

12-2019

Escaping the Spiral: How Peer Tutoring Disrupts Perfectionistic Tendencies

Anne Schill
Utah State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/wc_tutor



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Schill, Anne, "Escaping the Spiral: How Peer Tutoring Disrupts Perfectionistic Tendencies" (2019). *Tutor's Column*. Paper 48.

https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/wc_tutor/48

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the USU Writing Center at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tutor's Column by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usu.edu.



Escaping the Spiral:
How Peer Tutoring Disrupts Perfectionistic Tendencies

Anne Schill

Utah State University Writing Center

Abstract

This column examines how the peer tutoring setting allows for both students and tutors to relinquish perfectionistic tendencies. Peer tutoring gives students permission to bring in imperfect work and realize such an action won't cause the world to implode. It also teaches tutors to not expect themselves to know absolutely everything, but rather develop ways to get help with solutions. This column is part personal experience, part research. I provide my own experience as both a student and a tutor, as well as citing Rebecca Knight's *Harvard Business Review* article, "How to Manage Your Perfectionism." Perfectionistic expectations and cycles must be disrupted, lest an individual gets overwhelmed by impossible standards and is paralyzed by it. Expecting to make mistakes allows for an individual to simply learn and move forward, ultimately being more productive and fulfilled in their work.

Keywords: perfectionism, peer tutoring, writing center

My right leg bounced incessantly as I waited to begin my first Writing Center appointment. I was a college freshman with a history of straight As in English, never missing a deadline and always being fully prepared for every class.

That day, I only had a Google Doc with a couple bullet points leftover from a ten-minute brainstorming session the night before. The project at hand was a narrative essay, something I should be ecstatic about given my love of creative writing. Instead, I just felt dread as I imagined the tutor sighing in disappointment at my lack of preparation. Nonetheless, I stayed until the supervisor led me to a tutoring room where a dark-haired young man greeted me with a smile.

“Hi!” he said. “Welcome to the Writing Center!” I settled into the chair at the desk beside him. He made pleasant small talk as I pulled up my notes, leg starting to bounce again. I summarized my ideas aloud, looking down at the ground most of the time.

When I was done, he exclaimed, “I am absolutely in love with this idea!” I looked up in genuine surprise. He asked me to tell him more. Spurred by his sincere interest and positive tone, I began to delve deeper into possible themes for the essay. It became a conversation about writing and creativity, ideas bouncing back and forth between me and my tutor. By the time we reached the end, my legs were completely still and I had realized that despite my imperfect preparation, the world didn’t end. Life would keep going.

Professor and freelance journalist Rebecca Knight examines perfectionistic tendencies in her article, “How to Manage Your Perfectionism.” Perfectionists tend to get caught in anxious cycles where they overthink and return to problems without ever coming to a resolution. “Don’t confuse ruminating with problem-solving,” the reader is warned. The ruminating cycle is

counter-productive and tends to lead perfectionists to be unforgiving of themselves. They believe that if they slip up even once, their performance and standing will shatter to pieces. Thus, the cycle continues (Knight).

My experience in the Writing Center was the first time I had let a fellow student see my lack of a polished final product. Previously, the mere idea of sharing imperfect work was devastatingly embarrassing. But something within the peer tutoring structure opened me up to the concept that imperfection wasn't always a bad thing.

In Knight's article, a way to relieve the pressure perfectionists place on themselves is to "Get Perspective." She suggests going to a trusted individual—a co-worker, a boss, a friend, or a mentor—and talk honestly about how you're feeling. The peer tutoring format within the Writing Center gives students this opportunity. Tutors are taught to be kind, open, and generous with their praise. Students who aren't confident in their work, whether from being too hard on themselves or being at a genuine loss for what direction to go, benefit from hearing a peer compliment their work. It assures the student that they are more capable than they think they are. Tutors are also taught how to give constructive feedback without hurting feelings or taking over. Students come to the Writing Center expecting to get comments on how to improve. Additionally, they are not being graded while in a session, so it releases some pressure that might otherwise be present if talking to a professor. The combination of these two factors allows students to talk honestly about where they are with their writing and get refining feedback from the tutor in return.

A year later after I had my first session, I was in the Writing Center once more. This time, I was a tutor and it was my very first session. The bouncing leg had returned. The only thing running through my mind was how unfamiliar I was with grammar rules, citations, and research resources. Why hadn't I made flash cards? Why hadn't I memorized the AP style guide? Maybe I had time to look through the Purdue OWL website and hope I could absorb the content. While I knew I was supposed to be enthusiastic about any session, I silently hoped for a student who just wanted help on thesis statements, nothing nitty-gritty like comma splices or subject-verb agreement.

The student came right on time: a freshman doing work for her English class. She was nervous and stiff, very clearly unsure of what to expect. Pushing down my anxieties, I gave her a warm smile and asked her what I can help her with. She shrugged her shoulders and looked down at the floor. "I'm not sure," she said.

I panicked for a moment. How was I supposed to help a student who didn't even know herself where to start? What could I do to make sure I was helping her in the most effective way?

I took a breath and start asking questions.

"Well, how about you explain what kind of project you're working on?"

"I think I want to write an email. We're supposed to analyze a time we didn't communicate well and then pick a medium to explain it."

"Great! What do you want to write about?"

"I don't know," she said. I paused, unsure how to proceed. I didn't know anything about her life. In fact, there was no possible way I *could* know. It didn't help that choosing a personal experience as a base for an essay meant infinite possibilities. For a moment I considered

throwing some of my own history into the air, hoping it would trigger a memory or two for her. But then I realized that the best resource to find the answer was sitting right in front of me.

“What do you like to do in your free time?” I asked.

“Well, I like to write,” she responded hesitantly.

“Me too! I’m a creative writing major!”

Immediately she lit up. “Really? I’m looking into that!”

“I would really recommend it, but I might be a little biased.” We both laughed. She relaxed into her chair and I mirrored her energy. “Have you ever written something that didn’t come across the way you wanted to the reader?” The student began to list a variety of instances in which readers misinterpreted her fictional stories. We were able to quickly build a thesis and then an outline.

When she left the session, I let out a deep breath. I had been given a problem where it would have been impossible for me to study for and give a perfect answer. I had to accept that I couldn’t provide a solution on my own, and allow myself to fall below the “all-knowing” bar I had set for myself. This falls in line with another one of Knight’s suggestions, which is to calibrate one’s standards. One must realize they will have to be less perfect about some things, but that opens up time for concentration on the important tasks (Knight). In order to let a session develop organically, a tutor must let go of rehearsed answers and a need to prove they know everything. A tutor who fully accepts the fact that they can’t know everything allows themselves to learn skills they wouldn’t have otherwise, such as knowing where to look when they can’t find solutions by themselves.

Both students and tutors benefit from Writing Center peer tutoring settings by relinquishing perfectionistic expectations they have of themselves. It allows them to gain confidence by showing that work doesn't need to be perfect in order to be valuable. They are able to be more open-minded and willing to learn new things. The mindset of expecting mistakes, but not seeing them as annihilation of success, leads to a healthier and more balanced life, free from the pressures perfectionistic students and tutors put on themselves.

Works Cited

Knight, Rebecca. "How to Manage Your Perfectionism." Harvard Business Review. Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation, 29 April 2019.

<http://content.ebscohost.com/ContentServer.asp?EbscoContent=dGJyMNxb4kSeqLE4zdneyOLCmr1Gepq5Ssae4SbaWxWXS&ContentCustomer=dGJyMPPq34Dx6vNT69fnhrnb4ovf5ucA&T=P&P=AN&S=R&D=buh&K=136517096>