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**Of Writing, Teaching, and Tutoring:
Banishing the Presence of the Inner Critic in the Writing Center**

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ABSTRACT:

The inner critic is the internal voice inside all of us that impedes us with negative messages about ourselves and our own capabilities (Elliot 111). In this essay, I illustrate the impact an inner critic can have in Writing Centers for both students and tutors alike and structure strategies to silence that critic. Three specific strategies are provided: (1) to name the inner critic in order to grant control over it, (2) to practice freewriting and understanding poor first drafts, and (3) to assist the student in understanding the allowance for imperfection within writing. By implementing these strategies alongside awareness in the Writing Center, tutors will find the ability to better connect with students and assist them in crafting academic and personal writing.

KEYWORDS:

Writing Center, tutoring, fear of writing, inner critic, strategies, freewriting, teaching

Of Writing, Teaching, and Tutoring:
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I can't do it. I don't know why I thought I could be a writing tutor, but I know now, with complete clarity, that I can't do it. My foot taps incessantly as I attempt to stare down my therapist, but her gaze is steady. "And why can't you be a writing tutor?" she asks me. I've just been hired on at the Writing Center at Utah State University, so obviously *they* think I can. But I can't bring myself to believe them. I don't have an answer for her. She then asks me to, instead, tell her why I'm not good enough. I know this answer.

"I'm no teacher so what right do I have to tell other students what's good or bad. I don't know enough. I'm going to screw up. I'm not a good enough writer," and on and on and on. I spit out every negative comment my mind can invent to prove to her that I am not good enough for this. I think, at some level, I'm hoping she'll tell me to quit. She'll grant me that permission. Instead, at the end of my speech, she leans forward in her chair, closing the space between us, never breaking eye contact. "That's not you talking," she tells me. "That is your inner critic, and it's time for you to take control of your bus again."

The inner critic is the internal voice inside all of us that impedes us with negative messages about ourselves and our own capabilities (J. Elliott 111). It destroys our creative and logical capacities in ways that are difficult to recover from. My therapist tells me that after listening to an inner critic for so long, it's hard to separate that individual piece from our full, authentic selves. We begin believing that the critic is right, that "we are rubbish all the time" until finally "it stops us seeing things clearly" (Wright 29). My therapist describes a metaphorical bus inside all of us in which there is a driver's seat and rows behind it. She says

that this bus is full of emotions and personalities. There's Anxiety, Depression, Mania, Joy, Anger, along with the Inner Critic. She tells me how I've been allowing my inner critic to drive that bus. It takes me wherever it wants to go, impeding every idea and creative thought I have. It stops my pen from reaching the paper, it catches my tongue when I have a presentation, it tells me I am not good enough to be a writing tutor. All the while, I watch it from a back-seat as it barrels through my life, destroying my opportunities and wreaking havoc on my relationships. My therapist tells me by giving this critic a name and taking control of my own bus, I can save myself. We name him Harvey. We practice my ability to say *Hey Harvey, nice to see you again, but I'll take control from here.*

And, it works. My sessions with students, though not always perfect, are uplifting. And within the first month of tutoring, I find out that I am not alone in a battle with an inner critic. The student shakes a little as she places her laptop on the desk. She shifts in her seat, looking away as I ask her what year she's in. A staccato response, *Freshman*, comes quiet. I ask a few other questions: What's your major? *American Studies*. Do you like to read? *Yes*. Are you enjoying school? *No*. She starts chewing her lip, and I ask if everything's alright. She closes her eyes and shakes her head. I ask if she needs someone or if she needs to tell me anything. After a few moments, her voice breaks through the silence, tears clinging to her eyelashes, telling me, "I can't write. I've spent days trying to figure out this first paragraph and I can't get anywhere. It's due in two days and I can't get past this introduction."

We sit in silence for a few moments as I consider her statement. Something has sparked in my mind, a remembrance of the conversation with my therapist. Wondering if it's the right move to make, I ask her, "Why do you feel you can't write?" She describes how she would write a sentence, then rewrite it, then rewrite it again. She would move on to the next sentence, rewrite

it, delete the first sentence, and rewrite it. She wants each one to be perfect before she can move on.

“Each sentence is more awful than the last,” she tells me. “I just want to quit and stop going to class.” It all feels familiar. Her inner critic is attacking her, controlling her, driving her bus. She wants to control it, but perhaps she doesn’t know how. Perhaps there’s a lesson I can share that helped put me in our shared space. So, I tell her what my therapist told me. Name your inner critic and shove them to the back seat. It’s your time to drive.

The inner critic appears session after session once I notice it. Linda Poziwilko from Belmont University claims that “students who arrive on our campuses are facing one of the most psychologically demanding periods of their lives,” and I’ve seen this. I’ve felt it myself. We all have. And time after time, session after session, the first words out of someone’s mouth when talking about writing is: “I’m not that good of a writer.” Phrases like this are an immediate signal that the student might be battling with their inner critic, and over time I’ve developed some strategies to silence that critic for the students I teach. Tutors must be aware of their own inner critics and know how to shut them down in order to help students refute their own.

The first strategy is to name the critic. Tell the student to give the critic a real name so that when they appear, the student can greet the critic like an old friend, and tell them to go sit in the back. It does no use to try and battle with the Inner Critic. Challenging “does not involve debating, disputing, or reversing what the Inner Critic says” (K. Elliott 112), but rather taking back one’s own rights to be in control. Battling with or ignoring the inner critic only gives that being more power. We must simply greet him or her and tell them that it’s our turn to drive.

Another way of silencing the inner critic is to practice freewriting. Tell the student to allow themselves the space for poor quality writing. Explain that “the first draft is the child’s

draft, where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place” (Lamott 22). Tell them that they have every right to write poorly; they can fix it through the editing process afterward. It’s entirely possible that “seemingly unpromising gibberish can yield valuable material” (Glenn 183). Freewriting without stopping gives voice back to the author because the inner critic has no time to try and stop it.

A third way is to help a student understand that no paper will ever be perfect. I allow myself to be vulnerable with them in sessions, explaining that I’m terrified every time I sit down to write or have to hand in a paper. I’m terrified that I have no good ideas, that I’m imperfect, that I’ll never write anything worth reading. I’m also scared that, no matter how much effort I put in, I’ll never get better at these things. But I also tell the student that I believe it’s okay to be scared. The best writing comes when we’re afraid to be writing. It means that what we’re writing matters to us in a way that daily activities (like ordering fast-food or deciding on which jacket to wear) never could.

The inner critic is something that will never be truly shut down. Every time we are triggered, the critic will be there once again trying to take the wheel of our bus. It’s been years since my first session. I’m now a graduate student; I’m an instructor at the university; I’ve had years of training and learning how to write and teach better. Yet, every day when I sit down at the desk, waiting for the student to enter that space, I feel Harvey, my inner critic, trying to take control of my bus and my destination. The key is to welcome him and put him back in the back seat. Taking control of our own writing and teaching is the first step to inner freedom, and “from this free position, the individual can now decide what to do. This decision will no longer be based on the Inner Critic” (K. Elliott 113). We may not always be able to create drastic change within each individual student, but we may have just helped them get through a paper, through

another day in which we are all attempting to push forward. We must praise the student a little more; teach them what the inner critic is; find new ways to battle such critics so we can all can push forward and become the best writers, tutors, and teachers we can be.

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