

# RE-ENVISIONING COURSE-EMBEDDED PROGRAMS AT THE GRADUATE LEVEL: A TUTOR'S EXPERIENCE IN A DOCTORAL, TRANSLINGUAL<sup>1</sup> MARKETING COURSE

Rebecca Hallman

The University of Houston  
rebeccahallman7@gmail.com

*"It's like you're literally guiding them through the maze, and dropping breadcrumbs along the way."*

– Carol, MARK 8397 Instructor

We were halfway through our Summer 2014, PhD-level, required University of Houston,<sup>2</sup> Bauer College of Business class, MARK 8397: Communicating Academic Research, when Carol,<sup>3</sup> a five-foot tall, thick-skinned, straight-shooting, endowed chair and Marketing professor explained my role in her course as "hand holding." I raised my eyebrow and waited for her to continue. "You know, confidence building," she continued. I felt slightly better. Then she said, "Academic writing is confusing for students because they don't know which way to go. They might know when and why they need to make changes, but they don't really know *how* to do it." This was better. Carol's idea of me as a guide for students through the "how" of academic writing was something I felt matched my own understanding of my role in the course.

My role in MARK 8397 was set up via an eight-year partnership between Bauer and the writing center (WC).<sup>4</sup> Since most of the WC administrators at my university were not familiar with business writing at the graduate level, I was expected to draw on my own knowledge of and experience with writing in the disciplines from my rhetoric and composition doctoral coursework and from previous discipline-specific WC partnerships in engineering and health sciences at a different institution. MARK 8397 was scheduled to meet seven weeks during the summer: Carol would lead Monday classes focused on academic communication, while I attended and participated; I would lead Wednesday workshop classes centered on peer-review without Carol present. Since MARK 8397 was the only "co-teaching" style partnership the WC had, there was not a specific protocol for me to follow; I wasn't positioned as part of a larger Course-Embedded Program (CEP).

However, being familiar with WC scholarship, I immediately understood myself as a kind of "writing

fellow" (WF), as defined by Bradley Hughes and Emily B. Hall in their 2008 special issue of *Across the Disciplines*. In their "Guest Editors' Introduction," these authors argue that WFs play a valuable role within Writing Across the Disciplines programs because they "link students to specific writing-intensive courses; encourage partnerships between a Writing Fellow and a course professor, and promote collaboration between peers." Additionally, I was positioned as a "classroom-based writing tutor," as described by Candace Spigelman and Laurie Grobman in *On Location: Theory and Practice in Classroom-Based Writing Tutoring*, because I would be providing "writing support...directly to students during class" (1).

Yet, after my first summer in MARK 8397, I began to see my role as different from both the "writing fellow" and the "classroom-based writing tutor." Specifically, my experiences disrupted three key assumptions supported by research in the two collections cited above:

- 1) Tutors with disciplinary expertise are preferable to generalist tutors (Soliday 32; Severino and Traschel).
- 2) Tutors should act with directive, interventionist methods (Corbett 101).
- 3) Tutors must constantly navigate conflicts related to their own authority and their relationship to the course instructor (Martins and Wolf 159; Singer Breault, and Wing; Zawacki; Cairns and Anderson).

Thus, in Summer 2014, I began a pilot study to re-envision how a CEP at the graduate-level might operate using MARK 8397 as a model. After briefly describing the course's context below, I present three primary observations that challenge the three assumptions above by drawing on my own experiences and reflections as a course-embedded tutor, conversations with the course instructor, and captured content from the Wednesday writing group meetings that I facilitated. My findings show the value

of having a rhetorically trained WC professional who sets and models explicit guidelines for peer response without being overly directive and establishes a professional “co-teaching” relationship with the instructor.

### A Description of MARK 8397

The Summer 2014 MARK 8397 course consisted of seven first and second year doctoral students: six female (all of whom spoke either Chinese or Korean as a first language) and one male (who spoke Telugu as a first language). They were all highly intelligent (many had multiple Masters degrees), had sub-disciplinary expertise in Supply-Chain Management, Marketing, Accounting, and Management, and were extremely dedicated to becoming better writers in English. However, pre-assessment survey data suggested to me that these students lacked confidence in their abilities to communicate in English.

