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## Redefining Labels: The Session Is Ours for the Taking

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### Abstract

There is a wealth of resources available for any writing center tutor struggling with a particular aspect of sessions regarding the student, but equally important is for a tutor to receive adequate training on their own psyche in the tutoring experience. Through simple methods, this paper offers strategies for tutors to increase their own self-care and create a more positive outlook on tutoring experiences. Engaging these strategies in their own practice will equip tutors to better help the students, as well as encourage a healthier state of mind.

Key words: tutors, mental health, directional thinking, positivity, self-care

A student pulls out their laptop and starts to search for their paper, assuring you at least twice that the paper was written “like twenty minutes ago,” and that “it’s gonna be so bad, but, I just had to get something.” You smile reassuringly, make a few pleasant remarks as they wait for the screen to load, and *voilà*—the paper is up and ready. The student wrings their hands nervously as you ask them to read aloud. You lean forward in anticipation, already running through strategies to address concerns they mentioned earlier. After a few sentences, you internally breathe a sigh of relief. *This student is an excellent writer.*

All tutors have likely had the experience of interacting with a good paper that the student emphatically labeled bad. In some cases, we experience the opposite, an overinflated opinion of a sub-par piece of work. Regardless, we all likely assign some sort of value to a paper in our heads: this is good, or this is bad. Tutors practice this same technique, labelling themselves after a session: that was successful, or that was not. This kind of thinking can lead to harsh self-criticism and low self-esteem.

Let’s consider the implications of participating in this kind of labelling. Binary thinking is the tendency to assign something as “right/wrong, yes/no, good/bad, start/finish” (Priestley 1). This is something the majority of us unconsciously participate in, and has the danger of leading us down polarizing, unproductive routes. Directional thinking, on the other hand, defines more like this: “moving forward, a step closer, lighter grey/darker grey, an experiment, an opportunity to learn, smart-ish, safer, right-ish, wrong-ish, finished-ish” (1). Applying directional thinking does not come naturally, but can go a long way towards increasing confidence, bringing about growth, and remaining positive.

Plenty of discussion addresses student needs and student concerns within sessions, but it is not often that I encounter considerations for the tutor’s own state of mind. To me, learning to improve your own mental health is as important as learning to improve your tutoring techniques,

because we rarely help others effectively when we ourselves are struggling. Often, we unconsciously use binary thinking to label sessions as “good” or “bad,” “successful” or “unsuccessful.” While this type of thinking is arbitrary and counterproductive, it is also a natural tendency that I struggled to remove from my thought process. Instead of trying to completely remove a habit, I learned to revise it. Directional thinking, going hand-in-hand with positive thinking in general, was one tool I discovered that helped me with my mental distress.

Prior to any research on maintaining a healthier state of mind, I encountered my first failure as a tutor: Josh (name has been changed). Josh came in to work on an assignment focused on providing a solution to a problem that was aligned with an audience’s values and needs. He had chosen a topic, problem, solution, and wanted to brainstorm the rest of the paper. What followed was a beautiful session that every tutor dreams of. The notes section contained a pristine outline that fully addressed the requirements of the paper. We had directions for further research, an in-the-works thesis, and enough material to easily meet the page length. Nearing the last five minutes of the session, I felt that most writers could take this base and write a wonderful essay.

That’s when tragedy struck. I had asked Josh if the notes made sense to him, and we spent a minute reviewing everything we had typed up. He sucked on his bottom lip, tilted his head, and hit me with a bombshell: “You know, I actually can’t use any of this.”

My heart sank, then rose and frantically started pounding. Trying to ignore the fuzziness in my head and rushing in my ears, I smiled vaguely. I was relieved when I walked him to the survey and could finally contemplate my failure alone.

Alas, it was not meant to be. Josh popped his head back in on the way out, with a huge grin on his face. “Thanks so much for helping me today!” he exclaimed. “I don’t think I can use that topic because I don’t feel like the solution actually works for my audience, but now I, like,

totally get the assignment. I was doing it all wrong, but whatever topic I choose now it will be great.” My head continued spinning.

Although I never actually sat down at any point and decided that I had to complete X, Y, and Z to have a “good” session, and failing to do so resulted in a “bad” one, reflecting on how I felt at the end of this and other sessions led me to discover how I defined a session as successful. My original definition had three basic components. One: There must be some sort of physical proof of improvement/progress by the end of the session. Two: The specific concerns that the student wants to address must be resolved. Three: Either the student or the paper has to have improved in writing by the end of the session. By the end of this session, there was no physical proof of progress, the original goal (outline) had ended up being useless, and the only form of improvement was that the student understood his assignment. Per my definition of success, I completely failed. 1/3. 33%. Not a great session. And yet, the more I thought about it, the less and less I felt like a failure. Did we have an outline? No. But now the student had all the necessary skills to write his own, one that would meet everything needed for the essay. In terms of binary thinking, I had been an unsuccessful tutor. In terms of directional, I had done all I could, and the student *had* made progress.

The next session was so painful and so familiar to all tutors that I am not going to describe it in detail. Suffice to say, it was a “there-for-the-credit” student who was unwilling to participate no matter the measures I took. I can’t count the number of strategies I tried to engage her. At one point, I gave her a direct recommendation for her paper, and she simply looked at me and said, “No.” Which was her response to just about everything. This time, I failed on all accounts. No proof, no concerns addressed, no improvement. This session occurred shortly after I learned about directional thinking. So, I tried it out. My original standards for success were not at all bad. In fact, most of them help in letting us know if we accomplished what we wanted to.

But for a session like this, the standards didn't apply. Instead of telling myself: "You have to end a session with a physical proof of improvement," I told myself: "You are successful when you've done all you can do to improve the student in their writing." The more I thought about this, and revised my other standards, the better I felt. The student hadn't engaged, but she was receptive to my friendliness and there was a positive atmosphere during the session. I felt successful because of the efforts I had made, instead of allowing the student or arbitrary standards to affect how I defined my success. I found any possible benefit that I could.

I've had countless sessions that fall anywhere in the range of my original definition of success. Before, I believed that I was either a good tutor, or a bad one. *This paper either sucks or it doesn't.* But that is not true at all. I had to learn to engage my mind in directional thinking as opposed to binary. *That session wasn't perfect, but I learned how to teach a new learning style.* Instead of forcing myself into two definitions that rarely held true, I learned to embrace the spectrum. Positive thinking plays perfectly into this. Instead of reflecting on the less productive or frustrating parts of a session, look for any benefit that came out of it. Treat yourself like you would treat a student. *We might need to work on organization here, but you have excellent transitions and strong topic sentences.* Sandwich constructive criticism of yourself with positive feedback. We need validation, including from ourselves, as much as the student does. Write down any positive intentions you had throughout the session. Explore mindfulness, allowing yourself to exist in the moment rather than stress about factors out of our control. Just breathe. Let's not allow ourselves to brood over the "failures" that were likely still beneficial, be defined by not-always-applicable standards, or let a student affect our own definition of success. Instead, we can own our sessions like a boss.

Works Cited

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