



Situation Definition and the Online Synchronous Writing Conference

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Abstract

Since the mid 1990's, more and more college and university writing centers have been offering online synchronous writing conferences to students. Writing center researchers have published extensively on how tutors can promote collaboration in online conferences, but comparatively few have used Lev Vygotsky's conception of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) to analyze activity in these conferences or to develop specific methods for working with students in these environments. Using more recent developments in the theory of the ZPD, such as the concept of situation definition, I will discuss how tutors can apply strategies related to the ZPD to promote student learning. By focusing on students' definitions of rhetorical concepts that often implicitly guide students' writing processes, tutors can help students improve how they approach their writing tasks. Progress through the ZPD, then, is more related to how students grow their own understanding, rather than on the correcting of students' texts. I will illustrate this theoretical discussion by presenting examples of two online synchronous writing conferences, and I will describe the implications and possible shortcomings of a method of tutoring that applies the concept of situation definition and the ZPD.

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1. Introduction

At about eight o'clock on a Sunday evening, I was waiting at my computer when the Meebo window blinked with a new instant message: "Hi I'm new to this online help, but I was wondering if someone could help me proof read my paper." I was excited. A new student to work with! I quickly typed my reply, lest she think I was away from my computer: "Okay, I can probably help you proofread the first few pages, and see if you can take it from there. How does that sound?" The reply quickly appeared, "Well I think my conclusion needs the most help." In the physical writing center, I could have observed her attitude and seen the draft and other materials she brought to the appointment. But online, I only had her words, which seemed desperate and earnest. We messaged back and forth to find out what the best use of our time would be. In tutoring students online, I have learned that it is essential to have good strategies for working in the text-only environment of our online tutoring service.

Writing center scholars have been researching and developing theories of online synchronous writing instruction since the early 1990's when a few programs began trying this kind of tutoring through simple chat interfaces or multi-user object-oriented domains (MOOs). Online synchronous conferences could be marked by "tortured slowness" as tutors and students struggled to communicate by typing responses into chat windows (Harris & Pemberton, 1995, p. 532). Benefits, they claimed, were that students and tutors had access to the entire transcript of the conversation as well as increased contact with each other in a virtual MOO. In the mid 1990's, some writing center professionals were enamored with online synchronous formats, but struggled with the reality that students were not familiar with

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working in online environments (Jordan-Henley & Maid, 1995). This early writing center discourse continued to proliferate and focused primarily on how tutors could promote collaboration with students in online asynchronous environments (through e-mail tutoring) (Anderson, 2002; Coogan, 1998, 1999; Jackson, 2000; Monroe, 1998) and in online synchronous environments (Hewett & Ehmann, 2004; Hobson, 1998; Inman & Sewell, 2000). Recent scholars have also explored how writing centers may help students working in multiple modes of communication (Sheridan & Inman, 2010).

One theory that educators have drawn upon to frame the instructional environment is Vygotskian theory, specifically the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Composition scholars have recognized the strong connection between online tutoring and elements of Vygotskian theory (Hewett & Ehmann, 2004). However, few researchers have explicitly examined Lev Vygotsky's concept of the ZPD and how it may provide strategies for tutoring in an online synchronous environment (Vygotsky 1935/1978). According to Vygotsky (1935/1978), the ZPD "is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). The ZPD, which is a powerful theory for the analysis of one-to-one learning activities, is particularly helpful for developing a method of tutoring students in online synchronous conferences because of its emphasis on how interlocutors construct the ZPD through semiotic mediation. Written speech is often the only medium available to online writing tutors, so the function of language is especially important to online tutoring. Scholars in educational psychology have expanded Vygotsky's concept of the ZPD by developing theories about how interlocutors conceive of activity in the ZPD and how these conceptions are essential to learning activities in the ZPD (Wertsch, 1984, 1985). In this article, I will discuss these developments in the theory of the ZPD, argue for their applicability to online synchronous writing conferences, and present examples from my own tutoring that illustrate the use of the theory.

The ZPD complements the ideas of writing center theorists who have stressed how tutoring in a writing center is focused on helping students develop a better writing process—and not just a better writing product—through interaction with a tutor (Harris, 1986; North, 1984a). The ZPD is essential for focusing on students' writing processes that are in the process of developing—skills that students may not, at present, be able to apply in a learning activity (Clark & Healy, 1996). Stephen North (1984b) argued that writing tutors support the development of student writers by focusing on students' writing processes during the tutorial: "the object of this interaction is to intervene in and ultimately alter the composing process of the writer" (p. 28).

