

# Integrating Best Practices: Learning Communities and the Writing Center

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*Bringing together two evidence-based “best practices” in developmental education—learning communities and tutoring—seems natural, especially given that they share collaborative learning as a common pedagogical approach. And yet doing so raised questions around the role of the tutor in learning communities. In this article, a faculty development coordinator for learning communities and a writing center director trace the source of this ambiguity to the need for greater pedagogical coherence around the notion of collaborative learning, and highlight the need for both foregrounding and reiterating philosophy in professional development when combining best practices in order to ensure the integrity of each.*

## Introduction

A writing center tutor is sitting in a philosophy class that is linked with a basic writing course in a learning community. She knows this cohort of students well since she also sits in once a week on the basic writing course and additionally facilitates a weekly two-hour writing lab with these same students. The students are working in small groups to discuss ideas for a shared assignment that counts in both learning community courses. The tutor sits with one group of students, listening to their ideas and asking questions to help move them forward in their writing. Just then, the philosophy instructor calls her aside and asks her to please help students review for the midterm in their

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next lab session. The tutor is happy to help as she enjoys working with this professor and sees value in assisting students to understand key concepts, but she feels frustrated at being pulled away from the students to discuss this during class. She also worries that students will see her as an extension of the instructor, thereby compromising her role as tutor as it has been defined by the writing center. She doesn't want to lose the collaborative relationship she's worked so hard to develop with the students. She wishes her role were not so ambiguous.

A number of interventions have been identified as research-based "best practices" in developmental education (Boylan, 2002). A variety of these "best practices," implemented by many, if not most, community colleges, often operate in tandem. Challenges to maintaining philosophical integrity—that is, staying true to underlying philosophical assumptions—arise when implementing any practice, but these challenges are often made more salient when interventions are juxtaposed, no matter how apparently fitting the intersection. As illustrated above, we found that the interface between tutoring and learning communities (LCs), two well-established best practices for at-risk college students, revealed gaps in the philosophical integrity of these programs when offered in combination, as reflected in the

tutor's role.

As a faculty development coordinator for LCs and a writing center director, we set to the task of identifying the source of the confusion surrounding tutors' roles when LCs and writing centers are brought together in support of basic writers. Our purpose therefore is to highlight the collaboration between *basic writing LCs*—that is, those that include basic writing courses—and the writing center, in terms of its best potential for serving students. To do so, we describe basic writing and LCs at our institution, including the expanded role of tutors in basic writing LCs; report on a small survey of faculty and tutors that we conducted; discuss writing center pedagogy and general issues that arise when tutoring is aligned with the classroom, and identify collaborative learning as the common philosophical underpinning of LC and writing center pedagogies, even as we recognize the fault lines in its practice. Finally, we offer suggestions for ways that LC-writing center collaborations can successfully integrate the best practices they represent.

## Background

Learning communities have been successful with a variety of student populations, and the support they provide has made them a viable in-

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tervention strategy for many at-risk students (e.g., Boylan, 2002; MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004; Malnarich, 2003; Scrivener, Bloom, LeBlanc, Paxson, Rouse, & Sommo, 2008; Smith, Tinto, 1997, 1998). In LCs, two or more courses are “linked”—they share a cohort of students, and faculty collaborate to find common themes and create shared assignments designed to encourage students to think in an integrative way; that is, to “connect the dots” among disciplinary approaches, courses, and concepts. At Kingsborough Community College, a large urban college where we teach, our largest LC program, *Opening Doors*, is designed for incoming freshmen—many of whom place into developmental English. Each year, over 40 of our *Opening Doors* LCs (serving over 1,000 students) include developmental English courses, which are linked in three-course LCs to a gen ed course, such as psychology or sociology, as well as a freshman orientation course.

