

1-1-2014

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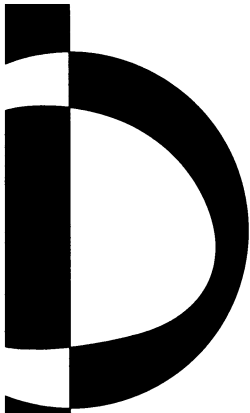
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Recommended Citation

Nordlof, John (2014) "Vygotsky, Scaffolding, and the Role of Theory in Writing Center Work," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 34 : Iss. 1, Article 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1785>

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Abstract

This essay argues for a broad theoretical perspective in writing center work that simultaneously contextualizes tutoring practices and complements research agendas. Writing center scholarship shows considerable resistance to both empirical research agendas and theoretical perspectives. Confronting this, the author chooses to examine the issue of directive/nondirective tutoring to evaluate theory as a framework. A review of social constructivist theories on the issue finds that these theories do not function as theory should, to clarify tutoring approaches and provide impetus for research. To fulfill this theoretical function, the author approaches the issue through Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), complemented by educational studies' scaffolding theory. ZPD explains that learning begins socially and is consequently internalized. This provides a model for tutors to scaffold growth through observing students' understanding and consequently adjusting intervention levels. A scaffolded ZPD approach thus provides an explanatory framework for tutoring practice and a basis for further research.

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Over the dozen years I have taught the writing center tutor education course at my university, I have had the opportunity to work through the classic, anthologized texts of our field many times. While my students and I wrestled with these texts, questions came to mind as to how these texts relate to one another: Why are some tutoring practices more effective than others? What explains why technique x is appropriate in some circumstances, whereas technique y is more appropriate in others? In short, I began to ask whether there could be a theoretical conception that might adequately explain and encompass the full range of successful practices that tutors might use to help writers develop their skills. In recent years we have seen a welcome emphasis in our field on the importance of conducting both quantitative and qualitative research to understand what works best in writing centers, rather than rely primarily on lore and anecdote. My essay will argue for the importance of developing a theoretical perspective on our work as an important asset in itself and a complement to a research agenda.

The role of research in writing center work has been a topic of significant discussion in recent years. There have been numerous calls from leaders in the field encouraging writing center scholarship to move beyond a reliance on lore or anecdote and develop more rigorous standards for research on what we do. Examples of these calls can be found in two recent articles appearing in *The Writing Center Journal (WCJ)*: Isabelle Thompson, Alyson Whyte, David Shannon, Amanda Muse, Kristen Miller, Milla Chappell, & Abby Whigham's "Examining our Lore" (2009) and Dana Driscoll & Sherry Wynn Perdue's "Theory, Lore, and More" (2012). Both articles reject the idea that lore, ungeneralizable local knowledge, "creates knowledge that is valid" (Hobson, 1994, p.8), but each does so from a different vantage point. Thompson and her colleagues focus on determining whether received lore about writing center work correlates to tutoring sessions that are seen as successful by both the student and the tutor. Their findings suggest that much of what they identified as received lore does not translate into successful tutoring sessions, and they conclude by arguing that "it may be time to clean our writing center closets" in terms of our own lore (p. 100). Driscoll & Wynn Perdue critique lore from a different perspective, considering the possibilities of RAD research, that is, "research that is replicable, aggregable, and data supported" (p. 18).

This call for stronger research practices is not new in the field, however. Stephen North (1984b) made an argument for the value and importance of empirical, falsifiable research in writing center work that sounds remarkably similar to those of the authors cited above. In his article, North urges writing centers to tackle the following broad

research question: “What happens in writing tutorials?” He also notes that research at the time showed more “about what people *want* to happen in and as a result of tutorials than about what *does* happen” (p. 29). Given North’s status in the field, it might seem surprising that his call for a serious research agenda did not gain much traction. Nonetheless, as Elizabeth Boquet & Neal Lerner (2008) have demonstrated, North’s 1984 essay on writing center research has been almost entirely overshadowed in the field by his more popular essay of the same year, “The Idea of a Writing Center.”¹

