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Who holds the pen?—The writer, naturally

Recent discussions about the value of directive tutoring argue that it is an undervalued technique that should be added to the writing center's repertoire. Anyone who has spent time tutoring knows how much simpler life would be if tutors could simply tell writers what to do to make their papers better. Not only would tutoring sessions go more quickly, writing center directors might be spared the kind of phone call I receive from time to time from colleagues who wonder why their student's paper received only a "C" when that student had come to the writing center for help. My response might be echoed by many other writing center personnel: "If the tutor had written the paper, it might have received an 'A,' but unfortunately we can't write a student's paper. All the tutor can do is be a guide, and too much 'guidance' can turn the paper into the tutor's work rather than the writer's."

My colleagues understand that argument, and subsequent conversation, usually focuses on the two reasons why the writing center must offer a tutoring approach that lets writers learn to help themselves, that is, the authorization (literally and figuratively) of students through guided questioning—or non directive tutoring—and the maintaining of academic honesty and credibility.

Obviously, to maintain credibility in an academic institution, where honesty is a cornerstone, papers must belong to the writers who compose them. Because my school has an honor code, administered by students and respected by faculty, I may be particularly sensitive to the question of not only who holds the pen but who owns the paper. And apart from concerns about paper ownership, I am also concerned about the best ways to help students become confident, able writers who locate authority within themselves. I am not overly fond of cliché, but the Chinese idea of teaching others to fish, rather than giving them their mullet already filleted, is the idea operating here. Although it is a slow process that is sometimes unsatisfying to the student writer who is looking for immediate answers, and frustrating to the tutor who could give those answers in a minute, non-directive tutoring is the best approach to answering these concerns, and ought to be a foundation for writing centers where these issues are also paramount.

This is not to say that I do not also share the concerns of my colleagues who favor directive tutoring. Students, after all, do not often come to us as founts of knowledge about writing. "If I knew what was wrong, much less how to fix it," they say in one way or another, "I wouldn't have to be here at all." While non-directive tutoring may be viewed by its proponents as part of a conversation all writers must engage in, a mutual movement of tutor and writer toward some resolution of the writer's questions, if tutors practice it in a dilatory way, or with slavish adherence to the principle of nondirectiveness and without concern for the writer, it can be a most unsatisfactory experience for both.

Certainly it is important to model, and no less important to show a writer

that a certain sentence is unclear, or a particular word doesn't mean what the writer intended it to mean. But a replacement word offered as one possibility among many can easily turn into a complete sentence as the writer passively sits by, while the tutor gives even more variations on the written sentence, until, together, they pick the right one, the one the writer might have written had he only thought about it. Similarly, a line drawn through the wrong word not only tells the writer there is something wrong, it also prompts that writer to look at the tutor as the center of authority. Putting aside questions of negative effects on the insecure writer's already shaky ego (at least when it comes to academic papers), our aim is to help inexperienced writers find ways to develop authority within themselves—to make our job self-limiting—as writers learn how to help themselves become better.

One way to avoid overly directive tutoring is through questions that lead writers to understand where the audience (who is at this moment the tutor) might have questions about the work. But this is not to say that a tutor must ask only Rogerian questions—those open-ended and sometimes confusing questions that leave that writer without a clue as to how he or she should proceed with a paper that was no doubt problematic to begin with. In fact, even a questioning approach has its pitfalls. Questions designed to lead writers into considering the strength of their argument can easily be misphrased. As a tutor asks, "Was this what you meant?" and follows that with a rephrasing of the writer's words, there is a danger of the tutor's revising the work, while the writer, too insecure to speak out loud, echoes Prufrock by saying internally, "That was not what I meant at all."

So, then, what do we do? We start, I think, by deciding what we want to accomplish. Is it to have writers leave the writing center with perfect papers? Then directive tutoring may be just the thing. Certainly it will help writers to understand what the issues are in writing and to know what someone (that is, the tutor) thinks is right or wrong, clear or unclear. But will it help students to find ways to help themselves become better writers? Will it make the job of the writing center self-limiting as the writer becomes stronger, more able, more certain about the power of the paper and the writing that informs it? I think not. Directive tutoring tells the student what is wrong with the paper, provides answers to how to fix it, and makes at least some part of the paper the tutor's rather than the writer's property. It does not, as questioning and other non-directive techniques do, place the authority for the paper in the writer's hands; it does not, I am afraid, let a writer find ways to solve problems that have not yet arisen, or come up with a heuristic that will be applicable to papers not yet written.