Basic writing courses at Kingsborough integrate reading and writing, bringing together a fluency-first model of writing immersion with portfolio assessment. Among writing programs, ours reflects best practices on a number of levels: integrated reading and writing; fluency for writers and speakers of English at all levels; assessment that allows for a

variety of topic and genre; process writing; and supportive entrance into “the discourse of the academy” (Bartholomae, 1985; Danielewicz, 2008; MacGowan-Gillhooly, 1991; Mlynarczyk, 2006; Tassoni & Lewiecki-Wilson, 2005; Zamel & Spack, 1998, 2004). The use of tutors in these courses is another instance of integrated support, deriving from two separate models of tutoring—the studio model (Grego & Thompson, 1996, 2008) and classroom-based tutoring (Spigelman & Grobman, 2005). Like the studio model, courses are amplified by additional hours working with tutors, usually in small groups. In fact, our two lowest levels of basic writing, along with all of our ESL courses, feature a “lab” or workshop component—two hours in addition to the six or eight per week required for each course. These two hours are facilitated entirely by two tutors at the Reading and Writing Center, apart from the regular classroom, and are not intended to extend class time. Instead, they were conceived as concomitant arrangements of and for learning—another plane on which reading and writing happen in connection—so as to reinforce the integrated practice of both in a collaborative setting.

While labs are not extensions of classrooms, they comprise activities that work in parallel to those

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of the classroom; in fact, Boylan (2002) cites evidence that the integration of classrooms and labs is, itself, a best practice (pp. 64-67). Integration is further encouraged through instructor-tutor collaboration and also by having tutors sit in on the English class once a week. This practice, modeled on classroom-based tutoring (CBT), increases classroom transparency and makes the classroom-lab connection more salient for students. We feel that by drawing on these two tutoring models to encourage classroom-lab integration, we stand to “double” the best practice potential of tutoring for students enrolled in basic writing courses. However, doing so can also contribute to ambiguity around the role of the tutor, as the tutor must now function in two distinct settings—classroom and lab.

When basic writing courses were linked with gen ed and freshman orientation courses in our Opening Doors basic writing LCs, another best practice was thereby integrated. Still following the CBT model, writing center tutors were additionally invited to sit in on the gen ed class once each week—a practice that makes sense given that students in LCs have integrative writing assignments that are shared across the linked courses. Yet, at program-wide LC meetings, some of the strains of integrating best practices regarding tutor roles

were voiced. Most gen ed instructors, who had never before been offered in-class writing center tutoring support, raised questions as to the role tutors might play in their classes. Ensuing discussions suggested that several English faculty, for whom having tutors in the classroom was not new, were also clearly struggling with identifying the tutor’s role, and those who had a clearer vision varied in their integration of in-class tutor support. We decided to explore this issue further by conducting a small survey to determine how faculty and tutors viewed the tutor’s role.

## **Surveying Faculty and Tutors**

English and gen ed faculty from Opening Doors LCs were asked to describe their experiences with tutors in the classroom and, if applicable, in the lab. We asked them, in particular, to describe the role of tutors. Similarly, tutors were asked to describe their role for at least one course. We sent questionnaires to 23 English faculty, 24 gen ed faculty, and 30 tutors, and received responses from 15 English faculty, 13 gen ed faculty, and 21 tutors.

Suggestions of ambiguity around tutors’ roles in the classroom were confirmed by faculty and tutor responses. The need for

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more clearly defined tutor roles as well as professional development was highlighted. For example, one philosophy professor offered the following when asked to comment on experiences with tutors in the class: “I have no model of what to expect from them, so I have treated them mostly like curious friends who sit in on a class and happen to be helpful. Their presence no doubt helps the chemistry of the course, but it would be better if their roles were more well-defined for me.” This sentiment was echoed by a biology professor who responded that “the tutors are very capable people, but I’m not sure how to put their talents to use” and a speech professor who thought it might help to “see the written guidelines or job descriptions of tutors.” One veteran English professor noted “a very wide gap (in the English Department) between seasoned teachers who have worked for many years with classroom tutors . . . and newly hired faculty who are not very familiar with the work of the Reading and Writing Center.” Tutors’ perceptions of their roles in class were somewhat clearer, but varied as well. Much of the work tutors reported engaging in was clearly student-centered—working with students one-on-one or facilitating small group discussions. However, other activities aligned tutors more with the teacher; in fact, one tutor described her role in a class

as one of “disciplinarian.” Survey responses also revealed variation with respect to the nature and degree of classroom–lab integration, with some labs supporting, but not necessarily duplicating, the more traditional structures of the classroom. In other cases, labs were either overly managed by faculty, essentially extending the classroom, or neglected by faculty, so that integration was compromised.