But while some resistance to research might be attributable to limitations endemic to our field (lack of resources, professional marginality, etc.), another aspect of resistance to research expresses itself as a resistance to systematic or theoretical thought itself. A cogent articulation of this position comes in Eric Hobson’s 1994 article, “Writing Center Practice Often Counters Its Theory. So What?” In this piece, Hobson argues that attempts to articulate theoretical positions that would have broad descriptive power for writing center work represent a “trap” rooted in what he describes as “positivist epistemology” (p. 7). In contrast, Hobson explicitly argues for the value of what he describes as “lore,” which he defines as a process of accepting “contradiction between theory and practice” (8). Hobson makes the connection between writing center theory and suspicion of empirical research explicit when he argues that empirical, RAD research approaches “can ensnare us and our theory and practice *only* when we consent to live by the disciplinary ‘rules’ of non-contradiction” (p. 7). The theoretical perspective articulated by Hobson represents not simply indifference to RAD research but outright resistance to it. But it is not simply resistance to research but to a theoretical perspective as well. If we cannot produce replicable and aggregable research, we cannot generalize about that research and pose possible explanations for the underlying principles behind the results. Hobson’s is a theory that is at heart anti-theoretical, presenting a deep skepticism about the possibility or even the desirability of generalizing from specific observation statements that might explain a broad range of scenarios.

1 According to Boquet & Lerner, “the righteousness of ‘Idea’ ironically became an ossifying force for the assumptions inherent in writing center work, assumptions that, in ‘Writing Center Research,’ North was calling for the field to test. ‘Idea’ began to dominate the pages and Works Cited lists in [WCJ]; in contrast, North’s plea to and for writing center scholars went largely unheeded: Only seven [WCJ] articles from 1985 to 2005 reference ‘Writing Center Research,’ in contrast to the 64 articles that reference ‘Idea’” (2008, p. 183).

Rebecca Babcock & Therese Thonus (2012) begin to address this issue of theoretical perspective in their book *Researching the Writing Center: Towards an Evidence-Based Practice*. According to them, “our theories have rarely been recognized for what they are: ontological and epistemological constructs that privilege anecdote and experience while overlooking empirical evidence” (p. 56). In this they are quite right, and they accurately describe Hobson’s position. Writing center theory has often relied on abstracted lore, sometimes defiantly so. At this point, however, I want to push Babcock & Thonus’ critique of writing center theories one step further. While our theories often lack empirical evidence to support them, they also do not function for us *as theories should* for a discipline. That is to say, the typical role of theory within a discipline is to provide a broad explanation of the processes that underlie the surface phenomena that can be observed. In other words, theories provide the “why” to help us understand the “what.”

This problem with theory brings me to the heart of the project for this article. A classic example of our problem with theory can be found looking at a familiar and well-worn discussion in the field: the directive/nondirective tutoring debate. Directive or nondirective tutoring stances do not comprise theoretical stances in any traditional sense. They describe in a general way techniques that tutors might use, like modeling certain behaviors or asking open-ended questions. Our lack of theoretical models to describe what we do in tutoring sessions, however, has meant that these stances have become proxies for theoretical models themselves. Absent some grounding in a clearly articulated explanatory principle, our most common tutorial practices have been termed by many writers as “orthodoxies.” And they are right to do so, as without connecting our practices tightly to a broader conception of our purposes, we are left feeling frustrated when those techniques do not lead us to our desired ends.

So what might be a way forward? The answer to that question, in my view, begins with consideration of our ultimate goal for tutoring sessions. If our purpose in tutoring students is to help them develop their skills at writing, this gives us a place to start. Developing skills in something implies growth, maturation. Thus to aid students in becoming better writers, it would help us in writing center work to understand as best we can the process of intellectual growth and development, and at the same time to understand the best ways to encourage that growth process. In short, it would help us as a field to understand something about educational psychology.

