

Writing center internship paper



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Connective Thinking, Mimetic Thinking, and Minimalist Tutoring Pedagogy

For the past two years, I have worked as a tutor at the Rutgers Writing Center as a “ minimalist tutor. ” Anthony Lioi, author of “ Small Victories: The Practice and Process of Tutoring, ” defines minimalist tutoring as “ a method that requires students to solve their own problems under the supervision of a tutor who acts as a coach, a more experienced peer, rather than an editor” (Lioi, 1). At Rutgers, minimalist tutoring works in conjunction with The New Humanities Reader, which was put together by Kurt Spellmeyer and Richard E. Miller and has as its goal the promotion of “ connective” as opposed to “ mimetic” thinking. Lioi offers the clearest distinction between connective and mimetic thinking when he says, “‘mimetic thinking,’ [is] designed to demonstrate mastery of a pre-established realm of knowledge, and ‘ connective thinking,’... links disparate realms of learning in new and unexpected patterns to solve problems unanticipated by traditional forms of knowledge” (Lioi 1). To this end, minimalist tutors are trained in a “ hands off” method that emphasizes the importance of giving students exploratory writing exercises to do on their own during the tutoring session and discourages the practice of “ correcting” students’ papers to “ create a ‘ perfect’ paper” (2). In my time at the Writing Center, I worked with many students and had much success with the minimalist tutoring methods. However, sometimes with some students, I did not seem to be very effective. I was never sure why the tutoring did not seem to be helping these students, and I couldn’t tell what, if anything, they had in common with each other that would make minimalist tutoring less effective. I was often tempted to break the “ rules” of minimalist tutoring and to apply a more hands-on approach, but I was afraid I would be even less useful to them if I did. Finally,

I was faced with a student who simply was not getting anywhere with the tutoring, even though I could tell he was working hard. I decided to break the rules and give him the help I thought he needed. In the process, I figured out that minimalist tutoring fails many students for the exact reason that it is effective with so many others. The emphasis of connective thinking over mimetic thinking in the Rutgers Writing Program, and the way that emphasis is translated into minimalist tutoring practices, ignores the specific needs of students who come to Rutgers without a strong background in expository writing. The student in question, Dave, came into the Center struggling with, among other things, figuring out how much information is appropriate in an introductory paragraph. This problem was contextual but it was also structural: he very literally did not know how much information to present about each article in the first paragraph. He fluctuated between two sentence paragraphs in which he only partially introduced some of the authors he was using to page-and-a-half accounts of every subject in each article under discussion. For instance, the second half of his rough draft for his last paper reads: ...Faludi describes the Citadel which is a private military college. She writes about the fourth-class system in which the cadets are ranked from freshman to seniors with freshman being the bottom of the food chain. With this, she discusses the freshman hazing that takes place, and the bond between the cadets. She also writes about how women do not play a large part in cadet's lives, but the cadets fill their place. This leads to why the men to not want women to join. It also shows a woman's point-of-view when she is accepted and then rejected when it is found out that she is female. Faludi ends by writing about the cadets dating cross dressers from a local bar" (student paper 2, 3). Clearly, this introduction of Faludi is entirely

limited to summary, and includes mention of topics Dave did not intend to analyze in the rest of the paper. His thesis statement, which appears at the end of the second paragraph, reflects this lack of focus. He writes, “

Changing a cultural tradition is possible, but a decision must be made to determine the extent of how money and possibly military action will be used and if it is really that necessary” (3). Again, Dave’s lack of focus is evident in his inclusion of “ money and possibly military action, ” which is a concept he does not touch on elsewhere in the paper. It is also difficult to tell whether this is Dave’s argument or the argument of one or both of his authors.

Finally, it is a weak argument in the sense that he says, “ a decision must be made” (note the passive voice), but he does not actually make a decision himself. I decided to attack Dave’s structural problems and ignore, for the moment, his conceptual problems. With this in mind, I took a separate piece of paper and made an “ introductory paragraph outline. ” This was not unlike Barclay’s, but it was specifically tailored to an introductory paragraph: I. In one sentence, introduce the first author and article title. a. Write one or two sentences on what the article is about. b. In one sentence, give the author’s argument. II. In one sentence, introduce the second author and article title. a. Write one or two sentences on what the article is about. b. In one sentence, give the author’s argument. III. Write one sentence saying how you are going to connect the two. IV. State your argument. I did this with the assumption (or, more accurately, hope) that Dave would, upon seeing his own words in the right order, understand the function of that particular order and would then be in a position to reject the strict outline I had given him while still retaining the understanding of the appropriate scope of an introductory paragraph. At our next and last session, the introductory

paragraph to Dave's "final" draft of his final paper read: Martha Nussbaum discusses equal rights for women and her ideas of universalism and essentialism (Nussbaum 459) in her essay "Women and Cultural Universals."

