susan Irvings, for their continued direction and support.

want to return she simply said, “I just can’t do it anymore.”

I saw the utter look of defeat in her eyes and turned my attention instead to the paper she was holding. Her written words, her ideas, and her voice were lost under the words of another. When we see the color red in American society we are trained to stop, and that’s exactly what she did. She shut down.

As we began to work through the comments I could see her relaxing, but it was still overwhelming, even for me. I mean, how do you keep a student positive while working through the red pen? How do you try to explain the importance of content over grammar when the majority of comments are grammar-focused? How do you try to decipher the professor’s comments while simultaneously helping the student through them? How do you motivate that student to write when his or her words have been taken over by someone else? How do you stand by the student as a tutor, while maintaining a relationship with the faculty member?

I tried to work through these questions while grouping together certain comments to point out patterns in her writing to give her some sense of focus and purpose in her improvement as a writer. Although my tutee and I were the only people participating in the session, there was an obvious third presence: her professor. Even though we had turned the conversation away from her professor, we both felt this presence in a different way: While she remained overwhelmed with the expectations of his class and her inability to get a decent grade, I was preoccupied with the realization of the completely disconnected relationship between not only the student and professor but also myself (the tutor) and the professor.

When working with a tutee, the professor’s essay comments, whether that means many comments or none at all, are not only complicating and potentially overwhelming for the student, but also for the tutor. Although it is not a physical one, the teacher’s presence in a tutoring session often

dictates the direction that session is going to take. As a result, not only does the tutor need to work with the student and his or her needs, but also, in a way the tutor must work with the needs and expectations of the professor.

THE PRESENCE OF THE ABSENT PROFESSOR

This scenario—in which the tutor navigates through both the tutee’s writing and the emotions he or she brings to the session, and the absent professor’s instructions and feedback—is illustrative of many tutors’ daily experiences. Our responsibilities at the Reading, Writing, and Study Strategies Center (RWSSC) and Graduate Writing Center (GWC) at UMass Boston, process-oriented centers where we meet with tutees weekly in one-to-one sessions, include tutorials similar to the one above, in which a student is on the verge of giving up. These tutorials happen more frequently than one might think. The tutorials we take part in can be shaped by a spectrum of other types of paper comments, including minimal ones. And, in all of these cases, the absent professor is an inevitable presence.

To better understand the multifaceted relationships involved in tutoring, we presented “The Absent Professor: The Presence of the Professor in the Tutorial Session,” an interactive session for the 2010 CIT Teaching for Transformation Conference. We created paper instructions, the first page of a paper, and four sets of paper comments (see Appendices A, B, and C). At the presentation, each of us became a tutee with one of the four sets of paper comments and individual reactions to them. We were each paired with a participant, who became our tutor in a mock session. We concluded our workshop with a discussion of the role-play and what we learned.

We viewed “The Absent Professor” as an opportunity to learn, from the tutee’s perspective, what contributes to a successful tutorial involving the student, tutor, and the

absent professor. We created our workshop-tutee identities with an awareness that, more often than not, the tutor and the instructor are inevitably disconnected. In many cases, the “triangulation” (see Thonus's discussion of the “tutorial ‘triangle’” 2001: 77) of the student, tutor, and professor relationships becomes instead a right angle, one in which the student ends up in the middle working with two distant ends.

As tutors, our blurred roles in the academic world (see for example, Kimball 2007, and McCarthy and O'Brien 2008) cause us to put what Andrea Lunsford (2008) terms “collaboration” high on our list of tutor responsibilities when meeting with students. Due to this, students often feel the tutor should take their side; however, using collaboration to create a sense of trust to accomplish students' goals does not mean that we disregard the instructors during this process. As Lunsford puts it, “Collaborative environments and tasks must *demand* collaboration. Students, tutors, teachers must really need one another to carry out common goals” (50). In tutorial sessions, we work to maintain the collaboration the tutoring environment demands. Some of the tasks we undertake with students include talking with them about the challenges of a particular assignment, figuring out how to work through those challenges in the most efficient way, and suggesting strategies to complete the assignment while fostering student confidence. As we navigate through these different tasks, we are not only working with the student, but also the absent professor.

