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How About You Give it a Try: Hands-On Tutoring Sessions

Mikayla Tobler

Abstract: The idea of asking a student to practice a skill first occurred to me when I was tutoring a student with an essay where I noticed that the student consistently missed opportunities to include sensory imagery. Within that session, I explained sensory imagery and asked the student to practice applying it. The success I felt after watching the student improve during this session motivated me to try it in many more. I've found that this technique works best when a student feels unsure about what to work on with a tutor. The tutor can then go through the student's work and assignment description with the student, watching for a repeated skill within the student's writing that would benefit from practice. Once they identify a skill, the tutor can explain the skill using examples from the web. After they feel the student understands, the tutor can ask them to practice, giving the student encouragement and space to write for a few minutes. When the student comes to a stop, they can discuss their work with the tutor, asking clarifying questions and polishing their skill even more. By the end of the session, the student will have improved their writing process and the tutor will have watched it happen, leaving both feeling satisfied by their efforts in the session.

Keywords: Hands-on, practice, tutor satisfaction, student satisfaction, student improvement, writing patterns, self-improvement, applying learning

How About You Give it a Try: Hands-On Tutoring Sessions

The first time I tried this

Once a student came into the Writing Center for help on his Word Meditation essay about stress. The Word Meditation assignment asks students to choose a word, then explore several of its meanings through a narrative of a few of their experiences. I'll call this student Nick. Nick's essay, nearly complete, represented Nick as a complex thinker whose essay worked with insightful interpretations of the word "stress." As I discussed his paper with him, I noticed that while Nick could feel the emotional significance of the scenes of his paper in his head, he had failed to communicate those emotions on paper. Yet, the emotions behind the scenes in Nick's paper drove his narrative about how moments of stress had shaped his current choice of major.

He begins with a scene of his 6th grade bully drenching him in Gatorade for excelling at math. Nick analyzes the stress of that scene. The essay then moves into a scene of his 6th grade teacher inviting him to take advanced math in junior high. Nick explains how the stress of that moment influenced his choice to pursue advanced math. Finally, Nick's paper ends with an "and this has made me into what I am now" statement which includes that he's a geology major and now studies how geological stressors shape rocks and mountains.

His scenes, while intentionally chosen, would benefit from sensory imagery, so I explain what it is, why he needs it, and then I wonder if he really understands what I mean. Looking for a way to tell if Nick understands what I mean, I ask him to practice using sensory imagery to communicate the emotions of his scenes. The first sentence he writes doesn't quite accomplish it, but after a bit of back and forth (me explaining and suggesting, him writing and asking questions) he elevates all his scenes and the essay feels far more intentional than when we first began.

This session felt more satisfying and concrete than most of my other sessions because Nick practiced and improved on a skill, and I felt satisfaction about that improvement. É voila! I realized that I could use this same approach with many other students.

When to Apply this Hands-On Technique

When a student comes in with a piece of their writing, unsure of what they want out of the session, a tutor could employ this technique to still make the session productive. Students who experience guided practice learn to write better. In their article entitled, “‘Tell me exactly what it was that I was doing that was so bad’: Understanding the Needs and Expectations of Working-Class Students in Writing Centers,” writing center experts Denny, Nordlof, and Salem, find that their “interviewees longed for a person who would fully engage with them and who would work with them all the way through their writing processes. They wanted help that was both generous and tangible, and they wanted to learn from an expert who could guide them confidently” (Denny, Nordlof, and Salem). This applies to what students want out of tutoring sessions across the board, even though they may not say it. When a tutor guides a student through mastering a specific skill, they fully engage with the student, and the student receives tangible help. They focus on an aspect of that student’s writing process. Asking a student to practice a skill during a session improves their ability to use that skill, strengthens their confidence, and helps the tutor feel successful.

Identifying a Skill to Practice

To identify a skill that student would benefit from practicing, a tutor looks for patterns in the student’s writing. In Nick’s essay, I noticed that his scenes consistently lacked sensory imagery, but the assignment description emphasized using it. Consulting the provided assignment description or rubric is another way to identify a skill to practice with the student.

