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ENG397H Tutoring Writing: Practice and Theory

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Tutoring Philosophy

My first Tutor's Notebook entry of this semester highlighted the nervousness and uncertainty I felt coming into the Writing Center as a novice tutor. I pondered the difficulty that would come with the unpredictable nature of a tutoring session – anyone could come in, with any type of writing assignment. With the few readings that had been assigned at that point in the semester, I tried to piece together a mental image of myself in the Writing Center. While some of those ideas I connected with early on in the semester still resonate with me now, I was feeling deeply unsure of myself as a tutor at that time.

Over the past two months of tutoring, by honing my skills and philosophies as a tutor through practical application of ideas learned in our course, this worry has begun to evaporate. I embrace differences in each session now, instead of ruminating about the challenges they pose. The challenge of tutoring excites me rather than worries me; I relish the opportunity to learn with each session. That desire to learn embodies a lot of how I view the Writing Center as an institution and how my tutoring philosophies have formed over time. To me, the Writing Center is an institution of mutual learning (i.e. collaboration) that should emphasize empathy and compassion between writers (tutor and tutee) as they seek to not just improve their writing, but expand their understanding of writing and its practice as a whole.

The Writing Center plays an important, although often underappreciated, role within the institution of UMass Amherst. The Writing Center's framing of peer tutoring is also unique as it

applies to UMass. Writing itself is a unique discipline; while important and prevalent in academic settings, it is hard to pin down the so-called right and wrong of writing, or whether right or wrong exists at all. In his "Study of Error," professor David Batholomae delves into this idea, describing errant sentences in student writing as potential "stages of learning rather than the failure to learn, but also as evidence that these writers are using writing as an occasion to learn" (254). Moreover, what an individual thinks is good or bad writing has a lot to do with that person's own background: their upbringing, their views of the world, their connections growing up, and so on. To that end, the Writing Center is in a unique position within the university as a space of peer-tutoring that does not inherently seek the right answer to a problem, or claims to be able to instantly improve a tutee's grade in a certain class like a course-based peer tutoring setting might. There lies the importance of the Writing Center's style of peer-tutoring, which is that the Center aims chiefly to foster collaboration between students. It is a judgment-free zone, where the goal is to shed the authoritative role commonly associated with the tutor and to level the playing field between tutor and tutee.

In this leveling action, certain values are instilled in the space of the Writing Center, namely compassion and empathy. Writing is a deeply personal practice, and sharing pieces of writing can be a vulnerable exchange, especially for those seeking help. The intimacy of writing makes it a highly emotional experience, too. Dana Lynn Driscoll and Jennifer Wells explore the complex set of emotions involved in writing in their work, "Tutoring the Whole Person," observing that "development writing research is resoundingly demonstrating that these "person" based aspects are deeply influential on writers' processes, written products, and long-term development" (Driscoll and Wells). Those "person-based aspects" – in other words, emotions, upbringing, and lived experiences – affect writers and their work in profound ways. As such, it is

logical that the Writing Center should focus on these aspects with values of empathy and compassion, as such an approach alleviates some of the tension that can come up during a session. I inform my tutoring methods with these values. When I first meet a tutee, I make my best effort at making them feel comfortable by building a friendly rapport. When a tutee laments that they think they are a bad writer, or that they feel like they make a lot of mistakes in their writing, I show that I understand their perspective through reassurance, relating, and simply acknowledging that writing is difficult. Considering and caring about these emotions is key to cultivating the Writing Center as a comfortable space where writers can feel free to make mistakes, try new things, and learn about writing in general.

To be an effective tutor, it is important to understand what exactly writing is, in both how it comes about abstractly and how it materializes practically. Professor Kenneth Bruffee describes thought as internalized conversation, and thus writing in the abstract as "internalized conversation re-externalized" (91). If thoughts are internalized conversation, and writing is the externalization of that internalization, then it follows that conversation is an extremely important tool in the generation of writing. Thus, this concept is especially important to tutors in the Writing Center, as it reveals that "our task must involve engaging students in conversation at as many points in the writing process as possible and that we should contrive to ensure that that conversation is similar in as many ways as possible to the way we would like them eventually to write" (Bruffee 91). Bruffee's idea of writing reinforces the importance of the goal of fostering collaboration in the Writing Center, as collaboration through conversation is how writing is put into existence in the first place.

More practically speaking, guidance and connections are extremely important elements in one's journey as a writer. For me, it started with my mom, who encouraged and fostered my

writing abilities throughout my academic career; I still occasionally ask her to review my writing if it feels necessary. For others, these connections can be found academically, at work, or among community members. Professor Harry Denny highlights this in his work "Tell me exactly what it was that I was doing so bad," where he interviews working class undergraduate students on their experiences in the Writing Center and in academic life generally. On connections, Denny emphasizes the importance of mentorship, observing that such relationships "helped our interviewees acquire cultural capital. The mentors shared their knowledge of the entry points into academia… They also mobilized their networks to make sure our students had access to opportunities. Through all of this, they helped our interviewees find a sense of agency and belonging" (85).

