

# **Writing Tutor Discourse**

A Quest for Student Engagement Manifested in Language

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## **Abstract**

This study looks at the discourse of writing tutor conferences with special attention to factors associated with student engagement. Building from my own experiences as a writing tutor and a theoretical framework drawn from conversational analysis as well as educational and sociolinguistic research, this analysis uses a coding system developed for this study to guide general analysis of conference structure and close analysis of moves tutors make that elicit student agenda-setting and addition-marker sequences. Results suggest the need for a complex concept of student engagement, particularly one that takes into account several diverse elements of student engagement as well as a broader understanding of what student engagement .<sup>\*</sup>

## **1.0 Background**

### **1.1 Intent**

This thesis grew out of my work as a Writing Associate, a writing tutor in Swarthmore's Writing Associates Program. Writing tutors at Swarthmore are initially trained in a semester-long class about the writing process and how to talk about it. Through this course and through my continuing contact with the program, I have come to see student engagement as key to successful tutoring. Through my experience as a student, I have found my level of engagement and active participation directly related to how much I get out of an education experience, and through my experience as a tutor, I am very aware of how challenging it can be to engage a student. Student engagement, however, is a hard term to pin down.

One of the ways we try to address student engagement is exemplified in the continuing conversation and debate about a non-directive style of tutoring as opposed to a directive style. This terminology comes from some of the literature we read (e.g. Cogie 2001) in the course and

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has become a part of the culture of the Writing Program. Generally the non-directive style is seen as aimed at eliciting student participation in setting the agenda of the conference, usually through initiations intended to elicit the student's concerns and the use of open-ended questions throughout the conference. The idea is to lead the student to identify and solve concerns for himself. The directive style, on the other hand, is one in which the tutor takes more control of the conference. For example, the directive tutor might completely control the agenda of the conference and mostly just tell the student what he needs to do to fix his paper. It may be obvious from those explanations that there is a positive connotation to non-directive and a negative connotation to directive in our culture. However there is much debate, and even confusion, about what we mean by the terms non-directive and directive and what is "good" and "bad." Attempts at non-direction may lead to less student engagement, and seemingly directive language may in fact foster greater student engagement and student structuring of the conference.

One of the reasons it is so hard as a tutor to elicit student engagement is that, although I have a kind of intuitive idea of what student engagement is, I do not completely know what I am looking for, or how I did it when I am successful. I do not think it is too bold to claim that this is a common difficulty for many well-intentioned tutors and educators. This is the inspiration for this study. The first step to figuring out what student engagement actually looks like is to analyze conferences where we think student engagement is happening and not happening and then figure out what correlates to student engagement and what it is that tutors say that actually elicits student engagement. So, the initial goal of this study is to see what exactly Swarthmore writing tutors are saying and how students are reacting. My more ambitious goal is to specifically look for and analyze factors associated with student engagement in the writing and student structuring of the conference.

## 1.2 Swarthmore: A Unique Culture

Swarthmore places a very strong emphasis on the importance of writing. First, the academic program for all students requires that all students take at least three Writing courses<sup>1</sup> before they graduate. The college also provides for a broad support network in all college life, and strongly encourages all students to take advantage of these services. Last, the general culture at Swarthmore is one of student empowerment and proactive engagement in their education. In this way the college fosters a shared value for writing and a common understanding that everybody needs support at college. The Writing Associates (our name for writing tutors) program itself actively promotes the philosophy that all students can benefit from writing tutoring. This fights against a common problem writing centers can face of being perceived as remedial or only for bad writers. My assumption and hope is that the combination of all these factors leads writing conferences at Swarthmore to be a particularly good place to look for students actively structuring the agendas of their own conferences and more generally, for student engagement. However, that said, there is always a worry that this philosophy is not shared by the general student body or that what tutors actually do in conferences does not actually put this philosophy into practice.

## 1.3 Theoretical Framework

Contemporary linguistics generally focuses on the study of language at or below the sentence level. Though there is work being done that looks for analyzable structure above the sentence level, there is debate about whether there is a higher-level counterpart to the kind of structural analysis linguists apply to sentences and words. There are worries that above that level either there is either no coherent, analyzable structure analogous to the predictable patterns and

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classifiable units in the other areas of linguistics, or that the analysis of such structure is irredeemably subjective. Still, few would argue that there is no such structure above the sentence level. Discourse analysis undertakes to address this structure. This thesis specifically makes use of conversational analysis, discourse analysis directed at the linguistic interaction between two or more participants. Even more specifically, the theoretical foundations of my work grow out of discourse structures originally developed for classroom discourse, that is, a teacher in a classroom interacting with students.

This thread of research begins with Sinclair *et al.* (1972), who presented a five-level model of discourse: *act*, *move*, *exchange*, *transaction*, *lesson*. The first level, *act*, consists of just a meaningful statement. It is often a sentence, but it doesn't have to be. My work is not particularly concerned with this level. The next level, *move*, is the main focus of my analysis. Generally, a conversational move is an utterance or set of utterances performed with a particular intent within the conversation, bounded either by a course-changing move by the other interlocuter or a change in conversational direction by the speaker himself. I will elaborate the specific definition of conversational move in this study in a later section. An *exchange* is a related set of conversational moves, and a *transaction* is an entire topical unit made up of exchanges. The meaning of *lesson* is fairly straightforward in the classroom context. I have not belabored the definitions of these three higher levels because for the most part, they do not enter into my analysis. I do look at the kind of exchanges certain moves initiate and at transactions, in the sense that I look at the structure of the entire conference, but these higher levels seem less useful to me in the context of the less structured (less lesson-like) nature of tutoring conversations. This brings me to the situation of tutoring discourse. I found little research specifically on tutoring discourse. Linguistic research tended to focus on analysis of natural

conversations and educational research tended to focus on classroom discourse. The studies specifically about tutoring discourse, which I view as my starting point, generally came from the educational perspective. In particular, I have focused on the work of Ross MacDonald (1991) who has a similar focus on conversational moves as the key unit of analysis.

MacDonald begins with a model common in classroom discourse (e.g. Mehan 1979, Cazden, 1986) consisting of three basic conversational moves: initiation, reply, and evaluation (IRE). He expands this model to the MacDonald Tutoring Interaction Codes (MTIC), which added two moves, marker and addition. Their definitions, in his own words:

An initiation is an utterance which intends to elicit a verbal or nonverbal response from another interactant. A reply is an utterance which is directly occasioned by a previously occurring initiation. An evaluation is an utterance which by inflection, tone, or word rates as positive or negative the accuracy or utility of a previous reply.[...] An addition move is an utterance, which has not been initiated, which clarifies, illustrates, extends, or elaborates the current topic. A marker is a one or two-word utterance (“um hum,” “OK,” “right”) which indicates one’s on-going attention to utterances of the other or indicates a boundary between topics. (4)

These definitions provided the basis for my own coding system, which I detail in a later section. Although my coding system has significant differences from MacDonald’s, I developed it in the spirit of the philosophy he espouses: to best explain the data.

My framework for analysis was also influenced strongly by several other sources. First, my particular interest in initiations was sparked by the work of Joann B. Johnson (1993) and informed by later work in a similar vein (Blau, Hall and Strauss 1998). Johnson brings together literature challenging the use of questions in educational contexts and invites further investigation of other types of initiations specifically in tutoring conversations about writing:

The literature on question asking reveals three problems associated with this practice: First the person asking the questions controls the direction of the inquiry; therefore, the student should be asking the

questions. Second, questioning imposed by a teacher may derail the student's train of thought, introducing confusion. Finally, most teachers do not give students as much time as they need to respond fully to questions. Teachers who become sensitive to these problems may want to ask fewer questions and find other means of communicating with students about their writing. Making declarative statements, especially paraphrases, and using imperative sentences often invites longer, more reflective responses. (34)

This work encouraged me to look at initiations as key places to look for student engagement and student structuring of the conference. Blau, Hall and Strauss provided me with guiding questions for question analysis: Who asks the question? (student/tutor) What type of question is it? (open-ended, closed, rhetorical) What is its purpose? (move conference forward, get information, elicit student participation, couch statement in question form). Though these are specifically about questions, modified versions of this list generally guide me in my analysis of all initiations.