In this paper, we discuss our experiences as “tutees” in our CIT presentation and as tutors at the RWSSC and GWC. These experiences illustrate the significant barriers that endanger tutors' and instructors' efforts to collaborate as teachers of their shared students. During our presentation debriefing, a professor from a neighboring college asked if we considered tutoring a form of teaching. We all automatically responded “yes!” The collaborative discussion that followed led us to a better understanding of

our roles.

As tutors (and, in many of our cases, classroom instructors) we believe tutors and professors have control over the ways in which we collaborate in teaching our students. In our roles as tutors, we should never approach our sessions with the mindset that professors' expectations are an obstacle our students must overcome. Professors possess a unique perspective of students that we do not have access to; likewise, we possess our own viewpoint that professors do not have. In tutorial sessions, we must combine these different perspectives by incorporating the presence of our students' absent professors. This presence then becomes a teaching tool, enabling both the tutor and the instructor to collaborate as teachers of our shared students.

USING THE PROFESSOR'S PRESENCE AS A TOOL IN TUTORIALS

These first examples below from Jesse and Rebecca show one strategy for integrating the absent perspective to effect a collaborative tutorial session.

Jesse and Rebecca

During “The Absent Professor” session, I [Rebecca] assumed the part of a student I have frequently met in real-life tutorials: the defeated paper writer. The essay I was working on with my partner, who was acting as my tutor, was peppered with comments written by my fictitious professor. They were all upbeat and positive and led, incomprehensibly, to the grade at the bottom of the page: C-. My tutor read through the comments aloud, ultimately arriving at the dreadful grade. I responded dejectedly, as I have seen my students do, sinking low in my seat. She asked me to tell her what I was thinking. “I don't know,” I said. “I mean, I've always thought I was a pretty good writer. The comments are all really good. And then there's this C- at the bottom of the page. And I just...I don't know. I feel stupid or some-

thing.” She tried to console me, then build me up a little, but my affect didn’t change. She leaned over the paper so she could read the comments again. I looked away. Our session came to a momentary stand-still.

After what felt like a long beat, she spoke up. She had arrived at a strategy: “Did you bring the assignment?” she asked. ‘I wasn’t expecting this,’ I thought as the overwhelmed student. “Okay,” my partner said, after I got out the assignment (see Appendix A). “Let’s talk about how you translated *this* [pointing to the assignment] into *this* [pointing the paper].” And we proceeded to go over the directions, comparing them to my essay. Step-by-step, she helped me figure out for myself which elements I had successfully incorporated, and the changes I had to make in my paper to fulfill the assignment. By the end of the session, we had pieced together a plan I could take home and I felt my heart lift.

For my [Jesse’s] part of the mock session, I played the role of the nervous and frustrated tutee. About halfway through our session, my tutor asked me if we could look at the assignment sheet for the seemingly impossible essay I was struggling with. This proved to be the turning point in our session. Not knowing what to expect, and risking further complication, my tutor took a risk in bringing the focus back toward the professor. It so happened that the assignment sheet contained the answers that I, the anxious student, was looking for.

In the workshop, it was illuminating for both of us to be on the receiving end of strategies we have employed scores of times in real life. As tutors, we know that starting with the assignment is an effective strategy for working with a student on a difficult paper; what we didn’t fully understand until the role-play was why. In both of our tutorials, focusing on the assignment accomplished several things:

First, it immediately put us back in conversation with our professors. Judging from the attitudes we portrayed as tutees, our tutors could tell we had decided that we didn’t want to ‘talk’ to our instructors any

more. The more time we spent away from that dialogue, the harder it would have been to pick it up again. Re-reading the assignment together opened the lines of communication again, which, although it was a difficult action to initiate, restored our agency as students. Our tutors helped us realize that although the comments were confusing, we had another source of written information from our professors: the original instructions.

