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The Intricacies of Tutoring Personal Narratives

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Abstract

In order to effectively tutor personal narratives, tutors must be aware of the different tutoring strategies for academic papers and personal narratives. This essay offers several different tutoring strategies that remain the same for academic papers and personal narratives, and several that are different. These strategies prepare the tutor to empower, educate, and validate the student's unique and vulnerable personal histories, while also being sensitive to each individual student's needs.

Key Words

Personal narratives, tutoring strategies, validation, vulnerability, constructive criticism, empowerment

The Intricacies of Tutoring Personal Narratives

During my first month of tutoring, I had two students come in for help that each, in their own way, shaped my perception of tutoring. Both students needed help with a personal narrative, and their unique stories opened my eyes to just how vulnerable tutoring personal narratives can be. I was humbled that, as their peer, they were willing to show me this incredibly personal aspect of themselves. I knew that these particular papers required a different style of tutoring than regular academic papers, but I didn't know how to accomplish this. Being a freshly trained new tutor, I was unfamiliar with the intricacies of tutoring personal narratives. What I, and many other tutors who face the same situation need, is a list of techniques that can be employed in the case of a personal narrative paper. Thankfully, I came out of those two sessions unscathed, with a heightened appreciation for the value of tutoring. However, it just as easily could have been a negative experience for all involved.

In many ways, academic papers, which for the sake of this essay will be defined as research papers or argumentative essays, can be tutored using the same techniques as personal narratives. The ways they remain the same are: helping the student clarify their thesis statement, helping the student with paragraph and idea development, and helping the student with grammar and readability (Heaps 1). Personal narratives, like academic papers, often have the same goal of conveying an idea and helping the reader understand something in a new way. Because of this, the basic principles of good writing remain the same, and the strategies of tutoring them remain the same as well.

The strategies for tutoring academic papers and personal narratives are the same in many ways, however, they also differ in many ways and those differences deserve our attention. In academic papers, a common strategy to try to clarify your understanding of a student's paper is

to give your own interpretation by asking questions such as, “So what you are trying to say is... am I correct?” However, asking such questions while tutoring a personal narrative can often be more harmful than helpful. As a new tutor, I was eager to show the students I was helping that I was interested in their story and what they had to say. However, asking interpretive questions such as the one above, can pressure the students into molding their experience to fit your interpretation. The best thing a tutor can do in this situation is let the student explain to *you* what their story means, rather than the other way around. Alyssa Quinn, a former tutor at Utah State University, has already done substantive research on this topic. She states that “if tutors push their own interpretations, the narratives are less likely to be authentic, which nullifies the potential for increased self-awareness and personal empowerment” (27). A possible way to remedy this is framing the interpretive question as “What do you want your reader to understand from this paragraph?” This shifts the responsibility of interpretation to the student, and gives them the power to decide how they want their personal narrative to be understood. This strategy is both empowering and educational.

Another important way in which academic papers and personal narratives differ is the approach tutors use to give criticism. Because the content of a personal narrative is often intrinsically linked to who the writer is and what shaped them to be the person they are, the tutor must take extra care when giving criticism of the *content* of a personal narrative. A possible way to frame criticism is by posing it as a question, rather than a statement. For example, if the purpose of a student’s body paragraph seems unclear, rather than stating, “I’m not quite seeing the purpose of this paragraph,” the tutor could pose it as a question, such as “How do you think we could clarify this paragraph for the reader?” This is a strategy that many tutors already use for all types of papers; however it becomes even more crucial while tutoring personal narratives. If

the tutor fails to do this, the student could misinterpret the tutors criticism as criticism of their experience, rather than their portrayal of the experience.

Just as important as a tutor's administration of criticism, is their administration of praise. The purpose of praise is to encourage and validate the student, but if done incorrectly, it could potentially do more harm than good. When giving praise, it is most effective for the tutor to make it as specific and constructive as possible. For example, rather than saying "You've got good evidence for your thesis!" The tutor might instead frame this praise as "I like this example you used, it really adds to your overall purpose and gives your reader unique insight!" While the first example is certainly still adequate, the second example adds an extra layer of specificity and gives the student something to build on in the future. This strategy becomes even more critical while tutoring personal narratives because vague praise tends to sound empty, which could leave the student doubting the tutor's sincerity. As a new tutor, the two students who came to me with personal narratives both had beautifully detailed and emotionally charged papers. However, I was concerned that the praise I was giving of their writing would come across as empty sympathy because of the heavy content of their paper. This concern is unnecessary though because if the praise is meaningful and specific, the student will likely see the tutor's sincerity. When faced with vulnerability, one of a tutor's most powerful tools is validation.

It is important to remember that while these suggestions are a general rule of what is and is not appropriate for tutoring personal narratives, every student and every paper is different and should be treated as such. The tutor will run into more problems of insincerity if they fail to personalize the session to the student. Knowing what strategies to employ in each individual tutoring session is a skill that comes with experience and a keen sense of awareness.

Quinn states, “as tutors, we are in a position to strongly influence students’ writing, and never is that a more risky position to be in than when dealing with personal narratives” (26). Tutoring personal narratives is more risky than tutoring academic papers because personal narratives often tell the history of a person. They tell the story of what makes them who they are, what forms their belief systems and why they view the world the way they do. Sharing that part of themselves with a peer requires vulnerability and humility. The least tutors can do is show the students’ personal narratives the respect and reverence that they deserve. The strategies listed above are simply a few ways that tutors can show this respect and ensure that students can leave the session feeling empowered and capable of sharing their story with others.

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