Finally, part of the reason I decided to use videotape rather than audiotape when recording the conferences is so that I could include some elements of non-verbal communication. Non-verbal communication just as much a part of human language as the vocalizations normally studied under that heading (McNeill 1985). I often found the non-verbal communication in a conference to be essential to understanding what was going on. In my transcripts, due to time and coding restraints, I only included head-nodding and a few relevant gestures because those were the elements most relevant in my coding system. Similarly, I have tried to represent some intonation by unconventional spelling and punctuation, but invariably the transcripts are not complete in those aspects.

## **2.0 Methodology**

### **2.1 Data Collection**

In spring of 2008 I videotaped 14 writing conferences. Of those 14, I picked eight conferences to transcribe and analyze. For this thesis, I chose five of those conferences to focus on. Videos were converted to digital format and transcribed using Digital Replay Software. Conferences were usually about 20 minutes long. In choosing the conferences, I tried to get a variety of tutoring situations and styles with respect to student engagement. I videotaped conferences from both our drop-in writing center, and conferences required for students as part of a writing course. Because our program attaches writing tutors to classes for a semester, students in the latter type of conference had usually already met with this particular writing tutor one or two times before. Conferences from the drop-in center include conferences both between students who have worked together before, students who don't know each other, and students who know each other in other contexts.

### **2.2 Setting**

The setting for these conferences was unusual, due to the necessity of the video camera. Writing associates attached to courses usually hold those conferences in public student centers, like our coffee bars. Conferences for the drop-in writing center usually take place in the hallway outside the center, which is a room in an academic building. I videotaped my conferences either in a classroom near the writing center, or in the writing center when it was closed. For drop-in conferences, since I had to walk the student and tutor to the classroom with the video camera, a lot of dialogue had already happened before I could start videotaping, such that some transcripts start in the middle of a conversation. In all conferences, however, I left the room immediately after starting the video camera and was not present for the duration of the conference.

### 2.3 Participants

To get volunteers to participate in this study, I sent about half of the writing tutors active at a time an e-mail asking them if I could videotape their course writing tutor conferences, their drop-in writing conferences, or both. Then I either came to their shift at the writing center and waited for them to get a conference, or I videotaped pre-scheduled course writing tutor conferences. I excluded foreign language conferences and math conferences from my potential conference possibilities, to avoid getting dialogue I could not understand well enough to analyze. All participants were briefly told that the study was intended to study writing tutor discourse and they all agreed to participation with the understanding that they would not be identified in this thesis. Here is a list of the conferences and brief profiles of their participants, both writing tutors and students, all of whom have been assigned pseudonyms:

Conference 1, drop-in writing center:

Writing tutor: Derek, male, senior, third-year writing tutor

Student: Heidi, female, senior, third-year writing tutor

Conference 2, course writing tutor conference:

Writing tutor: Lidia, female, senior, third-year writing tutor

Student: Marsha, female, sophomore

Conference 3, drop-in writing center:

Writing tutor: Lily, female, sophomore, first-year writing tutor

Student: Wally, male, sophomore

Conference 4, course writing tutor conference:

Writing tutor: Toby, male, junior, second-year writing tutor

Student: Daria, female, junior

Conference 5, course writing tutor conference:

Writing tutor: Nancy, female, sophomore, first-year writing tutor

Student: Sophia, female, freshman

Tutors are generally trained in the fall of their sophomore year, taking the training course and beginning to tutor during that semester. This sample represents a range of writing tutor experience: two first-year (second-semester) writing tutors, one second-year writing tutor, and two third-year writing tutors.

## 2.4 Coding System

Based on the above theoretical framework, I developed the following coding system by coding and re-coding the transcripts by hand and modifying the categories until they best fit the data:

Initiation (I): a move that directly solicits a response or overtly changes the direction of the conversation  
 Subcategories: request evaluation (req-eval), clarification (clar), suggestion (sug)  
 Syntax tags: question (ques), statement (stat)

Reply (R): a direct response to an initiation

Marker (M): a short utterance or gesture signaling continued attention, encouragement, or a boundary between conversational moves

Addition (A): an uninitiated move that may clarify, extend, or evaluate a previous move

I added subcategories to initiation for the purpose of being able to more specifically identify what kinds of initiations set up different types of exchanges, particularly those associated with student structuring of the conference. I could have added similar subcategories to the other categories (e.g. *evaluation*, *clarification*, *related point for addition*) but these subcategories are not critical to my analysis, and therefore I have considered them encompassed by the definitions of the larger categories. I could have also added more subcategories to

*initiation*, but these three alone captured almost all of the data, and so I decided to keep my subcategories as simple as possible. Notice my removal of *evaluation* from the list of MTIC moves. *Evaluation* in MTIC and in IRE was a move directly following a reply that evaluated in some manner that reply. In my data, this very rarely happened. I decided instead to consider *evaluation* more of an aspect that could manifest in several types of moves (e.g. *initiation*, *reply*, *addition*), and not a crucial element to my analysis. Here are some examples of how I thought about coding:

H: I just kinda like wanted your comments mostly on, on like the argument and like if there's anything that you went, "wow that's problematic" (SI-ques:req-eval)

This is a student (S) initiation (I). Syntactically it is a question, and because the student is looking for an evaluative response, whether her argument is good or bad, it is a request for evaluation.

D: um, so I think it might work best if we just go through the paper (TI-stat:sug)

This is also an initiation, as it changes the direction of the conversation, but it is a statement (stat) by a tutor (T) and as it gives possible options for how to structure the conference, it is a suggestion (sug).

L: so in this paragraph where you're talking about like the one Darly study and you're also talking about like the Lyson and Darly like sort of conceptual (TI-ques:clar)

M: mmmm (SM)

L: (*nodding*) steps, right? (cont. prev. move)

This is the last kind of initiation, clarification (clar). It is the kind of initiation that asks for more information on the same topic or, as in this example, repeats back some information to check that the information was understood as intended.

Sometimes moves are punctuated, but not ended by other moves. I represent this by a tag meaning that the move is a continuation of the previous move by that speaker that was earlier identified:

M: yeah it definitely does (SA) and um, also, I just don't know if like the kind of you know (SA)

L: (*nodding*) (TM)

M: I thought I had you know (cont. prev. move)

L: (*nodding*) (TM)

The boundaries between additions and markers are difficult to decide sometimes. That distinction is not terribly important to my analysis, since I care more about the boundaries between initiations and addition-marker sequences. But, when I made that boundary, I asked myself these questions: Is this a new point? Could the speaker have stopped here?

This coding guided my analysis of the conferences in that I look for the addition-marker sequences favored by MacDonald as indicative of engaged tutoring interaction, as well as the focus, encouraged by several studies mentioned above, on different kinds of initiations, and particularly initiations representative of student agenda-setting. In the next section I point out conference-by-conference highlights and take the analysis through the structure of the entire conference. I do this both to put my specific examples in their larger context and to give a sense of the conference as an entire discourse unit.

### **3.0 Results and Discussion**

#### **3.1 Conference 1**

This first conference, a drop-in writing center conference, took place between two senior writing tutors and lasted 31 minutes. My expectation going into the analysis of this conference is that it would show a particularly high level of student engagement and student structuring of the conference, considering the strong emphasis on those qualities in the writing program and the

experience level of the participants both as students and writing tutors. After explaining what the paper was for, a women's studies class, Heidi, the student, makes the first initiation, a request for evaluation in statement form:

H: I just kinda like wanted your comments mostly on, on like the argument and like if there's anything that you went, "wow that's problematic" (SI-ques:req-eval)

Derek, the tutor, continues in a manner that encourages Heidi to keep control of the conference's agenda:

D: (*nodding*) ok (TM)

H: yeah (SM)

D: um well, do you want to talk about like where you're kind of like at and like your concerns or do you just want to go through the paper and see kind of how it's going (TI-ques:sug)

H: um ok um let's start with my concerns (SR)

He gives her time and encouragement to continue that first marker, and then, when Heidi doesn't seem to know where to go next, he gives her two options for how to start the agenda of the conference. Notice that Heidi picks the option that will require her to direct the conference more, as opposed to following the paper.

