

# IN THE POCKETS OF YESTERDAY'S PANTS:

Theory, practice, theory



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JOHNSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

A JOURNAL OF WRITING CENTER PRACTICUM

WRITTEN BY PEER WRITING TUTORS

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# Welcome readers to our fourth edition of the JCCC Writing Center newsletter.

Each year, as an exercise in learning and developing their paraprofessional skills, I guide, observe and cajole my tutors into this final product. I try to move them toward a state of introspection that does not take too long nor too many drafts until they have a final copy they can be proud of. They are full-time students after all, and their written contribution is a gift to the Writing Center community.

Usually the tutors arrive at a final copy without much struggle. This year was different. Many of my tutors got lost in the peer review process or did not produce any writing at all for this edition, asking instead to be given a pass on the task. All were highly conscious of audience and audience expectation. A few tutors were in my office crying, worried that their work was not right, the voice wrong, their understanding weak – that they were not good enough writers. I have no idea where this tutor-writer dis-ease originated except to hope that their empathy for the writer, perhaps, overflowed into their own psychological state while writing. If not, perhaps I am guilty of creating a threatening atmosphere that was prohibitive to a successful writing environment.

I hope it is the former and not the latter.

Writing is such a tricky activity. The joy of piecing words together, that other worldliness our minds travel to when truly engaged in the task, can crumble in an instant when we do not know our audience or see it as hostile – and our sense of worth seemingly goes with it. Marilyn Cooper, in “The Ecology of Writing” acknowledges writing as, “one of the activities by which we locate ourselves in the enmeshed systems that make up the social world. It is not simply a way of thinking but more fundamentally a way of acting” (College English 373). Writing is truly social and marks our sense of place in the world while helping us to locate others. In an academic setting, however,

the social framework is complicated. Trying to negotiate the many layers of the academy as both student coupled with the title of tutor confounds their understanding of where they fit within those layers. Easily, one can be confused and frustrated. Nevertheless, tutors, who are accomplished writers at this level of education, fall victim too.

By practice, we try to reduce writing anxiety and then to move the writer toward more purposeful writing ("this is interesting, but what does it mean?" "I like this here, but as a listener, I expected to hear you say..."). During this process, JCCC tutors benefit too. They move from novice to practiced listeners while developing an even stronger sense of what is successful in their own writing. They gain a stronger sense of self as a writer, either having their skill validated after reading so many other writers' work, or by vicarious modeling of their peers, the other tutors (Bandura; Tinto). Yet, the tutors did not feel secure enough to produce a piece of public writing either collaboratively or independently without expressing some level of doubt.

Even with the anomaly of writer's angst during the production of this edition, I think they did a fine job. Each one [of my favorite tutors] demonstrated in their writings a heightened sensitivity and regard for the writers with whom they collaborate and share insights about writing.

Like past editions, the tutors chose their topics, did research and wrote about their findings through practical experience. Joy researches how age factors in a tutorial; Kel looks at who had the strongest influence on him as a writer; Peter and Ben discover the power of body language; Sharon discerns strategies for breaking through writer's block; Tess brings to light the enormous pressure for ESL students to produce perfect text; Brenda finds that encouragement is the best tool when trying to nurture a writer's waning engagement with the writing task; Jeremy investigates the promise of whole language as an approach to explaining grammar; Jane tackles Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development; Mrs. Hegner illuminates a writer's need to acculturate while remaining an individual; Di attacks gendered language; Cooper provides strategies to reduce writing anxiety; Brandon says goodbye after a four-year tenure in the WC and explains Supplemental Instruction for DevEd students and how it helped more than just the students. Jon reflects



on the benefits of reflective practice. Though all of them seemingly have a different topic or approach to a topic, they all share the same subtext: a heightened awareness of the disease of the student writer and the problem of getting that writer to feel good enough about his or her ability that an assignment can be produced, turned in and graded. All of the tutors demonstrate the care and awareness needed to be a good tutor.

Enjoy.

P.S. Thank you Jane Blakely, exceptional writer, for leading peer review and editing our newsletter.

# Perception of Reality – Nonverbal Communication in Tutoring

Ben Orman



Walking down a dim-lit hallway, I counted every step while trying not to focus on the fact that I seemed to be having stress-induced tachycardia. "How tough could this be?" I asked myself as I maneuvered through the sea of students frantically reading their schedules. "I just have to tell them if their paper is good, right? What if they don't need help? Am I the right person for this? Was my *Composition* teacher lying to me when he told me I should work here?" All of these questions flew through my mind as I quickly turned corners, navigating my way through the maze of JCCC. Finally, I stood beneath a rectangular sign appearing to be floating in an empty hallway. Writing Center. With a deep breath and racing mind, I entered.

At the beginning of the year, I had no idea what to expect. Tutoring seemed pretty simple. How tough could "fixing" papers be? On the first day on the job, I had a revelation: I had it all wrong. Tutoring requires combining teaching, communicating and supporting the learner with our words. But, what if more than that is said? What if a tutor contradicts himself/herself without speaking a single syllable? This seemingly impossible situation is possible because of our foremost mode of expression: body language. Everyone uses body



language throughout the day, for nonverbal communication has been ingrained into who we are. As Robert Koch of the George Peabody College for Teachers said, body language “was the first language, even before grunts came into vogue” (232). As archaic as this language is, nonverbal communication is still relevant and highly applicable to the relatively new concept of peer tutoring.

As tutors, we must constantly be aware of what we are saying both verbally and nonverbally, for each word and gesture has a meaning. Seemingly minute factors of casual conversation are magnified when working with a student. Throughout my year as a peer tutor, I have become increasingly aware of the messages that I send to students and those I receive. From my research and first-hand experience, I have witnessed several types of nonverbal communication and the effects that they have. However, out of the various forms of our nonverbal communication, proximity and gestures are undoubtedly two of the most influential.

Proximity involves the “use and perception of ... social and personal space” (Duke 398). How we position ourselves can convey our level of involvement, interaction and interest to students (398). In a recent tutoring session with Kate\*, I saw the direct effects of proximity from the start. She distanced herself from me, from the paper and from the session in general. Because of this self-removal, establishing a positive, encouraging and open connection with her became even more important. In order to do so, I made the arrangement of space a priority throughout the session and responded to any change that could impact any aspect of communication. As we read through her paper, Kate would lean away after certain sentences and paragraphs. This instinctive detachment undoubtedly showed that she was not pleased with what she had written. To stop this self-disapproval, I not only verbally encouraged her but also used my positioning to show that I was attentive and intrigued by what she had to say. Something as simple as leaning in was able to show that I was engaged in what she had written. This emphasized that there was a person behind the size twelve Times New Roman text. Speaking face-to-face further stressed the importance of addressing the person and not the paper. By the end of the session, Kate was no longer analyzing and had

moved away from the critical analysis. Fortunately, the original tense atmosphere became one of learning and laughter. This conscious adaptation made for a dynamic session that was focused on the needs of the student. Recognizing Kate's messages and adjusting accordingly to make an environment conducive to learning was critical. Our use of space quite obviously affects how we communicate. That we all know. However, the recognition of these effects is not enough. We must recognize and apply this knowledge to positively impact sessions and, more importantly, students.

In addition to our use of space, gestures are a major component of our nonverbal communication, so much so that some of us have substituted our words for gestures. Perhaps the foremost mode of expression for our gestures is our hands; however, we all make gestures with our feet, bodies, heads and faces (Koch 235). Unfortunately, these actions can create distractions from our verbal messages. Despite this, we as tutors can use these gestures to our advantage as shown in my work with James\*, a student who has had difficulty with English because of its abstract grammatical concepts. Realizing that writing, nevertheless English as a whole, can be quite overwhelming, I wanted to ensure that my gestures supplemented my words. We circled subjects. We underlined verbs. We even moved imaginary paragraphs in the air to show how we could improve organization. We did it all. Tutoring specifically to James, I made a constant and conscious effort to avoid superfluous gestures that could distract him. This technique was surprisingly effective. Following my explanations of the mistakes he made in the first few paragraphs, James progressed to recognizing his own errors, then eventually fixing them by himself with merely my encouragement. He had, in fact, learned something! To my surprise – and fortune – James told me that I had helped him more in thirty minutes than any other tutor and that he would most definitely be back to work with me. Fortunately, my gestures aided the communication and comprehension throughout the session by emphasizing the most important points and reinforcing the verbal message.

While I would like to think that my nine months of research and experience have transformed me into an omniscient sage of nonverbal communication, that would be blatantly false. Am I guilty of neglecting the importance of

nonverbal communication? Absolutely. Have I made mistakes in my use of body language? Without a doubt. However, I now recognize the significance that nonverbal communication plays in tutoring. For me, perfecting my nonverbal communication is not my goal, for I believe that is seemingly implausible and simply impossible. Instead, it is my goal to recognize and be consciously aware of all my forms of communication.

\* Names have been changed

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# Avoiding the Spikes Below: JCCC's New Experiment

Brandon True



When asked what some of the hardest courses at JCCC are, students and teachers would be quick to call out a few mathematic, science and composition courses. However, truly some of the most difficult classes at any college are developmental courses which are classes designed to bring students to college-level curriculum. These courses can be grueling, and after years of high drop rates within developmental courses, colleges are beginning to find techniques that help reduce students' chances of failure. Enter supplemental instruction, often abbreviated SI, which is a fairly new experiment here at JCCC. The focus of the SI program is to place tutors inside various developmental classes and model the behavior that will help students pass such as proper note taking, regular attendance and the willingness to ask questions. However, the real focus of SI occurs outside of the classroom when students meet with a study group once a week. Within the study groups, students address and or practice concepts from class and share information among their peers while I, the SI, lead as a facilitator. I avoid just giving answers, but instead show them that sometimes having the right answer is not the endgame, but simply a matter of knowing where to find answers, the varied resources available to me as a learner. Even more important is that students begin to learn within their communal study group. If I am successful and effort is put forth by them, students move onto more advanced classes and are able to form and conduct study groups on their own. If Hillary Clinton is right – it takes a village to raise a child, then SI asserts – a study group is essential for college success.

