

Portrait of the Tutor as an Artist: Lessons No One Can Teach

by Steve Sherwood

A university employee, Nancy, recently brought to me an idea for a nonfiction book about coping with thyroid cancer. In remission and awaiting word on her latest diagnostic scan, Nancy began our tutorial by excitedly reviewing the many and sometimes amusing lessons about life and family she had learned from her ordeal. As she explained, the book gave her a chance to explore her long-dominant writing skills, work on a project worthy of her time, and pass along what she had learned to other cancer victims. Her personal investment in the project was high, and the intensity with which she listened to my every word of encouragement and advice certainly raised the stakes for me. As we discussed where to begin and the book's potential commercial appeal, I felt edgy and alert—a condition heightened by Nancy's sudden jumps from idea to idea. I wanted to offer support but not build false hope, so I tried to balance any assurance that she had good ideas with a realistic assessment. She asked hard questions about working in a mixed genre—in her case, autobiography combined with elements of a “how-to” manual that might eventually become a sort of humorous *Chicken Soup for the Cancer Survivor's Soul*. Some of her questions I simply could not answer, in part because many of her ideas remained half-formed and success would hinge on her persistence and writing ability. But I improvised suggestions based on some experience with creative nonfiction, a slight familiarity with “how-to” books, and secondhand knowledge of cancer-survival stories. Nancy left our ninety-minute brainstorming session with an attitude of eager determination to continue working. As good sessions sometimes do, this one left me feeling used up but exhilarated—an intellectual version of runner's high.

About the Author

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I mention Nancy because our session was far from a routine tutorial—if there is such a thing—and because she prompted me to push myself creatively and intellectually, growing in the process of trying to help her grow. Writing center practitioners, including peer tutors, often experience the elusive, artistic aspects of writing and tutoring while struggling to make sense of the insensible, so we know the difficulty writers have in trying to capture the ideas and images that flash into their minds. In this essay, I want to explore the artistic aspects of tutoring that we can learn but that no one can simply teach us. It's a topic few writing center scholars write about—at least by that name—perhaps because “artistic” sounds ill-defined and expressionistic.¹ But if we accept the claim, made long ago by Isocrates, that learning a complex art such as rhetoric requires talent, training, and experience,² we should also accept that we learn the rhetorical art of tutoring in much the same way. To become artists at the job, we must begin with a certain amount of talent for writing, speaking, and interacting with people. A lot of the learning that goes into our development as writing tutors involves direct training, aimed at helping us handle specific situations and categories of writers, writing assignments, and rules of engagement. But the ultimate teacher, experience, often pushes us into unknown territory in our efforts to understand what a writer is trying to do and to help him or her succeed. As I will argue, a vital part of our education involves experience in reacting to and learning from four elements of artistry: (1) surprise, (2) circumstance, (3) improvisation, and (4) flow. To become artists, in other words, we must learn to cope with and embrace surprise, to spontaneously meet unexpected circumstances, to improvise appropriate and effective help for writers, and to remain open to what researchers call “flow” experiences. Some peer tutors appear, like beat poets, to come to the job equipped with a jazz-like talent for improvising solutions to novel problems, and developing this talent is perhaps the key to the writing tutor's art. Those who have this ability, I would argue, can ultimately achieve a degree of artistry both related to—and dependent on—their artistry as writers.

What Is “Art”?

Before arguing that the work tutors do in the writing center is equivalent to the work of a poet or sculptor, let me take the time to establish what I mean by “art.” Philosopher Larry Shiner, who has examined historical conceptions of “art” and “artistry,” says, “Today you can call virtually anything ‘art’ and get away with it. One reason for the explosion in what counts as art is that the art world itself has taken up the old theme of getting ‘art’ and ‘life’ back together. Gestures of this kind have lurched between the innocent and the outrageous” (3). Perhaps I am guilty of com-

mitting an outrage by applying the term “art” to the writing tutorial, but I hope not. By “art” I mean something akin to the terms *ars* and *techné*, by which the ancient Greeks and Romans referred to such diverse activities as “carpentry and poetry, shoemaking and medicine, sculpture and horse breaking” (19). *Ars* and *techné* described processes leading to works that had practical application, and the ancients made no distinction between fine art and craft or between artist and artisan (5). As Shiner says, there were “only arts, just as there were neither ‘artists’ nor ‘artisans’ but only artisan/artists who gave equal honor to skill and imagination, tradition and invention” (17-18). The distinction between artist and artisan is a recent one, he adds, with the designation of artist usually referring to one to whom the words “inspiration, imagination, freedom, and genius” might apply and that of artisan referring to one to whom the words “skill, rules, imitation, and service” (111) might apply. As these definitions suggest, an artist is a breaker of new ground and a maker of unique works or experiences while a competent artisan follows rules, learns how to perform a particular task repetitively, such as making a wooden bowl, and replicates this performance many times, striving not for uniqueness or originality of expression but for successful imitation of the original product.