Because of its widespread use and discussion in the writing center community, the directive/nondirective debate can serve as a laboratory

for evaluating the role of theory in our field. It is my contention that a theoretical perspective that adequately describes the processes behind our tutoring interventions will not only help us to describe what we do more clearly than we are able to do currently, but it will also help us to envision and implement even more appropriate practices. To make this claim, I will look at the debate from two theoretical perspectives. First, I will consider the debate through the lens of social construction or collaborative theory; second, I will consider the debate through the lens of psychologist Lev Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the related concept of scaffolding. I will then look at the critical differences between the two theoretical perspectives and consider how a more careful study of Vygotsky's work and perspective can serve to enrich our ability to understand what we do from a theoretical perspective. As I will argue, the importance of adopting adequate theoretical frames to explain our work will serve at least two important purposes. First, it will allow us to articulate our practices and their value more convincingly to those outside our own writing centers, including colleagues at our own institutions. Second, work that develops theoretical perspectives will allow us to explore the question of "why" that is so important to a spirit of inquiry.

The Directive/Nondirective Continuum Considered from a Theoretical Perspective

Because it has been a source of contention for so long, the directive/nondirective debate in writing center work seems to call out for an adequate theoretical perspective. To do so I would first like to set out a brief summary of the discussion. Jeff Brooks' 1991 piece, "Minimalist Tutoring," sets out a strong version of the non-directive position. Arguing that direct attempts by writing tutors to improve students' papers represents a "trap" to "avoid" (p. 219), Brooks encourages tutors to instead "ask questions . . . as often as possible" (p. 223). This widely-cited piece has become the classic statement in the field representing the nondirective position in tutoring. Linda Shamoon & Deborah Burns (1995) responded to Brooks by contending that encouraging imitation in the style of a master class as practiced in the fine arts can lead to student success and a demystification of the writing process. Furthermore, they argue that the Socratic, question-asking nondirective approach advocated by Brooks has become "orthodoxy" in the writing center community (p. 239). More recently, Peter Carino's 2003 article "Power and Authority in Peer Tutoring," addressed the debate in order to reconcile the two approaches. However, none of these sources base their

conclusions on what one could describe as empirical, RAD research. The evidence presented in these articles largely consists of anecdote. But from a theoretical perspective, the question is not so much whether one side or the other can be proven true, but whether there is adequate explanation for why it is true. That is to say, what frame can explain what underlying learning processes are at work and how might that frame justify the use of directive tutoring, nondirective tutoring, or some mixture of the two?

In many ways, it seems that social construction theory has the potential to reconcile the two poles of the directive/nondirective debate. As the theoretical construct supporting two of the field's most widely-read and discussed essays, Kenneth Bruffee's "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind'" (1984) and Andrea Lunsford's "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center" (1991), social construction holds a central position in writing center theory. By focusing on the back-and-forth of discussion in tutorial sessions, social construction—on its face—seems to break out of the model where either the tutor talks or the writer talks. But first, what exactly is social construction? According to Bruffee (1984), social constructionists find "knowledge [to be] maintained and established by communities of knowledgeable peers. It is what together we agree it is, for the time being" (p. 646). Put in other terms, knowledge is an idea that gains authority by the agreement of one's peers; it is belief assented to by a larger group of equals.

For the purposes of writing center work, a critical issue implicit in social construction theory but not addressed in Bruffee is that of how such communities are constituted. That is to say, by what authority do academic disciplines establish knowledge, and what differentiates that authority from arbitrary assertions of power? The issue can be understood by considering Bruffee's definition of social construction: "knowledge is maintained and established by communities of knowledgeable peers" (1984, p. 646). The key phrase in this definition, for our purposes, is "communities of knowledgeable peers." Using the term "knowledgeable," the phrase implies a group of people who have gone through a learning and maturation process and are able to approach academic questions as equals. So social construction describes the process by which professional equals build knowledge, but it leaves unanswered two questions that are important to our work in writing centers: How do "knowledgeable peers" become knowledgeable, and how do we describe collaborations in a community whose members are not equally knowledgeable?