## **Discussion: Sources of Ambiguity**

The ambiguity surrounding tutors’ roles, as indicated by survey responses, signaled the need to reflect on the premises and values supporting tutors’ work and overall teaching purposes. We began to theorize that instructors’ and tutors’ work with students encompassed overlapping and sometimes conflicting value systems for defining classrooms and writing center spaces. We believed that revisiting the foundational principles by which each intervention tends to engage students would help us develop a more coherent model of collaboration that could then guide instructors and tutors in their practice. We begin by examining the complexities that arise when tutoring becomes affiliated with classrooms.

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## Encountering the Service Model: When Tutoring Meets the Classroom

Writing center pedagogy is based on collaborative learning, which reflects a paradigm shift regarding the nature of knowledge, teaching, and learning. According to Bruffee (1984), collaborative learning calls for abandoning the assimilative, Cartesian model of knowledge and instead adopting Kuhn's view of knowledge as a "social artifact . . . maintained and established by communities of knowledgeable peers" (p. 646). Bruffee sees tutor-student interactions as providing students with opportunities to engage in "normal discourse, that is, *conversation*, through which knowledge is constructed, and belief [is] justified" (p. 647, citing Rorty, 1982), and continually negotiated. Writing center practice, based on these notions, squarely seats students at the helm of learning as a socially inflected and highly dynamic process. Similarly, Kail (1983) argues that, by definition, tutoring fosters learning that is collaborative, as it eschews the trappings of teacherly authority, potentially undermining authoritative instructional models.

Yet Spigelman and Grobman (2005) note that classroom-based tutoring "modifies or altogether reverses some writing center principles, such as the tutor's autonomy from a classroom instructor"

(p. 5). For example, depending on the instructor's pedagogical approach, the tutor may be engaged as a kind of assistant to the instructor, and be asked to comment on student papers, keep records, or even generate outlines of course material. Instructors may additionally seek input from the tutor as if from a colleague. In this way, instructors may reengage the "service model" of learning. Kail (1983) describes this model as one that adds the tutor (and writing center director, as well) to a traditional lineal progression where knowledge is passed from instructors—who are "the interpreters of important cultural knowledge" (p. 595)—to students. The writing center is thereby regarded as an institution "in service to" courses and programs which steer students in its direction, students who presumably lack their own priorities for writing and so who are, performatively, "in service to" various academic agendas as well. This model is one that many writing centers have struggled against, as it raises expectations regarding tutoring that often stand in opposition to the collaborative, conversational work that typically defines tutor-student interactions. So even in the context of CBT as a best practice, the writing center may cease to offer collaborative support in knowledge construction and instead may perpetuate instructional authority.

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If and when vestiges of the service model of learning emerge, the integrity of tutoring may be compromised as instructors variously conform tutors' roles to particular goals and course objectives. Instructors may see the lab as an extension of the classroom, writing instructors may feel entitled or obligated to determine lab activities, and general education instructors may expect tutors to use lab time for tutoring general education content. Tutors then become the essential resource by which instructors extend time for coursework, as disciplinary content moves beyond the classroom and into the lab. While we recognize the need for tutoring content in general education, such tutoring is rarely the goal of writing center tutors, whose primary focus is to help students develop as writers.

We acknowledge that the role of tutors is also shaped by students' perceptions, expectations, and needs, which are, to some extent, influenced by instructor-tutor interactions. If, as described above, instructors view tutors as assistants of sorts, referring students to them for instruction and reteaching, students will naturally see tutors as authorial extensions of the teacher, and may value tutors primarily for their roles as academic insiders.

For such reasons and others, tutors themselves may revert back

to traditional paradigms of learning once they are in the classroom, especially in the context of a classroom that is less than collaborative. This can happen in spite of tutors' original connection with the writing center and its emphasis on the collaborative construction of knowledge. As a result, tutors may find themselves shifting toward different, performative orientations toward tutoring that align them with the authority of the teacher (a contested area of tutor performance in recent writing center literature; see Corbett, 2005). Or tutors may adapt to those classroom demands that collaborative tutoring modes may not accommodate.

