

IN THE POCKETS OF YESTERDAY'S PANTS:

Theory, practice, theory



JOHNSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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Some Introduction

Kathryn Byrne, Writing Center Director

Welcome to our second newsletter. In this issue, JCCC peer writing tutors have written both reflectively and as apprentice scholars on various tutoring topics of their own choosing. In the reflective section, Morgan and Lori volunteer their insights about what being a tutor has meant to them this past year – what skills they have honed. Both have found during their interaction with others some aspect of communication key – speaking, listening, or body language.

As scholars, the tutors chose topics of research that interested them. All questions the value a tutor brings to a tutorial. Betsy argues for the importance of laughter during a tutorial. Brandon pays tribute to the teachers in the Writing Center and how just about anyone can find the center a second home. Evan and Erynne wonder whether knowledge about learning styles is helpful or not during tutoring. Stacy examines how her own body language might impact a tutorial. Maggie and Morgan reveal the importance of easing a second language learner's anxiety by befriending 2LLs as a way to help them be more receptive learners.

We also have a goodbye note from a previous tutor, Matthew Barnett, who has since transferred to KU and an essay written by Umid, a student who has used the writing center regularly this past academic year. Last, we have another anonymous submission of creative writing. I hope you enjoy the newsletter as much as we have enjoyed writing it.

*Regards,
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Writing Center Reflection

Lori Lentenbrink

Since my first reflection, I have much more confidence in my tutoring skills and I have realized a plethora of new opportunities on which I am just now embarking. I have ignited a passion for working with the EAP and ESL students, which I had never fathomed before working in the Writing Center. I have found it much easier to approach difficult tutoring sessions. I also realize I am getting better every day. This reflection will focus on one of the more difficult tutoring sessions I have had recently. The girl I tutored seemed aloof and unengaged. Dealing with this session, I saw some of my strengths come out, as well as a weakness.

While working with “Stephanie,” I feel I was able to boost her confidence. She was in the process of writing a descriptive essay about the Arboretum. When she handed me her essay, she did not want me to read it out loud and she was very adamant about it. After I finished her paper, I was extremely impressed with her writing. I ensured that I complimented her. Her images flowed beautifully on the page, and she had no idea. As I complimented her, I could see only through her facial expression that she was appreciative and excited to hear the words of praise.

“Stephanie” asked me to check over her grammar using a rubric her teacher gave her, but I let her know our hierarchy of concerns. She seemed slightly

annoyed by my explanation, so I was a bit intimidated going into the session, feeling unsure of what I was about to encounter. When I finished her paper, the only thing I noticed was one misplaced modifier, but I mentioned to her that sometimes teachers notice more issues that I, myself, may not always recognize. She did not seem satisfied with this, and I felt like I had let her down. However, in regards to the hierarchy, I did notice one issue with the organization of her thesis. She was attempting to compare the Arboretum with Oz, which she mentioned in her thesis statement and her conclusion. Though she offered beautiful descriptions, she failed to mention the comparison anywhere else in her essay. After I made her aware of the need, she understood that she needed the comparison, as it was one of the assignment goals. Again, I perceived appreciation from her, though I was not positive.

One bump in the road I noticed while watching my session with "Stephanie" was the spatial distance between us. I was not very close to her, relatively speaking, and I was practically cut out of the video in certain parts. "Stephanie" seemed less than willing to be at the Writing Center that day, as if she was probably there only for extra credit. If I would have been closer in proximity to her, I think our session would have been a little more personal. I felt as soon as I was done telling her about adding more comparison, she already had her bag packed and was looking for the exit. I think if my body language was a little different, more personal, she may have been more engaged in our conversation.

My session with "Stephanie" was actually different from most of the sessions I have had recently. Usually, my sessions are engaged and the students are more than willing to participate. "Stephanie" was not necessarily the same case. I think this is why I enjoy working with the EAP students so much. They are always engaged, and they learn something. They always genuinely thank me, and I can tell how truly appreciative they are for my help. Tutoring has really become one of the best things I have done in a very long time and one of the greatest decisions I have ever made.

Tutoring, Revisited

Morgan Daigneault



Offering a variety of resources, the Writing Center presents visitors with an environment conducive to learning. However, students who visit the Writing Center are not the only ones who benefit. After accepting this position, I wondered how much there was for me to learn. During the process of my first self-evaluation, though, I discovered that I have a lot to learn about myself and other people. Since that time, I have made a conscious effort to avoid my weaknesses and enhance my strengths. I have been looking forward to this opportunity to reassess myself now that I have a bit more experience under my belt.

The anxiety and reservations I had before recording my first session were not an issue this time; I knew this experience would be beneficial for me, and my attitude reflected this from the beginning. With smiles on our faces, the student and I laughed as I struggled to set up the camera — a fail-proof icebreaker, for sure. Having conquered the technical issues, I planted myself in a chair next to him (though not close enough to be seen in the video, unfortunately). To begin, I asked him about his assignment. The student did not have any printed guidelines, but he explained the details of his essay to me and summarized the content. He quickly but amiably declined my suggestion to read the paper out loud, so I offered to read for him, making sure he understood that he could stop me at any time to ask questions.