Those in favor of directive tutoring might argue that in fact such tutoring helps the writer very clearly to understand why the writing doesn't work, what the audience's response might be. They are right. But at the same time it does both less and more than that. That is, it does less in that it focuses the writer on the problems and concerns of only a particular and somewhat authoritative audience—the tutor. And directive tutoring does more, but not in a positive way, when it not only shows the writer what is, so to speak, "wrong" with the paper, but when it also provides solutions to the paper's problems. The kind of modeling used as part of a directive tutoring session has an extremely high probability of becoming not a model but the actual corrective to a poor sentence, a fuzzy idea, a weak argument. "Here is a better way to write this sentence," is ultimately a less helpful response than, "Tell me in other words what you were trying to say here." "Here's what I [the tutor] have a problem understanding" is a more valuable approach than "This is what is wrong."

Non-directive tutoring provides models also, but it provides them analogously; it allows for the writer to figure out—based on particular models—how, for example, a sentence might be written. Training in questioning techniques

can help tutors respond to papers in such a way that the writer becomes actively engaged in talking about, thinking about and finding better ways to articulate his or her ideas. It places the writer and tutor in a more equitable relationship—that of writer and audience—than does directive tutoring in which the relationship is between writer and authority.

Non-directive tutoring is in many ways more difficult than directive tutoring. It involves sometimes leaving a writer without a sense of closure. It takes more time. It involves excellent tutor training. It means relinquishing some power. Anyone who is a parent knows how tempting, how satisfying, and how final "because I said so" is, but we also know that such an approach doesn't really teach anything much.

None of this is to say that there aren't some times when a word is just wrong, when a sentence is ungrammatical, when punctuation is misused. But far better to ask that the student consult the writing center dictionary to see if the word has the meaning he or she thinks it has than to supply a better choice. Similarly, consulting a handbook together with the tutor, or talking about why sentences are usually clearer when subject and verb are in reasonable proximity helps a writer to understand what non-tutor resources are available and to pay more attention to the building blocks of a paper than he or she might have previously done. And asking questions like "What did you mean here?" "How are these ideas connected?" "Why did you use that particular word in that sentence?" helps writers to develop an active model for approaching their own work.

Students come to the writing center for help. They come because they want answers—obviously. But giving them the tools to understand what questions they need to ask, to find the resources to answer those questions, and to learn what it is that makes an effective piece of writing will provide them with more valuable skills than telling them what to do and how to do it. Directive tutoring fosters a dependence on the authority of the writing center staff. It shows writers that there is fixed, certain and correct information out there, and that the center's staff has it. It does not create writers who understand that writing is often fluid, that its effects will vary to some degree according to our audience, and that correctness is often in the eye of the reader. Non-directive tutoring does not preclude discussing some of the issues writers have to face, or examining questions about correctness. It simply makes the writer an equal partner in finding the answers.

What I am suggesting, then, is that there are two equally important considerations when we ask "who holds the pen" or—more significantly—"who owns the paper." One is academic honesty. Papers must belong to the writers who write them. They must in all significant ways be the product of the mind of their author. Otherwise the tutor should receive the paper's grade and corollary academic credit. Moreover, if faculty suspect that the paper belongs to a tutor rather than the writer, our credibility on campus will be severely undermined. Directive tutoring has the potential to create problems with paper ownership that will directly affect concerns about academic honesty. Non-directive tutoring is less likely to do this.

But equally important is helping writers develop their own authority, their own writing abilities. And non-directive tutoring—by guiding writers, rather than directing them, by helping them to ask questions that they can learn to answer even without a tutor by their side—is not only empowering but also most directly supports our goal as educators—the development of independent and capable individuals who can use written language to articulate what it is they think.