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## Close Vertical Transcription in Writing Center Training and Research

by Magdalena Gilewicz and Terese Thonus

*[Close vertical transcription] allowed me to pay attention not only to what I said but also when and how I said it. The when and how seem to matter more than my actual words. (Tutor)*

Not long ago one of us submitted an article about writing tutorials to a journal for consideration. As our research focuses on tutor-student interaction in tutorials, the paper contained a large number of transcribed excerpts. In the first set of reviewer comments returned, we read:

The transcription conventions, though well intended, are confusing and hard to follow. They could be dropped in favor of the *usual* way of transcribing tutorials. *As in play dialogue, one person speaks, then another.* The author wants to represent the tutorial more realistically, but the effort is more distracting than effective. [emphasis supplied]

The reviewer's advice, however, goes contrary to what takes place during conversation, in which speakers only sometimes synchronize their turn-taking. As speakers, we expect our own utterances to be punctuated by listener feedback; we pause to retrieve or to digest information; and we construct joint utterances through overlaps,

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interruptions, and completions—features that can carry significant information for the researcher.

The representation of tutorial conversation as playscript depicts language as primarily written, not oral. As horizontal transcription, it misrepresents temporal placement of speaker contributions, and it "edits out" linguistic and nonlinguistic contributions that are judged nonessential, relegating them to the category of "conversational dust" to be swept under the carpet.<sup>1</sup> We will argue that close vertical transcription, because of its greater depth and complexity, more accurately captures the writing tutorial as a speech event. We will also report how we used close vertical transcription in tutor training, and how tutors' analyses of transcripts of their own sessions increased their understanding of interaction and modified their practice.

Although in the past two decades writing center studies have employed transcripts,<sup>2</sup> Blau, Hall, and Strauss's 1998 article "Exploring the Tutor/Student Conversation: A Linguistic Analysis" is the first publication in the writing center forum purposefully advocating the importance of accurate linguistic transcription in writing center research. Blau et al. undertook a focused analysis to investigate the nature of collaboration between tutor and student. They looked at tutor and student questions, "echoing" or "conversational fillers," and tutor use of "qualifiers" (*I don't know, maybe, sometimes*). Recognizing the added depth inclusion of these features offered, they issued an explicit call to the writing center research community to use methods established in linguistics and other fields for tutorial analysis:

We encourage other writing centers to join us and build on our work on the linguistic analysis of tutorial conversations. We see our study as a way to continue looking at writing center practice with a scholarly eye, to build theories in our field from what we actually do in our writing centers. (39)

Two years later, Gillespie and Lerner in *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring* underscored the importance of tutors' transcripts of sessions by devoting an entire chapter to it ("Discourse Analysis"). When implemented in tutor training manuals such as the *Guide*, their transcription style (which appears to follow Blau et al.'s) constitutes a clear improvement over the fabricated *idealized* tutor-student dialogues of earlier manuals (e.g., Meyer and Smith) in that tutors are more likely to trust authentic transcripts and see them as realistic models for their own production. The kind of dialogue presented by Meyer and Smith does have its merits: it shows the kinds of questions tutors can ask and how a tutor can direct a tutorial conversation, and we have

used *The Practical Tutor* for this purpose. After tutors have conducted a few tutoring sessions, however, these claims begin to ring false. Tutors want more realistic representations of tutorial talk, where writing problems are not solved "so easily and quickly." They also want more complexity and detail once they realize it can be represented on paper by employing close vertical transcription style. Thus, we argue, tutor training can move from use of *idealized* to *realistic* to "thicker" transcripts.<sup>3</sup>

The *realistic* style Gillespie and Lerner choose employs playscript dialogue and depicts conversation participants speaking one at a time. We will refer to this transcription style as "horizontal." Whereas their work presages greater acceptance of linguistic analyses of transcripts in data-driven writing center research, the horizontal style selected by the authors precludes much meaningful linguistic and interactional analysis. Although it suggests using transcription for analyzing such features as, for example, dominance marked by interruptions, or marking and spacing of non-verbal clues (130), it is important to note that it does not employ specific markers to convey such features. In our view, horizontal transcription, though adequate for some purposes, leaves out important information needed for a more in-depth study of writing center interaction. To illustrate this point, in one of Gillespie and Lerner's transcripts (131), ellipses are used in an undefined manner permitting multiple interpretations and preventing specific functional distinctions:

(1)

Paige: You mean close together because you don't talk about the 19th century, or close together because you use that phrase?

Writer: No, because it's talking about...yeah, because it's like this is saying "it's needed," and this is saying, "it's not needed," and it's just such a quick...I mean does it make any difference?

Paige: Well, if you want because you're...

Writer: I mean I could make a separate sentence about it but...

Paige: You have made a separate sentence.

Do these ellipses signify omitted words? Pauses? Interruptions? Overlaps? Hesitations? False starts? Coughs? Laughter? Or simply verbiage the analysts believed unnecessary in the representation of the exchange? Playscripts, even when unedited and faithful to *verbal* data, appear orchestrated and flat; they communicate *what* was said, but not *when* or *how* or *with what intent*.

