Analyzing Power Dynamics

Through tutoring development, it has become clear just how different teaching is from tutoring. While a professor's responsibility is to educate and designate a mark (grade, percentage, etc) from a fairly objective standpoint, it is a tutor's responsibility to personalize and motivate a student by giving them the tools they need to succeed.

This divide brings into question methods of standardization and structures in a learning environment, and how those implicitly create advantages and disadvantages for students. In chapter six of *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors*, there is a discussion of "'provisionalism' rather than certainty" (152): standardization of grading systems and curriculum requirements falls into the realm of the "certain", because the "certain" relates to factors, knowledge, and expectations that are fixed. This can be advantageous, because it builds a strong foundation for students to rely on; conversely, by taking this cut-and-dry approach, the system possibly neglects individual student needs and finds an imbalance between specialized knowledge and common knowledge. Specialized knowledge could be defined as an advanced understanding of an area of study, which adds to the stricter form of "certainty": "With certainty, by contrast, the tutor acts 'almost as a teacher... offer[ing] definite suggestions with no room for options" (152). So while a fortified structural approach to a subject, theme, or topic can provide a framework for students to work in, if there is no room for interpretation, "certainty" could negate the possibility of differing opinions and approaches.

Near the beginning of chapter five of *OGWT*, it is noted that "Identity is central to writing centers" (149), and here again we see a divide between the environments surrounding classrooms and the writing center: classrooms, due to predetermined curriculums, structures, and grading systems,

have generally become homogenous: having grown up with a high school English teacher as a father, and having multiple friends who are English teachers as well, I have been able to listen and observe how assignments, tests, and discussions often have to fit into requirements set by the state and other organizations. While this is useful for building a foundation (as stated before), education has become more accessible to a wider range of people with varying identities (cultural, ethnic, disability, age, etc), and it could be argued that this style of grading, and the concept of a rubric as a whole, needs to evolve alongside the demographic of students.

Writing centers are a place where educational institutions such as universities and high schools could learn to develop and adapt to these changing demographics: tutors have studied and begun to develop skills such as mental agility, genre-awareness, flexible structures, and redefining power dynamics in the classroom. All of these examples relate to one specific skill tutors are developing throughout English Internship: empathy.

Again in chapter six of *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors,* the authors say: "…if you do have special knowledge about the writing, it is important not to let this expertise override your role as a tutors" (152): with this in mind, it is argued that tutors should act as audience members rather than educated instructors, which allows for more nuanced conversations about the development of writing. While teachers and professors do not necessarily see students as a statistic, and it is their profession to impart knowledge and develop academics, there does have to be a psychic distance between them and the people in their classes; as tutors, that psychic distance is allowed to be much closer, because their goal is not to give a mark, but to assist students in the process of their writing, to help them feel comfortable enough to ask questions and make changes, and to ultimately submit their work for the

aforementioned mark. Perhaps more than teachers, tutors have the opportunity to look at the abstract parts of the writing process.

An example of this difference of psychic distance could be seen in this tutoring example: a tutor is tasked with helping two students write music biographies for their music education class. These biographies will introduce these students to the faculty and broader university system, and will also eventually be used as a complementary or supplementary document to their curriculum vitaes or resumes. In the pre-textual phase, a tutor may ask what the student is exactly trying to accomplish with the biography, and this question works in "provisionalism" rather than "certainty" because it defines the assignment within the context of the student's intentions: instead of the student thinking "what does the professor want to see?", it becomes "What do I want to accomplish with this writing?" During the textual phase, this power dynamic can continue to be broken down through the application of empathy: one tutor may address his personal experiences with music in order to open up a a genre and subject specific vocabulary, signalling to the student that the tutor can understand the assignment on specific terms (using "provisionalism" to create a shared specialized knowledge); another tutor may be brutally honest about their lack of knowledge of the music disciplines, which would allow for the student to explain and, through discussion, make a breakthrough on their own writing. During the post-textual phase, now that the power dynamic has been redefined, it should be easier for tutors and students to have a conversation about where the piece needs to develop. Throughout the entire tutoring process, without the pressure of assigning a mark, tutors do not have to expect perfection, or qualification, or "certainty" from their students; instead, the focus is on development rather than an end product.

Multiple power dynamics can be seen here: between professor and student, between grading systems and knowledge deficits, between tutor and student, and even an internalized power dynamic while approaching the act of instruction. It is crucial to analyze these power dynamics, especially as education evolves, in order to establish an environment that works on myriad levels: a place where students feel encouraged to learn, instructors can grow from their experiences with students, and peer tutoring is recognized as an accessible means for building confidence and refining skill sets.

Works Cited

Ianetta, Melissa, et al. *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors: Practice and Research*, pg 152.

Oxford University Press, 2016.