To understand social construction's relevance to the directive/nondirective continuum, I will review Lunsford's (1991) influential article, "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center." This article continues to have relevance in part because it shows the possibility of working a way out of an intractable problem for writing centers. From a practical standpoint, Lunsford offers a possible resolution or way of thinking through the directive/nondirective debate. The collaborative model presents knowledge not as externally or internally available, but as present in the negotiation between student and tutor, as informed by social construction theory. For Lunsford, this idea of a writing center "would place control, power, and authority not in the tutor or staff, not in the individual student, but in the negotiating group" (p. 97). So applied to the directive/nondirective debate, Lunsford's collaboration model offers a possible way of resolving the two approaches. Since knowledge is created through social interaction, then the relationship between student and tutor is a give-and-take conversation, which appears to suggest that the tutoring session might consist of a balance between directive and nondirective forms of tutoring.

A closer reading of Lunsford's piece suggests otherwise, however. Lunsford's conception of collaboration centers on the idea that collaboration should comprise equal contributions from both tutor and writer, "an environment [that] rejects traditional hierarchies" (p. 95). This stance does not appear to be bound up in Lunsford's particular conception of collaboration, but in the nature of social construction. If knowledge is construed as whatever the parties in a tutoring session agree to, as Lunsford claims, then it becomes impossible to determine whether a tutor is helping the student gain knowledge or simply asserting a position of authority when taking a directive stance. The examples Lunsford gives of collaboration are telling in this regard, as she focuses on co-workers who occupy equal status (p. 95). What Lunsford does not discuss here is a key difference between workplace collaborations and writing center conferences, namely that in a workplace setting all parties might be equally assigned to complete a task, whereas in a writing center setting only one party, the student, is ultimately responsible for the assignment. As a result, divisions of labor that might make sense in a workplace or professional environment, such as giving each person a section of the document to compose, simply don't make sense in a writing center situation, regardless of the model. Furthermore, the workplace scenario does not account for the unequal collaborative encounter found in many tutoring sessions, where one of the participants is likely more knowledgeable about the writing process than the other.

Carino's "Power and Authority in Peer Tutoring" (2003) both applies and critiques the collaboration model in relationship to the directive/nondirective debate; in the process, his essay exemplifies the theoretical limitations of a social construction model for explaining this debate. While he is able to arrive at a practical approach that resolves the conflict, it will become clear in this reading that to do so he has to move beyond social construction as a theoretical frame. Carino seeks a balance in the article between directive and nondirective tutoring. While acknowledging that nondirective tutoring has been "justified by egalitarian notions of peership" (p. 98), Carino contends that sometimes withholding information from a student can be counterproductive for a tutoring session and possibly unethical. As a result, he seeks to convince his audience that holding authority, without being authoritarian, is a critical element in peer tutoring: "Writing centers can ill afford to pretend power and authority do not exist, given the important responsibility they have for helping students achieve their own authority as writers in a power laden environment such as the university" (p. 113).

It becomes clear as Carino attempts to move past the directive/nondirective impasse that he does so without also developing a wider theoretical perspective by which to frame his new conception. He calls for a "sliding scale" (p. 110) approach, based on the knowledge of the tutor and student, which could be described as follows: The level of directiveness in a tutorial session should be determined by the relative knowledge of the tutor and writer. While the solution to the problem Carino perceives seems reasonable, he still lacks a basis for explaining *why* one should follow his suggestion. It is as if his practical insights have outstripped his theoretical frame of reference. This problem appears to arise precisely because of Carino's reliance on Bruffee and a collaborative/social constructionist model. To justify a stance that includes a mixture of directive and nondirective tutoring, Carino quotes Bruffee's colleague Marcia Silver, who states, "probably the single most important condition for teaching writing is the willingness on the part of the student writer to accept criticism and grow as a result of it" (as cited in Beck, Hawkins, & Silver, 1978, p. 435). This certainly sounds reasonable. To rephrase the statement, student growth is paramount in a tutorial session, and techniques should be used that promote growth, be they directive or nondirective.

But there are two problems with Carino's appropriation of Silver here. First, the context of Silver's article is tutor training, not tutoring. The scenario Silver describes is a peer review session, not a tutorial session. In the context of a tutor education course, the students are encountering each other as peers, as equals, offering each other feedback.