2. Writing centers and online synchronous conferencing

As students and writing center tutors have increasingly acclimated to online synchronous conferencing, researchers have emphasized how this method promotes interactivity between students and tutors (Yergeau, Wozniak, & Vandenberg, 2008). Online synchronous tutoring enabled tutors to reach students who could not come to a writing center, such as students in rural areas (Thurber, 2000). This method of tutoring, more than online asynchronous tutoring, complements the model of the Burkean parlor¹ in which tutor and student could collaborate and engage in dialogue, rather than an instructional situation in which the tutor dictates corrections that a student passively integrates into his or her writing (Kastman Breuch, 2005). Online synchronous tutoring can enable students to engage in reflection on their own writing processes in order to develop as writers (English, 2000). Tutors in face-to-face (f2f) consultations were more likely to dominate the interaction, but students in online conversations collaborated more often in conversations that did not exhibit the interactional dominance of f2f writing conferences (Jones, Garralda, Li, & Lock, 2006). Also, students in the online consultations were more likely to discuss global concerns rather than grammar. Students were less intimidated in online synchronous tutoring and were able to better focus on the writing task at hand (Shewmake & Lambert, 2000).

More recently, researchers have examined the benefits of online synchronous tutoring that includes communication modes other than text, such as modes that use video or audio to enhance a tutorial. For example, audio-video-textual conferencing (AVT) enables tutors and students to communicate effectively in ways other than through sending

¹ See Kenneth Burke's *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (pp. 110–111). In his description of the "parlor" metaphor, Burke describes an "unending conversation" about an idea in which people arrive at a discussion that has been in progress, make a contribution to keep the discussion moving forward, and leave while the discussion continues.

messages in a textual interface. AVT can enable students and tutors to communicate online in a way that approximates a f2f tutorial (Yergeau, Wozniak, & Vandenberg, 2008). Although these authors (among others) have carefully examined online tutoring that harnesses the power of multiple communication modes, I am focusing on text-based, online synchronous tutoring because my data is limited to this kind of tutoring. Also, the focus on communication through text makes this mode particularly appropriate for methods that are grounded in the theory of the ZPD.

The medium of online synchronous tutoring has many affordances that make it an effective mode for conducting student-centered tutorials that are focused on helping the writer develop his or her writing process. Sending a message to a tutor online can be much simpler than making an appointment and visiting the writing center. Also, the chat interface (which is often not conducive to sending attachments back and forth) is well suited to consultations in which the student presents a thesis or a two- or three-paragraph section to discuss. In f2f tutorials, students all too often slide the paper (and pencil!) across the table to the tutor, but in online synchronous tutorials, tutors can emphasize discussion in which students take responsibility for developing a plan for revision. After all, if a tutor spends a great deal of time reading a paper, the student on the other side may become detached and disengaged from the conversation.

Researchers have also noted several drawbacks to online synchronous tutoring. Beth Hewett (2006), in a report of an analysis of how a student and professional tutor interacted in a conference facilitated by an online whiteboard, claimed that although the synchronous format allowed for dialogue, a good portion of the conversation was devoted to learning how to use the online tools. She suggested that ample training was needed to help parties use the tools successfully. Tutors could become impatient with asking open-ended questions to students because the slow speed of typing would make meaningful interactions time-consuming (Bell, 2006). Tutors who worked in this format were frustrated because they worked in a much more “evaluative mode” (Thomas, DeVoss, & Hara, 1998, p. 76).

Although many researchers have discussed the benefits and possible pitfalls of tutoring students in online synchronous formats, only a handful of researchers have made explicit connections between online synchronous tutoring and principles of Vygotskian theory. Hewett and Christa Ehmann (2004) claimed that online tutors may apply a variety of theories and should be familiar with strategies that are grounded in current-traditional, expressivist, neoclassical, and social constructivism. Hewett and Ehmann stated that their categories may oversimplify these ideas, but they provide descriptions to guide tutors. Tutors who value correctness of the final product over process apply a current-traditional approach, and the expressivist approach emphasizes tutoring as a way to help the student discover an internal truth through exploratory writing. Social constructivism corresponds to online synchronous tutoring in the sense that it stresses collaboration and construction of meaning through mediated activity. Collaborative activity in composition classes has the benefit of helping students practice strategies with others that they may internalize and use when they are working alone. For example, peer response activities can function to help students develop “internal editors” for analyzing their own writing (Hewett & Ehmann, p. 35).

