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High, Cry, Hesitant: A Lesson in Effective Teaching

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Abstract

There are no rules or perfect structures when it comes to teaching, tutoring, or learning. To be concerned with them will inevitably create a wall between the student and the teacher. That wall eliminates the possibility of open communication which leads to effective discussions—a back and forth—that results in true learning. Sometimes we need to kick the rules, the guides, and the formulas out the window and instead, remember what it is to be a student first.

Keywords

Reflection, assumptions, effects of stress, tutor as student

It's a Friday morning and I walk into the writing center feeling mostly confident that I know what I'm doing. I am the tutor, the students are the learners and therefore, I am the one to help them wade through the waters of academic writing. I log in to my computer, arrange the seat so that I may comfortably face the student at an inviting angle, and double-check the supply of scrap paper and pencils. I've been obsessed with pedagogy and rereading the tutoring manual for the past two months, and I'm beginning to believe my dedication has paid off. *Look at me*, I think proudly. *I am ready and inviting and can recall all the steps to a proper tutoring session.* However, on this same Friday morning, I was about to be schooled on what I was doing so wrong.

The first student of the day walks in lazily, slumping down into the chair next to me. I'm chipper and excited, ready to wow this student with my guiding questions and encouraging pauses. I begin with the perfect questions, which are received with unfinished answers and vague points that I'm not even sure have anything to do with their paper. I ask another question, nodding reassuringly and still so full of confidence when I look up and into their slightly red eyes. I ask myself, silently of course, *is this student high or am I just thinking that because they're writing about the legalization of weed?* I begin to low-key panic, wondering where in the manual does it cover tutoring a student who may or may not be faded? I draw a blank and instead try my hardest to carry on as if I don't suspect them - asking my usual questions and sitting through copious amounts of unfinished sentences. It was like trying to direct the student through a maze underwater, echoey and distant. Maybe they heard me, but most likely not. Eventually, the session comes to a sloshy end. The student half-smiles and murmurs amicably as I ask if the session was helpful. They leave as I'm wondering if they are going to remember a single thing I said. Hopefully, the notes we wrote are helpful.

The student who walks in next proves to be a tad tougher. She pulls back the chair next to mine, then keeps pulling until she is sitting behind me. I ask her if she could come closer to the table, explaining that it would be nice to be able to look at the writing together. She moves forward about a half-inch then stares blankly at me, saying nothing. *That's okay*, I think to myself, *I'll get her to open up*. She sits with a fistful of long black hair twirling endlessly through her fidgety fingers, silent. All the words that slip from my mouth are answered with one or two words. I repeat the questions in my head three or four times before saying them out loud, wondering, *are these questions not open-ended enough? Am I not being helpful? Why won't she answer me?!* The copious amounts of silence begin to chip away at my confidence. I'm growing anxious with every twirl of her fingers as she stares, refusing to discuss and opting to respond only to yes or no questions. I try and adapt but when the session is finally over and she walks out of the room like a stone soldier, I suddenly feel an undeniable need to breathe. *Was I holding my breath that whole time?*

Before I can speak to the supervisor about catching my breath, literally, another student pops into my office. They are bouncy, communicative, and for a moment it seems like I could rebuild myself from all that had transpired before. The first ten minutes fly by, I'm getting back in the groove when suddenly I turn my head to see a giant teardrop rolling down the student's face. I freeze, rewinding in hyperspeed through the last ten minutes. *What the hell did I say? What did I do wrong! Oh goodness, I've broken a student*. I could think of nothing that would trigger this response in the student. I did everything by the book. *Now where in the book did it outline ways to FIX the crying student?* I push the kleenex box towards the student as they repeat over and over again, "I'm so sorry, it's not you! You're doing great. I'm just so tired, ya know?" Then it clicked. In a split second, I am reliving the times when my own overwhelmed mind and

barely adult body burst into tears at the slightest bit of feedback, even when put in the most constructive of ways. It isn't the person giving the feedback, it's the involuntary release of the stress. The stress of continually working to better myself academically but also figuring out how to be an adult and appearing as if everything is together because if everything isn't together, I am not succeeding. And success must be the only option. I don't know what else I would do. After awkwardly pushing the tissue box to the sopping wet student, I found myself telling the student of the time I sat crying in front of my boss after she posed a simple question - "What can you do better next time." We giggled together as I told this student that saltwater is best for buoyancy, especially when life is trying to drown you.

I had been operating under the impression that in order to be an effective teacher and tutor, I needed to do all the right things in exactly the right way. This belief led me to do two major things wrong. First, this assumption stole all the focus from the student and firmly concentrated it on me. Second, I was so concerned about doing something the right way that I failed to effectively understand and respond to the individual sitting in front of me.

After the student left the office, thanking me for my help and asking me if they could come to see me again, I reflected upon the other students I had seen that day. It became very clear that I could have done more to get out of my head and into the present moments with those students. I had been those students in my undergraduate career, going to class hungover after drinking wine with my friends just after my 21st birthday or the times I could not, for the life of me, get my tongue to speak due to the firm belief that I had nothing intelligent to contribute. Perhaps if I had taken that extra moment to remember being that student, my tutoring and my teaching could be informed by empathy instead of anxiety. Each of those students needed

something different from me, and no formula or guide book could prescribe exactly what that could be.

I learned a valuable lesson that Friday morning. There are no rules or perfect structures when it comes to teaching, tutoring, or learning. To be concerned with them will inevitably create a wall between the student and the teacher. That wall eliminates the possibility of open communication which leads to effective discussions - a back and forth - that results in true learning. We have to remember that no matter our role in education, we are human beings. Although they say 'to err is human', in fact, mistakes in one situation may not be in the next. What I do for one student will not be the salve for another and because of this, I need to kick the rules, the guides, and the formulas out the window and instead, remember what it was to be a student first. It is this that leads me to firmly connect and empower all that look to me for guidance.