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The Right Answer: Intuition in Tutoring Sessions

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Abstract

In a writing center, following intuition is important. Tutor insecurities, lack of experience, and misconceptions can lead students to deny that intuition. Tutors who learn to recognize that lack of experience can learn from sessions where that intuition is denied. Coworkers and other resources are important to building that intuition and helping to create effective, independent writers rather than effective papers.

Keywords: Intuition, Insecurity, Tutor Expectations, Experience

The Right Answer: Intuition in Tutoring Sessions

“If someone were to push you off the shore in a boat without oars, would you be without direction?” I’m taking a risk here. This student had listed his concerns as “Introduction, Conclusion, Citations,” and we’d looked at both his introduction and conclusion, both of which had a cohesive story and goal. Instead of working on the other items that he’d listed, I’m starting a discussion about his topic. *I hope this is okay. He didn’t mention his topic when we went over his concerns. Can I do this?* Each thought rushes through my head as I let him ponder for a moment, before continuing. “Would that be without direction, or without control?” He catches on quickly and sees the potential that I see. Each event he had outlined works more cohesively through the lens of control, and what had started out as a discussion between a skeptical student and an amateur tutor turned into an engaging, interesting conversation about the direction, or rather, the control of the paper between peers.

This was one of the first times I trusted my intuition as a new tutor. There have been sessions where in hindsight, I’ve realized that I took that leap and did something that wasn’t quite along the lines of what I normally do in a session. Some of my coworkers have also had experiences where their intuition guided them into a good session. This happens outside of my writing center, too.

In her tutor’s column, Kristi Gridharry summarizes her experiences working with Dave, who was having trouble with summary-response papers. Dave brought in a copy of a response paper that was covered in red markings from his instructor. Kristi writes, “... I get the sense that this session is not about the writing in front of us. It is about the reading and thinking Dave needs to attend to before typing his papers,” and then acts on her intuition to advise Dave in his

reading, rather than his writing. The next session she has with Dave, "... he is excited to show me that he has indeed improved on his writing--fewer red marks!" due to the work that they have done. Rather than addressing the red markings from the instructor—or what the writer has typed into the concerns box, in my case—she acted on her intuition based on her background as a teacher and created a very successful series of sessions.

In my work, I see many of the same assignments. These vary from class to class and professor to professor, but as I helped writers with their needs I began to see common problems. One such assignment is a word meditation, a personal essay where writers explore their own experience through the lens of a specific word. I love working with these. Many writers struggle with differentiating this personal essay from research essays that they have written in previous classes and include large amounts of research and relatively small amounts of personal content. Many of these submissions can be addressed using similar advice. That being said, care must be taken in addressing these common trends. Every session requires an approach based on what is written and what the writer wants out of their piece. A modicum of intuition is used in each session in that way, to sense what the writer needs and wants and then to tailor the session to what they're looking for. I've sometimes denied this intuition in favor of what I determine is the "right" answer.

One reason that tutors, especially inexperienced tutors, would deny their intuition is the concept of "okay" or "right" in a session. Some of this comes from expectations to help the writer enough to be successful on this one paper. Other times tutors second guess their advice and deny or lack experience, then try to give the answer that they think the writer wants. I try to

help both the writer and the paper at the same time, and that can lead to conflicts of interest. This has led to less-productive sessions in the past.

I worked with a student on another word meditation, this time on the word “cut” related to circumstances around the death of a friend. He accented his word choice by including snippets of poetry wherever “cut” appeared in his writing, splitting the narrative for the length of the poem, then picking up where he left off. I felt like I should encourage his creativity but was unfamiliar with his instructor and their requirements. This was particularly tricky because one of the tenets of the assignment was to practice flow between different ideas, and the unexpected switches were formatted in such a way that I was concerned that it went against that requirement. I told him that I liked his change, but that was lost on him once I suggested that he should discuss the change with his instructor. We both left that session frustrated.

Sessions like these can be hard to deal with, especially for new tutors. Finding that my intuition didn’t have an answer for me was difficult, but it led me to discover something important. After this session, I discussed the situation with fellow tutors and instructors that I was familiar with, searching for the answer. I discovered new strategies to deal with similar situations and found out that the suggestions I gave to the student were perfectly fine. I was reassured that I was giving appropriate advice and found that the encouragement I gave was teaching good communication between instructors and students. By acting on intuition, I had been trying to teach the writer, rather than the paper! This reinforced my intuition again and demonstrated a new way to gain experience that I hadn’t utilized before. The next session I had where a writer was creatively deviating from the assignment description resulted in a productive discussion where I could see a writer’s understanding change.

What I've learned from these few experiences is that there is no "right" answer. Certain students have things that they will learn better from, and some guidance works better on some individuals than others. Sometimes my intuition will pick up on what a writer is looking for from a session, even if it wasn't expressed directly, and many times it will work out to be a session where both the writer and I learn something new. Other times my background has not prepared me for what I'm working on, but I can give the best answer that I have, or find resources to help guide them to what they're looking for. Learning this just takes a little awareness of personal knowledge and willingness to ask questions. A little intuition can go a long way.

Works Cited

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