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## “Whatever Happened With That Student?”: How to Measure Our Success as a Tutor and Teacher

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Writing Center Analysis Paper

9 November 2017

“Whatever Happened With That Student?”:

### How to Measure Our Success as a Tutor and Teacher

Among the many challenges tutors face, maybe the one that can cause the most existential despair is trying to figure out how to judge our own success. As tutors we *want* to be successful. We want to help others and we want *them* to have success and be positively affected by our session, beyond just the 25 or so minutes we are with them. Trying to measure that success, however, is a hazardous undertaking. How do we define success? How do we then measure it based on that definition? Can it be measured at all? Based on my experiences both observing tutoring sessions and also being a tutor, I have come to the conclusion that ultimately how we measure our success cannot be based on what happens after our students leave our session. This same principle applies to measuring our success as teachers as well. Rather than judging our success based upon others' decisions, attitudes, and abilities, we must assess our success based on what we have done and the experiences we have had.

I came to realize the importance of not relying on the student to define my success, and rather assessing based off of the feelings I had when I tutored Natalie. Natalie came into the writing center like any other student. She seemed relatively cheerful and willing to work on her paper. “I’m here to revise,” she explained. “My teacher, Jessica Griffiths, gives us that opportunity. I already got a grade but it was pretty low.” I mentioned that I knew Jessica (“Isn’t she great??”) and asked her if she would like to read her paper out loud. “Sure,” she quipped.

As she started to read her paper, it was clear that this tutoring session was *not* going to be like any other student’s. Mid-reading, she paused. I thought maybe she was pondering what she had written, but I realized she was becoming emotional. The subject matter of her paper

was very clearly personal to her, and though her paper was supposed to be a straight forward reflection of her writing and reading history, that history was apparently recent enough to still strike a chord in her heart. I could tell she had unresolved emotions. I understood those. Tears started to fall as she struggled to continue reading about her past trials. "Sorry," she mumbled, "it's just been a hard day."

Though I wondered briefly how I could appropriately address both her emotion and her need for improvement, the issue quickly resolved itself after she finished her reading. She held no expectations of comfort from me. "So," she sniffled, "my teacher said I need to better connect my story to my reading and writing history." We looked over the hand written notes. It was true. While clearly personal, her story was both vague as to how it connected to the actual prompt, and even more so, fuzzy as to what had actually happened and why it had impacted her so strongly. I doubt Jessica could have guessed upon grading Natalie's paper, based on it's ambiguous content, that Natalie would have had anywhere near such a reaction in its being read out loud.

I looked into Natalie's eyes. "I know how it is. It's really hard to write about something that affected you so strongly, especially when you still haven't fully figured it out yourself." She nodded. "What exactly happened here? It's unclear why your junior year in high school was so horrible." As we conversed, we were able to appropriately discuss her hardship while effectively figuring out how to tie it into the bigger picture that the prompt required.

As she left, I reflected on what felt like a particularly successful tutoring session. I didn't give myself a particularly large amount of credit. My evaluation was instead based off a feeling. We had come to a place of mutual understanding, trust, and partnership in a just under a half hour. I knew based off of questions I asked that she left the session feeling more empowered to change her paper, and I left feeling I had communed on a deeper level with a soul I had not known the hour before.

A few weeks later, I remembered my session with Natalie when I had the chance to catch up with Jessica. "I tutored your student, Natalie," I mentioned. "We had a really good session. How was her paper? Did she turn it in?" "No," Jessica shook her head. "She never did." I didn't know what to make of it. I didn't know if I was disappointed or simply confused. Had the tutoring session really been as good as I thought it was? Maybe Natalie wasn't as clear on what we talked about as I thought. Or maybe, I mused, thinking back on my own sensitive emotional experiences, while more solid on what she needed to do, she was still psychologically overwhelmed by the immense prospect of trying to tie her complex story together in a neat product to give to a teacher. There were so many questions left unanswered, possibilities I could never know the truth of.

As I've reflected on my experience with Natalie and then my lack of closure on how her paper actually turned out, I've come to see it as a less obvious but still prevalent pattern in *all* writing center experiences. Every student comes to us looking to improve their paper--or at least knowing that's the supposed outcome promised by the writing center--whether they believe we can actually help or not. Some come, treasuring their paper like a precious child they want to shield from the world, skeptical that anyone can understand it like they can. Others come lost, confused, wondering if they can even be helped. I have been fortunate enough to have finished every tutoring session I've had so far--and have observed--feeling (and seeing through their positive reactions) that the student has felt understood, has felt helped, and knows now where to go next. But then they leave. Will they remember all the things we talked about? Will the notes we took be clear when they go back to write their paper? Will they start to write and realize there's still a gap in their understanding of what to do and wish we had talked about something else? These same feelings come in slightly different ways as a graduate instructor. Do the students like class? Are they actually learning? Will they be changed at all, in any way, shape, or form by what we are learning? Or am I just teaching into a void?

While I feel all of these questions are understandable and common, they ultimately point in the wrong directions: they reflect things we cannot control. In some respects, being both a writing tutor and a teacher can be a bit of a thankless job. While the students' gratitude or increased understanding in the moment feels genuine and satisfying, self-doubt can plague our minds as we wonder what the outcome of their experience with us ultimately was. For the most part, we'll never know. It is more rare to have experiences like the one I had with Natalie. Even then, as the results were not what I had intended, a million questions about my legitimacy and effectiveness as a tutor presented themselves.

How can two strangers come together, reach an understanding about each others' truths, and then separate, never knowing the product that was created of their momentary impact? Does what happens in students effort reflect on our own abilities? How do we define and measure success as a tutor? As a teacher? I believe that in both situations, our success is not defined by our students' "success," at least as recognized through their grade or their efforts. What students do is up to them. They have their agency, their ability to make choices. A million factors could be affecting their final grades that we don't know about, including family and relationship issues, personal struggles, and just the general trial that is adjusting to college and to adulthood.

Rather than basing our success on our students or those we tutor, I believe we can only base it on our efforts--the love and support we give to our students and those we tutor, and the effort we put into self improvement in order to empower those we work with. When we have done our very best, we may still experience disappointments, but we will not be disappointed in ourselves. We can feel certain that we are doing what we should and that we have given our students every opportunity to learn and grow. There are times with students in a tutoring session or in a classroom where, like with Natalie, I can feel in my bones that we have reached a new plane of understanding and appreciation--of each other and of what we are learning together. These experiences are indefinable and unquantifiable. To try and put a number or a

percentage on the success of this experience would be to cheapen it. Instead, we can reflect on and appreciate what we have done within ourselves to be able to be an instrument of learning and growth for others. We ourselves are never done growing and neither are those we work with. Far from being discouraging, this is an exciting prospect. It only offers us an infinite number of opportunities to help and love others, and learn how to help and love ourselves as well. Because those categories of success are never full and never can be as long as there are more people to get to know and help, we can relish in the fact that our "success" is exactly where it needs to be--growing in the process. Our success lies in the understanding that we are never "finished" being successful. We can find new ways to be successful everyday, and that is certainly something to celebrate.