

## Step Away From the Text: Introducing and Supporting Innovation in the Writing Center

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### Abstract

This article examines at the effectiveness of two tutoring tools, concept-mapping and tutor read-aloud, exploring how these tools are used and how students and tutors respond to them. We find that students' perception of the effectiveness of any strategy is influenced by how the tutor uses it: students are unlikely to respond positively to an approach if the tutor does not employ that approach appropriately. Innovating, then, requires introducing tutors to a wide range of tutoring tools, and then training them to make effective choices about which strategy will be most effective in a writing/reading situation. Additionally, enticements, in the form of technology and other supporting materials, are necessary to get students interested in trying something new.

## Introduction

Writing Center practice often involves a set of activities whose effectiveness has been minimally analyzed; rather, benefits to student learning are assumed. My focus in this article is on exploring alternatives to the way in which writing center tutors ask students to engage with text, both their own and with sources used in the process of writing their papers, and on training tutors to make the most of whatever strategy they choose to begin a tutoring session. My study took place in the York College Writing Center (YCWC), but its results can be applied to Writing Center tutoring practice more generally.

A typical tutoring session at the at the YCWC begins by having students read the introduction of their papers to the tutor, or the tutor reads the introduction silently to him or herself, often after tutor and student have looked at the paper assignment. After the introduction has been read, the tutor asks the student a series of questions about the material in it. So students' first engagement with their own writing is usually either reading it aloud to the tutor, or answering questions which the tutor generates.<sup>1</sup> Both of these practices are standard in Writing Centers across the country. Block (2010) writes that while these practices are accepted as being the most effective ways to ask students to engage with their own writing, "evidence" of the effectiveness of standard modes of textual engagement has received little attention. Rowe (2010) describes these practices while Adams (2009) discusses some exceptions.

In the study I present, I asked tutors to try two alternative modes of textual engagement to student read-aloud: having the tutor start read portions of the students' paper aloud while the students follow along with their own copy of the text (henceforth tutor read-aloud), and having them apply concept-mapping to some portion of their drafts, or to texts that they are using as sources for their papers. I chose these two modes of engagement because they separate the visual and the auditory for the student, whereas student read-aloud requires students to engage with their text both visually and auditorily at the same time, resulting in a possible loss of information (Hecker, Elkind, Elkind, & Katz, 2002). Moreover, the student read-aloud strategy requires students to be comfortable with their written work to read exactly what is on the page, rather than what they *want* to see there. Tutor read-aloud and concept-mapping, on the other hand, require different kinds of processing, with tutor-read aloud emphasizing auditory engagement and concept-mapping emphasizing visual engagement with a text, breaking students away from the linear processing that listening to or reading language requires.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Jo-Ann Glenn, tutor supervisor at the YCWC, for clarifying these procedures with me.

I investigated the effectiveness of incorporating these two different tutoring strategies in the repertoire of the tutors at the YCWC. I asked the tutors to try concept-mapping with those students who they thought would benefit from a visual-graphical means of processing information, or to read the students' papers aloud to the student, who was following along, when they thought the student was struggling with online visual processing of their own work, especially when, in past sessions, the students had had trouble reading what was actually on the page, rather than what they wanted to see there.

Both strategies – concept-mapping and tutor read-aloud – were, overall, received positively by students and tutors who used them. However, the study revealed important limitations in design, which have broader implications for how institutions support innovation in their Writing Centers, particularly how they get “buy-in” from tutors and maximize effective use of a variety of tutoring strategies. Future attempts to broaden tutors' repertoire should include long-term reinforcement of initial training, as well as development of resources – paper-based and computer-based – that tutors and students can use together.

### Why Concept-Mapping?

Concept mapping is a tool for organizing information, developed in the early 1970s by Joseph Novak as a tool for modeling children's cognitive development (Novak & Cañas, 2008). Someone drawing a concept map draws connections between ideas, written down as nouns or phrases joined by single - or double -headed arrows, and considers what the nature of those connections is, via the use of verbs written over the connecting arrows. The concept-mapping tool has been used to help writers see organizational structures in their and other's work, to potentially re-organize it, and to link a student's reading with his/her own writing (Osman-Jouchoux, 1997).

