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Writer Empowerment: Seeing Through the Veil of Disinterest

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Abstract:

Students sometimes come to the writing center uninterested in their writing, however, a student's disinterest may be indicative of not knowing how to proceed with their writing. A solution to help combat a writer's disinterest entails asking open-ended questions. Sometimes the phrasing of open-ended questions does not resonate with the student, however, simply rephrasing an open-ended question can help the writer understand where and how they can continue writing their paper which ultimately empowers the student.

Key Words: disinterest, empowerment, open-ended questions, rephrasing

Writer Empowerment: Seeing Through the Veil of Disinterest

“Yeah, I’m pretty much done. I’m just here for the credit,” said the student upon entering his writing center session. Following his remark, I knew the session would be slow, and perhaps engaging the student in his writing would prove difficult. Still, I sat down with the writer, and we began working through his paper. We read, and I asked open-ended questions: “What do you think about this paragraph? Why is this information relevant?” With each question, the student shrugged his shoulders and sullenly replied, “I don’t know.” At the ten minute mark, the writer asked, “Can I leave now?” The answer is no. I informed the student that to receive credit for the visit he needed to collaborate with the tutor for at least fifteen minutes, but the same events ensued following the continuation of the session. I asked my questions. He shrugged his shoulders. In a final attempt to make some amount of progress in the session, I reemphasized issues from earlier in the session, and I asked the writer: “How does your body paragraphs relate to what you mentioned in your introduction?” A smile stretched across the student’s face, and he exclaimed, “Wow, nothing in my introduction relates to what I’m saying in my paper!”

In the final moments of the above session, the writer moved past his writing roadblock, uncovered an interest in his writing, and seized control over his session. To unpack how the writer adopted control in the session, it is first important to recognize how there is hope for the seemingly disinterested student. It is also important to recognize how approaching the issue from a tutor’s standpoint is key for writer empowerment. Between these two points, the issue at hand arises from what I intend by “seemingly disinterested” as I find students are often not disinterested, but rather unsure of how to continue writing or how to ask for help. For the tutor specifically, the writer’s attitude leads to a problem because the tutor may observe and assume

that the student does not care about their writing which potentially leads to an unproductive session where the student's writing roadblock remains an issue. To help solve the issue, I first suggest tutors approach the seemingly disinterested student with a fresh mindset and consider how their disinterest may be a symptom of a writing roadblock in which asking for help in the writer's eyes is not possible. After beginning the session with a new mindset, the rephrasing of open-ended questions aids the writer in moving past the roadblock. Ultimately, the adoption of this technique helps empower the writer.

The first consideration in guiding a student past their writing roadblock is gauging if they know how to ask for help. At a glance, the student may appear disinterested as if they do not care about their writing, but their disinterest is often a veil that drapes itself over a deeper issue: not knowing how to ask for help, or even knowing what parts of their paper need help. From the tutor's perspective, the deeper issue is not visible, and thus the tutor perceives the student as disinterested. However, red flags may appear which helps tutors identify the underlying issue. In Heidi Nobles' tutor's column, titled *I Will Not Edit Your Paper. (Will I?): Tutoring and/or Editing in the Writing Center*, Nobles explains how writers often default to wanting their paper edited because they do not know what they need out of a session. In response, Nobles says, "As a tutor, I can be directive enough to help writers ask better questions of themselves and their work, to show them options and strategies for proceeding" (Nobles 23). Here, Nobles writes about how she can empower students by helping them realize where help is needed which first shows how the seemingly disinterested student may indeed express interest and second how the tutor can help combat this issue by guiding the student to think about their writing. By gauging the

student's understanding of their work, tutors can consequently formulate a plan to help direct the writer.

Once the tutor establishes the possibility that the writer is potentially unaware of how to ask for help, the next step is guiding the writer into their epiphany moment in which the writer moves past their writing roadblock and is thus able to address and fix their concerns. However, to accomplish this power shift in favor of the writer, the rephrasing of open-ended questions is helpful. For example, a tutor may ask: "What is the purpose of this paragraph?" However, that question may not resonate with the student. The student may not understand how to apply the tutor's question, but the hope is not lost because the tutor can simply rephrase the question in a way that resonates with the student. Keeping the previous question in mind, a tutor may rephrase the question as: "How do these ideas help support this paragraph?" Both questions provoke the writer to think similarly, however, the second question may resonate more with the student. Once the student is asked a question that resonates with their thought process, meaning they can think about their writing, then the power, or control over the session, shifts in favor of the writer.

Following the discussion of how tutors can help shift the power dynamic in favor of the writer, tutors may ask: Why is empowering the writer important? When the writer is empowered, then they are the masters of their writing. The writer controls their ideas, and where and how those ideas are expressed through their writing. When the power dynamic shifts in favor of the tutor, then the writer is not the master of their paper. The ideas come from the tutor, and that only gives the writer a single idea to clasp onto in comparison with teaching the writer how to develop many ideas. At the writing center, we want writers to understand where and how to apply their ideas and ultimately express their ideas within their writing.

Going back the session where the student walked in and stated that he was only at the writing center for credit, a tutor sees how perhaps he cared about his writing from the beginning (at least subconsciously), however, he did not yet have the tools to continue revising. By asking and rephrasing open-ended questions, the student moved past his writing roadblock which in his case was relating the material in his introduction to his body paragraphs. Here, he also seized control over his session and indicated to the tutor what he needed going into the revision process which both helped him retain ownership in his essay and also to identify where, most importantly, he could take his essay upon revising it. By shifting the session's power dynamic in favor of the writer, the session achieved an important goal: empowering the writer by provoking them to think about their writing.

Going forward in future tutoring sessions, I invite myself and fellow tutors to consider the veil of disinterest which shrouds the seemingly disinterested writer and throughout the session, keep in mind how perhaps there is an interested mindset hiding in the writer's subconscious. Also, by bringing forth the interested mindset through asking and rephrasing open-ended questions, we as tutors can offer writers a key to unlocking their thoughts, and therefore we empower them to formulate their plan for revision. After all, tutoring is all about empowering writers and cultivating the necessary skills which lead them, as individuals, to achieve success through their writing.

Works Cited

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