In "Breaking the Attrition Cycle" authors Blanc, DeBuhr and Martin discuss

several aspects of SI they notice after being involved with the program for nearly five years. They state SI works to identify classes considered “high-risk” which Blanc describes as courses that “are those traditionally difficult, entry-level courses wherein student D and F rates and withdrawals exceed 30 percent of course registrant.” Customarily, resources to aid high-risk classes are created as a sort of drop-in service where tutors, teachers and an abundance of resources are available to help students find answers. SI takes a different approach and places a resource directly inside the classroom, basically fulfilling the slogan “If they don’t come to us, we’ll come to them.” SI is a great idea for especially shy or self-deprecating students; I clearly remember avoiding the Math Resource Center like the plague because I was afraid of admitting that I needed help and in fear of looking stupid.

Another connection I draw on is my father being a former home builder; as a result, I spent a good portion of my childhood on construction sites. I learned quickly that a poorly made basement means the house will suffer (not to mention the homeowners). The walls crack, the floors warp, and the basement becomes a small pond where owners fish for their old but dearly loved vinyl records. What does this teach? A good foundation is important. Even the most monolithic building will crumble with poor support below; the same idea can be applied to the process of learning: taking advanced courses will be difficult without proper groundwork – we do not just wake up knowing. Education of the highest caliber is worthless to someone who cannot understand the basic ideas embedded in a more developed line of thinking. Noticing the importance of this concept, SI steps in and helps students gain strong support for the years of college ahead. What surprised me about SI was that even after tutoring on the writing process for a few years, a large amount of the information taught in the basic writing class was new to me as well.

For the last two semesters, I have been working inside an English 102 class helping students understand some of the basics of writing: parts of speech, phrases and sentence types. I have worked at the Writing Center for several years prior to doing SI which has heightened my grammar skills exponentially. In my arrogance, I assumed I would be able to step into a developmental

class and quickly prosper. However, I learned the material covered in the course reinforced the very basics of sentence building. I quickly began to realize that I was part of the “privileged” majority able to recognize the visual and sounds patterns of sentences, but I never really understood the most basic rules of sentence structures. Prior to SI tutoring, diagramming sentence was not how I relaxed. My job as a writing tutor helped me to articulate the basic rules of grammar, but SI made explaining concepts to students, both in class and in the Writing Center, much simpler. I was able to explain some of the strange rules and odd exceptions of the English language that makes writing so frustrating for new college-level writers.

Though I was told I was not required to do all the homework for the course, only the homework that challenged me, I still felt compelled as a model of good student behavior, to have a freshly written essay on my desk for every due date that came. Having something to show during peer edits and allowing myself to be criticized seemed to help reaffirm my role as a peer. Peer editing could sometimes be a little tricky though. The students would assume my paper would be free of errors, or they were afraid to risk being challenged for a correction they made in my writing. I noticed as the semester rolled along, and they became a little more comfortable with me, the students were more open to making suggestions – if not grammatical, then at least organizational. The peer assessments, both inside the class and the study group, proved to be one of the most important elements I learned while working with the students as it was usually the beginning of the revision process.

Ask most English teachers what the key to good writing is and most will probably say revision and rightly so. Revision is all about blending in different perspectives and altering a paper until it obtains organization, flow and proper support. However, one key element to the writing process precedes revision: criticism. Criticism. The ability to allow oneself to be told they could say it differently and be even more clear. This is not a chicken or an egg kind of question: a student has to make mistakes before there can be any to amend. If students do not open themselves up for feedback, then the revision process cannot begin. Revising is not just a matter of taking suggestions put on a

page by a teacher. There has to be a certain amount of acceptance within a person's mind for criticism to be effective. Students have to be willing to admit they made mistakes but know that solutions come from the acknowledgement of these mistakes. When this happens, a student becomes more adept to being criticized because they come to realize that is the way they learn. This experience is one of the most important lessons I am learning, and I mean in a sense of life, far beyond what happens in the classroom. As Ray Bradbury once said, "You've got to be able to look at your thoughts on paper and discover what a fool you were." Were. Very clever, Mr. Bradbury.

Bradbury's advice aside, I finally learned what a community of learning means, and how important it is to the learning process. I always assumed the group dynamic was only successful in focus testing and diet programs. However, I learned the ideas and support created by people engaged in the same activities build strength. Even as students leave college and enter the workforce, they will find connection and effective communication will lead to more success. Hopefully courses, both developmental and higher, will show students that making mistakes is all part of the process – the process of life, that is.

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# A Place of Encouragement

Brenda Revard

For some students, walking into the Writing Center can be like exploring foreign territory. Perhaps they have never walked through the door of this unfamiliar place. Not only are the physical surroundings new, but what people do here – actually write – may seem mysterious. Many students have significant misconceptions as to how writing is done:



Most students have never seen writing being made. They believe that teachers and writers know a magic rite that places words on the page in an order that is full of grace and meaning the first time, that each word arrives correctly spelled, each piece of punctuation appears at the moment it is needed, and that all rules of rhetoric, grammar and mechanics fall into place on their own (Stelzer Morrow 222).

Not only should the Writing Center help the student learn the writing process, but do so in such a way that the student and the writer is encouraged. Encouraging the writer as well as the person within can only help the student gain confidence in his or her ability as a writer and learner.

Encouragement is needed because the sensation of treading on unfamiliar ground can make a student feel anxious when coming to the Writing Center. The student may fear not getting the help he needs (Harris 27), that he will appear incompetent, that his writing will be evaluated as poor in quality (Harris 35) or that he lacks ability as an academic learner (Poon 2). The student may have so much anxiety about writing that he cannot get started; he “frets because he cannot produce a polished piece of writing in one sitting” (Ryan and Zimmerelli 62). As peer tutors, we have no idea what this student has been told by authority figures such as teachers or parents regarding his ability as a writer or a student. The possible presence of any or all of these anxieties in the writer necessitates



that tutors in the Writing Center be friendly and approachable. Feeling welcome is vital to the students' success.

Keeping in mind that a common myth exists among students is important; the myth can be thought of as an equation: writing = a person's thinking = intelligence. Many students believe this, and this idea creates anxiety. Writing does expose a person's thinking, providing an intimate glimpse into that person's thought processes. This can make the writer feel vulnerable because when her thinking is exposed, she may feel that her level of intelligence is revealed. This can be a very scary experience. Writing, however, does not define a writer's intelligence; writing is simply a tool of communication. A clue that the student may subscribe to this myth may be demonstrated by how the student talks about herself or her writing. She may exhibit "tones of defeat and discouragement" (Harris 38) with negative self-talk such as, "I can't get this," or "I'm too old." In response to this, I usually encourage the student by saying, "Of course, you can get it," or "You are not too old." On the other hand, nonverbal cues may indicate defensive attitudes of frustration, irritation, anxiety, even anger. I have witnessed these behaviors especially when working with males; a tight jaw and tense body language are indicators of a student's anxiety. Often, simply using an I statement such as, "I hear how frustrated you are," can begin to alleviate stress by conveying to the student that the tutor understands and is available to help (Ryan and Zimmerelli 101).

To continue to quell the anxieties created by the myth described above, reassurance is required. As tutors, we can do this by being warm and friendly which usually helps the student relax (Harris 29). To begin interacting with the student, we can ask open-ended questions such as, "How can I help you today? What would you like to work on today? How do you feel about your paper at this point?" (Harris 28; Poon 1). These types of questions are less threatening than questions with yes or no answers because there is no wrong answer. Supportive behaviors on the tutor's part establish trust between tutor and student and lend support and compassion to the writer (Poon 2). Once the student is reassured, a relationship can be developed.

The quality of this relationship between tutor and writer will determine the success of the tutoring session (Poon 1). A trusting and reciprocal relationship

between student and tutor creates a caring atmosphere. Even if only small progress is made on the paper, this emotional connection encourages the writer. Once this rapport is established, the writer may begin to see the tutor as a resource – someone who can help him overcome obstacles or problems in his writing (Harris 29). The tutor may also be seen as the person who can help the writer meet demands placed on him by others in authority such as instructors (Harris 29). At this point, the writer will begin to feel that he has someone on his side (Harris 28). This realization of having a live resource, a helper, encourages the writer to continue working, to actually expend more energy on his paper (Harris 35). He will leave the Writing Center knowing that someone cared about his success (Hawkins 66). After several tutorials, I have had students express how much they have been helped and that they plan to come back to the Writing Center. Now that an encouraging relationship has been created, the tutor and writer can begin working productively together.

Once the writer becomes relaxed, real work can be accomplished, “The collaborative atmosphere of the tutorial, the sense of being with someone who does not assume any authoritative posture, seems to relieve that strain or eliminate the fear” (Harris 35). Getting the student to simply talk about her paper might be a good place to start. Sometimes a little brainstorming is needed – just kicking around ideas about the writer’s paper (Harris 31). Stelzer Morrow noticed in her tutorials that “students might learn more if they were allowed to make their own discoveries” (223). In the process of the student reading her paper aloud, “it seemed that she was discovering what parts were not yet clear and needed explanation” (Stelzer Morrow 224). This is a good opportunity for the tutor to give feedback to help spur on the writer’s thinking (Poon 2) as well as ask clarifying questions. This needs to be done with an open countenance and not any kind of critical attitude so that the student is not discouraged but built up.

The final stage in encouraging the student in his writing is to equip him. To help the writer move closer to independence, tutors can offer tools and practical applications that he can take away with him (Poon 3). Being thus equipped will bring about encouragement in and of itself. Throughout the session the tutor should be looking for two to four concepts that seem to be problems for the writer. For example, if run-on sentences are a repeated problem, mention this without being critical. Rather than saying, “This is wrong or a weakness,” say

something like, "I notice you really like run-on sentences" with a light-hearted attitude. Then explain how to fix the problem. Taking the next step of equipping for independence by giving the writer a method to deal with this habit in his future writing is important. I often suggest to proofread for each separate problem. At the end of the session, repeating the positive things that have been learned so that the student is reminded that he is now a better equipped writer will surely encourage the student.

