Teacher in Training: On Tutoring Before Teaching

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Abstract:
Graduate instructors often dive into teaching without extensive preparation or a teaching certificate. However, some graduate instructors tutored in university writing centers prior to their graduate work. Tutoring prior to teaching allows the graduate instructor to gain confidence with introductory coursework, cope with silence from students, and learn how to ask students questions before they ever have to step foot in a classroom. The relationship tutors have with students differs from the relationship instructors have with students, which adds a complexity for graduate instructors who are accustomed to the tutoring relationship. Although that relationship shift is difficult, this paper gives anecdotal and research evidence on how tutoring before teaching ultimately improves a graduate instructor’s teaching.
Teacher in Training: On Tutoring Before Teaching

I tutored at the university writing center for three years during my undergraduate degree. I was 19 during my first ever tutoring session. Terrified, I hoped the student wouldn’t know it was my first attempt as a tutor, and I begged the universe to send me positive vibes so that I could answer every question with abounding knowledge. I made it through the session without the student believing I was an unintelligent fraud. I even made it through the session after that and the session after that. A shy, nerdy English student who preferred listening far over talking, it didn’t take long for me fall in love with the tutor role. Tutoring felt like my niche. Immediately following graduation, I began my graduate program at the same university. Alongside my graduate work, I embarked on teaching an introductory composition writing course. A 22-year-old assigned to teach an entire class of 18-year-olds, the thought of standing in front of a classroom overwhelmed me. However, within the first few weeks of the semester, some of my tutoring roots started to show, and I believe my teaching bettered for it. My time as a writing tutor prepared me for reading introductory writing, trained me to be comfortable with wait time in a classroom, and taught me how to ask open-ended questions to students. Although my tutoring experience initially increased the difficulty in transitioning from peer relationship to teacher relationship, tutoring helped more than it hurt.

As a writing tutor, I became accustomed to reading introductory level composition papers. In the upper division courses I took during my undergraduate degree, I read a lot of strong writing from many capable writers in my classes. Because I was surrounded by writers and those who love writing, it would have been easy for my perspective on what is “average” writing to shift to a higher bar. If I never tutored in the writing center, I wouldn’t be able to appropriately judge an introductory student’s writing in that first batch of essays. Spending three
years reading essay after essay from students in the same course I would eventually teach
prepared me for what to expect from my students. The peers in my writing courses improved, but
introductory composition writing stayed the same. My time in the writing center helped my
expectations of student writing to stay grounded, rather than increase as my own writing
capabilities increased.

Peers in upper division courses often engaged in a passionate discussion about writing; however, those in introductory classes often do not. Thanks to my tutoring experience, I knew to expect students to sometimes be silent after I ask a question. Paulo Freire introduces a banking concept of education where the instructor deposits information into the student and the student quietly listens. To fill the silence, my instinct is to try depositing more information into students’ brains. Freire takes issue with the deposit mentality and says that instructors, “must abandon the educational goal of deposit making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world” (5). Silence is a natural consequence of instructors stepping away from depositing knowledge and stepping into communicating with our students as human beings.

Consistent writing center training heavily encouraged tutors to allow a few moments of wait time between asking and answering questions. Wait time gives the students a chance to contemplate the question and come up with a thoughtful response, causing them to be more actively engaged in the tutoring session. Constantly hearing how normal and appropriate wait time is in the tutoring sessions helps me stay calm when silence persists in the classroom. I still get nervous when nobody talks. However, because I’ve had more sessions than I can count where the student and I sit quietly, I know the benefit that comes from forcing myself to pause. I hope that the students are productively thinking about the question during this wait time. At the
very least, I know not to question my ability as a teacher, because even in my most successful tutoring sessions, wait time occurred. Tutoring taught me that silence doesn’t indicate incompetence from the tutor or instructor. Instead, it provides a space for the students to take charge of their own learning in a safe environment.

To help the students feel safe, I began most tutoring sessions by making small talk with the student. They would tell me about their classes, and I would tell them about mine. Sometimes I’d ask a student where they bought a particular jewelry item, or how they were feeling about their first year of college. Stepping into the role of instructor, the peer relationship dissipated. Students see me as their teacher and not as a peer. When I conference with my composition students, they sit straight in their chair and hesitate to share how their college experience is going. The change in dynamic from peer to instructor was difficult for me to navigate at first. I missed the peer relationship I had with those I tutored. Instead, my relationship with my students tends to revolve around grades. Every question students ask somehow ties back to grades or requirements, and they look at me as an authority who can give cut and dry answers. As a tutor, the students didn’t ask about grades or what the “right” answer was. Conversations with tutees became just that, conversations with less of a hierarchy and more of an equal discussion. If a student broached the topic of grades in a tutoring session, I diverted the responsibility of answering that question to their instructor. As an instructor myself, when students ask questions about grading, my instinct is to give a vague answer and move on. In these instances, I have to push against my tutor training and take the responsibility for answering the questions as the only grader of the course, while still trying to give the student the autonomy to be explorative in their own work. While the control of tutoring sessions is on the student, I recognize that as an instructor, I have to find a balance between giving the student control while also realizing that
my position requires me to distribute points to students. Although my instructor role forces me away from the relationship I developed with the students I tutored, researcher, Bonnie Zelenak, expresses that “Writing centers are in some ways ideal places to help teachers adopt and assimilate process-oriented, student-centered attitudes and strategies” (Zelenak et al. 33). Because I’d worked with students in the particular class I would eventually teach, I was able to develop understanding for those students and their learning processes. The perspectives I gained as a peer tutor became a part of my teaching philosophy, even though the relationships changed. In Zelenak’s study of graduate teaching assistants, 14% of respondents “specifically indicated an increased empathy toward students” when they tutored alongside their work as a graduate teaching assistant (Zelenak et al. 30). Connecting with students as a tutor increased my empathy toward them when I became an instructor because the one-on-one time I spent with composition students allows me to see them as human beings.

When I first became a tutor, I never imagined myself going to graduate school, much less teaching composition English. At that point, I was just trying to make it through my undergraduate degree. I didn’t imagine tutoring impacting my future, other than allowing me to earn a little extra money. When I took the plunge and accepted a teaching instructorship to coincide my time at graduate school, my experience tutoring comforted me. I wasn’t jumping into an instructorship without experience. I felt comfortable with introductory writers and the composition curriculum. Although my tutoring experience made it difficult for me to transition into a more authoritative role, I was prepared to handle beginning writers, wait time, and open-ended questions. Thinking back on my transition from tutoring to teaching, if I hadn’t had the tutoring experience, I may not have had the confidence to apply for the graduate instructorship.
Works Cited