Horizontal transcription can also be faulted for its misinterpretation of meaning. Let us take as an example Blau et al.'s study of how tutor and student "trade" conversational fillers, in which they overlook the distinction between different functions of a

word, for example, yeah. They argue that "fillers" have "no inherent meaning" and function merely "to mark time or put an idiosyncratic stamp on a conversation" (27). In fact, these "fillers" constitute a whole category of responses with very different meanings: backchannel (*yeah* = "I support what you're saying and agree with you—and you still have the floor"), minimal response (*Yeah* = "I am answering you—and now I have the floor"), and tag question (*Yeah?* = "Here's what I think. Do you agree with me?"). Relegating "fillers" to secondary status or omitting them altogether deletes valuable information from a transcript.

We will argue that such information is not only linguistically salient but carries meanings important for understanding what happens in tutor-student dialogues. We will demonstrate that tutor analyses of vertical transcripts, because they contain a more complete illustration of tutorial interaction, result in increased consciousness raising and changes in practice, and we will urge that research into writing tutorials employ this style of transcription if it intends to investigate more complex issues in discourse.

### *Elements of Close Vertical Transcripts*

Since the interest in incorporating transcription into writing center studies is clearly ascendant, the next logical step, in our view, is not to reinvent the wheel but to bring the standard of transcription up to the level of disciplines such as education, linguistics, ethnomethodology, communication, and anthropology, which have been making use of close and often vertical transcripts in research and practice for at least twenty-five years. (See bibliography for representative works by Drew and Heritage; DuBois; Duranti and Goodwin; Green and Wallat; Heritage; Labov and Fanshel; Markee; Nystrand; Ochs; Psathas; and Schiffrin, among others.) Considering the well-developed representation of interaction in fields adjoining and overlapping writing center studies, this transcription style suits investigation of many issues already working their way to the top of the writing center research agenda. As writing center research becomes more sophisticated and specialized, the tools used should match the questions asked. We feel it necessary to explain that other close vertical transcription styles, such as the much more involved conversation analytic one used by, for example, Jennifer Ritter, contain information on volume, word stress, phrase intonation, and additional linguistic and conversational features necessary only for very specialized study. We do not intend to advocate for these here.

Some of the purposes for which we use close vertical transcription in tutor training and research concern issues of tutor and student expectations, facilitation of student

response, comprehension, ownership, collaboration, dominance, and negotiation of input, as illustrated by these questions:

1. What do tutors and students expect of one another and of the session?
2. How does gender influence how tutors and students interact with one another?
3. What are tutors doing to facilitate or undercut student responses?
4. How will tutors and students know that the other understands what they are saying?
5. What aspects of student speech can distract tutors from their purpose, and vice-versa?
6. Are tutors doing for students what students should be doing for themselves?
7. When and how does collaborative talk take place?
8. What markers of dominance or opting out appear in tutorials, and what role do they play in the outcome?
9. How much tutor talk is too much? Too little?
10. What conversational indicators signal student acceptance or rejection of tutor suggestions?

Here, we explain certain conversational conventions of English that are key to the interpretation of writing tutorials and explain how they can best be transcribed in close vertical style.

### *Transcription Conventions*

- Pause:** (.) Short pause (1-2 seconds)  
(5s) Timed pause (2+ seconds)
- Filled pause:** **um, hmm**
- Overlap:** Beginning shown by a right-facing bracket (]) placed vertically. Overlaps between participant contributions are marked using brackets aligned directly above one another. Overlaps continue until one interlocutor completes his/her utterance.
- Backchannel:** **uh-huh, yeah, o.k., (all) right**  
Contributions made by other participants while the first speaker maintains the floor. Backchannels are written in lower-case (o.k.) to distinguish them from minimal responses.
- Minimal response:** **Uh-huh (= yes), Uh-uh (= no), Yeah, O.K., (All) Right**  
Brief responses made by participants when they have the floor.

<b>Paralinguistic:</b>	Nonverbal features
	(( )) Additional observation—laugh, cough, sigh, etc.
	^^ Finger snaps
	>> Hand striking a surface
<b>Analytic:</b>	*** Indecipherable or doubtful hearing
	⇒ Turns focused for analysis

*How To Read a Close Vertical Transcript*

The *vertical* feature of the style we advocate captures the reality that several speakers may share a channel and allows for the whole spectrum of linguistic utterances to be represented visually. The *close* feature of the style denotes the addition of rich detail for interpretation of writing center interaction. Conventional punctuation (periods, commas, question marks) signals basic intonation contours, and exclamation points mark emphatic statements.

