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## Learning to Write by Teaching Writing

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Richard A Blake

English 6820: Teaching Practicum

### **Writing Center Analysis Paper**

#### Learning to Write by Teaching Writing!

The writing center at Utah State University is an asset to all students who wish to have assistance with writing difficulties; whether from uncertainty of grammar or straightening out confusion in their work. While working and observing in the writing center I noticed quite a few different issues come before the tutors. Whether it be grammar, spelling, or just coming up with ideas students are able to have their problems addressed. One of those problems that does show itself occasionally is students who come in ask for a tutor's assistance with a problem, but their bigger issue is something else entirely. If the student shows up with grammar questions and then it's discovered from the rubric that they weren't quite following the instructions, what should the person in the writing center do? All tutors must keep in mind that this time does belong to the student and therefore the issues he or she brings should take precedence. Then if there's time point out these other things. That student would then be recommended to have another trip or two to the writing center to iron things out.

My first experience as a tutor in the writing center was with a student in the aviation department with a business emphasis wishing for me to look over his business plan. Since English wasn't his first language he wanted to have someone with English as a first language to have a look at the use of words and grammar. While looking over what he had written, some of which were bullet pointed lists for potential clients to read, I saw quite a few things which, generally speaking, would be understood by any native English speaker, but would sound like incorrect English and lose credibility in any kind of formal presentation. I pointed out several

places that needed to be corrected. At the same time I also discovered a few disorganized parts that didn't work within the framework of his plan. As time was limited I stayed focused on his original problem. Then at the end I pointed out one of those errors and explained to him how best to fix that and the areas they were located. For him the use of grammar was slightly more important because of the language issue. Structure could be more damaging in the long run, but it was something he could easily fix once that sort of mistake was explained. As with other students who I run out of time with, I suggested perhaps coming back to look at his next draft. He said he'd think about it and then left.

In one of my classes there is a student with whom English was not his first language either. He speaks fine when we talk in class, but in his writing I see several mistakes. A few incorrect tenses, spelling mistakes, and word orders had no effect on its meaning, but would be distracting to someone who would be reading it in something like a job setting. Teachers are supposed to aid students in correcting their problems. Besides grammar or word usage this student had another problem, that of following all the directions in the rubric. In this situation a large problem was the rubric, but his use of language was so distracting that I felt that his original concern about grammar would be handled first with instructions to follow. Then I started pointing out where he had diverged from the instructions. As with all my students I recommended the writing center if he couldn't see me during my office hours.

Some might wonder if being such a stickler about grammar or spelling should be that important to take precedence.

The simplest answer to this question would probably be 'yes'. We should expect the same from everyone since when they make it out into the real world employers in areas like business, any kind of writing jobs like tech writing, or areas of scientific research will likely be

stringent with language skills both speaking and writing. So you mark the grade and encourage the student to work on grammar skills to make them better. After all this is what the writing center is for and that can help with language skills.

A student in that case would be encouraged to visit the writing center more often and have the tutors help him with those rules as well as the exceptions when they come up. So far, in the tutoring sessions I've seen, when students have brought up these problems while doing their writing what happens is that the tutor just tells them what the correct way is then moves onto the next section. There are only twenty-five minutes to work with, so when there's a longer paper this quick fix method is a great temptation to use. The student could use a few minutes for the tutor to explain how that word, phrase, or part of speech works and show this student how to solve it him/herself rather than having to simply give a correct word change when it comes up. Of course, language itself isn't always the domineering problem. It could be usage of correct terms or keeping focus on the subject at hand.

Something else I noticed with my teaching is that students a lot of the time don't read all the instructions that they are given in an assignment. On Canvas there is a detailed explanation for each assignment, some of them being longer than others. That length can lead one to just read the first few lines or paragraphs at the top and neglect the rest. This leads to several instructions not being followed. In the writing center there is a similar problem with the students coming in. They are not reading all the instructions. Granted a lot of them are new college students and need more guidance, so some things might not be as easy to discern. They bring in their assignments and then want the tutors to go over instructions as well as check for corrections they might need to make. The writing center is a good place for the students to better understand what they are

doing for each assignment, but it always looks like either the teacher hasn't explained it or the student isn't paying attention.

I've pondered what instructors could do with their classes that might have the students show up with a clearer understanding of what they need to look for in the assignment. The teacher can explain what an assignment demands, but unless the student writes it down or checks the class website to get the details, they may keep wondering what they need to do to get the assignment done the right way. I'm afraid I'm not quite sure what the solution would be. I have found myself checking back with instructors or tutors to make sure that I understood what was asked of me with an assignment. Those students who learn best with hands on experience could need to have the tutor get them started with ideas.

In the writing center students don't always appreciate what it is the tutors do for those who come in for assistance. Some might consider it a simple check over someone's spelling and grammar, but every student has their own unique problems and the tutors need to be prepared to deal with them all. The rubric given for the assignment is always the best way to keep on top of what the students need in case there are some things they neglected to consider. The tutors have several rules that they need to follow, including explanations to all students who come in and making sure that the students aren't being lectured to during the twenty-five minute period.

The writing center is a great source for assisting students in answering questions and solving problems they find when working on their writing assignments. Whether it's helping students master their language skills, encouraging them to understand all instructions for an assignment, or encouraging students to push their own creativity both teachers and tutors have the same goals in mind. The time in the center belongs to the student. So what the student asks

for should be what the tutor focuses on. Other problems should be consideration for another visit.