As peer tutors in the Writing Center, we serve not only as live writing resources but also as encouragers. When we make ourselves aware of a writer's possible fears and anxieties, when we actively listen to how the writer views his or her abilities or intelligence, when we apply the practices of reassurance, relationship building, collaboration and equipping, then we will encourage the writer. When the writer is encouraged, the student is encouraged. Thus the student will also feel that he or she is better able to succeed academically in general. What a gratifying feeling to send writers out from the Writing Center built up, encouraged and better able to tackle writing and their studies. What a positive difference peer tutors can make in students' lives!

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# Debilitating: The Writing Anxiety Factor

Cooper T. Lockman

I am uncomfortably familiar with academic anxiety. In fact, I experience it every time I sit down to a math test. Even faced with so-called ‘simple’ math, I shut down – silenced into a corner of self-doubt and despair. The world looks daunting when one feels incapable of completing everyday tasks. It goes without saying that learning cannot take place in defeat. On the contrary, learning thrives on an air of hope. Tutors, therefore, must impart tangible advice about overcoming anxiety if we wish to have a lasting impact on the writing lives of students.



Writing anxiety is a sensation of total incapability. When a student begins writing a paper, but loses confidence at the smallest hint of doubt, then all needed push is lost and panic takes over. Mary Vielhalber, a professor at Eastern Michigan University, defines it in simple terms: "...writing anxiety is the fear that one has when faced with the prospect of communicating in writing" (22). The definition seems to be common knowledge, yet tutors often overlook the stark reality of academic anxiety. It is infinitely easier to tell students what to write than it is to assist them out of the labyrinth itself.

Like all psychological phenomena, the sources of writing anxiety are difficult to identify. Writing anxiety has countless sources and triggers. Educator James Evers details a study in which students with self-diagnosed cases of writing anxiety were given short writing activities and asked to verbalize their concerns as they wrote. Judging by the collective responses from the students, the researchers determined the main culprits behind writing anxiety are lack of planning, editing too soon, and students having misleading assumptions about the act of writing (Evers 27). Students will accomplish

little to nothing being intimidated by the supposed complexity of writing.

Luckily for us, James Evers has developed a unique system to combat writing anxiety called the Three-Color Process (28). Writers, he tells us, write better and easier if they focus on one step of the equation at a time. Evers cuts the writing process into the three distinct parts of a traffic light. First, there is the green stage where the writer briefly plans out the paper and writes. Creativity, not logic, is the focus of this stage. Once the paper has been fully written, the writer proceeds to the yellow stage. At this point, the writer thinks about the bigger picture. The writer will analyze the paper to see if it is properly organized and if it satisfies the requirements for the assignment. Only at the last stage, the red, does the writer go back and look at the grammar and other minor details (28).

Beyond teaching students the Three-Color Process, we can recommend simple life changes that can be made to lessen writing anxiety. Mary Vielhalber, quick to point out tutors can only do so much, believes students must take authority over themselves (24). The student should write in a safe place, away from the distractions of the world: "... controlling your environment gives momentum to the move to overcome writing apprehension" (23). She also suggests students keep a journal to get used to writing and expressing themselves (23). Every educator has his or her own theory on how to combat writing anxiety. The important thing, however, is that we do somehow deal with it, rather than merely setting it to the side as a petty job-related annoyance.

I have had many opportunities to use the Three-Color Process of James L. Evers. Whenever students show signs of writing anxiety, I assure them they have what it takes to write: break the assignment into easily digestible parts! Students are always flabbergasted to discover that writers do not simply wake up one Tuesday morning and cough up *Great Expectations*. Addressing writing anxiety outright makes for more productive sessions. Like all great things, writing is made up of many smaller bouts of hard work. Creative power flees if a writer begins editing before the first sentence is done. In other words, the building gets criticized before it is even built. As tutors, we have to encourage writers to build first and to criticize later. Over-

apprehension is the death of writing!

I can think of no more relevant professional encounter with writing anxiety than the case of Samantha K. She entered the Writing Center visibly distressed: red eyes and a going-to-the-guillotine expression. Upon sitting down, she informed me that she was 'stupid' and 'bad at writing.' I looked at her rough draft; it was far from done, but I recognized she was not giving herself enough credit. "You need to stop beating yourself up," I said. "You are able to write this, and you are almost finished. You need to have faith in yourself." She then realized I was not there to mock her; I was there to boost her confidence. I explained to Samantha the Three-Color Process. She was at the Green stage and needed to go beyond this stage before we looked at anything else. She seemed skeptical. I encouraged her on, however. Samantha knew what to do. Sure enough, the paper was finished in an hour.

Tutors have no choice but to deal with the factor of writing anxiety. Even seasoned writers become overwhelmed at times. We all have our own 'simple math' moments where the easy looks utterly impossible. If we fail to show students ways of avoiding and overcoming anxiety, then whatever else we do will be in vain. Students cannot learn anything when they are losing their wits due to worry. The best way to show students a way around anxiety is to explain to them that writing is a multi-step process. The process is drastically simplified by breaking it into modest stages. Although tutors cannot (alas) do everything for students suffering from writing anxiety, we can, at least, disclose the ancient, obscure and oft-guarded Writing Center secret that *writing is possible*.

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# Gender Bias: A History/Herstory

Di Kalisz



As a newly employed tutor at the writing center, stepping into unfamiliar territory felt unnerving at times. However, through the process of immersion and rigorous research, I've come to learn more about writing than I had anticipated, particularly on the topic of gender-biased language. The breadth and depth of sexist language may seem unimportant at first glance; however, alleviating sexist language is indeed crucial in written and verbal forms of communication. Tutoring has allowed me to expand my knowledge and ability to spot sexist language in and out of a tutorial setting. The research I compiled on gender-biased language includes its emergence through history, its societal implications, the need to reject outdated didactic texts and the influence of one's own personal biases.

Western society has often dictated how an individual should behave based on their gender – men ought to exude a rugged and stoic demeanor, and women ought to portray a cordial and passive personality. Today an individual cannot walk down a toy aisle and not see the demarcation line of pink and blue toys, denoting which gender should play with what toy.

The most often used tool for implementing desired behavioral traits is language, itself. However, gender-biased language (sexist language) is often too restrictive to fully describe the complexities of any given individual. Gender bias oversimplifies a person to the point of inaccuracy, leading to stereotypes which are often detrimental to a person, or a group of individuals. According to DeStefano, the National Council of Teachers of English agree that: "as with racism, so with sexism; we all lose when another is diminished and belittled; we all have much to gain from 'fair and equitable treatment under the



language” (qtd. in Hall and Nelson 75).

Sexist language was quite prevalent in several texts throughout history, from the Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Buddhist holy texts, to Shakespearean plays that depict women as weak-willed, ineffectual and emotionally unstable. For example, in *Hamlet* the character of Ophelia is portrayed as tragically broken and mentally unstable, a seemingly secondary or tertiary character, even though she plays the role of Hamlet’s love interest. These historical underpinnings help us put a spotlight on why sexist language still prevails. According to the journal, Words Matter: beyond being politically correct, “Most universities did not admit women until the late 1800s. So even today students enter as freshmen...” regardless of their gender, even though, “... now women outnumber men on campus” (“Words Matter: Beyond Being Politically Correct”). Conforming to gender bias simply reinforces its use over time, sometimes without the reader or writer knowing they are reinforcing an historical bias that no longer applies.

The most common form of gender bias includes the overuse of one pronoun: he vs. she, or she vs. he. Once we are privy to the various types of sexist language, we can rectify them by removing the gender from the word. In the latter circumstance, I recommend simply stating either the person’s name or using: one, someone, person, etc. According to Hall and Nelson, other gendered words still in use include: gentlemen, man hours, draftsman and workman (70). Here are more examples of gender removal: worker, drafter, people and hours. Now that we have a way to fix the sexist language, we may no longer mislead someone into thinking a person is a particular gender, or his or her job pertains to only a specific gender, thus preventing the proliferation of a biased assumption.

Removing or reducing sexist language in text is important because sexist language does not only reflect gender, but also status. I had not taken note of one particular aspect of gendered language until a fellow tutor, Kitty Rallo, commented on how titles for women are divided into two categories: single or married. She went on to explain that formally addressing a male via their title does not indicate relationship status. In the case of words like Miss and Mrs., a person is separated into their assumed relationship status: Miss for

single and Mrs. for married. However, interestingly enough, the use of Mr. does not denote whether the person is single or married. Despite the everyday use of such titles, somehow this had escaped me – a perfect example of how words deeply ingrain themselves into our collective subconscious, making questioning a word's true meaning difficult. Still, it seems we have remnants of the 1950's era embedded in our language, despite our best efforts to reform old belief systems about gender.

As a tutor, I am more aware of sexist language, not only in writing, but in verbal communication as well. Sorrel states: "prejudices and stereotypes ordinarily expose themselves [even] more in oral communication than in written communication" (qtd. in Hall and Nelson 77). Therefore, to be aware of proper gender neutral words in verbal communication is crucial for a tutor. I've had the humbling experience of having to correct myself during tutoring sessions. For example, as a tutor, when asking if the tutee has their homework guidelines, one should ask the tutee if they have their professor's guidelines, as opposed to "his" or "her" professor's guidelines, or the tutor can even use the professor's name (if they know it) as opposed to the gendered pronouns. Though the use of a plural pronoun may be incorrect grammatically, the insurgence seems to me worth the cost of a grammarian passing judgement on me – this practice, or slippage of pronoun usage, conveys a more professional atmosphere, and hopefully the student (at least subconsciously) recognizes the nonsexist language.

No doubt, rectifying sexist language is paramount, but so is praising an individual for proactively omitting sexist language. Recently, I praised a student who excluded sexist language. At first, the student looked at me quizzically, which compelled me to define what sexist language entailed. The tutee (realizing what my initial comment referred to) smiled widely and said: "Oh, no, I would never do that!" As, tutors, we are often quick to "fix" or "correct" problems, while forgetting to empower and encourage an individual to whom has already implemented proper guidelines and rules.