Close vertical transcriptions are read from left to right, top to bottom, in paired lines called *turns*. However, the reading of this type of transcript is linear only up to a point. Each participant’s speech occupies one or more lines that can be overlapped or cut off by the speaker on the line just below. At this juncture, the reader of a transcript must “unplug the other ear,” activate a stereo feature, and “hear” two channels at the same time. When noticing a gap in a line of speech, the reader should glance below to see how the other speaker fills it. New turns after one speaker has finished are signaled by the speaker’s designation (T, S, etc.) and a line of speech beginning at the left margin. We provide more details below.

Floors, turns, and pauses. A *floor* is a temporal space available to conversationalists to fill with talk. In “A Simplest Systematics,” Sacks et al. demonstrate that when taking the floor, conversationalists are familiar with and usually sensitive to “turn relevance places” (in English, sentence and clause boundaries). Quite often no pause occurs between one person’s turn and the next; that is, the turns are *latched*. Latching, according to Jefferson, is marked only by a change in speaker; in our version of close vertical transcription, we indicate this by beginning a new line of text at the left margin<sup>4</sup>:

(2)

T: All right. What are we doing today? Nice to see you again. ((to K)) Do you have any writing?

K: No. I passed my portfolio.

T: Congratulations! What did you get?

K: Two threes.

T: Two threes. Cool. Congratulations.

If tutorial conversation consisted only of latched turns, then horizontal transcriptions would be adequately representative. However, not all turns are so neatly taken. Most of the time participants take the floor after pauses or with overlaps. In close transcription, pauses between turns are indicated at the end of the previous speaker's line (although they may occur in mid-utterance as well). Pauses are timed in seconds: (.) signifying a pause of one second; (2s), a pause of two seconds; and so on, as illustrated here:

(3)

C: Sometimes it seemed like I seemed to repeat.

T: All right. Such as? (7s)

C: I can't remember where it was.

T: Did you mark it as you went?

C: Uh-uh. I was too busy thinking and reading ((laugh)). (3s)

In close vertical transcripts, both silent and filled pauses are included because, according to Local and Kelly, they mark participant "information fetching." *Filled pauses* constitute hesitations during which a speaker utters sounds or words (such as *um*, *hmm*, and *like*) as a means of maintaining the floor (to prevent interruptions and overlaps) or formulating a response. During tutorials, one not only has to process information that is coming in but also information that is going out. Consequently, differences in speakers' and hearers' processing times may indicate varying levels of certainty, accuracy, and ability, for example, how confident a speaker is in his/her suggestion, or whether he/she is retrieving internalized knowledge or ideas, or brainstorming new ones. In this excerpt from a group tutorial, a student responds to another group member's paper. Notice her strategic use of *like*, *hmm*, *you know*, *yeah*, and *and stuff like that*:



(4)

R: And I liked his conclusion, too, **like** I really liked **hmm** the ending. Stuff like the first, **like**, the thing that stuck in my head, **you know, yeah**, that were **like** "bite" and "no bark" **and stuff like that**. I like that.

Filled pauses are often omitted from horizontal transcripts as they are considered semantically "empty."

**Backchannels.** Because horizontal transcripts are only one floor "deep," they cannot represent what a second speaker is saying while the first has the floor. Vertical transcription, however, can represent the main channel and one or more "secondary channels," or backchannels, simultaneously. The most recurrent backchannel utterances in American English are **yeah, uh-huh, o.k.**, and *all right*. Because of their low volume and pitch, **backchannels** differ noticeably from the higher volume and often higher pitch of main-channel utterances. Jefferson explains that speakers generally deploy backchannels at sentence and clause boundaries as a supportive move to show agreement, attention, or empathy while accompanying the on-the-floor speaker:

(5)

T: O.K. ((to R)) Yeah, from listening to it, you made the transition, I think before it was different, it was kind of different, it was hard to understand, but I think

R: **uh-huh**

T: you fixed it much better, and as a narrative kind of thing it's extremely

R: **uh-huh**

T: believable, so that was kind of cool. So what changes exactly did you, did you make to it?

R: Like the transitions and how I explain my examples more and

T: **uh-huh** **yeah, yeah**

R: I switched some sentence that I would jump from one sentence to another,

T: **yeah**

R: so I connected them all. And that's it.

T: **o.k.**

Through her backchannels, R, the student, uses *uh-huh* to show attention, though not necessarily agreement, with what T is saying. T's use of *yeah, yeah* and *o.k.* are clearer demonstrations of agreement and acceptance (see Gilewicz and Thonus).

Occasionally, however, speakers use backchannels as a strategy to seize the floor or to signal displeasure. The tutor in the following excerpt does both (with *I see what you're saying* and *I understand what you're saying*):

(6)

M: So I'm basically saying nobody would read the book unless they were familiar with the Islamic, I mean they would not, they won't read it, but they would be really confused reading the book if they didn't know anything about Islam or these terms. So if I'm writing for an audience [that's (.)]

⇒ T: uh-huh **[I see what you're saying. [I see what you're saying. [And when I s- (.)] I understand**

M: [um actually [whether I should [change that?

T: **what you're saying, I understand what you're saying.** And when I, when I said that, what I was thinking of is you don't need to give us the plot summary at the beginning of this paper.

