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AUTHOR Munger, Roger H.  
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## ABSTRACT

Writing centers are one place where expert-novice interactions are likely to occur. Students often assume that tutors possess expertise by virtue of their appointment as tutors. The tutor, for his/her part, often assumes that the student's knowledge is deficient in the area in which the student is seeking advice. The complex interactional and linguistic demands on the participants of tutoring sessions are interesting in that usually both parties agree to coordinate their talk, but frequently, this coordination fails. The tutor-student interaction can be focused on the effect of questions. Questions play an important role in interactions where an asymmetry of knowledge exists and the conversants agree, at least initially, to try to reduce this asymmetry. Questions are one such speech choice that reveals power relationships. The teaching sequences present in most tutoring sessions replace the normal egalitarian style of dialogue with a hierarchical one. Using J. J. Gumperz and N. Berenz's (1993) method of conversational transcription, the role questions play in indexing expert and novice roles was analyzed. The student (a female graduate student) had expertise in an area she was discussing with the tutor (also a female graduate student). The women, however, assumed positions that conventions expect of them, and as a result, the student did not get what she wanted out of the meeting and the tutor become frustrated. It is recommended that future research should focus on describing and categorizing the ways novice students subvert the expert-novice frame of tutor-student interactions. (Contains 12 references.) (TB)

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Roger H. Munger  
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute  
Department of Language, Literature, and Communication  
Troy, New York 12180-3590

[munger@rpi.edu](mailto:munger@rpi.edu) (E-mail)

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## Asymmetries of Knowledge: What Tutor-Student Interactions Tell Us About Expertise

### Introduction

Writing centers are one place that expert-novice interactions are likely to occur. Students often assume that tutors possess expertise by virtue of their appointment as "tutors." Moreover, students come to the session assuming the tutor has expert knowledge on some matter relevant to the their needs. The tutor, on the other hand, often assumes that the student's knowledge is deficient in the area that the student is overtly seeking advice about. Otherwise, why would the student be engaging in a tutoring session? The complex interactional and linguistic demands on the participants of tutoring sessions are interesting in that usually both parties agree to coordinate their talk but, frequently, this coordination fails.

Although tutor and students may "fail" to coordinate their talk for many reasons, in this presentation I am going to focus on only one aspect of tutor-student interactions: The effect of questions on the tutor-student relationship. Questions play an important role in interactions where an asymmetry of knowledge exists and the conversants agree, at least initially, to try to reduce this asymmetry. The teaching sequences present in most tutoring sessions replace the normal egalitarian style of dialogue with a hierarchical one (Keppler & Luckman, 1991). Tutors are expected to

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carry the burden of "setting the agenda, introducing subtopics, posing problems to solve, and exposing the student's knowledge deficits" (Graesser 1993: 8-9). On the other hand, the student, or novice, is assumed to have some deficiency of knowledge or else he or she would not be seeking advice from a tutor. One interesting aspect of this particular expert-novice context is how the questions asked by the participants index their asymmetric roles.

Although much research has been done on tutor-student interactions (see, for example, Graesser 1993 and Porter 1991), less has been written about these interactions when the student is not a "novice" and possesses expert knowledge. In this presentation I will discuss how tutors and students contextualize their activity, frame their talk, and coordinate their talk through the use of questions. Of particular interest are interactions exhibiting asymmetries where the student "may possess some knowledge, but nevertheless have an asymmetrical position with respect to that knowledge" because of the tutor-student relationship (Drew 1991: 22).

Like Linell and Luckman (1991), I am interested in asymmetries of knowledge that are communicatively salient not just inequivalences of knowledge. I am interested in how asymmetries created by institutional norms and cognitive states affect the expert-novice relationship in tutoring sessions. Although the general expert-novice relationship holds true for tutoring sessions in general, I'll argue today that novices, in some instances, makes choices that also index them as an expert.

## Setting and Participants

I will focus on one particular tutoring session featuring a student who is closer in educational experience and age to the tutor than other sessions I observed. This conversation occurred at a state university's writing center. In the conversation we will look, the tutor, speaker T, is a white female graduate student in the University's English Department. Speaker S is a white female graduate student enrolled in a graduate program at a neighboring college. Both T and S are in their early twenties. T and S are seated next to each other at a table with a typed copy of S's resume on the table between them.