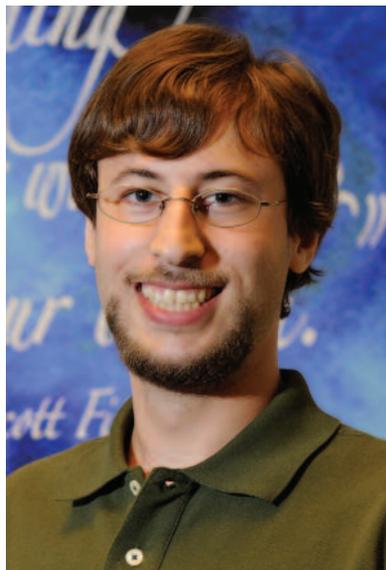
Placing the paper in front of the student, I began to read as my pen followed from word to word. I could tell that the student was comfortable because he did not hesitate to bring up any questions he had as we made our way through his analytical essay. At times, I would address his concerns by offering a suggestion. For example, I would show him how to reword a specific sentence. Instead of trying to write down everything I said like some students have in the past – a practice I try to steer students away from when I notice it – he felt confident enough to stand up for specific words or phrases and explain why he wanted to keep them. I enjoyed discussing these issues with the student. He reconsidered some points of concern after our discussion, but he decided to leave others intact. In the beginning of the semester, I might have found this perplexing, or even bothersome. Now I understand that this is a good thing: the student took ownership of his work. I can offer alternative approaches and explain grammatical rules, but ultimately it is the student who decides what words will represent his or her own ideas and analyses.

After my first evaluation, I knew that I needed to improve my eye contact and let the student take control of the pen more often. Although we often focused our attention on the pages in front of us, I did make plenty of eye contact, especially during our discussions. Without being asked, the student took a pen in his hand and made many marks and revisions on his own, further empowering himself. I was proud to have created an atmosphere in which the student felt comfortable explaining his observations and clarifying his ideas, especially because English is not his first language.

Although I have managed to overcome a few identified weaknesses, new ones have come to the surface. I feel that my use of language, in speaking, is not always very strong; I tend to utter a lot of “um,” “uh,” and “hmmm” noises to fill in the gaps between my thoughts. One of my greatest concerns is establishing a rapport with the student, and as a result I often use more casual, or even passive, language to put the student at ease and perhaps even make them feel superior. These quirks might not necessarily be a bad thing in certain situations, but I definitely plan to work toward a more confident, less cluttered way of communicating.

Working as a tutor has changed me in many ways. I've improved my writing abilities and my understanding of grammar. I've acquired new and valuable skills to help foster positive interactions with teachers, coworkers, and fellow students. I've learned how to identify my own weaknesses and develop strategies to conquer them. Most important of all, I've discovered the joy of helping others learn and explore their own paths in life. Whether they realize it or not, the students I tutor help me to understand that there is always room for improvement, and that each day is an opportunity to learn something new.





Can Tutors Provide Value to Students?

Al Nachman

As a Writing Center tutor, I provide a service, but do I provide value? It is a simple matter to show a student the difference between a comma and a semicolon while they are sitting at the table with me, but once they get up, it often feels like all those definitions just fade into the ether. In order for our session to have value, the student must take something with them when they leave. Or as North states, "Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing" ("The Idea of a Writing Center"). A student may not get perfect marks on a paper that they have spent twenty minutes looking over with me, but if they have learned a little bit more about the writing process, if they have become a little bit more confident with the idea of putting thought to paper (or onscreen), if I have helped improve them and not just the paper, then I could say that it was a successful session. It is easy to work on a paper; learning to move past the paper and work on the student is the true measure of a skillful tutor.

One might ask why I have a preoccupation with this notion of "value" and with imparting skills and confidence to students. After all, many who walk into the writing center appear to believe that the purpose of the tutor is to proofread their paper and tell them what is wrong with it. In business, they say that "the customer is always right," so who am I to argue with Writing

Center “customers?” Tracey Baker, a tutor-training instructor at the University of Alabama, believes that tutors should do more than just fix papers: They should teach students how to locate their own errors and self-edit. At the end of one semester, she asked her students to submit anonymous surveys describing how they felt about their experiences with the tutors. She summed up the results saying, “Many... students talked about the confidence they had gained during the term. One student discussed how important feeling confident can be, adding ‘and I will use what I have learned in other classes’” (Baker). To me, this is the greatest compliment that a tutor could receive. It is fantastic if a student has learned more about the rules of writing, but far, far better if they have learned something that they can apply to both writing and other areas of their lives, whether academic or personal. A feeling of confidence and efficacy can surely improve one’s performance in all areas of life.

Of course, this task is much simpler to achieve in theory than in practice, laudable a goal as it may be. It is easy, far too easy, for me to forget this goal and simply content myself with addressing only surface-level errors. Often, surface level error correction is all that the student wants me to do, and all too often, I am happy to comply because to try and go beyond the simple fixes is hard, even frightening. Though I have learned techniques for self-correction, reference-checking, and research (which qualifies me to be a tutor without being as talented as a writer), I am still learning how to tutor students that they too can learn these techniques, to prove that writing is not some sacred art that only the select few can master. Conveying this is difficult even in the best of cases, but what is most frightening – and what I, fortunately, rarely encounter – are the students who express the belief that they are incapable of succeeding at writing and at school in general.

I had one such encounter with a student recently. This student, “Jane,” was an older student who was clearly upset. She had been working late on an overdue paper and told me that she should never have come back to school. I floundered for a response. When I had finally collected myself, I focused on helping her get some grammar issues cleared up, which in and of itself was not a bad goal, but I wasn’t really thinking about what our transaction was

really all about. Did she feel more confident about her writing after the session? I fear no positive learning occurred during that session.

Even in less extreme circumstances, to focus on writers learning rather than tutors fixing can be very difficult. In general, this difficulty is most pronounced when students come in hours before their paper is due with nothing more than a draft and desperation. However, even the best-case scenarios can present difficulty: I have worked with many students who have come in weeks ahead of time, but even then I find that I often slide into pointing out basic fixes. To avoid being a basic fixer, great vigilance is required on my part.