Guidelines on how to remove sexist language are imperative for students and society as a whole. Looking back at my previous years as a student, I found that certain guidelines for sexist language were defined in textbooks, but

not necessarily properly emphasized. Proper technical writing textbooks, at times, elaborate on what gender bias is and how to fix the error. However, not all textbooks execute, or implement their ideas thoroughly. For instance, Zimmerman and Clark make use of guidelines to instruct students on how to edit biased sentences, "but none of the sentences students are to revise at the chapter's end deal with sexist language" (qtd. in Hall and Nelson 73). This highlights the tenuousness of the push to rid gendered language from our linguistic practice and begs the question: how will the individual know how to rectify biased language without any kind of practical application? A person may read a book on how to perform a yoga pose (memorization of the skill), but it is social practice that determines how the individual progresses and whether they succeed in grasping the concept, as well as whether they continue to use it correctly. Consequently, professors and tutors alike should reinforce the idea of learning via practice exercises which help strengthen a student's ability to quickly find sexist language, and fix it. In order to move on to more ideal ways of learning (via practice exercises), guideline textbooks must also evolve to fit the current times.

Textbooks, however, can only help students if tutors and professors are also aware of their own preconceived notions, or unrecognized biases. A tutor's propensity for bias can play a pivotal role in tutorial sessions by inhibiting the tutor from seeing how their use of language oppresses another. Below is an example of how one can misinterpret their outward behavior:

Dale Spender, a teacher and researcher, set out to prove the theory that as a professor, Spender maintained equal time addressing both male and female students (qtd. in Sunderland). However, Spender's findings, after 10 audio recordings of classroom lectures, found:

the maximum time I spent interacting with girls was 42% and on average 38%, and the minimum time with boys 58%.... It is nothing short of a substantial shock to appreciate the discrepancy between what I thought I was doing and what I actually was doing (qtd. in Sunderland).

As a tutor I find Spender's research invaluable and informative in questioning the validity of my own assertions when dealing with tutees. As my time with

tutoring progresses, I plan on evaluating, not only how I interact with both genders, but how much time I spend with them. Obviously, certain variables will be taken into consideration: the volume of work the tutee is presenting, as well as the overall quality of what was accomplished during the time constraints.

Gender bias is a vast and lengthy topic and I am still coming to terms with the fact that I have yet to even scratch the surface. Regardless, I look forward to implementing the knowledge I have learned into practicum on a more regular basis. Overall, the most crucial advice I can give to other tutors in abolishing sexist language involves choosing a proactive approach by educating oneself on the topic at hand. As tutors we must be conscious of every minute detail, including our own biases, our verbal language and how society affects our thought processes. Critical thinking coupled with a desire to question the status quo, substantially enhances not only our capabilities as tutors, but the writing of the students we mentor.

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# FINDING OUR VOICES:

## *Getting the Most Out of Cultural Diversity in the Writing Center*

Elisabeth Hegner



The Writing Center seems an unlikely place for the cultures of the world to collide, but that is exactly what happens. Working as a peer tutor has been more than just a job; it has been one of the most rewarding challenges I have undertaken as a student at this college. And over the past year, it has been the international students who continue to be at the heart of my love for this place and my job.

My past two semesters in the Writing Center have given me the opportunity to get to know students from all over the globe. I can now boast of having friends from China, South Korea, Indonesia, Iran, Israel, Russia, France, Honduras, Brazil, Ethiopia and Ghana. What I have come to discover through working with these students is that their cultures' approaches to writing are as diverse as are the individuals who come to see me. These cultural variances are important; they do affect writing, and we as tutors must understand and value these differences if we want to be effective. If our goal is to move past grammar to help international students with the higher priorities of the writing process, we need to learn to see a paper through the eyes of another culture. The challenge for us is to learn how to help international students adjust to the expectations of an American audience, and at the same time, work to preserve their individual writing voices.

As a tutor, I must take several things into consideration when approaching a tutoring session with an international student. The first step for me is to

realize that cultural expectations differ when it comes to writing and learning. Some are similar to what we are accustomed to in the U.S.; others are nearly opposite. A portion of these expectations has to do with the physical aspect of tutoring, like body language. For some cultures, sitting too close to someone may be offensive. As researchers Barnum and Wolniansky have observed:

In America, when people won't look us in the eye, we think they are...untrustworthy. However, in the Arab context ... withholding eye contact [is] actually a compliment. ... Not looking is correct behavior and actually conveys respect (Barnum and Wolniansky).

Many cultures also have different expectations about what is fair play in writing. After talking with several students, I have also come to find that in some Asian cultures, quoting someone without citation is not plagiarism. For students from these backgrounds, the act of quoting gives the honor and credit the original author is due.

Although taking care to use appropriate cultural body language definitely predetermines the success of a tutoring session with an international student, tutors must consider other differences as well. Contrary to our assumptions, what might appear to be "errors" in content or organization may be just a reflection of a unique cultural style. According to Robert Kaplan in "Cultural Thought Patterns and Integral Education," cultural writing styles can be categorized into four different rhetorical structures: "Semitic," "Oriental," "Romance" and "Russian" (Trianosky 67). Here at Johnson County Community College, we probably interact with the "oriental" – or Asian – category the most. This approach to writing, Kaplan writes, "is circular, and suggests that these writers circumnavigate the topic, approaching it indirectly but never coming to an exact point" (Blau and Hall 25-26). Maho Isono, a student from Japan, gave validity to Kaplan's findings: "'In American writing, writers have a lot of responsibility for their writing, but in Japanese writing, readers have more responsibility to understand and participate'" (Trianosky 1). All of this is to say that most Asian cultures don't value being direct in a paper, which can cause confusion as they learn to write for an American audience. In a recent tutoring session with Li Chun, a student from

Hong Kong, I was able to put my new knowledge about cultural style to use. When I noticed that he had some vague paragraphs, and was lacking a solid thesis statement, I was able to explain to him the differences in the American writing process. "Assume that Americans are dumb," I told him, laughing. "You have to tell us exactly what you mean."

Our approach to tutoring our international students should be one of care and respect. "Compared to those from middle-class U.S. families, international students run a greater risk of altering, or even losing, their own cultural values and identities in order to ease cultural conflicts and to receive positive comments on their writing" (Want 1). Although young people often come to study in America because they are exceptional students in their native countries, writing can be a very exposing and often a scary thing. Some students, concerned that they will be ridiculed by professors and peers, have little or no confidence in their writing. They try to remove themselves from their native culture as much as they can, and frequently end up sacrificing their unique writing voice on the altar of being "politically correct" or "sounding American." Even as we help them adapt to writing for a new audience with different expectations, we must remind these students that good writing results from the confidence and individuality of the student, not that student's outward conformity to cultural norms. We can help students in several different ways: we can express genuine interest in them as a person, engage them in conversation about their country and culture, and identify ways that a particular student has excelled in their writing. Letting international students know that they are important to us is vital, and by doing so, helps nurture honest, confident writers.

Ayn Rand, a Russian born American novelist, spoke the truth when she said "A culture is made – or destroyed – by its articulate voices." Our Writing Center is an amazing place where we have the honor of meeting and working alongside individuals from all around the world. We strive to make it a place where students of all backgrounds, languages, cultures and colors can feel safe and nurtured. Our job is to produce better writers, not simply better papers (North). One way we can do this is by using our knowledge about the cultures on our campus, learn how these cultures affect student writing, and

encourage individuals to take the necessary risks in writing to discover their own voice.

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# Scaffolding With Students – A Process of Learning

Jane Blakeley



We have built this house of language. We laid the bricks with our own hands while our elementary school teachers and parents guided us, supporting our unstable structures. We started in preschool with letters, wrapping our tongues carefully around each phoneme until we could sing the alphabet successfully and without prompting. Our teachers then taught us words and sentences, ending finally with reading – an activity we could do all on our own. Educators supported our journey there, carefully building and dismantling the scaffolding around our edifice of knowledge. Without their help, we could not have learned or built what we have.

Like our teachers, as tutors, we must try to facilitate learning. We may provide moral support, serve as an ally, friend or peer, but our foremost duty is to encourage efficacy and independence among writers. Often, this duty is necessarily expressed in the form of explicit instruction or direction. Though some writing center rhetoric advises against this type of tutoring, known as directive tutoring, “tutors [often] cannot avoid being directive” in certain instances because “the collaboration between students and tutors is asymmetrical” (Thompson 418-419). Tutors are frequently privy to more information than the tutee, and the tutee relies on the tutor to “support and challenge [them] to perform at higher levels than [he or she] could have achieved without assistance” (419). We must help students elevate their writing by using the most effective strategy we have at our disposal, including those that are directive.

Of the many compelling directive methods in tutoring, one of particular note is known as scaffolding. Scaffolding, like that of a building, is support that is provided to the student (often via direct instruction and modeling processes) that is removed as the student becomes more proficient and ultimately masterful at the task (Wood, Bruner and Ross 89). In tutoring, this takes the form of a three-step process – explaining and modeling the task, doing the task with the student, and having the student demonstrate their understanding and, hopefully, mastery of the task (Fetner 8). Scaffolding is not a foolproof process by any means – the tutor can fail to explain clearly or the task could simply be too difficult for the student – but with some practice, the method can be remarkably effective.

In one particular instance, I was able to put this knowledge of scaffolding to good use. I tutored a student who felt nervous that she did not understand “what her teacher wanted” in an argumentative essay. After speaking to the tutee in depth, some of the concepts required in the task seemed a little foggy for her. With this information, I explained the differences between a thesis, a topic sentence and a conclusion. By demonstrating these concepts with slightly outrageous examples (“If I was writing a paper about the best Sesame Street character, my thesis might be something like, ‘Elmo is the best character on Sesame Street.’”), I was able to explain the concepts in a novel way and show the student how to perform the task. I then asked the student directed questions about a hypothetical paper on the merits of Elmo, furthering the student’s efficacy in the task (“So, what reasons might you give for Elmo being the best Sesame Street character? ... Good. So, your topic sentences might incorporate those ideas.”) Finally, I asked the student what she envisioned for the thesis, topic sentences, and conclusion for her own essay. She was able to perform this task by herself, referring back to the notes we had made during the session. She came up with a thesis about a need to change environmental practices, topic sentences that supported that thesis (including why climate change is a problem, what can be done about it, and a rebuttal for potential objections to the solutions she presented). In 20 minutes, this student was able to gain efficacy on a task that she was previously unable to accomplish on her own.