## Analysis

Using Gumperz and Berenz's (1993) method of conversational transcription, I analyzed the role questions play in indexing expert and novice roles and how they help or hinder the interaction. Questions are often prompted by feelings of uncertainty, ambiguities, and a desire to hear more about an idea. They may also indicate that something needs further clarification. O'Donnell (1990), for example, argues that power and dominance is realized in the asymmetry of speech choices. Questions are one such speech choice that reveals power relationships. The questions asked by tutors and students reveal institutional and culturally approved roles. Linell and Luckman, for example, emphasize that "whatever asymmetries or symmetries are actually found, these are not merely expressions of individual intentions or motives. There are also social structures and traditions 'speaking through' actors" (p. 9). In this paper, I am not so much interested in the speakers' intentions and motives for asking questions, but rather I am interested in how questions establish the

expert-novice frame and index the roles of the participants as either expert or novice.

### Questions by the Tutor

The questions posed by the tutor indexes her as an expert and places her in an asymmetrical relationship with the student. Of note in the following excerpts is not only how the questions index T as an expert but also how S's responses help to establish the expert-novice relationship and limit the interaction. The tutoring session begins by S explaining to T that she is a graduate student and interns at the University's career development center. Two turns later, T asks a crucial question that establishes the expert-novice frame for the rest of the session:

1 T: ==so you should know a lot about this though? [laughs]

2

3 S: I ah you know i'm just starting [laughs]

4

5 T: ok

6

7 S: but um

8 I'm pretty bad as as the resume part is my weakest

T acknowledges S's experiences in line 1 and offers her a chance to claim expert knowledge about resumes and cover letters. However, S downplays this claim of expertise and adopts the role of a novice seeking advice. It is impossible to say for sure what prompts S to respond in this manner. S may be insecure with her abilities or she may be acting in the context of the tutor-student frame where claims of expertise by the student might appear silly and would stop the interaction. Even though her denial of expertise establishes their respective roles for the remainder of the conversation, her responses do not always index her as a novice.

The tutor's next question is an attempt by the expert to elicit a request for knowledge from the novice seeking advice. Speaker T is beginning to form a tutoring agenda and needs to know what sort of knowledge S is seeking:

- 1 S: so um  
2 i just wanted to basically go over my resume/  
3  
4 T: how do you feel that it is weak?  
5  
6 S: um my my grammar is awful//

The tutor's question is very similar to other expert-novice situations such as doctor/patient and auto-mechanic/car-driver. In these interactions, the experts try to first ascertain what type of advice (or treatment) is necessary. It is the sort of question like the one described above that indexes the tutor's role of expert in relation to the student.

The tutors initial questions are focused on the advice S is seeking and deciding on an agenda for the tutoring session. To this end, the tutor engages in what Drew (1991) refers to as "testing." Testing questions are questions that elicit responses from the student that reveal in some way the extent of the student's knowledge deficiency. Moreover, this testing , Drew (1991: 37) argues, brings the novice's lack of knowledge "to the interactional surface, and makes the asymmetry interactionally relevant." The tutor follows up her testing question by pointing out what Ulichny and Watson-Gegeo (1989) describe as a "correctable." A correctable does not match in some way the tutor's notion of "good" writing. It is something that an expert can discover in the novice's work and then offer advice. Here, T discovers what she thinks is a correctable:

- 1 T: ==and i i see first of all you don't have an objective up here?

2  
3 S: right//  
4  
5 T: did you, were you going to paste one in, or is this a case  
6  
7 S: ==no//  
8  
9 T: ==where you're applying to multiple places and {[lo] you don't?}

By identifying a specific correctable, the tutor is indexing her expertise. What is interesting in this exchange is the way S responds to T. Both of her answers end with final fall intonation. Instead of offering an excuse for being incorrect, S answers in a way that challenges T's expertise. The final falls suggest that S has confidence in her choices. S's response limits T's interactional choices by the finality of her answers. S's claim to possessing expert knowledge continues as the dialogue progresses. Notice in the following exchange S's claim to special knowledge that T does not possess:

