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You Matter to Me: The Necessity of Validation in the Composition Classroom

Shaun Anderson

Abstract: The Utah State University Writing Center works to create a student-centered environment that provides our students with the message that their voices matter, that they are cared for, and that they belong here. This same message needs to be carried on into our composition courses. This sense of validation enables our students to develop as communicators and leaders.

Keywords: Composition, Validation, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Writing Center, Leadership

You Matter to Me: The Necessity of Validation in the Composition Classroom

In their first year at Utah State University it is easy for students to get lost in the overwhelming flood of new experiences. There are relatively few check-ins for these new students, who are packed into introductory courses in lecture halls where attendance goes unaccounted. While many students appreciate this newfound freedom, the message the university is sending to these students is that they do not matter. The majority of the breadth courses will continue as usual whether or not every student attends. The curriculum will progress as it always has. Instructors will lecture about the same content they have for the past decade. In this state of obscurity and consistency, students find it easy to internalize and believe this message that they do not matter, and that they as individuals do not have a place at USU. Perhaps it is because of this internalized message that USU administration has concerns about retention. As students internalize and begin to believe that there is no one who cares whether or not they attend their classes, some grow discouraged and drop out.

USU's composition program significantly benefits our students by providing them with one-on-one interaction. This interaction revolves around helping our students develop their voices and express themselves. As our students experience this individualized attention, and as they develop their skills of expression, they get the opportunity to feel valued and valid. For this reason, it is essential that the Writing Center and the composition classroom must foster an environment where students feel safe, valued, and free to develop their voices.

As a new composition instructor with three years of tutoring experience at the Writing Center, I feel confident in my ability to teach English 1010. I understand and can explain the rhetorical triangle. I can wax eloquent about the necessity of defining audience and purpose. I've learned how to explain writing concepts so that they become accessible to students. I know how

to sit in the tutor room and make that time productive for the student. In short, I have internalized the teaching aspect of tutoring.

Last year, I had the opportunity to internalize and understand the administrative environment that exists within our Writing Center by sitting in on the interview and hiring process for Writing Center supervisors. In every interview Star—the Writing Center director—asked the candidates to walk through a hypothetical situation with her. She would tell the candidates to imagine that they were supervising when chaos erupted in our center. Her hypothetical situation had the candidates attempt to juggle students needing to be checked in for their appointments, tutors competing for supervisor attention, and Star asking them to handle an administrative task. After explaining this hypothetical situation, Star would ask each candidate how they would handle the mayhem in the Writing Center. Star asked this question in order to assess the candidates' awareness of the atmosphere she works to create at the Writing Center. In one particular interview, our candidate explained that she would help the students first, then move on to the tutors, and finally, once things had settled in the waiting area, she would help Star with the administrative task. This candidate's explanation demonstrated a clear understanding of the environment that Star has built at the Writing Center. At the Writing Center, we work to combat the message that our students do not matter. Instead, we work to instill in them an awareness that they are valued.

Star has constructed an environment in the Writing Center that has a clear understanding of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Writing is an act of self-actualization. In asking our students to find their voices, we are asking our students to engage with the world in ways that are potentially new and unfamiliar to them. We are asking them to weigh the voices of others and how those voices interact with their own lived experience. As Maslow explains, this territory of thinking

can be challenging for our students to reach when their other basic and psychological needs go unmet. While the Writing Center cannot logistically provide for all of those needs, Star has done significant work to ensure that she meets as many needs as she can. Most significantly, in this environment where students and their needs come first, the Writing Center instills a sense of safety, security, and belonging in students. The message becomes clear: You have a place here. You matter to me.

This semester in my observations, I saw a very clear example of what it looks like when our tutors show our students that they matter. I had the opportunity to observe Mikayla Doyle, one of our experienced tutors. In her session, she focused most on validation, helping the student know that their questions, their concerns, their ideas, and their voice mattered to Mikayla. Mikayla employed active listening throughout her session, asking clarifying questions and answering the questions the student asked her. The student opened up as the session progressed, because they felt valued and cared about.

I strive to carry this kind of environment into the composition classroom. My number one goal as an instructor is to show students that they matter to me, that they have a place in my classroom, and that their voices are worth hearing. The challenge of this semester has been shifting my focus from one-on-one, side-by-side teaching to addressing a classroom of students who all have varying degrees of confidence and passion for the subject of composition. Every composition course requires instructors to validate the voices of their students and instill a sense of belonging in their students.

One way that I have established this feeling in my class is to allow student voices to come first in my classroom. When my class has discussions, I will yield my time to my students when they have things to say. In this way, I demonstrate to them that their voices are worth

hearing. At first, I was afraid that if I let my students carry on discussions without much interference from me, I would have students who would say things that would isolate their classmates. Instead, I have been consistently impressed by the ways that my students, when given the space to communicate face-to-face, consider the views of others and carry on thoughtful discussions. When students feel that their voices are heard, valued, and validated, they allow themselves to hear, value, and validate the voices of others, regardless of whether or not they agree with the ideas.

This cycle of validation makes the Writing Center and the composition classroom essential. In both the Writing Center and the composition classroom our goals go beyond creating adequate writers and communicators. We create leaders. In the Writing Center, Star demonstrates that true leaders are those who value, validate, and see the worth in those they lead. Her student centered environment allows the tutors to begin developing those leadership qualities. The same development happens in our composition classrooms. As instructors make their classrooms centered on their students' voices, their students learn to value and validate the voices of their classmates.