of the directive/nondirective debate, "raises issues involving tutor authority, tutor-tutee (and even instructor) trust, tutor training, and writing process versus product—all relevant concerns in any writing instruction situation." He contends that "when diving deeply into a discussion of directive/nondirective tutoring, we soon begin to realize that—as in any education situation—we are dealing not just with instructional but also political issues." Corbett contends that this debate is more a continuum of practices than a polarity, and he argues that "tutors can better serve (and be better served) if they are encouraged to broaden their instructional repertoires" beyond a rigid adherence to either directive or nondirective modes.

A New Look at the Directive/Nondirective Debate

Arguably, no single issue in writing center theory and practice gets at the heart of one-to-one or small-group instruction like the question of directive/nondirective teaching methods. At the 2007 International Writing Centers Association Conference in Houston, Texas, writing center legends Muriel Harris, Jeane Simpson, Pamela Childers, and Joan Mullin discussed the "core assumptions" surrounding four hot topics in writing center theory and practice, including minimalistic tutoring as standard. Conversation buzzed around the idea that when considering what has become the default instructional mode in one-to-one tutoring—the minimalistic approach—writing center practitioners and theorists need to consider what we actually do versus what we say we do. The question of how and when tutors should use techniques like open-ended questioning versus just telling students what they think they should do, or what the tutors might do themselves if they were in the tutee's position, raises issues involving tutor authority, tutor-tutee (and even instructor) trust, tutor training, and writing process versus product—all relevant concerns in any writing instruction situation. Yet, despite all the critical questions and considerations the directive/nondirective debate raises, several session participants wondered if we in writing center circles have made more of this issue than we really need to.

When diving deeply into a discussion of directive/nondirective tutoring, we soon begin to realize that—as in any education situation—we are dealing not just with instructional but also political issues. Much has been written on the minimalistic approach (for example, Ashton-Jones; Brooks; Harris) and on subsequent critiques of this approach (for example, Clark "Collaboration and Ethics," "Writing Centers and Plagiarism," "Perspectives"; Clark and Healy; Shameron and Burns "A Critique," "Plagiarism"; Grimm; Wingate; Letterell; Boquet "Intellectual Tug-of-War," Noise; Carino; Geller et al.). I will analyze several key texts that comment on and critique general assumptions and influential arguments surrounding this debate, especially Irene Clark and Dave Healy's 1996 "Are Writing Centers Ethical?" I will argue that one-to-one contexts demand a close reconsideration of our typically nondirective, hands-off approach to tutoring. Tutors can better serve (and be

Tutoring Style, Tutoring Ethics: The Continuing Relevance of the Directive/Nondirective Instructional Debate

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Steven J. Corbett examines the theoretical, practical, and philosophical issues surrounding minimalistic tutoring and discovers a significant discrepancy between "what we actually do and what we say we do" in this essay originally published in 2008 in Praxis. Corbett states that minimalistic tutoring, as part
better served) if they are encouraged to broaden their instructional repertoires, if directors and coordinators encourage a more flexible notion of what it means to teach (and learn) one-to-one. Granted, this is an idealistic claim. I will thus begin to illustrate why—precisely because “instructional flexibility” is easier said than done—we should continue to carefully scrutinize tutoring style and method via the directive/non directive continuum.

Hands Off or On? The Directive/Nondirective Instructional Continuum

When diving deeply into a discussion of directive/nondirective tutoring, we soon begin to realize that—as in any education situation—we are dealing not just with instructional but also political issues. Clark and Healy’s essay tracks the history of the nondirective (or noninterventionist) approach in the “orthodox writing center.” It describes how in the 1970s and early 1980s writing centers began to replace grammar drills and skills with what would become the higher-order concerns (HOCs) and lower-order (or later-order) concerns (LOCs) approach to tutoring. Along with this new instructional focus, however, came a concurrent concern—fear of plagiarism. The fear of plagiarism goes hand-in-hand with the idea of intellectual property rights, a political and personal issue pertinent to tutors, students, instructors, and program directors. This “concern with avoiding plagiarism, coupled with the second-class and frequently precarious status of writing centers within the university hierarchy, generated a set of defensive strategies aimed at warding off the suspicions of those in traditional humanities departments” like English (Clark and Healy 245). For Clark and Healy, the resulting restraint on tutor method soon took on the practical and theoretical power of a moral imperative. They describe how influential essays from Evelyn Ashton-Jones, Jeff Brooks, and Thomas Thompson cemented the hands-off approach to one-to-one instruction.¹