The main objective of MARK 8397 spoke directly to this issue. As stated in the syllabus, the course was designed “to increase students’ skill and confidence in talking about research.” The course took place over the summer, with a gap between the first-week-in-June sessions and the remaining twelve July and early August sessions. During the first two meetings, students presented their research projects to the seminar-style class, and Carol shared both writing advice from a previous *Journal of Marketing* editor and a bad example of her own writing so that students could “get past the idea that everything that’s published is wonderful” (Carol). During the rest of June, students wrote, drafted, and revised an article-length proposal or study and submitted a full rough draft to Carol and me when class meetings started again in July. That rough draft became the basis for four peer review group sessions organized and facilitated by me, every Wednesday in July.

As I mentioned, I led class on Wednesdays without Carol. I broke the class into two groups, attempting to keep student specializations together (i.e. so that the two accounting students were in the same group, even if they were paired with a management student). This summer, each group attended class with me for 90 minutes, during which 15-30 minutes consisted of mini-lessons based on student need (audience awareness, paragraph organization, writing Abstracts, and organizing the Introduction, for example), and the remaining 60+ minutes were spent discussing student drafts.

In preparation for each discussion, I gave students specific guidelines for peer review and provided detailed comments and questions on each draft. We

worked through drafts section by section, using a modified IMRaD genre as a guide (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion—with an Abstract). During the first week, students submitted their Abstract/Introduction prior to our meeting; read, commented on, and returned the Abstract/Introduction of their peers; and came to class having read feedback from both their peers and myself. Then, we spent group time clarifying feedback, drawing similarities among responses from multiple readers, and working collaboratively to generate possible revisions. For the second week, students were expected to revise their Abstract/Introduction and also submit their Methods section for peer review. This pattern continued until we made it through the final Discussion section of each draft.

Meanwhile, Carol led class meetings on Mondays that focused on talking about academic research; students practiced “elevator pitches,” mock interviews, and teaching lessons from the course textbook (Williams and Colomb’s *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*). In addition, Bauer faculty members visited the class to discuss topics related to academic communication, including how to create effective graphs, figures, and tables; pick a dissertation topic; and give a strong oral presentation. During these classes, Carol developed the content and led class, while I asked questions, offered suggestions, and gave students written feedback on presentations. During the final week of class, students submitted a final version of their article/proposal to Carol and me for comments and delivered a 45-minute job-talk style presentation in front of the class.

During these Monday and Wednesday classes, my role was complicated as a course-embedded tutor because I acted as student, peer, and tutor. This was not an issue of authority, but rather I was trying to learn about research writing in business and help students develop both skills and confidence in English communication. On Mondays, I acted as a peer-student because I was trying to learn from Carol how successful business scholars like herself approach writing. I took careful notes so that I could get a sense of the broader disciplinary “keywords” and language for talking about research. On Wednesdays, I tried to bring this terminology into my instruction and our conversations. My role shifted to that of tutor-teacher, not only because I was leading class, but also because I was ultimately perceived as the “writing expert,” in that when conflicts arose, all looked to me for direction. Despite this, as time went on, I tried to position myself as a peer so that the students could begin taking ownership of both our conversations about writing and also the writing itself.

## Re-Envisioning Course-Embedded Tutoring at the Graduate Level

Drawing on my own observations, captured content from Wednesday meetings, and conversations with Carol, my experiences with MARK 8397 challenge the assumptions about CEPs mentioned at the beginning of this article. Thus, I would like to offer three key concepts that can inform WC practices as tutors and administrators begin to consider course-embedded tutoring at the graduate-level.

