Instructor tutoring in the classroom: A merger of domains

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Introduction
Traditionally, teaching and tutoring have been considered interdependent realms of education, dedicated in mutual ways to improving students’ learning. Instructors in classrooms deliver course material, supervise skill development, and regularly test students to guarantee learning standards. In a supporting role, tutors work in help centers to improve students’ skills and knowledge of course content already covered by the instructor. From this perspective, these two domains are clearly symbiotic in nature, conjoined in purpose, but distinct in roles and responsibilities.

However, when we look at the areas of crossover, the view is blurred and the roles of instructors and tutors seem more blended than discrete. At times, there is even an interchange of tasks. For example, instructors tutor students in the classroom, and tutors teach students in help centers. Similarly, instructors sometimes work in help centers and tutors in classrooms, a reversal that begs further discussion about territorial domains, hybrid teaching pedagogies, and prospects for adapting best tutoring practices for use in the classroom.

Although there is literature available on the separate domains of teaching and tutoring, there is actually very little on instructor tutoring in the classroom. This is mostly because it is often considered impractical in large classes, which result from economic necessity, especially in post-secondary institutions. Further reasons include the dominance of teacher-centered or other student-centered approaches and, occasionally, the pejorative opinion that tutoring is at most a supplementary area of education more suited to remedial studies. There is also the perceived problem of time restraints: teachers cannot regularly stop a lesson to tutor those who just don't get it. Consequently, tutoring in the classroom has been the responsibility of peer or help-center tutors, teaching assistants, or electronic tutoring systems.

But, there is a basis in educational theory and research upon which to make a case for the inclusion of instructor tutoring in the classroom as a formal blended methodology. A review of research on the effectiveness of tutoring, particularly in the subject of writing, will establish its pedagogical credibility, while a review of teaching and tutoring as merged domains brings us a step closer to realizing the practical value of instructor tutoring in the classroom. Finally, the development of a sample lesson plan will address the problem of time restraints and other classroom management issues.
Supporting research

Research by Bausell, Moody, and Walzl (1972) indicates that tutoring performed an historic role in educational theory and is in fact superior to other methods of teaching (p. 591). Although a little technically obtuse, the authors recognize the merits of tutoring and say “in a on-to-one instructional situation, a teacher through informal (and perhaps even subconscious) diagnostic procedures could make instruction more relevant to a student's needs” (p. 596). They also indicate that, because of tutoring’s rising reputation, it was eventually incorporated into school systems, but mostly for remedial purposes and in centers located outside the classroom (p. 591).

In a recent online article, Heisawn Jeong (2013) noted that a study conducted ten years later in 1982 by P. Cohen, J. Kulik, and C. Kulik “reported superior academic performance of tutored students in 45 of the 52 studies (p. 2). By 1987, according to Dave Healy (1993) in his article “A Defense of Dualism: The Writing Center and the Classroom,” peer tutoring “has been institutionalized within the academy” (p. 180). Quoting another research article by Harvey Kail and John Trimbur, Healy says peer tutoring and collaborative learning have been “recognized as innovative contributions not only to the writing abilities but more broadly to the liberal education of undergraduates” (p. 180).

Moving on to the 1990s, Bailin Song and Eva Richter (1997) make further claims for the effectiveness of tutoring in their article “Tutoring in the Classroom: A Quantitative Study”, published in The Writing Center Journal. They conducted a study of an in-class tutoring program at Kingsborough Community College of the City University of New York, one that placed writing center tutors in classrooms to work with teachers and students. At the end of the program, they conducted a survey to determine the results and found substantial statistical evidence of tutoring's positive effects on students' learning. For example, they found their students had higher pass rates and were more successful in subsequent writing courses than students who weren't tutored in the classroom (p. 58).

Further, in 2001, in their book Tutoring Writing: A Practical Guide for Conferences, Donald McAndrew and Thomas Reigstad describe the “the power and process of tutoring writing” (p. 3) and claim that “research overwhelmingly supports tutoring writing” (p. 8). They go on to summarize individual studies of peer tutoring, conferencing, literacy tutoring, and tutoring writing, proclaiming the superiority of tutoring over conventional teacher-based lectures. Overall, they list the following claims for tutoring:

1. It is “an effective way to develop [the] writing skills” of students from primary school to post secondary levels of education.
2. It “improves the quality of the written product, the effectiveness of the writing process, students’ chances of passing the writing course they are taking, students’ grades in writing courses, and scores on standardized writing test.”
3. “It is also effective at developing the affective domain related to growth in writing by improving writers’ attitudes . . . and their perceptions of themselves as writers.”
4. Lastly, “Tutoring writing improves grades in English 101 courses more effectively than traditional grammar instruction does” (p. 13).