The Tutor as Artist vs. Artisan

Applying these terms to the writing center, one can speculate that a tutor who performs as an artisan would take a similar approach to each tutorial, seeing tutoring as a repetitive, rule-bound task she can master through diligence. No doubt all of us act as artisans at some point in the work week, approaching particular tutorials as run-of-the-mill. Some tutorials—for example, a request for help with APA style—might qualify as routine. In fact, much of the training peer tutors undergo prepares them to be artisans—to follow the rules directors set for them (and this training is a necessary part of their development). Consider, for example, the recipes and scripts directors give neophyte tutors to help them survive their early tutorials. One such recipe I use in training divides a tutorial into seven steps: (1) greet the client, (2), discuss the assignment, (3) set a focus for the tutorial, (4) read the paper, (5) evaluate strengths and weaknesses, (6) give suggestions for revision, and (7) end the tutorial gracefully. Such a list, like a standard essay structure in a composition manual, has some value because tutorials will usually include these steps (though not necessarily in this order). But directors expect tutors to develop far beyond the need for such recipes, and those who do not would presumably continue to do the work of artisans.

By contrast, a tutor who performs as an artist would view each tutorial as a potentially unique event, a chance to experience instances of creativity, engage completely in the moment, and effect change in the writer and herself—without ever pretending she could fully master the art. Such a tutor would view any rules laid down during training as flexible rather than binding. Of course, one cannot seriously suggest that rules do not apply to writing center work, so often constrained by the needs and requirements of student writers, professors, the university, the profession, and society itself. A tutor sits at the nexus of conflicting forces involving ethics, practices, and social customs and can never feel quite sure that what she is saying or doing in a given situation is ethically, practically, or socially correct. And yet, in the service of student writers, she must speak and act. Through experience, she will have practiced the art form enough to learn how to navigate safely through these forces and devise a suitable response to a particular rhetorical situation. Postmodern theorist Jean-François Lyotard argues that all writers should work as artists do, “without rules in order to formulate rules of what *will have been done*” (qtd. in Vitanza 163, emphasis in original). As Lyotard suggests, rules apply only in hindsight to a specific writer’s project and may not apply to the next project or to the work of another writer. Each writer invents her own “rules” through experience and cannot teach them to others. An artistic tutor operates in a similar way, helping writers work through projects in order to gain insights into what they have done and are trying to do. Where elements of the artistic merge with workaday realities, where a tutor relies not only on established rules and existing skills but also on the impromptu creation of an appropriate response to each rhetorical situation, tutoring departs from the recipes of the artisan and attains some of the aspects of a fine art.

Cultivating a Taste for Surprise

One might begin building an artistic approach to tutoring by cultivating a taste for surprise, which has intimate connections to invention, wit, and writing. Indeed, one entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *wit* as that “quality of speech or writing which consists in the apt association of thought and expression, calculated to surprise and delight by its unexpectedness.” Humor theorist Arthur Asa Berger argues that surprise is a necessary element of comic invention, saying, “Humorists, like all creative people, live in a world of chance, . . . where random happenings and accidents suggest possibilities to be explored and developed” (171). Sigmund Freud notes the relationship between wit and invention in his discussion of the sudden insights that occur when a person’s mind bypasses logic through what amounts to a

“short-circuit” (182). As Freud explains, a joke is especially pleasurable when it connects ideas that ordinarily are “remote and foreign” (182). V. K. Krishna Menon cites a similar mechanism—“hopping”—by which humor forges surprising, yet creative and potentially useful, ideas by skipping logical steps and leaping to an association less clearly logical. Hopping allows a person to perceive indirect or metaphorical connections among objects, people, or ideas that a logical approach might miss.

