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Effective in the Affective: Cultivating an Emotionally Intelligent Writing Center

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Abstract

Academic contexts emphasize the cognitive component of writing. However, for tutors to effectively meet students' needs they must also give attention to the affective, or emotional, component. At times, anxieties about session productivity or a perceived inability to meet students' needs cause tutors to fall into a defensive mindset in which they attempt to address students' emotional states as quickly as possible. Rather than allowing this mindset to dominate the session, tutors should practice the empathetic mindset, giving students the space and support to express their emotional needs. Emphatic listening facilitates the empathetic mindset, positioning tutors to act as a mirror for the students' emotions and listen to their needs without assumptions or judgement. Vulnerability involves a mutual disclosure in which both student and tutor are willing to be open about their struggles and experiences. Emotional intelligence refers to one's ability to identify and respond to emotional behaviors within oneself and others. Through an articulated organizational culture of openness, honesty, and acceptance, we can cultivate an emotionally intelligent writing center.

Keywords: Writing center, tutoring, empathy, defensive mindset, empathetic mindset, emphatic listening, vulnerability, emotional intelligence, organizational culture

Effective in the Affective: Cultivating an Emotionally Intelligent Writing Center

Every student's paper is a story—a glimpse into their mind and ideas, and their complex narrative of experiences. That is one of the first notions I have developed as a new tutor. With limited experience in the role, I've yet to have the privilege of listening to a large number of them, but I have enjoyed learning each student's unique story.

Recently, I met with a student whose narrative was harder for me to read into. Throughout the appointment, they were mostly silent, responding with one-word answers and shrugging when I asked if concepts made sense, or if they had ideas for what to focus on next. At one point, they paused for a long moment then said, "I'm just...not really sure. The grammar part of writing is hard for me. I'm just not good at it." I was surprised. Reading over their paper, I had been impressed. Seeing a chance to listen, I paused to ask why they believed that was the case and what they thought about their writing. After a repeated, "I'm just...not good at it" and a silence, I complimented strong aspects of their writing, seeking to provide positivity. They brightened noticeably with a quiet smile. Then another long silence settled in. After a moment's hesitation, I asked if we should continue. Their expression fell and I felt that I had stumbled and backtracked, missing an opportunity I couldn't place. The session continued. Their tone became a bit more open, but remained predominantly removed. Afterward, I thought about what had happened. Pausing to compliment the student seemed like the right call, but beyond that moment, I hadn't managed to garner much of a response. I left the session feeling that I had made a step in the right direction but wondering, "What did I miss?"

An answer presented itself in the form of another story. In the literature review of her dissertation, "'How do you feel about this paper?' A Mixed-Methods study of How Writing Center Tutors Address Emotion," Jennifer Follett discusses how past writing center scholarship

has tended to emphasize how to quickly and effectively move beyond emotions and continue with the appointment. Emotions have been construed as hinderances to productivity, inappropriate in an academic setting. The cognitive focus is understandable within the academic context. However, creating a setting where emotions are never acceptable neglects the affective component of listening to and trying to understand students. Follett suggests that in past studies, academic norms influenced tutors to primarily respond to emotional disclosure with a “defensive mindset” derived from their anxiety about session productivity or their perceived incapability to help the student, both academically and emotionally. She posits a relatively new, emerging mindset: The empathetic mindset.

The mindset follows themes of “tutors as counselors” and involves recognizing emotions as an integral part of writing. Follett’s study departs from past literature in that most participating tutors took the empathetic approach. She describes the experience of one tutor named Katherine whose session closely paralleled mine. Rather than becoming defensive, Katherine asked the student if something was bothering them about the assignment. The student affirmed that they were struggling with the professor in that class and anxious about how the paper would be received. After reading about Katherine’s experience, it occurred to me that, with a basic notion of listening in mind, I had asked the student what they *thought* about their writing. I hadn’t asked them what they *felt*.

Our similar experiences demonstrate how, at times, negative emotions need to be addressed before the session can continue. Rather than moving past emotions as quickly as possible, we can care for them with empathy, even at a cost to efficiency. Validating emotions allows us to respond to students as people first and writers second, helping to meet their emotional needs. A simple, “How are you feeling about this paper?” might go a long way in

opening up the conversation for a student to receive support. Additionally, I recognize in my own experience the danger of surface positivity. I identified genuine strengths that I saw in the student's writing, but while that seemed to give them a temporary confidence boost, it didn't address what were possibly deeper insecurities about writing. Empathy means moving beyond positivity and allowing emotions to be the messy, complicated, sometimes lasting responses that they are. Although helping students find a positive place and achieving as much as possible in the short session are worthy goals, we can also recognize that sometimes emotions are not easily set aside. We can allow them to exist in whatever expression they naturally take.

McBride et al. maintain that one of the simplest, yet most effective, tutoring techniques for responding to students' emotions is empathic listening. Empathic listening moves beyond understanding the student's words. The listener acts as a mirror for the other person, allowing them to express themselves, and responding in a way that conveys a genuine desire to understand (Arnold 354-360). It requires setting aside our own perspective in an attempt to truly understand where the other person is coming from and what they are experiencing. With that idea, I realized I was *assuming* emotional disclosure would have helped the student I tutored when that might not have been the case. Accordingly, I found two additional suggestions in the literature for how to balance empathetic intuitions with the contrast between our own and the student's perception of reality.

The first is vulnerability. In chapter four of *Wellness and Care in Writing Center Work*, Giaimo et al. suggest that vulnerability requires even more than empathy. To be empathetic is to respond openly to someone else's struggles. Vulnerability requires being willing to be open about our *own* struggles. Vulnerability is a privilege. Certain individuals may not be comfortable being vulnerable because of past experiences where openness was a threat to their safety. In

allowing for vulnerability, we should recognize that it doesn't look the same for everyone. The practice allows everyday vulnerabilities to occur when people are prepared to participate. That can happen when we are both willing to listen to the students' vulnerabilities and express our own. Creating an environment where vulnerability is seen as a strength, not a weakness, can allow students and tutors to do their work and express themselves at the same time. That mindset will also allow us to listen to the student rather than our own assumptions.

The second idea is emotional intelligence, an indicator of one's ability to identify and respond to emotional behaviors within oneself and others (Giaino et al. ch. 5). It has an emphasis upon but need not be limited to individual competence. How, then, do we cultivate an emotionally intelligent writing center? According to Giaino et al. the answer lies in organization culture: "The values and underlying assumptions groups of individuals draw upon as they encounter similar situations and problems within an environment" (ch. 5). The authors suggest that there is currently a thriving conversation about writing center organizational culture, but not enough attention has been given to how each center defines its culture—specifically, for how each center's individual and collective emotional health and intelligence impacts the community's culture. I believe that within the Writing Center where I work, we have defined our organization culture through stated objectives and meetings where expressing concerns and receiving advice from others is encouraged. As we continue to articulate our organizational culture, and our goals for communicating with students and with each other, we develop the culture of sharing, validation, trust, and support. Those individual efforts and experiences culminate into an emotionally intelligent writing center.

Applying empathy is not easy. I discovered that for myself when I struggled to provide an opportunity for the student to open up, if they so desired. It involves practice and willingness to

engage in daunting conversations. However, as we consider this information, we will be able to instigate the strategies that work for our specific situations and writing centers. Those strategies can guide us as we continue cultivating an environment that allows emotions to be as they are, fosters empathy and vulnerability, and develops an organization culture of emotional intelligence. A culture, that manifests in an articulated identity as an open, honest, accepting writing center.

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