Concept-mapping is familiar to the Writing Center community: The *Writing Lab Newsletter*, a forum where Writing Center staff have shared practices and philosophy since Writing Centers started to become prevalent on college campuses in the late 1970s, contains many mentions of concept mapping being one of the tools that tutors could bring to their tutoring sessions. However, its usefulness in this context has not been directly explored but rather, has been asserted and communicated anecdotally. Authors who discuss incorporating concept-maps into tutoring sessions tend to treat the training of tutors to use the tool as a background issue, focusing on the compatibility of concept-mapping with a particular pedagogical approach that they are exploring in their writing center (Dinitz, 1987; Emerson, 1989;

Upton, 1999; Connor & Cushman, 2004). Upton's (1999) discussion of the role that concept-mapping can play in "brain-compatible learning" is typical:

We have discovered that the time spent in having clients make a mind map or become involved in some re-activating activity is most valuable in making the session productive and beneficial.  
(p. 12)

In this account, the apparatus for assessing the benefits of concept-mapping is invisible: the narratives do not reveal the process by which concept-mapping became a productive tutoring strategy. How many hours of training tutors went into the successful results that these authors report? How were tutors trained to use concept-mapping? And, finally, how were these positive responses from the students and tutors elicited? All of these factors are important to consider if Writing Centers are able to replicate the beneficial use of this, and other strategies.

### Why Tutor Read-Aloud?

In contrast to concept-mapping, which is somewhat marginal in Writing Center lore and practice, having tutors read students' papers aloud to the student is a mainstay of Writing Center pedagogy, though, at least anecdotally, it is not as common as student read-aloud (Block, 2010). Tutor read-aloud seems to be used particularly frequently with students who are English Language Learners (Severino, 2001), or students who don't feel comfortable reading their own work aloud. Students with learning disabilities, particularly attention disorders, have also been found to read more effectively, with increased speed and comprehension, when their silent reading is accompanied by another voice reading the text aloud to them (Hecker et al., 2002).<sup>2</sup> These authors found that using text-to-speech software helps these students by reducing their distraction when reading, because two channels for receiving information – auditory and visual – better mask external and internal distractions, as well as lessening the impact of those distractions. The software also reduces the need for re-reading, because it reduces students' inattention, and thus allows them to absorb more information on the first read, and, finally, "the multimodal presentation of information may increase the likelihood that the material is assimilated into memory and recalled"

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<sup>2</sup> Hecker et al (2002) discuss only assistive reading software in their article. I extrapolate their findings to live tutor-to-student read aloud, but acknowledge that the two modes of reading are often used in very different pedagogical environments. In particular, assistive reading software is something that students use alone after training, so its uses might be primarily for reading comprehension activities rather than for the collaborative, revision-centered activities for which tutor-read-aloud is usually employed in the Writing Center's collaborative environment.



(Hecker et al., 2002, p. 248). While tutors at the YCWC do not work with students who have identified learning disabilities (those students receive tutoring at a different venue on campus), the beneficial effects of assistive-reading software for the students in the aforementioned study would seem to be equally available for students with "normal" reading abilities.

As mentioned before, there is limited empirical data on the relative benefits of student vs. tutor read-aloud; however, Block (2010) and Adams (2009) both offer a comparison in a Writing Center context. Overall, Block found that tutor read-aloud sessions included more turn-taking than either student-read aloud, or the other tutoring method that she examined (called point-predict; see Block (2010) for details). In her study, sessions that involved tutor read-aloud yielded more discussions about sentence-level or formatting issues, and fewer concerning content and organization, and students initiated more of the conversations about content and evidence issues in these sessions than in student read-aloud sessions, where students mostly initiated conversations about sentence-level, formatting and citation issues.

Tutor read-aloud, however, needs to be used strategically. Adams (2009) reports that students strongly preferred reading their own work rather than having the tutor read it to them, stating that the latter made it difficult for them to stay focused on their papers (directly contrasting with the findings of Hecker et al., 2002), and that it made them feel like they had no control over their own papers. Tutors, on the other hand, felt that tutor read-aloud helped them focus on the task at hand, whereas having students read their papers aloud, particularly when tutors were asked to hold their comments to the end, made it difficult for them to focus, and to remember the comments that they wanted to make. However, since in Adams' study, the tutor is responsible for initiating post-reading interaction in all cases, we can question whether the student is productively engaged in either tutor read-aloud or student read-aloud sessions. While when a student is reading aloud, s/he is doing something, it is unclear from these results whether this "something" results with greater engagement with any part of the paper-writing process. This study underscores the necessity of placing some responsibility for interaction and discussion on the student before reading takes place.

