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Putting Writers at Rest into Motion

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PUTTING WRITERS AT REST INTO MOTION

Keywords: science learning, adjusted practices, workplace readiness, written communication

Abstract

Many students whose studies emphasize science-based fields often struggle to understand why writing skills are important and necessary. For this reason, writing center tutors have the opportunity to adjust tutoring practices in such a way that students are equipped for both educational and professional experiences. Research has shown that the majority of college graduates lack basic written communication skills employers look for, suggesting a disconnect between English classes and other writing situations. As tutors understand the struggles of science-based students, they can adjust tutoring practices such that students are comfortable learning about writing and translate those skills into all aspects of written communication. Tutoring in this manner avoids the pitfall of writing education being tailored too closely to specific situations and becoming inflexible. As students learn to write for various situations, they additionally improve their reasoning abilities, the skills they often find to be the most valuable.

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As I stare at the white and blue computer screen, I struggle to comprehend the math problem which glances back with a hint of mockery. The voice in my head continually taunts me: *give up; this problem is above your level; you're still in elementary school*. While the voice certainly possesses accuracy, I refuse to give in. I patiently struggle to keep my hand raised until my silver-haired teacher comes over to assist me. As he comes over and guides me, I solve the problem. While I am a sixth grader conquering junior high math problems, my classmates work through animated arithmetic in a computer game of sorts. In this moment I begin to realize my natural ability and inclination towards math and the sciences. As this proclivity towards reasoning and problem solving continues to grow within me, I avoid subjects such as English and writing like the plague. I justify that because they bring discomfort into my life, I will survive with a basic understanding of these subjects.

Just as I developed the idea that writing lacked worth because it wasn't my strongest area, many students who focus on math, science, and engineering fail to possess the necessary knowledge and confidence to effectively use the tool of writing. With this understanding in mind, tutors have the great opportunity to enable students studying scientific subjects to view writing in its proper light. These students can use writing to communicate, display an understanding of valuable topics, and link their reasoning to the ideas and voices of others. As students learn to overcome the science-induced writers block, they not only are better prepared

for professional careers, but also close the gap between the classroom and workplace. For a transformation of this nature to occur, writing center tutors need to have specific strategies and techniques in their toolbelt to best help students with scientific backgrounds.

In recent tutoring sessions, I noticed that students in science-based majors commonly expressed a lack of confidence in their writing abilities. Most tutors don't treat these students any differently than those who study English. The tutor may acknowledge that the major sounds cool and interesting but doesn't change the approach to meet the needs and concerns of these students. While an approach of this nature helps with the individual assignment, tutors can and should take a greater initiative to aid the student by improving their outlook on writing such that they are better equipped for the rest of their educational and professional experiences.

Within the professional world, and especially within the sciences, writing serves as a crucial means by which one conveys information and communicates ideas. For this reason, it is critical to help students develop clear and concise statements, a skill which surprisingly few college graduates possess. Litchfield, Frawley, and Nettleton, engineering faculty members at the University of Technology Sydney, observed, "Being able to write clear, concise emails and formal letters in order to avoid misunderstanding, ambiguities and mistakes is seen to be a necessity in almost every professional position – and an attribute that graduates often lack" (Litchfield et al. 522). This startling analysis suggests that while in writing situations such as an English class, a student may learn how to be succinct in writing, yet that skill fails to translate into other forms of written communication.

When a writing center tutor understands the disconnect students experience between English and other forms of writing, they can better engage with the student to meet their long-term needs. Therefore, if a student struggles with clarity and concision, the tutor can not only use

examples within the specific assignment, but also briefly brainstorm how that same idea could be applied in the professional field, such as through a proposal or an email. This approach provides a method for reinforced learning and helps the student remember the particular skill in future situations.

Clarity and concision stand as key components of communicating information. Some students fail to recognize that writing is one of the major means by which knowledge is conveyed within the sciences, as well as demonstrate the reasoning abilities of the author. Students often struggle with summarizing the ideas related to an English paper: however, they can often paraphrase many important ideas related to their major. Therefore, when a tutor needs to help science-based students understand summarization, a helpful activity may be to have the student verbally explain an idea such as Newton's Laws of Motion and then write a brief synopsis of that topic. Discussing this process with the student not only puts them back in their comfort zone as they practice writing, but also helps them see how important writing skills can be used in day-to-day communication.

While written communication is vital, evidence additionally suggests that writing acts as a means to enhance scientific reasoning and logical analysis. This idea advocates the notion that students can best understand the sciences through having to write about them. Carolyn W. Keys, an expert in Science Education at the University of Georgia, has noted that when students are able to focus their problem-solving energies towards the writing process, they are better able to generate the meaning behind patterns as well as make claims for specific knowledge. To this point, she has highlighted, "They learned science from the writing experience without engaging in advanced rhetorical planning" (Keys 688). An understanding that writing helps enhance scientific learning stands as an extremely useful idea for tutors to consider while helping a

student with brainstorming. Discussions centered around topics the student finds interesting will boost their own experience with that subject, especially regarding the sciences.

As tutors learn to adapt their tutoring practices to meet the needs and mindset of students involved in scientific majors, the gap between the classroom and the workplace will begin to decrease. Many experts have articulated that the classroom and the workplace act as competing systems. The classroom often teaches one very specific set of skills which fails to translate to the work environment. Simon Marginson, a distinguished author and professor of Higher Education, has emphasized, “If education is tailored too closely to particular jobs or workplaces it becomes inflexible – the skills are not readily moved to other places” (qtd. in Hansen). Similarly, if writing tutors focus their efforts strictly towards the concepts of an English class, students from science-based majors fail to acquire the concepts of written communication such that they can play a valuable role in the workforce. Thus, tutors have a great responsibility to best serve students by teaching writing skills in such a way that concepts are retained and applied in various aspects of life.

Hard facts and reasoning often attract science-based students, resulting in a lack of confidence and comprehension of the writing process as a whole. As tutors use adjusted practices to meet the needs of these students, they will retain the written communication skills necessary to succeed in school and the workplace, as well as improve their understanding of intricate topics. Just as Newton found that objects at rest stay at rest until acted upon by an outside force, students who are stuck in the mindset of not enjoying or seeing the value in writing will remain in that state until acted upon by the influence of an understanding writing tutor.

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