Note that this struggle for the floor and backchannel repetition-as-displeasure might both conceivably be omitted in a playscript. In fact, in a horizontal transcript, the tutor's critique might be construed as an affirmation:

(7)

M: So if I'm writing for an audience that's actually whether I should change that?

T: **I see what you're saying. I understand what you're saying.** And when I said that...

Conversational conventions are most frequently brought to light through their *mis-application*. In the two excerpts below, notice the positioning of the backchannels.

Tutor backchannels:

(8)

S: Yeah, because this means what I mean with this one. Because you know,

T: **right**

S: before he meets, you know, him, he was totally lost, well after he meets, you know, he finds out that there's like, you know, [future or hope, you know,

T: **[uh-huh**

S: like that.

Student backchannels:

(9)

T: So those, the relationship [between these two, however you set it out [in the

S: **[uh-huh** **[uh-huh**

T: thesis and in your own mind is going to influence what this transition

S: **uh-huh**

T: [is going to be between the two sections. If you're going to say,

S: **[oh, o.k.** **right**

T: "And also Silko. Silko also does [these things," or if you're going to say, "But

S: **[uh-huh**

T: on the other hand, Silko does [these things.

S: **uh-huh** **all right** **[Silko**

T: " It depends on how you see them if it's an "and" or "but."

S: **uh-huh**

**o.k., o.k.**

T: O.K.

The "syncopated" backchannels, inexpertly produced in mid-clause by a nonnative speaker of English (S) in (9) contrast sharply with the native-speaking tutor's rhythmic backchannels at clause and sentence boundaries in (8). The tutor in (9) revealed in a follow-up interview that he was annoyed with the student's "incoherence." Without recourse to a close vertical transcription style that includes backchannels, one would have been unable to revise the tutor's perception.

**Minimal responses.** In contrast with backchannels, *minimal responses* are continuers that fill turn slots and are thus main channel utterances. Listener responses are louder and more clearly uttered than backchannels. In this excerpt from a group tutorial, note the status of *yeah* and *uh-huh* as backchannels by students (D and S) versus *Yeah* and *Uh-huh* as listener responses by the tutor:

(10)

T: Why don't we want [to see fat people?

D: [Because that's our already idea, you know, that it's not good.

T: **Yeah**, and we never see it, [right? And if we see it, it's made fun of and

D: [yeah

T: ridiculed. Like on like Drew Carey, or something

D: yeah uh-huh

S: yeah ((laugh))

D: But anyway if you were already being used to always seeing people that have different type of bodies, it wouldn't be normal already for us to see people fat or skinny or in between.

T: **Uh-huh.** It would be like nothing.

Horizontal transcripts include minimal responses, but not backchannels, as turns; close vertical transcripts contain both.

**Overlaps.** Although in the interest of politeness, speakers tend to let others give up the floor before taking it themselves, conversational contributions often overlap. *Overlap* is defined as any simultaneous speech in which a conversational participant takes the floor before the first speaker has relinquished it by what Jefferson calls "completion intonation." In close transcription, the beginning of simultaneous speech is indicated by a right-facing bracket ([ ) on both speakers' lines.

Three types of overlap have been proposed in the conversation analysis literature: *interruption*, *joint production*, and *main channel overlap* (see Ferrara; Roger, Bull, and Smith; Sacks). It is important to note that the speaker's intent behind each of these differs. *Interruption* is defined as the initiation of a contribution by a second party before the first has finished. In the excerpt below, each speaker presages the end of the other's turn, and, ignoring the turn relevance places, launches into her own. Floors are taken and relinquished with each utterance:

(11)

T: Why no-, I mean why, **[why**

G: **[It doesn't work that way?** I mean, I, I always, that's just  
The way I always (.) **[thought**

T: **[Where would you put it in,** in this paper **[if you wanted to**

G: **[Well, I mean it**

T: **[move it?**

G: **[would be the body paragraph in the middle,** like I was going to end up talking about these (.) kind of like, because that's what I was, I thought we were supposed to do.

A second and less frequent overlap variant is the *main channel overlap* (simultaneous speech), in which the person overlapping does not take or is not permitted to take the floor:

(12)

J: What do you guys think?

A: **[See, yeah, I don't think so. [Because like you were naming like on off of**

F: **[They don't even know where. [First and like**

A: **4.1 and [Cherry. You got to (.) yeah, you've got to say that.**

F: **[Yeah, it's just going to deserted places and rinks.**

M: O.K. So I can like [take out things

F: [Don't be so specific.

We see here three main channel overlaps, which, unlike interruptions or joint productions, represent extensive simultaneous speech. Note how F completely overlaps A, who maintains the floor in spite of it. Their third main channel overlap (*Cherry/Yeah*) begins and ends together.

While main channel overlaps may be considered "supportive" by the on-the-floor speaker in some languages, in English they are generally viewed as uncooperative attempts to seize the floor.

