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The Creative, the Critic, & the Tutor: Tutoring the Creative Process

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The creative writing session presents tutors with the unique opportunity to become an integrated part of the writer's creative process, a system balanced between both the writer's creative and critical voice. The former spontaneously invents material while the latter crafts it into a final product. While the creative session can be daunting for general tutors as it requires stepping away from the familiarity of the traditional academic setting, embracing the uncertainty of the session allows the tutor to play imperative roles as a student of the writer, audience to their work, and creative voice for their creative process.

The Creative, the Critic, & the Tutor: Tutoring in the Creative Process

“Vivian is standing at the top of a waterfall during a forest fire. Nic hasn’t made it to the top yet. He has just finished helping the last of the girls up. She moves to the edge and a burning log falls over her,” Karen, a new student of the community writing center, tells me.

“And then what happens?” I ask, feeling like a faux psychiatrist prodding into the uncharted details of the novel she and her husband are writing.

Creative writing sessions present tutors with the unique challenge of objectively criticizing work that is often informed by the writer’s subjective feelings and experiences. This can leave the tutor feeling disarmed because it requires stepping away from familiarity. The challenge of the creative session is both emotional and intellectual. Not only is there, in most cases, less emotional distance between the writer and their creative piece than with an academic counterpart, but the tutor may be trained in the generalities of the craft and lack specific knowledge regarding the genre at hand. In the beginning, the session may feel as though suspended in the thin air of insecurity. However, these insecurities are more than a reaction to feeling unprepared on the tutor’s part. They reflect an intuitive sense that the authoritative position typically occupied by the tutor simply is not effective for the creative session, a sense that should be embraced with confidence.

“Well, she screams,” Karen tells me.

“Okay, but what is Vivian feeling?” I ask.

“Terror, fear, really, really uncertain.”

So, how is a tutor to provide a productive session from a position that feels so intangible? So uncertain? To do so requires understanding the intimate and valuable roles the tutor takes on when invited to join the writer's creative process: the student, the critic or audience, and the creative voice.

Karen and I had been discussing her novel for the better part of an hour before we narrowed our conversation into a precise moment of her character's experience, and we were far from our starting point in the Logan Library where she asked me to help "writerfy" her work. She brought me one chapter of 20 that was written in bullet points. I had no idea where to begin, and I entered the session feeling like Vivian. My instinct was to play the "artisan," take control and fit the piece into my preconceived little idea of what a session could be but, by nature of her writing, I couldn't (Sherwood 54). There was nothing to do but ask her to tell me about her work. In so doing, I was unintentionally embodying the first role of the tutor in the creative process by allowing myself to become Karen's student. "This role reversal is beneficial to writers because by having to teach the tutor about [their piece]...writers might realize they know more than they thought" (Fitzgerald and Lanetta 148). By becoming a student of the writer, the tutor sets the stage for a session that forefronts the writing by removing the dogmatic restrictions of the "artisan" and allowing for the uncertain to take place. "The surprises that occur during tutorials can— if embraced— bring unexpected dividends for a tutor and student writer, giving them experience with what may become an important element in their artistic process" (Sherwood 56). Embracing the uncertainty of the session by allowing the writer to teach results in learning on both sides of the tutoring relationship. While the tutor learns the unique language of the writer's creative process, teaching puts an important cognitive distance between the writer and their

writing, allowing them to become an observer of their work. Karen, for example, couldn't see the dissonance between her imagination and the work her words were doing to communicate it. As her student, I was simply trying to learn as much about the vision she had for her piece as I could.

"She screams. Does she hear herself scream?" I ask.

"Well, I guess...no. No, she doesn't hear herself scream," Karen says, after considering the question.

Creating a distance between the student and their work provides a space for them to get a fresh perspective, a sense of how effective their writing is to someone without their vision, and ultimately, more fully embody their craft. "Creative practice at its most invigorating should involve becoming both writer and reader at the same time...Creative writing is characterized by the two activities being more integrated, or part and parcel of the same process: to write as we read, and to read as we write" (Scott 5). The tutor's second role, that of the audience and critic, is invaluable for achieving this union because it allows the writer to view their writing through the eyes of a reader. Regardless of their experience with the genre, the tutor can provide an account of their experience with the piece and fulfill the important function of the audience:

Readers... mentally construct by drawing on their own unique background knowledge and experiences. As such, they provide a particular way of thinking about reading that encourages and allows for responses governed by a combination of text, author and reader. They conceive reading as a kind of [transaction] emphasizing that active participation by readers is crucial to making meaning. (Cushing 8)

By relaying their experience as an audience to the piece, the tutor becomes a passive but productive critic. In this role, rather than actively suggesting changes based on specific issues in the writing, like an academic session, the tutor provides their understanding of the piece as a final product. The tutor's attitude regarding suggesting changes should be speculative, with an attention to how their suggestions may define the writer's creativity and the goal of simply bringing the writer to an awareness of potential shortcomings in their work. "Awareness of what happens when readers read should be a prominent factor in creative practice" (Scott 20). For instance, as an audience to Karen's work, my task was not to explain how she should use scenic detail to improve her piece but to show her that I had trouble visualizing and feeling the intensity of her scene. Playing both the student and the audience allowed me to develop an empathy for the piece, an understanding of both her intentions for her writing and how it read as a finished product. With the combined experience of both, I was ready to play the part of the creative.

The final role the tutor plays is the part of the creative voice alongside the writer. This is not to say that they pick up the pen, but it is to recognize the necessity of creatively engaging with the writer and their writing in the unique circumstances of the session. The creative role is not the "third step" in the creative session, rather it is the combined approach of the tutor who has embodied both the student and the audience. Doing so optimizes the student's ability to creatively approach their work at whatever stage it's in and begin to craft it toward completion. The creative tutor recognizes that in the session they have been invited to actively shape the artistic process for the piece. Where the routine of academic tutoring can become dogmatic, "by contrast, a tutor who performs as an artist would view each tutorial as a potentially unique event, a chance to experience instances of creativity, engage completely in the moment, and effect

change in the writer and herself” (Sherwood 55). As the creative voice, the tutor works with both the writer’s vision and their writing, balancing their discussion so as not to command the piece. This includes crafting nuanced questions for the piece, being open to unexpected and even accidental ideas with the author, and providing mindful suggestions and approaches to reintroduce the writer to their work and help them pay closer attention to the details of their own imagination.

“So, what does she hear?” I ask, hanging on her answer.

Slowly, her look of beat concentration unfurled.

“The water comes to a halt...and the fire crackles like rain sounds...,” she says excitedly.

Rather than discussing Karen’s work with an agenda or vision of my own in mind, I tried to be as empathetic and creative with my tutoring as she was with her writing. That is, I tried to understand both sides of her work: her intentions and what was on the page. As a student, I learned how to listen to Karen’s vision and put distance between her and her work. As a reader, I helped draw her attention to how her vision was working on paper. Finally, as a creative, my voice and questions added an understanding perspective for her to arrive at her own creativity and by the end of the hour we weren’t just reading bulleted points about Vivian’s experience in Karen’s imagination, we were witnessing it.

“And then?”

“Then Nic’s hand comes over the edge and Vivian clasps it,” Karen says. “She pulls him over the falls and the world catches up to her.”

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