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Blind Leading the Blind: The Experience of an Inexperienced Tutor

By Westin Smith

Writing Tutors Column

Key Words: Resources, Source Credibility, Tutoring Experience, Tutor Confidence.

Abstract: In this paper the author delves into the hesitations a new writing tutor may feel by examining his own personal experiences. He discuss the necessity of using all of the sources offered to tutors, such as Internet references, assignment descriptions, and reference guides.

Using these resources builds the tutor's credibility, along with providing assurance to the tutor that he or she is guiding the student correctly. Demonstrating that tutors refer to these resources for help also strengthens the tutors' relatability as peers, and this will help create a more comfortable tutoring session for the student.

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Immediately the energy and buzz in the conference room paralyze me. I am one of seventy, and I can already tell that if there were a percentile, I would be in the lowest. The natural conversation each other seasoned tutor shares pushes me out. They all seem to know each other and know the procedure for our meeting. In an act of desperation, I just follow the crowd and take my seat. Every comment and insight points to the fact that my fellow tutors are English masters, and that I am a novice. My only credentials are a desire to learn and a love of the written word. I do not know the rules of grammar, and I do not know the technical aspects of writing, but I do know how to create flow and recognize what sounds right. This skill helps tutor students onto the right path of writing clearly and effectively, but I am left stranded whenever they ask for the rules behind the reasoning. Fortunately, the tools and resources provided for me serve as a map to save me from the desertion of ignorance.

Each session is equipped with a variety resources to help the student gain a better understanding of requirements and rules. Although these tools appear to be more for the student's benefit, they are a necessity for someone as inexperienced as myself. My abilities in English have come from years of reading, not from study of the language. So when a student wants to know the exact rules of commas, how to properly cite works, when and where to use a semicolon, or any other specific rule in English, I am forced to learn with the student instead of simply teaching.

Many students enter the writing center expecting us to be the fountain of all English knowledge from which to drink and learn. For many it is required to visit, and they hope that since their instructor has sent them in they can use this time as a way to fix up, or even create, a first draft. They come in with their papers, ready to sit down and listen to the tutors correct every little mistake and completely fix their paper. Some find it a little disappointing when they discover that our true purpose is to be a peer and help find ways for the students to find and fix their own mistakes. Their disillusionment is further compounded when they realize their tutor does not know every rule and cannot explain every mistake. In an attempt to regain some of my lost credibility, I turn to the books on our desks, or to online resources, for explanations of concepts and guidelines. I have found that using these resources has given me security in my advice and confidence in my help for the student. A clear definition within a textbook or online source will solidify the concept in the student's mind, and will give the student a point of reference for future papers and questions.

It may have been a blow to my pride admitting that I did not have all of the answers but, since I came to that realization, it has been quite the relief. Now I can base my help in accordance with the true goal of tutoring: guiding the students to their own answers instead of immediately providing them. In my first few weeks as a tutor I felt an immense pressure to have every answer and completely teach each principle. After working for a few months, now I know that it is more important to help students fix a few problems well instead of fixing many problems superficially.

A month into tutoring, a student came in frustrated and confused. He had no idea where to start with his paper and no idea of what was expected. It became clear that he did not understand the assignment or how to use his materials effectively. No longer a complete novice,

I knew that we should read through his assignment description before going any further. We read through each requirement and, after slowly restating each part in simpler terms, he gained a full grasp on what was expected. The easy part was now over. We now had to move onto bettering his process of developing a topic and, from there, into a full paper. He was allowed to pick his own topic and paper format, and this freedom proved to be more hindering than freeing.

Overwhelmed with options and no direction, he had essentially given up. I felt helpless with no answers and no ideas, so I decided we would review the complete list of paper formats. The list came from his assigned text, *21 Genres* by Brock Dethier. Of the twenty different options, I only knew about six off of the top of my head. We then looked up examples and brief definitions of each possibility. Now that we both understood the potential, it came time to select a topic then find the format that best fit with it.

I asked what he liked to do. His few responses led nowhere, so I probed further. I asked what he planned to do as a career and he suddenly revived and quickly told me he planned to work in real estate with his father. Moving his excitement towards the direction of the assignment, I began to ask how someone convinces people to look at, then buy, a home. Remembering a few of the types of papers we just covered in *21 Genres*, I proposed that he could structure his assignment as a review and proposal of homes that were for sale. He liked the idea, and he loved the fact that he could actually use this assignment for his career. We brainstormed for the few remaining minutes and he left confident in his direction and future paper.

If I had relied on my own knowledge and expertise in that crucial appointment, the student would have learned nothing and I would have only resented myself. Choosing to depend on the resources available, I have learned to quickly find answers alongside the student so they

may learn how to find them for themselves. We must accept the limitations that accompany our role as a peer tutor. As stated in the article by Raymond and Quinn, “If we ignore the benefits afforded by our peer status by failing to encourage initiative in our peer writers, we lose sight of one our key strengths,” which is the ability to demonstrate how one becomes a better writer through effort and practice (76). In this age of technology and information there is never a reason to be left with a question, and there is never an excuse to not find a solution for our students. Starting as one drastically inexperienced in English, learning to utilize the available resources came forcefully, but naturally. I urge those that are much more experienced than myself to find their own way into using, and guiding students to use, all of the possible resources.

Works Cited

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