4-18-2019

Professionalism in the Writing Center: Combining Compassion and Composition

Carrigan Price
Utah State University

Utah State University
MERRILL-CAZIER LIBRARY

Carrigan Price

Professionalism in the Writing Center: Combining Compassion and Composition

English 4910

18 April 2019

Abstract:

Much is demanded from peer tutors if they are to be perceived as professionals; they must be a listening ear, a helping hand, and an expert writer in order to effectively help students. However, tutors' behavior must adapt to each individual student, paper, and session. Truly professional tutors ignore traditional definitions of professionalism in favor of providing students the help and advice they most need. Tutors need to pay attention to students' initial behavior, students' body language throughout the session, and their own feelings of comfort or discomfort in order to appropriately react to the private and personal content of student papers. Openness to discussing typically-taboo topics is an integral part of professional peer tutoring; tutors who adapt to each student and session are fulfilling their professional obligations far better than tutors who refuse to discuss the intimate and distressing content of students' writing.

Professionalism in the Writing Center: Combining Compassion and Composition

As if being a new tutor wasn't nerve-wracking enough, being observed by the Writing Center Director pushed me dangerously close to giving up on the new job altogether. My fears diminished slightly as I realized I was familiar with the assignment the student was working on. Better yet, the student was quite chatty and ready to dialogue with me. However, the more we read and the more the student talked, the more uncomfortable I became—the paper was an exploration of the relationship between the student and her abusive father. Her writing was good, but there were things to improve. I did my best to ignore the content and instead focused on organization and paragraph structure—like good tutors are supposed to do. Right? My well-formed open-ended questions only invited the student to pour out more personal details about the difficult relationship. I stuck to my guns and finished the session without ever touching the intimidating content of the paper. I had helped her improve her organization, which was what I felt my job description entailed. My observed session was over and I heaved a sigh of relief—until the next session began. The next student was working on the same assignment; however, much to my dismay, her topic was equally as private and significant. She needed help developing the ideas in her paper as she explored her crisis of faith. Again, I vowed to look at the writing separate from the writer and completed the session by tiptoeing around the content of the piece. By the end of my shift, I felt like I had snubbed the students who had asked for my help and sidestepped my responsibilities as a tutor. I realized that by ignoring the content, I had impressed upon students that the powerful parts of writing are conventions, grammar, and organization. Out of fear of mishandling the situation, I had refused to acknowledge the powerful emotions in the pieces and the writers' willingness to share their writing with me.

As I have become a more experienced (and hopefully better) tutor, I've settled on the solution to the problem of working with private, personal pieces while maintaining an appropriate level of professionalism. Tutors must create their own brand of "personal professionalism," and that brand must be based off the student's approach to the session. In contrast to the formal and impersonal professionalism required at many businesses, offices, and firms, writing center employees must enact a more personable and flexible type of professionalism. Because each tutoring session is so distinct and each student so different, tutors must read students alongside their papers to determine what a "professional" tutor looks like to them. Tutors can determine what professional behavior is needed for a particular session by being attentive to students' initial behavior, students' body language, and the tutor's own comfort levels.

The Writing Center is a professional workplace; despite the student-status of most the employees, writing centers implement and utilize policies, procedures, data, training, and academic research. Tutors are expected to be knowledgeable, affable, adaptable, academic, and expert. In a word, they are expected to be professionals. However, "professional" means many different things to many different people. The Oxford English Dictionary has a formidable number of definitions for the word; the one that I had in mind during my previously-mentioned tutoring sessions was "a person that engages in a specific occupation or activity for money or as a means of earning a living, rather than a pastime" (Professional, 3a). Instead, I should have considered myself a professional tutor if I fit this definition: "a person that has or displays the skill, knowledge, experience, standards, or expertise of a professional; competent, efficient" (Professional, 4d). To find the "personal professionalism" needed for empathetic and effective

tutoring, tutors need to find the middle ground between human compassion and educational rigor as they help students navigate assignment prompts and difficult experiences.