Principles of Vygotskian theory are important for understanding how a tutor may use language in the online synchronous writing conference to promote student engagement and learning. Tutors can focus on helping writers by eliciting definitions of writing tasks and rhetorical concepts that (often implicitly) mediate students’ writing processes. These concepts function at the level of thought during the writing process and have important significance for understanding students’ writing processes. According to Vygotsky (1934/1986), “In inner speech, one word stands for a number of thoughts and feelings, and sometimes substitutes for a long and profound discourse” (p. 248). Inner speech can also be “disconnected and incomplete” (Vygotsky, p. 235). But the special format of online synchronous tutoring highlights the role that writing can play in the student-tutor interaction. Vygotsky argued that the pace of written speech is better for deliberation and reflection: “The speed of oral speech is unfavorable to a complicated process of formulation—it does not leave time for deliberation and choice” (p. 242). Thus, the format of online synchronous tutoring, which often depends on communication through writing, offers special advantages for tutors in helping students to reflect and develop ideas during the online tutorial.

Vygotsky’s concept of the ZPD, and recent developments in that theory, have great potential for illuminating and improving tutoring in text-only, online synchronous environments. Tutors can harness written speech as a learning tool as they work in the ZPD with students. As students type their definitions into the online interface, they transform the raw ideas of inner speech into language (external speech) for the tutor (Vygotsky 1934/1986). Through mediating the tutor’s understanding, students enhance their own understanding of the necessity to use external speech to more specifically define a concept (Karpov & Haywood, 1998). This process of using language to communicate and to refine one’s own understanding of a concept, also known as semiotic mediation, enables the student to analyze a concept that has been implicitly guiding the writing process. The online synchronous format is perhaps a better medium for

using writing as a reflective and learning tool since all communication must happen in writing, and the lack of a shared personal context requires students to make their ideas as explicit as possible. Through guided questioning and additional writing activities, tutors can help students examine and, in some cases, re-define certain concepts in order to help students improve their writing processes.

I intend to draw upon Vygotskian principles of learning theory, more recent developments in his original conception of the ZPD, and composition theory to establish a sound strategy for working with students in online synchronous environments. I will also provide examples from my own tutoring that I will analyze using a method for discourse analysis that was outlined by James Gee (2005).

3. The zone of proximal development and situation definition

I will now turn to an earlier time period to review relevant literature regarding the ZPD and discuss how it is vital to writing center pedagogy and online synchronous writing conferences. Vygotsky's conception of the ZPD is a key concept for understanding the social features of learning and development. It has, since the 1960's, been a popular model for the instructional process because of its explanation of what kinds of educational environments promote learning. According to the theory of the ZPD, there are three "zones" that are created during activity: one includes the activities that the student may complete in solitary activity, the second is the zone in which the students may carry out an activity successfully in collaboration with a tutor or more capable peer (the ZPD), and the third is the zone with problems that the student cannot solve even with the guidance of others. It is important to note, however, that the ZPD is created in joint activity—students do not have zones of proximal development that exist independently of engaging in joint activity. Effective instruction occurs in the ZPD because it engages the developmental processes that are currently underway—when instruction is targeted at the learner's ZPD, learning can pull development along behind it.

Because Vygotsky's description of the ZPD is relatively brief, scholars have sought to better understand this theory of development and to expand upon Vygotsky's ideas. For example, researchers have examined activity in the ZPD with respect to who controls the activity in the task environment (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1991) and how the ZPD relates to dialogic models of inquiry (Wells, 2000). Researchers have explored the connections between peer tutoring and elements of Vygotskian theory (Falchikov, 2001). Literacy scholars have also used the theory to study how students develop literacy skills through participating in cultural activities. For example, Carol Lee (2000) found that instructors in literature classes could successfully draw on the practice of signifying in the ZPD to help African American students learn advanced literary tropes.

