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Power to the Writer

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Abstract

Some students are intimidated by writing at a university level. Often, self-degrading comments will be made, in which the tutor will reject and attempt to build their confidence. Is there a correct way to empower each student? McCarthy and Weimer suggest giving specific feedback, using starter terms, picking a topic relevant to the author, helping them feel competent, acknowledging the effect a writer can have, and giving the student the option to choose. By using these tactics, the tutor can shape the student's feelings for writing and help them become an independent writers.

“I am not a very good writer.” Students can sometimes be hard on themselves when it comes to writing. Coming to college and taking an English class can be intimidating, especially when it is not their strongest area. Knowing how to empower a student is an important aspect of tutoring. As a tutor, you can empower your student by giving specific feedback, using starter terms, and reinforcing the idea that their writing can make a difference.

Being empowered in education is “how students approach learning — motivated, confident, and ready to tackle the task” (Weimer). Having a student ready to dive in and work on the paper is ideal for a tutor, but this is not always the case. For the students who are not empowered, they may think of the challenging tasks, such as they are not capable of doing the assignment, wish it was something they could just not do, and quit trying if they do not come up with something good right away (Weimer). There have been times when each student has not felt empowered.

As a freshman, I took English 1010. Going to the Writing Center was required, so I went for the rhetorical analysis, a genre experiment, and for my final paper. Whenever a tutor gave me feedback, I felt like I was horrible at writing, or I should be defensive of my work. I had put a lot of work into my paper, and these tutors were telling me what was wrong with it. At the time, I did not realize that they were only helping me get a better grade, and I definitely needed help. On the final paper, the tutor told me I had three thesis statements in my introduction. I felt each of these statements were necessary, but it made sense that three thesis statements were confusing. After receiving this feedback, I thought “I should have known that. I really suck at writing papers.” Feeling this way may have been ridiculous, and I grew out of it, but if I felt this way, there are probably students now who feel the same.

As a tutor, I have seen students feel the same way I did. The student will make comments like “I don’t know what I was trying to say,” “this is why I am not an english major,” and have a look of defeat. This look of defeat can be seen when they sigh, slouch in the chair, or a blank expression on their face as if they have given up. When I make a suggestion, the students who think they are not good at writing will assume I must know more than they do, so they just take the advice. With other students, they will almost negotiate the feedback I give them; they will combine my advice with what they have done or actually talk about how they could use that advice.

Initially, when a self-degrading comment is made, most tutors will often level with the student creating a sense of unity, “That’s not true. Don’t worry, I have been there too.” In a way, I will say their comment about their worth is wrong, but in a nice manner. I ask them to expand on why they feel this way, so we can find the real issue. Further explanation can lead to a session focused on building their confidence and overcoming one of their struggles. Now that I understand the student has low confidence, I adapt to their personality and give feedback accordingly. I have noticed it is important to state their strengths first, then give feedback in a nice subtle way, asking them what they think of it.

McCarthy suggests two successful ways to empower writers with feedback. The first way is to be specific. Saying “that’s a great opening” or “that opening needs work” does not tell the student much. “I wonder how your summary could end with an anecdote that ties together the main points” lets the student know exactly what they can improve on. Notice the beginning of that sentence, “I wonder,” is a starter term. Starter terms offer suggestions without making the student feel like they messed up. For example, “I like” acknowledges what they did well. “I

wonder” invites the student to reflect and engage. “What if” asks the writer to think about the advice they are given. Giving specific feedback and using starter terms allows the writer to receive the advice without feeling defeated (McCarthy).

To be empowered, four concepts must be included in a tutoring session. The style of writing might not be the student’s choice but the topic can be. When the topic is meaningful to the author, it becomes easier to dedicate themselves to it. The second concept is feeling competent. As a tutor, I can make the student feel more competent by acknowledging their strengths. When a student is told they are doing some things right, they are more willing to hear suggestions for things that need to be changed. They will also leave encouraged for their next paper because they believe they are not as bad at writing as they thought. The third concept is to understand any writer can have an effect. Their words can make important impacts in the community. Any writer has the potential to move an audience: Harriet Beecher Stowe in “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” Anne Frank in “The Diary of a Young Girl,” and Stephen Odd in “Voices of USU”. “It’s not just about writing. It is about social justice; it's finding our voice and using it to make a choice in the world” (Yost et al. 3). The final concept to apply is to give the student a choice. While tutors do make suggestions for improvement, having the choice to choose to take the feedback is up to them. After all, the writer should be able to have their voice in their writing. The tutor plays the part of helping them recognize what they can improve on, then they choose the direction they want to take with the advice given. (Weimer).

Tutors have the potential to motivate and build confidence in the writers that come in. Tutoring toward the goal of creating independent writers is more than just improving on general concepts found on the paper. Empowering students can be achieved by providing specific

feedback, using starter terms, picking a topic relevant to the author, helping them feel competent, acknowledging the effect a writer can have, and giving the student the option to choose. Writing at a university level can be intimidating; empowering anxious students can help them become an independent writer for life.

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