So, research has shown convincingly that tutoring is an effective teaching methodology, although its effectiveness has been measured only in help centers or in classrooms with various tutoring programs that exclude instructors, and this leads us to the question of domains.

Separate domains?

It seems the history of tutoring has always shown it to be a domain separate from that of teaching. This dichotomy has been reflected in the establishment of separate locations, with tutoring entrenched in the help center and teaching in the classroom. And, not only are these two domains separated physically, they are often set in opposition politically by institutional agendas or traditional hierarchies of value that pit professional teachers against non-professional (student) or semi-professional tutors (teaching assistants). Students themselves have definitive
expectations about the separate roles and responsibilities of teachers and tutors that cannot seemingly be violated.

In The St. Martin’s Sourcebook for Writing Tutors (2008), for example, Muriel Harris reports in her article, “Cultural Conflicts in the Writing Center: Expectations and Assumptions of ESL Students,” that in the cultural realm, ESL students “were remarkably consistent in stating that teachers teach and tutors help” (p. 209). These students go on to further differentiate teachers and tutors, perceiving teachers as having greater authority than tutors and the ultimate responsibility to deliver knowledge and to inform students about problems (p. 209). Also, ESL students “perceive tutors to be more immediately helpful, more approachable, more practical, and more personal than teachers, but the students expect tutors to work on errors and difficulties in specific pieces of discourse, not on the larger, more abstract level of writing skills and processes” (p. 210).

Two articles from the 1990s focus specifically on this issue of separate domains. Dave Healy (1994) argues these two entities need to be separated because the writing center offers a necessary alternative to the stifling authority of the teacher and to formal evaluation, both of which he claims inhibit the free creative impulses students draw on in the writing process (p. 184). Although the writing center and the tutoring paradigm are still associated with authority and evaluation, he believes their nature is different in the writing center.

However, Helon Raines (1994) refocuses attention on the similarities between teacher and tutor roles. For her, teaching can be a form of tutoring, and in certain writing centers the tutors are teachers. In fact, at College of the North Atlantic-Qatar, I am a classroom teacher working as a full-time tutor in our writing center and use the same collaborative tutoring methodology in both roles. Raines does much the same, commenting that she uses a dialogic process with students in her office and in her class (p. 158): “Our goal is for the best of teaching to enter the tutorial and the best of tutoring to imbue teaching with new practice, collapsing both at some point into a new perspective in the dialectical process” (p. 159). This statement encourages us to consider more directly a merger of domains.

Merger of domains

Raines’ “new perspective” is a paradigm shift that promotes the systematic entrenchment of tutoring programs in the classroom. These are commonly referred to as curriculum-based programs, but they use designated tutors, not teachers. So, there is still a separation of roles here. However, in a later article published in 1995, Mary Soliday argues for a transitory relationship between teacher and tutor. In “Shifting Roles in Classroom Tutoring: Cultivating the Art of Boundary Crossing,” she describes the results of a study at the City College of New York, whereby writing center tutors were asked to work for two semesters both in classrooms with composition teachers and at the writing centers, other tutors were asked to work only in the classrooms (p. 59). The most successful tutors were those who blended teacher roles with their own tutoring roles. Soliday identifies several benefits of this merger of domains, including broader perspectives for writing centers and their students and long-term student commitment to quality writing (p. 60).

“Tutor,” of course, refers to the role of a person who tutors another in some subject or skill. In an educational institution, a teacher (which describes another role, obviously) can readily assume certain responsibilities of tutors. In fact, some educational theorists prescribe it. In Tutoring Writing: A Practical Guide for Conferences (2001), Donald McAndrew and Thomas Reigstad discuss the social constructionist theory of tutoring, drawing on Lev Vygotsky’s idea that students have a “level of potential development,” which is “the level at which they could work if they had the help of a teacher or an able peer coaching them to move beyond what they can currently do” (p. 2). They also comment that “in this process, the teacher is a more experienced writer or language user who asks questions and supports students to help them progress” (p. 2). And this is the strongest advocacy for instructor tutoring so far in this line of research.