## Methods

In my role as Faculty Director of the Writing Center, I conducted workshops for tutors twice a semester to introduce new strategies to the tutors as well as providing a forum where they could discuss issues that were arising in their tutoring sessions. In order to prepare tutors to participate in the present study, I spent one of these regular tutor-training workshops explaining

the principles of concept-mapping and tutor read-aloud to the students, demonstrating how both worked by incorporating activities into the session so that tutors could learn the strategies, and apply them in mock tutoring sessions. I then asked tutors to incorporate each strategy into three of their tutoring sessions – that is, to use both strategies three times each, for a total of six trials per tutor. The YCWC has no fixed protocol as to how much of a paper should be read aloud, either by student or by tutor, and so for the study I left the decision to the tutor, knowing that the general practice in the Writing Center is to read the introduction first, and then initiate interaction between tutor and student, rather than having either party remain silent until after a complete paper reading. I also gave tutors questionnaires to give to their students, in order to gauge the students' reactions to these strategies. Following the completion of the student portion of the study, I conducted one-on-one interviews with tutors who had used these strategies.

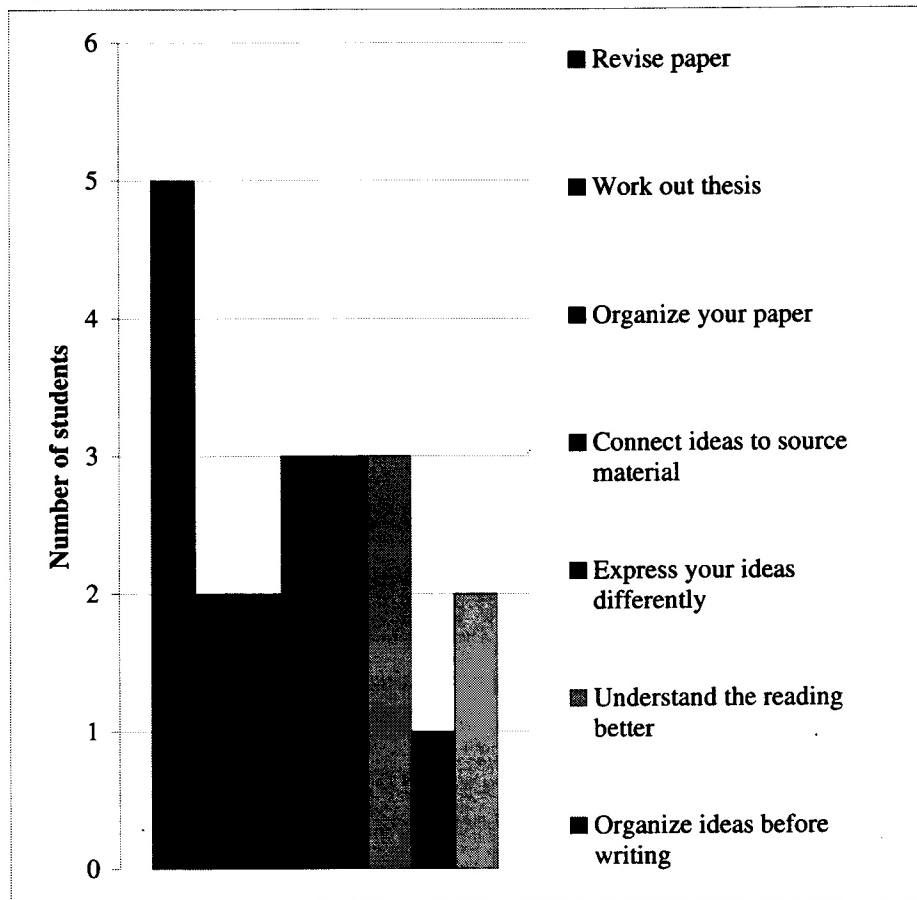
### Results and Discussion

Approximately 14 tutors conduct roughly 200 tutoring sessions per week in the YCWC. Of this pool, nine students and five tutors participated in the study. From these 9 students, I received 6 responses relating to concept-mapping, and 6 that related to tutor-read aloud (3 students provided responses for both strategies). Because of this very small sample, the study can only be treated as a pilot; in order to gain real evidence as to the effectiveness of these tutoring strategies for the YCWC, a larger sample is necessary. This preliminary data does, however, show clear places where the study, as well as tutor training at the YCWC, can be refined.

