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Well, How Do You Feel About That Semicolon?

Striking a Balance Between Instruction and Discovery as a Tutor and Teacher

Mark Smeltzer

Abstract

The paper explores the relationship between experiences with teaching and tutoring in the English Department at Utah State University. It examines observations of a first-year graduate instructor; it also draws conclusions on how to navigate the different environments of the USU Writing Center and the 1010 classroom, incorporating strategies and lessons from both.

Keywords

Tutor
Teacher
English
Writing Center
Questions
Discover
Conversation

Having never tutored or taught before, I could not imagine at the beginning of the semester how I might draw from one experience to inform the other. However, I quickly realized after just a few weeks how the differences and similarities in these two approaches offer new learning opportunities, both for the students and for myself as an instructor. On its face, it seems quaint for a first-year grad student, who has taught and tutored all of two months, to share his experience with any presumption of authority. Instead, I offer the experience of genuine and immense growth I have achieved these past months as an English instructor and tutor. For me, there was nowhere to go but up, so the learning curve, but also the potential, was great. I believed that I had no previous experience to rely on except my intuition as a student. But as tutoring sessions progressed, I realized that many of the discussions I was having with students were ones I have had numerous times with my peers and professors in other settings within the English department. I could then combine the confidence that instilled in me with what I have learned from observations to grow as a tutor as well as an instructor.

I have never considered myself particularly personable, or at least, not outgoing in the way I imagine teachers and tutors. So, when I observed other tutors, I felt envious of how smoothly and warmly they introduced themselves to students coming in for writing help, as well as how clearly they explained the procedures of the Writing Center. It quickly became obvious to me that there is no way of knowing what is happening in the minds of tutors; for all I know, they are just as introverted and withdrawn as I am. What is truly admirable is how tutors are able to step into their role and let go of any insecurities and apprehensions for the sake of the student. One by one, I have observed sessions that were friendly, inviting, and always had that x-factor that is needed when working with others, especially given the unavoidable power dynamic that comes with the territory. After all, many students are required to make the trek out to the Writing

Center; they're not always sure why they're there, or they know they need help but aren't sure where to start. They often come in believing that we have something that they need, like some glowing relic that will fit perfectly in their essay. I know I am not the only tutor who senses this level of pressure and responsibility. However, the best sessions I have had involved the immediate diffusion of that imbalance. We are having a conversation, human to human, and all I can do is offer an educated opinion, or even better, help them to discover solutions on their own. I can even help them consider the consequences of the different formal choices they make in their writing, no matter what they decide.

The most common method to help students help themselves is to ask them the right questions rather than giving them the "right" answers (and giving up on the notion of there being one answer in many cases). The question-based approach that is so prevalent in the Writing Center was foreign to me. Like many people, I am impatient and would much rather have an answer be given to me whenever possible. I would also prefer to merely give the answer if I knew it. If someone has a question and I have an answer, why be coy? Why play hard-to-get with the truth? How many times can you reply to a question with, "Well, what do *you* think about that?" What I have learned, however, is that it really is OK to provide answers when the opportunity arises. There is one important caveat to that, however: opportunities like that are few and far between. I never realized how sharp tutors need to be in responding to unique problems on a daily basis. How they do this without knowing every answer to everything is by developing a toolkit adapted to patterns they recognize in students' work. It is true that no two students will come to you with the exact same concern, but they are often very similar. For example, I helped one student connect elements of a braided essay, while another was concerned about transitioning between arguments in a persuasive essay. Both are organizational issues, so upon

recognizing this commonality I can begin to categorize the issue at hand, and at the very least narrow down the solutions I offer the student.

What if I don't know have a solution for them? What if I still don't know what to tell them? To my great relief, I learned through observations that it is not my job to have answer for everything. While this can be frustrating for students and tutors alike, we need to understand that this is also the sweetest deliverance. Not having a direct answer to a student's question is unavoidable. When that happens, there are two options. First, we could speak with feigned confidence and give them answers that work to get the student from point-A to point-B. Or, we can demonstrate to students the process of recognizing an opportunity and discovering an answer. To watch this process in action has been the most rewarding part of tutoring for me. Throughout my observations, I saw time and again how tutors discover with the students that come in. No matter where they are in the writing process, or how frustrated they are, if they are open to discussing their writing, they will always leave with something new to work with. The great strength of all the tutors I observed was in their ability to actively listen to their concerns and ask questions that challenged students to reach their own conclusions. The way I see it, this method helps students understand that no one will understand what they want from their writing more than they do. It also reminds them that ultimately they must take responsibility for what is on the page.