James Wertsch (1984, 1985) has written about the concept of "situation definition" to describe how interlocutors conceive of activities and objects in the ZPD. According to Wertsch (1984), it is not enough for an adult (or more capable peer) to examine just what the student is doing in the activity; the adult should also examine just how the student defines the activity and how he or she represents objects (and concepts) that are part of the activity. According to Wertsch (1984), "A situation definition is the way in which a setting or context is represented—that is, defined—by those who are operating in that setting" (p. 8). To provide an example of this concept, Wertsch described a situation in which two children are separately working with an adult to build a copy of a model from individual pieces. One child consults the model when deciding which piece to select next, but the other child just picks up a piece from the pile and adds it to the copy he is building. Although both children are carrying out the same activity (constructing the new object), they have very different situation definitions because of the different ways they represent the objects and actions in the activity. Progress through the ZPD is marked by situation redefinition: "this process of giving up an existing situation definition in favor of a qualitatively new one is characteristic of the major changes that a child undergoes in the zone of proximal development" (Wertsch, 1984, p.11). Thus, when a student constructs a different representation of the activity and concepts within the activity, this situation redefinition can lead to a better understanding of the writing task at hand.

Tutors can use specific communication strategies in online synchronous conferences to determine students' situation definitions and prompt them to progress through the ZPD and achieve situation redefinition. The student's situation definition corresponds to his or her actual level of development, but the situation definition of the adult or more capable peer (or tutor) may or may not correspond to the student's potential level of development. It is worth noting that the adult's situation definition includes representations of objects and activities that exist outside of the student's ZPD. Therefore, tutors must be aware of how they and their students represent concepts in language because the refining of representations can indicate situation redefinition and progress through the ZPD. Often, students in online conferences

may communicate in short utterances, making it difficult for tutors to fully understand their students' difficulties. According to Wertsch (1985), interlocutors have two ways of communicating that minimize the amount of information that is shared in a dialogue: deictic expressions that include pointing gestures or the use of "this" or "that" to stand for complex ideas and common-referring expressions that are very basic definitions of concepts that are broad and not specific to the speech situation at hand. Another type of expression, the context-informative expression, "can introduce a perspective that is informative about the specific way that the speaker views the referent in the speech event" (Wertsch, p. 171). This third kind of expression is more specific to the situation and is related to a greater level of intersubjectivity in a speech situation. Because online synchronous conferences are better suited for deliberate thought while a student considers and types a definition of a concept, tutors can prompt students to engage in activities that promote context-informative expressions in which they actively connect their definitions of writing concepts to their writing projects.

In online synchronous conferences, these different types of expressions are an integral part of how tutors and students set agendas for activity and establish intersubjectivity, which can help tutors and students collaborate more effectively. For example, if a student is struggling with writing a conclusion and does not know how to finish a composition, the tutor may seek to understand how the student conceives of what a conclusion might do in the context of this piece of writing without trying to "force" the student to accept a different conception that could be too advanced for the learner. In these situations, the tutor may seek to establish an intersubjective situation definition by facilitating dialogue that moves away from deictic and common-referring expressions, which are very general definitions of writing concepts, toward context-informative expressions in which the relationships of concepts to the specific writing task are defined clearly. For example, the tutor may begin by using a simpler definition, or common-referring expression, of a concept, such as "A conclusion summarizes main points and provides closure" while planning activities to help the student develop a more nuanced definition. This concept has important implications for online synchronous conferences because writing tutors and their students often have different purposes in a writing conference. While discussing a certain passage of text, a student may think that the tutor will correct or edit the essay during the conference, but the tutor may actually want the student to plan a course of revision after answering several questions and participating in focused writing activities. What may appear to be one activity can be two different activities, depending on how the participants define the situation.

Wertsch (1984) observed that true intersubjectivity exists between the student and adult in the ZPD when both of them know that they share the same definition of activity and representation of objects or concepts in the ZPD. Intersubjectivity also means that tutors can use more abbreviated utterances that prompt the student to complete the implicit steps that may be part of the revision process (Wertsch, 1985). In this case, it is not necessary for the tutor to provide further guidance. But in cases in which the situation definitions differ, the tutor may engage in semiotic mediation in the process of redefining the activity and objects in the activity. This process may involve the tutor attempting to communicate on a plane that is closer to the student's definition of the situation by using less abbreviated suggestions. In describing a situation in which tutor and learner do not achieve intersubjectivity, Wertsch (1985) wrote, "If this challenge is not met, the tutor always has the option of switching back to non-abbreviated directives, thereby taking over responsibility once again for certain aspects of the situation definition" (p. 182).

