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Successful Tutoring Sessions, Successful Student Conferences

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Abstract

Many students come into their writing center appointments and student-teacher conferences with largely negative “writing baggage.” These students often have the expectation that these sessions will be what they were like in high school—the teacher marks what they have done wrong and though there may be positive things said, the students often remember the negative. So how can tutors and teachers create a new environment to help students feel comfortable with their writing while still teaching? This paper explores two potential solutions: beginning sessions and determining a session’s agenda. Through treating students like they matter and letting them help determine an agenda in a session, we can push back against negative writing experiences and create a productive space for students to talk about their writing.

Keywords: agenda, student-teacher conferences, writing baggage, tutors, teachers, writing center sessions

Successful Tutoring Sessions, Successful Student Conferences

The student walks into the writing center, their calm demeanor betrayed by the crumpled piece of paper. It's the first time they've been here and they are only here because there is that subtle, stressful reminder on their Canvas page: "Writing Center Visit 25 points." Their shoulders are worn down with the weight of everything negative their teachers have ever said about their writing. They poured their souls into those papers, doing their best to meet their teacher's expectations, but with each red mark the confidence they had was replaced with fear. Those red marks translated into more than missing points. For this student, and many others, these marks become a symbolic representation of their self-perceived inability to write. Then, they are introduced to their tutor, another authority figure with a figurative red pen, and they are forced to confront years of writing fears and beliefs. For this student, whether they realize it or not, those first few minutes of their session will determine if they have to relive these former experiences or whether they will have a new, uplifting writing experience.

The adage "first impressions matter" is something that should not be taken lightly when beginning a writing center appointment or a student-teacher conference. Writing centers preach that they are peer-tutoring centers, and teachers try to stress that a student-teacher conference is there to help the students. Still, when many students walk into these meetings, they bring with them their writing baggage, a lack of faith in their writing abilities, and a great deal of trepidation. They've met with their teachers before, they've seen those pens, and they know what is coming. So, how can teachers and writing tutors push back against the years of potentially negative writing experiences in order to create a favorable writing experience?

There are a variety of approaches that tutors can take to push back against writing baggage, but a foundational approach can help establish a good tone for the rest of the tutoring session. The first few minutes of a writing center visit is when a tutee can learn that the writing center is a place where their writing isn't going to be judged. Sure, there will be constructive criticism, but it won't be that harsh red pen. But this is all dependent on the tutor. It is so important for tutors to realize that they have a lot of influence over how the session will pan out. The little things they do, like shaking a student's hand or asking a student how their day is and listening will have a powerful impact on how the student responds to the advice. Still, this is often seen as a challenge. However, is it because we have overcomplicated it with expectations of "things a tutor should say"? What if we encouraged tutors to begin sessions like they would begin a conversation with a friend? What would happen if we reinforced a more casual approach focused on seeing how students are doing that day, asking them how we can help them, and listening to their concerns? As I have observed sessions, I have come to believe that beginning a session with a more casual, informal approach not only eases the discomfort of the student, but also helps reinforce the concept that the writing center is a peer-tutoring center.

The same principles of creating an open, friendly environment for peer-tutoring applies directly to teacher-student conferences. When a student comes in and meets their teacher one-on-one in a pre-scheduled conference, they may be worried or stressed. After all, they've interacted with you during class sessions, but now that they are working with you one-on-one, your role as an authority figure is inescapable. However, through assertive efforts by the teacher, a discussion-based space can be created in a conference as well. Just like in a tutoring session, a teacher should always begin a conference by asking to see how the student is doing. When

students enter a conference with their teacher and the teacher takes a few minutes to inquire after their day and well-being, even if it is brief, it can change the tone of the conference. Just like it is obvious when someone listens to respond (which means they aren't really listening), students recognize when they have become a 20-minute obligation and the conference immediately changes.

In both situations, there is an important element of determining the plan for the tutoring session or student conference. How this will occur will vary according to the type of session, but some of the principles are the same. The most important thing to remember is that the students need to have a say in how these sessions or conferences will happen. It is reasonable that tutors and teachers will have specific things that they need to discuss, but students also need to have an opportunity to help decide the agenda. I had a tutoring session where student came in asking for help with APA citations. Her paper wasn't due for a while yet and I explained that we really prioritized working on her ideas first. But she emphatically said she wanted help with APA citations. So, we worked on APA citations. Maybe it wasn't what the paper needed exactly, but it was what the student wanted. Instead of superimposing my ideas on her, I allowed her to play a big role in determining the trajectory of the session. As she left the session, it seemed that instead of constantly worrying about her citations, she could now focus on the rest of her paper. It is possible to reconcile the two disparate approaches to a paper. Sometimes the tutor will have to be more assertive, but they should never refuse to work on what student wants. It can be a difficult balancing act, but one that is achievable because the student already knows that you are there to help them as a friend and a peer.

The same principle also applies in a student-teacher conference. This will take place differently as student-teacher conferences are by nature different. They should begin with the teacher inquiring after the student, just like in a tutoring session. Ideally through the expression of genuine concern about the general welfare of the student and authentic listening, they will recognize that you genuinely care. In turn, when it comes time for you to broach a difficult topic like the state of their grades or their classroom experiences, it doesn't seem trite because you've already shown that you are there to help the student succeed. Furthermore, through a less-formal interaction it can open the doors for a discussion when you ask for feedback.

Beginning a conference in a personalized manner can make it a less stressful situation for students. In one conference with a student I tried really hard to make it a friendly, personable session instead of overly formal. We still talked about the things that I wanted to address, but at the end of the conference the student brought up some concerns she had and we had a great discussion. I firmly believe that if I focused on ticking off all of the items in the to-do list of the conference agenda, the student may not have felt comfortable in helping to set the agenda that gave her space to focus on her concerns. Though I never formally asked what she wanted to talk about, I tried to create a space that encouraged discussion and that discussion followed.

As we encourage tutors and teachers to create a space for students to talk about their writing, we can help to reframe the writing experiences many students have had. The way to push back against these negative experiences is to treat every student like they matter and to let them help determine what will be discussed in a tutoring session or student conference. These small steps, even though they seem trite, can have a great effect on the success of these meetings, and in turn, the future success of the students.