Secondly, turning to the assignment enabled our tutors to remove themselves from the direct dialogue between ourselves (the students) and our professors. At the beginning of both of our sessions, we wanted the tutor to validate our feelings by siding with us against the instructor. Our tutors’ choice to emphasize the assignment instead enabled them to position themselves objectively. It also shifted our views of our predicaments to their rightful focus: our essay and its audience—in this case, our professors. Our partners’ side step toward the assignment forced us to assume responsibility for our own writing, and empowered us to do so.

Ultimately, what made this strategy effective was that it stopped us, the students, from treating our professors as absent. Instead of throwing up our hands and blaming some specter of a faculty member, our tutors led us to engage with our professors’ writing and seek out the information we needed to complete our work. Guided by the assignment, we established a trajectory, and, as a result, revising our papers felt like a worthwhile and conquerable task. We weren’t stuck any more.

Arianne

Arianne’s experience in the CIT workshop was similar to Jesse’s and Rebecca’s. Here she explains how, in much the same way a tutor can use an assignment to refocus his or her tutee, pairing a rubric with an assignment can also redirect a tutoring session to make it more collaborative.

I sat down with my role-playing tutor and slumped my shoulders. I handed her a copy of my paper and the grading rubric (see Appendix C) my absent professor had given me. "I guess I have a lot I need to fix," I told her. The rubric listed several potential grammar mistakes and content problems, with more than half checked, and instead of a grade, instructions to fix the paper. My paper itself was unmarked.

"Well," my tutor said, looking over my writing, "where should we begin?" There was a pause while I stared at the desk in front of me. She set the paper down and picked up the rubric. "Let's start at the top." I sighed, remembering how students confronted with feedback usually respond when I as a tutor suggest going over professor feedback in detail. I was playing the student who does not understand what it means that the paper had "insufficient analysis of quotations" or "illogical sentence structuring" as indicated on the rubric. We got through only one-third of it before we ran out of time, but my tutor's careful explanations of its meaning helped make the feedback less overwhelming by connecting my professor's comments to the assignment and then to my paper.

Before the conference presentation, we tutors spent a large portion of our time designing the feedback we would use for our mock sessions with particular goals in mind. The rubric was designed to serve as an example of the ways communication may break down between the professor and student when feedback is involved. What was problematic in my mock session was that the rubric instructed how *not* to write instead of how *to* write. My tutor's idea to combine the rubric with the assignment brought together seemingly distant parts of the writing process: my idea formation (assignment) and my professor's expectations for the final product (the rubric). This made revision much more approachable than it would have been using either source alone.

As Jesse and Rebecca discuss in the previous section, breaking down the assignment, even in the absence of a rubric, is a reli-

able way to open the line of communication between the student, tutor, and professor. By working together to understand the rubric, the student and tutor are piecing together the professor's expectations for the assignment. The student starts to recognize what is being asked of him or her in the assignment and, while working with the student to build this roadmap, the tutor is also able to see the absent professor more clearly. In effect, this brings the absent professor into the tutoring session by demonstrating that there is a relationship between the professor's expectations for an assignment, the instructions, and the student's ideas.

Kristi

While the previous sections discuss the value of using professor-provided materials, Kristi describes an instance in which she uses her unique perspective as a tutor to identify student needs that may not have been visible to the professor.

After the CIT conference, I met a new, ready to work tutee named Carl who reminded me of the student I portrayed in my mock session, unaware of what he needed from tutoring. I was immediately reminded of the fact that sometimes there are problems that do not manifest themselves right away via the comments on a paper a student is pushing towards you.

I started meeting with Carl the second week of classes this semester. He's never missed one of our sessions, and he seems genuinely happy to meet with me every week. Carl is focusing on a higher-level Humanities course in our tutoring sessions.