For the next five and a half minutes, neither participant makes an initiation that changes this initial agenda. Heidi initiates one request for evaluation. Derek asks one clarifying question, but after answering, Heidi immediately continues with her concerns:

H: the first section is like trying to problematize that view of representation a little bit (SA)

D: (*nodding*) the first section being..."who's on the committee" ? (TI-ques:clar)

H: uh yeah, "who's on the committee" (SR)

D: (*nodding*) ok (TM)

H: guess who's coming to committee...yeah I know (SA)

D: (*shakes head, shrugs, hand movement toward Heidi*) (TM)

H: um and so um I guess that like sort of trying to like look at that there needs to be um that like who you put in theses positions matters (SA)

D: right (TM)

Although Derek merely asks a clarification question, Heidi seems to think there is something wrong, perhaps with the title “guess who’s coming to committee,” but Derek non-verbally denies that there is a problem, urges her to continue, and then waits for her to regain her train of thought without interruption.

At seven minutes, after Heidi pauses, Derek directs the conference towards the other option he initially offered:

D: um, so I think it might work best if we just go through the paper  
(TI-stat:sug)

H: (*nodding*) let’s do that (SR)

He follows with a fairly indirect initiation:

D: um so the first thing: terminology. I really like it when people like define their terms. um it struck me though, that you didn't define gender (TI-stat:sug)

H: oh right. good point (SM)

Both of these initiations are statements, and the second is a particularly good example how a statement can be a more inviting initiation than a question. One could imagine Derek, with best of intentions, asking at this point “I was wondering, why didn’t you define gender?” In the form of a question, this initiation might have several negative effects: 1) Heidi feels pressed to respond directly to the question, without understanding it better. 2) Feeling pressed, Heidi may try to construct an answer defensively such that it may be harder to convince her to consider the suggestion. 3) There is a sense of judgment and negativity – Heidi feels she missed something that is obviously important. 4) Heidi doesn’t get the benefit of working out for herself why she didn’t define gender and what she should change.

In our real conference, Derek continues to explain he had expected such a definition until Heidi offers a proposition for what her definition might be, and then herself decides to revise that

definition. They stay on this point for two and a half minutes. Then Derek sets up two arguments he sees in her writing and gives one of his more overt suggestions of the conference:

D: um so I would like pull those two apart (TI-stat:sug)

H: (*nodding*) (SM)

D: and like show where they overlap but give both like kind of their due in here (cont. prev. move)

Heidi builds on this and elaborates points related to the arguments Derek had referred to. She then asks him for evaluation on the organization she articulates, setting up an exemplary addition-marker sequence:

H: so do you think structuring it like that (SI-ques:req-eval)

D: (*nodding*) I think that's good (TR)

H: would work? (cont. prev. move)

D: um and I think that if you're gonna come in from that angle, like I think maybe giving...exploring a little bit of like women's bureaus

H: (*nodding*) (SM)

D: and like are they being set up in a country or are they being propped up

H: (*nodding*) ohh (SM)

D: as like western feminist, (TA) um cause it's something you're saying is that sometimes they're just not (TA)

H: oh yeah (SM)

D: coming from the cultural viewpoint (cont. prev. move)

H: yeah (SM)

D: of the country (cont. prev. move)

H: yeah um a lot of times they made prerequisites for like a certain kind of bureau and I mean

D: (*nodding*) (TM)

H: at the start. Like this is, the problem is that a lot of books I have to work with are very like mid-80s (SA)

D: (*nodding*) uh huh (TM)

H: um, uh and so like they're, they're talking about when the bureaus were first being created

D: (*nodding*) right (TM)

H: and it's a little hard to find data on like what their goal is now and like how they settled it (SA)

D: (*nodding*) uh huh (TM)

H: um (SM)

D: I think you could couch it in terms of like in the past this has been done but like as you're like here's how bureaus like need to be

effective and can work on behalf of women (TA)  
 H: (*nodding*) uh huh (SM)  
 D: like to say to like set it up culturally  
 H: (*nodding*) (SM)  
 D: and make sure that there is that cultural specificity (TA)  
 H: (*nodding*) mhmm (SM)  
 D: um and then I think you bring it up that that like the cultural specificity does not even like go across the entire country (TA)  
 H: (*nodding*) yeah (SM)  
 D: like sometimes you need different techniques (cont. prev. move)  
 H: yeah exactly (SM), is this the one that had...this is the one that had brazil. ok good. does this, was this example helpful for you? (SI-ques:req-eval)

Every time one participant loses steam, the other picks up the conversation, each adding and explaining without prompting. The sequence ends when Heidi initiates with another specific request for evaluation. The conference continues with similar exchanges, Heidi explaining her arguments and requesting evaluation on certain points, and Derek mostly asking questions to help her clarify her position and offering suggestions on structure. The conference ends on a final request for evaluation and a transition into friendly chat:

H: great um yeah any like any other comments going forward? like... (SI-ques:req-eval)  
 D: (*shakes head*) I think that's, that's generally it (TR) if I had a question about something or like just like a further explanation would be good (TA)  
 H: (*nodding*) (SM)  
 D: I put that in there (cont. prev. move)  
 H: (*nodding*) ok (SM)  
 D: um and just like obviously the conclusion's like the last thing to do (TA)  
 H: (*nodding*) (SM)  
 D: but that's just...you got the right idea (cont. prev. move)  
 H: sweet (SM)  
 D: and like, I'm (TA)  
 H: thank you so much (SA)  
 D: I'm available, so if you want to send me another draft or whatever (cont. prev. move)  
 H: (*nodding*) great, thanks a lot. (SA) is your thesis in? (SI-ques)

In this conference, there were two major structuring moves with respect to the agenda. First Heidi chooses starting with her concerns from the options Derek offers. The following conversation consists almost entirely of Heidi explaining her concerns, and Derek encouraging her to talk them out. This part lasts for seven minutes, so about a fourth of the entire conference. When Heidi ends with a request for evaluation, Derek moves to go through the paper as a way to structure the agenda. From that point on, topics of conversation are pulled either from Derek's written comments on the paper or the text itself. But, it is important to note that when there was a lull in conversation, when one of them pulled the conference back to the agenda, it was not always Derek. Once they settle on going through the paper, I counted twelve distinct topics of conversation. Five were initiated by Heidi and seven by Derek, so the structuring in this conference seems to be fairly equally distributed to both participants, although still slightly in favor of the tutor. The domination of addition-marker sequences was also fairly equal; sometimes Derek would explain his perspective and sometimes Heidi would talk out their ideas. Each encouraged the other to continue regularly, and each immediately picked up the thread of conversation when the other lagged. This conference seemed exemplary of a non-directive conference, where student and tutor interact as peers having a conversation as writer and reader. However, considering the unusual qualifications of the participants, this is probably not the most typical model for a Swarthmore conference.

