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## Skeptically Optimistic

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ENGL 6820

Writing Center Paper

### Skeptically Optimistic

Skepticism and optimism usually don't go together: in sentences, life, or people if we're being honest. However, I find myself skeptical and optimistic about my experiences in USU's Writing Center, as well as about how those experiences can be applied to my role as a teacher. Switching between being a teacher, who is actively building a relationship with my students, and being a tutor that has to quickly establish a temporary relationship, in order to help with a single paper, is hard. It feels like a constant exchanging of one mask for another, and I'm terrified I will someday use the wrong mask in any given situation. However, the switching of roles also helps me practice "soft" skills that are necessary for being a successful teacher and tutor in different settings. During tutoring sessions, I have to remember to ask open ended questions, focus on the "big picture" issues in papers, and caveat every suggestion with a statement about style choices and the preferences of an individual professor. I also have to remember to keep the student in control of the paper, utilize "I" statements, and not say anything that the student could take as an accusation. These skills are things I have to remember and apply on a consistent basis, but I can't let them take over my conscious thought processes or I won't be able to focus on teaching or tutoring. In reality, all of these skills boil down to remembering one thing – students are individuals, who have individual needs, and as teachers or tutors, we need to do everything we can to address those needs.

One of the most important "soft" skills a tutor has is the ability to be silent and give students time to think. As teachers and tutors, it is tempting to fill each silent moment in the

classroom or session because we already know the answer, or have a possible answer. However, if we are filling every silent moment with our "expert" voices, our students are missing out on valuable learning opportunities. Some students need more time to process a question or identify where part of their paper is going than others, and it is important we don't cheat them of the chance to find their own answer. I have found it is much easier to practice silence in a tutoring session than in the classroom. Tutoring only involves two people, so it is fairly easy to make the student feel like both of you are still processing the question. But in the classroom, it is obvious that the teacher is waiting for an answer from one of many students, some of whom find silence incredibly awkward. Tutoring sessions help us become more comfortable with silence in general, and it can help us learn how to deal with our students' anxieties about silence, while still giving each student the time they need to process the question.

The Writing Center also teaches its tutors that each student has individual needs, even if they don't always know how to articulate those needs, which provides a solid foundation for growth. In recent sessions, I have had students who needed help with everything from content and organization, to correctly formatting a works cited page using the new MLA style sheet. When the student walks through the Writing Center doors with an idea of what they want to work on, the session goes well. Both the student and I walk away from the session feeling like we made progress on the paper, and they have a solid foundation for developing their paper independently. When the student doesn't walk in knowing what they need to work on, most of the session is spent feeling our way through the paper for things to work on. Sometimes these sessions go well; the student and I are able to quickly identify what we should focus the session on. But in many cases, the student and I are still identifying major areas of focus as the session is ending, and we both walk away from the session feeling unsatisfied and a bit dazed. These

students are walking out of the Writing Center with a half-formed foundation and will struggle to strengthen it independently.

Learning how to help individual students articulate their needs is difficult when combined with the lack of long-term relationship building between tutor and student, but it also presents an opportunity to practice adapting "lessons" on the fly. Tutoring sessions are focused on a specific paper, and it is unlikely that I will see a student for more than one session – they might come back to the Writing Center, but they probably won't have the same tutor twice. There is nothing pre-existing that the tutor can use to ground the session. The absence of a pre-existing relationship forces tutors to have backup plans they can use to guide the tutoring session when students aren't sure of what they need, or become experts at plucking ideas from thin air. Having a series of "back pocket" strategies and activities is also useful in the classroom, especially when a discussion runs short or students don't have as many questions as you thought they would. Teachers have to adapt to fit each classroom situation while still accomplishing the course objectives, and tutoring forces us to practice our adaptability. However, teaching also eliminates the constant need for adaptability because it creates a long-term relationship between the teacher and the students. I do not have to adapt every lesson because our ongoing relationship allows me to plan ahead for my students' needs and build on the concepts from previous classes. I can see where students are progressing well independently and where I need to help them, before the next class period even begins.

I am in favor of honesty and full disclosure, so I will admit that I am not entirely sure I learned "new" skills from tutoring, or that the Writing Center is set up in a way that can help a wide variety of students. There are multiple "soft" skills I get to practice in one-time appointments that aren't easy to practice elsewhere, and I use those "soft" skills while teaching

and holding individual conferences with my students. I'll also admit that when one-time sessions go well there are tangible benefits for the student and myself. However, there are ways the Writing Center could be modified in order to help more students on a regular basis. Everything from giving new tutors more training before the semester starts to providing students with a clearer understanding of what the Writing Center does would help sessions be more successful, and beneficial to more students. I am also aware that practice truly makes perfect; we can train new tutors as much as we like before their first session, but nothing truly prepares you for dealing with a panicking first-year when their paper is due in an hour, and they haven't even started it yet. I also think making it possible for students to meet with the same tutor on a consistent basis would allow tutoring sessions to help a wider variety of students in a more direct, meaningful way. I have tutored in situations where I worked with a student on a consistent basis, and I could see the student benefiting from the long-term relationship we created. After the first session, it wasn't necessary to reassess what the student needed and we could truly master the skills she would need for success. We learned how to communicate clearly with each other, and were able to build on the skills practiced in previous sessions.

So here I am, skeptically optimistic about how tutoring and the Writing Center help me be a better teacher, but also grateful for the opportunity to practice communicating in ways that are understandable and helpful to other people. I think tutoring and teaching methods can be compatible, but my tutoring experiences have been lackluster and frustrating. The Writing Center can be an immense resource for teachers and students, but right now there are several barriers in the way. One such barrier is the lack of long-term tutoring relationship building, which is harder to establish than it seems and might be unrealistic for the scope of the Writing Center. We cannot help students make significant progress if we are not building on previous

concepts. However, there is a barrier that can be easily surmounted: students not understanding what the Writing Center is for, and how to use it. If we improved the in-class presentations and became involved in first-year orientation, our students would be more prepared for their visits to the Writing Center and have a better tutoring session.