### **Collaborative Learning: The Shared Pedagogy of LCs and Writing Centers?**

While many of the concerns raised above seem likely to be realized when tutoring supports traditional, noncollaborative classrooms, they would not be expected when tutoring supports LCs where collaborative learning is a core pedagogy. In fact, collaborative learning has been identified as a core LC practice (e.g., Malnarich, 2003; Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004) because it "promotes a larger educational agenda" for LCs—one that includes encouraging students to become more involved in their own learning;

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cultivating teamwork, community building, and leadership skills; and fostering civic responsibility (Smith & MacGregor, 1992). Given this agenda, Smith et al. (2004) see collaborative learning as one way to “capture and intensify the synergistic possibilities for meaningful community building and learning” (p. 97).

Writing on LCs, Malnarich (2003) notes that collaborative learning “introduces community expectations into the classroom equation and alters the role of the teacher” (p. 39). Collaborative learning, in its truest sense, requires that classrooms be places of critical engagement, involving students in determining their own priorities for learning; it asks instructors to step back from authoritative roles, and “reframes the student role by requiring students to shift from a passive, privatized, and competitive learning mode to active, public, and cooperative ways of learning” (p. 38). Similarly, Hennessy and Evans (2006), quoting Bruffee (1999), capture the core dynamic of both collaborative and LC classrooms in stating that collaborative learning “assumes that students rebelling against the teacher or the task and questioning one another’s views are inevitable and necessary aspects of learning” and that the role of the instructor is minimal as “students govern themselves in a context of

substantive engagement, conversation, and negotiation” (p. 97). Collaborative learning, then, involves more than simply having students work in groups, and, as such, can be distinguished from learning that is simply cooperative (see, for example, Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2004; Bruffee, 1999; Flannery, 1994; Hennessy & Evans, 2006; Matthews, Cooper, Davidson, & Hawkes, 1995). While *cooperative learning* is generally seen to assume a more “traditional view of the nature of knowledge, namely that there is a ‘correct’ answer or ‘best solution,’” *collaborative learning* makes no such assumption (Barkley et al., 2004, p. 6). Further, Hennessy and Evans see cooperative learning as incorporating more formal structure and faculty involvement, and as having group consensus, not intellectual debate, as its goal. They see a place for cooperative activities, but claim that collaborative learning is more appropriate in the community college because it is more likely to generate higher-level thinking and motivation (pp. 101-102).

The recognition of collaborative learning as a shared value of both LCs and writing centers naturally leads to expectations that teaching and tutoring, in LCs that include tutoring, will align. Yet from our vantage point, we recognize that ensuring such alignment is most likely substantiated when

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faculty, as well as tutors, examine their assumptions about teaching and learning and have a clear understanding of collaborative learning, in order to see if the two are compatible. In fact, we suspect that the ambiguity surrounding tutors' roles in LCs reflects an underarticulation of shared LC and writing center principles by both tutors and faculty, as well as possible mismatches between these principles and teaching perspectives.

## Recommendations and Best Practices

According to Pratt (e.g., 1998, forthcoming), good teaching must include opportunities to identify and examine one's own teaching perspectives. As Pratt defines it, a teaching perspective *per force* integrates the "beliefs and intentions that [give] direction and justification" to our teaching and "is a lens through which we view teaching"; in other words, it is "something we look through, rather than look at" (Pratt, forthcoming). Pratt identifies five perspectives, four of which—developmental, apprenticeship, nurturing, and social reform—can easily be expressed through collaborative learning pedagogy. By contrast, the transmission perspective, which assumes that instructors "are to efficiently and effectively pass along (teach) a common body

of knowledge and way of thinking similar to what is in the text or the teacher" (p. 3), is least compatible with the principles of collaborative learning and is therefore strongest in its potential to ambiguate roles in basic writing LCs. This perspective, which Pratt identifies as the most common in higher education (p. 2), seems to work at cross-purposes with collaborative learning, as it resonates the "lineal progression of knowledge" model that Kail (1983) identifies as problematic in the writing center. It is not surprising, then, that while many faculty teaching in LCs may embrace the structures of collaborative learning pedagogy, they may have a perspective on teaching and learning that is incompatible with collaborative learning's underlying assumptions.