When we consider in-class tutoring strategies available to an instructor, we think of one-on-one sessions. But, there are several tutoring methods instructors can use in the classroom, besides these sessions. Among them is conferencing, defined by McAndrew and Reigstad as “a
form of tutoring in which the tutor is a teacher rather than a peer” (p. 8). Popular since the 1970s, conferencing is, according to their review of documented research, “as effective as the traditional lecture class and often lead[s] to more positive attitudes toward writing and writing classes” (p. 10). Another possible strategy is outlined in Heisawn Jeong’s 2013 online article, “Tutoring,” previously cited. Jeong discusses studies that prove the effectiveness of the collaborative observation of tutoring, whereby, in this case, “students learned to solve physics problems just as effectively from observing tutoring collaboratively as the students who were being tutored” (p. 7). Jeong also mentions Socratic dialogues, which are series of questions that lead students toward self-discovery of information. He makes the claim, based on research conducted by several other educators, that “Socratic tutoring appears to produce superior learning outcomes compared with didactic tutoring, but it is rare not only in typical tutoring session[s] involving novice tutors, but also when tutors have years of experience” (p. 3).

But, before the instructor enacts any of these strategies, lesson plans must be written such that students first receive instructions for an activity that address a course objective and then are given adequate time to study and understand these instructions, along with samples and other related material. The challenge here is for the instructor to plan lessons that reserve time for tutoring, thereby reaping all the benefits of tutoring as a classroom pedagogy.

**Classroom time management**

Classroom teaching generally involves the introduction to a particular learning objective, an explanation of its theoretical and practical uses, discussion of an example, and a practice assignment. It is during this practice assignment especially that students need tutoring. It is healthy to experiment with various tutoring strategies to find which fit the instructor and students best. Here is a sample class schedule for writing a persuasive business letter that provides ample time for instructor tutoring and a short list of strategies.

**Table 1: Sample Lesson Plan Incorporating Time for Instructor Tutoring**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 minutes</td>
<td>Introduce objective/topic: writing a persuasive business letter</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discuss the importance in the business world of developing this skill</td>
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<tr>
<td>20 minutes</td>
<td>Distribute copies of a sample letter and discuss sections and their purposes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 minutes</td>
<td>Discuss common mistakes students make writing persuasive letters</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recap and let students know what is to be covered next class</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 minutes</td>
<td>Distribute and discuss a practice assignment (formative assessment)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have students sign-up for the in-class tutoring sessions to follow</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>individual small group collaborative sessions any other type suggested by the students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 minutes</td>
<td>Tutor students who have signed up</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 minutes</td>
<td>Continue tutoring</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Encourage students to rewrite, edit, and finish on time</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
15 minutes
Group tutorial
Instructor provides feedback to students on their strengths and weaknesses
Students ask any questions about the instructor's feedback, the course objective, the practice assignment, and the upcoming assignment (summative evaluation)

10 minutes
Review the three-day session and remind students of the assignment next class

It is obviously in the second and third classes that the instructor gets time to tutor students, either randomly or according to a specific, predetermined order, perhaps working with weaker students first and the stronger students last. Or the instructor can simply be available upon request, tending to students who first raise their hands.

**Conclusion**
Research has shown tutoring to be an effective approach to teaching. Because of the advantages tutoring offers students, the adaptation of tutoring methods for instructor use in the classroom needs to be considered. Such a process needs to take into account the pragmatic issue of time constraints, the selection of tutoring strategies that best fit individual instructors and students, and constant feedback from students that can lead to improvements. Overall, students get the full benefit of an effective blended methodology delivered by full professionals, rather than by semi-professionals or peer tutors. Instructors, for example, can use heuristic questioning and link learning objectives more directly to broader course content. They can also delve more deeply into sophisticated writing skills and show how these skills have cross-disciplinary value in the broader academic community. Finally, I concur with Heisawn Jeong's statement that tutoring is “a particularly effective form of instruction because it facilitates active knowledge construction within the interactive context of tutorial dialogues” (p. 7). One of our goals as educators then should be to implant this critical learning tool firmly in the classroom so students can avail of its historic successes.

**References**