Reading the rubric together encourages the student and tutor alike to recognize potential skills to practice. In addition to explaining scenes using sensory imagery, tutors may also work with students on improving or writing topic sentences, explaining evidence, specifying thesis statements, eliminating passive voice, deconstructing a source's argument, and integrating quotes, to name a few. When a student consistently misuses or omits core elements of a strong piece of writing, it indicates a potential gap in their understanding about how to communicate their thoughts to the reader. Finding and filling gaps of understanding in the context of a student's essay helps the student more than addressing the grammar of isolated sentences does, and to do that a tutor looks analyzes a student's writing patterns within the essay.

Explaining the Skill

After a tutor identifies which skill to work on with a student, they try to explain the skill, how it would benefit the essay, and how to do it well. In Nick's case, I told him that using sensory imagery means writing in specific packets of detail (how a thing looks, sounds, feels, tastes, or smells) to describe parts of the scene. We discussed how sensory imagery would help his reader feel the emotions of his scene and connect to his narrative, and I explained that sensory imagery wraps a reader more fully into the story.

A tutor might use supplementary materials to help the student understand. The supplementary materials often provide an explanation and offer examples. A favorite at my writing center is the APA Example Paper on the Purdue OWL website. Since I cannot usually come up with examples on demand, those prove especially helpful. Additionally, when I teach passive voice, I like to use a page called, "Passive Sentences in English" which has a table of examples in every tense of the same verb actively declined and then passively declined ("Passive Sentences in English"). The examples also help me to explain because I can ask a student,

“Where did the author use passive voice in that sentence?” and then follow up with, “Can you see how to change it?” I avoid reviewing supplementary materials for more than five minutes unless I can see that the student’s confusion would prevent them from trying to apply the skill.

Practicing the Skill

After the student and tutor have discussed the skill, the tutor invites the student to practice, emphasizing that the student is capable, and that a desire for perfection should not prevent them from simply trying. When a student practices in a session, their mistakes help the tutor to know what to explain. This saves the tutor the awkwardness of offering generalizations about writing that the student may find difficult to apply. I’ve seen other tutors practice skills with students verbally, but asking a student to practice on their own works better for me because then the student and I can discuss things on paper. Rarely formal, I say to a student something like, “let’s try this out in your essay,” and then they start practicing.

The next step is leaving the student alone to write. For me this silence lasts a few minutes, but I am patient. I also use this time to write notes about the session, summarizing the important things about the skill we practice and including links to resources we used. Feeling comfortable in that silence took me several weeks. I have found, however, when a student gets the opportunity to process what I say and then try to employ it, we have a productive discussion about that writing skill.

Discussing and Clarifying

After the student has tried it out, a tutor goes back over what they wrote and discusses it with the student. Discussion flows back-and-forth. If a tutor simply explains a concept and then asks the student if they have any questions, they will not voice any. But, if a tutor invites the

student to practice, often the student will have more questions and thereby get more out of the session.

A student understands a tutor's feedback best when they practice applying it at a time when the tutor can clarify what they mean. As an inexperienced tutor, I recognize that a tutor's feedback can include unclear suggestions and advice, so tutoring proves most effective and satisfying when a tutor can see that the student understands what the tutor offers them.

More than it first Appears

The underlying implications of the hands-on tutoring method prove its worth. A tutor identifying a pattern within a student's writing enables a student to recognize and address their writing habits. When a student can see their inhibitive writing habits, a tutor explaining the skill in depth and offering examples gives the student something they may not have had before—a one-on-one discussion about a skill or technique they do not understand or are not familiar with. As a student practices without consequence in a positive and expert environment, their writing ability holistically improves. With their newfound knowledge of their own writing habits and how to address them, the student's ability to self-edit their work grows. While the student's ability grows before a tutor's eyes, the tutor's self-confidence also increases. By applying this technique, a tutor's effort to engage with the student on a level that applies to the entirety of the student's future writing rewards both the tutor and the student with a feeling of satisfaction about the session.

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