During our first meeting together, I asked him some general questions about himself and his interests as a student. We looked through the class syllabus and noted that the course description mentioned that the course would involve critical thinking, critical reading, and critical writing. When I asked how he felt about these things, he said that they "seemed okay" to him. We talked about his writing specifically, and he admit-

ted to having some problems in the past. Then, I asked him if he was getting anything out of the readings, and if he was comprehending and retaining the information. He was pretty sure that he was comprehending the readings, but he was unsure about how much he was retaining: "Enough to write the pay-pahs," he said with a thick Boston accent.

In this case, by "papers" he meant short summaries about the week's readings. Analyzing his response on the spot, I started to offer some reading strategy suggestions to Carl: try timing your reading and see how long it takes you to read x-amount-of-pages in x-amount-of-time, take notes on what you read, gloss the paragraphs to help you summarize the chapters and articles.

The next week, Carl actually started our session by telling me that he had used the reading strategies I had suggested and they had worked for him. After talking about this for a bit, he pulled out a short summary paper he had written before our first meeting. The cover sheet, a grading rubric offered by the professor, had a lot of red pen on it. His very short summary had the same amount of red on it. The professor had given him a score of 6.5, the lowest possible grade for the assignment. He was taking out his computer while I looked over the comments, one of which read: "I know you're seeing a tutor this semester, but I'm not sure tutoring will give you the amount of help you need to complete this course." Looking at this first example of Carl's writing, maybe I would have thought the same thing, but I immediately knew that his struggle with writing was a direct result of his struggle with reading.

Many times students and instructors think of tutors at the RWSSC as people who can only help with writing, but as was Carl's case, struggles with writing sometimes stem from a lack of reading strategies, or some other issue that may be hard to see from the instructor's standpoint. Because of the intimate roles tutors play in their tutees' educations, often times we have to make decisions about what is most important to work on: the

overall academic strengths of a student or the work in front of us that is soon going to be evaluated by an instructor. Many times it is difficult for students to turn off the fact that they are being assessed.

The fortunate thing about Carl's story is that there was an opportunity for the professor to see an example of Carl's writing right away. However, in many courses where writing is not the main focus, professors may go weeks without getting a writing sample, often relying on classroom discussion as a source to evaluate students' understanding of the reading, which can sometimes be a poor indicator. As tutors, we are able to see these issues right away, thus we become triangulated with a faceless instructor and have to try to negotiate around this fact by directing these types of teaching moments in a way we hope is not contradictory to the pedagogy of the course. In our tutoring sessions, we blur the lines of student, tutor, and professor, but we must always keep the instructors' goals in mind.

Because of this, I realized that it would be most effective in this case to temporarily set aside the professor's presence, re-incorporating it after addressing Carl's immediate needs as a student. The experience in my CIT mock session helped me realize that the most successful tutoring relationships are those that focus on student learners as a whole, yet still invite "the absent professor" into our sessions. The question for me is when and to what extent.

Meghan H.

So far, we have discussed tutoring scenarios in which the professor's presence is overwhelming. Below, Meghan H. considers how to redirect a student whose emotions and anxieties, exacerbated by her professor's expectations about tutoring, have complicated a tutoring session.

In my CIT mock session, I had the privilege of being partnered with the director of a college writing center. I played the part of a student whom I have encountered many times before: one who received an F on his or

her essay with no comments except for the lone phrase, “go see the tutor” (see Appendix B). Exasperated, frustrated, and quite angry, I took a dominant role in our tutorial from the start.

Without giving my tutor the time to introduce herself, I immediately launched into a tirade against my professor. “I just need to know what she wants from me,” I complained. “Why would she just fail me without any explanation? She just told me to come see you—I need you to tell me what I can do, so I won’t fail this class!” Despite these rants, my tutor remained patient, and tried her best to calm and comfort me. She assured me that she would do the best that she could, and that we would look closely at both the assignment and what I had written to begin the revising process. She then pointed to the assignment, and went sentence by sentence, asking me how I had responded to each question.