#### *What the Students Say: Tutor Read-Aloud*

As we see in Figure 1, students report that they were using read-aloud for a variety of tasks, but in particular for revision of their own writing, and of their engagement with texts. They report that it was most helpful for improving sentence-structure and grammar and for organization of their thoughts. Of the eight tasks for which students indicated that they used tutor read-aloud in their sessions (the descriptions were supplied on the questionnaire), not all seem optimally suited to this tutoring strategy. For instance, it is more difficult to see how tutor read-aloud would be useful with organizing a whole paper or pre-writing organization, and yet these were both things that tutor read aloud was used to do.

Figure 1: Tasks for which Tutors and Students used Tutor Read-Aloud



It is promising to see that some of the tasks for which tutor read-aloud was most commonly used are those which align with the findings in Hecker et al. (2002) as being the most beneficial for students – those connected with reading comprehension – but overall, these results suggest that more training is required to help tutors deploy tutor read-aloud to maximum advantage, rather than using it for all tasks that they might want to accomplish in a tutoring session. A key step to work on is the shift from using a tutoring strategy as a starting move for a session, then connecting it with the appropriate writing issue in the following discussion.

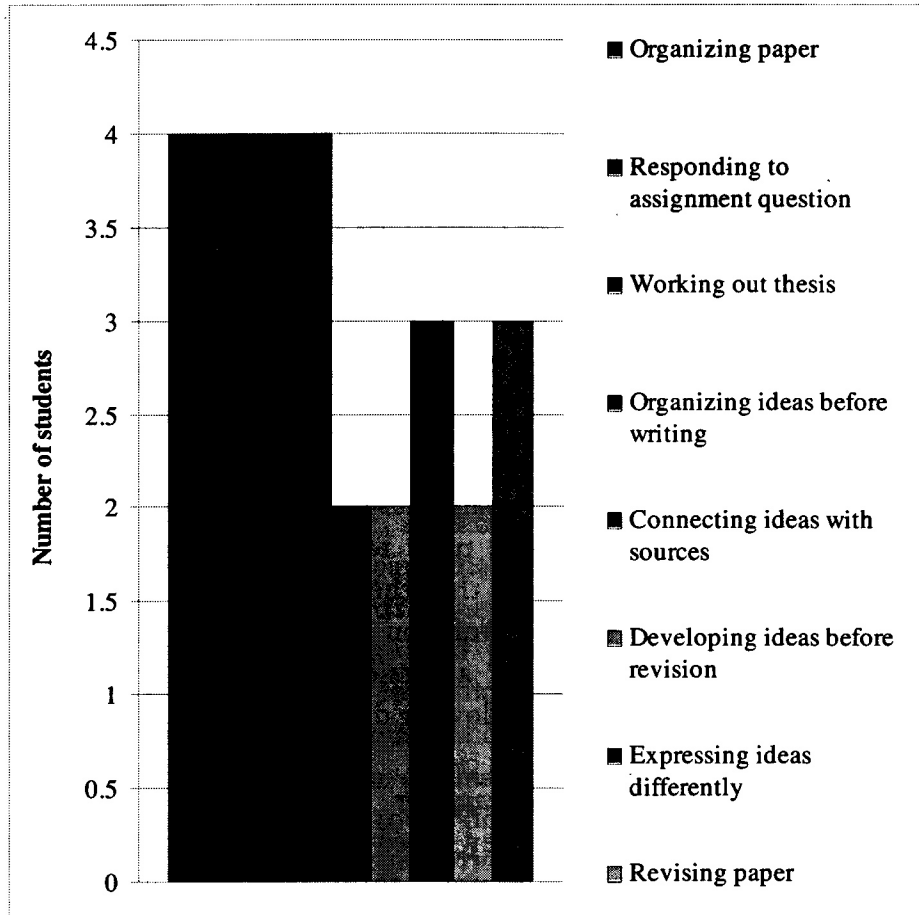
#### *What the students say: Concept-mapping*