In *joint productions*, the third type of overlap, speakers complete each other's utterances. Note *and then Silko + Speaks for her heritage?* in the following excerpt:

(13)

T: So those yeah, that's the way, that's definitely a good way to go about it, um to identify the key concepts that you want to include in your thesis that are really important to your argument. ((writing)) So the personal and cultural memory (5s), the Kundera expressing his state of mind, (4s) **and then Silko**

S: uh-huh

**Speaks for her heritage?**

T: Speaks for her heritage? (4s) Yeah. So all of this into your thesis.

According to Ferrara and Thonus ("What Makes"), joint productions, more than interruptions or main channel overlaps, represent a movement toward greater solidarity and collaboration.

To sum up, because close vertical transcripts feature pauses, backchannels, minimal responses, and overlaps, they allow for analysis of features that can be key to the

interpretation of writing tutorials. Different types of overlap, as we have seen, can be construed as collaborative or as competitive. <sup>5</sup> We have also seen that, unless recognized, unanticipated and atypical backchannels can become a source of confusion and irritation. Also, paralinguistic features, not discussed here, such as ((laugh)), ((cough)), ((sigh)), finger snaps (^ ^), and hand striking a surface (>>), may be noted in close vertical transcripts of audiotapes and provide additional features to spur awareness and action on the part of writing tutors.

Close vertical transcription is a valuable analytical tool not only for dialogues but also for multi-party conversations. If presented in playscript format (horizontal transcription), the conversation in (14) would look like this:

(14)

M: See, I don't know if my conclusion really, I kind of like messed up.

F: I kind of like the essay.

A: I like the whole thing.

F: Like the essay was really good.

A: It's really good.

J: It's really, really good.

F: The only thing that...

M: I messed up like...

F: I like it because it actually flows along with it.

A: Yeah, and you can picture everything.

F: Yeah, but like...

M: I left out the winning. I forgot it.

This version of the conversation, while appearing more readable, presents the interchange as less complex, sequences the simultaneity of utterances, and omits the very features that provide a vivid and nuanced account of the tutorial. In (15), notice the "creative mess" produced by the tutor (T) and three students (A, F, and M):

(15)

M: See, I don't know if my conclusion really \*\*\*. I kind of like [messed up.

F: [I kind of like  
the essay.

A: I like, I like the whole thing.

F: Like the [essay was really good.

A: [It's really good.

T: It's really, [really good.

F: [The only thing that

M: I messed up, like

F: D-, I know, I like it,  
'cause it actually flows along with it [(.) but like

A: [Yeah, and you can picture every[thing.

F: [Yeah,  
[but like

M: [I left out the winning. I forgot it.

The four participants carry on a lively conversation that includes interruptions (*I kind of like messed up* and *I kind of like the essay*); false starts (*I like, I like the whole thing*); overlapping speech (*Like the essay was really good* and *It's really good*); and collaborative utterances (*It actually flows along with it* and *Yeah, and you can picture everything*), which can be meaningfully interpreted. The vertical spacing of the utterances also captures the excitement and energy of the conversation.

### *Close Vertical Transcription in Tutor Self-Analysis*

In the Writing Center at California State University, Fresno, which employs both semester-long, three-to-one group tutorials and one-on-one walk-in sessions, we have trained tutors in the use of close vertical transcription and asked them to transcribe ten minutes of a recorded session. The one-hour training session was based on a handout adapted from the transcription conventions shown earlier. It consisted of an explanation of the conventions, examination of a short sample excerpt matched with an audio version, and guided practice in transcribing. Based on our own practice, we advised tutors to first capture the most essential syntactic elements of the conversation (as in "cleaned up" horizontal transcription) and then add the extra-linguistic and spatial markers. Admittedly this added an extra step to the process of transcribing, but lifting the burden of deciding what to include and what to omit compensated for the extra listen it took to "verticalize" the transcript. As data collected from three semesters of the practice of including transcription in tutor training indicate, all of the tutors present at the training were able to implement the conventions of close vertical transcription with ease.

Tutors offered positive reactions to the experience of taping and transcribing ten-minute segments of their tutorials and transcribing them in close vertical format. Some of the comments revolved around silence and pauses. One tutor, Craig, realized that he talked more than was useful during the session: "I think that at a couple of key points, my silence would have been more helpful to the session than what I had to say at these moments." By timing pauses, Marianne realized that her "wait time" for student responses was only five seconds when her tutees needed about fifteen "to develop their thoughts and ideas." Since transcribing her recording, she had become "very aware of allowing extra time and not stepping over [tutees'] thought processes." From the close transcription of filled pauses, she understood "how many fillers and stalling devices we all used. There were a lot of *ums*, *mhms*, *uhs* and the like." She also realized that ESL students in her tutoring were "unsure of the English language, [and] therefore...hesitant to interrupt when somebody else is talking."