This is not to say that I have made no progress towards my utopian goal of delivering value. Earlier this semester, I worked with a student, "Jim," who had some difficulty with sentence flow. I first told him how to check and see if sentences are ordered logically and went through the first paragraph before turning the reins over to him. I helped him through the second paragraph, and he did the third on his own, and he did well. The greatest question, of course, is how much Jim retained after he left, but unless he returns, this is a question that will be difficult to answer. I do try to urge all the students that I work with to come back again, but I rarely get to see the same person twice.

There are some other small successes that I can take heart in. One student who frequents our Center, "David," lacked computer literacy when he began coming to the Writing Center; he did not even know how to open Microsoft Word. Now, however, he has learned much, including how to use Word's spell-check and grammar-check functions, a simple example, but isn't the act of looking up words, even with an automatic digital dictionary, the very essence of self-correction? Some of my peers have been using computers their whole lives and still do not seem to understand what the red squiggly lines in their text mean.

Learning how to tutor is an ongoing process that will require continual effort. To help foster confidence, I think that I need to do more to point out what students are doing well, even if he or she and the paper is a mess. I am

generally very critical of my own efforts, and so I often forget, or gloss over, what students have already done right. Sometimes, seemingly, this is what they expect, but I think that if I want to do more than just fix a paper, if I want to give value to the tutor session, I want to provide more focus on what students are already doing well. Otherwise, I may risk reinforcing the idea that they are incapable of becoming strong writers. In the span of twenty to thirty minutes, expressing this can be difficult, but I believe, I hope, that if I continue to try, I will do a better job at teaching confidence not just grammar.



Tutors Who Can, Teach!

Abigail Linhardt

Tutors are not teachers. We are not here to teach anyone, we are here to learn and aid other fellow students. However, a time will come when a tutor must show certain “teacher” like qualities when working with a student and play both roles.

Any tutor who has worked in a writing center for a few semesters knows what we should do and things we should not do in a tutoring session. Tutors also know that there are times we have to break rules, become a teacher, and do more for a student than we should. I struggled with this ethical dilemma for too long; I thought that we should only be tutors, not teachers. However, the boundary between tutor and teacher must be breached or blended sometimes like paints on a tray to really help a student who is in need.

Studying to be a teacher and tutoring at the same time has helped me much in the last two semesters. I have learned what my education really means: gaining the knowledge to help a student learn anything later in life; reading and writing are essential to that. When tutoring, we are not instructing students on what to do, but we are guiding them on their adventurous journey to a more decisive lifestyle where they can solve problems for themselves.

So what is the difference between teaching and tutoring? Teaching is

correcting and presenting new information while tutoring helps or guides a student to be more deliberative about the choices he or she makes in his or her writing. During a tutoring session, a student may want help proofreading his or her sentences. As a teacher, I would correct the errors and expect the student to model the correction. As a tutor I coax the student into understanding the errors the teacher corrected, provide examples, ask him or her to spot those errors in his or her own writing. If I do this well enough, the student will not come in next time asking about proofreading, but ask for specific guidance; a sure sign that they are learning. The Penn. Valley University Writing Center handbook says we should "... leave each writer with something that will remain useful long after the end" of the tutoring session (Penn). In a sense, teachers do the same but they do not re-inform multiple times to assure that the student learned; students are left to their own devices on their own time. So for me as a tutor, tutoring and teaching crosses boundaries and more often than not, the tutor in me is left behind.

As I researched, I saw the lines become more and more blurred. Tew defines a tutor as "a teacher who gives individual instruction to a student" (Changing). According to Tew, students only spend one-third of their daily time in lectures and class. This leaves much for us, as tutors, to reinforce; students will come to us with questions about the assignment, about formatting, about citation style, syntax, organization. As tutors, we discuss ideas with the student and get her started to answering her own questions. Yet, we must correct her when she is wrong – then I am a teacher. I feel an obligation to stop a student from making errors in their thinking or in their grammar.

It took me many semesters to realize that the experience of tutoring will only help me when I am a teacher. Iannetta et al. in "Taking Stock: Surveying the Relationship of the Writing Center and TA Training" suggests teacher prep can happen in the Writing Center in the form of individual experience. My experience in the Writing Center helps prepare me for teaching opportunities after academic preparation. As a tutor, I am presented a hundred times a day with opportunities to be teacher-like or to devise an immediate instructional plan.

One experience stands out to me most. I had spent longer than the typical thirty-minute session time tutoring one student who needed help reading and summarizing chapters from a book she was supposed to have been reading all semester long. She had been assigned another book and to write a book report on it. Since she had a mild learning disability, she had not had the courage to read any of the assigned books herself. We could not just go into the summaries or outlines because she had not read the chapters, so we read through the first couple chapters together; this session helped me understand that “tutoring is a way to understand the broad range of knowledge that comprises the material taught in the writing classroom” (lanetta). As she underlined important facts, we went through and wrote notes. After this, I thought she might be able to work alone. At this point, a teacher would stop and say “go to the writing center if you need help,” but I was the Writing Center. I had to be teacher-like to show her how to study and a tutor to reinforce what hopefully was learned. I did this by challenging her choices, a task that took longer than I thought it should. After we were a good way into the first book, I had to prepare her again, showing her how to read the next book for her report. I had at this point crossed another line – I had become a “personal tutor,” a person who does this kind of teacher/tutor work for extended hours.

Although, I do not recommend any tutor cross that line, this session did help me get a feel for what kinds of students come to college to gain an education; we are not collectively typical but a diverse student body which is why I look at even these long and intense tutoring sessions as positive and have a desire to learn all I can from them. Otherwise, I would have a narrow view of teaching and of my future self. If a tutor does not seize as many opportunities as possible from all kinds of different students and their needs, they cannot get a feel for the variety of student needs now and in the future.

Teaching and tutoring is different and at times I must adopt qualities of both and mix them to help students to the best of my abilities while simply being a fellow student who is able to teach.