Unfortunately for her, I was still preoccupied with my essay. Instead of answering her questions, I diverted the conversation, insisting that I had already thought about all of these things. Then, she did something I didn’t expect. She picked up my essay, turned it over, and moved it aside. “I understand that you’re upset,” she said, “but let’s talk about this assignment together for now, and go back to the essay later. You did receive an F, and it’s true that your professor didn’t give you many comments, but we can try to work through this together if you’re up to it.” After hearing these comments, I was calmed and able to listen as she went through the assignment with me methodically, asking me questions and helping me to notice that what I was telling her was not what I had written in my essay.

My tutor, I think, handled this situation very well. Tutoring students who are this aggressive and upset with their professor can be quite challenging. The key issue in this role-play was the fact that the professor had given me no direction other than “go see the tutor.” As tutors, this dreaded phrase—especially when accompanied with little or no

explanation—carries a tremendous amount of weight. Students told this often enter the tutorial session with specific goals in mind: Sent by their professors, they expect an explanation of why they received an F, and how they can revise their papers to avoid failing. In such cases, the professor’s expectations of tutoring cause the student to come to the tutoring center with unrealistic goals, leaving the student frustrated when these goals are not met.

What my tutor did—calming me, empathizing with my situation without insulting the professor, stepping away from the essay and discussing the assignment—was precisely what I needed. As tutors, we should not and cannot resist the role that professors assign to us, because to do this is to deny the inevitable triangulation that occurs between the student, the professor, and ourselves. We should, however, find a way to revise this role by bringing the conversation away from the student’s anger, frustration, and rants about the professor, and back to where it belongs—the student’s ideas. The professor who chooses to use “go see the professor” with little or no additional commentary creates distance between his or herself, the student, and the tutor. Isn’t it a coincidence, then, that it is precisely this distance from the student’s own essay which he or she needs the most? The essay itself is clearly important; to deny this would be irresponsible. However, in order for the student to take stock of his or her writing, we as tutors must first move him or her away from that work by referring back to the assignment, having a conversation about ideas, or something as simple as my tutor suggested: turning the essay over.

Meesh

Meghan H. notes the importance of distancing the student from his or her own writing. By comparison, Meesh explains in the following section that it is sometimes necessary to separate, temporarily, the professor’s expectations from the individual student’s personal goals, and the

importance of the tutor-tutee collaborative relationship.

During "The Absent Professor," I portrayed a student with long-term writing goals which I expected to rely on when collaboratively setting the tutorial agenda. I planned to practice using a multi-step drafting process to deliberately (rather than passively) organize my course papers. My experience tutoring graduate students, who are often committed to addressing specific aspects of their writing, informed my tutee-identity and goals. In my case, the absent professors' comments praised my observations, presumed that I had submitted a final draft, and showed that I had earned a C- (see Appendix B). I arrived at the tutorial eager to address aspects of writing the professor's comments had seemingly ignored. In addition, I wanted to improve my paper without necessarily mimicking the organizational structure that the professor had used to generate the paper instructions.

Others have already pointed out that reading and writing centers exist in what Mary Louise Pratt (1998) calls "contact zones"—"spaces where cultures... clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (173). Within this zone, as we struggled to determine the tutorial's direction, I reminded the tutor that we had purportedly set a long-term agenda for improving my writing during previous sessions. The tutor expertly drew out and listened to my concerns, and then addressed my dismay by encouraging me to focus on the revision process. She asked, "Which portions of the paper address the different aspects of these instructions?" As an actual tutor, I ask versions of this question during practically every session. Being asked it as a tutee beneficially refocused my attention on the professor's instructions. The refocusing indicated that I needed to more carefully design my research goals, enabling me to evaluate my paper myself. However, the use of this question as an agenda-setting device also deflected my attempt to, as a fellow tutor at the RWSSC puts it, "read my

own paper respectfully" (Erin O'Brien). Doing so would have allowed me to discover the most appropriate drafting plan for my own writing. In other words, the redirection instructed the tutee to generate a paper-organization based on the absent professor's ideas rather than the tutee's.