As Muriel Harris (1992) has argued, the collaborative context of peer feedback should not be confused with that of a tutorial session. The second problem relates to a key phrase in Silver's statement, "to grow as a result of it." What does it mean for a student to grow, and can social construction explain what growth might mean in this context? The very concept of growth implies a developmental process that reaches beyond the social context of human knowledge building as it directly implies some form of internal development. To sum up the difficulties arising from this passage, social construction might explain how knowledge is created between peers, but what about a situation where the participants are unequal, and furthermore, how in fact does growth arise in the individual? All this is not to suggest that Carino is wrong in his conclusion that somewhat hierarchical tutoring relationships might lead to student growth and positive outcomes in a tutoring session. In fact, as will be seen, I agree with his conclusion. However, I believe that he has not developed the theoretical explanation for his conclusion adequately.

This problem of a lack of theoretical justification for Carino's position might seem like an artificial crisis, but I plan to show why this is not the case. Rather, this problem haunts Carino's argument and puts a question mark over his conclusion.² To see the problem clearly, we need to look at an extended passage:

I realize here that I am seeming to treat knowledge as an entity, a thing, rather than something constructed, as is readily accepted in postmodern thought, but in many tutorials the knowledge, for student and tutor, *is* something to be retrieved or transmitted. (2003, p. 108)

The passage displays understandable unease. Carino opens with a nod to the social constructionist position when he states, "I am seeming to treat knowledge as an entity." But he then goes on to assert the external reality of knowledge relevant to a tutorial session, elements like "conventions of the lab report and the play review" (p. 108). It's easy to

² It should be noted that Carino is not the only person haunted by this issue. In her piece "Maintaining Chaos in the Writing Center," Irene Lurkis Clark (1990) has a similar difficulty. The challenge is not so much in resolving the issue practically. Clark, like Carino, proposes that both directive and nondirective approaches have value for peer tutoring, but her attitude towards theoretical perspectives is consistent with Carino's approach. She uses the term "chaos" to describe her stance, by which she means "a willingness to entertain multiple perspectives on critical issues, an ability to tolerate contradictions and contraries, in short, not to become so dogmatic, so set in our ways, so fossilized, so sure that we know how to do it 'right' that we stop growing and developing" (p. 82).

have sympathy for this position. It probably feels right to most readers, and it appears to put the interests of the tutor first. As Carino later states, this position has “the good sense to place student needs before orthodoxy” (p. 112). In other words, if social construction, “orthodoxy” as he describes it, is inadequate, writing centers should ditch the theory. This move seems like sound advice, but in taking it one is forced to abandon collaboration as a theoretical basis for evaluating directive and nondirective tutoring practices.

The point of this line of reasoning is not to critique Carino from a practical standpoint. Carino is working through a difficult issue in writing center studies and addresses problems in what he terms the “orthodoxy” of the field. Rather, the point is to acknowledge an impasse represented by two things. First, the continuing debate over directive and nondirective forms of tutoring represents a real attempt by our field to develop the best methods for helping students grow as writers. Second, the problem will not be fully addressed until an adequate theoretical frame can be proposed to describe and explain the range of tutorial decisions that might be made in terms of the directive/nondirective continuum.³ Resolution of this debate should provide greater clarity for tutor education curriculum and practices; in addition, it could provide impetus for research agendas in the field by providing a new theoretical perspective to be tested, critiqued, modified, and extended.

The Debate Considered from a Vygotskian Position

While I noted that Carino (2003) significantly questions collaboration’s relevance as a theoretical framework for writing center work and dismisses it as “orthodoxy,” he does propose a model for negotiating directive and nondirective approaches in tutoring based on the relative knowledge areas of the student and tutor. Furthermore, he points toward a principle that could provide an overall framework

3 On this front, it should be noted that critiques of collaboration theory as articulated by Bruffee (1984) and Lunsford (1991) are not new. See, for example, Alice Gillam (1994), who notes that “Bruffee’s theoretical formulations of practice tend to be idealized, unproblematic, and acontextual” (p. 39). Like others, however, Gillam concludes her analysis with a rejection of the very idea of searching for a concept that might have greater insight into the tutoring process than collaboration, noting that “theory does not offer explanations of criteria for assessment as new perspectives” (p. 51), perspectives that are, as she puts it, “paradoxical, contingent” (p. 51). Other critiques include Harvey Kail (1983), John Trimbur (1987), and Christina Murphy (1994).

for writing center work, namely the encouragement of student “growth.” The task of this section is to move that idea further. From a theoretical standpoint, this means finding a framework that is broad enough to explain how to adjust tutoring methods for different stages of development and exemplify a conception of student growth.