Students report that they used concept-mapping primarily for organizational; they found it most useful for fitting their ideas together, and to understand the concepts in their texts, as shown in Figure 2. The fact that students report using concept-mapping to address organization and revision issues is promising, as is the relatively low frequency of activities that separate

the student from negotiating the ideas in their own or another text. But again, these results indicate that more focus is required, in training, on helping tutors to use concept-mapping strategically, rather than using it as a default, as may have been the case in some sessions.

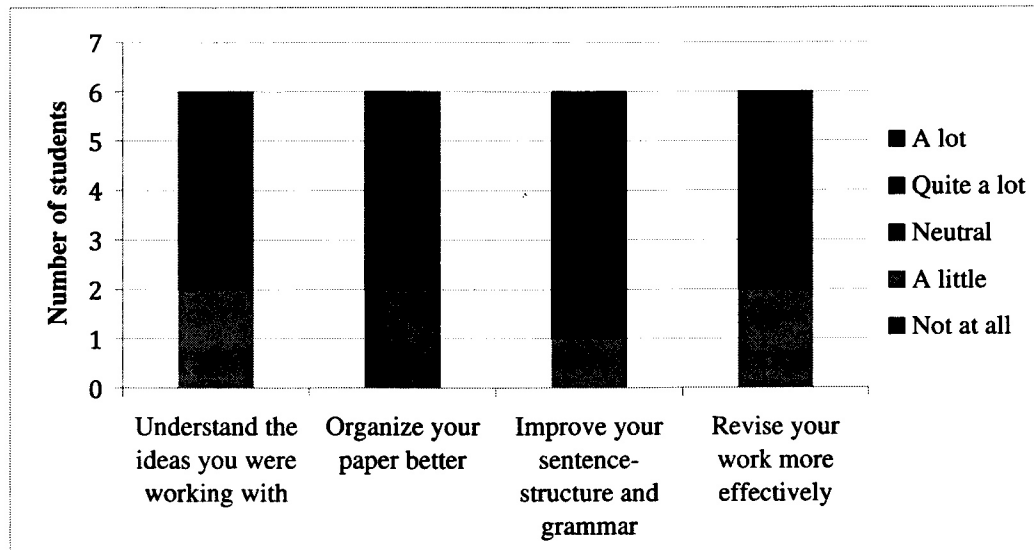
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**Figure 2: Tasks for Which Tutors and Students used Concept Mapping**



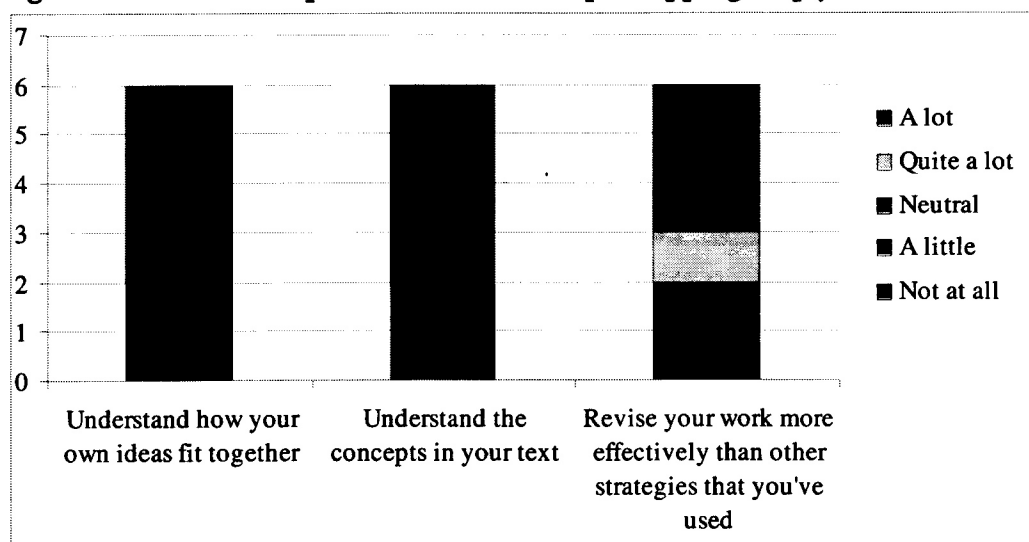
We move now to students' perception of the effectiveness of these tutoring strategies, with respect to particular types of task. Students responded on a 5-point Likert scale when asked questions about four specific areas, described in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Students' Responses to "Did having your tutor read your work aloud to you help you to...?"**



