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Wearing a Hat or a Mask: How to Consolidate the Teacher/Tutor Identity

Abstract

What is a tutor and what is a teacher? What roles do they play in the construction of writing and the teaching of it? These identities, and their unique approaches to teaching, initially served as struggling points of my pedagogical identity. Many individuals who have ever tutored writing or taught composition can relate to this pedagogical trial by fire. So, then, while under the duress of identity how can a teacher/tutor consolidate these distinct practices? What may seem to be a crisis of identity is actually a crisis of self, best solved by identifying these frustrations and compiling the best parts of both identities into a cohesive whole. Once the tutor and teacher are one, learning is best facilitated in any composition setting.

Keywords: Identity, Writer, Academic, Masks, Composition, Pedagogy, Rhetoric, Persona, Role

I once perceived tutoring and teaching, as pedagogical practices, as existing in wildly different worlds of composition and writing, both with varying intrinsic values that were their own. Tutors, in my mind, were the experts of one on one discourse, much of which was unusable in a large classroom. Alternatively, the teacher stood at the head of a room, guiding and directing learning for the majority and aiding in the construction of knowledge and understanding. To me, much of this was unusable in the one on one teaching experience. I saw value in both identities, but valued them based off of a contextual hierarchy that I invented for myself. In this evaluating of worth, I left no space for me, as an identity. In my pedagogical struggle with identity, my experience as a tutor in the writing center taught me that it was okay to be myself. Whether that was in a classroom or a tutoring session, my most important identity, and the hat I should wear most often, is my own.

I remember my first day walking into my classroom on a Monday morning. I was early, due to nervous energy, but I had spent the entire week before preparing in an orientation for new instructors. I felt fairly confident, but that fear, ever present, lingered in the back of my mind. I set about preparing the tools I would need for my first lesson and watched as students arrived one by one. The feeling in the room was different than anything I'd encountered till then. Students, as they took their seats, were quiet and almost fearful. Myself, being a new Graduate Instructor, chose to do nothing about the feelings in the room and instead finished preparing my lesson and then sat quietly behind the desk until class started. I realize now that what I was sensing from my students was deference to what they perceived as authority. To them, I was already wearing a hat to which authority and power in the classroom was granted.

In contrast, I remember my first day walking into the writing center to tutor. It was a Wednesday morning, nothing too special or out of the ordinary about it. I had just finished teaching my fifth class for my graduate instructorship and had begun to sense the lingering deference from my students to my position as a teacher. Now, before me, stood another new mountain that I had no familiarity with. I felt the anxiety increasing, the feelings of incapability growing in my chest, threatening to burst free. I had entered the classroom with some confidence, due to a received training, but I had no such preparation for tutoring. I was certain that I would not know how to correct grammar properly or that a student would show up one day with a paper that I wouldn't even know how to begin to approach. In my mind, the Writing Center had become a place of improvisation and on the fly lessons, which I was not comfortable with yet in my limited experience. I couldn't seem to put a finger on why I felt the way I did. I wouldn't, in fact, gain any answers to my complex feelings about the dichotomy of teacher and tutor until a few weeks later.

My first experience of beginning to understand the estranged dichotomy between my identities as the teacher and the tutor started with a book titled, *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors Sixth Edition* by Leigh Ryan and Lisa Zimmerelli. Within this book you can find everything from information on how to ask open ended questions to new ideas about generating thought or approaching topics. What I found most fascinating though is located on page four, right at the front of the book. There is a section here titled "The Many Hats Tutors Wear" and it contains, within its brief four pages of space, a list of "hats," or identities for tutoring, that can be used to better aid a tutee in receiving the information they need. I immediately began trying to apply these hats to my tutoring sessions to find some sort of foundation of thought. I had mixed results. Some of these hats like "the ally," "the commentator," and "the counselor," all came very

easily and were effective for me, fitting my methods naturally and aiding my efforts. Meanwhile, attempting to be “the coach” or “the collaborator” felt like a stilted struggle upon which I could find no foundation of success or efficacy. At first, I chalked it up to my own inexperience and kept trying to wear the hats that I found so difficult to put on, but I eventually found myself resorting to those identities less and less frequently as my frustration with them grew. It became not a matter of which hat I could comfortably wear, but which identity could I force onto myself and keep there throughout an entire session.

The frustration was only the first step in a long process. I felt it was my responsibility as a tutor and a teacher to be able to assume the role or identity that I might determine any given student/tutee may need. Why, then, was it becoming increasingly difficult to adopt the hats that didn't seem to fit me? It seemed that, if I wanted to be as effective as possible, I would need to force these hats to fit until I became comfortable with being uncomfortable. This only made tutoring into an agonizing process that I no longer enjoyed, but I continued to struggle with pushing onwards anyways, determined to be capable of wearing any hat for any student.

I found a piece of my answer in a dialogue, written between David Bartholomae and Peter Elbow, two compositionists who argued extensively on the idea of identity. They suggested, in their discourse spanning several essays, that there is a decision that everyone must eventually make within the field of teaching. That decision is whether or not they adhere to the identity of writer or academic in their pedagogical practices. A writer, in Peter Elbow's words, is someone who gets “deep satisfaction from discovering meanings by writing—figuring out what [they] think and feel through putting down words” (Elbow 72). Meanwhile, an academic is “reading knowledgeable books, wrestling [their] way through important issues with fellows, figuring out hard questions” (Elbow 72). I found myself, throughout the course of this

discussion, identifying the writer as a tutor and the academic as a professor or teacher. I see an issue here, however, and that lies in the fact that I believe that anyone who is invested in composition, or teaching of any kind, does all of these things. Writing to discover answers, reading to find new knowledge, arguing with fellow colleagues to figure out hard questions. These identities, in one way or another, fit anyone who engages with composition in a meaningful way. My identity wasn't solely that of a writer/tutor or academic/professor, but instead I was both.

I concluded that I had been attempting to consolidate my philosophy as a teacher into my philosophy as a tutor. I was wearing hats that didn't fit, trying too hard to cover up the teacher in the writing center and the tutor in the classroom. Somehow, in my mind, I had come to believe that the two identities were distinct and definable. In other words, I wasn't wearing hats, but masks instead. I was attempting to cover up my identities, depending on location and context, formulating distinct personas and adopting pedagogical ideas. It was for this reason that I found it very difficult to force myself into hats for the Writing Center and in my own classroom.

An experience I had with a student helped me clarify and resolve these feelings. They came to visit me during my office hours, and I found myself slipping into my persona as a tutor as we discussed their paper. It felt easy, natural even, and the student and I managed to work through their concerns quickly. Open ended questions, listening, silence, and many other tutor tools played a huge role in turning the space in which I was a teacher into a space I shared with the tutor. All along I had told myself that the personas were different and distinct, used only in certain spaces. This experience, however, taught me that I am the tutor and the teacher, the coach and the ally. I am both of those people and distinguishing between the two was foolishness. I am me. Thus, the identities came together, and my pedagogy broadened. This is the lesson that the

writing center taught me. Be yourself, no matter the context or circumstance that you find yourself in as a teacher, and then you will find a success that exists far beyond false authority or forced identity.

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