### 3.2 Conference 2

This conference took place between Lidia, a senior writing tutor, and Marsha, a sophomore. It was a course writing tutor conference for a psychology course and lasted 31 minutes. After some clarification about which parts of the paper to address, Lidia begins the conference by asking for how Marsha feels about the paper:

L: so like how did it go writing this? like how are you feeling about it? (TI-ques:reg-eval)

Marsha responds at length:

M: um, mmm, let's see, I don't...it's hard because I've read plenty of like articles, you know journal articles (SR)

L: (*nodding*)

M: I've just never written one (cont. prev. move)

L: yeah, yeah (TM)

M: so I thought it was a weird thing to write I don't know (cont. prev. move)

I'm, I guess also, one, I'm not sure if I did enough in my results section (SA)

L: (*nodding*) mmm (TM)

M: or if I reported it correctly (cont. prev. move) cuz I like had like intro stat but (SA)

L: (*nodding*) yeah (TM)

M: but you know, it kinda starts to... (cont. prev. move)

L: well it helps a lot (TA)

M: yeah it definitely does (SA) and um, also, I just don't know if like the kind of you know (SA)

L: (*nodding*) (TM)

M: I thought I had you know (cont. prev. move)

L: (*nodding*) (TM)

M: I was kind of going on the, with my lit review, kind of like the right direction, but I just wasn't sure (cont. prev. move)

L: (*nodding*) yeah (TM)

M: so yeah, I don't know (cont. prev. move)

L: ok (TM)

M: I mean I also definitely like stylistically I have a lot of like, like where I am, mmm I have to go back (SA)

L: (*nodding*) (TM)

M: and like make this sound better (cont. prev. move)

L: (*laughs*) (TM)

M: but I'm like ok, this is like mainly like (cont. prev. move)

L: (*nodding*) (TM)

M: put my ideas out there (cont. prev. move)

L: (*nodding*) yeah (TM)

M: and then have time to go back (cont. prev. move)

L: (*nodding*) yeah totally (TM)

M: make it stylistically better (cont. prev. move)

L: yeah, so are those the things that you're kind of like most interested in fixing? like, or like looking at? like making sure that the lit review flows and like (TI-ques:reg-eval)

M: yeah (SM)

L: and that the results are right, that kind of stuff? (cont. prev. move)  
 M: (*nodding*) yeah (SM)

This exchange is the first of several that reveal Lidia's tutoring style to rely on encouraging markers and repeating the student's words back to her. The exchange contains several examples of places that Lidia could have jumped in, but instead used markers to encourage Marsha to continue. Many tutors might feel compelled to reply with feedback after statements such as, "I'm not sure if I did enough in my results section," "I thought [...] I was kind of going on the, with my lit review, kind of like the right direction, but I just wasn't sure," and "so yeah, I don't know." One could imagine Lidia jumping in with an evaluation of Marsha's results section, her literature review, or just starting in on the concerns Lidia herself wants to address at any of these points. Lidia, however, does not reply, except with encouraging markers, to any of these, and Marsha comes up with another substantive concern, about the stylistic elements of her paper. At the end of the exchange, Lidia both repeats back specific concerns she heard, "making sure that the lit review flows," "that the results are right," and verifies with Marsha that these are the concerns she wants to address, "are those the things you're kind of like most interested in fixing?"

Next, they turn to the paper, and Lidia starts with what Marsha does well in the paper:

L: um so, just as like an overview, like basically like, um, I thought like you obviously like had a lot of really good studies that you'd found, and like I think you talk about those really well (TA)  
 M: ok (SM)  
 L: (*nodding*) so like that's like, that's really great yeah (TA)  
 M: I wasn't sure, because I just, I had the model  
 L: (*nodding*) (TM)  
 M: I wanted to work off relying on Darly (SA)  
 L: (*nodding*) mhmm (TM)  
 M: and I'm like, ok like they talk about this in my social psych textbook (SA)  
 L: yeah (TM)  
 M: and I don't just want to be like you know (SA)  
 L: (*nodding*) (TM)

M: it is the studies that are supporting the concepts  
 L: (*nodding*) yeah (TM) (cont. prev. move)  
 M: but I don't want to just like reiterate what they say (cont. prev. move)  
 L: (*nodding*) yeah (TM)  
 M: I want to like, you know, so, I... (SA)  
 L: yeah definitely (TM)  
 M: I had to rewrite that a couple times (cont. prev. move)  
 L: (*nodding*) uh huh yeah, so I think like, maybe like the direction you could go in then is like moving from the studies towards explaining your study (TI-stat:sug)  
 M: (*nodding*) ok (SM)  
 L: which is something that you like, you sort of like, you do like talk about in the introduction (TA)

Lidia begins with positive feedback, but Marsha interrupts with a concern. Again, there are several places where Lidia could reply with feedback, but chooses not to, such as “I wasn't sure, because I just, I had the model I wanted to work off relying on Darly,” and “I don't just want to be like you know, it is the studies that are supporting the concepts, but I don't want to just like reiterate what they say.” Like the above examples, these are all expressions of the student's uncertainty, which often prompts some kind of (usually positive or encouraging) feedback from the tutor. Lidia, however, encourages Marsha to continue explaining her concern with markers. When Marsha loses steam, Lidia does give her a suggestion, but in doing so, she points to a specific place where Marsha is already going in the right direction: “[...] which is something that you like, you sort of like, you do like talk about in the introduction.” By giving this kind of specific, relevant positive feedback, Lidia accomplishes several things: First, she gets the general benefits of giving positive feedback, such as improving the student's self-confidence, morale, and general good will towards the tutor and the conference. Second, she is able to give a concrete example of what she is talking about, one that the student understands. Finally, she frames her suggestion in a way that implies that the student already can and has done to some

extent the suggested task, that it isn't a radical change or a completely new idea, but rather builds off what the student already knew to do.

Just as in the first exchange above, in which Lidia repeated back to Marsha what she heard Marsha say, Lidia explains her concern by repeating what Marsha does in her paper:

L: so you're sort of going through like the different things that can get in the way of helping, um and then you start saying, like um, that you might, like here are like other things that could be risks (TA)

M: mhmm

L: and then you say like in this situation the researchers hypothesize (TA) and then all of a sudden like I think you're talking about your study, right? (TI-ques:reg-eval)

M: uh huh

L: did I interpret that correctly? (TI-ques:reg-eval)

M: yeah yeah

L: ok, yeah so like, so I'm reading this and I'm like oh wait a minute like, now you're not just talking about like general principles, all of a sudden you're talking about like your study (TA)

M: yeah

L: and it, I was just, it just took me a second to like process like oh wait a minute (TA)

M: (*nodding*) ok (SM)

L: like that's where you are now (cont. prev. move)

M: (*nodding*) mhmm (SM)

L: um so maybe like, there might be some way to like structure it so that it's making it clearer that that's what you're moving toward (TI-stat:sug)

M: mhmm (SM)

L: um, so that might be something like here's the literature I've summarized so far, but here's a gap in that literature (TA)

M: ok (SM)

L: and, which is, which is like kind of

M: yeah (SM)

L: which is the sort of thing you're saying here

M: (*nodding*) mhmm (SM)

L: but to like more explicitly say like, what this literature doesn't discuss is (TA)

Lidia starts by giving a summary of what Marsha did: “so you're sort of going through like the different things that can get in the way of helping [...] and then you start saying, [...] here are

like other things that could be risks, and then you say like in this situation the researchers hypothesize and then all of a sudden like I think you're talking about your study.” Next, she verifies that this is what Marsha thought she said in the paper as well: “did I interpret that correctly?” Then Lidia explains the issue by giving her personal reaction to the structure: “so I'm reading this and I'm like oh wait a minute like, now you're not just talking about like general principles, all of a sudden you're talking about like your study.” By giving her personal reaction, rather than just a direct suggestion, she invites Marsha to see her writing through the eyes of her audience (the specific audience of Lidia) and thereby see the problem for herself. This, assuming it is successful, helps Marsha understand the suggestion and give it more credibility. Again, then, when Lidia gives her suggestion, she points out that some of what Marsha has written already emulates Lidia's suggestion when she says, “...which is the sort of thing you're saying here.”

This again implies that Marsha is already partially on the right track, and that she just needs to continue in that direction.