*Assumption 1: Tutors with disciplinary expertise are preferable to generalist tutors.*

*Challenge 1: Generalist tutors are practical, effective, and should work with students in small groups.*

When I asked Carol if it would be desirable to substitute a business graduate student for my role, she said that there was not a chance that would happen. In this program, the top business graduate students do not accept teaching assistantships because they earn more money working as consultants. Instead, international students without solid English communication skills usually hold assistantships. The latter would not be qualified to take on the role of course-embedded tutor because they lack the English writing and communication skills that were key to my participation in the course, according to Carol.

Beyond this point of practicality, Carol admitted that she viewed tutor disciplinary expertise as “marginal” in the context of MARK 8397. Since the students in the course come from a variety of sub-disciplines, they end up being the experts, and the practice of explaining their research to a more general academic audience is valuable for them. Part of the purpose of the course is to help students become effective communicators for a broader departmental audience: they need to be able to explain their research across a varied business faculty and deans, in addition to experts.

While the students themselves functioned as sub-disciplinary experts, their peers acted as general business experts. Thus, it became less necessary for me to have business-specific disciplinary knowledge, but equally necessary for us to discuss writing in small groups. When given clear guidelines for feedback, graduate students were capable of providing thoughtful, discipline-specific feedback to their peers. For example, a typical peer-to-peer comment would read like this:

In your “method” section, you use logistic regression model. I wonder if you could explain why you choose this model either from an

econometric point of view or from a theory point of view. For example, as a reader, I want to know whether the logistic model is the only/most appropriate model for estimation and/or whether some studies have used that model for similar estimation.

In this comment, the reviewer not only requests more explanation from the writer, but she also offers two different perspectives from which the writer could draw (econometric or theory). Then, the reviewer describes her question from the position of a reader who has other possible models for the study in mind. I found that methodology was one aspect in particular that students across the sub-disciplines of business seemed to understand and comment on regularly.

While I did not bring disciplinary expertise to the table, I tended to focus specifically on writing-based issues with which students felt less comfortable. Our small groups functioned well because the students initiated discipline-specific areas for conversation, I initiated writing-specific concerns, and then we were all able to weigh in based on our own readings of the draft. Thus, it became clear early in the course that the students expected me to provide them with feedback focused on clarity, organization, and style. For example, I often commented on paragraph length, topic sentences, unclear terminology, syntax, and section-specific organization, and then we were all able to discuss possible revisions together.

*Assumption 2: Tutors should act with directive, interventionist methods.*

*Challenge 2: Explicit instruction and non-directiveness teach students to navigate various perspectives.*

Since I provided feedback from a position of writing—not disciplinary—expert, I understood my role to be non-directive, in that I did not tell students specifically what changes to make. Instead, I provided explicit directions for peer review to stimulate strong, detailed feedback from multiple readers, and also offered detailed comments/questions on each student’s draft. These guidelines called for writers to identify areas of focus for their readers, and for reviewers to spend at least 45 minutes commenting (see Appendix 1). The purpose of working in writing groups then was to offer students a variety of perspectives on their drafts and to engage in conversation that made those perspectives clear to the individual writer. Then, students worked individually to navigate the feedback they received and make decisions about the changes they wanted to make. This process usefully mimics what students will eventually experience when they submit articles for publication and when they work with dissertation committees.

Overall, I found that when graduate students are taught how to provide specific feedback in writing groups, tutor directiveness is unnecessary because graduate writers are capable of self-directed revision; students revised holistically and did not need to work individually with me to figure out how to do it. Although I offered to work with students one-on-one, only one student requested a meeting one time over the course of the semester. Furthermore, since we continued to work with the same article and its revisions, students received comments from their peer groups and myself four times. Oftentimes, if a section of the draft was not revised thoroughly enough, we continued to bring our concerns to the writer during writing group time until our questions/concerns were resolved.

While I did not consider my role to be directive in terms of speaking over the group to tell students what to revise and how, I did explicitly describe academic writing conventions, as I understood them, especially because I was working with a group of translingual students for whom this American-style of research writing seemed new. For instance, one area that was unfamiliar to these students was the literature review section, where students needed to draw conclusions about multiple sources, point out gaps and limitations, and then position their own work in relation to previous research. In addition, these students were unfamiliar with the concept of “foreshadowing,” or stating early in the Introduction what was to come in the remainder of the article. Thus, we spent time early in the semester looking at sample articles together and writing out guidelines for how students could make similar moves in their own writing.

