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Cold Turkey Belongs on the Dinner Table:

How Tutors Can Warm Up to New Tutoring Sessions

Every Tuesday afternoon at 2:15, I leave the quiet comforts of my office and walk across campus to fulfill my tutoring commitment in the Utah State University Writing Center. Instead of enjoying the view of mountains that frame the campus, the butterflies of anxiety gather in my stomach as I question who I will work with during my sessions, what assignment are they bringing, and how I can help them. Tutors have not met the students before, nor do they have any idea what projects they will be asked to work on. The Writing Center experience is built on the ‘cold turkey’ delivery system. Little is known about the origin of the phrase ‘cold turkey’ except that it is a meal served straight from the refrigerator with little or no preparation. While I may feel unprepared for my tutoring sessions on the surface, upon closer examination, that is not the case. After two months of the same scenario, I decided to use my problem as the focus of my Writing Center research paper. To overcome my anxieties, I found the reasons I am uncomfortable, reminded myself of the skills I learned during past experiences, considered the other traits I have in addition to writing and took advantage of working with experienced tutors in the Writing Center.

I believe in the mission of writing centers. As a non-traditional student unfamiliar with writing styles like MLA and forming arguments, I benefitted from meeting one on one with a trained employee at my former school. After transferring to USU, I wanted to give back and

work with students. I applied for and was accepted into the Writing Fellows program. To prepare for my new job, I took an Elements of Grammar class over the summer. The Elements of Grammar course enabled me to recognize common mistakes in writing, helped me get over my own writing insecurities and reminded me of how far I have come as a writer. As a new Writing Fellow, I took a semester long class to learn how to be a tutor—what was expected of me and how I could help the needs of my students. Each semester I worked with twenty-five to fifty-six students majoring in aviation. The sense of accomplishment I gained from helping non-English majors understand they still need writing skills to communicate in life lead me to the current path I am following—a graduate student who teaches a technical and professional communications class. So, what is the difference between my past experiences and my present job at the writing center? As a Writing Fellow, I collected essays in advance, took time to read, reread, mark and prepare my comments for the thirty- minute conference session. The professor gave me the writing prompt in advance and I worked with the same students throughout the semester, and became familiar with their writing habits. Now, I meet cold turkey with random students with no advance reading or preparation for the conference.

When an addict stops using a substance cold turkey they experience undesirable side effects. Now that I am no longer a Writing Fellow with time to prepare for my tutoring session, I panic causing my mind to go blank. I forget the goal of the USU Writing Center which “is to help students become independent writers for life” (Welcome). I lose the memorized greeting, explanation of the Writing Center, the student’s name and my lack of focus blurs the assignment description. My anxiety worsens as I multitask between listening to the student read their essay out loud and typing notes on the computer.

Before sitting down to enjoy a cold turkey sandwich, I must remember the turkey was cooked in advance. Tutors have their own list of preparations. Star Coulbrooke, the director of the USU Writing Center, personally hands each new tutor a copy of the “Handbook of Policies and Procedures” and *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* and asks that they read them before they begin working. On the days that tutors are scheduled to work, they should arrive early and log into the system to work out glitches that could take time away from the session. They should prepare a greeting and session questions and work on it until it becomes natural. For example, Whitney welcomes the student, asks what brought them in today and if they have been to the Writing Center before. In her lighthearted voice, she finds a way to make a connection and then moves forward with the session explaining that together they will focus on content and organization and work their way down to grammar if there is time. She asks about the assignment description and if the student has anything they want to work on. Whitney’s genuine and positive attitude put students at ease and they felt comfortable sharing their work. Since most students using the writing center come from ENGL 1010 and 2010, tutors can familiarize themselves with the common assignment descriptions so they are not reading them for the first time in front of the student. Feeling as comfortable as Whitney takes practice and a willingness to take a risk and try something new.

Tutors have many options they can bring to the table to gain confidence. In the *Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, Leigh Ryan and Lisa Zimmerelli suggest that tutors wear many hats unrelated to writing. First, tutors are an “ally” (Ryan and Zimmerelli 5). Although I do not feel like a peer in age, I do know what it is like to be a student juggling homework which can make me seem less like their mother. Tutors are also “collaborators” because they have taken

the same classes and read the same material (Ryan and Zimmerelli 6). They can use their familiarity of the content to propose new ways of looking at material and encourage students to think deeper. Often the personal essays explore issues from the student's life or they may walk into the session with other thoughts on their mind—problems with roommates, relationship break ups or unhappy with a professor about a grade. As a “counselor,” tutors can listen and offer “support, sympathy and suggestions as appropriate” (Ryan and Zimmerelli 7). In return, they gain the trust of the student. Students want to trust in the process and improve their writing—the original reason that brought them to the writing center—but writing may not have been the only help they needed that day. Tutors who consider the other roles they play will be more effective when working with students.

Just as a Thanksgiving meal is shared with family and friends, tutors can share their concerns with those in their tutoring community. Each new tutor is asked to observe four experienced tutors at the beginning of the year. During an observation session, I noticed that Joseph showed genuine interest about the content in a student's paper which made her feel more comfortable. He validated her when she replied, “That's a tough question.” He did not take over but instead allowed a few minutes of silence so the student could think. Madi referred to the student's original concerns throughout their time together. Hannah acknowledges that students come from all different backgrounds by embracing diversity. She brings her Spanish language skills into the tutoring session while working with ESL students. Margot Iris Soven emphasizes why peer tutoring works in her book, *What the Writing Tutor Needs to Know*. She references a 1972 study conducted at the University of Pittsburgh by J. R. Lagana who “showed that students who received peer responses improved more rapidly in organization, critical thinking, and sentence revision, than students in classes in which their

writing was read only by their instructors” (Soven 13). The experienced tutors used techniques that brought their students closer into the session and, by the end, both tutor and student were engaged working on the piece.

After the observation, tutor trainees have opportunities to ask questions. Tutors can take advantage of down time and role playing different session scenarios to prepare for the unknown. Some common suggestions are what to do when a student does not bring a rough draft, how to draw students out and get them talking, and how to focus on content when the grammar mistakes get in the way. The more scenarios a trainee can rehearse, the more relaxed they will feel during a session.

While looking back, I determined that tutors are not new cooks in the kitchen. Reflecting on what went well during a session and what they can work on in the next session continues the learning process. Recording these thoughts in a tutoring journal is like creating a recipe for success. Tutors who tweak their recipe each week will eventually end up with a delicious finished product. They can pull ingredients from their own classes such as 1010, 2010, literature, history or any others that required writing a paper and realize they already have years of preparation. Tutors need to remember that the ‘cold turkey’ was originally cooked with love and care, and this should help eliminate their uncomfortable feelings. By becoming more relaxed in the tutoring room, practicing and retesting recipes, tutors will find tried and true success in the tutoring session.

Works Cited

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