Given the prevalence of the transmission teaching perspective in higher education, it could be presumed that faculty who become involved in LCs may not necessarily hold a constructivist view of learning, and so their LC classes lack what many LC theorists identify as a core component. Others may embrace constructivism in theory, but may find it difficult to practice. In fact, as Tassoni and Thelin (2000) point out, "Student empowerment and challenges to the status quo obviously could not run seamlessly and still be what they claimed" (p. 2).

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For example, instructors may encourage debate, but be unable to forego the assumption that there is one “right” answer at which students must arrive. Or they may feel uncomfortable or threatened by classes or classrooms that are less than “orderly.”

As we have already suggested, students’ own orientation toward collaborative learning may also partly decide the extent to which collaborative learning is engaged in LC classrooms. Studies that detail the workings of actual, and generally successful, collaborative classrooms often also acknowledge the difficulties of acculturating students to greater engagement both in and out of the classroom (Hennessy & Evans, 2006; Spigelman, 2000). Among these difficulties, Hennessy and Evans cite the tensions that arise as students must renegotiate their roles as members of peer learning groups. Or, as practitioners of critical pedagogy point out, students may strain against the expectation that they assume leadership for learning as structural hierarchies for learning are reconfigured.

Further, as educators, we know that the process that leads students away from absolutist frameworks often begins in college and continues throughout a person’s lifetime, and it is students at the earliest stages of this trajectory that often have the most difficulty

as instructors cede authority (Perry, 1970). The life circumstances of many community college students—interruptions of education, economic and family obligations, cultural and class expectations—are part of what shape students’ orientations toward learning, and learning from one another. As Bailey and Pransky (2005) make clear, education’s “cultural ideology in constructivism” (p. 4)—which asks students to question their assumptions and attach relevance to their learning for themselves and collaboratively for one another—is a tall order for students who come to learning with a different set of expectations around authority. Still more, mismatches between student expectations and instructor pedagogies are exacerbated when students are presented with various models for learning across courses in their college careers (Chiou, 2008).

As we have noted, partnering of tutors and LCs emphasizes a trajectory for learning that is meant to grant the student more authority for learning. From a student’s perspective, tutors merge the communities of student and institution in their simultaneous ties to both worlds (Harris, 1995; Spigelman, 2000). In a sense, tutors embody the “community” aspect of LCs. The way tutors’ roles play out in the pairing of courses—aligned more with teacher or

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student, or with the creative blurring of these categories—signals the structures and expectations for learning which the community assumes for students. When tutors become part of the queue of knowledge transmission (e.g., teacher to student, teacher to tutor to student), student roles become fixed and the potential for collaborative learning languishes.

Fortunately, tutors are in a prime position to mediate the conflicts and tensions that arise for students within basic writing LCs. However, to do so, shared understandings among LC stakeholders—faculty, students, and tutors—regarding the writing centers’ affiliation with the classroom and collaborative learning as a foundational pedagogy for LCs are needed. These shared understandings can be cultivated through professional development and through scaffolded classroom activities.

### **Professional Development**

It is important to carefully think about the kind of professional development most appropriate in arrangements for learning that combine best practices. Reflection begins when the values and pedagogies they share are made available to stakeholders to scrutinize, affirm, and adapt. Accurate understandings of teaching perspectives, one’s own or others’, emerge by way of a time-intensive,

varied, and collegial process, according to Pratt (e.g., 1998, forthcoming). In basic writing LCs that formally include tutoring, open discussions around collaborative learning and tutors’ roles must be part of professional development for LCs, with writing center directors, and their unique perspective on writing center–classroom affiliations, as part of the mix. Pratt’s Teaching Perspective Inventory (<http://www.TeachingPerspectives.com>) (Pratt & Collins, 2001) is one way for instructors and tutors to discover whether their own actions, intentions, and beliefs are compatible with a collaborative learning approach. More than likely, disparities of perspectives will emerge, and when they do, these moments can become opportunities to refocus professional development on helping faculty locate the place for collaborative learning within the framework of their own teaching perspectives.

