

How the Writing Center Can Help Create More Confident Writers

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For all of the unique benefits that they provide, writing center tutorials come with several drawbacks compared to regular writing instruction. Chief among these is permanence. At Lane, an average student spends about 4 hours a week in an English class, working with the same teacher and classmates. This same student might come to the writing center a few times a semester, mostly when required to, for a 20 minute appointment with a tutor that they probably haven't worked with before and may not work with again. With this in mind, what can tutors do to make sure that their sessions with writers have an impact once their 20 minutes together are up? It's standard procedure to send our writers accounts of the discussions that we had in the session, but this falls firmly in the category of creating "better writing" as opposed to the "better writers" that are considered the ultimate goal of the writing center. The latter can be hard to describe and harder still to create; an improved writer doesn't just leave the center as a more talented writer than when they came in, they are also more motivated to write going forward, and they are more confident in their writing. Authored primarily by Isabelle Lundin, the paper "The Impact of Writing Center Consultations on Student Writing Self-Efficacy" explores how tutors can help their writers become more confident in their compositions.

Lundin begins by describing concerns of writers that go beyond the higher order-lower order continuum that is central to tutoring practices. These students aren't worried about their grammar, their quote embedment, or their thesis statements, they're worried about their ability to complete the assignment at all. This, as Lundin notes, can create a vicious cycle; "students are not going to produce anything of quality if they don't think that they *can* produce anything of

quality.” The writer loses confidence in their work, their work decreases in quality, they receive more negative feedback, causing further loss of confidence, and so on. Efforts by tutors to create “better writers” largely center around writing practices; paragraph structure, textual analysis, phrasing, and the like. Low-confidence writers present a unique challenge to tutors. Most will be receptive to the feedback that they receive in the center because they will feel that they need it. However, the writer might be reluctant to make suggested changes on their own, believing that they will not be able to do so effectively, and attempt to make their tutor the primary editor of the paper. Avoiding this is difficult for the tutor; all of Lane’s tutors have read Jeff Brooks’ article on minimalist tutoring, but the strategies that he offers for returning the role of editor to a reluctant student could serve to further frustrate them. To remedy this, Lundin encourages the use of directive tutoring strategies to “allow students to learn through instructional scaffolding,” but notes that these strategies must be grounded in empathy.

From a broader data set that will be discussed later, Lundin picks out four practices that writing center customers noted were particularly effective in helping them become more confident in their writing, which she defines collectively as “empathy-based tutoring strategies”; listening, advising, translating, and motivating. She identifies the importance of listening “to determine why the student needs help, to acknowledge what parts of their writing makes them anxious, to set goals for the session, and to clarify unclear concepts.” While all this seems obvious enough (a tutor can only assist a student if they know *what* the student needs assistance with), most students generally don’t receive this help in their English classes, simply because there isn’t time to address each individual student’s concerns. Instead, issues with the student’s writing are instead addressed via the “red pen,” a reading that focuses exclusively on the errors

of the paper with no thought given to why they occur. In the absence of positive feedback or constructive criticism, is it any wonder that students cease to believe that they can be good writers? There isn't a great solution to this in large-scale English classes, which makes the writing center's role in reversing this process that much more important.

Lundin expands on this with her discussion of motivation in tutorials, noting that tutors ought to “[reaffirm] the value of the students’ ideas, [encourage] collaboration within the session to slowly build confidence, and [demonstrate] kindness and concern for students’ success.” Of the main empathy-based tutoring practices mentioned by Lundin, this one has the most to do with confidence. It’s already standard practice to mention the existing strong points of student essays, and this takes on a special importance when the student does not receive this sort of feedback elsewhere. In a similar vein, students sometimes have good ideas, but struggle to put them onto the page. This is where the tutor can step in as a translator who can “[talk] through ideas and [help] to transform them into things that can be written down.” The tutor can’t be inside the student’s head, and therefore often can’t articulate exactly what it is the student is thinking, but in letting the student talk about their ideas in a way that they might not be able to elsewhere, their thoughts can be put (at least partially) into words that can be refined either during the session or on the student’s own time as they work to more closely match their writing to their thoughts.

“Advising” is something of a tautology when mentioned as a tutoring strategy. While the focus of this piece, and of the writing center, is that the student behind the paper deserves as much (or more) attention as the paper itself, tutoring ultimately boils down to offering ways for

writers to improve, colloquially known as giving advice. Lundin names “making suggestions, introducing or explaining a writing concept...explaining the rationale behind suggestions...and providing tools or strategies for the student to use after the session is complete” as a few specific ways for tutors to advise their students. This is one of the main benefits of peer tutors; they are more able to connect with students than a teacher might be, and can explain a suggested change in a way to which the student will be more receptive. The same criticism will feel less harsh coming from a fellow student than from the literal or metaphorical “red pen” of normal English classes.

As a concluding note, I don’t intend to villainize English teachers in this or any other piece. My point is that the writing center is able to provide students with a personal touch that isn’t as accessible in a 30-person English class. This is nobody’s fault, and is an unavoidable reality of large-scale education. In order to make better writers, we have to make more confident writers who feel like they can create a quality piece on their own, and writing center tutors are uniquely able to work towards this goal.

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