At this point the work of Russian psychologist and theorist Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky becomes relevant. In this section, I apply Vygotsky’s most popular concept, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), to the directive/nondirective debate.⁴ Presented in Vygotsky’s essay “Interaction between Learning and Development,” the ZPD first of all addresses a key question posed by Carino’s article: It frames the issue of student learning clearly in terms of growth. According to Vygotsky, in the Russian schools of his time, development was tested by assessing what students already knew (1978, p. 85). In contrast, he poses a different way to look at the question: “Over a decade even the profoundest thinkers never questioned the assumption; they never entertained the notion that what children can do with the assistance of others might be in some sense even more indicative of their mental development than what they can do alone” (p. 85). To rephrase this point, Vygotsky asks if student accomplishments while under instruction might be better markers of their potential intellectual growth than their unaided accomplishments. Vygotsky then turns this question into an idea or hypothesis, which he calls the ZPD. In defining the idea, he describes the ZPD as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (1978, p. 86). Later, Vygotsky articulates the process he has in mind as structuring this Zone:

The acquisition of language can provide a paradigm for the entire problem of the relation between learning and development. Language arises initially as a means of communication between the child and the people in his environment. Only subsequently, upon conversion to internal speech, does it come to organize

4 Vygotsky has been cited a number of times in articles about writing centers, including Bruffee (1984), Anne DiPardo (1992), Jane Cogie (2001), and Sam Van Horne (2012). However, it has been typical in these articles to refer to Vygotsky in ways that do not distinguish his approach from that of social constructionists. For a full discussion of Vygotsky’s relationship to social construction, see Stuart Rowlands (2000).

the child's thought, that is, become an internal mental function. (1978, p. 89)

Put briefly, Vygotsky sees linguistic development as a process that begins with external, socialized communication, only later to be translated to what he terms "internal speech." All this points to a concept of *how* growth happens through the process of interaction with a teacher or tutor. According to Vygotsky, "Any higher mental function necessarily goes through an external stage in its development because it is initially a social function" (1981, p. 162). Growth, in Vygotsky's model, happens through the internalization of what begins as social interaction. Vygotsky can therefore offer us a model for understanding student learning; it is a developmental process in which concepts are internalized through social interaction.

So how can the ZPD be applied to writing center work? Although developed separately from Vygotsky's ZPD, the concept of scaffolding as developed by David Wood, Jerome Bruner, & Gail Ross (1976) has close parallels with Vygotsky's concept and this association has been recognized by scholars in education.⁵ Considering how these scholars developed the idea of scaffolding can help us understand the power of Vygotsky's ideas for writing center work. According to Wood, Bruner, & Ross, scaffolding "consists essentially of the adult 'controlling' those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner's capacity, thus permitting [the learner] to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within [the learner's] range of competence" (p. 90). An example of controlling elements of a task for a learner might be found in teaching a child to ride a bicycle. When an adult holds on to the back of the bicycle while the child rides, the adult effectively controls an element that might be beyond the child's ability at the moment (balance), and allows the child to focus on the skill of pedaling. Connecting back to Vygotsky, scaffolding might be seen as a metaphor to describe the approaches tutors might take to help students reach the limits of their zones of proximal development.

Sadhana Puntambekar & Roland Hübscher (2005) summarize the key features of scaffolding in four concepts: intersubjectivity, ongoing diagnosis, dialogic and interactive, and fading (pp. 2–3). The first concept, intersubjectivity, is helpful for the purpose and posture of the tutoring encounter; it is a collaboration based on a shared goal. As the authors state:

Intersubjectivity is attained when the adult and child collaboratively redefine the task so that there is combined ownership of the task

5 See, for example, Puntambekar & Hübscher (2005).

and the child shares an understanding of the goal that he or she needs to accomplish. The adult or expert's role is to ascertain that the learner is invested in the task as well as to help sustain this motivation. (pp. 2–3).