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“Did You Hear the One about the Comma that Walks Into a Bar?” or: The Importance of Laughter in the Writing Center

Betsy Overesch



Danish conductor Victor Borge once said, “Laughter is the closest distance between two people.” This is especially true when it comes to the Writing Center. Each day, we see an enormous amount of students, most of whom we do not know personally. We are the foreboding tutors, the kings and queens of grammar, those who turn their nose up at the sight of a comma splice and mock underling students when they do not understand how a persuasive paper is written. At least, this is what many students think. However, the ability to get a student to laugh breaks this barrier and is the most powerful tactic we can do to help students become comfortable as they interact with us.

Over the past year that I have worked as a tutor, what I have noticed most about my “favorite” sessions is that they contain laughter, often, a copious amount of laughter. Quite frankly, these are the sessions that I have been told, lovingly, to shut up because I am being too loud. Yet, I cannot help myself. Once I get a student to laugh, the entire demeanor of the session shifts. Instead of being an intense, hostile moment, the session becomes more like a coffee shop sit-down with an old friend. I know only this person’s name, what class and professor they have, and what they are working on, but in some small way that laughter connects me to them. The laughter is

such an abrupt shattering of the invisible boundary between the student and me, one action that lets me reach out to them in a very emotional way. *I am your friend, and I will help you.* I want the student to be comfortable, both in the room and with me, and I have found that laughter is the quickest way to achieve that.

As Pam Farrell-Childers stated in *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, "The laughter in the Writing Center not only gives it a warm atmosphere, it also creates one in which writers are willing to share."¹ The sound of laughter coming from a room creates a much friendlier image than flickering florescent lights and strict tutoring sessions. Personally, I am drawn to areas that sound lively and welcoming, especially in new situations. Were I a student coming into the Writing Center for the first time, the last thing on Earth I would want to see is a bunch of people huddled around desks, talking with sober faces and somber voices. If I sat down and had someone glare at me, and then ask me to read my very personal essay to them, I would most likely become hostile in return. Laughter is the signal to let down your guard, and the sign that this experience might be more enjoyable than first thought.

Because so many of the students are under high stress, laughter can be a way to relieve tension. Sometimes even a smile can do wonders. One of my more memorable sessions took place with a student who was writing a research paper for Composition II (let's call her Ethel). Ethel was extremely frustrated with the topic given to her and had just been given back a teacher-reviewed draft. The teacher had, in Ethel's words, "shredded, crumpled, and then spit on" her paper. Ethel was not happy.

When we began the session, she was very hostile towards me. Her responses to my questions were short, thrown out with the force of a bullet, and she clearly did not want to discuss this paper any more. I was patient, I smiled, and eventually I got her to relax a bit. She began reading the paper to me, and about halfway through, she ran across a misplaced modifier. When I was explaining the error to her, I made a joke about how a modifier and the object being modified are not unlike a gold-digger and his or her wealthy

¹ Farrell-Childers, Pam. "A Good Laugh is Sunshine in a House or a Writing Center." *The Writing Lab Newsletter* 18.4 (1993): 5-6. Print.

spouse: when they separate, things get ugly. She did not respond, so I kept on going. Thirty seconds later, she started to laugh. In fact, she laughed until she cried. While I would like to take credit for this, being *exceptionally* witty and all, I know that it was more a moment for her to release tension. She was having a rough day, and it was a chance for her to let go of some pent-up emotions. The rest of the session was considerably less tense, and she left smiling.

Getting Ethel to smile certainly made me feel better as a tutor and helped me to have a successful session with her. I am aware, however, that many students will not laugh, regardless of what a tutor says. Many may not even smile, as we have seen, with individuals who are mad, frustrated, or just having a bad day, which does not mean that we cannot try. We, as tutors, can be pleasant and encouraging even when a student is grumpy. We can smile, laugh, and interact in a friendly manner with those around us. Yes, some students may still walk out unhappy, but by presenting a place that is enjoyable and inviting, we show students that the Writing Center can be not only friendly, but a safe place to ask for help.





Beyond Writing: The Tutor's Friendship Role with ESL Students

Morgan Daigneault and Maggie Curry-Chiu

Tutoring is inherently a challenging process, and adding English as a second language (ESL) student issues increases the difficulty. We found that, while difficult, expanding the tutor's roles with ESL students was a worthwhile effort. In addition to managing their demanding course loads, ESL students at Johnson County Community College (JCCC) face many social challenges. Challenges include feelings of isolation, culture shock, frustration, unmet expectations, and fear of failure. ESL students lack confidence in their writing abilities and are hesitant to ask questions when they fail to understand an assignment, grammar concept, or reading passage. Tutors who are willing to embrace the friendship role with ESL students will find that they can better serve the students' needs.

Some tutors dread the experience of a language barrier during tutoring sessions. A common issue is difficulty understanding ESL students, both in verbal and written communication. Tutors fear that the ESL students can't

understand them. Overwhelmed with errors, tutors may not know where to begin with some ESL papers. Some tutors lack empathy for ESL students. Finally, tutors may feel like they don't have the time in a session to build better writers, as ESL students tend to be far more demanding of a tutor's time and energy. From our experience, the typical 30-minute tutoring session is impossible; it is not uncommon for the sessions to run closer to an hour.