A second topic of tutor commentary dealt with overlaps and interruptions. Doris wrote, "I've realized that I need to stop myself from doing it [overlapping] in a group setting because it could prohibit someone from making a very valid point." Another observant tutor noted how his interruption of a student influenced the outcome of the tutorial:

In some of these moments, I could hear that she was about to perhaps make an important realization on her own, or at least make a relevant point on her own, and I had cut her off and, in a sense, fed the realization/point to her, turning what could have been for C a moment of active learning into a moment of passive acceptance of information. It is a big failure on my part to let such moments slip away.

When analyzing backchannels, Alice noticed that one member of her semester-long tutoring group used backchannels in an "interesting" way and decided to change her interpretation of them as a result:

M sprinkles these liberally and with a very enthusiastic tone of voice. She spent a good part of the semester making me believe she understood whatever I was explaining. This, however, is NOT SO. ...I'm no longer fooled by the positive backchanneling because it does not indicate comprehension.

Although not instructed to do so, some tutors found it valuable practice to share their transcripts with tutees. Monica offered:



I intend to share my transcription with my group. I am very eager to hear their reactions. I think it can be a good tool to see how we can improve as a group. I know my analysis and the things that I felt I should have said or not said, but I wonder what my group would change about this session.

To sum up, tutors were intrigued by the use of close vertical transcripts. Their observations and analyses resulted in a change in tutoring practice for some. Louise, a third-year tutor, wrote this reflection after her transcription experience, which centered on turn-taking and response:

I've completely changed the way I tutor. I've tried to make it more student-based. I listen more. In fact, if a student is speaking, I listen and don't talk until they have finished. To make sure they have finished, I usually ask them if they are done, or if that's all they have to say.... Also, other students in this same group have imitated this model of listening, repeating what someone has said with the phrase *What I hear you saying is....*

### *Two Case Studies in Transcript Analysis*

In training sessions we use transcripts in two ways. In general meetings we use our transcriptions of sessions by former tutors to point out effective and detrimental practices, as well as to illustrate to new tutors during the orientation preceding actual tutoring what a tutorial conversation is like. Then mid-semester we ask tutors, as Lerner and Gillespie suggest, to transcribe their tutorials and also write narrative self-reflections. These pieces are discussed in individual conferences with the director to help tutors become aware of patterns in their practice. In our present discussion we will concentrate exclusively on how features of close vertical transcription informed tutors of their effectiveness in sessions.

Following are two examples of how tutors employed and interpreted pauses they marked in their transcripts and the writing center director's responses. The first tutor, Robert, even though allowing long pauses, requires students to perform tasks impossible for them during the pauses he offers. Excerpt (16) depicts at least ten attempts on the part of the tutor to get each student in turn to compose orally a polished thesis statement for W, the writer. He does not invite a collaborative exercise in composing the thesis:

(16)

T: So, so you, **all you need what you were missing is the initial the statement here**

saying what you're gonna talk about.

W: uh-huh

O.K. well \*\*\* ( ) ((to X and E)) Guys? (.)

X: Don't ask me, I don't do thesis statements. ((laugh))

T: ((to X and E)) **Well, if this was your paper how would you write a thesis statement in the intro paragraph? (10s)**

X: I would probably use the sentence where she says (3s) their special uses include oils, medicine, food, dyes, \*\*\* art work, fuel feed and gardening. I'd probably use that as her thesis. Because that's what she talks about in the paper. and then you can just

T: hmm

X: rephrase the, that the special uses include to say something like and like the reader know that that's what they're gonna talk about.

T: **Give me an example. Give us an example. How would you phrase it?**

⇒ X: ((sigh)) (5s)

T: ((to W and E)) **How would you guys phrase it?**

W: That the major uses that this paper explains are and then list all those, I don't know.

T: O.K. What kind of ((to E)) **If this was your paper, how would you state the thesis?**

E: She talks about the um people around the world, right? I mean I would kind of say something about (1s) sunflowers were used around the world for da da da da da.

T: O.K.

E: ((laugh))

T: I don't know if that da da da da da would work

E: Or um \*\*\*

X: ((laugh))

E: [\*\*\* kinda say something about how they were used? Like in the different parts.

X: ((laugh))

T: O.K. Now, you guys you guys you brought in essays before, you guys had thesis statements before.

W: Uh-huh.

T: O.K. **Give me an example of a thesis statement. How would it be phrased? (.)**  
Not what the content of it. **Tell me how what the phrase is? Like how would you [phrase it?**

W: [The importance of this paper, the reason for even writing the paper is blah blah, I don't know. ((laugh)) That's why it's so hard to do. ((laugh))

T: O.K.

In the transcript margin (at  $\Rightarrow$  above), the writing center director wrote, "Here, you could ask all students to write it [the thesis statement] down and share their attempts, rather than compose orally (which is difficult, and the long pause indicates it)." X's statement, following the first 10-second pause, already suggests that the phrasing of the thesis could be rehearsed more effectively in writing. The director attributed to the students this thought: "I cannot recite you a complete thesis statement, even if you give me five *minutes*, and the sigh probably indicates that!"

