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Cree Taylor

*Utah State University*, [cree.taylor@usu.edu](mailto:cree.taylor@usu.edu)

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Becoming a Tutor:

Teachers as Tutors in One-on-One Conferences

Cree Taylor

Utah State University

### **Abstract**

University Writing Centers are valuable tools for university students of any level: first-year undergraduates through doctoral candidates. Peer reviews and edits help students recognize possible flaws in their writing that they otherwise would not have seen. The climate of the Writing Center allows students to review their writing in a low-stakes, comfortable environment where their concerns are heard and addressed by an understanding peer instead of an all-knowing professor. Techniques used in the Writing Center such as making immediate connections with students, allowing students to drive the tutoring session, and continually asking about and focusing on student's concerns with their writing, can and should be applied to one-on-one meetings between students and instructors. Cultivating a Writing Center climate during one-on-one paper conferences can help instructors provide students with the opportunity to identify problems in their writing and come up with their own solutions to address those problems. It will also allow instructors to provide their students with tools they can use in the future to write and edit their drafts on their own.

Key Words: writing conferences, foster independent learning, tutor sessions, address student writing concerns, mentor, freshman writing, student driven conferences, writing center, writing programs

First semester Graduate Instructors (GI's) face a lot of uncertainties, especially if they have never taught before. How do I make a lesson plan? What if my students don't like me or won't listen to me? How can I balance teaching with my own course work? In addition to taking on the responsibilities of their own graduate course work and the teaching of English 1010, GI's are also required to spend a delegated number of hours working in the Writing Center on campus. These hours include conducting their own tutoring sessions as well as observing a specified number of experienced tutors in order to gain insights on how to be an effective Writing Center Tutor. At first this obligation may be viewed by GI's in a negative way. Their time is valuable and it seems like it might be better spent in the office working instead of tutoring in the Writing Center. After conducting these observations, I realized that there is tremendous value in requiring incoming GI's to work in the Writing Center. Many of the practices used in a tutoring session can and should be applied to the GI's interactions with his or her own students outside of the classroom. Writing Center tutors are encouraged to make immediate connections with tutees, to allow students to drive the tutoring session, and to continually ask about and focus on tutee's concerns with their writing. These three practices can and should be applied to one-on-one meetings between students and instructors.

During my observations of four outstanding experienced tutors, I noticed many practices which I can and will adopt into my own tutoring and especially my own teaching. There is an obvious overlap between tutoring and teaching that is important for Graduate Instructors and beginning teachers to be aware of. *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* offers up informative instruction on how a tutoring session should begin. They indicate that "a casual but interested greeting and a smile... can immediately make [tutee's] less apprehensive about the prospect of

sharing their writing” (Ryan 11). I noticed this type of friendly greeting in my observations of experienced tutors. Each tutor greeted the tutee with a smile. They asked the tutee’s name and engaged him or her in brief, casual conversation. Each tutor tried to make some connection with the tutee, even if it was something as simple as knowing an individual from the same area. The tutors then asked the tutee if they had been to the Writing Center before and then proceeded to detail what the Writing Center is, how it works, and how they can expect their tutoring session to go. This put the tutee’s at ease right from the beginning. They were able to view the tutor as more of a peer than a superior and any questions about what role the Writing Center could play in their collegiate career were immediately answered.

If teachers were to apply these same techniques in one-on-one meetings with students, their meetings would be much more successful. Not only would the students feel welcomed and valued, but they would feel more comfortable discussing their writing with their instructors. Students are more receptive to teachers who try to relate to them and who refrain from projecting the attitude that they know so much more than their students. It takes a lot of courage for a student to seek out an instructor’s guidance outside of the classroom and they may feel intimidated or nervous about their first meeting. Instructors can ease those fears right from the beginning if they greeted their students the way Writing Center tutors greet their tutee’s.