Of course there is always time for plain instruction. If a student is struggling with punctuation, it might not be the time for things like, "But what do *you* think about semicolons?" Part of the job is also knowing when to step in. Deciding when to step in and when to simply guide the student is not a matter of our skills and knowledge in a given area; it's a matter of what is best for the student. Questions about citation are my Achilles' heel. While I enjoy the act of

helping students with their writing, no matter what that entails, my creative writing background leads me to bristle at the mention of *sources* and *bibliographies* and other nuisances of the craft. The value and ethical importance of citation is, however, indispensable. So when a student comes in for help citing their sources, I turn to resources like Purdue OWL, and I do so without any embarrassment. I want to demonstrate to students that knowing where to go for help is far more efficient (and far less aggravating) than trying to memorize an implausible number of rules and standards that are likely to change in the near future anyway. On a broader level, it is also important to show students the strength in admitting one's own ignorance. It would be a severe disservice for me to pretend I knew the answer and misinform them, because I was too afraid of looking foolish.

I cannot help but notice how much tutoring and teaching has required me to simply re-learn what I intuitively valued as a student. For example, I would know when I needed straight answers from an instructor and when I just wanted some guidance while still maintaining personal freedom in my work. That balance must be practiced now that I sit on the other side of the desk. For example, the importance of one-on-one conferences, which at first I did not understand, is now becoming clearer and clearer. I can use these meetings to better understand the needs of each student and help them with projects in a low-pressure environment. The practice tutoring provides is a valuable tool in cultivating those individual relationships students will benefit from both in my class and in the future.

Writing Center Analysis Draft 2

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Writing Center Analysis Draft 1

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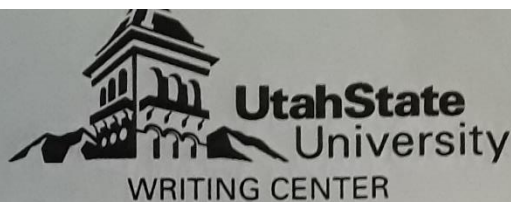
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Writing Center Tutor Observation/Review

Tutor: Camille

Semester/Year: Fall 2019 Start Time: 3:00 End Time: 3:25

Observed by: Mark Smeltzer

Tutor Checklist for Session

- How did the tutor begin the session (i.e. greeting the student/explaining Writing Center procedure)?
 - friendly greeting
 - asked if they've been to WC
 - explained notes, how to get credit, etc.
 - explained what the WC does
- What techniques did the tutor use to give effective feedback to the student?
 - let student search for answers and expand on thinking
 - repeated student ideas back, reworded them for clarity
 - worked through, refined solutions with student
- What questions and strategies did the tutor use to discover the student's concerns with the paper?
 - had student describe where they're at w/ assignment, decisions they've already made
 - shifted conversation to audience to help steer thesis
 - helped student identify missing elements by asking questions
 - encouraged ~~the~~ specificity
- What effective open-ended questions did the tutor ask?
 - what "problem" are you writing about for your project
 - Asked student to word "problem" in sentence form. (thesis)
 - who's your audience?

- What resources did the tutor use in the session?

• requirements for assignment

- How did the tutor ensure that the session lasted between 20-25 minutes

• asked specific, open-ended questions

• expanded on student ideas and offered specific suggestions.

• thoroughly unpacked and explained why they should do "xyz."

• offered example thesis to keep conversation going.

• kept track of time

Reflection

What are your strengths and weaknesses as a tutor in general?

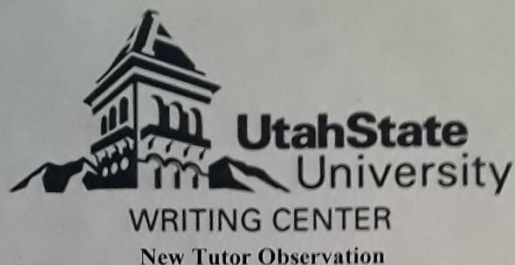
S • upbeat, positive, friendly,
understanding of assignments

W • time management

What are your goals for future sessions and how will you accomplish them?

Goal: end 20-25 minutes by informing student,
reminding self.