Although the process is by no means infallible, scaffolding remains a powerful tool to facilitate learning. We, as tutors, have a duty to provide individuals with the

tools they need to become more effective and independent writers. We can do this in many ways; we can be a friend, an ally, a collaborator, a sounding board or an instructor. And while we are not nearly as important as the educators who were instrumental in building this house of knowledge, we can perhaps give tutees the leg up to wedge in the last brick or shingle.

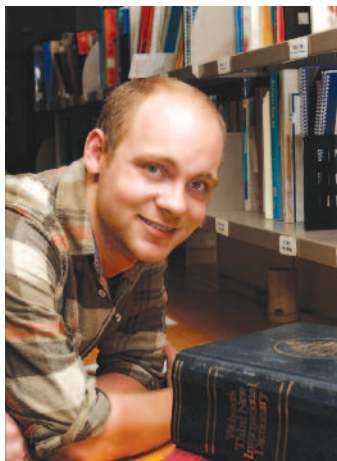
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# Natural Language in Academic Writing

Jeremy T. Hoag



Civilization could not exist without a means of communicating. According to cambridge.org, natural language is any language derived naturally by native speakers as a means of communication between people. This description encapsulates any spoken language including different forms of one language, such as English, derived from various backgrounds and cultures. These different populations all face the same problem as first-year writers trying to take their natural language and process their words into academic writing. This problem can be tenfold for non-native speakers, the deaf community and students with learning disabilities. Translating one's natural language into academic is problematic as it can be approached in several ways. Since all students are different, the working solution may vary from case to case, but two of the major solutions I have found helpful are organizational exercises and communication.

In the United States alone, English-speaking students come from uncountable different backgrounds before walking through the doors of a university. Affluence, culture and geographical location all play a role in how someone communicates verbally. For example, a student from the southern United States may have a drawl or use words such as, "y'all," which is not accepted in academic writing. In Eugene Nida's article, *Linguistic Implications of Academic Writing*, he writes, "Native speakers of English . . . have serious difficulties with technical writing, even in areas in which they have presumably specialized"

(478). Nida's claim is even more evident in situations of working with a second language writer. If native speakers have a problem with English academic writing, students who are learning English are going to find this venture especially difficult. One example of this can be taken from writing from English to French in literal form and then back again.

- I. I was going to the park when you called and told me I'd forgotten my keys. So I came home even though I was almost to the park.
- II. J'allais au parc quand tu m'a téléphoné pour me dire que j'avais oublié mes clés. Alors, je suis rentré chez nous malgré que je fusse déjà près du parc.
- III. I was to go at the park when you me have telephoned for me to say that I was to have forgotten my keys. So, I am returned place us even though that I was to be already near of the park.

As one can see, it appears that I am telling you that I forgot my keys, because of the placement of pronouns. In addition the prepositions make little sense and the auxiliary verbs in past tense are used differently in French than traditional standard English. "The nature of academic literacy often confuses and disorients [English as a Second Language] students," according to Professor Johanne Miles. Second language acquisition students are not only trying to develop a better understanding of English, but also often trying to grasp (along with native English speakers) the principles of (English) academic writing. Added with the stresses of trying to accustom oneself with American culture and college life, writing in a foreign tongue can be a difficult and frustrating process even with the resources available through the Internet and traditional resources such as dictionaries.

Nida believes that the "complexities of the syntax and discourse structure" are the main cause for this disorientation for non-native speakers of English. A dictionary might not be as helpful to them as one may hope since the individual words do not confuse the writer, but the way words are often arranged by technical and academic writers and the way that students are expected to have them written in academia is confusing. One way to reduce this confusion is to copy the words of others. Many cultures feel plagiarism is not considered stealing, so many students learning English turn to copying

another's work as a means of displaying an understanding of the classwork assigned which unfortunately can lead to academic punishment. At Johnson County Community College, plagiarism can lead to being dropped from the course and possible expulsion.

One solution for students is to communicate with their professors or peers about the unclear meanings found in academic writings being studied. This goes for writing of the student's papers, too. The opportunity to speak with an individual about their writing can be extremely helpful to students. This chance helps them to use their own words to describe the information, which often helps in understanding material.

During a recent tutoring session of mine, a student was having trouble with linking verbs and other grammatical problems. He was visually showing signs of nervousness, such as responding to a question by stating it back in a raising tone in the end, indicating a question instead of a response. Through communicating verbally with the student, I showed him that he already used the grammatical rules in everyday speech – his new English had a natural language pattern emerging. His confidence grew and after talking for a few minutes, I wrote down some practice exercises for the student to work on and his ability was clearly observable. For example, I would write things like '\_\_\_\_-ed coffee,' and, '\_\_\_\_-ing man' to help with tense variation. He excelled in the exercises, including several of which I had made deliberately more difficult near the end. Because of having the resource of an individual to communicate with, he realized his ability in the subject.

For some students, understanding the material is not the problem, but putting their own words into something academically acceptable. To this end, I have found that working through an outline with a student is often a fitting course of action a tutor can take. Communication plays a strong role in the solution of this kind of situation as well, since working with a student requires the student to communicate what his or her own words actually are. Students have a chance to re-articulate concepts they are formulating.

Another tutoring session this semester involved an older student working on a cultural experience essay. He was positively thrilled to talk to me about

what happened, but not nearly as excited to write about his adventure to an Ethiopian restaurant for his class. Peter Elbow, *Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can Bring to Writing*, says, "We can enlist the language activity most people find the easiest, speaking, for the language activity most people find hardest, writing" (139). Elbow makes an interesting and crucial point, which must be recognized in cases similar to the one with this particular student. After talking for ten or fifteen minutes with the student about the restaurant he had dined at the previous night, I showed him how an outline works by writing Roman numerals at the top, center and near the bottom of a blank notebook page to indicate where three main ideas would belong. He decided that the three most important pieces of the night to write about were the atmosphere, the people (working and eating within the restaurant), and most importantly to him – the food. I asked him to write these down to the right of the Roman numerals respectively and requested he write down, "A, B, C," beneath each numeral. We continued to speak about his experience and I asked him leading questions and hinted at which parts of his story could be included in his paper if he saw fit to add them. Through talking about these ideas, he began to turn them into developed sentences. In the end, he had a well-organized and academically acceptable essay about his cultural experiences in an Ethiopian restaurant using the foundation of his outline.

Communication is clearly one of the most powerful tools that a student can use in understanding and relating to material. While native and non-native English speakers both have difficulty when reading and writing academically, having tutors available to talk to is an infinitely valuable resource for any student who is having trouble understanding class material, organizing his or her own ideas and using his or her own voice in academic writing. By explaining something in his or her own words, a tutor may assist a student in looking at something in a way they've never realized before, improving the student's understanding. Natural language is the foundation of this communication.



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# The Practice of Becoming a Reflective Practitioner

Jon Charles Miller



## The Methods of Conversation

When I began to research different tutoring styles, methods of discourse, and methods for approaching a student-writer, and the different restrictive situations associated with them, I became concerned with ways to understand and approach the student-writer. I was concerned with the urge to seek inside myself, an attempt to understand the process and limitations that occur during the process of becoming a reflective-tutor. Then once I practiced the methods, I found the systems can be transferred to the student-writer, in the hope that they become reflective-practitioners too.

Claims for a widening gap between teaching and learning may stem from teaching writing in a way that may be different from the writer's process. To resolve this discrepancy, distinct methods – reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action – can be learned, so the teacher can transfer knowledge to the student (Schön 125). The processes, reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, are both connected by the instinctual knowledge of the writer, but differ in ways. Reflection-in-action allows self-positioning while tutoring a student, and reflection-on-action allows a conversation after the session, when the reflection permits the knowledge of whether or not the expected outcome was achieved (Schön 125-126). I suggest that we imagine the "widening gap" as a tennis match between a professional tennis player teaching and an amateur player learning. Obviously the professional player will win easily five straight-sets. The question should be, how does the professional play on the same level as the amateur to help the learner

achieve and what technique is needed for that outcome. The professional should reflect-in-action since the amateur does not possess the same technique. If the professional wrong-foots (a deceptive move where the hit off-balances the opponent) the amateur, both players are not playing within an equal-playing field, the professional must learn to not play with such vigor and play with a conversational-rally. The technique needs to be addressed in a way where the professional approaches the amateur on an equal level, thus allowing the amateur to gain instinctual knowledge of the technique and close the “widening-gap.” As a tutor, I demonstrate reflection-on-action, since my professional knowledge limits my ability to “wrong-foot” a student.

The practice of reflection is a natural occurrence. Reflection can be as simple as looking at the reflection of the environment in a body of water; the actual image is filled with flaws, yet the idea of self-positioning comes into play, similar to a person standing in front of mirror. The image allows for modification through the act of self-evaluation and conversation. In the case of the mirror example, a reflection-in-action process takes place in front of the mirror, while reflection-on-action applies to the reflection of the memory on the waterfront.

## **The Bodies of Knowledge**

I have been a writing tutor for a couple years, and there has always been the importance of the knowledge-transfer between the tutor and student. The main point is the conveyance of information regarding subjects, which might be outside of the tutor’s area of expertise, ranging from various fields: biology, philosophy, history and composition. Even though the tutor may lack knowledge in the various fields, if the tutor uses the discourse methods set forth in the following paragraph, a reflective conversation will begin to develop.

As a matter of context, an understanding of three main discourses should be achieved:

- 1) competent practitioner, an ability to take technical expertise
- 2) application of a body of knowledge using pedagogy and rhetoric
- 3) a reflective practitioner (Edwards 116-119).

The three above represent components, or modes, of a whole. The first two discourses, competent practitioner and technical expert, hardly ever function independently. Although the technical expert is more common with understanding the reflective practice. Each mode implies knowledge of certain attitudes and training for different individuals (Edwards and Nicoll 119). The ability to take skills learned in the lecture hall and apply them to an outside situation can be associated with Donald Schön's reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Silcock 280). Given the didactics set forth by Edwards and Nicoll and Schön, I will attempt to discuss how the tutor can approach the student-writer, and I, as the tutor, can apply the methods toward a tutoring session where the student-writer becomes a reflective practitioner.