The next two concepts, ongoing diagnosis and dialogic and interactive, function in tandem to describe the process by which the tutor gauges the appropriate level at which to engage the student. Ongoing diagnosis implies that the tutor must continually adjust approaches based on an assessment of the student's "current level of understanding" (p. 3), while the dialogic and interactive nature of scaffolding provides the means for this diagnosis. The final concept, fading, describes when a student has internalized a particular task, at which point "there is a transfer of responsibility from the teacher to the learner and the scaffolding can be removed, as the learner moves toward independent activity" (p. 3).

Some key scaffolding concepts emerge in these descriptions. The first is that a goal for tutoring becomes clear: to help students achieve what they could not do on their own. The second is the idea that the nature of support the tutor provides changes depending on the circumstances. When the student is first learning a concept, the tutor might provide more explicit modeling and instruction. Later, when the student is becoming more comfortable with the concept, the tutor begins to fade back, providing less and less support. The image of scaffolding provides an apt metaphor for this approach; the scaffold provides structure, but it is temporary, meant to be dismantled once the building is in place.

In practice, tutors implement the concept of scaffolding through two main techniques: cognitive scaffolding and motivational scaffolding. As described by Jennifer Cromley & Roger Azevedo (2005), cognitive scaffolding involves providing appropriate support to help students "in figuring out problems for themselves" (p. 88). They give a number of examples of cognitive scaffolding, including "simplifying problems, hinting, asking open-ended questions (pumping), and prompting" (p. 89). Motivational scaffolding techniques, according to Jo Mackiewicz & Isabelle Thompson (2013), help a tutor build a supportive learning environment for the student and might include things like expressions of "praise," "sympathy and empathy," and "optimism about students' possibilities for success" (p. 47, italics in original).

A significant scholarly discussion of tutoring strategies and methods based on the ZPD and scaffolding has developed since the 1970s, but this discussion has had little influence on writing center research. A notable exception to this lack can be found in Isabelle Thompson's 2009 piece, "Scaffolding in the Writing Center." One important element

of this study is quite simply its literature review, which describes the bounty of research done on the concepts of the ZPD and of scaffolding in tutoring. In other words, Thompson introduces the writing center community to a whole discussion that had previously been ignored. But just as importantly, Thompson shows that the scaffolding concept, as developed by education scholars over the years, provides writing center researchers with a greater ability to describe the elements of “effective” tutoring. In her discussion, Thompson notes that, for example, “discussing tutoring strategies in terms of directiveness limits our understanding of how writing centers can best serve students” (p. 446). Furthermore, Thompson finds that what she terms an “asymmetrical relationship” (p. 447) between tutor and student is a critical part of a scaffolded tutoring session, and that writing center research should focus not on avoiding asymmetry but on “examin[ing] the nature of the asymmetrical relationship, not only linguistically according to the directive language used by tutors but also according to the tutoring strategies used” (p. 447). Thompson’s research leads her to question the usefulness of the directive/nondirective continuum and collaboration theory as tools to explain successful tutoring practice. Specifically, Thompson begins at a very different point than the collaborationist, assuming different forms of knowledge on the part of tutor and student.

So to return to Carino in closing this section, it becomes clear that the conclusion he arrived at through practice has roots in the theoretical model Vygotsky established. Not only does the ZPD highlight human growth in the process of knowledge acquisition, but it also provides a reasonable framework within which we can move beyond the directive/nondirective continuum. If, as Vygotsky (1978) argues, “learning which is oriented toward developmental levels that have already been reached is ineffective from the viewpoint of a child’s overall development” (p. 89), then the role of the tutor or instructor becomes to establish what the student already knows and what the student is learning so that the session can be focused on building the scaffolding or structure for the student to practice under supervision those skills that are in development. Ultimately, a focus on the ZPD and scaffolding creates a whole new set of questions for the tutor to use during a session. The question tutors ask is no longer *Am I being too directive or nondirective?* Rather, they can now ask *What is this student’s ZPD?* and *How can I utilize appropriate scaffolds to help the student develop further?*