In an ironic twist, Clark and Healy note that “by being so careful not to infringe on other’s turf—the writer’s, the teacher’s, the department’s, the institution’s—the writing center has been party to its own marginality and silencing” (254). In answer to this perceived marginality and silencing, they offer essays by Marilyn Cooper, Shamoon and Burns, and Muriel Harris, as well as the work of Vygotsky, that value the pedagogical feasibility of modeling and imitation and an epistemology that moves writers outside their texts to some degree. Cooper, for example, in her close reading of Brooks, argues “when writing center sessions remain resolutely focused on how a student can fix a paper, it is difficult for tutors to focus instead on what students know and need to know about writing” (337). For Cooper, and others, a strict minimalist approach forecloses the act of collaboration that could take place in a one-to-one, collaborative negotiation that takes both the tutor’s and the tutee’s goals into consideration. This echoes comments made during the 2007 IWCA session I mentioned above. Respondents felt that a strict minimalist approach can be manipulative and still leaves the tutor very much in control of the session. Cooper would have us instead make room for the “really useful knowledge” that may involve listening to student experience or offering ways of reading assignment prompts or even syllabi that make room for the writer’s creativity or risk taking, rather than, as Brooks would have us, “always focusing on the paper at hand” (347).

In short, tutors need to be aware of the rhetorical complexity—both interpersonal and intertextual—that any given tutorial can entail. Clark and Healy point to an earlier work of Harris’s from College English in 1983, “Modeling; A Process Method of Teaching,” in which she advances a directive approach. In describing the benefits of intervening substantially in students’ writing processes, Harris asks “what better way is there to convince students that writing is a process that requires effort, thought, time, and persistence than to go through all that writing, scratching out, rewriting, and revising with and for our students?” (qtd. in Clark and Healy 251; emphasis added). Harris, early on, like Shamoon and Burns, understood the value and importance of the ancient rhetorical tradition of modeling and imitation in the service of invention. In order to perform such moves as “scratching out” and “rewriting,” tutors must have some confidence in their ability (the theoretical and practical feasibility and timeliness involved) in offering more direct suggestions on issues of style and correct usage.²

Negotiating the Fine Line between Talk, Teaching, and Our Best Intentions

Harris, however, has always understood the value of both directive and nondirective tutoring strategies, and scholars like Nancy Grimm, Anne DiPardo, and Carol Severino concur. In her concise yet theoretically sophisticated 1999 monograph Good Intentions, Grimm juxtaposes the implications of Brian Street’s autonomous and ideological models of literacy with the work we do. Arguing that our traditional hands-off approach to one-to-one instruction is often misguided, she writes:

Writing center tutors are supposed to use a nondirective pedagogy to help students “discover” what they want to say. These approaches protect the status quo and withhold insider knowledge, inadvertently keeping students from nonmainstream cultures on the sidelines, making them guess about what the mainstream culture expects or frustrating them into less productive attitudes. These approaches enact the belief that what is expected is natural behavior rather than culturally specific performance. (31)

