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Stop, Think, and Question

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to encourage peer tutors to attempt utilizing different questioning methods during tutoring sessions. Instead of asking closed off questions with definite answers, tutors should ask open-ended questions that challenge the student. This method of questioning will also help the tutor as it will alleviate pressure from them and make the student and tutor equally accountable for the session. The Socratic method of questioning is also suggested as it allows sessions to develop more organically based on topics that are useful and interesting to both the student and the tutor.

Stop, Think, and Question

Tutoring can be difficult. Especially when working with young writers. As tutors, we only want the best for the students who come into the Writing Center. Because of this, it can be very easy to feel pressure in our efforts to make tutoring sessions as successful as possible. Tutors develop different strategies to help students unearth writing tools that they will use for the rest of their lives. One way that tutors can help students discover these strategies is through the questions that we ask. Although there are a myriad of tutoring strategies, the questions that we ask are often variations of four main questions:

1. What specific concerns do you have about this paper?

2. What/where is your thesis?

3. What is the purpose of this paper?

4. Who is your audience and why are you writing to them?

My question is why so many tutors use these same questions within distinct strategies and whether we could improve our services by forcing ourselves to ask different questions. Are the well-used questions simply a way to maintain control of a situation where the variable with the most control (the student) is also the least well-known? Research shows that tutors resort to familiar questions in unknown situations. However, using different questions and methods (such as divergent questions within the Socratic questioning method) would help students and tutors get more out of the sessions in which we participate.

Based on interviews conducted with writing tutors at Utah State University, it seems that many have changed the questions that they ask during sessions over time. Most of the interviewed tutors have altered their questions so that they give the student more freedom in answering. This technique also helps the tutor assess what concepts or ideas the student needs more help developing. For example, several tutors have changed their entire tutoring strategy simply by altering the question, "Is this your thesis?" to "Where is your thesis?" This lets the tutor know if the student has a firm grasp on what a thesis statement is. If they do not, then the

tutor can explain the purpose and importance of a thesis statement. This simple change represents an important shift between two categories of questions, convergent to divergent (Tofade, Toyin, Elsner, Haines, para 5). The convergent question, "Is this your thesis?" is a closed off question that has a very distinct yes or no answer. This engages the student less. "Where is your thesis?" the divergent question, offers more potential for higher learning because there is no single definite answer and the student often has to think a lot harder (para. 3).

Another common tactic developed over time by experienced tutors is to ask students to explain their point without reading it. All of the tutors who use this method said that it helps students to explain their point out loud because it is often easier to say what one means than to write it out. Something interesting I found while conducting interviews was that almost nobody who uses this method has utilized it since they began tutoring. Instead, it has developed over time as the tutor becomes more comfortable with their position and learns more about how to help students.

It would seem that part of why new questions are developed over time instead of being instantaneously implemented is because of a human tendency to revert to familiarity under stress. One study conducted at Stanford University concluded, "When feeling pressured, people often most desire what is familiar. Familiarity signals safety, which gains heightened importance and appeal in stressful… situations," (Litt, Reich, Senia, et. Al, p. 523). Even though tutors have run at least dozens of sessions, each new student can present a stressful situation because they are unknown. Because of this, tutors seem to revert back to the four basic questions mentioned previously rather than letting the session develop more organically through the questions that we choose to ask.

It also appears that tutors resort to convergent rather than divergent questions because it is easier for us. Since the tutor knows the answer to a convergent question, we are able to take back control of the session. Quite simply, it requires less effort from the tutor to ask a convergent question and then guide the session in the direction that we wish to go.

This leads to the question of what the best way is for tutors to let go of the familiar and allow the student equal partnership in the tutoring process. Tovin, Elsner, and Haines suggest one approach to formulating questions called the Socratic Method. Socratic questioning "uses a form of inquiry that promotes open discussion in which one viewpoint is compared to another… the lesson is taught through probing and thought-provoking questions in an effort to stimulate original thought from students," (para. 11). Although this method is much more laborious for the tutor, I would argue that this demand on the tutor is necessary because it makes both the student and the tutor accountable for the session. If anything, it diverts responsibility from the tutor to the student because the tutor is not subconsciously formulating questions and answers at the same time.

The Socratic method involves skillful use of three different types of questions: exploratory, spontaneous, and focused. Exploratory questions are "used to find out how much students know about the issue under discussion" (Tovin, Elsner, and Haines para. 12). Exploratory questions would be asking where a student's thesis is or asking to see an assignment description. Spontaneous questions help the student and tutor feel more connected on the topic because the questions work best when both parties are naturally curious about the topic. Focused questions "[narrow] the content down to specific issues…" (para. 13). Examples of focused questions would be asking the student what they want to work on because that helps the tutor know which issues should be addressed first or given the most attention.

Tutoring is in no way easy. Each student is unique and they require a different strategy from every tutor to help them get the most out of their Writing Center visit. However, the one constant in every tutoring session for every student is the questioning that the tutor and student participate in. The tutoring process should require an equal amount of effort from both the tutor and the student. In order to create this equality, the Socratic method of questioning should be used. This keeps both the tutor and the student engaged because they are both working to ask and answer questions. Although it is more difficult, it is absolutely imperative to the success of

students who visit the Writing Center that tutors take a moment to stop, think, and then

question.

Works Cited

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