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Praiseworthy *and* Developable—How Psychology Takes Shape in Tutoring

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ENGL 4910

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Abstract

In a standard tutoring session, positive reinforcement in commonly used to bolster a student's confidence, as well as point out good aspects of the writing. This paper explores the use of Behavioral Skills Training (BST) in tutoring, an Applied Behavioral Analysis procedure in which instruction, modeling, rehearsal, and feedback are used to teach proficiency in a skill. This paper examines the benefits of using BST in difficult sessions where standard protocol would be of little value to the student's writing ability. Behavioral skills training is an intuitive and simple procedure, but proves to be an effective way to structure a session. BST is an easy and effective way to deliberately use positive reinforcement in a session.

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"Even when we write, we usually speak first, either overtly or covertly," (Skinner, 1).

That is, when I sit down to write, I've likely thought about my ideas. Even if I don't write

anything down, I've come up with the gist of my paper and made a mental map of where I want

to go. Most tutors have had a session where the student can express their ideas and hopes for

their paper verbally without problem, but seem unable to switch their mental tracks to writing

those same concepts.

The goal of a writing center is not to edit, generally speaking. It's to help students put

their ideas on paper in a clear way. Peer tutors do their best to help students learn to write well,

but writing well takes so many forms—how can you teach that? As a psychology minor with an

interest in behavior, I've always wondered: what role does psychology take in our everyday

lives? Every tutor knows of the uses of positive reinforcement in a session. Telling someone

what they've done well in an essay is a key part of building a student's confidence and skills

repertoire. When we begin tutoring, we're given an outline for what to say and do; we let the

student guide the session. To teach independent writers, this is by no means a bad approach.

But when we're faced with a particularly difficult session—maybe a student who doesn't have

any interest in learning, or whose paper needs more than twenty minutes can offer, a student-led

session can fall short. What I'm interested in exploring in this paper is the application of

Behavioral Skills Training, or BST, in tutoring.

BST uses instruction, modeling, rehearsal, and feedback to teach a skill. This is often how elementary-aged children make their first foray into writing essays. Their teacher instructs them on the details of a five-paragraph essay, models it (in a simplified manner), and then the students can practice and receive feedback. These steps can be easily modified to address an individual student's concerns, and can be harnessed to use the least obtrusive methods to meet the session's goals. In both psychology and tutoring, any interventions should be as non-intrusive as possible, which, coincidentally, means helping the student retain authorship. Not only is BST a positive intervention, it's an effective method to teach, as a recent study that used behavioral skills training to improve college students' interview skills demonstrates (Stocco et al., 495). I tutored an international student and found a few instances of subject-verb disagreement. I helped walk her through the correction of just one, and as we continued reading, she stopped and tentatively pointed out another disagreement. She practiced correcting it, building confidence for both that issue and for leading the session. The goal in using BST in tutoring is to consciously use skills we already have—asking questions, giving praise and feedback, and showing students resources.

Keeping in mind that organization is what tutors look at first, how could I use BST? Most people can pick out a good paragraph when they hear it, but how do you define that? It's not a binary, sure, but it's not impossible. Does the student know their purpose in writing the assignment? One use of BST would be prompting for an explanation of the paper and its goal, then listening. What is right in their paper? Giving positive feedback is key, but it's also important to give constructive advice about what could be better, whether that's audience or the logical progression of the paper or the paragraph. It's not that BST is so foreign or unusual to

see in a tutoring session, but having a plan—even if it's just four steps—can make the difference between a good session and a great session.

While tutoring recently, I helped a student with a report-style essay on the politics of college campuses. It was a very charged piece, with potentially inflammatory statements and a very biased voice. I thought it was important to not only praise the student for excellent diction, but to tactfully point out that his writing wasn't a report, it was an op-ed. Given that sessions are only about twenty minutes, it is often difficult to make a concrete plan about how each minute will be spent. Thinking consciously about BST helped me address his concerns (that the last paragraphs weren't focused) and address his paper's needs (namely, not being written in the correct genre). Looking at his last page, I asked him about the goal of his paper, then asked a few follow-up questions before he mentioned that he should probably work on the tone. I praised that idea, and we rinsed and repeated the process until the session was over. Even though the session was emotionally draining (a lot of his paragraphs were hateful), I still felt it was productive for him and me. Making sure I was sticking to BST and doing the same four things, over and over, kept me from becoming overwhelmed, and it proved a lot more constructive than just nitpicking his arguments and not focusing on the paper's good aspects.

This reinforcing approach is so wonderful because not only is it grounded in science, but it easily meshes with the mentality that everyone's writing is both praiseworthy and developable. We're hardwired to pursue reinforcement, and if a behavior—like a student cautiously suggesting how to better his/her paper—leads to reinforcement, then that student will continue to engage in that behavior (Schultz, 853). Behavioral skills training takes the good and the bad in stride, and builds on what the student's paper showcases. Maybe their paper is phenomenally well laid out, but comma splices have made one too many appearances. It's easy to instruct them

on how to identify a comma splice, show the student a grammar resource or how to change their

sentence structure, and give them feedback while they practice. BST is an intuitive practice with

applications at every part of the writing process, and can help tutors make the most of each

session.

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