In addition to these organizational structures that seemed new to this group of translingual students, we also focused our discussion on academic style. As noted by Talinn Phillips in “Tutor Training and Services for Multilingual Graduate Writers: A Reconsideration” (2013), such a focus on what we would usually consider to be “lower order concerns” must be taken seriously when working with translingual writers. Not to be confused with grammar, these students turned specifically to me for advice about how to position themselves in their writing (to use “I,” or “we,” or neither), how to use sentence-level writing conventions (like “On the one hand...On the other hand...”), and how to write transitional topic sentences that start with the previous paragraph’s old information before introducing the new information. Our style discussions were framed around findings from our first Wednesday meeting when students were asked to investigate editorial guidelines for a journal in which they wished to eventually be published. One

student found a business journal that requested manuscripts to be written in “scientific English.” While we had a few laughs over not understanding what that meant, we also were forced to acknowledge that this journal (and perhaps others) wanted what we could only interpret as an American-style of writing. Thus, we took sentence structure, grammar, and style seriously in our group meetings, and I was explicit in explaining these conventions when they surfaced.

*Assumption 3: Tutors must constantly navigate conflicts related to their own authority and their relationship to the course instructor.*

*Challenge 3: Peer-to-peer authority can be established among all class members, including the tutor and instructor.*

Carol starts each semester by stating that we should all think of one another as peers with different kinds of sub-disciplinary expertise. For instance, in addition to calling everyone by their first names, Carol is quick to point out her own lack of expertise, especially when she responds to students who are not in Marketing. “Don’t let me put words in your mouth,” Carol said almost every time she repeated students’ projects back to them in her own words. Thus, Carol taught with an awareness of her authority as the course instructor, and constantly worked to encourage students to take ownership of their research and speak as experts of their own sub-disciplines.

Not only was authority shared across all students of the course, but Carol also trusted me with a third of our class periods to focus on writing in any way that I wanted. When I asked her about this, Carol explained that when working with people in academia at the graduate level, people tend to know what they are good at and they work best when they are given the freedom to work off of their own strengths. She also argued that in terms of writing, there are so many different things you can work on with a group of students, and that while she and I would probably spend time in writing classes differently, both approaches were equally valuable.

While I do not necessarily think this degree of trust and freedom is possible in an undergraduate classroom with a faculty member and an undergraduate course-embedded tutor, it works well at the graduate level because the students enter the classroom with more authority. My own experience as a graduate student and co-teacher in MARK 8397 suggests that instructors are more likely to trust the class of graduate students with carrying out their own education. Thus, we did not need Carol’s “supervision” to work seriously and effectively in writing groups because the students were invested in becoming better writers.

This suggests that, while not appropriate for all courses and students, there may indeed be instances where undergraduate tutors and students should be given more trust and independence, which in turn can help them gain more authority. In our Wednesday meetings for MARK 8397, students seemed to feel more comfortable admitting their questions and concerns about writing without Carol present. For instance, we spent some of our time trying to interpret things Carol explained in class (like when she told one student that she “couldn’t see the forest for the trees”) or comments she had made on someone’s draft. Had Carol been present during our Wednesday meetings, we might not have talked about our questions and confusions as openly.

Furthermore, in both the small group Wednesday setting and during Monday classes, I noticed that I was treated as “the writing expert,” and in this particular context, I was comfortable owning up to that. For instance, on Mondays when we worked together on phrasing a research project in a sentence or two, Carol often turned to me for advice. Sometimes I offered a suggestion and other times I asked questions geared at helping the writer establish the task at hand in her own words. Thus, I did not face conflicts related to my own authority because my authority was recognized as different yet equally valuable compared with Carol’s and that of the other students in the class.

