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Black and White and Gray All Over

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Black and White and Gray All Over

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Keywords:

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Abstract:

This essay examines the division between keeping professional regulations as a Writing Tutor while working with a paper that goes against the tutor's personal moral code. It suggests two approaches to handling these situations, from leaving the paper exactly as it is to respect personal authorship to following the tutor's own moral obligation to inform the student of the incendiary ideals written in the essay. It then concludes that the true answer may lie somewhere in between these two proposed solutions. The narrative follows the author's experience as a peer tutor, explaining the first time she encountered an essay that was inflammatory and biased, then analyzes the author's inner turmoil of professionalism versus morals during the session. The essay then provides different suggestions on how one may tutor a paper that verges into polarization: focusing on structure instead of content, determining an audience for the paper, and encouraging the student to search for academic sources on credible databases.

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13 December 2017

Black and White and Gray All Over

We live in a world of lines. Lines that signify a beginning, then lead straight into an ending. There are lines used to indicate one's property and others to separate one thing from another. We set rules and guidelines, either undefined or written in permanence, of what we should do and how we should behave. Justice believes in enforcing these lines. Human nature leads us to believe in lines and follow them wherever they are supposed to take us. But what happens when lines just don't steer us where we believe we should go? What happens when two lines don't coincide like we thought they were supposed to? How do we as human beings come to grips with the fact that the lines we form in a linear world don't always have a straight answer?

I faced a challenge that led me to contemplate these questions during a tutoring session at the Utah State Writing Center. I, a new tutor of less than two months, had listened closely to the rules and regulations of the writing center; I did not want to create any issues by breaking a rule I didn't know had been set. The rules were simple and hardly more than common sense: arrive five minutes before your work time to get prepared to tutor, treat all sessions professionally, and never talk about your own opinions or debate with students about conflicting ideas, to name a few. I had followed these rules carefully, finding it easy to show up

on time and tread lightly around issues that didn't necessarily pique my interest. (The importance of college? Diets of a frogs in the Galapagos Islands? Piece of cake!) The rules had been set, and I easily followed.

The session of note began as any other normal appointment. My supervisor brought in the student whom I would be working with, and we began with formalities. After a few polite exchanges, the student and I shifted our focus from the inclement weather to the stack of papers he had just pulled out of his backpack. He explained to me that the assignment he wanted to work on was an argumentative essay and that he had been excited to write it because the subject matter was something that he felt very passionate about. I nodded enthusiastically, elated that someone was so excited about writing in a time when many students saw it as a chore. I reached for my own piece of paper and pencil as I asked him a few more questions about his writing style and topic. He flipped over his paper, and I was finally able to read the title of his argumentative essay.

A line appeared. This one was in the form of a furrow on my forehead. From the very first words, I could tell that I was not going to agree with this paper. *Oh no*, I thought to myself, *I don't think I've emotionally prepared for this today.*

As the student began reading, more lines formed on my forehead, becoming deeply entrenched in the space between my eyebrows. Internally, I felt two different urges tugging at me. One was the professional ethics that I knew I had to follow, the rule I knew so well in which I couldn't insert my opinion into a paper that wasn't my own. Rocking the boat would not only create yards of tension in the session, but it would also be highly unprofessional. I knew this with all my heart. The other pull, though, was the moral compass inside me that was tugging

me harder and harder as the subject matter turned from one disconcerting subject to another. The points that the student was making for his argument were personal opinions, not fact. Not only that, but they were opinions that radicalized and polarized groups of people. These arguments became more and more biased as we progressed through his essay, and I became more and more shocked as the bigotry continued. Those people he was writing about were my friends. Those people were my family. Those people were me. I was greatly divided: one part of my reasoning steered me one way, while the other veered the opposite direction. There I sat, split internally in half by a line dividing moral code with professional conduct as the student carried on with his narrative.

To say I am the only tutor to handle “patently offensive, ethically questionable, or morally repugnant papers” (Pemberton “Do what I tell”) would be a beautifully optimistic outlook on life, but it is also not realistic. The moral code for tutoring papers of this caliber has been debated for years, drawing opinions from all ends of the spectrum. To some, it is believed that “students have a right to say anything they want to, and it is our job to help them say it the best they can, even if we disagree with their views” while others argue that there are some subjects that cannot be morally excused and that we as writing tutors have a “responsibility to tell the students they are wrong and steer them in the right direction” (Pemberton “The ethics”). The actual answer may be woven within both of these opinions, nestled in what we all lovingly know and accept as the gray area.

So, what are some things we can do as writing tutors to handle these papers when we see them? After my session, I approached my supervisor to talk about the experience and receive feedback on what I did well and what I could do better when a situation like that

happens again. One of the main suggestions he proposed was to focus less on the content of the paper and more on the structure. In an article by David Rothergy on teacher responses to inflammatory papers, he states, “We will continue to evaluate student papers as to mechanics/usage, style, organization, and thesis, and by way of thesis development we will surely [give] students the appropriate grades” (242). A focus on structure over content will not only avoid verging into personal opinion, but it will also cater to the grading of teachers as well.

Another idea is to focus on the paper’s audience. Audience is an aspect of writing that is promoted a lot, but is also not understood well by many writers who come into the writing center. Identifying audience and purpose is central to writing because it gives the writer a specific focus and urges them to take time to evaluate what would appeal to the group of people they are trying to cater to (Laflen). Lack of understanding of whom the paper is directed to can lead to polarization. If a student writes a polarizing paper, it will succeed in doing two things: making the people who already agree more passionate in their views and causing people who disagree to become more upset by the closed-mindedness of the author. Asking the student to identify whom they are trying to persuade, and then working with the student to appeal to that audience, is a great way to urge the writer to consider who will be reading their work and how it will affect them.

One last thing to remember in situations of polarizing and often prejudiced papers is that much of the time, these opinions come from lack of information on the true nature of the topic. Research, especially the kind found in scholarly journals and non-biased mediums, is the key to knowledge and understanding. Many people hear what those around them say, and they tend to look for information that agrees with their previous ideas. Encouraging students to

search for information using unbiased academic resources, such as non-fiction books and online databases, will succeed in helping the student add credibility to the argument and enlighten them to the possibility that the opinions they had previously acquired from biased sources may not be as cut-and-dried as they had once believed them to be.

For me, the session I had with this student was very eye-opening. The morals I held so dear to my heart had snapped under the sudden pressure of tutoring a paper that I didn't believe in, and all I could do was try my best to walk the gray area that mixed both professionalism and my own moral code. What I learned most from this experience was that life composed of more than just lines. There is more to the story than just "this" or "that," more than just "black" or "white." Just as we wish others could love and accept everyone around them, we must do the same thing and accept that there are people and things we won't understand as well. We live in a world that bends lines. Why should our tutoring sessions be any different?

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