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Stephanie Fielding  
*Utah State University*

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Balancing Give-and-Take in Tutoring

Stephanie Fielding

Utah State University

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Abstract:

Satisfaction in a session increases for both sides when a tutor uses active listening as the mediator between student participation and tutor guidance. Part of the session needs to be devoted to hearing the student's concerns, which makes the student feel validated. However, at appropriate times, the tutor also needs to provide the student with feedback, and active listening contributes to the tutor's knowledge of what to say to the student. Active listening can also help diffuse tense tutoring situations.

Key Words: active listening, tutoring, feedback, student concerns, validation

### Balancing Give-and-Take in Tutoring

Let's face it: as writing tutors, we get piles of advice on how to conduct the ideal tutoring session. When we're getting ready for bed at night, we think back on the precarious situations we've navigated in the Writing Center and suddenly remember the perfect tip for avoiding those exact problems—or maybe I'm just an overanalyzer. Regardless, at the end of the day, we really just want to help students feel more confident as writers, and we want them to be willing to come back if they need help in the future.

So how do we accomplish that? In my experience as a tutor, I've identified three strategies for increasing the effectiveness of a session that work in most scenarios: getting a student to talk about their paper, actively listening as a tutor, and responding at the appropriate times and in the appropriate ways. Together, these strategies function as a sort of seesaw, with student commentary and tutor commentary on opposite ends and active listening in the middle. While all three elements are absolutely crucial, there is no motion without active listening. Satisfaction in a session increases for both sides when a tutor uses active listening as the mediator between student participation and tutor guidance.

Active listening can mean a lot of different things, depending on the situation. Other tutors I've spoken to believe that active listening is an important life skill because it encourages genuine communication between two people rather than just a constant exchange of talking past each other. For a tutor, however, active listening is a strategy for isolating ideas. It consists of clarifying, paraphrasing and verifying, reflecting or empathizing, and summarizing (Andersen). These strategies work together to ensure that the tutor possesses a full understanding of what the student is trying to communicate to them. For my purposes, I have defined active listening as a

manner of tutor engagement that allows for response to a student's words and appropriate extrapolation. Several benefits stem from this listening-driven style of tutoring.

First and foremost, active listening puts the power in the student's hands. Why? Because if the tutor is listening, that means that the student is talking—at least, in theory. The majority of the time, students know what they want their essay to say, and they understand a large part of what they're struggling with; they just need us to let them express it. Listening to students validates their concerns and allows them to feel comfortable sharing because they feel that they are being heard. As students are allowed to determine the direction of a session, they are more likely to feel satisfied since their wants and needs are prioritized.

On the other hand, the two people on either ends of a seesaw are meant to alternate moving up and down; it doesn't do much good to have one person always in the air and the other person always on the ground. Similarly, sometimes students genuinely need input from another person, not just a chance to talk, and that's the moment when a tutor needs to apply what they have learned from active listening. If active listening allows us to pick up on the problems a student is facing—and it does—then we have the responsibility to take it a step further and share whatever knowledge and expertise we may have on the topic. This is what John Davidson and Christine Wood call “appropriate assertiveness,” the key word being “appropriate.” We don't want to just drown out the student's ideas, but sometimes they really do need suggestions, or at least ideas that they can reject so that they know what they don't want. If we're listening, we may manage to express the idea that they really needed to hear.

Just recently I had a student come in for a class assignment who wasn't sure what he even wanted from me; he just knew he had to come to get credit. So I asked him to talk to me about his paper and tell me what he'd done to meet the criteria for the assignment. He guided me

through what he'd written, step-by-step, and I answered any questions that he had along the way. The more he talked, the more he realized that he did have concerns about his paper, questions he couldn't answer on his own. That's where I came in. After he'd said what he needed to say, I could offer my thoughts as suggestions for him to work with. Some of them he didn't seem very enthused about, which was fine, but he recognized others as valid points. The session wasn't perfect, but we were able to make genuine progress with the help of active listening.

There are other benefits to active listening as well, such as a quicker path to conflict resolution. I don't mean the kind of conflict that involves screaming mobs and flying fists—though active listening can help in preventing those situations as well. In a writing center, the conflict happens when a student has spent hours upon frustrating hours working on their paper, and they don't understand why they can't get it right, and their professor requires them to come in for credit. It's any situation that leaves a student sullen and defensive about their writing, unwilling to work with a tutor. In their study, Davidson and Wood identified active listening as a tool that allows a win-win situation in conflict resolution. During that moment of frustration, often the best thing anyone can do is listen. In a different article, "The Power of Active Listening," Brian Schriener and Bruce Blitman assert that "you will be surprised at how easily conflicts can be defused and resolved without you having to do much more than listen." Sometimes by listening and identifying the problem, a tutor can offer a solution such as clarifying the instructions of the prompt or explaining the basics of a rule. At the very least, a tutor who is listening can express a thought of validation or comfort for the student to help get them in a better mindset for writing a paper.

Every tutoring situation is different, so different bits of tutoring advice will come in handy at some point or another. However, by actively listening, we will be able to figure out

when it's time to become all ears and when it's time to speak up with some of those tidbits. It provides us with the flexibility we need as tutors to adapt to each unique situation . Active listening is the fulcrum that the seesaw of student contribution and tutor feedback rests on, part of the balancing act of give-and-take that we endeavor to master as tutors. Active listening facilitates movement.

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