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Preparing to Perform: The Power of Observations in Tutor Education

Jordan Forest

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Abstract: One powerful tool for further developing our education as writing tutors is peer observations. Observations give us the opportunity to develop new skills and— as one surveyed tutor puts it— add to our toolbox. In order to benefit from observations, we can see to ask questions in a way that provokes further knowledge and insight. Additionally, we can utilize the time after a session in order to ask specific questions to the peer we observed. Through these processes, our own tutoring skills and knowledge can be expanded.

Key words: peer observations, observational learning, new tutor training, tutor education

As a brand-new tutor at the Utah State Writing Center, my first session on the opposite side of the table was something I apprehended like the first note in a music solo. *How would I begin? What would I say? What would I focus on?* In theory I could tutor— I had helped my friends with their papers— but I hadn't had that experience in the context of a formal writing center job. The one thing capable of quelling my anxieties was the opportunity we were given through the Writing Center to observe other tutors in action. Maybe I didn't know what I would look like tutoring, but I could see what they looked like. As I observed others, my own confidence as a tutor grew, and I gained insights that I wouldn't have discovered on my own. I was watching someone else perform the piece I was about to play and getting ideas along the way. As we seek to become more educated tutors and to perfect our craft, one of our greatest assets is the opportunity to observe others. Through observing our peers, we can learn new skills or methods of tutoring. As tutors, we can also work to develop the effectiveness of our observations through the questions we ask before, during, and after the sessions we watch.

As tutors, one of our greatest benefits in observations is the opportunity to learn new skills. The same idea can be found in performing music. When musicians take the time to observe how other artists are speeding up or slowing down, getting loud or going quiet, using their fingers or their arms, they can learn new skills to adapt into their own performance. In one of my first experiences as an observer, I watched as a student came into the Center with questions about APA formatting. As an onlooker sitting safely in the back, I was unsure how I would respond. I didn't have much familiarity with citations outside of MLA. However, despite my personal concerns, I observed as the tutor in front of me went to the internet, searching the keys to APA alongside the student. She accessed helpful websites, found images of the proper formatting, and ultimately pulled up the right tools. From watching this tutor, I learned a new

skill. I learned how to approach a session where I didn't know all of the answers and, subsequently, how to lean on other sources. Not only did I learn that skill, but I got to see that concept in action.

My simple experience is something that can be replicated in tutor education. In an anonymous survey conducted through the USU Writing Center about observations, 22 out of 28 responders said that they either usually or always walk out of an observation having learned a new skill or method for tutoring. Truly, we can gain insights that we might have never thought of had we stayed in our own room and not entered another tutor's session. Paula Gillespie, in *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring*, identifies this in conjunction with observations as well when she says, "We're always picking up new, better strategies we wouldn't have thought of on our own, and we admire the way our tutors function in different circumstances" (Gillespie, 61). A tutor who participated in the previously mentioned survey at USU's Writing Center saw a similar benefit. They responded, "It helps to have more tools in your tutoring toolbox at your disposal, and the more you observe the more tools you collect." Truly, observations enable tutors to expand their learning to include that of their predecessors and peers. Observing others informs our own tutoring and, as one tutor describes it, "helps [us] get out of personal ruts or habits and see each of [our] own sessions with fresh perspective." This type of "fresh perspective" comes as we watch new ways of phrasing a question, approaching a topic, or relying on the resources around us. It is finding a new way to play the notes, or perhaps an old way that we have since forgotten.

It is important to consider and adapt the types of questions we ask ourselves in the process of watching other tutors so as to increase the benefits of observations. When we ask better questions, we can open ourselves to more connections and opportunities for learning. In

The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors, some example questions include, “How does the tutor engage the writer, phrase questions, and respond to the writer’s concerns? What does body language convey about tutors and writers? How is a session ended?” (Ryan, 25). These types of questions can lead to more learning on our end as observers. We may end up missing out on so many fruitful discoveries if we limit our questions to only general queries, such as, “What went well?” One helpful method for asking good questions is to consider the aspects of tutoring we feel unsure about and then to form questions specific to that concern for reflection in observations. It would be most helpful to write down these types of questions prior to entering a session as preparation for watching another tutor handle that concern. For example, if I feel unsure in my own tutoring about how to begin a session, I could take time in an observation to consider, “What was the first thing this tutor said to the student? What questions did they start with? What was their facial expression?” This type of inquiry can then open me up to a variety of specific learning that will benefit my personal experiences going forward. Ultimately, the more specific our questions, the more insights we can give ourselves the opportunity to take away.

Immediately following a session, it is also beneficial to talk with the tutor and ask questions in order to gain more insights to the tutoring process. When we take time to follow up with a tutor and ask them about their decisions within the session or how they handled certain complexities, we open ourselves up to a wealth of exclusive knowledge. We can figure out why they decided to turn to the internet at that one part or generally how they approach citations they aren’t familiar with or even what was going through their head when they were first handed that paper. One individual from USU’s Writing Center said in context of following-up with tutors, “I usually ask them to tell me about their logic behind certain decisions or I ask them why they did or did not do something I would have done.” It is powerful to not only see a session in action, but

to then hear about the behind-the-scenes processes that were happening within the tutor's mind. When we ask the tutor about their feelings and thoughts afterwards, we can really dig in deeper to the individual elements of a session and what made it effective. Another USU tutor said, "I also like to look for anything the tutor does differently than me and ask them after why they made that choice. This helps me because I'm able to get a look at someone else's decision making process, which helps improve mine." The questions we ask don't need to be specific to the session either, as one tutor pointed out. They said, "After an observation, I like to ask tutors what's one thing they think all tutors should know." Truly, our observations are valuable not just because of the things we learn by watching a tutor but because of the things we learn in conversing with them as well.

The processes of observation are invaluable in our learning efforts to become better tutors. As observers, it is our responsibility to ask the right questions, whether those questions are being used for personal consideration or interpersonal discussion. Truly, observations are simple means to effective learning. The more we watch others, the more we can understand and develop in ourselves. Perhaps that's what makes watching others the perfect prelude to our own first notes.

Works Cited

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