In his written reflection, Robert realized that his perceptions of silence changed while doing the transcription. Yet he seemed unsure about how pauses should be used productively:

I also pondered how much of the time was spent in silence. When tutoring, the silence seems to fill a certain duration of time that seems rather short. Upon listening, I found those durations of time to be endless. There's a striking distinction between the silence during the session itself and the taped silence which I listened to. I think that when one is present with others the silence tends to be awkward and so one must say something. When listening to the taped session, I failed to see the awkwardness, and the time seemed to drag on and on in silence. Five seconds seemed like a minute.

Responding to this reflection, the writing center director wrote, "But silences can be very productive as well—if thinking is taking place"—followed by a critique of Robert's insistence that students compose a precise thesis statement orally on the spot, without recognizing that students' thinking on paper would be more productive and require an even longer pause in the conversation. The latter part of the excerpt illustrates how difficult those oral attempts are for students and that the tutor's insis-

tence on getting them to do so fails. As a tutor trainer, the writing center director expected Robert to allow students to rehearse (with pauses) possible ideas and wording, capturing those attempts in writing, which then could be phrased successfully as he insisted a thesis statement should be.

The second tutor, Alexandra, understood the value of pauses in tutorial conversations, as demonstrated in her transcript, which showed significant pauses during which both she and the tutee wrote, reviewed the draft, pondered, and waited for the other's contribution. Alexandra, however, overshot the target by using pauses to incite the student to answer her questions as if saying, "You answer this. I won't do it for you." Yet as evidenced throughout the transcript, she consistently answered those questions (for *herself*, not for the student) in order to pursue her own agenda.

Below are two excerpts in which we illustrate Alexandra's deliberate (but unproductive) use of pauses. The student she is tutoring (S) is writing about her experience in high school. Having met some new friends who influenced her behavior in a negative way, she later realized that school was important. Diagnosing the problem to be solved during the tutorial, Alexandra wrote, "Her teacher and I had been, for several weeks, attempting to get her to expand on that area of experience she had reduced to 'months passed, and things changed.'" The following excerpt was preceded by a tutor question regarding the bad influence her new friends had on her:

(17)

⇒ T: O.K., so **what (.) what was going on right there that you chose to be friends**

S: uh-huh

⇒ T: **with them? (7s) What was more important, right there? (9s)** Do you know what I mean?

S: Yeah. (13s)

T: Those friends offered something (7s) and so, so what you have to do

S: yeah

⇒ T: right here is where the analysis comes in. **Why do people do this? (13s)**

S: Um, I don't, I don't (9s)

⇒ T: 'Cause people do it all the time. **Why will the high school students that you're talking to why will they do it, too? (12s)** In order to avoid going through

S: uh-huh

T: what you went through, they will have to know what it is that

S: yeah yeah

T: made you do it. **Do you know yet? Have you been able to think about that yet?**

S: Well, not really, I don't know, see 'cause **(3s)** maybe it's just 'cause of the, like the popular, like you know, **(5s)** you want to be popular **(4s)** you want to be popular **(6s)** and stuff like that but I'm not, I don't know, too **(8s)**.

Even though the long pauses indicate Alexandra gives S space to respond, the student does not take the floor. Notice that the tutor does not recast (elaborate) unanswered questions to facilitate response; in fact, during the questioning, she piles query upon query (*What was going on here that you chose to be friends with them?* and *What was more important, right there?*)—not rephrasing the previous question but instead adding a new one. The tutor is creating a problem for S by taxing her short-term memory with eight questions to which she must respond, a burden which is exacerbated by the fact that for S English is a second language. In addition, Alexandra inserts three closed questions—Do you know what I mean? Do you know yet? and Have you been able to think about that yet?—that undermine the open-ended questions she asked immediately before that she expects the student to answer. Instead, S answers the closed questions only, and her backchannels uh-huh and yeah are noncommittal. The writing center director wrote repeatedly on the transcript excerpts: "Why was there such a long pause? I wonder if the student got the question, if she knew what you were asking about?"

The conversation continues. In this second excerpt from Alexandra's tutorial, following a short break for writing, she re-engages the topic nominated by S, popularity.

(18)

T: Well, O.K., so let's talk some more about, (.) 'cause you keep raising that idea about wanting to be popular, you raised that before, you wanted to be popular. **(8s)**

S: uh-huh

T: So, what, (.) what did you think being popular would give you?

⇒ S: Um **(11s) I don't know**, that you would know everyone.

T: You would know everyone. **(6s)** And why would you want to do that?

⇒ S: Just 'cause to be cool, I guess, you would look, **I don't know (7s)**

T: Being cool. ((writing)) O.K. So where does being cool come from? (12s) If somebody "bees" cool (3s) who decides whether they're cool?

S: uh-huh

You, I guess it's up to you, being cool.

T: Well, but that's not the way you were thinking, is it? You were thinking (3s) that the only way to be cool is if everybody in school thought you were cool.

S: uh-huh

T: Right?

S: Uh-huh.

T: You had to be.