To examine how the concept of situation definition can be applied to online tutoring, I will use discourse analysis to examine two of my online conferences². Rather than a general method for looking at discourse, discourse analysis is a specific method for analyzing communication. Gee (2005) argued that a discourse analysis should examine how language is used in one or more of the seven building tasks in a discourse situation, a "situation in which language is put to use" (p. 97). One of the building tasks, "activities," is appropriate for this analysis because in the conference both the student and I, as the tutor, are using language to accomplish a goal, whether stated or not. Discourse analysis is an appropriate method for examining the special role of language in carrying out an activity. Dongseop Park and Yuji Moro (2006) have argued that interlocutors co-construct an activity—there isn't "one" activity that both construct together, but rather both parties construct sometimes-dissimilar representations of an activity.

Gee's (2005) methods for discourse analysis are an appropriate lens for understanding the role of language in the conferences because the only method of communication in these online conferences was through the use of language and symbols (emoticons that users send to each other, such as smileys, to communicate phatically). According to Gee,

² My institution's Institutional Review Board approved all research procedures.

“[A] discourse analysis involves asking questions about how language, at a given time and place, is used to construe the aspects of the situation network as realized at that time and place” (p. 110). Discourse analysis, then, is a method for analyzing how interlocutors use language in a situation and how the situation itself affects the ways language is used to communicate.

4. Theory into practice: How students can progress through the online ZPD

Students initiated conferences with me by 1) logging into their own instant-messaging account and sending a message to me or 2) communicating with me through the MeeboMe widget on our writing center’s homepage. The conferences began with questions for help and not introductions or discussions of backgrounds of the students. Because of the nature of online instant-messaging, I did not “seek out” students to have conferences with when I was logged in to Meebo. Instead, students contacted me with a greeting or a question about their paper or problem that they were having with a writing assignment. If someone contacted me through the Meebo widget on the writing center’s Web site, a message like this one popped up in the chat window: “MeeboGuest123444545: Can I ask you a question.” But if someone had signed on to their own instant-messaging program and sent a message to the writing center’s account, I saw their instant-message ID, such as CoolStudent10. Usually the beginnings of the conferences did not include introductions; instead, the discussion turned right toward the issue that the student wanted to talk about—anything from developing a conclusion to finding newspaper articles about local controversies. Often, their requests for help included common-referring expressions related to writing and writing concepts; these students defined their own problems in the ways that they perceived them. Situation definition and the theory of the ZPD also complement the online synchronous conference because this beginning dialogue is often not mediated by the draft, which the student may want to point to without communicating. More than in f2f conferences, the tutor can use the beginning of the conference to understand the current situation definition and ask the student to refer back to it as the conference unfolds.

I am going to provide two examples from my online synchronous writing conferences to illustrate how this format for tutoring is well suited for harnessing the instructional value of situation definition and the ZPD. The first conference, with “Jan,” illustrates how eliciting students’ definitions of writing concepts can set up a student-centered task that is focused on helping the student achieve situation redefinition in the ZPD. The second, with “Mark,” illustrates how the student uses writing to mediate the tutor’s and his own understanding of his thesis statement. It also illustrates how having access to a transcript of the tutorial can provide a record of a student’s changed understanding that he or she can use in the revision process.

A conference in which the online synchronous format was essential to helping a student progress in the ZPD was my conference with Jan. Jan was an undergraduate student who had written an essay about a British schoolgirl who was barred from wearing a chastity ring to school despite her claim that the ring was a symbol of her religious beliefs. The conference began when Jan sent me this message: “Hi I’m new to this online help, but I was wondering if someone could help me proof read my paper.” In the beginning of our conversation she told me that she had a paper in which she was supposed to “advocate for a position within a controversy of [her] choice.” Because she told me that she needed help proofreading, I wanted her to understand that, for me, this meant that she was in the final stages of writing the paper. (Our guidelines on our Web site said that we did not proofread students’ work, so I wanted to know whether she needed additional help with revising, not editing.) I said, “So, you feel like you are essentially finished with constructing your main arguments?” Two turns later, she said, “Well I think my conclusion needs the most help.” And when I asked her if she needed help both with its ideas and with the proofreading, she replied, “Both..?”

Not being able to immediately see any drafts that the student has brought to the conference affects my understanding of the student’s writing process (e.g., whether the student has done any planning writing). The online synchronous conference can put the focus on the student’s explanation of writing process, about how much writing they have produced (including notes and outlines), and how they feel about the writing project. Eliciting definitions of writing concepts, in addition to discussing the purpose and goal of the conference itself, can help make certain thinking processes visible and part of the writing conference. Indeed, when the definition of the conference or writing problem becomes the focus of the activity, the tutor and student are working on an important aspect of the writing process: the cognitive processes or tools that mediate the writer’s activity.