In the haphazard wordplay of the writing center tutorial something similar sometimes happens. There is often an element of surprise in our conversations; things happen that no one can entirely predict. Our give-and-take dialogue can sometimes generate unexpected links between ideas (for example, Arnold Schwarzenegger as radical feminist), which can strike tutor and student writer as amusing yet, in a backhanded way, illuminating. These short-circuits or instances of hopping help create a set of circumstances that may never happen again, but out of which fragmented notions combine in unexpected patterns. And some of these patterns may prove both creative and valuable—at least to the student writer. Last semester, for example, I observed a conversation between a peer tutor and student writer that took a surprising turn thanks to what looks like a case of hopping. Assigned to write an essay on invention processes, the writer was—ironically enough—stuck for an idea. During a collaborative brainstorming session with him, and as if thinking aloud, the tutor asked, “Why do so many people come up with great ideas in the shower?”

Without hesitation, the student said, “Steam.”

After a brief silence, the tutor asked, “Steam?” They both laughed, but the student nodded with unshakable confidence and repeated, “Steam.”³

A discussion followed as the tutor pressed him to elaborate on this absurd notion, and together they drew a cause and effect chain leading from steam to heat, from heat to relaxation, from relaxation to revelation, and from revelation to invention. The student’s surprising and illogical leap led to a good paper topic, and I later praised the tutor for being alert and open-minded enough to take pleasure from and run with the student’s idea. Such moments may not occur in every tutoring session, but as Truman Capote reveals in a *Paris Review* interview, surprise is an essential element in his own and other writers’ creative processes. As he says, “In the working-out, infinite surprises happen. Thank God, because the surprise, the twist, the phrase that comes at the right moment out of nowhere, is the unexpected dividend, that joyful little push that keeps a writer going” (Hill 297). The surprises that occur during tutorials can—if embraced—also bring unexpected dividends for

a tutor and student writer, giving them experience with what may become an important element in their artistic processes.

Responding to Contingency and Circumstance

Although saying so may sound paradoxical, surprise is the rule within the contingent, circumstantial setting of the writing tutorial—and in responding to surprise, a tutor must rely to a great extent on her own spontaneity. After all, when she goes to work each day, she has no way to anticipate the sorts of questions she will have to answer or the challenges she will face. Unlike a classroom teacher, a writing tutor cannot rely on lesson plans. And even when she can prepare, thanks to appointments aimed at resolving particular issues, she cannot predict the circuitous paths the conversation will take. Writers may interject, ask unanticipated questions for which the tutor has no definite answer, and express misunderstandings the tutor must attempt to address on the spot. And students are right to put tutors on the spot, to ask questions, to lead the conversation astray, to misunderstand points, and to resist advice, especially when doing so leads them to deeper understanding of their own ideas and writing processes. Students often ask such challenging questions as “If Hemingway can use sentence fragments, why can’t I?” Or they bring us essays that may fail to meet a professor’s assignment but do so in clever and interesting ways, and these essays put tutors in the uncomfortable position of deciding whether to advise the writers to take the safe or the risky road. Writers also tie themselves into stylistic or ethical knots, which they ask tutors to help untie. Last semester, for instance, a young man came to our center asking for help with a journal assignment due the next day. Twenty minutes into the session, the tutor assigned to work with him came to my office and explained her dilemma, one we had never faced before. For the past three months, the young man—a kinesiology student—should have been keeping a journal of his efforts to use diet and exercise to achieve specific personal fitness goals. His problem, which had become ours, was that he had not written a single entry. He wanted the tutor to help him write them now.

“We can’t help him cheat, can we?” she asked.

“No we can’t.”

“And yet he’s so desperate I want to help him somehow.”

“What would you do in his place?” I asked.

She made a bad joke about killing herself, and then said, “I guess, I’d write from memory, changing pens to make it look like I’d done the journal all semester. But that would be cheating too, wouldn’t it? He could go to the professor and beg for

mercy. If he tells the truth, maybe the professor will let him write the journal from memory, for partial credit. And that wouldn't be cheating then."

"Not bad," I said, impressed on a number of levels with her thinking. "The professor may fail him anyway, but it's probably the best we can do."