We consulted two articles that addressed these issues. The first article "ESL Tutors: Simulated Friends," written by Loyola University professors A. F. Macdonald and G. L. Macdonald, asserts that ESL students lack informal contact with English speakers outside the classroom, and writing tutors are uniquely positioned to provide that contact. We tend to agree with the authors that when tutors speak with ESL students in the same manner as they do native English speakers, the ESL student receives two services for one. For English learners, the exposure to conversational English in a tutoring session is just as valuable as a lesson in written grammar. Furthermore, the authors emphasize the concept of a professional friendship. We experienced this friendship concept with a Colombian student who, after two sessions, brought some Colombian coffee to share in a display of cultural camaraderie. Macdonald and Macdonald contend that writing center policy should be to hire outgoing tutors who are open to extended interaction with ESL students. "Success is evident not just in ... more error-free compositions ... but in the genuine social relationships" (Macdonald & Macdonald 1989). The authors see potential for professional friendships to evolve into real, lasting friendships. While this may seem idealistic, it can happen and has happened to us. We have experienced a professional friendship that developed into a traditional friendship with a student from the Czech Republic who came in for multiple tutoring sessions. We reached a level of comfort that allowed us to become friends on Facebook, to collaborate on school projects, and to socialize outside of school.

The second article, "Second-Language Acquisition, Culture Shock, and Language Stress of Adult Female Latina Students in New York," was written by Lucia Butarro, assistant professor, City University of New York at Kingsborough. Butarro explores the results of a case study of linguistic, educational, and

cultural influences on ESL learning. According to her study, ESL students emphasize the importance of caring instructors to their success. Butarro concludes that “the sensitivity of the instructor is very relevant . . . being with ‘Americans’ helped them understand the American culture and the English language” (2004). Tutors are not the primary ESL instructors, but they are English learning ambassadors. We can contribute to a positive impression of America and higher learning institutions. The article serves as a concise yet thorough analysis of the challenges that face English language learners and provides valuable insight into ESL student motivations such as getting better jobs and fitting in with their peers. Tutors can and should take strides to be more accessible and sensitive to ESL students.

For tutors willing and able to embrace an expanded role with ESL students, we suggest the following methods of building rapport. First, tutors can simply chat with ESL students. Tutors can ask about their experiences, greet them in the hallways, and invite them to tag along to a campus event or join them for a lunch break. We can also increase our awareness of the ESL experience by learning a new language, taking an intercultural communication class, traveling abroad, or just trying something new and unfamiliar. Tutors can read up on the ESL experience through immigrant fiction, ESL syllabi and workbooks, and idiom-awareness. Finally, tutors can prepare the writing center environment for inclusion by utilizing maps, photos, nametags, and grammar visuals. Some of the strategies that we personally tried with success were studying sign language and Spanish, having a nametag featuring name translations in several languages, studying abroad in Mexico, and making casual hallway conversation with ESL students. With one simple gesture, this student felt welcome: “Oh, I see your name in Korean!” The Korean student pointed to the characters on the nametag, smiled, and sounded out, “Mah-gee.” Because of our efforts, we have more confidence as tutors, and the students respond positively. When it comes to building professional friendships with ESL students, there is a lot of room for creativity.

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Issues in Applying Learning Style Theory

Evan Harmon and Erynne Daigneault

Every writing center tutor has experienced both very productive sessions as well as sessions that have appeared to accomplish almost nothing. Often, the difference between these outcomes lies in the ability of the tutor to “plug in” to the writer’s dominant learning style. Does the writer learn best through aural, visual, or kinesthetic methods? Much research has been done in this area, including research that has specifically considered a writing center context (Brown, Macauley). If the tutor can adapt to the writer’s dominant learning style, a much more productive session will follow. However, as is often the case with theory, problems arise when it is put into practice.

Ideally, the tutor will observe the behavior of the student, looking for clues of a dominant learning style. Does she twirl her hair and make hand gestures? She must be a kinesthetic learner. Or does she sit back from the table and prefer to explain at length? She must be an aural learner. Or perhaps she points to specific parts in her paper, preferring to actually see

her paper develop. Clearly, she is a visual learner. However, as we shall see, such conclusions are often incorrect.

Much has been written about the psychological and emotional obstacles inherent in seeking help with one's writing. For many people, exposing their writing to a critical eye can be nerve-racking. But a writer's nervous impulses do not necessarily bear a relationship to her learning style. The writer might fidget and play with her hair simply because she is nervous, not because she learns kinesthetically. Another obfuscating factor of identifying a writer's learning style is writer's confidence. To foster confidence within the perceived authority of a writing center is often difficult. A truly assertive writer is a rare occurrence and is often only attained after a deliberative process. When the writer lacks confidence, he or she will often appear very agreeable, going along with whatever suggestions the tutor might have and saying that they agree or understand something when they really don't. On the other hand, a less than confident writer might be very withdrawn and hesitant, never responding definitively to the tutor's questions. None of these behaviors, since they are not the writer's natural behavior, can be grounds for an accurate determination of a writer's dominant learning style. Therefore, alleviating these various issues should take priority over forming a learning style hypothesis, even if this takes multiple sessions.

Yet, perhaps the most significant issue in applying learning style theory occurs when a clear hypothesis simply does not emerge from the writer's behavior or dialogue. While most people do have a learning style preference, often it encompasses more than one learning style (Brown 2). Further, even if a writer has a strong preference for one learning style, no one uses just one. We would hold on to our hats if someone walked into the Writing Center with the superhuman ability to talk, see, and touch all in the same session. (The issue of what to do when a writer smells or tastes her paper is outside the scope of this article.) It does not take a devout skeptic to remain unconvinced of the student's dominant learning style, even after multiple sessions.

So, is learning style theory irrelevant when the tutor cannot be confident

about a learning style assessment? Absolutely not. The tutor should continually be on the lookout for learning style clues; the tutor can increase her effectiveness if she invokes many different types of learning styles, even if she is not certain about the writer's learning style. For example, the tutor could have the writer write example sentences in the same session that she reads her paper aloud for errors. In this instance, the student will have utilized her visual and kinesthetic learning styles by writing out and working on examples, as well as her aural learning style by hearing the words of her paper read aloud. This example also illustrates the importance of prompting. When the tutor prompts the writer to take action, the writer takes control of the session and therefore will tend to gravitate to her own learning style, whether the tutor can decipher it or not. Further, when the student is taking an active role, it will help the tutor become more aware of potential clues of her learning style.

