

Brian Tomasik
Professor Gladstein
Seminar Paper #2
7 November 2006

Most writing centers, including our own, have the explicit goal of, as Stephen North has said, "produc[ing] better writers, not better writing" (Wingate 9). Tutoring sessions, notes Carol Severino, should emphasize "the play of the process" over "the efficiency of producing a product" (Cogie 39). As a result, tutors often feel the need to avoid giving students answers and to instead force them to figure things out on their own. This positive impulse can be taken to an extreme, however; as Alice Gillam, Susan Callaway, and Katherine Wikoff observe, "tutors frequently evaluate their tutoring effectiveness in terms of their use of authority" (Cogie 38). Arguing against the simplistic notion that directiveness is always bad and nondirectiveness is always good, Cogie and Latterell present cases in which dogmatic efforts to be nondirective could become counterproductive. Instead, they argue, tutors should strike a balance between directiveness and nondirectiveness that depends on the type of work being done—whether the tutor brings up specific, content-based points or broader thought-based questions—and on the background and motivation of the tutee. I argue, on the basis of both evidence from the texts and personal experience, that a third factor is also highly relevant to the directive-nondirective balance: namely, the level of confidence of the tutee. When the tutee is comfortable and certain of his own ability, nondirective styles can be very effective; however, in cases where the tutee is shy, nervous, or diffident, tutors should temper their nondirectiveness with techniques to affirm the tutee's abilities.

Before discussing the issue of confidence, I summarize the other factors that Cogie and Latterell cite as relevant to the directive-nondirective balance. Latterell describes her experiences

tutoring Carlos, a student who did not fit in to the traditional academic setting and was therefore unable to make his work his own (113). In this case, attempting to center the dialogue around Carlos's needs and to empower Carlos to be the, as Jeff Brooks expressed, "the only active agent" in the discussion (Latterell 111) proved ineffective, inasmuch as Carlos remained disengaged and unmotivated. After trying for over a year to effectuate her idealized notion of student empowerment, Latterell realized that her usual approach was not working (107). Cogie presents a different example, one in which the tutor, Ken, struggled to balance directiveness and nondirectiveness in helping his tutee, Janelle, come up with some basic ideas that she needed to move along her paper (Cogie 44-45). Cogie argues that since Janelle lacked much of Ken's "situated knowledge of academic research" (42), Ken might have been more successful if he had directly told Janelle what she needed to do. As Susan Blau, John Hall, and Tracy Strauss observe: "[There are] too many examples of tutors dancing around a direct question, when they already knew the answer [...]. Generally speaking, a directive approach seems better suited for content, nondirective for process" (Cogie 45). This perspective is reflected in the conventional wisdom that discussion of grammatical and other micro-level issues is best done explicitly, while the process of developing and organizing ideas, such as in a pre-writing conference, can greatly benefit from nondirectiveness.

A third issue that determines the best mix of directiveness and nondirectiveness, however, is the degree of confidence of the tutee. In cases where the tutee is self-assured and comfortable, a nondirective approach can often help her to flourish. One example of this was my eighth-grade Earth Science class, taught by Richard Lasselle. For the most part, students in Mr. Lasselle's class were confident of their abilities. Earth Science was an advanced course in which only a fraction of the eighth-grade class was enrolled, and all of the students in the class were

also taking advanced math. Mr. Lasselle knew that his students were "used to getting all As," so he felt that he could challenge them without making them feel stupid. "If you want to get better at playing ping-pong, you don't do so by playing with your little sister—unless she's really good," he would say. "Instead, you do so by playing with someone better than you." As a result, Mr. Lasselle asked us tough questions all the time—during lectures, on homework and labs, and (especially) on tests. He gave us just enough factual information for us to solve the problems and then set us to the task of figuring out the rest. During one lecture in particular, Mr. Lasselle spent a full 45 minutes helping the class to answer the question of how to determine the volume of a rock by measuring the decrease in its weight when submerged in water. He could have told us the answer in two minutes, but he recognized the value in "teaching us to think" and to solve problems on our own. When the class finally did discover the answer, we felt excited and (to use Latterell's word) empowered. As the year progressed, I felt increasingly confident about coming up with my own answers to puzzles and problems, in large part because Mr. Lasselle's class had taught me the process of doing so.

