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# A Tutor as an Educator

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## A Tutor as an Educator

By Justyn Hardy

Abstract: Tutoring as a verb implies the requirement to educate; however, the role of the tutor as an educator is often set aside in order to fix the immediate issues with a paper rather than the overarching issues with a student's writing. Tutors provide answers, but it's far better to provide long-term solutions through a moment of education. This paper seeks to identify the moments a tutor ought to become the educator and assuage the trepidations a tutor might have in using their voice in a moment of formal education with a student.

Key Words: Tutoring, Educator, Writing Centers, Roles, Instructor, Syntax, Chronology

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Final Draft

### A Tutor as an Educator

As writing center tutors, we often imagine our sessions as opportunities to work with a student to improve their paper. We ask common questions regarding thesis statements, body organization, and reputable evidence, and all these questions exist in good turn and provide direction to the student on behalf of the paper. But therein permeates the flaw of such logic. Our instruction must seek to provide direction for the paper on behalf of the student. As tutors, it is not our primary job to improve a student's paper; rather, it is our responsibility to improve a student's writing.

I had a student visit me a few weeks ago with the hope of restructuring her essay. Her instructor had given her poor marks for organization on a prior assignment, and she aimed to correct this flaw. After identifying her thesis, we discussed the standard elements: theses are placed at the end of the introductory paragraph, body paragraphs mirror the chronology of points introduced in the thesis, etc. And although these points resonated with the student, even so much that she explained them back to me without a stumble, the writing at large lacked congruency. The syntax followed fascist-like patterns and associative movements didn't exist. Thoughts sprung from one leak to the next and none of the pipes ended up anywhere of use. I found myself at an intersection, one that required me to go beyond the paper she handed me to a more personal level. It seemed in this moment, I had the choice of continuing as a tutor or adopting the temporary hat of an instructor. I adopted that hat, an experiment really, to see what would happen.

Setting the paper to the side, I asked her to tell me why she had chosen her topic. She did so marvelously, citing personal experience that related to her fervor, evidence she'd found within JSTOR, and how the combination suggested the inevitability of her argument. And as she spoke, I typed each word she said verbatim. The process took no more than a couple of minutes, at the conclusion of which, I asked her to look at her speech patterns: the variance in sentence length, the syntactical construction, and most of all, the way her thoughts built one upon the other like a long line of railroad ties. We compared her dictation to the first body-paragraph in her paper and within mere seconds she began identifying the differences. I explained to her that writing, at its best, is distilled speech, a conversation with an audience where the ums, uhs, and likes are removed, and the verbiage refined, but the overarching cadence remains to act as her structural base. If we do not write as we speak, we risk writing in a language that no one can understand. It clicked, and this student began scribbling away at her paper with little input from me.

This took the remainder of our session, and when time when ran dry, her paper remained far from complete, but her skillset acquired a new tool. I felt confident that this student would take the knowledge she gained from our session and apply it, not only to this paper, but to all her writing moving forward. However, to accomplish this, I had to make her the subject of our session and dare to set the paper aside. Steve Matthews eloquently describes this phenomenon in his essay *Helping College Tutors Define Reading and Mold Active Learners* stating, “If {students} see tutoring as a place to come to get answers, then tutoring serves no significant purpose, if, on the other hand, students experience what it is like to be an active engaged participant in learning through tutoring, then tutoring has made a difference.”

As peer tutors in a writing center, we often feel as though the scope of our work involves recommendation and suggestion rather than moments of traditional education, but this couldn't

be further from the truth. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of website resources regarding the rules of writing exist within the search engines of a student's cellular phone. They can access the OWL at Purdue while eating breakfast or waking from an afternoon nap. And these are reputable resources, ones the students ought to use, but answers are not the entirety of a student's education and qualify no one as having learned. As tutors in the writing center, we have the opportunity to educate our peers in the discipline we know best, English, and this opportunity should not go wasted.

Muriel Harris of Purdue University describes the role of a tutor as that of an athletic coach, one that possesses the information their athlete needs but cannot translate that information effectively unless the athlete is taught through engaged, active practice (Harris 63). In my own situation, it was clear the answers I offered the student were useful and did improve the structure of the paper, but my answers could not improve her writing. That outcome required demonstration and practice, neither of which comes through giving students traditional answers to their preformulated questions. As Harris puts it, "What we need to do as we tutor, is to remind ourselves that we are coaches and not members of the varsity squad."

Although it may seem intimidating or even out of place to set aside a student's paper to better focus on their writing, this can net results that will far supersede a single writing assignment. A student who suffers from an overuse of passive voice may not even be familiar with what passive voice is. A tutor might point out one or two instances in the paper and allow the student a few minutes to rephrase the syntax, but what of the habit, what of the knowledge gap that goes without service. If that same tutor becomes a coach, an educator, even for five brief minutes and sets the paper aside, there exists an opportunity to enhance the student's writing for

the remainder of their college career. The greater payoff is clear and yet, so often, tutors resist a moment to educate.

In the sphere of higher education, it is easy to view only those with a Ph.D. or an MFA as appropriate to educate. As tutors, we don't possess those credentials, but that lack of experience does not equate to a lack of knowledge, especially in our respective fields. If peer education was considered taboo or relegated to those unaccredited stations, writing centers at all universities would cease to function. As writing center tutors, we must realize that we have not been hired to better a student's grade, rather, we have been given the privilege to improve their skill set within the English discipline. And it is a privilege we should exploit at every opportunity.

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