Where and however connections manifest, though, they are an extremely important aspect of how one learns to write. As such, an individual's writing is not just connected to that person but is connected to everything that was around them as they learned to write. This is an important element to consider in Writing Center practice. Not everyone was given the same tools in their life as they learned to write; in other words, what may seem obvious to one person could be totally confusing to another. Recognizing this fact allows a tutor to approach a session with the aforementioned value of empathy. Understanding on a basic level that everyone writes differently, just as we know everyone grew up differently, allows for a level of grace when tutees make mistakes, feel insecure about their writing, or are shy and reserved when presenting their work. It also gives the tutor a level of humility that is needed to foster collaboration – that knowledge shows that tutors do not know everything there is to know about writing and that there is plenty to be learned about the process through our interactions with tutees.

Additionally, understanding this difference in upbringing as it relates to writing helps prevent a tutor from overriding the unique voice of the tutee. Shanti Bruce illustrates this powerfully in "ESL Writers," where she cautions tutors "not to fix every phrase just because it sounds different. Sometimes these variations can be refreshing, if not poignant" (36). Bruce goes on to describe an anecdote from her own experiences working with multilingual students in the Writing Center, describing a Korean student who was feeling insecure about needing help in a writing class where others did not need help. Bruce writes of the instance, "when she realized that, she said, "I feel… I shrink." Her phrasing was at once unusual and moving." (36). Bruce's embrace of the student's unconventional phrasing is demonstrative of the need to understand each other's differences in the Writing Center, as it fosters unique and often more powerful use of language.

Abstractly, I try to guide my tutoring methods on much of what I have already discussed in this paper. Most important to me is the idea of making the tutee feel comfortable in the space of the Writing Center. I deeply relate to the anxiety and pressure felt when presenting a piece of writing to anyone, let alone a stranger. With that in mind, I try to cultivate an atmosphere that is relaxed and friendly at the top of the session in an effort to set a tone conducive to success. In their "Longman's Guide to Peer Tutoring," Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner describe the importance of tone-setting in the first minutes of the session through quotations from tutor e-journal entries, akin to our Tutor's Notebook. One tutor, Kip, is quoted about students' apprehension to come to the Writing Center, saying, "I think it boils down to a confidence issue, and I think it is part of the job as a tutor, to help them maintain their confidence" (Gillespie and Lerner 28). Another tutor, Maggie, says that tutors should "try to be warm, friendly and humorous. That seems to ease most people" (Gillespie and Lerner 29). These quotes, while

anecdotal, demonstrate the power of rapport-building in the Writing Center. It is not just about having small-talk, which many find inane and meaningless, or simply being polite, which many see as a socially contracted obligation; it is about creating an atmosphere in the Writing Center that is comfortable, non-judgmental, and safe. Without such an atmosphere, collaboration between peers is made much harder.

Conversation is another fundamental aspect of my Writing Center philosophy. My goal in every session is to cultivate an engaging conversation about the writing assignment at hand. The purpose of this goes back to Bruffee's ideas of writing and conversation – that conversation is essential to idea generation and therefore will facilitate the writing process more smoothly. Conversation is also fundamental to the collaborative aspect of the Writing Center. The session would lose its collaborative element if I took the reins and made edits and suggestions in a completely directive way.

Of course, in practice, things do not always go according to my plans as a budding Writing Center tutor. It is not uncommon to have a session with a tutee who is not reciprocal in efforts to build a friendly rapport, or tutees who do not respond to my questions in an enthusiastic or engaged manner. This is not a value judgment on these sessions; I do not view them as better or worse than others, rather that they present unique challenges that require consideration.

My first session ever as a tutee is a strong example of things not going according to plan. It was an online walk-in session – a surprise that did not help with my already nervous feelings on my first shift – with a mechanical engineering faculty member. The writing assignment was a lengthy and complicated grant proposal with esoteric language and concepts far beyond my understanding. The issue came in with this particular tutee's assertiveness. She flat-out rejected

my opening questions about broad elements of the writing assignment, like its purpose, the expectations that came with it, and so on, telling me that I could ask later, once I reviewed the particular paragraphs and sentences about which she had concerns. While I initially tried to push back on this, I eventually gave in to the tutee's very direct attitude, resigning to simply addressing the questions she had for me. While the session was not ideal, I actually felt good about it, especially after discussing with directors, because it presented a profound learning moment. I learned that boundary-setting is vital to a session's success, but more importantly, I understood that each session would teach me something new about tutoring, whether that session was ideal or not.

This became a vital part of my philosophy which revealed itself in practice: that self-reflection is one of the most important tools we have as tutors. I remember leaving the Center that day feeling incredibly excited about what I would learn in my next shift, about what challenges and situations I would be put in and how I would adapt and solve them. The failure (maybe a strong word) of the session was cathartic. I had spent so long worrying about whether I would fare well as a tutor, and after that difficult session, I really felt I could. As long as I keep reflecting, keep looking internally at what works in my philosophy, what does not work, and how I can cater to different types of people, the growth as a tutor will happen. It just takes care, determination, and awareness.

My final Tutor's Notebook entry of the semester struck a very different tone than my first one. In it, I wrote that "the more experience I gain in the center, the more I feel free and confident in engaging with tutees." What I learned over the semester, both in my sessions and in class, about emphasizing empathy, compassion, collaboration, and reflection in my practice has made me a much more confident tutor. I look forward to the end of next semester, and the one

after that, and so on, when I am able to look back on this paper, having many more hours of experience and reflection in the Writing Center, and see where my philosophies have evolved, stayed consistent, or changed completely.

Works Cited

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