As a high-involvement speaker, Alexandra might be expecting latching, overlap, and joint production from S, a low-involvement speaker. The 8-second, 6-second, and 12-second pauses indicate Alexandra is waiting for S to latch on her responses in order to extend the tutor's own utterances. She ascribes to S the inability to engage in the conversation despite the space-offering pauses:

I knew going in that I talk far too much in these sessions and that the student talks far too little, and the tape confirms that. I did see, however, that I have become much better about waiting for a response to my questions. At one point in the tape, I waited 21 seconds before rephrasing the question. Nevertheless, in this particular situation, it doesn't seem to make much difference. The student tries, really tries, to respond to the kinds of questions that I ask her, but it seems as though she has never thought about things in the way that I'm asking her to. When she says that she doesn't know (and she says it a lot!), she really doesn't know and seems utterly unaccustomed to thinking of things in that way—especially in the area of being responsible for making choices (or of having choices, for that matter).

In her response to Alexandra, the writing center director explained that instead of offering the student space, the pauses instead might have put the student on the spot, perhaps even embarrassing her. The transcript showed that S *did* answer some questions in latched turns, which suggests that unfilled pauses signify not knowing how to answer a question as posed, rather than "not being responsible for making choices." S's responses, when they came, were often mitigated with more *I don't know*s, indicating that she might have been guessing at what she thought the tutor wanted. Alexandra

was asked to speculate on the effect the repeatedly unfilled pauses and "I don't know" responses had on S and weigh that against the tutor's own feelings of frustration. What was suggested for the tutor is first, learn how to recast rather than "pile up" questions, and perhaps change the overall approach to tutoring this student by having S respond in writing to one question at time, as that proved productive at one point in the session.

### *Conclusion*

Close transcription goes beyond representing the essential syntax and vocabulary of an utterance to capturing most of the elements of the stream of speech; vertical transcription includes temporal spacing and renders horizontal "monody" as homophony and polyphony.

By taking the time to prepare close vertical transcriptions of tutorials that include hesitations, repetitions, timed pauses, backchannels, overlaps and paralinguistic features, writing center tutors and researchers obtain much more information to work with. It needs to be stated, however, that in advocating the use of close vertical transcription we do not claim that adopting it for examining tutorial conversation will result in radical change in writing center practice or philosophy. Employing this transcription format will modify the focus and give us more defined criteria for the analysis of tutorials, which in turn will help us operationalize such categories as collaboration, facilitation of response, negotiation, awareness of comprehension, acceptance of response, dominance, etc., to reveal how and how effectively they are constructed in tutorial conversation. Conference presentations and publications by Gilewicz, Plummer, Thonus and Walker, which employ close vertical transcription, have already shown how it can aid in answering such questions as "How directive are tutors, really?", "How do males and females talk differently in writing tutorials?" and "How do students interact with one another and with their tutor in group vs. individual tutorials?" Areas that can also be examined through such transcription include tutorial myths (e.g., "Don't interrupt the student"), functions of laughter, and comparisons between the responses of native and nonnative tutees, among others.

Besides addressing practical concerns in the methodology of tutoring writing, close vertical transcription could help to answer larger questions of interest to those researching talk about writing. If adopted more extensively by writing center researchers, this style of transcribing could help us delineate more clearly the differences between tutorials and other talk about writing, such as classroom peer groups and writing conferences with teachers.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, this transcription style will

permit comparison of writing center tutorials with the multitude of studies available in the discourse and conversation analysis literature. Ultimately, writing center tutorials will gain legitimacy as an oral discourse genre in the academy when transcribed in the detail and depth of close vertical transcription.

cult to digest what has taken place because the ideas are intercepted by excess words...An example of this is shown at the beginning of the transcript. I asked J, 'What is most interesting to you about S's paper?' [His]response alone took up to ten lines of computer text when all that was said could have been done in one sentence. That is why I attempt to ask leading questions or make brief comments to the students' response. Capturing those raw ideas and putting them down on paper was a task that opened my eyes to understanding the importance of conveying my thoughts clearly, as if they were to be captured and written down at that moment."

<sup>2</sup>These include published works by Davis et al, and by Walker and Elias, as well as unpublished dissertations by Thonus and by Young, among others.

<sup>3</sup>Precise, detailed descriptions, which Clifford Geertz termed "thick description."

<sup>4</sup>In transcripts, we decided to follow a consistent pattern of marking tutorial participants: The tutor is labeled "T," while students are labeled with other letters of the alphabet. Within the text, we changed tutors' names so that all may remain anonymous.

<sup>5</sup>See Carole Edelsky's work on the typology of conversational floors.

<sup>6</sup>It is worth noting that Laurel Johnson Black's book, *Between Talk and Teaching*, employs close vertical transcription in descriptions of teacher-student writing conferences.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This perception was initially shared by several of the tutors at our writing center who did close transcription: "Reading the transcript word for word [it's] hard to understand what each student is saying. Ideas are choppy, and it is diffi-



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