These examples illustrate a number of problems in applying learning style theory. It is often suggested that learning style theory should direct the tutor's methods as soon as possible. However, it takes a relatively large amount of data to come to an accurate assessment of a writer's learning style. As such, learning style theory, as a means of adapting one's tutoring methods, should be recontextualized as a medium to long-term strategy that should, except in rare situations, only be expected to apply when an in-depth tutor-writer relationship emerges. Yet, a short term relationship does not make learning style theory irrelevant when a hypothesis cannot be accurately formed. Until a learning style can be determined, the tutor should utilize multiple learning style methods because multiple methods are effective even for writers with a dominant learning style.

Works Cited

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Body Language

Stacy Whitney

Last semester, I researched and presented the importance of body language in a tutoring session. Since then, I have applied what I learned in my tutoring, and by reviewing some video footage of several sessions, I feel like I have improved how I communicate to the student through my body language. I had not really noticed that I fidget until I began research and became consciously aware of my body language, so I am not sure that the students have noticed either. I have not seen measurable results to support the case that body language significantly affects the success of a tutoring session.

Body language can communicate a tutor's attitude towards a student. By slouching or staring off into space, the tutor may be conveying to the student that he or she does not want to be there and that the tutor does not want to help with the paper. Maintaining eye contact is important when a student is talking or asking a question. Tutors should always make the student feel that their question is valid and important. Sitting too close to a student can create awkwardness in a tutoring session. The student needs to feel comfortable and relaxed so he or she can concentrate on the paper at hand. Spatial distance differs from culture to culture, so the tutor might notice some student writers feel comfortable sitting right up against his or her leg, while other student writers seem so far away that the tutor might have to shout across the table.

These situations can be awkward too. Since as tutors, we are there to help the student become a better writer, I always want the student to be comfortable, even if it means I can smell what they had for lunch. As a general rule, I let the student decide how close to sit. When I sit down next to a student, I sit where I feel comfortable and let the student adjust. Sometimes the student will stay in exactly the same place, but most of the time he or she will move closer or farther from me. Of course, a tutor should never be in an uncomfortable situation. In such a situation, the tutor might move some or ask the student not to get so close if need be.

Penn State suggests that tutors should be wary of actions like fidgeting in your seat, shaking your legs under the table, biting your nails, touching your hair, fiddling with your ring or earrings or constantly glancing at your watch. Not only are these gestures distracting, they also give the impression that the tutor is nervous, not confident, uninterested or in a hurry to get the session over with.

Although fidgeting can be distracting to students, as a kinesthetic learner myself, I need to fidget with something in order to concentrate at all. I was a pen clicker, hair twirler, and chair swiveler. Then I began to apply my research to tutoring sessions. I actively worked on sitting still. It took concentration and repetition to break old habits, but I replaced them with a new habit. When I feel the need to fidget with something, I play with my ring under the table. Penn State says that "fiddling with your ring" can distract students, and it can. However, I found that if I only use one hand to play with my ring under the table, it stays out of sight and out of mind of the student. This way, I allow myself to play with something so I can think more clearly and give the student better feedback.

Although having good posture does not necessarily make a significant difference in a tutoring session, having poor posture and body language does make a difference. If the tutor slouches, swivels in his chair dramatically, crosses his arms, and fidgets obnoxiously, the student will most likely be distracted or offended that the tutor does not really want to help with their paper. Of course, the tutor does not just sit like a statue during the session in order to avoid distracting the student. Using hand gestures while talking

or following the words with your finger when the student reads his paper helps engage the student. While I did not notice a significant difference in students when I improved my body language and posture, I did notice that students seemed to be able to concentrate a little better when I did not spin in the chair, click pens, or twirl my hair. While having good posture and body language does not significantly improve tutoring sessions, poor posture and distracting body language can certainly be harmful to the student's concentration and the tutoring session.



The Ones Right Beside Us Help to Culturally Transform US

Brandon True



To walk into the Writing Center is to admit that help is needed. Think about that. For anyone reading this, I wonder if they hesitate or ever have hesitated at the notion of asking for help. When was the last time? I ask this because being able to sympathize with the role of those who come in our doors helps make us better tutors. By observation, I have come to realize how my attitude influences others and how rewarding the job can be, and through these observations, I have realized ways to help keep this job interesting. Though I could fill pages with all that I have learned since I started working in the Writing Center, here are just few of the insights I have had since I started.

Lost in Translation

When I first started working at the Writing Center, I was certainly out of my comfort zone. Fresh from retail, I was taught that personality, knowledge of inventory, and product location was the only way to earn my keep. People often sought my help, but rarely asked my advice. My first time at the Writing Center, I remember being vigilant and excited about the new knowledge I was obtaining and the writing process. People were finally interested in the opinions and suggestions that I had to offer. I was on the edge, soaking up all sorts of new information I had never been exposed to. But as time has

passed, confrontation with new material diminished. The Writing Center became my comfort zone. I have now become more comfortable with the material and skills when tutoring because I am familiar with the routine – I know them. And even though I love my job, when people know something so well, the ability to translate it to another audience can eventually become lax. We've all had this happen to us. After years of teaching, a teacher might explain a concept only a few times, using examples to his class and look out to a crowd of empty faces, unable to understand why the material isn't clicking. This might often be caused from the teacher teaching the material so much that steps have been cut out because he assumes that these steps are just common knowledge because they are for him. However, and this applies to tutoring as well, what is common knowledge to some, may be new knowledge to others. So, I try never to assume. When I am in doubt I ask students whether they are familiar with certain steps already and pay close attention to reactions. Some will say they are comfortable with steps to avoid being thought of as "stupid," while nothing could be further from the truth. Not knowing does not make a student stupid while not trying to learn does.