Like Cooper five years earlier, Grimm calls for writing center practitioners to move away from a focus on the paper to the cultural and ideological work of literacy: negotiating assignment sheets to see if there might be any room for student creativity or even resistance; making students aware of multiple ways of approaching writing tasks and situations, in order to make tacit academic understandings explicit; rethinking tired admonishments regarding what we can not do when tutoring one-to-one. Grimm illustrates what a tough job this really is, though, in her analysis of DiPardo’s “Whispers of Coming and Going: Lessons from Fannie.”
While Grimm, drawing on Street and Lisa Delpit, forcefully argues for the importance of moving past our infatuation with nondirective tutoring, she may be inadvertently pointing to why it is also perhaps just as important for us to continue to value some of our nondirective strategies—suggesting the truly subtle nature of this issue. DiPardo’s essay describes and analyzes the tutorial relationship between Morgan, an African American tutor, and Fannie, a Navajo student who just passed her basic writing course and is attempting the required composition course. Both DiPardo and Grimm speculate that Morgan’s repeated attempts to prod and push Fannie toward what Morgan believed was realization or progress only pushed Fannie away from any productive insights. The tutorial transcript presented by DiPardo illustrates how Morgan dominated the conversation, often interrupting Fannie (though unfortunately we do not get micro-level analysis like how long pauses were after questions, etc.), how Morgan appropriated the conversation, attempting to move Fannie toward her idea of a normal academic essay. While this approach may ostensibly resemble the directive approach advocated by Grimm, Delpit, and others, what it leads Grimm and DiPardo to conclude is that tutors must be encouraged to practice “authentic listening”: “As DiPardo’s study illustrates, without authentic listening, the very programs designed to address social inequality inadvertently reproduce it, ‘unresolved tensions stuck continually at the fabric of institutional good intentions’ (DiPardo 1992, 126)” (Grimm 69). Ironically, “authentic listening,” or allowing the student to do most of the talking during one-to-ones to enable them to be more in control of the tutorial discourse, is one of, perhaps the most fundamental of, nondirective strategies.

Something as fundamental as asking the tutee at the beginning of the tutorial what phase their draft is in could go a long way toward setting up just how hands on or off a tutor can be. Carol Severino, drawing on Ede and Lunsford, associates directive tutoring with hierarchical collaboration and nondirective tutoring with dialogic collaboration. But her analysis of two conferences involving two different tutors with the same student points just as much toward our assumptions of what a good tutorial is supposed to sound like. The student is Joe, an older African American returning student taking a class titled “Race and Ethnicity in Our Families and Lives.” Severino analyzes the transcripts of sessions between Joe and Henry, a high school teacher in his thirties working on his MA in English, and Joe and Eddy, a younger, less teaching experience. Like the sessions that DiPardo and Grimm analyze above, Henry uses his teacherly authority, from the very start of the conference, by asking closed or leading questions that persuasively direct the flow of the rest of the tutorial. In contrast, during the session between Joe and Eddy, Eddy starts off right away asking Joe open-ended questions like how he feels about the paper, and where he wants to go from there. For Severino, this sets a more conversational, peerlike tone that carries through the rest of the tutorial. Although obviously privileging the nondirective/dialogic approach, Severino concludes by asserting that it is difficult to say which of the above sessions was necessarily “better” (especially since we do not hear Joe’s point of view, and, importantly, we do not know what phase or draft Joe’s paper is in). Instead, she urges those who prepare/educate tutors to avoid prescriptive tutoring dictums that do not take into consideration varying assignment tasks, rhetorical situations, and student personalities and goals—the “always” and “don’t” that can close off avenues for authentic listening and conversation. The problem with Severino’s analysis, is that we do not get a clear enough picture of exactly what was going on during the tutorial. As with Fannie above, we do not know how Joe felt about the interaction. Perhaps he found greater value in Henry’s more directive approach.