By wrestling with such moral or practical dilemmas, tutors learn to think on their feet. In the process, they become increasingly sensitive to what the ancient Greeks called *kairos*, a rhetorical principle with several definitions, including "fitness for the occasion" (Bizzell and Herzberg 44), "opportune moment, right time, opportunity" (Poulakos 57), and "the situational forces that induce, constrain and influence discourse" (Enos, *Roman Rhetoric*, 16). Rhetorical situations tend, like tutorials, to unfold in unique, unpredictable ways and defy prefabricated responses. A sense of *kairos* helps one understand the social context surrounding the act of speaking or writing and provides clues about how to proceed. A tutor who has developed a keen sensitivity to *kairos* is more likely than those without this sensitivity to read a situation well enough to determine the most appropriate response to a particular student writer's work. For example, although some students have no trouble accepting frank criticism of their writing and welcome honesty as a key to revision, others may respond to honesty by suffering an emotional meltdown. In dealing with sensitive students, an artful tutor would walk a line somewhere between honesty and diplomacy, delivering just the right dose of candor. As John Poulakos observes, "Springing from one's sense of timing and the will to invent, *kairos* alludes to the realization that speech exists in time and is uttered both as a spontaneous formulation of and a barely constituted response to a new situation unfolding in the immediate present" (61). A person who understands the contingent nature of discourse, Poulakos says, "addresses each occasion in its particularity, its singularity, its uniqueness" (61), making her "both a hunter and a maker of unique opportunities, always ready to address improvisationally and confer meaning on new and emerging situations" (61). In plainer words, she becomes more adept at improvisation, and her process comes to resemble those of the mid-twentieth century beat poets, like Alan Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, who claim to have done their best work in bursts of spontaneous composition. As Rick Moody writes, the beat poets shared "a devotion to spontaneity" (qtd. in Plimpton xi) and considered their first, raw words to be poetry—"the only requirement being that the poetry *was not to be rewritten*. First thought, best thought" (emphasis in original, ix). Writing centers exist because of a widespread belief in the power of revision. And in this way, our ultimate goal could not differ more from that of the beat poets. But by engaging student writers in conversation, and giving them advice, we often rely

on the principle of "first thought, best thought" (ix), drawing on a repertoire of techniques and experience, and using our creativity and our "ear" to improvise a response that sounds right in a given situation.

Improvisation as a Key to Artistry

Improvisation is, as Donald A. Schön has observed, an essential aspect of professional artistry in nearly any field. Facing a problem that goes beyond her experience, a professional improvises a solution in a way similar to the process of jazz musicians, who, by "listening to one another, listening to themselves, ... 'feel' where the music is going and adjust their playing accordingly" (30). Elizabeth H. Boquet makes a similar observation in *Noise from the Writing Center*, where she applies the metaphor of musical improvisation to tutoring. As she says, "The most interesting improvisations work because they are always on the verge of dissonance. They are always just about to fail. They are risky. But when they work well, they are also really, really fun. They leave you wide-eyed" (76). Opportunities for improvisation, and for such wide-eyed moments, occur often in tutorials thanks to the continual need to react to changing circumstances. A tutor's preparation for such work comes primarily from her regular experience with improvisation—a capacity Quintilian calls "the crown of all our study and the highest reward of our long labours" (X. vii. 2-3). However, to provide such experience, several writing center directors use exercises invented by famed improvisational acting groups such as the Groundlings—both in their work with student writers and in tutor training. For instance, in "From Stage to Page: Using Improvisational Acting to Cultivate Confidence in Writers," Adar Cohen recounts how she has used improv exercises to stimulate creativity and bolster confidence in struggling writers. At Boise State University, Michael Mattison uses a number of improvisational exercises he picked up in theatre classes to prepare tutors to react constructively to the unexpected. These exercises include

a free-wheeling, risk-taking, community-building, expectation-dropping, laugh-inducing series of skits that prepare us as a group to role play in mock consultations and then move on to real consultations. It is a first step in the process of educating consultants to trust in themselves and their instincts and to take some risks in their consultation work. (11)

These skits often hinge on "what if" questions that lead to scenarios that could unfold in the writing center, Mattison says, such as "What if a student has plagiarized?" or "What if someone hits on me?" (12). These improvised scenes and other

exercises, he says, “lead to more freedom and creativity in our consulting work and also help us better connect with one another” (13).⁴