An Audience of Culture

The ability to translate information will never be more helpful than it is with non-native speakers. While it is obvious tutors will be approached by American students, I would like to dedicate this section to one of the most interesting audiences we get in the Writing Center, EAP students. I am amazed that people from all over the world leave everything they have behind and come to a strange land for all kinds of reasons and opportunities. What fascinates me even more is that that they come to Kansas of all places. Maybe some like our slower lifestyle and adjacent rural communities. Maybe they desire to live in the heart of this country. Maybe their country of origin mistranslated The Wizard of Oz and they actually thought the Emerald City was Kansas City. Nevertheless, my second observation is that JCCC has a pretty good reputation and the cost of education is relatively inexpensive. Because of this, I have met and become friends with so many people from all over the world. Sometimes I am in awe of the opportunity I have each day to know people who have survived the struggles of war in Sierra Leone, Bosnia, Djibouti, or witnessed the collapse

of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor in Russia, or the political downfall of their homeland's government. Knowing all these people has helped keep me interested in my own learning. I try to show that interest by learning more, asking about their culture as well as asking what their native language is, how many languages they can speak, or what they miss most about their country. Most of the writers are all too eager to talk about where they come from. Since they spend so much time trying to learn American culture, it is nice for them to talk about home. When tutoring EAP students, I try to be extra patient as most foreign students feel they have been thrown into another culture, like learning to swim with a cement kickboard and told to paddle. Sometimes our accents are difficult to understand. A good attitude, however, shatters the language barrier: having a relaxed enthusiastic approach helps put many if not most EAP students at ease. And the conversations are always interesting because I am reminded that my education has value. Some students come from a culture where education is an implausible luxury or simply a non-existent opportunity. Their gratitude for the educational opportunity JCCC provides helps remind me that education is both a privilege and a right.

The Ones Right Beside

The final insight I have is that tutors need others to help them be inspired. Having role models is important. A role model helps weave a person's own fate so to speak, carves a niche in their life, while helping to avoid some of the failures others have met. While tutoring, I have sought out advice about style and organization from my peers, and believe me, plenty of advice has been passed along at that first round table in the writing center. Inspiration may come from EAP students and peers but the co-workers who stand right beside tutors on the frontlines – teachers – are a tremendous boost to professional growth. One teacher in particular I know has managed to stay enthusiastic about teaching for over fifty years. I wonder if his enthusiasm comes of his allowing himself to enjoy the personalities of his students, or because he encourages them to reflect life experiences, truthful experiences, through their writing. Perhaps both. Perhaps, his encouraging their interests lets him live multiple lives through their writing. Come the end of each semester, when he has read through a stack of research papers, he has seen into the future and dreams of another generation, traveled to the distant shores of some faraway land, and been privy to the customs of a culture that only the indigenous can share. However, not only does he revel in the opportunity to broaden his own knowledge, but also he realizes all the opportunities he has to pass on knowledge to



students and tutors. In this sense, he is forever young: always curious, always listening and always observing. I know I have learned much from him, and I try and will try my hardest not to forget it.

I can't say the information here is entirely new nor is it based on any research. It's based on observation, my personal experience of being a peer writing tutor. I have learned much from my training but more from the people around me. What I'd like to say to all the tutors that remain and all that will come is that it is important to observe and absorb the surroundings of the Writing Center. When another Friday meeting has come and gone, reflect on what has been taught, but more important, reflect also on all the kinds of people encountered in this job. These influential people constantly remind me that a tutor's influence too is great and they verify how tutors approach student writers affect tutoring outcomes.



To Seek Knowledge from Womb to Tomb

Umid Iskhakov, student contribution

All students who are studying in JCCC have approximately the same goal: to get a good education and gain necessary knowledge. The base of almost all kinds of knowledge is grammar. Generally, it is difficult to get a quality education without having good grammar skills. The Writing Center offers a good opportunity to learn and improve grammar skills.

In my opinion, it is hard to overestimate the Writing Center's value for students.

When I first came to JCCC, I could hardly write coherent phrases. My instructor, Professor Jones, advised me to visit the Writing Center if I wanted to improve my writing skills. He said, "That is irreplaceable source, and I encourage you to work there as much as you can." And now, after I discovered this place for myself, I thank him for his advice. To my surprise, it turned out that it is the best place in JCCC for me. During this spring semester, I have been working

in the Writing Center, and despite my laziness, I can claim now that the difference between my beginning and current grammar skills is significant, although, I still need more practice with the language.

Following Professor Jones's advice, I went to the Writing Center thinking about what I would do there. I did not realize that the Writing Center would help me the way it did. I thought that it will be something like the Computer Lab where I just had an opportunity to use computers and several computer programs. I entered a large, bright auditorium, where the atmosphere had a scent of knowledge. This atmosphere was new for me because this kind of lab does not have an analogue in my country. I have never been before in labs like this, and I can describe it as a combined library with a students' club. The low voices of people talking gave a feeling of comfort. A large number of books caught my sight. On my left, I saw dozens of computers. Many students were working in the Writing Center. Some of them were completing grammar programs, and some of them were consulting with the tutors.

When I entered, I was immediately greeted by Gwen Flipse, a kind and hardworking administrative assistant in the Writing Center. Gwen politely asked me to sign my name and swipe my student ID card. After I completed this necessary procedure, she asked how I could be helped. I actually didn't know what I needed there; I just knew that I needed something that could help me learn to write complete sentences without mistakes. Gwen accompanied me to the computer and showed me which grammar program could be helpful in improving my skills.