While first impressions are oftentimes misleading, they provide crucial clues for tutors adjusting their approach at the start of a session. When tutors pay close attention to a student's behavior as they begin a session, they are better equipped to modify their personal professionalism to the student and whatever paper that student brings with them. Timid students who need encouragement to sit beside the tutor, to explain what they're working on, and to read the piece aloud are most likely not comfortable enough to open up about private, personal, or traumatic experiences. Although students who are initially uncomfortable and awkward should not be pushed to share more than they wish, the tutor's behavior throughout the session may put the student more at ease. At the very least, tutors ought to always express appreciation for the student's willingness to seek out help. Students who are eager to discuss the assignment, who have been to a writing center before, and who exude confidence in their greeting might accept (and expect) more conversation about the content of their paper. In this instance, tutors could potentially offend students or diminish students' experiences when they refuse to discuss the content of the paper. Watching and listening to how students approach the tutoring session will aid tutors as they develop strategies for professionally addressing the content of students' papers.

Body language provides visual cues for tutors from the beginning to the end of the session. Assessing students' posture, eye contact, physical placement, and gestures will aid tutors as they determine how to best help the student, both emotionally and compositionally. A study on the effects of body language in power dynamics proves that "nonverbal behaviors have a direct impact on how people attribute specific bases of power" (Aguinis et al. 464). This means it is important for tutors to be aware of both students' body language and their own body language

as they work to create a welcoming and open atmosphere. Tutors should pay special attention to facial expressions during a session. A student with pursed lips and a wrinkled forehead probably want the tutor to pull back; a tutor with a "lowered brow, and a nonsmiling mouth" can project feelings of dominance (Aguinis et al. 459). Students who make direct eye contact, sit in close proximity to the tutor, and utilize open hand gestures are silently inviting tutors to begin a dialogue or pose questions. The tutor should be aware of their own eye contact; people are perceived to be more credible if they keep direct eye contact with others (Aguinis et al. 463). Students who refuse to make direct eye contact, sit far away from the tutor, sit with legs or arms crossed, and who slump or lean away from the tutor are communicating that discussion is not an option. While tutors need to pick up on these nonverbal hints, they also need to be aware of sudden changes. For tutors to know if they have overstepped their boundaries or if they have ignored an important element of the paper, they need to watch out for shifts in body language and behavior. These transformations will help the tutor act in an appropriately professional way for the session.

The tutor's discomfort can be a valid indicator that the session needs to shift; if the tutor feels uncomfortable, the student is most likely extremely uneasy. Professional tutors have the confidence and skill to make changes during the session to ensure students feel seen and heard, while still completing their assignment. If the topic of the piece affects the tutor on a personal level, it is more than appropriate for them to request a substitute tutor. If the topic of the piece is obviously too close to the writer for them to objectively view the writing task, it is germane for the tutor to encourage the student to pick a new topic. *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* encourages tutors to "speak with your director or other administrator who will know the appropriate campus resources and can refer the student" if you feel that you alone cannot cope

with the content of a student's paper (8). When it seems that simply acknowledging the writer's bravery for sharing their experience has not put the student nor the tutor at ease, flesh out that feeling. Concern about acting unprofessionally (in the traditional sense) should not prevent a tutor from sharing their emotional responses to the paper, or from encouraging the student to talk about things that are usually avoided in a typical workplace environment. The Writing Center is a place where professionalism demands tutors do what they can to help students—and that is all that is required. Tutors who ignore feelings of discomfort because they don't want to act too informal or subjective are not fulfilling their professional obligations.

Tutors need to realize that acting professionally during tutoring sessions looks different than it does in other situations. Tutors become true professionals when they read students and situations to provide the best peer support for private and personal papers. I acted unprofessionally by refusing to acknowledge the personal nature of students' papers; I now understand that I should have followed the students' lead when addressing their paper. Tutors should give resources when necessary, provide a listening ear for a struggling student, and tell students how impactful their pieces are. Tutors who have worked to master their own brand of "personal professionalism" react honestly: they cry, laugh, or rage depending on the how the paper affects them and what cues the student has given them. The beginning of the session, body language, and the tutor's reactions to the session will provide a thorough, albeit subjective guide, on how to respond to students who share experiences that touch readers.

Works Cited

Aguinis, Herman, et al. "Effects of Nonverbal Behavior on Perceptions of Power Bases." *The Journal of Social Psychology,* vol. 138, no. 4, 1998, pp. 455-468.

"Professional, 3a." *Oxford English Dictionary Online,* http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/152053?redirectedFrom=professional#eid. Accessed 19 March 2019.

"Professional, 4d." *Oxford English Dictionary Online,* http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/152053?redirectedFrom=professional#eid. Accessed 19 March 2019.

Ryan, Leigh, and Lisa Zimmerelli. *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors,* 6th ed., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016.