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Tutors: A Multiliteracy Journal About Tutoring

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Avoiding the Awkward Silence:

Tips for Creating Conversation and Getting Students Involved in Tutoring Sessions

I think that we've all had *those* appointments. Those totally silent, terribly uncomfortable, one-sided tutoring sessions in which the tutor does all the talking and the student never says one word. Sometimes, the student is simply shy or unconfident. There may be a language barrier. Perhaps the student has never received any positive encouragement. Or, worst of all, there are those appointments in which the student sits down and asks the tutor to "just write that down" or "repeat those *exact* words." For one reason or another, the tutor cannot figure out how to get the student to engage in a discussion about his or her work, and as a result the session is forced, uncomfortable, and much too quiet.

Having worked in a university writing center for three years, I have faced this dilemma again and again. I firmly believe that the most effective tutoring sessions are the ones in which there is a conversation—in which both the student and tutor ask questions, raise concerns, and suggest new ideas. However, creating this type of conversation in a session is much easier said than done. It can be very difficult to get shy, nervous, bored, uncomfortable, or uninterested students to talk about their writing, and this often leads to ineffective sessions. In such one-sided sessions, I have often found myself either imposing too many "answers" on students' writing "problems" or waiting in uncomfortable silence for students to pick up the threads of a conversation that I begin but don't know how to get them to extend. In response to these problems, I have come up with a few tips for getting students to engage during tutoring sessions in order to avoid that dreaded silence.

Tip #1: Be Silly

Often, the lack of discussion and student engagement in tutoring sessions stem from students' embarrassment at the prospect of showing me papers that they feel are badly written. Such anxiety can cause students to withdraw during sessions, which makes it difficult for the tutor to involve the student in active learning. This was the case with a student who I tutored several times in the UC San Diego Writing Center. I'll call her "Taylor." Taylor is a non-native speaker and international student from China. She was in her last year at UC San Diego, having transferred in two years before. On this particular day, she came to see me about a paper that she had to write for her college writing program. She was on the verge of tears and clearly nervous, telling me in the first few minutes that she had trouble with English and that her TA had even made fun of her during class for the way that she pronounced certain English words. She wanted me to look at her thesis and tell her if it was clear and arguable. Seeing that it was not, I attempted to explain that she had great evidence and a strong grasp of the topic, but that she needed to move beyond a statement of fact to an assertion about the evidence that she had. These words only made her uncomfortable.

I realized that in order to have a productive session, I would have to put aside the writing for a moment and just make her smile. So I pulled out a piece of paper and wrote down three statements:

1. Breathing is a good way to stay alive
2. It is healthier to drink soda than it is to drink water
3. Dogs are better than cats

As I wrote each statement and simultaneously read it aloud, I heard her giggle. Smiling brightly, I asked her whether for each statement she thought that:

1. Everyone would agree

2. No one would agree

3. Some people might agree and others might disagree

She quickly and correctly classified each statement, and I explained that she had just identified an arguable statement and two different types of non-arguable statements. Her relief and excitement were palpable. Not only had she finally smiled and relaxed, but she also understood for the first time the meaning of an arguable thesis.

These are silly examples, of course. A writing professor might never use such examples in a college class. However, I think that the tutor's job is not only to help students develop academic skills, but also to make them feel more relaxed and, hopefully, *excited* about their work. After I got Taylor to laugh, the entire session improved. She was more comfortable; I was more comfortable, and we were able to work together on her paper. Such discussion and collaboration likely would never have been possible if I hadn't been able to get her to relax. Thus, I firmly believe that using humor can break down the wall between tutors and students, allowing them to have a two-way conversation instead of a tutor-to-student lecture.

Tip #2: Adjust Your Language

During the time that I tutored Taylor, I also realized the value of discovering each student's language. I don't mean Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, or French: I mean the style of learning with which each student feels secure. This can be really difficult for the tutor. I feel very comfortable using writing terms—claims and conclusions, subject-verb agreement, parallel structure. However, most of the students with whom I work feel very *uncomfortable* with these terms. Using them can cause the student to shut down and quickly the session becomes a lecture. As a tutor, my job is to figure out what makes the student feel comfortable, excited, or calm, and to do my best to speak this language.