Since students’ expectations for work with tutors will proceed from the models for learning implemented in the classroom, instructors and tutors must together explore the collaborative classroom—over and against the service model or any idea of tutoring as supplement to teaching. At pre-semester meetings, LC teams, including tutors, could directly confront questions such as: What does it mean, *in practice*, for stu-

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dents to learn collaboratively, to participate in the social construction of knowledge? To what extent do all stakeholders agree on who shares authority and how? How can students best be encouraged to share this authority and responsibility for their learning, and where and how does the tutor fit in? As a result, a new and consensual vocabulary around learning may emerge, which makes direct reference to notions such as teaching perspective, shared authority, student agency, and the social construction of knowledge.

### **Scaffolding: From Role-Playing to Authority**

The classroom is the next and equally vital site for articulating LC coherence, and it is the place where the LC team can address student resistance to or uncertainty about collaborative learning. Some instructors may choose to establish a classroom of collaboration from the first day—in line with the critical pedagogies of such practitioners as Shor (1992; 1996) and Thelin (2005); others may aim for a more gradually emergent dynamic of collaboration. Considering the complexities of building the collaborative classroom in the community college (Miranda, 2009), we advocate the latter scaffolded approach. This can be done through activities that develop student responsibility for learning by

gradually moving from structured, cooperative activities to more student-directed, collaborative activities. Scaffolding might occur along two dimensions—moving authority from instructor to students, and moving students from knowing and comprehending to higher order cognitive skills such as synthesis and application.

Tutors in the classroom can be recognized for their potential to lead new types of role-playing that model active, collaborative learning. In its essence, scaffolding can be thought of as a sequence of modeling, explaining, and inviting (e.g., Hogan & Pressley, 1997; Lipscomb, Swanson, & West, 2004). Initially, students might observe teachers and tutors as they engage in purposeful (even if spontaneous) academic “talk,” that is, as they model discussion, debate, constructive dissention, civility, and other important values of the discourse. Students might be asked to reflect on, and discuss with tutors and instructors, the ways in which such conversations are helped to move forward, identifying key values and protocols for collaborative work; students may even practice constructive discourse through role-playing. At the same time, students could also be asked to engage in activities through which they are encouraged to assume their authority more readily, such as the peer

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review of writing. To support students, tutors would then take the role which Decker (2005) advocates for classroom-based tutors, namely, that of a “meta-tutor” who “encourage[s] students to tutor each other” (p. 27) and consider their work and the work of their peers with a more critical eye. In this way tutors play the part of students, modeling how students can serve as facilitators to help each other grow in critical thinking and writing.

The type and range of collaborative activities in the classroom could then be adapted to the lab. Group activities would be the mode of learning for lab where students set their own agendas. Students from LCs firmly rooted in collaborative practices would see the lab as an extension of the classroom only with respect to their own responsibility for learning and as a place for them to prompt their classmates’ learning and rely on one another as resources.

Crucial to such scaffolding is the need to make salient for students the value of their individual strengths and contributions, thereby empowering students and building peer trust. Students’ active participation, even through disagreement and dissent, would effectively re-form their assumptions about learning by way of direct experience, helping them to see the social, constructive dimen-

sions of learning as a process.

## Conclusion

On our campus, a successful LC program found additional support through tutors from our established writing center, and since the LC program and the writing center shared a pedagogical philosophy, we anticipated few problems in implementing them in tandem. However, we found that in bringing together LCs and tutoring, underarticulated notions of collaboration and shared authority—on the part of instructors, tutors, and students—both challenged the collaborative approach that underscores LC and writing center pedagogies, and confused the role of the tutor.

Here we have recommended that instructors and tutors examine their own teaching perspectives and find the place for collaborative learning within these perspectives. From here, they can collaborate to define the tutor’s role, plan classroom and lab activities that align and reflect the pedagogical philosophy common to LCs and writing centers, and provide scaffolded opportunities for students to share in the construction of knowledge. Despite the collaborative underpinning of both LCs and writing center tutoring, such explicit reflection and discussion is needed because, as

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we have seen, there are often tensions in the sharing of authority that pull against the larger arc of collaboration desired for the LC as a whole.

Most community colleges are committed to implementing a variety of best practices that address the needs of their students.

As colleges struggle with budget constraints while still addressing the needs of varied and changing populations, much can be gained from bringing together resources that are already in place. Our experience highlights the need to actively draw upon a unifying philosophy in ways that restate and renew it, in the interest of effectively integrating best practices.

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