She also makes a list of rights that all people should have, called the Central Human Functional Capabilities (Nussbaum 462). With the list, she also makes a call for equal rights for women. Susan Faludi writes about the Citadel, and all boys military college run under the fourth class system, in *The Naked Citadel*. A female was accepted and then rejected because of her sex. Faludi supports the decision not to allow women in the Citadel.

Nussbaum and Faludi show us why it is necessary to change tradition in some cases, and why it should be left alone in other cases. In either case tradition definitely has a strong purpose and a right to exist. (student paper, 2) This introduction, while not perfect, is a vast improvement over that of Dave's first draft. Although he still summarizes more than analyzes the articles he is using, his thesis statement here is more direct and more analytical than that of his previous paper. For instance, in his previous paper, it was unclear whether his thesis reflected his own argument or those of his authors. Here, on the other hand, he has made a distinction between the arguments of his authors ("Nussbaum and Faludi show us why...") and his own ("In either case, tradition definitely has... a right to exist."). His thesis statement is a simple, declarative sentence with none of the passivity or lack of focus of his previous paper. He has also had the confidence to allow himself to disagree in part with his authors. For instance, they say "it is necessary to change tradition in some cases" and he says tradition always has "a right to exist." Granted, there is still room for him to learn more about how to "engage actively with the text" to formulate a more

complicated thesis, but there is no argument that he has set the stage for such work by nailing down the difference between his authors' arguments and his own and by allowing himself to see that the two might be very different. I knew that my "intervention" had been effective, but I didn't know why minimalist tutoring had failed to help Dave or why the outline I had given him had helped him so much. In short, I needed to know exactly how my actions had violated minimalist tutoring in order to know which part of the minimalist philosophy didn't work for Dave. General definitions of minimalist tutoring proved to be too open to interpretation to be useful in answering this question, however. For instance, to repeat Anthony Lioi's definition, minimalist tutoring is a "method that requires students to solve their own problems under the supervision of a tutor who acts as a coach, a more experienced peer, rather than an editor." On the one hand, I did not require Dave to solve his own problem of the structure of his introductory paragraph. On the other hand, I did require him to do the work of filling in the outline, not a small task considering that in order to do it he needed to figure out what it meant to "connect the two authors" and "state your own argument." Similarly, I did not act as a "more experienced peer" when I authoritatively told him that his paragraph "should" look like "my" outline (Though if you read his paragraph carefully, you will see that he did not actually follow my outline to the letter. Whether that was because he couldn't or because he was acting autonomously and decided not to I do not know). However, in the sense that I mapped out a play and left Dave to execute it, I did act as a coach, albeit perhaps in a more literal sense than Lioi intended. Clearly, though, I did not act as an editor. I did not tell Dave which of his sentences to use and I did not rearrange his paragraph myself.

In that sense, while my actions may be borderline, they did not blatantly contradict the spirit of minimalist tutoring as defined by Anthony Lioi. Therefore, I knew my contention with minimalist tutoring was not with the pedagogy as a whole, but I still had not found the specific part that did not work for Dave. The Cook/Douglass Writing Center Tutoring Manual opens with, “ The goal of the writing center is to help students become independent readers and writers.... This means we ask students to do the work of interpreting, generating, writing, and revising, rather than telling them...what or how to write” (C/D Tutoring Manual, 2.). Like Lioi’s definition of minimalist tutoring, this passage is somewhat open to interpretation. Certainly my goal in giving Dave the outline was to help him become “ independent. ” However, I based this on the assumption that using the outline would help Dave understand the function of an introductory paragraph, and that once he understood that, he would no longer need to adhere to it. If that assumption is incorrect, then I did violate minimalist tutoring by providing Dave with a piece of paper with which he could become dependent. I didn’t, however, make him feel dependent on me specifically, so, the outline was not a total rejection of minimalist principles. As with Lioi’s definition, whether or not I was in violation of this goal of minimalist tutoring depends on what it means to tell a student “ what or how to write. ” I did not tell Dave exactly “ what to write, ” but I did tell him how to structure his paper, which may be tantamount to telling him “ how to write, ” and this is getting to the heart of the problem. Some of the rules laid out in the Tutoring Manual are much more specific than the more general statement above, and here is where my action and, therefore, theory, is in direct contention with the practices I am supposed to employ as a minimalist tutor. Among other