A key to effective improvisation is riveting one’s attention on what is occurring in the moment. Patricia Ryan Madson, author of *Improv Wisdom: Don’t Prepare, Just Show Up*, says, “To improvise, it is essential that we use the present moment efficiently. An instant of distraction—searching for a witty line, for example—robs us of our investment in what is actually happening. We need to know everything about the moment” (36). An artistic tutor must also bring to each moment an awareness of and investment in what is actually happening. Consider, for instance, what might occur when a student writer brings to the center a project that, on the surface, looks like a simple, well-defined exercise but—in concept or execution—is actually complex and difficult. Such a situation might occur because a writer is trying to push beyond his or her current ability level or beyond the boundaries of a particular genre. Or it might occur because a teacher has issued an assignment that sounds straightforward but, on reflection, is a complex tangle. And sometimes students come up with quirky ideas that make a certain amount of sense, such as one student’s comparison of J.D. Salinger’s Holden Caulfield to Shakespeare’s Hamlet. A distracted tutor who fails to recognize the hidden complexity and difficulty in a project may attempt to use tutoring or writing strategies that have worked on past projects—only to share in the writer’s puzzlement and frustration when these strategies founder. The tutor may even assume, since her strategies have proven sound in the past, that the fault lies in the student writer or in the assignment rather than in her failure to attend to and embrace the moment.

On the other hand, a tutor who brings to a tutorial the rapt attention of a beat poet or jazz musician, and who views each encounter with a writer as a potentially unique event, increases her chances of detecting and rising to the challenges posed by a deceptively difficult or complex writing project. An existing technique or combination of techniques may work well. But if the tutor’s current repertoire of strategies does not work, she may find herself stretching (or bending) her mind in an effort to understand the problems well enough to help the writer improvise solutions. Madson argues that a heightened awareness helps improvisational actors to surprise themselves with “images, solutions, advice, stories” (36) which may already lurk in their minds or hide in plain view. She urges her readers to surrender to the moment—to “[t]rust your imagination. Trust your mind. Allow yourself to be surprised” (36-37). Those who give in to the moment—or go with the flow—may not only gain a greater sensitivity to *kairos* and become more adept at improvisation but also reap other benefits.

Going with the Flow (Experience)

After all, investing all of one’s attention and abilities into a complex task, such as assisting someone with a piece of writing, can lead to what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls an “optimal” or “flow” experience. As Csikszentmihalyi says, “When all a person’s relevant skills are needed to cope with the challenge of a situation, that person’s attention is completely absorbed by the activity” (53). In such moments, people become so absorbed in what they are doing “that the activity becomes spontaneous, almost automatic; they stop being aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing” (53). All the aspects of the task, complex as they are, appear to form a harmonious whole (41). As those who experience flow step outside of themselves and their ordinary concerns to focus on the task, their perception of time warps, either speeding up or slowing down (49). As Csikszentmihalyi says, “The combination of these elements causes a sense of deep enjoyment that is so rewarding people feel that expending a great deal of energy is worthwhile simply to be able to feel it” (49). Flow is, he suggests, why people find enjoyment in work that others find routine and even boring.

Both Richard Leahy and Lynn Briggs have applied the concept of “flow” to the writing center. Leahy looks at flow primarily from the writer’s perspective, seeking ways to help student writers recognize and take advantage of their “flow experiences” (155). Briggs applies “flow” directly to the tutorial, seeing a tutor’s total absorption in a person or text as akin to meditation—and potentially transformative for both the tutor and writer. As she says, Viktor Frankl’s three ways of gaining meaning in life—doing good work, connecting with others, and undergoing personal change—“often intersect in the writing center—writers bring work they have created into a setting where they plan to encounter someone and change themselves (even if the change is only to be a better writer). The writing center is a site where people can use the text they have created to make transformative connections” (88). In her own case, Briggs’s close work with a particular writer led to revelations about her practice, feelings of invigoration, and personal growth as a tutor. And I believe my session with Nancy, the cancer survivor, also qualifies as a flow experience. Our conversation became a dance of intellects, a push and pull of wits. Both of us were intensely involved in this act of communication, I trying to understand her ideas well enough to help her analyze, develop, and organize them, and she trying to make clear both what she hoped to do and how much the writing of her “how to” book would mean to her personally. The time passed quickly, and when the session ended, instead of falling back wearily into my chair, I felt refreshed and elated.

