

12-7-2017

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Recommended Citation

Pomeroy, Nichelle, "Let's Talk: Training Anxiety Out of New Tutors" (2017). *Tutor's Column*. Paper 4.
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ENGL 4910

7 December 2017

Let's Talk: Training Anxiety Out of New Tutors

Keywords: tutoring, peer tutors, anxiety, imposter phenomenon (syndrome), new tutors, training, collaboration, writing center

Abstract: This paper focuses on the author's experience becoming a new tutor at Utah State University's Writing Center. The author gives suggestions on what can be done to ease anxiety in new tutors during their first few sessions. Additional training is suggested with collaborative efforts between new and experienced tutors along with familiarization with logistical aspects.

Don't quote me on that, I think as I impart my first shred of writing wisdom, I'm not even sure how to articulate, to the poor unsuspecting student who has had the misfortune of coming into my care. In my first session this is suddenly all too real. All my feigned confidence evaporated the moment I'd stepped into the room and in this moment, and my hope of seeming like I know what I'm doing has fizzled away as well. This very real first session with a very real student and very real grades and very real issues, all of whom are looking at me, expecting me to solve the problem I haven't even identified yet.

In psychology there is a phenomenon that has been identified in recent years called the Imposter Phenomenon. Imposter phenomenon is where highly successful people find themselves thinking they are frauds, or they don't deserve their achievements. How does this relate to being a new tutor sitting in the first session? This was the moment I began to question what I was doing there. Why was I the one chosen to tutor this particular student? I knew there were other, more experienced tutors sitting in empty cubicles, yet somehow, I was the one sitting with the student? What if I told the student something wrong and they failed because of me? Who gave me the authority to sit here and tell this student what need to fix in their paper and how to fix it? This rollercoaster of thought led to thinking about how I could have been more prepared for my first tutoring session.

Shannon Carter from Texas Woman's University writes in her paper, *Writing Center Internships: The Case for Collaboration and Integration?* about the observations she made of the tutors working at the Writing Center there: "But here's what happened to our peer tutors, again and again: though they were enthusiastic, and though they were more than willing to apply the theory they got out of the short readings... they were often at a loss for what to do" (Carter). Regardless of the theory training they received, there was an application aspect missing. Utah

State University's Writing Center has many similar training techniques for tutors, both as they enter the Writing Center for the first time as a tutor and as they return as experienced tutors. All tutors are armed with their purpose, guidelines, and resources in the handbook and online.

Before the semester begins, incoming tutors are assigned the *Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* and the *Handbook of Policies and Procedures* as required readings. These are great resources continually available to them during their time as a tutor. As a supplement to those readings there are modules provided online including videos made specifically for new tutors. Topics include an introduction to the writing center, professionalism and technology, and tutoring strategies. There is also an example tutoring session for them to watch. All of these resources provide direction, advice, and procedures to follow that are expected from all tutors. All tutors are required to attend a training meeting the first week of the semester. This meeting is the chance to go over announcements, give out reminders, do a training on a certain aspect of tutoring, as well as the chance for new tutors to do a short mock session with an experienced tutor. This roleplay was crucial to my feeling like I knew at least how to start a session. It didn't take away all the anxiety I felt, but it allowed for my insecurities about my position to be lowered.

During the first semester the new tutors must take a one credit practicum where they have the opportunity to discuss the different issues and challenges of tutoring at the Writing Center. They get and give advice on how to handle those situations, under the supervision of the Writing Center Director. Each week an article was assigned, and tutors were required to post on a discussion board their thoughts and opinions. Then during class, discussions revolved around issues that may have come up during the week in our sessions, or things tutors noticed during the readings for that week. Grammar spotlights are presented in order to remind new tutors of

grammar rules and principles that we know, but might be a little rusty on. This class is designed to help new tutors learn theories and skills related to tutoring as well as get the support needed throughout their first semester.