This can work in a few ways. When I meet with students for the first time, I like to ask them what their majors are, what they like to study, and what extracurricular activities they enjoy. This sets the tone for a friendly session, but it also gives me a clue about what kind of language I might be able to employ during the session. For example, when I work with science majors, I often draw upon the scientific method to explain how to develop an arguable thesis. With math majors, I use proofs. For runners, I use pacing. I find that typically, the student will be more willing and excited to enter into a discussion about writing if I try to meet the student wherever he or she feels comfortable and happy.

For other students, I find that simply employing common metaphors and imagery is more effective. After we worked on her thesis, Taylor told me that she didn't have any piece of evidence that directly supported her new claim. By this point, I understood that the best way to help her was not to explain that she could take pieces of evidence that supported different parts of her thesis and combine them, but to show her. After thinking for a minute I told her, "You know those pieces of colored film that they hold over lights in a movie studio? Well, imagine that you have two different colored pieces. When you cross one over the other, it forms a new color in the middle. If each colored film symbolizes a piece of evidence, then the emerging color is your own original argument." Taylor was much more comfortable discussing how to integrate examples by using colored lights than by using writing terms, and we were able to work through her problem together in a language that worked for both of us.

Tip #3: Promote Active Note Taking

As I discussed in Tip #2, I try my best to adapt my tutoring methods to the student's particular learning style. However, there is one thing that I strongly encourage every student to do (whether it is comfortable or not): take notes during tutoring sessions. For some students, I

don't even have to bring it up. Like me, they are eager and active note-takers who often begin to scribble in the margins of their papers the second that I begin talking. Others just don't think about taking notes; they are too wrapped up in listening or thinking to put pen to paper. I've had others still who have asked me to take notes for them. Typically I'll take notes during a tutoring session, but I still ask *all* students that I see to take their own notes as well. Here's why.

First of all, I recognize that the student and I might think very differently. Thus, while the things that I *say* might make sense, it is possible that my notes wouldn't register with the student. If the student writes his or her own notes, then he or she can do it in a way that makes the most sense to him or her. I've seen students write full sentences, and I've seen others write in a kind of shorthand that wouldn't make sense to me, but evidently it works for them. Having students take their own notes also causes them to become more involved in the tutoring session. In any tutoring session, there is a fear that the tutor will simply instruct the students rather than work with them collaboratively. It is possible to avoid this problem by asking the students to take their own notes. When students need to convert the suggestions that they have heard into writing, they must consider which words are most important, which pieces of advice will ultimately be most useful. In this way, the students take a more active role in their own learning.

Furthermore, having students write their own notes also allows me to determine if there are things that I've said that they don't understand. I try to give each student a moment of quiet after I provide each major suggestion to jot down a few notes. If the student seems to be at a loss for what to write, it gives me the opportunity to ask the student if anything I've said doesn't make sense or should be rephrased. Whereas some may argue that a tutor could simply ask this question without making the student take notes, I believe that this question in conjunction with note taking leads to more specific questions. Often when I stop during a session and ask students if anything needs to be clarified, I can tell that the students have trouble pinpointing exactly *what*

doesn't make sense. Note taking helps students to zero in on precisely what point may be confusing or unclear and makes it easier for them to express those concerns.

Concluding Thoughts

Of course, these are only a few ways in which tutors can attempt to engage students during tutoring sessions. Some of the most basic things I didn't even mention. For instance, a smile and a genuine greeting can make students feel that they are in a space where they can share their concerns without fear of being mocked or chastised. Whatever technique you find works best for you, I think that it is so important to remember that tutoring is not all about the academics. At the UC San Diego Writing Center, the tutors are actually known as "writing mentors," which is a great reminder that the tutor's job is half about the student's paper and half about the student's confidence. And when the confidence improves, the writing often improves as a result. Win-win!