## **The Development of the Reflective Practitioner**

The transformation of the self into a reflective practitioner is a self-conversation. Whether it is an internal or external conversation, the dialogic process is the most important process toward self-development and actualization through knowledge.

The application of the reflective practice in a writing center environment, when tutors are faced with students who lack knowledge of the proper writing practices, divides the tutors approach into two groups – a student-centered and a tutor-centered approach (Bell 80). The open-nature of the writing center also can complicate issues with different varying degrees of the student-knowledge. The following scenario should serve as a synthesis of the different theories.

First problem – during the tutor session, understanding the knowledge and competence of the student. During the construction phase of a session, I like to ask the tutee a series of questions (e.g. what do you [student-writer] expect to get out of the session? What can I do to help you [student-writer], then how can we get there together?); the questions direct the rest of the tutoring session because they dictate whether a student-centered or a tutor-centered approach is appropriate. The student-centered approach places an emphasis on active learning, which leads to deep-learning. The deep-learning

process increases the responsibility of the student and the session becomes a social-learning-community. Tutor-centered requires a more passive learning of the student-writer. The tutor shows while the student writer either listens or mimicks.

Second, while the student-centered discussion is ideal because it fosters an interactive discussion, it does not readily allow the less-knowledgeable learner to understand the presented information (Bell 85). When I am faced with a writer who does not know, I take a tutor-centered approach because it allows me to have control and implement a more instructive tutoring session. Student-centered should be taken most times, but it is important to find a good combination of both styles (Bell 85). I believe that implementing a student-centered and tutor-centered discussion allows an interactive discussion, so the student-writer and myself will obtain a deep understanding of the topic. The combination of discourse methods, the competent and expert practitioner, (hopefully) leads toward the student-writer becoming a reflective practitioner.

Third, a tutor can integrate the methods into a model session. I think an idyllic session occurs when the tutor assumes control of the construction phase. When I, as the tutor, question the student about what they want to discuss, then I ask the student a series of Socratic questions, which is a method of building an interactive dialogue between myself and the student-writer (Bell 81). Socratic questioning is important because it allows the tutor to have control over the conversation, but, at the same time, the student-writer is able to work at a pace that is comfortable for them (Bell 82). The Socratic method is limited because a discussion related to composition and writing skills is still placed in an abstract field. I believe in a Socratic dialogue partnered with a free-writing model, where the tutor models a sentence example then the student-writer reiterates the example. This allows the transfer of knowledge from the reflective-tutor toward the student-writer, and enables the student-writer to become a reflective practitioner.

## Conclusion

Writing is an important part of culture, and writing is a skill that is difficult to

master. Since we communicate through language in conversation, an effective tool to help writers achieve proficiency is dialog and reflection. The reflective conversation can be one of the most important steps for the transfer of knowledge. The writing process is not just one author sitting alone in a room writing, but is a combination of self, other and contemplation. The process of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action might explain well the relationship between conversation and writing; while both seem independent, hopefully, through application of the reflective methods, a reflective practitioner understands their interdependency and learns to employ both as strategies for better writing.

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# Resumed Education: Learning with Nontraditional Students

Joy Mosier-Dubinsky



When I first started in the writing center, I wanted to research and understand the mistakes commonly made by first-time tutors. I had hoped that, by knowing these errors, I might not make them. With my gross lack of experience in the art of peer tutoring (and I firmly believe it is an art), I am positive I screwed up repeatedly. But almost universally, students seemed enthusiastic at the end of our sessions and, more importantly, most seemed much more self-assured about the next steps they would take. As gratifying as their evident confidence was, I would sometimes find myself wondering whether my admittedly novice methods were truly working. Since I was the only constant in the sessions, I had no choice but to begin by looking at myself. I am, of course, what is politely and euphemistically termed a “nontraditional” student (which, in this case, simply means that I’m old; I’ve accepted that), and this means I bring both a lifetime of experience and a crushing suspicion of failure with me in all my collegiate interactions. Thus, I shifted my focus from looking at mistakes born of inexperience and began to examine how my age, relative to the students I work with, factors into the tutoring equation.

Without fail or doubt, a hierarchy is established in every tutoring session. As Thomas Hemmeter opines in “Live and on Stage: Writing Center Stories and Tutorial Authority,” a measure of equality is in every tutoring session but:

... peer tutoring also involves a dynamic performance which releases forces of power and authority, continually altering the presumed

equality as the dialogue between tutor and student proceeds (36).

As a so-called “nontraditional student,” I sometimes work with students who are the ages of my children (and younger,) as well as my own age. In the instance of the former, I wondered if my “mom-ness” had any appreciable effect. With respect to the latter, I figured the path of the session would be closer to level, and therefore easier.

I was wrong.

In the majority of the reading I have done with respect to that hierarchy of position in a tutoring session, most of the focus is on the tutor and the power granted comes merely through that position. However, when age disparity is mentioned at all, almost immediately age gets dismissed out-of-hand as being inconsequential. Oddly, though, I find that a similarity in age presents a unique challenge with those closer to my age which is absent in the session when the student is younger. Invariably, those returning students I work with begin a session by telling me it has been “X” years since they wrote a paper and everything they learned so many years ago is wrong. While I certainly relate to that sentiment and said those exact words when I returned to school, we have then only established common ground. However, we have not fostered or engendered anything close to the sort of rapport necessary for the effective give-and-take of working on a paper together. Rather, we have simply acknowledged years – not abilities.

For me, then, the challenge of working with older students is one I struggle with personally: how do I overcome the psychological stumbling block of time spent away from formal education (but by no means away from learning). I would never presume that the college course load is easier for younger students or think that they do not struggle with a lack of confidence in their abilities. Nonetheless, I am keenly aware that, for a nontraditional student, additional worries interfere with his or her belief in themselves. These often manifest as a perceived inability to write effectively or to meet assignment guidelines. I was surprised to discover that this commonality among those closer to my age changed the entire dynamic of the sessions in a way that made me even more uncertain about my abilities to efficiently tutor.



While the interplay of the session changed in a way I wasn't prepared for, even more surprisingly, I discovered by struggling so hard to find my footing in this landscape something I had never anticipated: my older students were actively forcing me to abandon one of my worst "new tutor" mistakes – ceaseless yammering designed to disguise my fear of not being very good in my role. I had this crazy idea that, if I could explain, I could somehow "fix" whatever the student was struggling with. My sessions with nontraditional students revealed – once I shut up and allowed them time to vent about more than just the

insanity inherent to comma usage – I did not have ready answers. I, however, did have empathy of experience. More importantly, my role was to help and rarely – if ever – does "help" come in the form of a pat, easy answer.

In his research, Hemmeter points out, "tutorials are living relationships" in which the dynamics of power ebb and flow between the participants (49). In my experience with nontraditional students, interaction will, like water, seek its own level. Part of establishing a relationship, for me at least, is finding something beyond just how different we are from other students and determining what makes us the same. In this way, I have discovered that, while we certainly are older, the important part is that we're students, too. I am ashamed to admit in my fear of not being a "perfect" tutor, I lost sight of that distinction. However, I believe that my work with nontraditional students allowed me to become a more competent and stronger tutor with all the students I work. Naively, I had believed that a similarity in age would lead to a fully formed link. The truth is, though, that no short-cuts to building the link necessary for effective tutoring exists, nor do easy fixes. I may not be a "perfect" tutor (and I doubt I will ever be), but I am a good listener and a decent sounding board.

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# My Ascension: Becoming a Writer and a Tutor

Kel Inthavong



From the moment I first heard Bob Dylan's music, I knew I wanted to be a writer. His lyrics blew me away. I did not necessarily want to be a poet or a song writer; I simply wanted to write. First I bought a few books on how to write stories, but after my many failed attempts at writing readable prose, I scrapped the idea. I then went and bought some books about English grammar. Most people would not consider learning grammar enjoyable, but I wanted to be a better writer and learning grammar was essential. Once I reintroduced myself to the wonderful world of grammar, I was well on my way to becoming a better writer and eventually, an English tutor.

My first task to see whether or not I had improved my writing skills was to test them in my *Comp I* class. I did fairly well until I hit a snafu: the dreaded research paper. After I composed a few drafts and had my professor look over my paper, I learned something which has helped me both as a writer and a tutor. My professor, Mr. Schmeer, introduced me to the "What? So what?" concept. When I received my rough draft back, I noticed "What? So what?" written on my paper. Professor Schmeer went on to explain to me that even though I provided quotes and summarized passages, why should the reader care? He told me I should give a reason for why the summary or quote was important. When I completed all my revisions, I was relieved to be done; I hated writing research papers. Professor Schmeer returned my paper to me and I received a 97%. I was elated; I ended up passing my class with a resounding A. Realizing

that the “why” part of a paper was instrumental in good writing helped me to be a better writer.

After conquering *Comp I*, the time had come for me to conquer *Comp II*. The assignments were not as different as *Comp I* had been, but still I was excited to see if I could get an A. Since I was becoming more comfortable with my writing, I knew I would do well. My papers were well received by my professor, Dr. Gulley. Whenever we had drafted our papers, we would have private conferences with her to go over them. During my conferences with Dr. Gulley, I discovered my grammar knowledge was not quite as good as I thought. She told me my main problem was my use of commas. She explained to me how to fix the errors, which helped me immensely. After one of my conferences, I purchased another grammar book because the ones I had were not as thorough. In the end, my *Comp II* class was a breeze, and because of Dr. Gulley, I have become a better grammarian. Noticing I had potential to be a great writer, Dr. Gulley suggested I apply for a position as a writing tutor, which I was at first reluctant to do, but then decided to give a try.

Even though I was well on my way to being the best damned writer I could be, I realized I was not the best tutor I could be; I had trouble explaining the fundamentals of writing to students. Whenever I would explain certain grammar rules or ideas, student writers would stare at me blankly and nod in agreement. However, when I asked if they knew what I meant, they would say “no.” My approach had to change.

