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Potential of a Tutor's Personality

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Abstract

In this paper I talk about the importance of each individual tutor's personality to the value of the Writing Center. Without the various personalities, students could just search for answers on the internet. What the Writing Center provides is a dynamic tutoring experience where tutors can shift to meet students' needs.

Keywords: Tutor personality, improvisation, student dependence

When I first started as a tutor, I was terrified. The responsibility of helping other students with their work was almost overwhelming, and I barely felt qualified to even get hired. To make up for that pressure, I tried to understand and memorize every rule and line that I read about or we talked about in training. The problem with all of this is that I'm terrible at following scripts—I'm an awful actor—and under pressure everything I'd learned was completely wiped from my mind. For the first month of working at the Writing Center, I thought I was terrible at my job; I never said the lines I was supposed to, I talked too much, I was too weird. I had no confidence in myself, and discouraged, thought that I just might not be cut out for the job.

That changed after I was observed by Suze, one of my Writing Center course instructors, during a session. I got a little lucky with the student who came in—she might be the most excited and collaborative student I've ever met—and the session went very well. After the student left, I was expecting a wave of criticism that I didn't hit specific beats that we had talked about in class, or that I was too jittery and informal. Instead, Suze was incredibly affirming, immediately quieting all of my fears. Surprisingly to me, she pointed out how I used my sense of humor and personality in the session to connect with the student.

Suze's comments completely changed my approach to tutoring moving forward. I stopped feeling guilty when I talked a little too much or acted a little goofy in a session. Instead of seeing a lot of my natural impulses and personality as a flaw, I began to see them as a tool in helping students feel comfortable and confident in a tutoring context. All of this isn't to say that rules and other essential parts of being a tutor aren't important, but that instead of restricting my own behavior while obsessing with meeting those standards, I can use my personality to more effectively achieve them.

The impact of personality on students is key to getting the most out of a tutoring session. It's not inaccurate to say that a lot of students either don't understand the function of the Writing Center or don't know what to expect. Many students arrive with a citation machine mentality, hoping that they might be able to plug in certain information and needs and have their session spit out a clean and concise answer on the other side. While a tutoring session sometimes needs to be just that—a student needs a question answered and the tutor can answer it—they can be so much more messy, sprawling, and productive than that as well.

Similar to the citation machine mentality is the search for an authoritative voice, hoping “please, god, just tell me what to do.” A student overwhelmed by their assignment or professor's expectations might come to the writing center looking for someone to grab their paper firmly by the shoulders and march it in the right direction. While this isn't inherently bad, this kind of mentality can create a tempting trap for a tutor eager to feel helpful. In “Can I Say That,” Kim Nolt says that “tutors find job satisfaction in being needed, so they sometimes strengthen the reliance on tutoring services instead of helping students develop skills” (14). Nolt emphasizes the “delicate balance between dependency on tutors and the independence of writers” (14). In my early sessions (and even still today, I'll admit), sometimes a student would come in with a paper that just wasn't quite clicking but I could feel the passion and energy behind what the student was trying to do, and I can't help but offer too many personal additions. Instead of working alongside the student to help them develop their own ideas and approaches, it can become too easy to just load the student up with a checklist of changes and decisions handed down from an authoritative tutor.

It's in the rejection of these two mentalities—of a script-following robot or an all-knowing authority—that the unique and vibrant personalities of each individual tutor can flourish in an infinite number of unpredictable ways.

The unique personalities of tutors can also be important for students who aren't comfortable with the tutoring experience or aren't open to having their work judged by a stranger. The addition of the personal aspect of tutoring can be a raw and stressful experience. Writing is by its nature an extremely personal act, even when the writing is technical. A student's writing, even if they're not passionate about the paper, becomes an extension of the writer just through the sheer effort and time invested into the project. Students can feel reticent to be criticized or have their writing changed by someone they see as a peer.

Tutoring can be an odd obstacle course of navigating social mores while simultaneously trying to objectively evaluate someone's writing. Because of this, the personality of the tutor is overwhelmingly important to how the session goes. By highlighting and emphasizing the natural empathy that tutors have within themselves they can make the session so much more productive on both ends. Although the initial stress of tutoring can feel like an insurmountable hill of obligations, requirements, and signposts, once a new tutor is used to the basic skeleton of the session, the possibilities of tutoring blossom immediately on the potential of their personality.

Works Cited

Nolt, Kim R. "Can I Say That?" *Writing Lab Newsletter*, March 2011, pp. 14-15.

