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Why Don't You Ask Me?

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Why don't you ask me?

Writing center tutoring sessions are built on questions. Questions help tutors gain information needed to help students. This may include details about the student's classes, professors, assignments and struggles. Questions can also engage the student and make them an equal partner in the session. However, just because questions are being asked does not mean the student is getting the help they need. The types of questions asked directly influence the quality of the tutoring visit. Questions need to be genuine, which means they come from the tutor's desire to truly understand the student and where the student's ideas come from. Additionally, genuine questions do not have a right or wrong answer, either factually or socially. When tutors ask students genuine questions, a real conversation is created between the two. Real conversation gives students more control of the discussion, creates an atmosphere of mutual peer discovery, and allows students to see the value of their ideas.

Asking questions plays an especially important role during my favorite types of tutoring visits-- brainstorming sessions. Multiple times I have watched students come to the center with a look of dread on their face because they don't know what to write. As we have talked, I have seen the concern fade, or even change to excitement when they realize they actually have good ideas. While the student shares thoughts about what they could write their paper on, I enjoy thinking of questions that may help them further develop their ideas. I ask these questions in a

variety of a ways, but the focus is always an invitation to students to freely share their thoughts and feelings.

During one session, an energetic student came in and eagerly began telling me about her next assignment. She wasn't sure what she would write about yet, but she was willing to have a conversation with me. I began to ask her about what she was studying and what she cared about. This opened the door for her to tell me what she cared about. By the end of the session, she had developed two different ideas she planned on researching more. She was passionate about her topics and genuinely wanted to continue working on the assignment. Because I had used questions to help her reach this point, she was prepared to continue to use her own ideas to develop the paper.

During another brainstorming session, a very disinterested student told me he needed to write a research based paper. Upon examining the parameters of the assignment and listening to his ideas, the two of us discovered he could create a webpage about fly fishing, one of his hobbies. I helped him reach this conclusion by asking him about what types of things he considered himself an expert in. As we discussed this, he was able to create a response to the assignment that played to his strengths. Although he was not as excited as the first student, he still benefited from the questions asked and our discovery changed the assignment from a dreaded necessity to an approachable task.

Because students are often lectured to throughout their educational experience, they don't need more of that when they come to the writing center. What they need instead is the benefit of being worked with as an individual. For their needs to truly be met, students need to direct the session. However, in order to focus on the writing center goals and stay within the time window, tutors also need to provide session guidance. Questions are an ideal tool to use in order to meet

both of these goals. The types of questions tutors ask can help pace the session. If these questions allow the student to share both what they need help with in writing and what they already know, the student will be able to take the session in the direction they need most. By responding to what the student says, the tutor will show appreciation for the student's ideas and give the student more courage to seek the help they need.

When tutors ask students questions that encourage conversation in a tutoring session, students also learn how to ask better questions themselves. Social barriers in classroom settings that may discourage students from asking questions are not present in tutoring sessions. As tutors ask students questions, the student learns it is okay for them to do the same. Researchers Arthur C. Graesser and Natalie K. Person said:

The student may be embarrassed in front of his or her peers when a question reflects ignorance in a classroom setting, whereas pressure from peers is minimized in one-to-one tutoring. It is appropriate for the student to interrupt the tutor with questions and to change the topic of conversation in a student-centered exchange... students might become exposed to better questions in a tutoring environment because the tutors have the opportunity to concentrate on deeper levels of understanding and reasoning. (106)

One of the benefits of peer tutoring is that the tutor is not an experienced expert in the field, but someone who is also learning, just like the student. While writing may be one of the tutor's strengths, they are still working to improve in other academic areas. Most tutors are very aware of their shortcomings. However, when students come to the writing center they may mistakenly view tutors as writing experts. It is important for tutors to address this myth so students can more fully enjoy the benefits working with a peer offers.

Tutors can present themselves as a peer by looking to learn from each student they tutor. Students who come into the writing center have a variety of different backgrounds and experiences. This is reflected in both their writing content and process, and their learning styles. When tutors realize this, they can view meeting with students as an opportunity to learn about new ideas and to better understand the different ways people write, think, and feel. This will lead tutors to naturally ask students better questions. Because these questions come from a real desire to learn, the student will feel empowered. Since they have something to offer the session, students will be more willing to vocalize their ideas, whether or not they consciously realize that this is happening. As the tutor learns where the student is coming from, they will provide more effective help to the student.

When students come to be tutored and are struggling with writing, they mistakenly think their ideas aren't any good. However, there is a difference between not having ideas and not being able to communicate them. For many people, it is easier to vocalize thoughts than to write them down. This disconnect between speaking and writing about ideas can be bridged by a tutor. When tutors seek to learn from students by asking good questions, the students may resolve issues in their writing on their own. When the tutor truly listens to them, the student will feel their ideas are validated. Tutors can even use the information provided by the student to address some of the student's concerns. This works to further enforce the value of a student's ideas.

Asking genuine questions requires time and practice. In order for questions to be productive, students have to be willing to answer them. No matter how hard a tutor tries, if a student isn't willing to engage questions become ineffective. This rarely means that the tutor or student are doing something wrong; it is simply a reality of the job. Despite this possibility, most students welcome the chance to engage. Genuine questions increase the likelihood of a positive

response because students will feel valued as an individual. When the tutor really listens to what the student says rather than trying to distil writing knowledge, the student will feel empowered. As tutors seek to learn from students, both of them will enjoy a session characterized by mutual peer learning. Students will leave with a higher appreciation for their own ideas and better equipped to handle the future writing challenges they encounter.

Works Cited

Graesser, Arthur C., and Natalie K. Person. "Question Asking during Tutoring Sessions."

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