The Importance of Establishing a Collaborative Relationship Between Tutors and Tutees Through Dialoguing

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One of the common misconceptions about the Writing Center is that it is a place where tutors sit down with their tutees to edit a paper. In actuality, the Writing Center is a place where tutor and tutee collaborate in order to help the tutee understand the problem-areas of a paper. In a tutoring session, tutees bring the knowledge of their assignment and perhaps a general idea of the argument or point they want to make. They might lack the right words to express a feeling, the ability to organize a paper, or the importance of a thesis statement. Tutors, therefore, are expected to have a greater knowledge of the English language so they can help students who make appointments at the Writing Center. While the tutor does not solely instruct the tutee about how to fix a paper, there is an important relationship between the two parties that characterizes the outcome of a session and whether or not it ends productively. Tutorials are always changing, and students’ needs are different. Therefore, the most productive tutorial is one that employs a collaborative relationship between tutor and tutee by dialoguing, but also goes above-and-beyond sentence-level issues to address the content of the paper.

Ideally, a tutorial is a conversation between tutor and tutee. According to Barbara Beaupre, author of *Practicing Academic Discourse with the Developing Writer: The Role of the College Writing Center*, “A successful tutorial keeps the focus of the conversation directed to the student’s goal” (Beaupre 5). While this advice may be challenging for students who come into the Writing Center without a goal, the tutor then becomes an advocator for conversation that would allow students to present their ideas and receive positive feedback. A tutor is a participant in students’ prewriting process. Therefore, dialoguing between tutor and tutee is one
of the most important steps for a student who has writing difficulties. However, Dr. Teresa Henning, author of *Theoretical Models of Tutor Talk: How Practical Are They?*, cautions tutors against using a directive, or didactic, method of speaking. A successful tutorial is perceived as one where tutor and tutee establish a relationship, or rapport, with one another, negotiate an agenda that meets the tutee’s expectations, and includes a discussion about revision (Henning 1). When tutors speak authoritatively by using a directive method of tutoring, then the goal of a tutorial becomes to teach. The Writing Center does not only seek to teach, but also to help a tutee learn how to identify and correct his mistakes. Therefore, a tutorial is a meeting where a tutee learns by dialoguing with the tutor. Dialoguing has a number of important benefits for tutor and tutee. It is a way for a tutee to verbally revise his or her paper (Newkirk 312). It is also a way for the tutor to pose non-directive questions, such as, “What do you think you meant when you wrote this sentence?” in order to help a student verbally interact, and thus, learn about the importance of a paper’s clarity simply by engaging in a discussion.

However, dialoguing can be a useless tool if tutors and tutees do not agree on an agenda within the first few minutes of the tutorial. Tutorials typically last up to fifty minutes, and sometimes only a few pertinent issues can be discussed in a student’s paper. If a tutor and tutee cannot set an agenda, then “a conference [tutorial] can run on aimlessly and leave both participants with the justifiable feeling that they have wasted time” (Newkirk 303). Ideally, a tutee sets the agenda of the tutorial, and then the tutor reviews the problem areas of the paper. Setting an agenda is beneficial for many reasons. First, it organizes the fifty-minute time limit
and prevents idle chatter from tutor and tutee. Second, it allows the tutee to control
the problem-areas of the paper because the tutee verbally acknowledges the issues
he needs help with. Third, it allows tutors to narrow their focus on the problem-
areas and prevents only editing grammar issues in a paper.

Sometimes, however, tutors and tutees are unable to set an agenda because
they do not communicate effectively. The Writing Center is a discourse community
where a tutor has more familiarity with the English language, and a tutee could feel
intimidated by a tutor's extensive knowledge. Beaupre indicates that it is possible
for the unequal gap between tutor and tutee to be bridged by inviting the tutee to be
an active participant in the tutorial through dialoguing. By making eye contact,
voicing interest, and asking questions, tutors are able to bridge the gap between a
teacher-and-student relationship in order to make the tutorial a productive form of
discussion between two individuals (Beaupre 5). If a tutee has trouble
understanding a tutor's use of unfamiliar terms, Beaupre advocates the use of
interdiscursive linking, which is “the strategy of providing academic words related
to recognized concepts” (Beaupre 5). For example, using a metaphor of a messy
room to explain a disorganized paragraph might help a tutee better understand its
poor organization. By using familiar terms, a tutor and tutee can be more
productive, and the tutee can also feel like he is in control of fixing the paper.

While dialoguing is an integral part of the tutoring process, minimalist
tutoring is another strategy that allows tutees to control a session. Jeff Brooks,
author of Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work, says, “The less we
[tutors] do the paper, the better,” and this statement encompasses the objective of
Brooks advocates a minimalist approach because he believes that, “when you ‘improve’ a student’s paper, you haven’t been a tutor at all; you’ve been an editor” (219). A tutor’s main objective, according to Brooks, is “not [to] expect to make student papers “better”; that is neither [an] obligation, nor is it a realistic goal” (221). Instead, Brooks says that a tutor should pose non-threatening questions, such as, “I can’t tell you [what to do], it’s your grade, not mine” (223) to tutees when they ask how to fix their paper. This nondirective statement does not open the channels of dialogue between tutor and tutee. Even though tutors are not teachers, they work at the Writing Center as available and willing participants to help students learn how to fix their papers. A tutor cannot simply dismiss a tutee’s question of, “What should I do here?” if it arises at some point during the tutorial.

Theresa Miranda, author of, Case Study: Personal and Social Ethics in the Writing Center, agrees that a tutorial is not a “static, simply ask the basic questions to arrive at the problem” type of session (5). When a tutee’s paper lacks factual information, then minimalist tutoring becomes an ineffective approach. Miranda provides anecdotal evidence about a personal writing center consultation, stating,

A student appeared in the writing center to discuss his essay on welfare fraud. His paper offered an argument based on sweeping generalizations, unsupported by factual evidence or convincing reasoning. More specifically, he identified the cause of welfare fraud as coming from all African-Americans and Hispanics. (3)

Using the minimalist style of tutoring in this situation would not benefit a tutee whose paper contains grossly uninformative generalizations about racial
stereotypes and welfare participants. Of course, a tutor could choose to ignore this statement and instead discuss organizational or grammatical issues; however, in a tutoring session, tutors indirectly become “gatekeepers”, meaning they, to a degree, control the type of information included and omitted in a paper. Ignoring the offensive material in a paper does not benefit tutor or tutee. A tutor who acknowledges offensive, nonfactual material and alerts potential problems to a tutee contributes more to the quality of a tutoring session, and a tutee that is receptive to a tutor’s suggestions gains the knowledge of more appropriate ways to address sensitive issues such as ethnicity, gender equality, and social problems. Therefore, while minimalist tutoring is effective in some cases, tutors should be aware of the time when it is appropriate and not appropriate to use.

Tutors who engage tutees in dialogue, are sensitive to tutees’ needs, and are able to provide interesting, insightful, and helpful feedback by posing non-directive and directive questioning (when appropriate), are the ones whose tutees learn more than just how to revise a paper. The foundation of effective dialoguing between tutor and tutee may be built by the ability to set an agenda, the willingness to discuss the tutee’s needs, and the desire to improve a paper. However, there are additional benefits of dialoguing that help improve a tutee’s ability to write, interact, and think critically. When tutors guide tutees to think critically and conceptualize problems, then a tutorial becomes more than a way for students to have an editing service at their fingertips, it becomes, as Kenneth Bruffee states in his article, Peer Tutoring and the Conversation of Mankind, “a conversation of mankind.”
Works Cited