A longer exchange later in the conference shows how Lidia's rephrasing and summary helps Marsha identify and work through a particular issue:

- L: so in this paragraph where you're talking about like the one Darly study and you're also talking about like the Lyson and Darly like sort of conceptual (TI-ques:clar)  
 M: mhmm (SM)  
 L: (*nodding*) steps, right? (cont. prev. move)  
 M: yeah (SM)  
 L: um, so it seems like there are a couple of different ways that one could put those together (TI-stat:clar)  
 M: (*nodding*) (SM)  
 L: and so I wasn't sure like exactly, you know, how you were (cont. prev. move)  
 M: (*nodding*) yeah, mhmm (SM)  
 L: thinking about it in doing it this way (cont. prev. move)  
 M: yeah, that, that was like a paragraph (SR)

L: (*nodding*) yeah (TM)

M: that I wrote like five times and I still don't know if it's (cont. prev. move)

um, cuz the thing is that like the way it was presented in the book (SA)

L: (*nodding*) (TM)

M: also it kind of is like noted, they presented it, ok well I guess the first way that um that you could present it is say like noticing the event, interpreting the event (cont. prev. move)

L: (*nodding*) (TM)

M: and then assuming responsibility to help (cont. prev. move)

L: (*nodding*) (TM)

M: and introducing those steps and then explain each study, but the one study I thought that doesn't really quite fit is the good Samaritan (cont. prev. move)

L: (*nodding*) mmm yeah (TM)

M: because they did notice the study they just (SA)

L: right (TM)

M: weren't able to follow through so I explained that first and then I went to the (cont. prev. move)

L: so it doesn't really fit with this (TI-stat:clar)

M: yeah (SM)

L: yeah, hmm (TM)

M: that was, that, that's the one I was like kind of having trouble placing (SA)

L: (*nodding*) (TM)

M: in their, cuz you know (cont. prev. move)

L: right (TM)

M: it's kind of like the exception to that, or like a variant of it (cont. prev. move)

L: (*nodding*) yeah (TM)

M: not an exception of kind of deviates from that (cont. prev. move)

L: mhmm ok um (TM)

M: so that's why I kind of talked about that first but um (SA)

L: mhmm (TM)

M: but I don't know if that was the best (cont. prev. move)

L: yeah I mean, I guess like--

M: also, I guess another thing I could do would be to explain the first, the assuming the responsibility, the steps (SA)

L: (*nodding*) (TM)

M: and then the two studies that talk about, the smoke-filled room (cont. prev. move)

L: (*nodding*) (TM)

M: and the seizure one (cont. prev. move)

L: yeah (TM)

M: and then go back and say also, you know, well (cont. prev. move)

L: yeah I think that could work because then you have like, you know, you explain sort of like the context (TA)

M: (*nodding*) mhmm (SM)

L: in which these studies are going to fit (cont. prev. move)

The beginning follows the same strategy I have explained above: First Lidia summarizes Marsha's writing. Then she expresses her personal reaction. Marsha responds with an explanation that is at first a bit rambling, but Lidia helps her focus the problem by repeating back an important phrase from what Marsha said: "so it doesn't really fit with this." But Lidia does not try to solve the problem at this point. Marsha goes on to explain in what way the study doesn't fit: "it's kind of like the exception to that, or like a variant of it, not an exception of kind of deviates from that." Then there is a point where Lidia seems like she might be about to offer a suggestion ("I guess like..."), but before it's clear what move Lidia is making here, Marsha comes in with her own solution. Lidia approves the solution and further, she goes on to explain specifically why the solution would work.

In terms of initiations, this looked like a very tutor-directed conference; Lidia had almost all the initiations (33 for Lidia, only two for Marsha). This looks very different from the non-directive conference between Derek and Heidi. However, the kind of initiations Lidia used, usually clarifying questions and statements of her reaction to the writing, tended to set up long addition-marker sequences of the kind above, which involved Marsha working out her ideas in a very engaged way. Thus this style shows a way to evoke student engagement even within the framework of a tutor-directed and tutor-structured conference. One potential advantage of the control Lidia maintains in this conference is that she retains her agenda and is able to prioritize issues; although they do address the concerns Marsha brings up in the beginning (her literature review and results sections), the majority of the conference is spent discussing the introduction,

which Lidia raises as her first concern. Thus, as a tutor, Lidia neither completely leaves the direction of the conference to the student, nor does she steamroll the student's concerns. Instead, she maintains the prioritization of her agenda in the conference, but integrates the student's concerns. This approach is also less dependent on having a proactive student, which probably contributed to Derek's ability to be non-directive in Conference 1.

Marsha also volunteered a significant amount of positive feedback. First, after they finish talking about the introduction:

L: ok, um, let's see, yeah, ok, alright, um was there anything else from the introduction that you'd had a question about or...? (TI-ques:req-eval)

M: no I think you did a really good job (SR)

Then again at the end of the conference:

M: thank you so much for your help (SA)

L: sure no problem, great (TA)

M: it was really, you really went through well (SA)

L: (*nodding*) (TM)

M: the issues that I had questions about (cont. prev. move)

L: (*nodding*) yeah it's nice when we're on the same page (TA)

M: yeah, that was a good thing (SA)

Of course, giving positive feedback may just be Marsha's personality, but it may also reflect that the conference was genuinely successful from her point of view, which is significant if the ideal tutoring style is intended to evoke student satisfaction and empowerment.

### 3.3 Conference 3

This conference was the third conference in this sample from the drop-in writing center, and lasted only five and a half minutes – significantly shorter than other conferences in this sample. It took place between two sophomores, Lily, the writing tutor, and Wally, who had brought in an economics paper. Lily begins with a solicitation for Wally's input on the agenda:

L: um, is there anything in particular you wanted to start off with talking about, about this paper? (TI-ques:req-eval)

Wally explains vaguely that he is confused and ends up with a general question for Lily:

W: I guess a lot of it is just kind of like, does it sort of make sense (SI-ques:req-eval)

L: (*nodding*) (TM)

W: and flow? and like...I don't know (cont. prev. move)

Lily responds with fairly general very positive feedback:

L: (*nodding*) ok, sure, um I mean, I thought it was actually really well written (TA)

W: (*nodding*) (SM)

L: and I thought it flowed and your organization was really good (TR)

W: (*nodding*) (SM)

L: to be honest, I really didn't have much to say about it, cuz I just thought it was so well written as it was (TA)

Already, 30 seconds into the conference, it seems clear that it is going to be a short conference.

Wally, though he doesn't seem terribly confident about his paper, does not volunteer any specific issues to work on, and Lily has minimal criticism. As compared to Lidia's style, she does not clarify what Wally's concerns might be. She does give him one substantive criticism, and here follows Lidia's style in explaining first what he has done well in the paper:

L: you have a very coherent argument in your paper (TA)

W: (*nodding*) (SM)

L: cuz you're talking about the carbon trade system (cont. prev. move)

W: (*nodding*) (SM)

L: you kind of, you explain it, you talk about it's benefits, then you talk about its you know disadvantages (cont. prev. move)

W: (*nodding*) (SM)

L: you conclude that you still think that it's the best way as opposed to the (cont. prev. move)

W: (*nodding*) (SM)

L: carbon tax you talk about (cont. prev. move) um, so you have a very coherent argument, but you don't have a thesis (TA)

W: (*nodding*) (SM)  
 L: at the beginning of your paper, actually, just like the sentence or two statement (cont. prev. move)  
 W: yeah (SM)  
 L: in which you actually say what your argument is (cont. prev. move)  
 W: (*nodding*) (SM)  
 L: um which is, as I'm sure you know, is a very big part of the paper (cont. prev. move)

The next move of Lily's framing is particularly interesting, though:

