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## Three Powerful Tools for Teaching and Tutoring

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Chris Davis

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### **Three Powerful Tools for Teaching and Tutoring**

When I first heard about how involved the 2017 Fall semester Graduate Instructors were going to be in the Writing Center, I was a little confused, and even more annoyed. “Wait, we have to tutor once *a week*? And we have to go to trainings and write a paper worth *200 points*? Don’t they know how busy we’re going to be? What does peer tutoring even have to do with being student teachers?” Then I got to my first tutoring session. Charlie came in wanting some feedback on his “Writing and Reading History” essay draft. Nothing in particular, just wanted to “look over it and see how it went.” On the one hand, this instilled faith in my first-week what-am-I-doing-posing-as-a-teacher panic; there were writing problems everywhere. On the other hand, seeing those problems was about all I had going for me. I stuttered through it, not knowing how to explain the problems or get Charlie to see the problems or to even put them into a conversational context where I wasn’t just telling him what to do (or more accurately, what *I’d* do) to fix things. This is the moment that I started to realize the importance of our Writing Center experience, finding answers to those original questions I asked myself in disbelief. This semester, my teaching and tutoring has improved immensely by practicing three of the Writing Center’s methods: asking questions, using the inverted triangle of focus, and having students read their own work aloud.

Asking leading questions, rather than telling students what the problems are in their writing, allows them to discover and learn for themselves. Teaching and tutoring are both

deceptively difficult and complex. The reason for this is that learning takes place individually, and each individual has their own way(s) of learning, so a single method of teaching may work for one student, but not another. So being a teacher almost requires you to complete inception in that you have to use your abilities to lead others to learn something for themselves. This is illustrated clearest in the Writing Center's method of asking the students questions about problems in their writing, rather than the tutor telling them there's a problem. For example, when a student has asked me, "Is this paragraph confusing?" I have responded, "The fact that you asked me that, makes me think you probably think it's confusing, yourself. Why might you think it's confusing?" By referring the question back to the student, *they* are required to think through what the problem is. This method allows students not only to come to their own conclusions about what's not working, but also to think through the process of *why* it's not working. In other words, they're learning what's wrong with a piece of writing, one error at a time. Because they're finding these errors *on their own*, students will continue to see those errors in writing long after that first discovery. Since learning this tactic, myself, I've applied it in nearly every one-on-one conference I've had with my students, and been able to watch, firsthand, each one discover specific problems on their own, rather than me having to point them out.

The Writing Center's inverted triangle of focus is an exceptionally useful way to think about writing, both from a teacher's perspective as well as a student's. Far too often, students believe, incorrectly, that revising a piece of writing means fixing comma splices, or correcting punctuation errors. I've had multiple students come to see me during office hours or when I'm tutoring to ask me how to improve their papers. About ninety percent of the time, the first question I get asked is grammar-related ("I just don't know if I'm using commas right."). While I appreciate their attempts to improve their grammar, they often haven't even considered whether

they've answered the prompt effectively, or looked into the structure or organization of their paper. While the concepts of grammar and mechanics are important, they're not the first thing students should focus on when working on improving their writing. The Writing Center understands this, and has offered tutors the inverted triangle of focus for tutors and tutees to consult during their sessions. Keeping the focus on improving the "Content, Organization, and Requirements" *before* looking into the "Proofreading, Punctuation, and Grammar" allows students to think through the most important parts of the writing process, in the correct order. This also allows students to avoid the all-too-real trap of the reverse that they too-often fall into straight out of high school; i.e. focusing more on grammatical and mechanical errors than on content or making sure they've fulfilled the assignment's requirements. I've also brought this tactic effectively into one-on-one conferences with my students, to great benefit – students are often slightly surprised, but overall happier with the resulting feedback and suggestions.

The Writing Center's tactic of having students read their own work aloud lets students hear problems in their writing. This allows students to see, firsthand, the benefit(s) of reading their writing aloud – an extremely useful practice that's far too often overlooked. Reading a paper aloud gives the writer a new perspective on the syntax and phrasings – they are able to *hear* problems, rather than having to read them, which puts just enough distance between writer and writing to let errors and awkwardness shine through. I've seen the difference of stumbling over a mechanically erroneous sentence with awkward syntax myself, compared to listening to the writer stumble over it themselves, and the difference is staggering. Very nearly every time, the student will stop *themselves* (before I've even said anything), having realized there's a problem with the sentence. Employing this method, I've literally watched the majority of my students and tutees mark up every page of their own paper without having said a word, myself.

As a teacher, not only does this make my job easier, but I am able to watch that discovery and comprehension (“Oh, this actually *is* useful”) dawn on their faces. This understanding of why reading aloud is a useful practice also lets students see how it can be useful, as a tool, on their own – so they leave the tutoring session or conference with a new idea for improving their writing that they can then practice at home, rather than only with a tutor or instructor present.

All three of these methods benefit both my tutoring and teaching, in general. As stated earlier, teaching is complex by nature – not everyone learns the same way, and more importantly; learning is *individual*. That basic principle demonstrates the need for more than one tactic when teaching, and the Writing Center has given me three solid methods to practice, right off the bat. With the inverted triangle figure, they’ve helped me see where my feedback should be focused, not only in tutoring sessions and student conferences, but also in class lessons as well. Having students read aloud lets them see problems in their writing on their own, and gives them a tool that can be used any place, any time. Asking questions allows for self-discovery and learning, which aids in retention of the principles we’re aiming to teach. These tactics not only prepare students and tutees for successful writing both in and out of college, but improve the teaching of the teachers and tutors who employ them.