Such a strongly nondirective style may not work so well in cases where the tutee lacks self-confidence. For instance, when I recently tried to teach my mom about Bayes' Theorem (an elementary but powerful rule in probability), I started off with a completely nondirective approach. I asked her open-ended questions about what it meant to talk about the probability that two events happened together, in the hope that she would come to an intuitive understanding of the theorem by herself. I have no doubt that she could have done it had she persisted, but because she thought she wasn't smart enough to understand such things, she said, "Just tell me the answer; I won't be able to figure it out." I realized that continuing with my Socratic approach would have been counterproductive, because her failure to immediately see the answer would

have just reinforced her lack of self-confidence. So instead, I gave her a more structured walkthrough of the theorem, leaving some particularly easy parts for her to solve. For instance, I asked, "If A will happen ten times as often as not-A, what is the probability of not-A?" My mom was able to answer this question on her own, and I think doing so gave her some confidence that the material wasn't incomprehensible after all.

Harris reports that there are many writing tutees in my mom's position: these "apprehensive students [...] may be very likely to shut up" in tutoring sessions (26), and as Wingate says, they may be "thrown into a tizzy when a tutor starts asking questions about the assumptions of a project or even to have technical jargon explained" (14). Janelle was probably such a student; at the start of her session she explained, "I don't know [where to go with my paper]. I'm kinda stuck." Ken responded in ways that bordered on being directive, such as giving away answers before Janelle would have found them on her own and recapitulating the main ideas of Janelle's paper (Cogie 41). Ken's concluding summary of Janelle's research "provide[d] a more complete answer than did Janelle to his own earlier question on her paper's direction" (Cogie 45). Cogie acknowledges that this is a rather directive style, but defends it on the grounds that it "affirms the real substance" of Janelle's research (45) and shows what a complete summary would look like (46).

I have found Ken's approach effective, not just in my mom's case, but also in the case of Jimi, a high-school student whom I tutored in math last spring. Like my mom, Jimi was diffident, quiet, and often unresponsive. There were times when I asked open-ended questions related to a problem, to see if he could work his way to the answer on his own. But Jimi often just fell silent, indicating that he didn't know how to proceed. It became clear—as in my mom's case, and perhaps Janelle's case—that Jimi lacked the self-confidence to dive into a complex question on

his own, so I began to provide more concrete guidance, giving him tips along the way. While Wingate might have been characterized as a weak form of "taking over" a problem (12), I think this approach was indeed helpful. I didn't give Jimi all the answers—just enough so that he could wend his way to the answer and feel good about his accomplishment. Had the tutoring continued for a longer period of time, perhaps Jimi would have become more confident in his problem-solving abilities—the way I did through Mr. Lasselle's class. At any rate, Jimi did appear to grow more comfortable during our sessions together; had I dogmatically insisted that he solve the problems through my questions alone, without offering partial solutions to help him along, he probably would have instead grown more apprehensive about tutoring sessions.

The proper balance between directiveness and nondirectiveness depends on a number of factors. Latterell, for instance, relates how her nondirective approach broke down in the case of a student who couldn't make the material his own. Cogie mentions that content-based tutoring (on matters of grammar, conventions, and basic "situated knowledge") is often more effective when conveyed explicitly. In addition, I've argued that the tutee's level of confidence is also highly relevant. If tutees are unsure of their own abilities, they will often feel uncomfortable, rather than stimulated, when they are asked open-ended questions. In these cases, a more directive approach—summarizing the tutee's argument in order to affirm its merit and helping the tutee along to difficult answers—can help to improve, not undermine, the tutee's learning. At Janelle said at the end of her session with Ken, Janelle commented, "Yeah. I'm not stuck anymore" (Cogie 41). This method of helping a tutee to overcome a daunting challenge can indeed be empowering.