L: um, but to be honest, reading it, it didn't seem like it would um be (TI-stat:sug)  
 W: (*nodding*) (SM)  
 L: like I mean, like it seems like maybe just kind of you know reread it for yourself (cont. prev. move)  
 W: (*nodding*) (SM)  
 L: and then (cont. prev. move)  
 W: (*nodding*) mmmm (SM)  
 L: just summarize in a couple sentences (cont. prev. move)  
 W: (*nodding*) (SM)  
 L: um, I don't know, to be honest, I thought it was a really good paper (TA)  
 W: (*nodding*) (SM)  
 L: so I don't really have all that much to say about it, I'm afraid um (cont. prev. move)

She does not engage the student in talking through her criticism, either by soliciting his opinion or trying to get him to come up with a solution, but rather just expresses confidence that he will be able to fix it on his own. Notice, also, that she gives one very specific suggestion; she does not enlist the student's help in identifying or understanding the problem. Lily then reiterates that she doesn't have much to say. Wally now expresses some confidence:

W: well no, that's fine, I felt, I actually felt pretty good about it (SA)

He talks through what his writing process was a bit and then Lily raises another concern, a lower-level concern about citations and sources. Wally ends up deciding that he needs to talk to his professor about this issue and the conference, with respect to talking about writing, ends:

L: well, I mean, I think you have an excellent um paper to take into her (TA)

W: (*nodding*) (SM)

L: and show her (cont. prev. move)

W: ok (SM)

L: and you know ask her those questions (cont. prev. move)

W: mhmm (SM)

L: about how should I cite these ideas (cont. prev. move)

W: (*nodding*) (SM)

L: these concepts (cont. prev. move)

W: (*nodding*) (SM)

L: um, in terms of the writing itself, put a, you know, one, two-sentence thesis statement in there (cont. prev. move)

W: (*nodding*) (SM)

L: and I think you have an excellent paper (TI-stat:sug)

W: (*nodding*) alright (SM)

L: so um, sorry the conference itself wasn't very long (TA)

W: (*shakes head*) no that's uh (SA)

L: I didn't have much to say (cont. prev. move)

W: that, that works for me (SA)

Lily summarizes the content of the conference and then again apologizes for how short the conference was and repeats that she didn't have much to say.

Although in this conference Lily does use the same technique Lidia does in summarizing what the student does in the paper and giving specific positive feedback, she does not elicit the student-dominated addition-marker sequences that in Lidia's conference helped Marsha work through her ideas and come up with her own solutions. Wally does not come with any specific agenda to the conference. Lily comes with a very limited agenda, and does not elicit any further agenda items from Wally. Thus, neither of the two factors of student engagement I was looking for appeared in this conference.

### 3.4 Conference 4

This conference, a course writing tutor conference, was again about a psychology paper and lasted 32 and a half minutes. It took place between Toby, the writing tutor, and Daria, both juniors. Toby starts off with a personal question, and Daria immediately jumps in with a negative comment about her writing:

- T: um, so how are you? (TI-ques:req-eval)
- D: good (SR) how about you? (SI-ques:req-eval)
- T: hanging in there (TR)
- D: I apologize for how horrifically bad this draft was (SA)

Toby replies, acknowledging that it needs work, but trying to push a more positive interpretation and then segueing into the coming conference-beginning kind of question about how the student felt about writing the paper.

- T: oh I don't think it's horrifically bad at all, I think it has work to, it needs work, but um I definitely think that the structure is there (TA) um so yeah, tell me a little bit about what was hard about it, what was good about it (TI-stat:req-eval)
- D: absolutely. what was really super hard for me is that I felt like her results were total BS (SR)

Toby asks some clarifying questions and Daria talks through her frustration with the experiment for about two minutes. Then Toby guides the conference towards the paper:

- T: um and well I guess we can start with your discussion um, um I think (TI-stat:sug)
- D: well I mean we can go through it in order (SI-stat:sug)
- T: well it doesn't matter, I think since we're talking about the discussion it makes sense (TR)
- D: (*nodding*) (SM)
- T: to start there (cont. prev. move)

Notice that Daria objects to the agenda, pointing out that they could just go through the paper chronologically, but Toby sticks with his choice to start with the discussion, explaining his rationale to Daria.

The rest of the conference is marked by the resistance of Daria to Toby's various suggestions and questions, mainly stemming from her frustration with the flaws of the experiments. Toby responds by trying to get her to explain more or see how she might follow the suggestion at least in part. For example:

T: um, it would be interesting to talk about how yours was different from, from the research that he's done if you can, I don't know if you have access (TI-stat:sug)  
 D: yeah (*shakes head*) I probably can't get my hands on it (SR)  
 T: sure um, so maybe that's not something you can talk about (TA)  
 D: (*nodding*) (SM)  
 T: but what you can talk about is the research that's been done like by Bloftis and the research that's been done on cognitive load (TA)  
 D: (*nodding*) (SM)  
 T: and how does your data expand on that why, um yeah, in what ways does your data add new information (cont. prev. move)  
 D: (*nodding*) (SM)  
 T: or go in new directions, especially in your introductions, but also in your discussion (cont. prev. move)  
 D: mhmm (SM)  
 T: given what you know, why is your data something new, how does it fit into the existing framework (cont. prev. move)  
 D: (*nodding*) (SM)  
 T: um so do you have a sense of how your data relates to the, I mean, is it you know...? (TI-ques:clar)  
 D: not really insofar as that, like you know I, I certainly could have done more reading on cognitive load, you know, cognitive load was kind of something that was thrown in here for someone's amusement (SR)

Toby also tries to acknowledge her frustration, while pushing her to still consider his suggestion:

T: um and I definitely appreciate the limitations (TA)  
 D: (*nodding*) (SM)  
 T: of what you're dealing with (cont. prev. move)  
 D: (*laughs*) (SM)  
 T: um but to the extent that you can (cont. prev. move)  
 D: (*nodding*) right (SM)  
 T: make it clear that [...](cont. prev. move)

But she seems to close off almost all the options he gives:

T: um well, it might be interesting to see if she's done any research that tries to address like the real world like (TA) you know, I would look for that kind of real world kind of question, cuz that's where your focus is going (TA) do you know if she does anything...? (TI-ques:sug)

D: her direction is kind of different (SR)

T: (*nodding*) ok (TM)

D: um, you know, there's a guy who's gotten more into that, his name is Guy Johnson, who's done more with like police interrogations and stuff (SA) she's done more with false memories in terms of like childhood abuse (SA)

T: ok, um, so I mean did you, do you feel like that contributes to what you're talking about or is that uh tangential? (TI-ques:clar)

D: I think it's uh, no, I think it's a very different topic (SR)

He continues to try to sincerely acknowledge her point of view, while at the same time trying to get her to see his point:

T: so you do this kind of at the end of each paragraph, and I definitely appreciate why you're doing it, but there's a fine line between the kind of analysis and interpretation that you want to do in your discussion section and the just the straightforward factual presentation of your results that you want to do in this section (TA)

D: mhmm (SM)

T: so um, and supporting the notion that participants in the cognitive load condition were indeed under cognitive load, that may be getting to the point where you're interpreting what those numbers mean in a sense (TA)

D: well it basically was saying you know like this is a manipulation check (SA)

T: ok (*nodding*) um ok, I see what you're saying, that's where the notion that...yeah I think that's fair, but I would be aware of keeping your interpretation of the data for your discussion section (TA)

D: (*nodding*) mhmm (SM)

T: so does that seem fair? (TI-ques:req-eval)

D: yep (SR)

Notice the phrases he uses like “I definitely appreciate why you're doing it,” “I see what you're saying,” “I think that's fair,” and then checks in with her, saying “does that seem fair?”