To be honest, I was a little scared because I hadn't studied English since I was in high school, where my achievements were not good. Moreover, my English studying experience was somewhat unpleasant because it was boring. In the United States, I was surprised, when it turned out that the method of teaching can be so captivating, and I began to learn English with pleasure. I started to learn some grammar rules at the same time with a study program. I was captured by the challenging Glencoe program, and was not satisfied until I passed through it. The Glencoe and the English MicroLab computer programs enhanced my grammar knowledge.

Describing the tutors' work deserves of a whole book; they are very kind, intelligent, and skillful people. They work face to face with great patience and

attention to each student's writing and comprehension abilities. Tutors never do the students' work, but patiently direct them to an effective writing way. I have learned considerable writing skills while I worked with tutors. My favorite tutor is Professor Frank Robertson. Together, we have done a great job by writing several essays for my writing class and a couple of outlines for my speaking class. I am very grateful to him for his help, tutoring, and patience. I am sure that profound knowledge is hidden behind his cheerful behavior. Usually, when I have an assignment, I try to be in the Writing Center when Professor Robertson is there because it is a big pleasure to work with him!

The importance of the Writing Center might be emphasized by some interesting statistics and facts. For example, during the spring semester of the current year, over ten thousand students have visited this place. The Writing Center has made over two thousand student folders for those students who regularly visit the Writing Center. Almost all my spring classmates preferred to work in the Writing Center rather than to work independently. These facts and statistics confirm my attitude toward the Writing Center. I would strongly recommend visiting and working in the Writing Center as often as possible for everyone during the studying process.

According to my experience, I can confirm Professor Jones's conviction that the Writing Center is an irreplaceable source for those students who are concerned about their literacy level. The way one speaks and writes might be more important than the way one is dressed or looks; if one wants to be admired, recognized and respected, it is necessary to be an eloquent orator and skilful writer. Clear and logical writing indicates not only good writing skills, but also good thinking ability. Therefore, those who are concerned about their appearance should not miss a unique chance to become more literate. Folk wisdom says, "Seek knowledge from womb to tomb," and the Writing Center is a great opportunity to follow this wisdom.



The Big Picture

Matthew Barnett



I will never forget seeing a student light up with excitement after finally figuring out what someone has been trying to explain to them for years during one of my tutoring sessions. It's impossible to forget a connection with a peer after a good tutor session, and I'll never forget the times I shared a smile and laughed with a peer writer I had just met. Because something special happens when I sit down with a stranger, introduce myself, empathize with them, and help them accomplish tasks that were frustrating them. Funny how communication can be so incredibly hard, and yet, it can be so incredibly rewarding at the same time. Each person is unique, and consequently, each tutor session should have a unique approach. If a tutor remembers that, then that tutor will likely have a good session ahead of them. Of course, remembering uniqueness and communicating clearly are just ground rules; tutors need skills too. The skills used in a session are developed in tutor workshop training throughout the year, and skills continue to develop with help from administrators, teachers, and other more seasoned tutors. The act of writing, even for those who chose it as a profession, isn't always easy. I'm sure most of us have felt like throwing a computer out of the window at some point in time, as if the writing was worthless and the tool the reason. Understanding that a person can feel that way about his or her writing, I believe, is what makes helping tutees discover their abilities easier to do. At least, that's how I have come to

understand writing and working as a tutor in the WC at JCCC for the last two years.

My adventure in the JCCC Writing Center started almost three years ago. It has come to an end now, but it's not a sad ending. As a student, I was able to take advantage of this great resource to improve myself and my grades. As a tutor, I not only continued improving myself in different ways, but I was able to connect with and improve my peers' writing. The experience has been wonderful, and it has only been so because of the great people who spend their time making JCCC's Writing Center what it is, a brilliant atmosphere of caring, supportive administrators, professors, teachers, students, and co-workers that work together to continuously improve and impact peoples' lives in one of the best learning environments possible. I'm glad to have been a part of it, and appreciate the opportunities that have presented themselves along the way. To everyone whom I've shared time with in the Writing Center over the last two years, thank you. My time here would not have been the same without all of you. The countless memories made in our little community inside LIB 308 have put smiles on my face, as I hope they have all of yours. In the words of David Pepper at closing time:

And now it's time to say goodbye to all our family, M-I-C-K-E-Y M-O-U-S-E.



A Zone of Proximal Development

Anonymous, August 2010



The night before, I had dreamed I was struggling to birth a calf from a bloated cow the size of a bus. I had reached deep into the cavernous chamber of the cow's uterus. I forced my head in so I could see what was going on, and I found the calf huddled in a corner. He was shaking and crying. I entered and sat next to him. When I asked why he didn't want to come out, he said . . .

"The sounds I hear coming from outside are all discouraging. Clanking machinery, stomping boots, and other cows mooing in distress. I don't know much, but I know unhappy sounds when I hear them. Why should I want to go out there?"

As I thought about that, the mother cow – the size of a bus – turned into an actual bus and drove itself out of the barn, and then I knew what to say.

I said, "Hey, calf, you're already too big to end up as a specimen in a jar on the shelf of some high-school biology storeroom, so we're getting out of here whether you want to or not. But now you get to choose where to get out."

I looked out the window of the bus and saw a faintly glowing purple and green field of alfalfa. "It doesn't get any better than this. Get out there, take a deep breath, don't look back. You'll thank me later." Me, I stayed on the bus to wait for a place with the smell of cinnamon toast and the sound of electric guitars.

Always Helpful Links:

Johnson County Community College Writing Center (OWL, handouts, MLA/APA formatting guides): <http://www.jccc.edu/writingcenter>

Citation Styles (quick look how to): <http://www.cite.auckland.ac.nz/www.php>

Grammar Girl: <http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/>

Grammar Myths: <http://ncteinbox.blogspot.com/2008/03/grammar-myths-for-ellesl-classroom.html>

