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Utah State University

Scaffolding in Online Tutoring: Addressing the Issue of Productivity

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**Abstract**

The expanding online tutoring format poses unique challenges when attempting to maximize communication and productivity in a 20–25-minute writing center session. Relatively recent literature has revealed that discontented students have reported in feedback surveys that their sessions felt unhelpful or fruitless. This situation has been termed: "non-productive non-directivity," and it may be attributed to an over-reliance on open-ended questions. It is of interest to determine whether this is truly helping students in online settings. While tutoring roles have not changed, the impersonal nature of an online session requires a more perceptive approach to tutoring: recognizing that a student may need more specific direction to feel sufficiently instructed. This is a practice known as scaffolding.

**Key Words:** Non-directive non-productivity, student feedback, scaffolding, Zone of Proximal Development, tutoring

A 20–25-minute writing session never feels long enough. I quickly learned this during my commencement as a writing center tutor. Not only did students suddenly look to me as a master of diction and grammar, but they were counting on me to maximize every second of those 25 minutes to help them make global and local revisions. Coming away from my first Zoom call felt like leaving a timed essay exam. Was my student satisfied with my suggestions? Gradually, I began to understand that there never would be a “perfect” tutoring session. The best strategy was to allow the student to guide me through their expectations and to offer what I could.

Two weeks later, an appointment rekindled my anxieties. There I was, posing a question I had so many times before: *how do you think you could state this in your paper?* My words hung in the air. Eventually, the student offered a halfhearted suggestion, looking very uncertain. I was torn. Should I stay adamant about letting the student initiate everything, or should I offer more direction? After a moment of indecision, I decided to compromise. I paused. Then, without drafting the sentence for the student, I presented a model of a thesis statement. Gradually, this hypothetical sentence jumpstarted the student's understanding, and she synthesized an idea to work with after our meeting.

Hedengren and Lockerd reported in a 2017 article that the most common negative writing center feedback they gathered from student surveys was what they termed: “non-directive non-productivity” (132). This occurs when students feel that their session accomplished nothing—frequently because the tutor bombarded them with open-ended questions (e.g., “what do you think?”). This article made me reflect on my experience tutoring. I was trained not to fear silence (Ryan & Zimmerelli 24), but my student was not. How cold would it feel to have a mentor stare expectantly through the screen, unaware that their question may not have provided sufficient

context or made sense? I began to wonder how to ensure that my silence was productive. What I discovered was not a straightforward answer, such as asking more questions (i.e., "minimalist tutoring" (Brooks 3-4)) or less often (i.e., directive tutoring). The key was being perceptive enough to ask the right level of question through scaffolding. Scaffolding is the concept of prefacing, modeling (Ryan & Zimmerelli 41), or breaking a question down into more digestible pieces.

My tutor training emphasized challenging students with open-ended questioning. Literature has acknowledged and argued against this unspoken preference (Truesdell 7). However, considering lag time, troubleshooting, camera anxiety, etc., students may have new needs in the increasingly ubiquitous online tutoring format. Notably, the ability to remain engaged in a discussion online is a new and daunting challenge. In many sessions, if I avoid being directive with my questions, student and tutor "tune-outs" occur, and the session deviates from being beneficial. On the other hand, some tutors attempt to decrease "awkward" moments by dominating sessions. Scaffolding open-ended questions is a happy medium. The tutor provides enough information that the student is stretched but still able to answer. Sometimes, this practice even includes positive affirmations (Thompson 428). Both parties are left more at ease when silent moments follow scaffolded questions because the student maintains understanding and inertia.

John Nordlof explains in his 2014 article in *WLN* that an underlying principle of scaffolding is "that the nature of support the tutor provides changes depending on the circumstances" (57). These circumstances are determined by a concept he draws from Russian psychologist, Vygotsky, called the "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD). A knowledgeable

mentor perceives the ZPD as the span between the potential and actual development of an individual (Nordlof 55). Nordlof illustrates how scaffolding functions this way using the analogy of a parent helping a child ride a bike: a gradual decrease in direct assistance as the student progresses (56). Similarly, one cannot master a skill without help and instruction first. If a tutee has not learned the fundamentals of writing a thesis, simply asking how they might write one will not teach them. I had a student struggle with this, and after attempting several questions about how they would map out their main points, I realized it was not working. My question needed a preface: “For example, if I was writing about X, then I could say Y.” This was all it took for the concept to click in my student’s mind.

I discovered that the art of scaffolding open-ended questions requires a tutor to be perceptive. I have been the tutee of sessions where tutors take both too little and too much directivity. To eliminate potential uncertainty, I designed a system that delineates effective scaffolding, summarized in the acronym WAIT. “W” stands for wait, which reminds the tutor that silence is not always unfavorable. A student often needs quiet time to think. If, however, a question leads to an abnormally long pause, the tutor should move on to “A”: ask the student if they understand. If they do not, proceed to “I,” or incremental steps. It is important not to jump immediately to giving the student a sentence to copy. Instead, set up steps that could guide them to an answer. For example, I once helped a student interpret graphs in a journal article. I took some time to indicate sections that had helped me decipher the figures, then gave a brief example of how I might apply that understanding to explain one graph. Finally, I applied “T,” or testing understanding, by asking: “How would you explain the next graph to me?” After that, the student was off, and she seemed to have a much better understanding of the research data by the end. If I had just given her all my interpretations of the graphs, she would not have learned the skill the

assignment was attempting to teach. On the flip side, jumping straight to an open-ended approach would likely have led to non-directive non-productivity.

Undoubtedly, since some erroneously assume that the writing center is a paper-correction center, the use of open-ended questioning is fundamental to promote critical thinking. However, we must consider this strategy in the context of a rising online format. Already isolated from professors and peers, students desperately need perceptive tutors. In a post-pandemic world, we need to be collaborators, coaches, and counselors (Ryan & Zimmerelli 5-7) more than ever before. Anyone can eventually figure out how to complete a task with few or no directions, but tutoring sessions are 25 minutes long. With a lot to cover, guidance catered to the student's level of understanding is paramount. Thus, methods like scaffolding should be emphasized as ways to increase student session productivity. Most students value our advice and are enthusiastic about developing their writing prowess. Therefore, our charge is to sense when a student is struggling, wait a moment and observe where they may need further clarification, then formulate a slightly directive, scaffolded approach.

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