He does have some success at one point, when he points out an issue, and then explicitly enlists Daria's help in trying to solve it:

T: um, and then, I think this point is definitely worth making, um, that this one question you don't know without more responses (TA) um I wasn't sure if there's a way to incorporate that above so it's not kind of just this one paragraph down at the bottom

D: (*nodding*) mhmm (SM)

T: but I'm not sure if there is (TI-stat:sug) do you have thoughts on that? (TI-ques:req-eval)

D: um (SM)

T: does that kind of relate to one of these ideas or is it really its own...? (TI-ques:clar)

D: well I mean it relates to the fact that ultimately we weren't using you know, the question that we were supposed to, to draw this conclusions (SR)

But even here, Toby still eventually runs into quite stiff resistance when he tries to get her to expand in the way she's just explained:

T: ok, um, yeah, I think it might be worth maybe, can you expand on that? (TI-ques:sug)

D: (*nodding*) (SM)

T: or is there anything else to say about that in terms of like numbers? or, you know, we want to do an analysis on this but...? (TI-ques:sug) can you, is there a way to say that, or is it just that? (TI-ques:req-eval)

D: um I mean, I can, I can explain more why we didn't use it, but I think like that's like more like a discussion issue (SR)

T: (*nodding*) uh huh (TM)

D: than a result issue (cont. prev. move)

T: uh huh (TM)

D: you know this was kind of the result finding (cont. prev. move)

T: yeah and there wasn't any more analysis that you could do on this, is what you're saying? (TI-ques:clar)

D: no (SR)

There are more examples, but they generally follow this pattern of Toby pressing for some kind of acknowledgement of a positive possibility of change, and to enlist Daria's help in finding a way to solve problems, but meets with resistance every step of the way. Also, in comparison to the above conferences, Daria nods and encourages Toby markedly less.

The end is a bit interesting, because Daria does take advantage of the usual "any more questions" Toby asks at the end. She goes back to one of his suggestions, summarizes it, and

then expresses worry over actually being able to do it. So clearly, Daria is not just resistant for the sake of being resistant; she does want to make her paper better, but just seems not to believe it's possible or that Toby's suggestions are feasible. But their final exchange, while still displaying Daria's resistance, does show well Toby's use of acknowledging Daria's perspective while sustaining his own point:

D: just in terms of discussion, um, so like would you move this kind of back to the beginning, saying ok this is kind of what worked and then keep the caveats all together and then still feel like that transitions ok to the...? (SI-ques:clar)

T: well you might have to change like a sentence or two (TR)

D: (*nodding*) (SM)

T: to make the flow work, but I think that works as a concluding thought, even if you do move this forward (cont. prev. move)

D: ok (SM)

T: to me, that distinction between, you know, positive conclusions and caveats is a natural one (TA)

D: (*nodding*) mhmm (SM)

T: but you may feel like you want to make those qualifications really quickly and soon (TA) um, my sense is that generally I wouldn't want the caveats to be the focus of the discussion section (TA)

D: (*nodding*) mhmm

T: but I hear you saying that you really feel strongly that that is the most, that it's really important to make those points um so I understand that there's a tension between (TA)

D: well yeah, well and that was kind of because there are so many caveats (SA)

T: (*nodding*) yeah, I totally appreciate that (TA)

D: um you know, that's kind of why I brought it back to this, so it's kind of like they were sandwiched in the middle (SA)

T: (*nodding*) mhmm (TM)

D: but it was kind of both beginning and ending with, but you know, maybe there's something here that matters um, to try and kind of make that not the most salient feature of the discussion (cont. prev. move)

T: (*nodding*) I see, I think, yeah, I think you can push it in a number of different ways, and that would be the one that seems most natural to you (TA)

D: well no, I mean like if you think it works better the other way, that's fine, I just didn't, you know, I had felt you know, that I was trying to take some of the focus off of it (SA)

T: yeah, um, I don't think the focus would fall too heavily on the caveats if you first you know argue for here are the important things you can take away (TA) but try it, see how it feels (TI-stat:sug)

D: (*nodding*) ok (SR)

T: if it feels you know, inappropriately weighted, then you can adjust it as you think it works (TA)

D: (*nodding*) ok sounds good (SA)

Toby maintains his own points with statements like “I think that works as a concluding thought, even if you do move this forward,” and “my sense is that generally I wouldn't want the caveats to be the focus of the discussion section.” At the same time, he acknowledges Daria’s opinions with statements like “you may feel like you want to make those qualifications really quickly and soon,” “I hear you saying that you really feel strongly that that is the most, that it's really important to make those points,” “I totally appreciate that,” “I think you can push it in a number of different ways, and that would be the one that seems most natural to you.” This last one is interesting, because it seems to strike Daria as too much of a concession, and she backtracks, acknowledging the legitimacy of his suggestion, although, still expressing her point of view. She also starts nodding and encouraging again more. Toby then ends with kind of a balance; he reiterates that he thinks his suggestion is feasible, but that she should just try it and adjust it if it doesn't work. Daria seems satisfied with this, and they end the conference on a friendly note (which Daria initiates), talking about classes.

Toby’s style has several elements that are similar to Lidia’s. He repeats back to Daria what he hears her saying and incorporates her concerns into the conference, as in the exchanges where he acknowledges her frustration with the limitations of the experiment and as well as the fact that he spends much time in the conference trying to work around those limitations. At the same time he maintains his points and suggestions, even in the face of stiff resistance from the

student. Although he at several points explicitly tries to engage Daria in working out her own problems, the addition-marker sequences are generally dominated by Toby rather than by Daria.

### 3.5 Conference 5

This conference, a course writing tutor conference for a religion class, took place between Nancy, a sophomore, and Sophia, a freshman. However, unlike the other course writing tutor conferences in this study, Nancy and Sophia had never conferenced before. It lasts 16 and a half minutes. Nancy begins the conference a bit differently from the models above, first explaining how to understand her comments and then asking a specific question about Sophia's paper:

N: I write these like notes at the end of it, and it's not like bad bad bad, it's all just like thoughts thoughts thoughts (TA)

S: (*nodding*) (SM)

N: so don't be intimidated by it (cont. prev. move) I don't know, have you worked with WAs before? (TI-ques:clar)

S: (*nodding*) mhmm (SR)

N: yeah so probably you've seen these before (TA) ok, ok, cool. so, in this paper, what would you say is your um, your main direction, your main claim, your thesis? (TI-ques:clar)

Unlike the other tutors in this study, Nancy does not give the student a chance to set the agenda at the beginning of the conference, but begins with her main concern, and so the agenda at the beginning is very tutor-directed. Nancy then asks what prompt Sophia was writing on, and it turns out that much of Nancy's confusion in the paper was due to Sophia's lack of a thesis statement that addressed the prompt, even though her paper overall did address the prompt. Once they figure this out, Nancy explains what should be in Sophia's thesis, as framed by the confusion Nancy had as a reader:

N: ok cool, um, I was a little bit unsure as to what exactly you meant to assert, because I didn't see your opinion there in your thesis (TA)

S: (*nodding*) (SM)

N: so I think it might be useful for like what you offer like as your solution to the nightmare, um if you offer that in your thesis as well like (TI-stat:sug)  
 S: mhmm (SM)  
 N: your analysis of baldwin and king, like that would really map out exactly what I'm, what I'm, I as like the reader is going to be looking for in the paper (cont. prev. move)  
 S: (*nodding*) mhmm (SM)  
 N: because like in your introduction and your thesis it's sort of like, it's sort of like the cliffnotes to like what eventually is going to come (TA)  
 S: (*laughs*) (SM)  
 N: so like if you tell me um just a little bit about baldwin, about king, and then about um you know what you think of him and what you're offering up instead (TA)  
 S: (*nodding*) (SM)  
 N: then as I read through like the body of your paper and all the evidence for it, then I'll sort of know what to look for (cont. prev. move)  
 S: (*nodding*) ok (SM)  
 N: and then it makes the reader sort of like follow the same track as you do (cont. prev. move)  
 S: ok (SM)  
 N: do you know what I mean? (TI-ques:req-eval)  
 S: mhmm (SM)  
 N: so I think if you just incorporated that into your thesis statement it would be made much clearer (TI-stat:sug)  
 S: (*nodding*) mhmm (SM)  
 N: um like right from the outset, what you're trying to say (cont. prev. move)