Collaborating to work on the conclusion appeared to be an appropriate task for the ZPD because we could discuss not only the text that she had composed but also her definition of “conclusion” that was mediating her writing process. To begin, I wanted to know her definition of the concept because that would show me her current definition (i.e., her

actual level of development). I asked her to tell me what she thought that a conclusion does in a piece of writing. She replied, “Well, it should not only wrap up loose ends but also bring up new ideas.” This information helped explain why her conclusion included an argument (not supported by the body of her paper) that the school administration was after media attention. In her conclusion, she also argued that standing up for one’s own ideas is a good thing to do and a sign of strength. But this point was not included in the body of the paper and seemed tangential to her main arguments about a student’s right to express her religious beliefs.

Her problem with the conclusion may have stemmed from an inadequate development of supporting ideas in the body of the essay. For example, Jan admitted that she did not know the specific British laws that govern religious expression in public institutions. To support her own argument she cited American court cases, not British cases. As a result, she did not appear to be making a strong argument in favor of the student wearing the ring. I decided that her conclusion could be enhanced if she would strengthen the arguments that her conclusion might have emphasized:

Tutor: Okay, I think the conclusion could be enhanced by trying to clarify your main arguments in support of why Lydia should be allowed to wear the ring. What do you think is the main reason that she should be allowed to wear it? Also, I think the conclusion makes a claim about the school (that they were looking for media attention) that isn’t supported by evidence. It seems like some anger toward the school is creeping out at that point.

Tutor: The end of the conclusion seems to say that it is good for people to stand up for what they believe in.

Tutor: But that, to me, isn’t your main point, which is that she should be allowed to wear the ring.

Jan: Right

Tutor: So I think that you want to stay on point and not go off on a tangent (the tangent being the sentences about standing up for beliefs). Do you agree or am I wrong about this being a tangent?

Jan: I agree.

Jan: I thought that by adding that media part and standing up for what you believed in would be adding new ideas into the conclusion to make the reader think.

Jan’s justification for why she included ideas about the media and the importance of standing up for one’s own beliefs showed me why these ideas were in the conclusion. By making her thought process visible, she was able to present her situation definition of our task in the ZPD and discuss why she made her choices in writing the conclusion. She explicitly referred to her earlier statement in which she said that a conclusion “should not only wrap up loose ends but also bring up new ideas.” Her statement also showed she had her own reason that she felt was valid for including them, but it also indicated she may have redefined her conception of what a conclusion should do. This statement was a sign for me that Jan likely was progressing in the ZPD and constructing a new conception that she could use in the revising process. Having immediate access to the transcript of the conference was essential for focusing on her definition of the writing concept because I could see how her initial statements, which minimized information, became more context-informative during the conference.

Helping her refine her arguments would help her strengthen the conclusion, so a large portion of the conference was devoted to discussing ways to improve the argumentation, such as finding reasons that would connect the wearing of the chastity ring to legitimate religious expression. Jan realized that although her case was an example of British law, she needed to examine how it applied to law in the United States. At the end, when we were discussing the activity in the conference, we shared this exchange:

Tutor: Remember when you said that a conclusion can introduce new ideas?

Jan: yes

Tutor: Although we can introduce new ideas, we have to be sure not to introduce new ideas that can’t be supported (such as the school wanting media attention.)

Jan: Ok. I agree.

Although at the beginning of our conference Jan said she thought her conclusion “needs the most help,” a better task for the ZPD was her conception of “conclusion.” It also helped her to stay in control of her own paper and develop a better conception to use in her revision process. Toward the end of the conference, Jan said, “You definitely helped me expand on my arguments and made me think of new ideas as well. I think I know where I am going with the conclusion now.”

Conducting conferences according to this theoretical perspective may require tutors to resist the student's desire to send the entire paper to the tutor. This kind of resistance to reading the entire paper is easier in an online conference; in a f2f conference it may have been harder to focus on having a conversation if the student had slid the paper over to me. If I were to have spent a lot of time reading the paper, I may not have been able to keep the student interested and engaged in the writing conference.

