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So What?: Writing and Tutoring Intentionally

In my first semester of tutoring, I have seen papers about forestry services, Rihanna as an emblem of dominance, the nutritional chemistry of an English muffin, NASA funding, and the endangered Peruvian vicugna. I have worked with students writing genres like persuasive research essays, personal narratives, lab reports, and even philosophy short-answer midterm responses. When confronted with papers that have requirements or subjects where I am far from an expert, I have learned to ask, “Why did you select this topic?” and “How would you want your audience to be changed by reading your paper?” These questions function to alleviate demands on inexperienced tutors, but, more importantly, they guide students to understand their own intentions. Peer writing tutors should be guides for students as they develop their own ideas and writing. Through my own years of middle school and high school, my mom would often pose the classic writing question, “So what?” after reading my papers. I dreaded the question until I understood that writing was a medium for changing the world. Writing is a small way of relating to another person, sharing an idea, expressing an opinion, and ultimately helping someone else feel and think about something the way you describe it. By showing interest in students’ writing, tutors create a forum for understanding what writing can do to influence the world.

Students learn the importance of recognizing and relating to their audience and writing purpose-driven papers by first understanding their own purpose for writing. The Meaningful

Writing Project, research conducted at three eastern U.S. universities, claims that writing is meaningful to students “when students are invited to

- tap into the power of personal connection;
- immerse themselves in what they are thinking, writing, and researching;
- experience what they are writing as applicable to the real world; and
- imagine their future selves” (Eodice 25).

Tutors aid the process of finding meaning in writing by recognizing those four concepts and highlighting them in tutoring sessions. One of the best ways to help students write with purpose is to intentionally tutor with genuine interest. When students come into the writing center lacking purpose, tutors who use effective questions can guide the writing process to be more intention-driven. Questions that invite students to consider their own attachment to a topic, its practical applications, or the depth and perspectives involved in it will help them to have meaningful writing experiences in the tutoring center. Questions can help students to discover and highlight their intended purpose in writing.

One student’s voice filled the tutoring room with purpose while I listened quietly. With each word, I was increasingly drawn to her paper. She was recounting the story of her parent’s divorce, emphasizing themes of separation, family, and identity. So many of her words reminded me of one of my own essays, written just a few months earlier. Later in the week, another student’s work filled me with nostalgia as I thought about my own personal experiences coupled with emotions so vividly described by the student. This sample of purpose-driven writing reminded me that when students are personally connected to their work, the content has enough power to allow students and tutors to turn their focus to how to present the student’s ideas instead of feeling frustrated by searching for meaning. This experience showed me that the

foundation for good writing is understanding purpose. Success in writing starts with a stated or unstated personal connection to the topic, deep thinking and involvement with the project, real-world applications, and personal future implications stemming from a project.

When students come to the writing center with an eloquent story that has no clear purpose, I don't ask, "So what?" But, I do ask, "What do you want someone who reads your paper to feel when they are done?" or, "Why do you think this topic should matter to your audience?" These are common questions, but they are essential stepping stones to helping students find purpose in their own writing. Asking "Why is it important for you to share this topic through writing?" invites students to deepen their purpose and consider their audience in a way that simple suggestions for organization and cohesiveness lack.

After asking these questions so often this semester, I began to see my own writing assignments differently. By the end of the semester, I had meditated so frequently on the idea of intentional writing that I began to ask myself, "What message do I want to send in this paragraph?" and "How will the way I phrase my conclusion allow my audience to understand why this topic is important?" As these questions became an integral part of my own writing process, I recognized that the benefits of writing collaboration at the tutoring center blossom when they cease to be one-time suggestions to improve your grade and begin to be questions that guide meaningful writing. The writing center's purpose is to help students become self-reliant, capable writers. I recognized the fulfillment of that purpose when I contemplated a purposeful paper I had been working on one day and realized that the ideas and concepts I had been immersed in remained in my mind and even transformed my perspective. After a long day spent constructing a term paper about the role of female mentors in an assigned reading, I was still contemplating the importance of such mentors in my own life. I felt accomplished and in some

ways, transformed by the paper I wrote. I remembered clearly then that purposeful writing is powerful writing.

When a student comes to a tutoring session with a paper for a geography class or a philosophy class, I may not know anything about their topic, but the principles for meaningful writing are still a useful guide. One of my most challenging sessions in the writing center was when a student came in for his food chemistry class. Before the session, I never would have thought about the purpose behind this kind of scientific paper. How could this student's personal connection to a food make the paper any more interesting? How could I help him when my own personal connection to the topic was so limited? I knew my only choice was to think of some effective questions to ask the student. I simply asked why he chose his topic. By asking about his personal connection to the topic, I watched as an interesting take on his paper unraveled. He left the session eager to start writing.

Students who struggle to find meaning in writing or lack clear connections to assigned topics present a challenge to a tutor's goal to help them develop intentionality. "...Learning to write well is dependent neither solely on ability nor on a given professor, course, or program. Rather, becoming a competent writer depends upon a particular student's motivation to put forth the requisite effort, something that is largely outside of our control as professors and programs" (Johnson). Finding meaning in writing does require significant effort. How do writing tutors inspire students to invest so much in their writing projects? The Meaningful Writing Project suggests that such effort does not always come naturally, nor does it apply to all projects, but students are more likely to be motivated and engaged in writing when writing is "agentive, relative, and consequential" (Eodice 29). By encouraging student authorship and discussing personal connections to the topic, tutors can help students be agents in the writing process. By

discussing real-world applications, tutors can help students to see how their topic relates to a larger discussion. By asking students how a particular project will affect them in their future academic interests, helps both the student and their tutor recognize how their writing is consequential.

A session in the writing center should always be a conversation. The more meaningful the tutor-student conversation, the more the students will be capable of purpose-driven writing. Whether the “So what?” of a paper is personal interest, a desire for policy change, deepening understanding of a subject, or learning to think in a new way, intentional writing will allow both students and tutors to learn to write to effect change in the world. When students learn to write from their own personal connections and immerse themselves in a project, they might go home meditating on their own ideas, like I did after considering the “so what?” of my own paper so deeply.

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