Here Nancy does what both Lidia and Toby did in their conferences when she frames her suggestion in her personal reaction as a reader. Sophia does not seem to participate in this exchange much, but then Nancy does solicit Sophia's input on the agenda, though she does limit the scope a bit:

N: um cool, so uh, as far as like um direction of thesis or content or anything like that, are there other concerns that you have? (TI-ques:req-eval) or do you want me to talk about some other things that I saw? (TI-ques:sug)

Sophia replies to this with a request to look at Nancy's comments and this leads them to go through the paper and Nancy's comments in order. Sophia then proceeds to point out a couple of comments she has questions on, and they follow a similar model to the above, with Nancy mostly just explaining. Sophia does not really question any of the explanation, but when Nancy again asks her for more questions, she does come up with a more specific question:

N: um, cool, do you have questions about any of these things? (TI-ques:req-eval)  
 S: um, no, not particularly, um but is there anything that you would like to see me add besides like my, like doing more clearly my thesis and...? (SI-ques:req-eval)

Nancy adds one more suggestion, again explaining while Sophia listens. Sophia does volunteer a little, as in the following example:

N: yeah, do you know what I mean? (TI-ques:req-eval)  
 S: yeah (SM)  
 N: um (TM)  
 S: it's just really hard for me to separate myself from like my work (TA)  
 N: (*nodding*) (TM)  
 S: and I like have this problem of thinking that everybody's in my head (SA)  
 N: (*nodding*) sure (TM)  
 S: and can follow my thought (cont. prev. move)  
 N: (*nodding*) sure, yeah, I totally know what you mean, and I have had similar experiences while writing um (TA) but definitely every time you see yourself making a claim, um, make sure to ask yourself, you know, ok, well you know if somebody were to disagree with me (TI-stat:sug)  
 S: what could I do to counteract (SA)  
 N: like you know, yeah, what could I do to convince them (TA)

Here Sophia volunteers what her trouble is, and then starts to give her own wording for what Nancy is suggesting, when she says "what I could do to counteract."

In many ways it does not look as though Sophia is all that engaged, because of the lack of student agenda-setting and student-dominated addition-marker sequences. She also, like Daria in

the last conference, does not nod or encourage Nancy very much. But Nancy has a pretty theatrical, entertaining style of explaining things, often getting Sophia to laugh. So even if Sophia does not participate as much as some of her counterparts in the above conferences, she does seem to be actively listening, though that is of course difficult to gauge. However, it is definitely worthwhile to point out that she gives Nancy very positive feedback at the end of the conference:

S: that's really helpful (SA)  
 N: good I'm glad (TA)  
 S: yeah (SM)  
 N: I'm glad (cont. prev. move)  
 S: I'm just amazed, you're like an amazing WA [writing tutor] (SA)  
 N: oh thank you (TA)  
 S: like compared to the one I had last time for our midterm paper (SA)

So, clearly Sophia liked Nancy's style of conferencing. But there are different ways to interpret this positive feedback. It might be that Sophia would not agree with the philosophy of the Writing Program, that she actually prefers a conference style where she does not have to show engagement and would not associate student engagement with a successful conference. It might be that she has never experienced that kind of conference, but this conference was still better than those she has had before. It might also be that she did actually feel engaged in this conference and there are factors of student engagement that I am missing.

## **4.0 Summation**

### **4.1 Summary of Results and Conclusions**

In Conference 1, the longest conference, Derek's non-directive style and Heidi's active participation style made for a conference in many ways exemplary of student engagement, such as Heidi's control of the agenda, frequent initiations, and addition-marker sequences. In Conference 2, Lidia took a much more directive approach. Her style included summary of Marsha's writing, her own reactions, and then rephrasing and focusing of Marsha's spoken ideas. This approach did not allow for or evoke as much student-directed agenda-setting as the non-directive style of Conference 1, but it did regularly elicit addition-marker sequences in which Marsha talked her ideas out. Conference 3 was an interesting example of a conference that did not show much student engagement. Though I did find some elements that in other conferences had led to student engagement, Wally's lack of specific concerns and Lily's insistence that she did not have much to talk about quickly ended the conference, leaving little room for student engagement. In Conference 4, Toby met with a student who seemed to consistently resist engagement. He took an approach similar to Lidia's in his use of repeating back Daria's words and attempts to enlist her help in coming up with solutions. He also retained a fair amount of directivity in his structuring of the conference's agenda and in the way he maintained his suggestions and concerns despite resistance from Daria. In Conference 5, Nancy took an even more directive approach than any of the above tutors, directing the agenda from the beginning, and dominating the addition-marker sequences. Sophia, however, responded very positively to this style.

The vision of student engagement that emerges from these results is a bit different from what I started out with. Although student agenda-setting and addition-marker sequences are certainly a good place to start when looking for engagement, the concept is clearly much more complicated. Student agenda-setting probably only works with the kind of students who are able

and willing to set the agenda. When considering addition-marker sequences, it matters not only who dominates them, but also what the content is and how much those sequences actually reflect student investment and understanding. There is also a question about what approach should be taken towards tutors and students who do not buy into the philosophy of student engagement. These considerations may point towards a philosophy aimed not only at encouraging student engagement overall, but at the different ways student engagement can manifest and ways conferencing styles can be individualized for particular students.

#### **4.2 Limitations of the Study**

While there is much in this study that I expect to be significant and useful, there is also much I wish I could have included, but was unable due to constraints of time, resources, and my own knowledge. I tried to teach myself discourse analysis, run a legitimate scientific study, develop my own analysis, and write about it all in a very short period of time. I claim moderate success in all of those goals, but mastery in none. I would have liked to study both discourse analysis and other work in the field in much more depth than I did before creating my analysis. Also, with this kind of highly interpretive analysis, I wish I had had other researchers to work with. The analysis in most of the studies I looked at benefited from consensus agreement among several researchers, and so although I tried to be consistent and rigorous in my analysis, I would have much more conviction in my claims if I could confirm them with others who have worked with the data as I have.

Further, I did not have a methodology that would have allowed me to be as legitimately evaluative of the conferences as I would have liked to be in order to have said more about what tutors should or should not do. Since I did not develop criteria for success in these conferences, nor did I get evaluations from the participants, I tried to avoid evaluations of the tutors or their

techniques. However, my interpretation of what they did is unavoidably evaluative to some degree, because there are many ways to look at any particular set of words someone says, and some of the criteria by which I chose to make my interpretation are bound to be biased by my own ideas of what makes a successful conference. Another element of evaluation comes from my framework – the focus of factors associated with student engagement. That focus is evaluative because I chose it precisely because those factors, and student engagement in general, are associated with conference success in the literature I reviewed and in the current philosophy of our Writing Program at Swarthmore.

### 4.3 Directions for Further Research

Looking beyond this thesis, I see several directions my research points to. First, it would be useful to be able to combine breadth of kinds of conferences and tutors with breadth of detailed analysis. The reason why I chose this kind of analysis, over a more narrow and detailed analysis is that much of the literature I reviewed could give only very limited generalizations and did not look at structures of entire conferences, but only select sections. However, by not doing that detailed analysis, I had less information to generalize from. So, ideally, a future project would have the time and resources to analyze a large body of detailed analysis for more general trends and conclusions. Examples of specific and significant details I was unable to incorporate include intonation, laughter, interruptions, pauses, and a more detailed analysis of non-verbal communication.

My conclusions also suggest that it will be important to study not only what tutors do, but how students differ in the way they react to tutoring. It is quite unlikely that there is some kind of blanket method of tutoring that always successfully elicits student engagement, but rather the success of the approach depends on the student. Finally, I think there are huge possibilities for

using technology and coding in this kind of work. It is time-consuming and painstaking, and I only scratched the surface in this study, but computer-based analysis definitely holds a lot of possibilities for all areas of discourse analysis.

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