Another tip provided by *The Bedford Guide* and exemplified by the experienced Writing Center tutors is to “give the writer control of the paper.” *The Bedford Guide* continues, “keep the paper in front of the writer as much as possible...indicate patterns of error, model a correction or two, and then encourage the writer to practice her own editing skills” (12). In each session that I observed, the students brought their writing in on their laptop which made it easy for the tutor to

relinquish control of the work. The tutors continually asked the tutee what their concerns were and worked to address those concerns appropriately. Tutors frequently asked, “What concerns do you have about your paper? What can we work on to make effective use of your time? What did you notice about your paper that you wanted to fix?” Instead of reading the paper through and when offering up a list of corrections, the tutors listened to the tutee’s concerns and then worked together with them to come up with solutions. The tutee was able to use the session to their benefit and all of the students I observed left the Writing Center feeling like their time was well-used.

Although it may be difficult for instructors to relinquish control of a one-on-one meeting to their students, this skill will greatly enhance the student’s ability to self-correct and lessen their need for instructor or tutor guidance on future papers. Students need to feel in control of their work. Writing --whether academic or creative-- is a very personal process. It involves creating something that is unique to each student. Students aren’t willing to give up their work easily, nor should they be. Teachers need to remember this about their student’s work. It is the student’s work, not the teacher’s. The teacher can serve as a guide and a sounding board for the student to bounce his or her ideas off of. Instruction and clarification on paper guidelines will be needed and should be provided, but teachers need to resist the urge to reformulate student’s ideas and writing structures. It is tedious and discouraging to have a professor critique a student’s work to the point of changing what it says to conform to the teacher’s unique writing style or their opinions on a particular subject. Writing Center tutors have honed in on the ability to let the students manipulate and control their work and teachers would be wise to do the same.

Writing Center tutors are also adept at allowing students to critically think about problems in their papers and how to fix them. All of the tutors I observed used open ended questions to get the tutee's to think about their papers. It was the tutee's responsibility to identify problems. It was the tutee's responsibility to formulate solutions to those problems. The tutor was there as a support and a guide and they offered up suggestions or hints when tutee seemed stuck. In the end, the tutee left the session feeling proud of their work and having cultivated an increased sense of ownership over what they had written.

It is tempting for teachers to begin a meeting with: "Here are the things I found wrong with your paper and here are my proposed solutions." The student spends the entire one-on-one conference writing down the teacher's corrections and gets little to no time to discuss things with which he or she specifically wanted help. If teachers were to adopt the Writing Center model, they would be able to help their students even more than a Writing Center tutor. Teachers are experienced writers in their chosen fields, they created the assignments and know what they are looking for, they are present in the classroom with the students and know what instruction they have given about the assignment; therefore, they are the most qualified to help the students navigate their way through getting their ideas down on paper. Teachers know how to clearly express their thoughts and ideas and they can use these one-on-one opportunities to teach their students how to do so. This can be done through using open-ended questions to get the students engaging in metacognition. Questions such as: "What about this paper did you find challenging? How do you think you could say this more clearly? What do you think you could say to further your analysis?" will get students thinking and will teach them how to think this way on their

own, without outside support. Writing and thinking improve when students are pushed to think for themselves instead of being forced to regurgitate the thoughts and words of their teachers.

Cultivating a Writing Center climate during one-on-one paper conferences can help instructors provide students with the opportunity to identify problems in their writing and come up with their own solutions to address those problems. It will also allow instructors to provide their students with tools they can use in the future to write and edit their drafts on their own. By developing connections with their students, allowing students to drive one-on-one conferences, and continually asking students about their writing concerns, teachers will be more successful in their attempts to foster increased writing skills and confidence in their students. All of these skills can be learned through the observation of experienced Writing Center tutors which will ease the worry and burden placed upon first year Graduate Instructors.

Works Cited

Ryan, Leigh, Liza Zimmerelli. *The Bedford Guide For Writing Tutors*. Boston, Macmillan, 2016.