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Engaging in the Drafting Process: The Key to a Student's Writing Success

I haven't been a writing instructor for very long—not even a full semester, so maybe I'm not the most qualified to start making generalizations. But I'm sure I'm not the only teacher who thinks that there is nothing more frustrating than seeing students submit papers with the same mistakes, over and over again. All those hours I spent pouring over their papers—providing feedback that not only brought attention to mistakes they may have overlooked, but also explained how they could fix the mistake and why it was incorrect—only for them to go and continue repeating those same mistakes! Do they not realize how many hours of sleep I've lost for them? How many cramps my hand has suffered? How I may end up with carpal tunnel or tendonitis because of the amount of time I spend writing on their essays? They probably do not realize all of the work and stress I put into grading, and even if they did, I'm sure it wouldn't really make a difference.

It's not that my students are awful people. On the contrary, the majority of them are really friendly and pleasant, and occasionally even funny. But I remember what it was like to be a college freshman. I remember the constant demands pulling me in all different directions, and the desire to just be selfish. In fact, as a grad student, I still feel that desire. So I get my students, I really do. But it doesn't make the matter any less frustrating. Especially since I have a responsibility as their instructor to help them overcome their selfishness to see the bigger picture.

However, with forty-six students, such a task seems almost herculean. I see my students three of the 168 hours in a week, and it's rarely ever on an individual basis. And my students aren't a homogenous blob of robots with the same needs or at the same level. No, my classroom is conglomerate: together as a whole for those three hours, but each student remains his or her own entity. Each student is at his or her own level, with his or her own needs. And in order for me to help them become better writers, thus fulfilling my responsibility as their instructor, I need to know and address those specific needs. But how do I go about accomplishing that?

The obvious answer is through their writing. Through my students' assignments I am able to assess what level they are at with their writing, and what their specific needs are to improve. This brings us back to my long nights full of stress and hand cramps as I attempt to provide the most helpful feedback possible—feedback which essentially has transformed into mini, customized lessons for each of my students. But like I mentioned earlier, even with this feedback, this still doesn't solve the problem. The few students who do revise their papers—the precious rare gems that they are—only fix what I explicitly point out, ignoring my explanations, and commit the same mistake in the next assignment. And so I continue to stay up late, stressing over how to help my students, but maybe not writing as much anymore, and try to remind myself that I actually love teaching.

Here is where my experience as a writing center tutor comes in. Prior to coming to Utah State, I worked as an online writing tutor for my undergraduate university. The majority of the students I worked with were often international or non-traditional students, many of which struggled with basic writing principles. Because of this struggle, my tutoring sessions often ended up being mini lessons where I taught them one or two principles, as opposed to just

looking for ways to help them improve their papers. While my tutoring experience explains my habit of customized and specific feedback, it also created my love for teaching.

The nature of my undergrad's online writing center allowed tutors to develop relationships with their tutees. "Regulars" became the norm for our center, and students often requested tutors with whom they worked with previously. With my regulars, I got to know my tutees as individuals. And once I knew them as individuals, tutoring sessions became less about the paper, and more about the student. As a tutor, I witnessed many students grow in their writing abilities. With my regulars, I conducted the tutoring sessions based on the previous ones. I could build on earlier principles and give them "homework" or exercises to practice on their own. And because I knew what I had taught them, I could also follow up. And when my tutees would finally understand a concept—when their papers became more organized or had less comma splices—we would both rejoice in their success. They did it—they actually learned! And it was through witnessing that joy that I fell in love with teaching.

As an instructor in charge of an entire class, I can do many of the things which I did as a tutor. I can assign students homework and exercises, and I can follow up on those assignments. I even work with the same students throughout the semester, so I get to know them as individuals. And I have been doing all of those things. So why haven't I been able to see the same success I saw as a tutor? Why are my students still committing the same mistakes in their paper?

The answer I have found lies in the greatest difference between tutoring and teaching. While it appears that the difference is tutoring focuses on the individual student and teaching focuses on a collective class, my experience with grading demonstrates that is not necessarily the case. No, the difference is that writing tutors are involved during a student's writing process. Writing centers are generally individualized experiences, but it's when tutors get to work with

the same students repeatedly throughout the semester that success really occurs. And the reason success occurs is because tutors are able to be there for the student throughout his or her writing process.

Returning to my experience as a tutor, my “regulars” nearly all became regulars after a brainstorming session. After helping them come up with ideas, I would express interest in seeing the end result. My investment in their ideas resulted in their wanting me to help them throughout. After the initial session, the students would come in again with their drafts. The drafts were where I could best identify and assess their writing levels, and then teach them what they specifically needed to know to improve not only their paper, but their skills as well.

It is during the drafting process where having a tutor or instructor is most beneficial to a student. While as an instructor I can identify a student’s struggles by reading their final draft, and thus giving customized feedback, most students will not go through the effort of learning from their feedback because they already received the grade. But if they had someone there during their drafting process, giving them the opportunity to fix their mistakes before evaluation, then maybe they will be more motivated to apply themselves. And that is what’s missing from my experience as a writing instructor.

Due to the nature of teaching an entire class—or in my case, two classes—it’s nearly impossible for me to engage with all of my students during their drafting process. However, seeing the success of my students whom I’ve tutored, I realize the necessity of allowing my students more time to draft and revise. While this semester is nearly over, I now know how I can better help my students in the future. I need to restructure my classes so that I may be engaged in their drafting process. And hopefully by doing so, I can finally start getting to bed at a decent hour.