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things, my giving Dave the outline went against the rule that, “ The work you do with students on [structural] issues should be...tied to the content of their paper, so that you ask them to “ be more organized" by making connections between the different ideas of the paper..." (4). No interpretation of this passage could make the “ introductory paragraph outline" seem directly “ tied to the content" of Dave’s paper. I was never unconcerned with the content of Dave’s paper, and I did anticipate that the content would improve with his use of the outline, but I was actually more concerned with structure than with content. I felt that Dave’s structural problems were preventing him from concentrating on his conceptual problems. This is where I my views fundamentally differ from the principles of minimalist tutoring. According to the Tutoring Manual: Conceptual work precedes formal work in the writing process; therefore, conceptual work should precede formal work in the tutoring session. Many writing problems that appear to be formal or structural...are in fact the manifestation of conceptual confusion or underdeveloped ideas.... Particularly in early drafts, focusing on structure, organization, or grammar merely fixes the paper. (3) For a writer who understands the basic structure of an expository paper, this statement is not only true, but also one of the most important strengths of the minimalist tutoring pedagogy. For such a writer, fiddling around with the exact order of sentences in a paragraph or tinkering with the perfect word in a thesis statement is counterproductive and, as the manual says, often a sign that the writer is conceptually uncertain. Minimalist tutoring, with its dual emphasis on content and independence, can help these students gain the confidence that is needed for them to concentrate their efforts on less familiar conceptual thinking. However, for students like Dave who don’t

understand the basic structure of an expository paper, forcing them to concentrate on content first effectively drops them into the ocean without first teaching them to swim. The reason minimalist tutoring emphasizes content over structure, and the reason this emphasis makes it ineffective for students who don't know the basic rules of structure, goes back to the attempt of minimalist tutoring to foster connective thinking rather than mimetic thinking. In *The New Humanities Reader*, Miller and Spellmeyer say that in mimetic thinking, "the student learns to reproduce information [that was] already collected and organized by someone else" (Miller, Spellmeyer, 17). Mimetic thinking limits students by "requiring them to recapitulate and author's own arguments" whereas connective thinking allows for "an informed and original position" (18). Minimalist tutoring is based on this favoring of connective over mimetic thinking and, as a result, is quite effective in getting students to think "independently" and to create and "original position." This focus on connective thinking is also the reason for the de-emphasis on a paper's structure. Structure is mimetic. The authors of the articles in *The New Humanities Reader* may have the luxury of treating structure connectively and taking their "knowledge" of structure "somewhere new" (18), but undergraduate students in *Expos 101* have to "write-to-tell" (18). That is, they have to engage in the mimetic exercise of structuring their paper in such a way as "demonstrat[es] mastery over an existing body of information." In this case, the "existing body of information" is the correct, traditional way of structuring an expository paper. Students must also, simultaneously, engage in connective thinking on the level of content. Minimalist tutoring is perfect for helping a student think connectively because minimalist tutors force students to do the work

themselves and encourage them to explore different ideas and to express their own opinions. However, strict minimalist tutoring will always fail at teaching structure because mimetic knowledge requires that a student know the “ information already collected and organized by someone else” before they can “ reproduce” it. Minimalist tutoring, by definition, does not provide students with such information. Minimalist tutoring does not fail to acknowledge that a paper needs both structure and content, but it does fail to acknowledge that those are two different skills requiring two different training methods. Ideally, students learn at least the basics of structure in high school, but many students do not. Such students are not likely to get more than a cursory explanation in their writing classes because teachers assume that they have at least been superficially introduced to such rules. However, clearly, many of them have not. Because minimalist tutoring does not acknowledge that structure is a mimetic skill, it attempts to teach structure using the same methods as for content. The methods for teaching structure do not have to be drastically different from those used to teach content. After initially giving Dave the “ outline, ” I left him to his own devices to learn how to use it. The mimetic “ formula” I gave Dave did not tell him how to write a thesis statement, only where it should go. The work of putting it all together was still on his shoulders, but the outline gave him a badly needed place to start. Furthermore, the content of his final paper showed enormous improvement over his rough draft. In his final paper, he writes, “ Most people would not want to go through what cadets do at the Citadel, but that does not mean that there is something wrong with that system (Dave, 5). This may not be quite the level of connective work that Miller and Spellmeyer envisioned when they set out to compile *The New*

Humanities Reader, but it is a clear, declarative, analytic statement that shows that Dave finally learned to conceptualize and express his own argument in addition to the author's. This work he did do on his own, so whether or not my outline actually helped him to do so, it certainly neither did the work for him nor prevented him from doing it himself. Miller and Spellmeyer focus on teaching students to think, and minimalist tutoring is designed to do just that. However, both make the assumption that students already know something about how to write, and many of them don't. Before a student can participate in conceptual connective thinking in a paper, he or she must have the mimetic information required to structure that paper correctly. I am not suggesting an overhaul of the minimalist tutoring system, especially as it has helped so many students do the difficult work of connective thinking, but I do think the distinction should be made between the mimetic information needed for structure and the connective work of content. For students who do not know structural rules at all, no amount of understanding their content will teach it to them. Many tutors, sensing this problem, already break or bend minimalist rules to accommodate for this problem, but by making the distinction explicit to tutors, the Writing Center would ensure that tutors knew why they were bending the rules and when it is appropriate to do so.