The last thing tutors, of all experience levels, must do is observations. New tutors must observe experienced tutors four times in the first month of the semester and experienced tutors once. These observations provide an opportunity for the new tutors to watch experienced tutors and pick up new tactics for handling tutoring sessions. There are a few things that I have found most useful about the observations. First, you get the chance to watch other tutors and see how they tutor. As a new tutor, watching experienced tutors work allowed me to have a jumping off point from which I could develop my own personal style, and learn new techniques and skills that I might not have picked up on my own.

But even after all that, even if you're lucky enough to observe a session before your first, feelings of inadequacy and anxiety can plague those first few sessions. There is a lot that is already being done to help new tutors feel comfortable with their new role and ease the anxiety that comes with the territory, but is there more that can be done? There are two categories of improvements that could help lower new tutor anxiety, logistical and collaborative.

The first has more to do with logistics than tutoring. Doing a separate training for just the new tutors to go over logistical items such as the scheduling software would be extremely beneficial. Some of the biggest stresses I had going into my first session were concerns about the software. I had never seen the system before. I was so nervous I wouldn't be in the system, or that I would click the wrong button and crash the system. After reading the handbook the software seemed temperamental and stressful. In a previous job, I was required to work with a lot of technology that tended to be temperamental. The idea for a pre-semester training on software

comes from this experience. At this job there is a training every semester the week before the semester starts that is required for all new employees. Something similar to this where new tutors are walked through a typical session, technology and all, would have been extremely beneficial for me coming in. It would have relieved a lot of worry and anxiety about the logistics of being a tutor to be able to see the writing center (which I hadn't been to in five years) and understand how the scheduling software worked.

The second category of suggestions is collaborative. In 2014, Bonnie Devet wrote an article for the *Writing Center Newsletter* entitled, "Untapped Resource: Former Tutors Training Current Writing Center Tutors." In this article Devet talks about the benefits of veteran tutors coming back to speak with current tutors. She says, "The power of peer-to-peer is strong, especially because of the veterans' vivid stories and anecdotes" (Devet). It's this peer-to-peer collaboration that will be crucial to helping new tutors feel comfortable in filling their new role as a peer tutor. Veteran and experienced tutors have experiences and expertise they can pass on to new tutors. The first suggestion in this category is to allow for a panel. This panel would answer any questions new tutors have about going into tutoring, or their first session. Time for a panel could be allotted during the credit course or during a new tutor training like the one mentioned above.

Continuing with the pre-semester training, it would be a good idea to invite experienced tutors to come and help out with this training. Ideally, while walking through a typical session new tutors would have the opportunity to roleplay a session with an experienced tutor acting as a tutee. This provides new tutors a hands-on experience with tutoring before they go into their session. I mentioned before that something similar to this took place at the first training session on the semester. There would be two differences. First, the experienced tutors would know their

role beforehand and come prepared to act in the role of tutee; and second, there would be time for feedback. Part of the privilege of working with an experienced tutor is that they give new tutors advice on things that may work or not work during a real session. It creates a safe environment for the new tutor to try their hand without the fear of giving bad guidance. Leaving time for the experienced tutor to give some constructive criticism and praise for the new tutor's skills could bring many benefits to both parties.

The last and final suggestion follows right in line with the previous. During the observations tutors are required to do at the beginning of the semester, leave time for discussion afterwards. I had the opportunity to sit with the experienced tutor for a few minutes after the session was over and ask questions I had about why they did certain things or didn't do others. While this is certainly not the norm, it was an opportunity for them to pass on any advice that they had found beneficial and for me to ask questions about being a tutor. Since I was lucky enough to be able to do this observation before I went into my first session, much of what I did during my first session stemmed from what I learned after that first observation and discussion.

Much of the anxiety that new tutors feel comes from the lack of experience in this kind of situation. The more exposure that new tutors have to mock situations and problem solving through peers who have gone through the same transitional period, in a safe welcoming and expected environment, will lead to a significant decrease in stress and anxiety related to the first few sessions as a new tutor.

"Thanks for coming in!" I smile. I'm both relieved and exhilarated now that my first session is over. I'm smiling, but I still don't feel confident. "You're welcome to come back." *Please get a second opinion, I plead as I lead them to the exit survey. You probably shouldn't be listening to me.*

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