The stretching, striving, improvising, and growing I do during tutorials first attracted me to the job and provide a good reason to continue doing it. As far as I'm concerned, the lessons I learn as a writer and tutor from such "flow" experiences are an intended product of tutoring—of lesser importance than the learning of student writers, perhaps, but still important because they keep me vital, engaged, and eager for the next session. As tutors help people achieve their potential as thinkers and writers, after all, the tutors become more adept at these arts themselves. Of course, not every writing center encounter is satisfying or results in a flow experience. Some tutorials are frustrating events—often because either the writer or tutor is unwilling for whatever reason to fully engage in the work. Wayne Booth's observation about the complexities, difficulties, and frustrations of teaching applies to tutoring as well. As Booth says,

Teaching is impossible to master, inexhaustibly varied, unpredictable from hour to hour, from minute to minute within the hour: tears when you don't expect them, laughter when you might predict tears; cooperation and resistance in baffling mixtures; disconcerting depths of ignorance and sudden unexpected revelations of knowledge or wisdom.

And the results are almost always ambiguous. (219)

The fact that Wayne Booth found teaching impossible to master should give the rest of us—even those who have tutored for decades—a sense of the challenges we and our peer tutors face in attempting to master our own rhetorical art form. Writers learn by experimenting, failing, and trying again. And by working alongside student writers in this process, tutors not only learn lessons about writing but also about how to help writers improvise solutions to the often surprising and ambiguous problems they face. This shared adventure onto unfamiliar ground can test a tutor's intellect and abilities, and sometimes he or she will on some level fail. For example, a peer tutor in the writing center I direct recently experimented with humor during a session involving a paper about Flannery O'Connor's use of biblical symbolism. Noting that the student had cited a biblical passage without making a transition back into the paper, the tutor said, "Try to introduce and summarize quotations. As you can see, this one sticks out like a big biblical zit." The writer took offense and complained to her teacher, who complained to me. I suggested that, in the future, this tutor read the students with whom he works a little more carefully to gauge their tolerance for humor, but at the same time I felt a grudging sense of pride. He's a good writer, his advice is nearly always sound, and he cares about his work. What I like about the incident is his attempt to lift a tutorial out of the mundane. This tutor is in the process of becoming, in John Poulakos's words,

"both a hunter and a maker of unique opportunities...[,] ready to confer meaning on new and emerging situations" (61). His joke qualifies as a surprising, spontaneous act of improvisation, and during the tutorial he obviously engaged fully in the moment. Though his sensitivity to *kairos* could use some tweaking, and his joke did not result in a flow experience, he has many of the qualities—including an ability to learn from failure—that he will need to make a run at becoming an artist.

Portrait of a Budding Artist

That such a tutor can evolve from artisan to artist became clear to me recently after I witnessed such a transformation. Three years ago, I hired Ben Graber—an honors student—based on a very good writing sample and the recommendation of a trusted faculty member. A tall, stocky, introverted young man who always carried a book, Graber struck me initially as only a fair candidate for the job because of his personality. He seldom spoke without prompting and seemed withdrawn, reluctant to meet my eyes when we talked. But he did good work during his first semester—in spite of the untimely death of a close family member. At the start of his second year at the center, when I began to train a new group of tutors, Graber spoke to the group about his experiences in the center with a level of sensitivity and self-assurance that surprised me. And I soon began getting feedback about his work from students who appreciated not only his gentle manner but also his insights into their needs and abilities as writers. He became someone whose intuition I trusted—to the extent that I sometimes let this undergraduate religion major assist graduate students in English, history, and divinity with their writing.

In fact, Graber's responses to writing assignments for our center's tutor training course impressed me enough that I invited him to compose an essay about his experiences as a tutor and present it to a regional writing center conference. In this unpublished essay, which he delivered in April 2006 to a conference of the North Texas Writing Centers Association, he reflects on several tutorials that taught him lessons about his work. During a session with a neuroscience major struggling to make sense of social issues raised in literary works, for example, he realized the problem lay in the young man's inability to go beyond scientific reasoning to discover relations among seemingly unrelated ideas. What the student needed, Graber believed, was to adopt an artistic vision, a way to look "*between the data*" he had gathered in order to forge connections and meaning. As Graber writes, "It's a matter of aesthetics: can you see these data, and then look between them and see why they fit together in the way they do? Can you find something beautiful in the way the two authors argue their opposing cases, or how another two came to the same conclu-

sion from such radically different angles? How do you teach that?" As I later told him, experienced writing center professionals often ask such questions.

