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Age Perception and the Peer-Tutor Relationship

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Age Perception and the Peer-Tutor Relationship

I waited eagerly for my first tutee. I felt nervous, wondering what kind of help I would be able to provide. I was curious to see if they'd be able to consider me a peer: I could hide the fact that I'm in a Ph.D. program and already have a master's degree; I couldn't hide that I'm well over the age of the average undergraduate student. A man walked in, he appeared to be in his early twenties, I smiled and introduced myself.

During my training for new peer-tutors at the Utah State University (USU) Writing Center, it is stressed that my fellow Graduate Instructors and I shed our identity of "teacher" as we walk into the Writing Center. We are *peer*-tutors. Our connection to our tutees isn't mainly about writing, it's about being a student as well. Ishikawa (2012) describes some of the personal benefits of peer tutoring, "Peer advisors are potentially friendlier, more sensitive to the cultural background of learners, and better able to create a supportive and collaborative learning atmosphere than teachers taking an advisor's role" (p. 94). As peer-tutors we can empathize with students, because we understand that experience. However, several tutors literally have children similar in age to our potential tutees. How can we shed our creped skin, too? One GI shares their story:

I'm 51 years old, which is a little old for peer tutoring young undergraduate due to the noticeable difference in age. It seems to me that young undergraduate students look at me and do not see a peer, even when I explain that I am a student, too. I think they see an authority figure, either their mother or their instructor. Some students seem to shut down, and not be as open as I would hope they would be in a peer tutoring session. I worry that they do not try to explore their writing like they would with a peer closer in age.

This experience highlights the age gap that is present here at USU where the average age of undergraduates is 22.4, and the average age of graduate students is 32.3 (Utah State University, n.d.). I am nearly 41--nearly twenty years older than the average undergraduate, and almost 9 years older than the average graduate student. Those are noticeable differences.

Non-traditional students, often defined as post-secondary students over age 25, are an important part of the USU community and are peer-tutors at the USU Writing Center. One such student describes their experience, "As a non-traditional student working in the writing center, I feel that students categorize me with their professors and find it difficult to relate and see me as a peer." This insight highlights the purpose of being viewed as a peer, rather than an instructor: instructors are seen as experts who should be able to answer any questions, peers are seen as an extra set of eyes who should help the student find their own answers. Another student shares their experience of being a non-traditional peer-tutor:

My experience in the Writing Center has been a mixture of different experiences. Being an older student seems to make the visitors feel like you know what you're doing. That can lead them to possibly disappointment later on if their expectations aren't met. It all depends on how well you make them feel comfortable when they arrive. Most of the time when they first arrive, there isn't much difference from other tutors I've observed, but as time progresses it's clear that they are expecting a lot from me since I am older than the others they see.

This perception of expertise due to visible maturity is felt by other tutors as well, who have developed strategies to turn this assumption into a benefit for the student:

It is a constant battle to disrupt the perception of expert/novice relationship between tutor and student because I am visually older than most the students I tutor. However, I can use that relationship to validate the student's own textual agency. My strategy is to phrase almost every interaction as a question, which illustrates I, the person they perceive as expert, value their words and the choices they make as authors. I also use questions to help them come to decisions about what is weak in their writing and how it can be strengthened. When they leave the session, I want them to feel empowered by their own ability to make effective decisions about their writing using the resources they discovered by coming to the writing center.

The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors (Ryan and Zimmerelli, 2016) describes the variety of hats tutors must wear in a tutoring session. Sometimes tutors are the Coach, or the Counselor, or the Writing Expert—all positions of authority. However, as this tutor pointed out, these types of roles offer the opportunity to empower students. Regardless if a student perceives an older tutor as a teacher rather than a peer, a tutor can actively engage with the student and treat *them* as the authority on *their* writing.

During my research, it became obvious that further inquiry into how the perception of age difference can affect the peer-tutor relationship is necessary. No specific scholarship regarding this question exists. The USU Writing Center's dedication to research provides the platform in which to investigate this question. I suggest developing a study that utilizes the online and face to face tutoring capabilities and the current surveying system already in place at the Writing Center. For example, if a non-traditional peer-tutor conducts tutoring sessions both in person and online, patterns in student responses from their survey assessment can be analyzed to determine if significant differences exist between the two types of sessions. In the face-to-face

session, the student has the potential to perceive a difference in age; however, in the online session, because sessions can be held solely through chat, this potential is eliminated.

As an “older” peer-tutor concerned with providing the best possible service to students, I have wondered if my age affects my sessions. Certainly, it is obvious to me that, generally, the students I tutor are much younger than I am. Through discussions in my sessions, I’ve frequently realized that the student I’m tutoring has parents similar in age to me. However, I cannot assume that the student in front of me sees me as anything other than their tutor. I am neither their parent nor their teacher. I will greet them warmly, listen to their needs, and offer feedback as a fellow student of writing. I am their peer because I say I am.

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