Patricia Nelson Limerick (1993) reminds us that a "very well-established pattern" of limiting graduate student writers' prose to a stilted, sometimes obfuscating discipline-specific style can be "the ruination of scholarly activity in the modern world. Many professors... think that one of their principal duties is to train the students in the conventions of academic writing" (205). As tutors, we need to be aware of our complicity in this process. During our CIT session, I was a tutee struggling to suspend the conventions—at least long enough to uncover more ideas before conforming—so the imposing of the professor's organizational structure was particularly startling and deflating. It was also instructive. It caused me to reflect on my own tutoring strategies because my perception of the absent professor's instructions as an intrusion indicated that the tutor and tutee both need to be in teaching roles, and jointly responsible for maintaining the integrity of the tutorials' writing instruction goals.

Before "The Absent Professor," I often immediately centered tutorials around instructions and professor feedback, a tactic which can interfere with the tutee's agency. Students, especially graduate students, are responsible for becoming contributors to their fields. Emerging contributors need careful guidance that does not prohibit discovery of ideas, writing that challenges conventions in an informed way, or long-term writing goals. I am working to be more supportive of tutees who are able to synthesize professors' project-specific guidance and to assess it within their own academic contexts.

Absent professors and their paper instructions, frameworks, and topics, and their directive points about the revision process, continue to be present within my tutorials. However overt reference to these

presences is more often initiated by the student. One tutee has commented that she now reads more observantly, since we have subordinated an initial focus on the professor's paper-specific goals to her graduate writing goals. More purposeful reading has caused her to more efficiently complete the papers assigned by her professors. So, delaying reference to instructions until my tutees have framed their papers' purposes within their academic careers has proved to be a beneficial approach: Ultimately, tutees communicate with their professors more successfully when they set the agenda themselves.

CONCLUSION

Our process of proposing, writing, and presenting at the CIT conference has led us to continuously re-examine ourselves and our roles. From the onset, we have been asking ourselves exactly what we would be able to suggest, both to ourselves and our audience, as a take-away of this endeavor. While it would counter our philosophies of reading and writing education to propose that any of our conclusions voiced here are by any means absolute, through our experiences we have identified the importance of collaboration among students, tutors, and professors involved in our work at UMass Boston.

Each professor (and his or her expectations) is always present in our tutorial sessions. As tutors, rather than resisting that presence, we must think of it as a teaching tool we can use with our tutees. We must bring the professor into the tutorial to varying degrees to help our students claim agency and authority over their own writing. The way the absent professor might be brought into a tutoring session differs depending on the situation.

In Rebecca's, Jesse's, and Arianne's cases, it was necessary for the tutors to bring the professors' perspectives into the tutorial sessions. Rather than disregarding the professors' remarks, the tutors utilized the instructors' comments constructively. In

other words, the tutors invited the professors into the session by engaging with the instructors' written materials. Taking both the professors' and students' perspectives into account, the tutors in these cases avoided taking sides and worked collaboratively to help their students move forward with their revisions.

In Kristi's case, the tutor discovered immediate information about her student the professor was not aware of, in this case her student's struggle with reading strategies. To address these issues she identified as a tutor, Kristi chose to temporarily set aside the presence of the professor. She did not, however, disregard that presence altogether—she only shifted the focus of the session to the student's needs she observed. She was able to set goals with her student by allowing the professor to "sit in" on the session via his writing assignments and grading rubrics. Ultimately, Kristi was able to bring the student's, tutor's, and professor's perspectives together to address a higher order concern.

In Megan T.'s and Meghan H.'s cases, the tutors had to choose which aspects of the professors' presences to accentuate in their sessions. In Megan T.'s situation, the amount of instructor's comments was overwhelming for the student. As the tutor, in order to address the student's feelings of defeat, Megan T. focused her student on comments which were similar to help make the student's task of revising seem less daunting. In other words, Megan T. prioritized which aspects of the professor's presence to emphasize to suit the needs of her student. In Meghan H.'s case, the absent professor was present in the tutoring session in two ways: via a set of unrealistic expectations the student brought with her, and a written assignment. The tutor pushed aside the professor's expectations to re-focus the student on her assignment. Although the student resisted the tutor's redirection of the session at first, she later realized that addressing the issues her tutor pointed to actually helped her revise her paper. The

tutor had to push aside one aspect of the professor's presence in favor of another.