Tutor: Camille Observer: Mark Smeltzer Date: 10/1/2019



Tutor: Carri-gen

Semester/Year: Fall 2019

Start Time: 2pm

End Time: 2:25

Observed by: Mark Smeltzer

Tutor Checklist for Session

- How did the tutor begin the session (i.e. greeting the student/explaining the Writing Center procedure)?

Welcomed student, explained time, what they'll do during the visit, notes, and how to get credit.

- What techniques did the tutor use to give effective feedback to the student?

• Asked lots of questions
 • Gave student lots of chances to come up with own answers
 • let student brainstorm and responded with specific detail

- What questions and strategies did the tutor use to discover the student's concerns with the paper?

• Asked what the project is for and professor.
 • Asked what student wanted to improve on
 • Had student read aloud

- What effective open-ended questions did the tutor ask?

• what are requirements for assignment?
 • Asked what they want to work on.
 • Asked student to summarize their draft

- What resources did the tutor use in the session?

• Took thorough notes
• student's draft

- How did the tutor ensure that the session lasted between 20-25 minutes?

• asked lots of questions
• helped student see more possibilities that added to the conversation
• stayed on task

What was something you liked about the session, and how did the tutor achieve that?

• tutor paid close attention to student responses
• took notes not just for specific things to improve, but also brainstorm ideas that will help her later.
• helped student put ideas in her own words

Explain something you might have done differently if you had been tutoring this session.

Might have had student go through assignment description or rubric with me.

Tutor: Carrigan

Observer: Mark Smeltzer

Date: 9/12/2019



Writing Center New Tutor Observation

Tutor: Andrea

Semester/Year: Fall 2019

Start Time: 2:30 End Time: 2:50

Observed by: Mark Smeltzer

Tutor Checklist for Session

- How did the Tutor begin the session (i.e. greeting the student/explaining the Writing Center procedure)?
 - Friendly greeting and ice breaking.
 - Asked if student has been to WC.
 - Explained what WC helps with and how notes work and length of session.
- What techniques did the tutor use to give effective feedback to the student?
 - Have student look at assignment.
 - paid close attention to student's needs.
 - made sure they were on the same page with requirements.
 - read aloud from draft
 - kept good notes
- What Questions and strategies did the tutor use to discover the student's concerns with the paper?
 - Asked what they're concerned with
 - what is the biggest concern
 - Asking who is the audience
- What effective open-ended questions did the tutor ask?
 - "Tell me about..."
 - "How would you explain..."

- What resources did the tutor use in the session?

- materials from student
- Assignment description

- How did the tutor ensure that the session lasted between 20-25 minutes?

- Tutor stayed focused on student concerns and evenly used time for those topics.
- checked time and let student know (nicely) how much time left.

What was something you liked about the session, and how did the tutor achieve that?

Session was focused on student's specific concerns and used examples to make goals clear. Made student feel comfortable with humor and helpful demeanor.

Explain something you might have done differently if you had been tutoring this session.

Make sure feedback is specific to rubric.

Tutor: Andrea Observer: Mark Smeltzer Date: 9/25/2019



Writing Center New Tutor Observation

Tutor: Andrea

Semester/Year: Fall 2019

Start Time: 2:30

End Time: 2:50

Observed by: Mark Smeltzer

Tutor Checklist for Session

- How did the Tutor begin the session (i.e. greeting the student/explaining the Writing Center procedure)?
 - friendly greeting
 - asked if they'd been to WC, explained length, notes, what the WC is for.
- What techniques did the tutor use to give effective feedback to the student?
 - had student explain criteria
 - read draft thoroughly
 - active listening
 - encouraged student to read aloud or use Text-to-Speech.
- What Questions and strategies did the tutor use to discover the student's concerns with the paper?
 - let student read through draft, stopped periodically to highlight specific concerns.
 - talked about introductions
- What effective open-ended questions did the tutor ask?
 - asked how student is evaluating ad
 - how do you feel about the draft?

- What resources did the tutor use in the session?
- draft, pre-session notes from student
- How did the tutor ensure that the session lasted between 20-25 minutes?
- when goal wasn't specific, adapted and went through draft looking for concerns
- made sure all concerns were addressed

What was something you liked about the session, and how did the tutor achieve that?

- Took the time to analyze the draft and find specific opportunities for revision.
- highlighted what student already excelled at.

Explain something you might have done differently if you had been tutoring this session.

Maybe more encouragement to discover opportunities and ways to revise,

Tutor: _____ Observer: Mark Smeltzer Date: 10/02/19