In another conference, Mark asked me to help him with his thesis statement and conclusion for an analysis that he had written about two works by John Updike, "Ex-Basketball Player" and "A&P." He offered to send me his entire paper, but I asked him to send me his thesis statement. This was an appropriate focus for an online conference because if he needed to revise his thesis, the text-only format of our conference would enable him to try out different versions and keep them for his essay later. Very often, in f2f consultations if a student is having difficulty focusing a main idea or thesis statement, I will turn the essay over and ask the student to put the main idea in one or two sentences. He sent me this thesis statement:

In "Ex-Basketball Player" and "A&P" by John Updike, the main characters, Flick Webb and Sammy, show us the importance of being able to move on from adolescence and into adulthood and the effects this transition can have on our lives. While Updike conveys this same message in both texts, his use of tone, imagery, and point of view are far different.

First, I wanted Mark to unpack what he meant by "effects." In our conversation, he explained that these two characters differ in that Flick Webb does not effectively make the transition into adulthood, but Sammy does. According to Mark, Flick Webb is working at a gas station at the end of "Ex-Basketball Player," but in "A&P" Sammy has quit his job and is walking out into the "real world." I was unsure about how the paper might be able to describe the "effects" of making the transition to adulthood when we do not know exactly what happens to Sammy as a result of his decision. Engaging Mark in conversation and asking him guided questions to explain his concepts behind these characters helped me to see the way he perceived them, and typing his responses may have enabled him to reflect on and refine his ideas.

To keep the focus on what he felt the term "message" referred to in his thesis, I resisted his requests to just e-mail me the draft. This mode of tutoring helps a tutor focus on having a conversation because it is not usually apparent how to send a file through the chat interface. In this exchange, I declined his request and asked him to continue to explain the words with unclear meanings in the thesis (in this case, "effect"):

Mark: would it help you at all if i emailed you the whole paper?

Tutor: No, I don't think so.

Tutor: So what is the "effect" of the transition in the case of the basketball player?

Mark: because he failed to make the transition into adulthood, he is a lonely gas pump attendant who doesnt have much going for him and life

We continued to discuss the thesis statement and how it related to the actions of the two characters. Mark seemed to understand that his argument about how the characters "show us the importance of moving on" was difficult to apply to Sammy in A&P because Sammy leaves at the end of the story. There is no information about what the result of his "moving on" is.

Mark began to consider ways to revise his thesis, and he first said that his thesis could still work because the characters showed the importance of "moving on" by not "moving on":

Mark: but couldn't you still say they "show us the importance of being able to move on from adolescence and into adulthood and the effects this transition can have on our lives." because we see the importance through flick webb not moving on and where it took him in life

Mark: and by comparing the poem and short story, we understand through sammys description of his boss, he would end up like flick if he didnt move on

It seemed that Mark was reconsidering his thesis and evaluating his own argument as he typed these ideas into the chat interface. After he typed these two messages, I told him that I needed to think about what he wrote. But he already began to diagnose the problem that his use of the term "transition" was unclear:

Mark: or do u think that would get criticized because the teacher might think only one made the transition and so Flick (who didnt make the transition) didnt show us the importance

By writing about his thesis and having to explain his ideas to another person, Mark started to see his ideas more clearly. This process of mediating a tutor's understanding complements the notion that effective learning in the ZPD is learning that proceeds ahead of development and thus pulls development behind it. If one goal of the online synchronous writing conference is to help the student develop a better understanding for the revision process, then it is not improper for the understanding to be the object of the conference and not the text. It is through working with another person that the student realizes more clearly what he or she wants to say. According to Vygotsky (1981), "[I]t is only through others that we develop into ourselves and that this is true not only with regard to the history of every function" (p. 161).

This method of tutoring complements recent scholarship in which researchers have recognized that students can benefit from interactions where the tutor provides a structure for the conference. Writing center researchers have recognized that tutors often determine the specific activity that will be used to help the student with his or her concern, and that students prefer "asymmetrical collaboration" (Thompson, Whyte, Shannon, Muse, Miller, Chappell, & Whigham, 2009). Students also were satisfied in writing conferences in which the authority of the tutor was not "openly negotiated" (Thonus, 2002, p. 129). However, writing center tutors need to be aware of how the ability to scaffold learning can blur into assuming ownership of a piece of writing. By challenging the situation definition of how the conference could proceed, my aim was to deflect my authority as a judge of the text, and rather play the role of asking questions that would prompt the student to revise in the way he wanted to. This text-mediation strategy has already been recognized as a technique for enhancing learning in the ZPD (Warschauer, 1997).