Reconsidering Our Best Intentions: Conclusion

This discussion of directive and nondirective tutoring suggests that if we keep our pedagogy flexible and attuned to one writer at a time, we may better appreciate when to urge a closer rethinking of content or claim, when to pay attention to conventions and mechanics, and how and when to do both. In short, tutors need to be aware of the rhetorical complexity—both interpersonal and intertextual—that any given tutorial can entail. This complexity means that tutor coaches should stay wary of the all-too-tempting sort of rules of thumb that lead to Geller et al.’s caution regarding “premature cognitive commitments” or Severino’s denouncement of prescriptive dictums that can unintentionally cement a strained social relationship between tutor and tutee. Geller et al. write: “Familiar memes—don’t write on the paper, don’t speak more than the student-writer, ask non-directive questions—get passed among cohorts of writing tutors as gospel before they even interact with writers in an everyday setting” (21). As Harris and Shamoon and Burns suggest, we should reevaluate nondirective tutoring in light of the historical precedents that may no longer serve exigencies that originally produced them (for example, fear of plagiarism, or writing centers struggling to find their institutional identity). We should reevaluate the importance of the classical-rhetorical idea of imitation and style in the service of invention—but with a heightened sensitivity to when to provide models for imitation, and when to nudge students toward agency in their own inventive processes. If our best intentions more closely match our best practices, we might find ways to further question and more rigorously examine these reconsidered notions. An understanding and appreciation of the range and scope of the directive/nondirective continuum can provide one possible starting point for such examinations.

Adding the idea of modeling, a willingness to sometimes take a more hands-on approach to tutoring, can complement a tutor’s instructional repertoire. Tutor coaches (be they directors or more experienced co-workers) can offer suggestions—or models or examples—of when it might be more or less appropriate to be more or less directive or nondirective. Something as fundamental as asking the tutee at the beginning of the tutorial what phase their draft is in could go a long way toward setting up just how hands-on or -off a tutor can be.
Finally, we should (and often do) realize that sometimes it’s all right to give a pointed suggestion, to offer an idea for a subtopic, to give explicit direction on how to cite MLA sources, to practice along a continuum of instructional choices both socially collaborative and individually empowering.

Notes
1 Ashton-Jones juxtaposes the “Socratic dialogue” with the “directive” mode of tutoring. Drawing on Tom Hawkins, she characterizes the directive tutor as “shaman, guru, or mentor,” while Socratic tutors are given the more co-inquisitive label “architects and partners.” Personally, I feel that it could be a good thing if a tutor-tutee relationship develops to the point that the tutee looks to the tutor as somewhat of a “mentor.” Brooks, in arguing that students must take ownership of their texts, associates directive tutors with editors, good editors perhaps sometimes, but editors nonetheless. Brooks goes so far as to advise that if a tutee seems unwilling to take an active role in the tutorial, tutors simply mimic the tutee’s unengaged attitude and action. And Thompson urges tutors to avoid having a pen in hand during tutorials. In the name of the Socratic method, he also urges tutors “not to tell students what a passage means or give students a particular word to complete a thought” (Clark and Healy 246).

2 One problem with the literature on the directive/nondirective debate is the fact that no one really talks about what stage of an essay draft a tutee is in. The stage makes a great difference in how a tutor should approach the tutorial. For example, if a student is in the early phases of a draft, then perhaps tutors can take a more minimalist approach, asking questions, trying not to get too hands-on. If the student is working on a “final” draft, then it would be more appropriate for a tutor to get involved in some of the more hands-on “scratching out” and “rewriting” Harris speaks of. Thus, one of the key queries that should be asked in the first round of questions foregrounding a tutorial is something like “What stage is this draft in?” which of course will lead to further follow-up questions.

Works Cited

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Carl Glover examines the relevance of the ancient Greek idea of kairos, or “the opportune moment,” to tutoring as an actively “involved experience.” Glover finds that a “kairos-consciousness,” or a readiness to respond appropriately to the opportunities created in the tutor-client relationship, can provide for an “ethically grounded” experience capable of synthesizing “antithetical elements.” For tutors, kairos involves a type of “double vision” that looks for a balance between the abilities of the writer and the demands of the paper. Kairos thus is a way in which tutors can be attuned to “the cues in moments of insight” in which the writer is engaged in “discovery” and “holds the primary responsibility for the progress of the paper.”