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Turning Apathy to Ambition: Strategies for Countering Student Disinterest

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Turning Apathy to Ambition: Strategies For Countering Student Disinterest

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Abstract

Apathetic students – those who do not care enough about writing to engage in a session - are some of the hardest to tutor. Their reluctance to engage with the tutor is often the result of a perceived lack of connection between their personal interests and the topic they are writing about, or even writing in general. The connection between writing and STEM fields, for example, is not often readily apparent; the necessity of written communication in one form or another is often lost in the theory and technical skills that dominate the major. This reduces the problem of inspiring a love for writing in the student to a problem of relating their interests with their writing. This revised goal of a tutoring session, coupled with a long term perspective of striving to make better writers rather than better papers, is one method of turning student apathy to ambition.

He smiles broadly, seemingly entertained by your anecdote about the importance of a thesis statement, as you transition to ending the session. “We’re already done? It feels like I just got here!” he laments. He knows it’s time to leave – the supervisor had come in twice to remind you that the session should be ending, but you stretched it a little longer to squeeze a little more out of the session. “It’s that time, I’m afraid,” you say disappointedly. This was a good session, a good student. He matches your excitement with seemingly bottomless enthusiasm about both his paper and writing in general. You learned just as much as you tutored, and it’s hard to peel away from an assured source of educational entertainment. “Well I hate to go, but thanks for the help!” he says, seemingly promising to apply your suggestions.

This scene is one that every tutor has dreamt of, particularly after a poor session. The fantasy of the ‘perfect session’ is a pervasive one, sometimes almost attainable, often hopelessly out of reach. The reality is sometimes things do not go according to plan. Maybe you are having a bad day and your warm greeting comes out more as the bark of a drill instructor. Maybe the student is adamant that you merely proofread their paper. Maybe you can’t think of any worthwhile questions to ask the student, leaving an excruciating silence filled only by desperate mumblings of paragraph structure or the importance of a thesis statement. Or, perhaps the most dangerous of all, maybe the student simply does not care about writing. Apathetic attendance of instructor-mandated writing center appointments is a tutor’s worst fear. There is no excitement to further encourage, no anger to grow into passion. There is indifference. At its best, this disinterest yields an unproductive session; at its worst, it yields contention. Almost every tutor experiences these apathy-infested sessions, often with increasing frequency as a deadline approaches (Bell and Stutts 5-7). How can we counter this apathy and help the student through the writing process?

One of the principal instigators of student apathy is perceived lack of connection between the topic of the paper and their personal interests (Gaskins 13-15). This feeling is especially prevalent in English classes and with science and engineering students. Because students have no choice but to take English, they often feel like it is simply a box they must check before advancing onto major classes, important classes, and interesting classes. Of course, English classes are important in every major, but this significance is often not readily apparent. That is, it is not immediately apparent to many students that English classes can be used to explore their major, and the fact that nearly every profession requires written communication seems to be obscured by the heavy focus on theory and technical skills in most degrees. Thus, in many cases, this apathy toward writing simply reduces to a lack of connection to the student's interests. This is good news for tutors because it converts this impenetrable disinterest into a game of learning about the student and relating writing to their interests. This is of particular importance for students with a science or engineering background. Our society, and the school system by extension, is often one of compartmentalization. There are English people and there are math people. In reality, the interdisciplinary nature inherent in STEM fields requires strong communication skills. Conveying this reality is essential to capture the attention of an apathetic student and can mean the difference between a productive session and a wasted one. Further, many STEM students are blinded by the ENGL prefix, unable to recognize that they have the freedom to use writing to explore their major. Genre experiments can focus on a scientific paper, persuasive research essays can delve into a field-specific controversy, and the discourse community project can give the student real exposure into their chosen field. Because this obscured relevance to a student's interests can prevent them from engaging in a session,

discovering the student's interests and finding a connection to writing can often provide the impetus for student engagement and a productive session.

In order to guide the student toward the bridge that connects writing with their interests, it is often useful to prehend the session with small talk and a conversation about the student's semester, major, or classes. This relieves some of the anxiety that comes with sharing their writing and allows the tutor to start thinking about how to get the student to see the connection between the assignment and his major. Further, apathetic students often require a longer introduction to the goals of a session and what kind of things you will try to address. Students who do not care about writing benefit from having every decision made during the session motivated and explained. This is because apathetic students are dependent on the tutor for progress made on their paper and in their writing skills. By giving the student clear reasons why you are doing what you are doing, you give him the tools to recognize deficiencies in his own writing and make his own progress. This same principle is applied to the small talk made at the beginning of a session. While it is certainly acceptable to ask a student about his classes purely out of courtesy or curiosity, it is useful to note the way he responds and what he is excited about. This information can help you steer the session toward topics the student is interested in, ultimately guiding the student to see the connection between these interests and writing.

In order to subconsciously gain a student's trust and attention, it is often useful to make friendly gestures and have friendly body language (Janney 14-15). Smiling, adopting an open, relaxed posture, and maintaining eye contact can have huge implications for making a student feel welcomed and accepted. This further reduces the pressure on the student, making them more likely to listen to what you have to say. While a friendly demeanor and some small talk won't immediately change a student's apathy to ambition, it is an important subtlety that can make a

lasting impression on the student. While it may seem strange to direct so much attention toward nonverbal communication and creating a welcoming environment, these elements of tutoring are crucial for engaging apathetic students and countering their disinterest. If nothing else, the benefit of creating a welcoming and friendly environment is that the student has a positive image of the writing center. This means a student is more likely to consider the writing center when they need help with writing in the future. This deferral of helping the student with writing, while mildly uncomfortable, is congruent with the purpose of the writing center. The goal of the writing center is not to churn out grammatically correct papers or make sure a paper is using appropriate vocabulary. The focus of the writing center is not on creating better papers, but on creating better writers. Because of this, addressing a student's apathy can be one of the most beneficial things a tutor can do to improve the student's writing in the long run (Pemberton 10-11).

At the end of the session, one of the hardest things to do is disconnect from the student. It is easy to become invested in a student's development and improvement, but it is not the job of the tutor to make sure the student has learned or will apply the suggestions you have made. One session is not long enough to change the way a student thinks, but it can be long enough to make a lasting impression of welcoming at the writing center, as well as to convey the importance of developing skills in writing (Healey 5-8). Despite diligent efforts to combat apathy, there is sometimes nothing you can do. Students may or may not be receptive to help. Tutors are not in control of the reasons for student apathy, and it may not simply be due to a lack of motivation or vision for the connections between their interests and writing. Sometimes, the most important thing you can do is to make sure the student has a good experience at the writing center, so if they are ever more receptive to help, they will consider giving the writing center another chance.

Apathy is a condition that too often goes untreated, and can be the primary source of a student's trouble with writing. By focusing your attention toward relating writing to the student's goals and interests, you can provide an avenue by which the student may come to appreciate writing in the framework of their own interests.

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