To summarize, an understanding of the ZPD and scaffolding can provide explanatory concepts that push us beyond the dichotomy of directive/nondirective tutoring, replacing techniques with a broader matrix of tutorial strategies in a way that can enrich the way we think

about what we do in writing centers. The ZPD provides us with a more appropriate conceptual basis for writing center work than social construction, as it provides a developmental model for how student learning occurs, as opposed to social construction's focus on how knowledge is created in professional fields. Scaffolding provides the metaphor to describe how that development can be encouraged through the use of cognitive and motivational scaffolding techniques that help students develop in ways that they could not do alone. For the writing center tutor who employs these concepts, the question is no longer *Am I being too directive or nondirective?*, but whether *I have identified what skills the student is in the process of developing, and how I can develop proper scaffolds to help the student to work on those skills with me?* Thus the greater coherence of the scaffolding model creates a practical advantage, as it offers tutors not simply a range of techniques but an understanding of how those techniques work together and might be used effectively at different points in the tutoring session. Carino's goals are met under a scaffolding model by holding together both directive and nondirective models of tutoring, combined with a richer conception of human development. But the difference is that they become tied into a coherent picture of what tutoring should be, as opposed to relying on a "we should just do what works" approach that avoids generating a conceptual model for our practices.⁶

So what are the larger implications for writing center studies? Vygotsky's ZPD, along with the related concept of scaffolding, expresses an idea that has both explanatory and theoretical power, describing as it does a process of learning and development, but it also provides the basis for specific tutoring strategies that enable learning and development. In other words, it has powerful theoretical and practical applicability that could help tutors understand not just what range of techniques they might use in a tutoring session but how those choices might fit into a larger conception of learning and development.

The first point I would like to make in terms of future writing center theory and research is to downplay the significance of the ZPD or any other catchphrase that might emerge from a cursory reading of Vygotsky's work. When Babcock & Thonus (2012) claimed that "writing center theory has often bypassed empirical research in its urgency to immediately inform practice" (p. 56), they sounded an important caution. Given current scholarship in both education and writing center studies on the ZPD and the related concept of scaffolding, there is justification to encourage widespread use of these concepts

⁶ Another example of this approach can be found in Corbett (2008).

in tutor training as a sound theoretical framework. Nonetheless, the bigger picture of this essay has to include a sense of Vygotsky's work as that of scientific inquiry guided by a historical materialist perspective.⁷ That is to say, we should view the ZPD as both a tested and testable theory. As research examines this idea within the context of writing center work, we can gain further confidence in its usefulness. A quick review of the points established in this essay should demonstrate both the practical utility of the ZPD theory and its adequacy as a theoretical framework capable of addressing the concerns raised in the directive/nondirective debate. This is no small accomplishment in itself, given the scholarship, conference papers and discussions, and tutor training devoted to consideration of this issue. But in what sense is the Zone an adequate theory? Not in the sense that it should become the new "dogma" or "orthodoxy" of writing center work, to borrow terms used by some writers discussed here to describe received concepts such as collaboration. Rather, it is adequate in the sense that it provides a perspective that actually explains the nature of student educational development and growth (in terms of internalization of socially learned concepts), and it also provides a pedagogical perspective that provides a broader frame of reference for describing a range of tutoring techniques than can be found when working along the directive/nondirective continuum.

According to Carino (1995), "as the writing center community continues to mature, it will need to see theory and practice in a multivocal dialogue, with theory providing a means of investigating practice, practice serving as a check against theoretical reification" (p. 136). This more strenuous back and forth between theory and practice is exactly what we should see developing in our field. It is my hope that as we move towards developing a research agenda in writing center studies, we do so while simultaneously recognizing the kinds of theoretical perspectives that will help us to focus and develop our research more effectively.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank the Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association for its assistance in preparing this article.

7 For more background on Vygotsky as a historical materialist, see Wayne Au (2007) and Martin Packer (2008).

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