1 S: I'm applying i'm applying to . .  
2 it's all the same  
3 but what I was going to do because I have limited space I was going  
4 to just take care of that in my cover letter/  
5  
6 T: um ha/  
7  
8 S: um and also I-  
9 . . . because my my degree is going to be in counseling with a  
10 concentration is school counseling  
11 I'm going to um just applying to schools.  
12 school districts/  
13 obviously  
14 and um  
15  
16 T: ==so it's fairly obvious what ( ) =get a job in=  
17  
18 S: =yea, exactly/=  
19 that's why I didn't really feel the need . . to put that in there/

20  
21

T: ==um ha/

This excerpt is important because it casts S in a role different from that of novice. Indeed, S demonstrates knowledge about her profession that T does not possess and T backs off her assertion that a lack of objective is indeed a correctable.

S's response to T's questioning results in T trying to fulfill her role as expert by finding another correctable. T drops the missing "objective" as a topic, and moves on to another correctable. T points out that S does not have an institutional address on her resume. Using specialized language (e.g., "cv's"), T goes back to testing questions to expose S's lack of knowledge. Also, T may be suggesting to S that she should consider a different format (i.e., using a vitae instead of a resume). S a few turns later responds with a definite final fall intonation that it's is not that important at this point. Again, the definiteness of S's statements--the final fall intonation-- in response to T's "expert" talk indexes S more as an expert herself than as the novice that most of her questions index her as.

Increasingly confronted with S's expertise, T acknowledges that she is not familiar with the way S's profession expects resumes to be written. Perhaps, T is frustrated at this point because she obviously not supplying S with what she wants (whatever that is). The questions S is asking her require her to adopt the role of expert, but when she speaks as expert S responds in a manner other than that of a novice.

After professing no expert knowledge in S's field, T indexes her authority as expert through her references to her authoritative experience--an area she can claim expertise.

1 T: ==um usually the degree com- comes before the college/

2 at least that's been my experience I don't know if that's the way  
3 you've selected you've decided to do it that way?

4  
5 S: {[lo] I've pretty much decided to do it that way//}

T's authoritative statement in line 1 is marked by false starts. T's remark in line 1 could possibly be an example of T imposing her "institutional definition" of the correct resume format (Mehan 1990: 160). Mehan states, "This imposition negates the [student's] definition, relegating [her] experience to an inferior status" (1990: 173). She qualifies the statement in line 2 with "at least that's been my experience." S responds with finality and in a low pitch. She ignores T's authoritative experience and sticks with her original resume format. She breaks the frame of expert-novice and decides to ignore the expertise of the tutor.

### Questions by the Student

What distinguishes this tutoring session from the other tutoring sessions I recorded is that in this session the student is on a more equal status level with the tutor. The student is similar in age and education to the tutor. In addition, the student's areas of study and work experience give her access to expert knowledge on resumes and cover letters. She has job experience working in a career center counseling students on career placement documents such as resumes and cover letters. Thus, at the career center, her role is that of expert. Nevertheless, during the tutoring session the student repeatedly downgrades her claim to expertise in the tutoring session. The student overtly assumes the role of novice based on the questions she asks. Wintermantel (1991) describes the task of the novice as that of grasping the meaning of what the expert is saying. He goes on to argue that this relationship "provides a regularity which is

accepted by both participants at the outset. For the one who is delivering the instruction it should be clear that she is ready to transfer her knowledge; for the one who wants to learn in the course of the dialogue it implies acceptance of the dominance of the expert" (Wintermantel 1991: 125). However, her responses to the tutor's questions and comments departs from the novice role.

Although the student's responses index her as an "expert," her questions often place her in the role of novice and advice-seeker. Early in the tutoring session S asks questions such as:

- 1 S: ==does that make sense?  
2  
3 T: yea it makes lots of sense I mean but ( )  
4 yea you have all the descriptions here/  
5 I wouldn't know what wouldn't fit would be excluded here  
6 but everything that's there  
7  
8 S: ==well, I mean do \*\*you understand what I'm what it's saying?  
9 because guess I wanted to make sure that  
10 I mean  
11 whoever read it knew exactly what I did

Invited by S into playing the role of expert, T responds with evaluative phrases like "it makes lots of sense" and "it's very direct and to the point."