That students responded that tutor read-aloud was most effective for working on sentence-level issues is not surprising, given Block (2010)'s findings. More surprising is the positive response that students had to using tutor read-aloud to address organizational issues; I suspect that this is because *tutors* found the strategy effective in helping them to see organizational issues in student papers, and so were able to ask useful questions following their reading. Indeed, it is possible that all of these positive responses are the result of tutors finding the strategy useful, and being able to direct it into appropriate and useful questions that helped their students address these issues. The more negative responses are most likely responses to tutors who could not effectively channel the strategy into addressing that particular type of issue. I interpret the negative responses to concept-mapping, shown in Figure 4, in the same way.

Figure 4: Students' Responses to "Did concept-mapping help you to...?"



Students responded most positively to concept-mapping when they used it to understand how their own ideas fit together, and to understand the texts with which they are working; these responses fit well with the original purposes of concept-mapping, which were to represent how concepts fit together in a knowledge base (Novak & Cañas, 2008). Again, these responses suggest a direction for tutor training: showing tutors how to use concept-mapping when this type of task is appropriate for students, and not for other types of activity.

#### *What the Tutors Say*

During the original meeting, tutors had a positive response to incorporating a wider variety of tutoring strategies into their sessions. When it came to trying out the two strategies under focus, however, just five tutors participated in the study, out of the 10 who attended the original workshop. Those tutors who did use the new strategies in their sessions indicated that they enjoyed the experience, and were also using the strategies in other venues, either to help with their own writing, or in their teaching.

In interviews with tutors, they suggested that having more materials in the Writing Center for teaching these strategies would be helpful, as students often respond better to handouts than they do to tutor suggestions when it comes to incorporating new strategies into their work habits. Some of the other tutor comments are summarized below:

- Concept-mapping is useful, as a break from the normal. It worked best for students who didn't have a "system". Several students appreciated seeing their ideas laid out on paper, represented in a new way.

- Coaching students to be creative is difficult – they are used to being told what to do, and doing it one way only.
- The use of technology might be useful in enticing students to try new things.

The fact that tutor responses focused on implementation, rather than effectiveness, reinforces the need to provide support, both in terms of training and resources, to induce students and tutors to try new things, and to use them effectively. In the following section, I discuss the implications of this study for in supporting and furthering innovation in the YCWC.

### Future Directions

The clearest conclusion that I draw from these preliminary studies is that, if we are to innovate in the Writing Center, the tutors need more support and resources to help them implement new strategies in their tutoring sessions. Part of this support would include more training, so that tutors have a better understanding of which among the possible tasks are best suited to the new strategies.

This study shows that there is interest, among students and tutors, in trying new things in their tutoring sessions, but tutors need to be trained to use innovative practice effectively, and students sometimes need to be enticed to try new things. These enticements can be as simple as handouts, which tend to encode authority for students (that is, they look official, and therefore like they are effective ways of “doing school”), or as complex as software packages. Of course, with any innovation that takes the form of new technology, there is an additional training component to be considered, so that tutors can also be teach students to use the software. Since much Writing Center practice focuses on separating tutors from instructors in university contexts, this step would require careful thought. Other forms of important, less controversial training should include helping students to make the move from their session-starting tutoring, to using that strategy to get student actively engaged in generating or revising their own text. The most common tutoring strategy, having the student read aloud, is, I suggest, seductive, because it creates the impression that the student is *doing* something, while the student may be largely disengaged from the text that they are reading. This is the key point that I take away from this study: helping tutors help students to connect with their work, and to take the initiative in revision, is our main priority, and all three strategies – student read-aloud, tutor read-aloud, and concept-mapping, have the potential to help with this goal. The issue that deserves our attention and focus is that of training tutors to put this student engagement first, no matter what the strategy.

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