I stumbled upon a concept known as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) while working with a fellow tutor on a research project. The ZPD was developed by psychologist Lev Vygotsky who explains that everyone has an imaginary zone in which they are able to learn and comprehend knowledge on their own or with assistance (Espinoza and Winsler). If a student requires help to learn, the helper is considered to be the more knowing other (MKO), a term self-explanatory (Lidz). An MKO could be a teacher, a mentor or a tutor. The MKO does not necessarily have to be someone in an educated position. For example, someone’s big brother could be an MKO. Since the big brother has more knowledge than his siblings, he could teach them what he knows, such as tying a shoe or how to read.

For me to use the ZPD and to know what the student was capable of understanding, I would have to ask specific questions to get a feel for the student's understanding. I had to be careful not to treat students as if they were children, so they would not lose interest or become upset. Asking students if they knew what nouns or verbs are might give the impression that I do not think highly of their abilities. Also, if I go overboard and overwhelm the student with too much information, the student maybe become anxious and be unable to focus on the task at hand. Before I knew about the ZPD, I would use technical writing terminology to break down sentences and paragraphs during my tutoring sessions. For example, whenever I would explain to students that they need to use past-tense verbs because they used present-tense verbs, most students did not know what I am talking about and became frustrated with me. Thus, I now try to avoid using writing terms because most students simply do not know them. After finding out what the students know about writing, I then try to foster their ability to remain engaged in the "learning zone."

Whenever I received my rough drafts back from Professor Schmeer, he would go through and mark up my punctuation errors on only a few pages. He did not go through the whole paper because he wanted me to learn to identify and fix the mistakes myself. Since tutors are not supposed to proofread a student's paper, I employ Professor Schmeer's technique. I too point out some punctuation errors within students' papers, but I do not leave the students without the information they need to recognize their mistakes. I use what I learned from Dr. Gulley and try to explain the grammar rules by remembering the importance of Vygotsky's ZPD; I work within the students comfort zone making sure not to belittle them. An example of Dr. Gulley working in my learning zone was when she explained how to fix my comma errors. She found out what my zone was by asking me specific questions. First she asked me whether or not I knew how to spot comma splices, and I told her I did not. Dr. Gulley then explained to me a comma splice error was when two complete sentences were joined together by a comma. She then introduced me to conjunctions, or FANBOYS: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so. Dr. Gulley made sure to tell me comma splice errors could be fixed many other ways, but for the sake of the initial conference with a student writer, I focused solely on the FANBOYS.

Looking back at my two Comp classes, I realized my teachers worked well within my learning zone. I was able to take what I learned from my professors and apply it to my writing and tutoring skills. During some of my tutoring sessions, I would write on the left margins (the same way Professor Schmeer did) of a student's paper to indicate what I thought a certain paragraph was about. For instance, if the student was writing about global warming, and the first paragraph was about the ozone layer, then I would make a note. I continue the trend with a few more paragraphs to see whether or not the student was on point or not. I am explaining to the student what I am doing as well, so students better understand how to break down their paper to check for organization. I want the student to think, *if an experienced writer is doing this, then maybe I should do this as well.*

In the end, writing plays a huge role in a student's collegiate and professional career, no matter what that job may be. In college, students are required to write essays for a variety of courses: composition, psychology, philosophy and many others. Learning how to write proper papers is crucial, but most students fret at the thought of learning how to write better. Many people view writing as a chore, and chores are what people tend to avoid. And I agree, mastering writing is one of the toughest skills; hours upon hours must be expended. However, with the proper guidance, the writing process can be smooth and seem less like a chore. Writing can be a fun and exhilarating experience. With my better understanding of the ZPD, I believe I am well on my way to becoming a great tutor.

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# Beyond the Obvious: Eye Contact and Successful Tutoring Sessions

Peter Vanderhorst



Imagine a puzzle, enclosed in a plastic bag, separated from its box cover, void of any clear idea of what the final image the pieces are meant to portray. In attempting to assemble such a jumbled assortment, the only logical method would be to start from the edges and meticulously work toward the center. In the Writing Center, the journey toward a complete and effective tutoring session can be similar in its beginning to a mass of confused pieces with no image from which to pattern the process. Beginning to understand and implement some of the most basic aspects of tutoring is analogous to working in from the sides of a puzzle and nonverbal communication is one of the most fundamental pieces.

In approaching any tutoring session, tutors must remember that, at times, outward appearance often communicates more to the student than spoken words do. Being aware of the potential of words and behavior together has increased the productivity of tutoring sessions I have had with students from many varying backgrounds, ages and ethnicities. Learning how to use our nonverbal communication effectively is one of the essential skills in becoming more consistent and proficient tutors.

Human beings are constantly communicating nonverbally, most of the time without the knowledge that they are doing so. With this in mind, understanding the role unspoken communication plays in effective tutoring sessions is vital. According to Williams, "Unspoken cues can either support,

neutralize or contradict spoken statements; a tutor's sensitivity to nonverbal cues plays a part in determining the success or failure of a writing conference" (6). Remembering that humans are always communicating something, even when we are only listening, is an important step toward becoming more effective tutors. When aware of this, we begin to see that saying helpful and instructive information with an unenthusiastic countenance or a refusal to make eye contact can render useless the lessons we impart to students. Often, our failure to communicate positively with our body language is inadvertent. The student, however, can feel as though tutors speak to them in condescending tones, or appear to be more interested in completing the session than in ensuring the student understands. Both tutors and writers can be frustrated by presumed indifference in the other (such as shrugged shoulders or erratic eye contact), which is often discerned through nonverbal channels rather than spoken words.

Since unspoken facial communication in tutoring can be the difference between success and frustration, learning what we are conveying with our faces is essential. According to Cicalese, "... by maintaining steady eye contact with the speaker, you will not only absorb more of what they are saying, but you will also offer your full attention and interest." In one of my recent sessions, I purposely made an effort to smile, make eye contact and listen carefully to what the student said. By being conscious of what and how I was communicating, and observing the student's unspoken cues, I had one of the best tutoring sessions I had yet experienced. We worked very well together and were able to move past the stilted and forced interaction in tutoring sessions that can seem insurmountable. This "awkward stage" in tutoring sessions often includes forced smiles, shifting eyes and, ultimately, less-than-optimal learning outcomes. At least a part of the reason that this student and I moved past that uneasiness was thanks to my conscious effort to make clear eye contact and talk to her instead of at her.

With focus and attention to both our own nonverbal communicative tendencies and those of the students we tutor, the quality of our tutoring sessions can continue to improve, and peer-to-peer relations can become less tense. Greeting students as we approach them to tutor with positive and relaxed nonverbal

communication techniques (such as a bright smile and direct eye contact) can put them in a “comfort zone” more quickly and allow for more of a teamwork mentality. Once we are aware of our own facial cues, consciously noticing and reading students’ facial expressions is the next step toward successful tutoring. As we adopt the mindset that nonverbal communication plays an important part in tutoring, concentrating mainly on our own unspoken indicators can become more natural than being aware of students’. Even though we unconsciously read the actions and expressions of those we tutor, a more focused effort would increase our ability to help students according to their individual needs and situations. Not every student will react the same way to the various techniques or observations that we make externally or internally, and that is part of what makes the job of tutoring both challenging and rewarding. Some students thrive with clear eye contact, while others tend to retract into themselves even further. Being able to decipher what each student is comfortable with, and what combination of words and eye contact will be the most effective, also plays a part in successful tutoring.

Cultural differences also factor into what is appropriate and valuable in using nonverbal communication effectively. The world is home to only a few universal cultural customs, even when it comes down to what can seem to be ubiquitous facial expressions and interaction. According to Lynne Ronesi, the ESL (English as a Second Language) Specialist at Rhode Island University, “Behavioral norms that dictate appropriateness in such issues as the distance between people, the amount and length of eye contact, the level of directness in speech or writing, or the amount of time between question and response vary from culture to culture” (4). With this in mind, attempting to use appropriate nonverbal communication with students from other countries can be a little more challenging than with those from the United States. Nevertheless, much of what is effective and what is not can be clearly ascertained as each tutoring session continues and students respond to tutors’ various unspoken indicators positively or negatively.

The field of nonverbal communication is vast, a jigsaw puzzle not easily understood or delineated. As we put the pieces together, though, beginning with the corners and the sides, the picture becomes more clear, the method



more obvious. A smile appears, a pair of piercing eyes . . . and the journey has begun. As we understand what is being said through actions, and learn to interpret the nonverbal language of others, we can continue testing, placing the pieces of the puzzle. One day, with persistence, the picture will be complete.

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# Brainstorming: the right direction

Sharon Smith



Most of us love completion, but the road to getting there can be a struggle, particularly when it comes to writing. Students come into the Writing Center all the time appearing bored, stressed or disorganized. They hand us their assignment sheets, hoping that we can lead them in the right direction. The first step (and a critical component) on the path to a quality paper is prewriting. Tutors must understand the different ways to generate and sort out thoughts. We also need to know how to encourage students to spend time on a task in which development is the goal.

Prewriting, or brainstorming, is a way for the mind to work out ideas. For some students, what might start off as a slow trickle can gradually release into a steady stream of potential topics and evolving themes. Note, that other students can have too many ideas. They might produce more tangled thoughts when brainstorming, like the ones that show up in papers, unorganized and overwhelming. Once pieced together though, both types of writers will have the beginnings of a quality essay.

Most of us understand that people are different from one another, so the generation and organization of ideas will not work the same for everyone. Brainstorming is productive in all forms of writing—from a letter for an employer to academic essays. The key is to find the technique that is compatible to the individual. For instance, I had a tutoring session with a student whose topic was on whether or not nuclear energy is good for America. I suggested listing as a way for the student to compare and contrast the information collected.

Listing works by creating two lists. The student made one list concentrating on the positive benefits of nuclear energy, while the other's attention focused on how people might oppose nuclear energy. Soon the solidity and weaknesses of both stances became apparent. However, some students find bullets and listing too insipid. Different styles of brainstorming, such as cubing, simile building, or drawing thoughts might work better for the more abstract thinker.