Continuing in her novice role, S asks T about the appropriate wording of her job. S focuses on a seemingly irrelevant point. At this point in the conversation, T has already raised topics concerning the format of the resume and omitted sections. T has also implicitly questioned whether S should be using a vitae instead of a resume. However, S avoids these challenges to her expertise and maintains the tutoring frame by asking minor questions of the tutor.

- 1 S: I did have a question

2 as far as  
3 we we were joking about this yesterday when we were working on it  
4 um now is it career counsel\*\*or intern?  
5 or would it be career counsel\*\*ing intern?  
6 or does it matter?  
7 because I am a career counsel\*\*or

Even though S has been working in the field and is more familiar with the terms used to describe the type of work she does, S defers to T's expertise.

What is interesting is the response, or lack of response from T:

1 T: ==um ha  
2  
3 S: ==or i would be a career counsel\*\*or  
4  
5 T: ==um ha  
6  
7 S: ==but i'm an \*\*intern//  
8 now or am =i the career counseling intern=  
9  
10 T: =well how have how=  
11 how have they officially designated you?  
12  
13 S: career counselor  
14  
15 T: career counselor  
16  
17 S: intern  
18  
19 T: intern  
20  
21 S: [laughs] interning i don't know?  
22  
23 T: ==you could deal with career counselor slash intern  
24 i i don't know how important it is

This episode is characterized by an initial lack of response by T. Briefly shifting to an advice-seeker role, T asks how people in S's field have designated her. But, then in line 24, she resumes her expert role and dismisses it as possibly unimportant. S continues to seek-advice, but from

an angle that she assumes T has expertise in--grammar. T responds to this request with specialized words marking her as an expert in things grammatical:

- 1 T: (it's still you know) modifying there/
- 2 so no i don't think it's any problem/
- 3 i don't think it's something that will catch them up when
- 4 they're reading it /
- 5 \*well was she a counselor was she an intern? i don't think so

T's use of phrases like "modifying" index her as expert and fulfills the tutor-student frame S is trying to maintain.

For the most part, S's question place her in the role of novice and more importantly elicits expert comments from T that do not challenge her expert knowledge. S's questions index her as a novice seeking advice from an expert. The questions she asks elicit evaluative "expert" statements from the tutor. By asking for advice an asymmetry is created which places the advice-seeker in an inferior position (Kasermann 1991: 105). But, looking closely at the questions she asks, they are of a superficial nature. They often focus on micro-level details of word choice or word order. Instead of attending to more global issues like the résumé's format, she focuses on minor items that may not really matter. Perhaps, by asking less relevant questions, S continues the tutoring frame and avoids having her own expertise challenged.

## Conclusion

Observing this tutoring session, it was clear that the student was not getting what she wanted out of the encounter and that the tutor was frustrated by the student's frequent rebuffs. One thing that may be happening in this tutoring session, I think, is that both are trying to

contextualize the session as a traditional tutor-student (i.e., expert-novice) interaction. However, the student does not play the role of the novice. Although she claims little expertise and asks questions that index her as a novice, her responses to the tutor's questions and comments index her as an expert.

Future research should focus on describing and categorizing the ways so-called novice students subvert the expert-novice frame of tutor-student interactions. Knowing this will lead to a better understanding of expert-novice dialogue. Perhaps, research will show that what we label as "expert" and what we label as "novice," is not so clear cut. The expert and novice relationship is a dynamic one, as this interaction suggests, and the roles participants take are fluid. Problems arise when speakers try to maintain an expert-novice relationship when the relationship is not so rigid.

Admittedly, this analysis focuses on just one tutoring session involving just one tutor and one student. It is impossible to generalize to all tutor-student interactions. What this encounter does do is illustrate an instance where the expert-novice relationship was subtly subverted. This is an important finding because it suggests that some tutor-students relationships do not follow traditional expert-novice roles. Moreover, it proposes that although on the surface expert-novice roles may exist in tutoring contexts, a close examination of the discourse reveals subtle ways novices can challenge the expertise of the tutors.

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