Meesh's role play brought to light yet another means of utilizing the professor's presence as a tutoring tool. In this case, immediately turning to the instructor's assignment did not satisfy the needs of the student, who had her own idea of how she might continue her writing process and improve her draft. Devoting exclusive attention to the professor's instructions devalued these self-determined needs, causing the student to become withdrawn and reluctant to move forward. Later, in an actual tutorial, the strategy which proved successful was pushing the professor's presence to the periphery—not out of the picture, only out of focus—to give the student the scope, space, and agency she needed to revise and re-think her work.

In our teaching role as tutors, we have scores of pedagogical moves at our disposal. As we at the RWSSC and GWC have learned through "The Absent Professor" and practical experience, one of the most powerful of these is the presence of the absent professor. Using the professor's presence as a tool, we can enable students to choose a direction that works for them as readers, writers, and critical thinkers. As we have shown, when the professor's comments or directions are more evaluative in nature, we may opt to set that instructor's presence aside momentarily to address our students' needs. Conversely, when we recognize that the absent professor's comments could serve as an anchor, tethering our student to her or his task, we may steer our tutee back to the assignment or an instructor's comments to move him or her forward in the writing process.

In our role as tutors, regardless of how we choose to utilize the professor's presence in the tutorial, it is an element we must always address. This is not to say that we should ever think of professors as an obstacle. Quite the opposite, in fact. We must bear in mind that professors have access to information we as tutors do not, and, by the same

token, we have access to information professors do not. Ultimately, it is this triangulation that is a source of support for tutees, enabling them to succeed.

The process of composing this article has been particularly informative for those of us who, in addition to tutoring at the RWSSC and GWC, also teach classroom courses at UMass Boston. Considering the ways in which our assignments and paper comments might be utilized in tutorial sessions has informed our teaching practices. It is our hope that this article prompts further discussion about the student-tutor-professor collaboration in order to best support our common students.

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Appendix A: Paper Instructions

A 100 level course

UMass Boston

First Major Paper Assignment

We have been reading strategies/recommendations for management of invasive species authored by branches of the U.S. government, for-profit organizations, and non-profit organizations. For your first paper, choose one invasive species such as purple loosestrife or zebra mussels, and summarize the threat associated with that species.

Then, compare and contrast various arguments and proposals while evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. Choose arguments that you think are the most relevant or important and focus on those in your comparison. Your comparison should include how each argument relates to the others, with recognition of where each addresses key points and where they do not. In addition to analyzing the course material, you need to identify a relevant example from your independent research and use that example to substantiate your argument.

Length: 3-4 pages, double spaced. This is not a research paper, rather a summary/critique of various approaches and proposals. Your writing style and grammar are just as important as how you handle the source materials.

You must follow APE or CBE style. At least four sources must be referred to in your paper, and you must refer to a scholarly source located during your independent research.

Be sure to cite your sources and include a works cited page at the end.

Some tips:

- Write grammatically correct, clear sentences, and pay attention to syntax.
- Proofread carefully
- Feel free to consult with a tutor if you are confused or stuck
- Talk to me if you need any clarification

Appendix B: Sample Comments (part 1)

12

The Absent Professor: The Presence of the Professor in the Tutorial Session CIT Conference 1/25/10

Presented by tutors from the Reading, Writing, and Study Strategies Center; and the Graduate Writing Center, UMass Boston

Noname Wonnortime
Sample Paper
12/27/09

Canary Reed Grass (*Phalaris arundinacea L.*) is an aquatic plant that has become a very hard to control invasive species in North America. Many organizations have plans and recommendations to control this grass. The plans have some overlapping agreement, but they also contradict one another. Some of the methods of control that we discussed in class—burning, long-term flooding, and mowing (and other forms of control), and placards about cleaning of boots and boats (and other public education)—are discussed. Some states have copied some of the organizations' plans, or connect to them on their websites.