Our concentration on the thesis statement resulted in Mark wanting to revise the paragraph on his own. When I asked him if he wanted to work on the conclusion, he replied, "yeah but that will all change now that my thesis statement has become more clear." This was heartening because it suggested to me that Mark was willing to revise a section of the paper that we did not have to talk about and to use his new insights to improve the introduction. Our online synchronous conference and its focus on writing clearly, with each message from him an attempt to explain himself, resulted in text that he could return to later because the transcript would be available to him after the conference.

5. Caveats and concerns

These examples show that a tutor can elicit students' definitions of rhetorical concepts or important ideas during an online synchronous conference. It is difficult to know whether students are actually constructing new definitions that will mediate their future writing projects. For example, when I was discussing the purpose of a conclusion with Jan, she simply agreed with my own assertions that a conclusion should not introduce ideas or arguments that are too tangential and cannot be supported by evidence. Without prompting students to restate their concept definitions, a tutor can only rely on a student declaring that they have achieved a new understanding (admittedly not the most reliable method of verification).

Perhaps these examples suggest that writing tutors need to leave time at the end of conferences for students to re-state their definitions of the concepts that were discussed during the conference. Often, electronic conferences can end quickly once students have decided they have received the help they wanted. Eliciting definitions at the end of the conference can help tutors to see what the student has internalized and how far the student progressed in the ZPD.

Another potential problem with this method of tutoring is students may simply re-state their definitions using the terms the tutor used during the conference because they want to satisfy the tutor. Mikhail Bakhtin's conceptions of authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse are helpful in an analysis of how power affects the way people use language. Authoritative discourse is "privileged language that approaches us from without; it is distanced, taboo, and permits no play with its framing context" (Bakhtin, 1975/1981, p. 424). According to Bakhtin, "It is not a free appropriation and assimilation of the word itself that authoritative discourse seeks to elicit from us; rather, it demands our unconditional allegiance" (p. 342). Authoritative discourse can be seen, then, as a conception that a student perceives to be "right" but yet is unable to assimilate into his or her own discourse. In contrast to authoritative discourse, "Internally persuasive discourse... is, as it is affirmed through assimilation, tightly interwoven with 'one's own word'" (Bakhtin, p. 345). Thus, if students do not re-state their own definitions in their own language and apply the definitions in the contexts of their own writing, they may resist using a definition that the tutor provides. The tutor's

definitions may become an authoritative discourse the student uses only in the context of the conference and is not able to relate to his or her own discourse.

Although these rhetorical concepts may have different definitions in other discourse communities, tutors and students can use this method to work on the definitions in the context of the student's present project. Current models of literacy and literacy learning avoid describing an autonomous model and, instead, describe literacy as intertwined with communities and cultural activities (Barton, 1994). Thus, there is danger in assuming that the definitions of "conclusion" or "thesis" in the examples of Jan and Mark, respectively, exist outside of the norms of their particular discourse situations. Compositionists such as Elizabeth Wardle (2007) have pointed out that "transfer" of a rhetorical concept from one writing task to another is difficult to gauge because the situation in which the student learns a concept may be radically different from another one in which he or she must apply the concept. Tutors and students should discuss the situated meanings of these terms to avoid creating the impression that these negotiated meanings are constant across discourse communities.

6. Conclusion

The text-only environment of online synchronous tutoring requires tutors to find appropriate strategies that are suited to activities that are created through written speech. Eliciting students' definitions of writing tasks and rhetorical concepts can be an effective strategy for helping students refine their writing processes because students can reflect on these mediating concepts when they translate them from inner speech to external speech for others. Composition scholars have long recognized that it is important to have students write about their subjects in order to receive feedback about the subject matter (Flower, 1979), but I propose that online tutors should use contemporary learning theory as it relates to the ZPD to make students' unstated definitions of writing concepts the subjects of online conferences and use the affordances of the text-only environment to help students refine those mediating concepts. The transcript of the conference, available to both parties, is available for the student to consult during the revision process so they can integrate their new ideas or employ their new conceptions of rhetorical concepts.

A next step in developing this method of tutoring may include designing a study in which researchers can study whether working on students' mediating writing concepts actually contributes to improving the way students use them in other writing tasks. It is not enough to examine the transcript of a conference to determine whether students are internalizing and using new concept definitions they developed through negotiation in an online conference. It is important to know whether having students re-define important writing concepts actually transfers to other writing tasks because this would help to show that the work of online tutoring could be helping to "produce better writers, not better writing" (North, 1984a, p. 438).

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