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Hats: Being a Tutor, Teacher, Student, and Mother Learning When to Wear What Hat

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Abstract: “Chapter One” of *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* (Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2016) breaks down the ways in which tutors may interact with students with the metaphor of hats and “the many hats tutors wear” (Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2016). This paper explores the way in which these hats have been worn in the USU Writing Center, in my experience, as well as how they translate into other roles I play.

Keywords: motherhood, tutoring, graduate instructor, writing center

## Hats

*The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* by Leigh Ryan and Lisa Zimmerelli (2016) was handed to me. The white, green, and goldish cover stared at me, with the black professional font seeing into my soul and judging my ability to tutor or teach, or anything at a University. As a new Graduate Instructor and student at Utah State University (USU), I was diving into unknown water and it felt like the kind of cold lake water that makes you gasp deeply, when you jump in, as you shiver to the core of who you are. The guide book for the tutoring part of the journey, which was a requirement for the Graduate Instructorship, was handed to me during a week-long overwhelming orientation. Information was constantly being thrown at me and expectations about who I needed to be as an instructor, tutor, and student felt like an ominous black cloud hanging over my head, assuring me that I could never be good enough.

*The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* (Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2016) discusses different hats tutors wear and goes through each, explaining how tutors play each individual role depending on the situation, such as coaches for some students and collaborators for others (Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2016). I have worn all of these hats before as a mom, I have literally been a coach, but only to a tee-ball team consisting of 4 to 6-year-olds who had no idea what was going on, and I have definitely been an ally. I have been a commentator, collaborator, writing expert, and counselor as well but mostly I have been a learner. Each hat the Bedford Guide sets out I can put on and with my experience as a teacher and tutor, these last few months, I can wear them better and better to show up wearing the best hat for a given situation. In this paper, I will discuss how each hat in the writing tutor's guide has been influenced by motherhood and more precisely shaped by experience gained in the classroom and the USU Writing Center.

## The Ally and The Counselor

My 11-year-old daughter laid on the dining room floor sobbing in my lap as I stroked her hair and asked her what had happened at school that day that was making her so upset. She began to tell me, muffled through her sobs, about a girl at school that was pulling on her clothes, kicking her in the back of the knees, and was all around demanding and demeaning towards her. As her ally I called the principal the next day and requested that he take care of the situation, which he took very seriously. An ally, to me, speaks up for someone who can't speak up for themselves and finding opportunities for this in teaching and tutoring is a hat well worn. Though in the writing center a student won't necessarily come in and cry about being bullied requiring a call to the Dean, they still may need an ally in a way a writing center tutor can provide. *The Bedford Guide* says, as an ally, "you are a friend who offers support to a writer coping with a very difficult task—writing a paper (Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2016, p. 5). A smile is a quick way the guide suggests demonstrating you're an ally to a student in the writing center, just like stroking my daughter's hair was the best way I could be an ally at that moment. An ally is an empathetic commiserator and sometimes just sitting with someone a moment, giving a smile, or another appropriate gesture for a given situation, can create an ally.

The hat of an ally is similar to the hat of the counselor, a tutor must remember that students have way more stress going on in life than their paper, maybe the GRE coming up or another big exam and personal issues that are distracting them from their studies (Ryan & Zimmerelli). *The Bedford Guide* (2016) suggests "In such cases, you offer support, sympathy, and suggestions as appropriate" (Ryan & Zimmerelli, p. 7), Back to me and my daughter on the floor, I find as she gets closer and closer to being a teenager being a parent who offers "support, sympathy, and suggestions" (Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2016, p. 7) is exactly what she needs.

## **The Coach and The Commentator**

Recently, I had a student come into the writing center who was working towards a final paper in English 2010 and had come in hoping to get help with organizing his thoughts. He had many sources and an idea but wasn't sure how to actually arrange them to create a cohesive body of work. As we talked he shared with me that through his research he had found positive and negative aspects of his chosen subject matter which gave me the idea of making a pros and cons list. After creating that list the student could see how he would organize his work and say what he wanted to say. He left excited to have direction and I was excited I put on the appropriate hat for the occasion.

A coach doesn't play the game, a reader doesn't write the paper, but by being on the outside looking in coaches and readers, aka tutors, play an important role in winning the game (Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2016, p. 5). A commentator is a similar hat but consists of the paper, or game, as a whole and in that role a person could guild students, gearing them up with know-how to benefit the current assignment the student has brought in as well as future writing (Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2016). Like a sport's commentator who can see the entire game and describe each play, what strategies are being used or not, wearing the hat of a commentator in the writing center gives insight into the big picture yet the hat of the coach allows for more detailed tactics, and maybe a little bit of cheerleading. By being on the outside looking in, I was able to give the student guidance, using the pros and cons list strategy, and be the commentator and coach he needed. In the writing center, classroom, or at home a coach and/or commentator can see a broader perspective, giving invaluable insight to a paper, a homework assignment, or really any project a person is embarking on in life or for a grade.

## **The Collaborator and The Writing Expert**

My daughter's Jr. High recently announced the Spring musical, *Fiddler on the Rood Jr.*, and she is looking forward to trying out. The day she was given the information she ran home from school when the last bell rang, burst open the door, and after telling me how excited she was she asked me what song she should sing for the audition. I have never been in or auditioned for a musical but I enjoy going to see them and I have had years of professional singing lessons. To my daughter, her mom who has taken her to the theatre and sings constantly must be an expert.

The writing expert hat is one that students put on tutors (Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2016) like my children put on me—I'm the mom, the only adult of a single-parent home, I must know! The guide says, "just by being a tutor, you become more knowledgeable about writing" (Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2016, p. 6), just by being a mom, I become more knowledgeable about parenting. Sometimes the expert hat is the best hat to wear but other times a collaborator is more what is needed. The guide uses the example of having a student come in to be tutored who is a well-versed writer with extensive knowledge on a subject and the session becomes a collaborative exchange of ideas mutually exhilarating and beneficial (Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2016). With the expert hat in place, I gave my daughter suggestions based on her voice and the song that I knew but quickly switched to the hat of the collaborator when it came down to deciding on which tune.

## **The Learner**

Whether I am sitting on the floor with a daughter crying over being bullied, using strategies to guide a student in the writing center, giving advice for a musical audition, being

overwhelmed in grad school, teaching, or any other myriad of activities I do sporting different hats, I am first and foremost a learner. According to the guide, a learner as a tutor gets the opportunity to gain knowledge from all the different papers students bring in for guidance but, I would argue, it goes further than that (Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2016). As a learner, I am also learning what hats are the most appropriate to wear to guide a student in the USU Writing Center or the classroom, as well as which hat to wear to be a student myself, a mother, a friend, a partner, and all the other roles I play.

As a learner, all these lessons I've learned in the past few months have prepared me for the initially overwhelming role of a Graduate Instructor, grad student, and tutor as well as the roles of parenting that I am constantly struggling and learning new things through. All these roles, the different hats I wear to show up for them, and how I am constantly learning has helped me become better in each role and as a person overall. I gain much more from these experiences than students and my children will ever know.

## References

Ryan, L., & Zimmerelli, L. (2016). *The Bedford guide for writing tutors* (6th ed.). Boston; New York: Bedford/St. Martins.