"Reed canarygrass is a cool-season, sod-forming perennial grass that produces stems from creeping rhizomes" (Invasive Plant Species Assessment Working Group para.1). This makes the plant especially hard to control. According to Tu and the Invasive Plants Association of Wisconsin, the type of flooding and mowing required to completely eliminate this grass also kills most of the native species (Best Management para. 1-5). This is why many organizations recommend prevention and carefully timed mowing.

However, the U.S. government has a different view of this species, and promotes it as being "well suited for use in seeding filter fields which collect wastewater from food processing industries, livestock operations, and sewage treatment plants" and says that it is good for "lambing." (USDA para. 2, para. 11). Even though the USDA states that people should check with local authorities before planting canary reed grass, (USDA para. 5) its policy is almost completely counter to the non-profits' policies.

Here, in Massachusetts, the plant is listed as "prohibited", which means that the state agrees with the non-profits' recommendations. This coast of this state has a severe

Edit with Tutor before resubmitting! (F)

Appendix B: Sample Comments (part 2)

5

The Absent Professor: The Presence of the Professor in the Tutorial Session CIT Conference 1/25/10

Presented by tutors from the Reading, Writing, and Study Strategies Center; and the Graduate Writing Center, UMass Boston

Noname Wonnortime
Sample Paper
12/27/09

nice!

Canary Reed Grass (*Phalaris arundinacea* L.) is an aquatic plant that has become a very hard to control invasive species in North America. Many organizations have plans and recommendations to control this grass. The plans have some overlapping agreement, but they also contradict one another. Some of the methods of control that we discussed in class—burning, long-term flooding, and mowing (and other forms of control), and placards about cleaning of boots and boats (and other public education)—are discussed. Some states have copied some of the organizations' plans, or connect to them on their websites. good

"Reed canarygrass is a cool-season, sod-forming perennial grass that produces stems from creeping rhizomes" (Invasive Plant Species Assessment Working Group para.1). This makes the plant especially hard to control. According to Tu and the Invasive Plants Association of Wisconsin, the type of flooding and mowing required to completely eliminate this grass also kills most of the native species (Best Management para. 1-5). This is why many organizations recommend prevention and carefully timed mowing. interesting

✓ However, the U.S. government has a different view of this species, and promotes it as being "well suited for use in seeding filter fields which collect wastewater from food processing industries, livestock operations, and sewage treatment plants" and says that it is good for "lambling." (USDA para. 2, para. 11). Even though the USDA states that people should check with local authorities before planting canary reed grass, (USDA para. 5) its policy is almost completely counter to the non-profits' policies.

Here, in Massachusetts, the plant is listed as "prohibited", which means that the state agrees with the non-profits' recommendations. This coast of this state has a severe

Much better than
previous draft!

C-

Appendix C: Essay Grading Rubric

A 200 level course
UMass Boston – Reading, Writing, and Study Strategies Center
CIT January 21, 2010

Essay Grading Rubric

Supporting Evidence:

- Unreliable sources
- Fails to properly cite quotations
- Insufficient analysis of quotations
- Quotations are not properly integrated into the essay

Mechanics:

- Misuse of semicolons and colons
- Tense disagreement
- Evidence: Quotations are not complete, copied wrong, punctuation within the quotations, etc
- Illogical sentence structuring
- Subject-verb agreement
- Fails to use possessives properly
- Dangling participles
- Run-on sentences
- Comma slices
- Pronoun errors
- Misplaced modifiers

Content:

- Unfocused thesis
- Did not follow assignment directions
- Too much summary
- Repetition

Organization:

- Fails to produce smooth paragraph transitions
- Lacks topic sentences
- Insufficient introduction
- Insufficient conclusion
- Lacks paragraph unity

Comments:

This paper looks unfinished. Where is your thesis statement? Where is the conclusion?
Don't start paragraphs with quotations. Don't use first person.
You need to re-read the assignment and fix this paper!