Although he offers no definite answers, Graber raises similar, and even more insightful, issues about other tutorials, including one involving a student who disclosed in an autobiographical essay for a composition class that, at eleven years of age, she had been the victim of a rape. This disclosure at first stopped Graber cold. As he writes,

What was I doing reading about this? What business did her professor have knowing this, for that matter? How many people knew this about this girl? But here I was, and she'd brought her paper to me, and now I was within this privileged circle of those to whom she could share this kind of experience, because I was supposed to be helping her to make it read better, to make it seem more real to those who were presumably to try and attach a grade to this revelation [...]

The tutorial raised a number of moral and practical dilemmas. It challenged Graber to respond sensitively to a situation he had never before encountered. It made him wonder about the nature of his role as a tutor. It frightened him—on several levels. And it called into doubt what he thought he knew about his job. As he asks, "Who was I to tell her to think of [the rape] as being *like* something, or as connected to something in a way that is as beautiful and powerful as the original experience was tragic and frightening and cruel and hideous? But that was the only thing I knew how to do." Afterward, he gave this difficult session a lot of thought and realized, among other insights, that tutoring "would not be a safe job; we're in the business of helping people to put their lives on display, or at least to publish their lives for a select audience, and it's something very serious."

In response to the risky and consequential moments he faced on the job, Graber synthesized a tutoring philosophy based in part on his own "commitment to see teaching as the art of conveying the ability to think artistically." As he explains, when meeting challenges with which he cannot cope by using standard techniques,

I can only hope to be a sort of Zen master, urging the novices to focus, to stare into themselves until inspiration strikes and enlightenment is achieved. There are only so many facts to be learned in writing; once you learn them, you have all the tools of a sculptor but can just as easily end up with a pile of rubble as a recognizable statue when you try to use them.

While presenting this part of his essay Graber paused to glance up at the professionals in the audience and add, "You all probably know this better than I."

Do we? I wondered at the time. Many writing center professionals would hesitate to describe tutoring as a fine art or themselves and their peer tutors as artists. But those who remain aware that tutoring "is impossible to master" (Booth 219) and yet willingly confront, learn from, and exploit the ambiguous moments when ideas unexpectedly unify or fragment do think and act like artists. By embracing surprise, refining their sensitivity to *kairos*, developing a capacity for improvisation, and cultivating a taste for "flow" experiences, they have achieved a high level of *ars* or *techné* and, in the process, gained valuable insights into writing, rhetoric, and human nature. Can these professionals pass their insights along to peer tutors? I'm not entirely sure they can—at least directly. Formal training plays a key role in the development of any artist. Like all of the peer tutors who work in our center, Graber took a noncredit course, read about writing center theory and practice, wrote about his experiences, engaged in mock tutorials, and participated in discussions. Yet he (and several others) moved beyond his formal training and beyond the status of artisan. Graber may have come to the job with a greater potential than most to develop into an artist—thanks, as Isocrates suggests, to talent and an ability to learn from experience. Each tutor possesses a different mix of aptitudes, and no writing center director can anticipate all the quandaries a tutor will face in the writing center, so I doubt we can devise a training program to mass produce artistic tutors. But we can caution them against complacency and help them see ambiguous, frustrating, frightening, or difficult tutorials as chances to explore, improvise, reflect, and grow. And by incorporating practice tutorials and improvisational exercises into training, we can give tutors some preliminary (and safe) experience with unusual and challenging situations. Such stage-managed experiences may, in a limited way, help to prepare them for the real thing—and provide a foundation on which to build their own techniques and philosophies of tutoring. After that, maybe the best we can do for the ones who show artistic promise is to step back and let them make their own discoveries.

NOTES

¹ Several scholars write about similar concepts, placing them in the context of Zen philosophy. For example, see Gamache and Murray.

² In *Against the Sophists*, Isocrates said, "Ability, whether in speech or in any other activity, is found in those who are well endowed by nature and have been schooled by practical experience. Formal training makes such [persons] more skillful and more resourceful in dis-

covering the possibilities of a subject..." (14-15).

³ The anecdotes and examples in this article are personal observations drawn from day to day work in the writing center, not part of a formal, sustained research project.

⁴ As sources for improvisational exercises potentially useful in tutoring or tutor training, Mattison, Cohen, and others recommend Keith Johnstone's *Improv*, Milton Polsky's *Let's*

Improvise, Viola Spolin's *Improvisation for the Theatre*, and Patricia Ryan Madson's *Improv Wisdom: Don't Prepare, Just Show Up*.

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