### A Call for Course-Embedded Programs at the Graduate Level

In this article, I have challenged key assumptions about CEPs at the undergraduate level. Specifically, I’ve argued that tutors with disciplinary expertise and directive approaches are not necessarily preferable at the graduate level, and that establishing authority can be less of a struggle. Instead, graduate-level CEPs can benefit from generalist, non-directive tutors who work with students in small groups and operate with a writerly authority that is recognized by both the instructor and the students.

In addition, I would like to argue that course-embedded tutoring at the graduate level begins to answer Steve Simpson’s call in “Building Sustainability: Dissertation Boot Camp as a Nexus of Graduate Writing Support” (2013) for WCs to create a more university-wide, outward focused kind of writing support for graduate students. In particular, MARK 8397 serves as a model for how a graduate class with a course-embedded tutor could function. Furthermore, the three observations from within MARK 8397 that I have presented provide future course-embedded tutors and administrators with a starting point from

which to develop further research about how to develop and train course-embedded tutors at the graduate level.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I prefer the term translingual, as defined by Horner, Lu, Royster, and Trimbur (2011) because it recognizes the potential for multiple languages to be key resources in producing meaning in writing and speaking. This term also recognizes that students work across languages, rather than solely within one language or another.

<sup>2</sup> Permission to include the course and college names was granted by the instructor.

<sup>3</sup> Name has been changed to protect the privacy of the instructor.

<sup>4</sup> Before I had the position, an assistant director turned graduate student in rhetoric and composition worked with MARK 8397.

#### Works Cited

- Carol. *MARK 8397: Communicating Academic Research Syllabus*. 2014. Bauer College of Business, University of Houston, Houston, TX. Microsoft Word file.
- Carol. Personal Interview. 7 July 2014.
- Cairns, Rhoda and Paul V. Anderson. “The Protean Shape of the Writing Associate’s Role: An Empirical Study and Conceptual Model” Hughes and Hall n. pag. Web.
- Corbett, Stephen J. “Bringing The Noise: Peer Power and Authority, On Location.” Spigelman and Grobman 101-111. Print.
- Horner, Bruce, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur. “Opinion: Language Difference in Writing: Towards a Translingual Approach.” *College English* 73.3 (2011): 303-321. Web.
- Hughes, Bradley and Emily B. Hall, eds. Special Issue “Rewriting Across the Curriculum: Writing Fellows as Agents of Change in WAC.” *Across the Disciplines* 5 (2008): n. pag. Web.
- . “Guest Editors’ Introduction.” Special Issue “Rewriting Across the Curriculum: Writing Fellows as Agents of Change in WAC.” *Across the Disciplines* 5 (2008): n. pag. Web.
- Martins, David and Thia Wolf. “Classroom-Based Tutoring and the ‘Problem’ of Tutor Identity: Highlighting the Shift from Writing Center to Classroom-Based Tutoring.” Spigelman and Grobman 157-173. Print.

- Phillips, Talinn. "Tutor Training and Services for Multilingual Graduate Writers: A Reconsideration." *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal* 10.2 (2013): n.pag. Web.
- Severino, Carol and Mary Traschel. "Theories of Specialized Discourses and Writing Fellows Programs." Hughes and Hall n. pag. Web.
- Simpson, Steve. "Building Sustainability: Dissertation Boot Camp as a Nexus of Graduate Writing Support." *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal* 10.2 (2013): n.pag. Web.
- Singer, Marti, Robin Breault, and Jennifer Wing. "Contextualizing Issues of Power and Promise: Classroom-Based Tutoring in Writing Across the Curriculum." Spigelman and Grobman 139-156. Print.
- Soliday, Mary. "General Readers and Classroom Tutors across the Curriculum." Spigelman and Grobman 31-43.
- Spigelman, Candace, and Laurie Grobman, eds. *On Location: Theory and Practice in Classroom-Based Writing Tutoring*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2005. Print.
- Williams, Joseph M. and Gregory G. Colomb. *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. New York: Longman, 2010. Print.
- Zawacki, Terry Myers. "Writing Fellows as WAC Change Agents: Changing What? Changing Whom? Changing How?" Hughes and Hall n. pag.