Although more artistic methods of forming ideas consume time, writers might consider techniques, such as cubing, to gain a better understanding of their chosen subject. Cubing asks writers to use construction paper to form a six-sided cube, with each square directing the writer how to approach a topic. A simple roll of the dice may have the writer responding to any two combinations of: Describe it. Compare it. Associate it. Analyze it. Apply it, and argue for or against it (UNC Writing 4). To be able to actually see a thesis work and connect from six different sides can be invaluable. In the case of whether or not nuclear energy is good for America, cubing could help a writer organize their thoughts into a clearer paragraph-by-paragraph layout and maybe some unforeseen complexities in the topic.

Another student I recently worked with came into the Writing Center with an essay thesis and a couple ideas for body paragraphs. I asked him what kind of help he needed, and his response was, "I don't know what to say about any of this. Could you give me some ideas?" This session is a prime example of why I picked brainstorming as my subject matter. I could have sat with him, tossing out random suggestions, but they would have been mine, fashioned by me and not the student. Tutors need to offer tools and guide students into making their own choices and incorporating their own ideas. Planning before writing is a key step in the process. As indicated by The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), "12th grade students were given a brochure on prewriting instruction and the opportunity to use space in the test booklet for prewriting activities. The percentage of students who used the prewriting activities during the assessment scored 40% higher than students who didn't" (qtd. in Occurences of Prewriting as Part of the Writing Assessment). Recognizing this, I wanted to give my student writer

instructions that he could work with outside of the Writing Center on his own time.

Knowing the different ways to brainstorm is essential, but students need more than just knowledge; they need to understand application. In my tutoring sessions we use free writing. Free writing lets the writer's thoughts flow from their brains onto paper without any concern for surface-level issues, such as spelling or punctuation. The concept is to start writing, even if the writer has no idea what to say. Eventually, the random thoughts will become cohesive. This is when a budding thesis, argument or association might begin to show. The student I worked with came up with quality sentences while thinking aloud, but he needed prompting to put his words on paper before they were forgotten. I encouraged him to think about his topic and write everything, even the thoughts that might be considered pointless or useless to the larger goal of writing, like "I can't think of anything to say." I told him to write the senseless phrase anyway. With some nudging, the student began to see how the free writing technique worked. Once his progress became clear, he had total buy-in. He left the Writing Center with a new tool and confidence that he could write more on his own.

Although I choose to use free writing in my tutoring sessions, the journal, *Focus on Exceptional Children*, states that, "several planning strategies have been shown to increase the length and quality of a students' writing as well as improve the organizational structure of the composition" (qtd in Santangelo 9). A more common idea starter for stronger writing is clustering and webbing which is when a possible topic is written on a piece of paper with associative ideas scattered about in no particular sequence and then circled. The writer can then attach ideas that stem from the initial topic. Some of the inside bubbles will inevitably correlate with each other. When they do, they can be connected, like the woven threads of a spider's web.

Brainstorming techniques are limitless; the techniques I have shown are just a portion found in books, like *Paper Lightning*, by Darcy Pattison, and on tutoring websites such as the Writing Center at UNC- Chapel Hill or, our own, JCCC Writing Center webpage. Using prewriting can effectively enhance a student writer's work or composition. I would encourage students

and tutors alike to reflect on the words of Linus Pauling, who stated, "The way to get good ideas is to get lots of ideas, and throw the bad ones away." As tutors we want students to leave our writing centers not only equipped with new ways to spark ideas for future papers, but also with the strategies of how to sort them. Once ideas become developed, motivated students will hopefully begin the ensuing steps they need in order to finish their writing tasks.

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## Parlez-Vous Anglais?

Tess Neely



Last year, I focused my research on understanding more helpful ways to work with Deaf students in the Writing Center. This year, I switched my study to working with ESL students. Along with my research this year, I was fortunate enough to have an experience that would forever alter how I go about helping ESL students. I took a foreign language class.

Now, do not get me wrong. I had taken Spanish for three years in high school. But, my elementary French class at the University of Kansas changed my perspective. I went into this class expecting it to be quite simple, such as learning colors and how to count, as we did in *Spanish 1* in high school. I was gravely mistaken. On the first day, the professor walked in and lectured the entire class period without speaking a single word of English. I cannot accurately describe the way I felt that day. All I can say is that I was completely overwhelmed, lost and disheartened. The experience was precisely like I had stepped into a foreign county. I went and spoke to the professor after class. He informed me that, yes, I was in the correct class, and that his theory of teaching was to “overexpose” us, as that would be the fastest way that we would learn. This “overexposure” throughout the semester has given me a completely new perspective on working with ESL students, since I feel – five hours a week – somewhat similar to a foreign language student. I can only imagine feeling that way all day, every day, semester in, semester out. Sharon A. Myers writes in “Reassessing the ‘Proofreading Trap’: ESL Tutoring and Writing Center Instruction,” how ESL students learn, and some of the

challenges that they go through in their process of learning to write. Meyers highlights three modes of language: speaking, reading and writing. Myers also states that, of the three modes, writing is the most advanced and hardest to master and is also, usually, the last of the three to be learned. Myers goes on to say that, "even among first-language learners, relatively few achieve the ability to write good formal academic prose at the university level ..." and more importantly, "the ability to speak a given language does not necessarily predict a person's ability to write in it ..." (Myers 53). To support this idea, Meyers suggests that "writing is denser than speech and in academic settings requires very high levels of reading comprehension, a formal register, sophisticated paraphrasing ability and a specialized vocabulary" (Myers 53). I relate to these statements. I have been through almost a whole semester, and at this point I can comprehend the majority of what my French professor is saying, but I still only write in short, broken, childlike sentences. The article also discusses the idea that the foreign language students often are quite aware of the mistakes that they make; they just don't know how to fix them (which is clearly apparent by all of my French papers); it's not that a student does not want to fix errors in his or her paper. One of the biggest tips that the article gives to tutors is that, when a writer is stuck on a paper, the tutor should focus more on the issue that most construes the meaning of the paper, whether it be a higher order concern (HOC), or a lower order concern (LOC). The article stresses that,

What needs to occur is a shift in emphasis from carving up whatever language the students have managed to summon up for their texts and then asking them to autopsy it, to giving the students more language from which to make choices, establishing more and more links for them from the language they have to new language they need. (Myers 64)

Myers feels that the best way to go about helping these students is not just by repetition but providing them with more words to choose from. An example of this is when a tutor sees an issue in a paper, instead of just focusing on how to get the writer to correct it, the tutor could try saying something similar to, "'Another way to say that is ...'; 'One way of putting that is ...'; and 'Some other phrases you can use are ...'" (Myers 65). The majority of writing is putting together phrases, not "filling in grammatical slots" (Myers 65).



Providing extra examples for foreign language students is essential in their learning process, even if it means frequently pointing out and explaining only a missing article. While the occasional ESL student just wants his/her paper "edited," the majority of them really do want to learn, and this method seems to be a good way of going about it. Myers stated it beautifully when she said, "filling in an article somewhere it is needed and pointing out the context is one drop in the waves of the language ocean carving out its shape on the shoreline of the student's memory" (Myers 66). From my personal experience with foreign language acquisition, these methods could be quite helpful in tutoring. Repetition and examples are an essential part of learning any language, even if it is a writer's native language. Many of us have achieved the level of writing that we are at now by these very methods, without realizing it. The large numbers of novels that I and the other tutors are reading are a steady stream of examples of good writing, while emphasizing good writing habits. Language acquisition whether verbal or written is the student's journey which will continue on for a lifetime. As tutor, I want to facilitate the journey as if it were my own, because it is.

## References

- Myers, Sharon. "Reassessing the 'Proofreading Trap': ESL Tutoring and Writing Center Instruction." *The Writing Center Journal* 24.1 (Fall/Winter 2003): 51-70. Print.
- "Tips on Teaching ESL Students." *The Writing Center*. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2012. Web. 26 April 2012.

# The Session

Sophia Kali

I.

It was not a typical tutoring session,  
The man turned to exclaim, "Oh my God!  
What happened to you?!"  
his gaze fixed, mouth slightly ajar.

Hypertrophic skin always begs the question.

I had been careless.  
I thought 7 years had been long enough.  
Seven years to make them fade.

I discounted him, pretending to have not heard the shock in his voice.  
I pointed to the computer screen with proper poise,  
"Try re-writing the sentence by  
removing the unnecessary information."

Truthfully, I do not understand the astonishment behind people's questions.  
Isolated animals placed in extremely stressful and unnatural  
conditions have been known to violently and impulsively  
attack themselves.

Constituent parts no longer recognizing the self...  
I am in a way,  
no different.

People forget,  
We humans are animals, too.

II.

While looking at my arms, my older brother once said,  
"We should look into finding a plastic surgeon."  
His embarrassment was as apparent as the well-  
intentioned actor fumbling for grace.

III.

Grace is lacking amongst strangers,  
sometimes, even friends.

I have been highly informed:

"It's not across the street, it's down the street."

IV.

It so happens I can walk down the street, just fine, thank you.

I am not your typical tutor.



## Associations

### **International Writing Center Association**

<http://writingcenters.org/>

### **Midwest Writing Center Association**

<http://pages.usiouxfalls.edu/mwca/>

### **National Association on Peer Tutoring in Writing**

<http://www.ncptw.chicagolandwritingcenters.org/>

### **CRLA (College Reading and Learning Association)**

<http://www.crla.net/>

## Helpful Links

### **Grammar Bytes**

<http://www.chompchomp.com/exercises.htm>

### **ONELook.com (dictionary resource)**

<http://www.onelook.com/>

## Journals and References

### **Kairos: a multimedia journal**

<http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/>

### **College Composition and Communication (JCCC link)**

<http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublication?journalCode=collcompcomm&>

### **CompPile (resource for Peer Writing Tutors)**

<http://compfaqs.org/WritingCenters/WritingCenters>

### **Writing Center Journal**

<http://casebuilder.rhet.ualr.edu/wcrp/wcjournal/search.cfm>

### **Praxis: A Writing Center Journal**

<http://projects.uwc.utexas.edu/praxis/>

### **Writing Lab Newsletter**

<http://www.writinglabnewsletter.org/>

## BLOGS

### **Friends of the Writing Center Journal**

<http://writingcenterjournal.blogspot.com/>

### **IWCA Discussion Forum**

<http://www.writingcenters.org/board/index.php>

### **Peer Centered**

<http://www.peercentered.org/>