Chapter 22. "I Have No Idea What I'm Doing": Why Training is An Essential Part of Labor Conversations in Writing Centers

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When I started tutoring in a writing center as a well-intentioned undergraduate senior, I had no idea what I was doing. Although I received a few hours of "training," this training mostly involved individual conversations with my supervisor and filling out paperwork. I was recommended by a faculty member because I was a "good writer," and the writing center coordinator generously agreed to include me as part of the team. After asking me what hours I wanted to work, she put me on the schedule, and suddenly, I was responsible for supporting writers in one-to-one tutoring sessions! Unfortunately for my clients, prior to working with them, I received no training in how to actually give feedback or talk about writing, nor did I understand how to structure a session. Rather, I relied on "good writerly intuition," a bubbly attitude, and a true enjoyment of talking with peers.

One day, I was working with a student who wanted to work on her grammar. We reviewed her paper together with me pointing out different grammatical concerns for her to fix.

"This is a run-on sentence," I said, pointing to the sentence with my pen. "You need to break this up into smaller sentences or connect them with a comma and a conjunction like 'and,' 'but,' or 'or.' This will fix the problem."

The student stared at me with a smile on her face, though she clearly didn't understand what I was talking about. I felt a bit uncomfortable but kept moving. Again, I pointed to her paper. "You need a comma here, because . . . well I don't really know why. But you need a comma here."

At this point, I felt more uncomfortable and definitely embarrassed. Why couldn't I explain this grammar rule? Did I need to? Did the student want to know how grammar worked? Did I want to waste my time explaining to her? After all, if I just told her what needed to change, we could get through a lot more of her paper in the 30 minutes that we had together.

But maybe it didn't matter. The student asked for help with grammar, and she got it. I did my job, and the student left satisfied. I think.

As I have talked to other writing tutor friends, many of their stories are similar to my own; we became tutors as undergraduates because we were told we were "good writers." But a good writer does not automatically make a good writing

tutor. Thus, the training of tutors must become an essential part of the conversation about labor in writing centers.

My own experience speaks to how the myth of good writers equaling good tutors simply does not create effective tutoring practices. As an undergraduate student hired to tutor for credit, I loved writing. In fact, I still do, and I even believe I'm good at it! But as my session about grammar shows, I didn't know why something worked. I just knew when something was wrong. While I had good intentions and probably helped some students, my lack of training and knowledge about good tutoring practices made me less effective as a tutor. There's only so far that a "can-do" attitude can get you, and I quickly learned that my intuition as a writer worked great for me but not for the writers I worked with.

As I tutored more (which often felt like fumbling in the dark for a light switch), I took it upon myself to try learning more grammar rules and just get better at my job. After I graduated, I got hired on as a part-time professional tutor, and then later interviewed for another part-time tutoring position at a community college, where I was also an alum. At this new institution, I was expected to participate in mandatory staff meetings and complete a training checklist, which included being observed during a session and working with a librarian to review research in the databases. I was excited by this, especially because I was more explicitly taught how to structure a session and set expectations for my role in a tutorial. Consequently, I felt more comfortable in my tutoring work.

However, I would continue to make mistakes as a tutor. At this community college, I worked with a student who was in an English 102 class. As a former English literature major, I was thrilled to work with her and talk about her project.

"So you're reading *The House on Mango Street*? I've never read it before. What did you think of the story?" I asked, twirling my pen excitedly.

"Um . . . it was okay, I guess. Now I need to write an argument about it," she said. She looked worried about the assignment and looked down at her prompt.

"Okay. Well, what do you think the story means? Why is it important? What do you think the author wanted to tell everyone?" I could feel myself getting more and more interested, leaning forward to show my enthusiasm about her project.

To my surprise, she leaned away from me with widening eyes: "I . . . I don't know."

Oh. Well, that's a little disappointing. Maybe she needs a little more prompting. I started asking her about metaphors and personification and noticed that instead of getting more enthusiastic about the project, she just looked more overwhelmed. I stopped.

"I don't understand what you're talking about. How do I make an argument about any of this?" Though she tried to disguise it, I could hear the catch in her voice that indicated she was getting overwhelmed to the point of tears.

Oh no. I paused and took a breath. Then I said, "I'm sorry. I got a little excited and got carried away." I paused again. "Let's back up and look at the prompt together . . ."

I had good intentions here, but looking back, I feel horrible about nearly making this student cry. I had never considered that too many questions could get frustrating, since I find questions super helpful in my own writing process. Once again, my lack of awareness and knowledge kept me from being an effective tutor. I learned a few things that day. One: once again, what works for me does not always work for other writers. Two: what works in one session does not always work in another session.

I have continued my training as a writing center tutor, and now I'm able to reflect on my experiences and recognize how helpful this training would have been from the start. My continued training, which included a class on writing centers and tutoring in graduate school, taught me the importance of valuing the voice of the writer whether we look at global or local concerns in their projects. I wish I had understood what it meant to give students agency over their own work from the beginning. In both of these stories that I've shared, I took these students' projects and made them into my own. Without training and understanding how to be a tutor, I didn't consider the writer's agency and ownership of their work. I know that there are other instances in which I copyedited papers to tell students exactly what to do. How many students did I unintentionally drive away from the writing center because of my ignorance? How much damage did I actually do? While training alone does not eliminate the potential for a poor interaction between tutor and student (as demonstrated by my overly enthusiastic approach to the literature paper), it certainly better prepares the tutor to support writers.

Lack of training also hurts tutors; I felt unequipped for my job for a long time. It took a while for me to finally feel like I was supporting students in the way that writing tutors should. When tutors don't understand what their role is, they are left to make something up based on what they know about themselves as individual writers. Unfortunately, without training, tutors' knowledge about the writing process is incomplete, and they will continue to fumble in the dark.

I know that providing training takes time, energy, expertise, and funding. Certainly, even as I advocate for ongoing tutor training as an important issue in writing center research and conversation, I also want to recognize the implications of the additional labor that this training requires. Yet, without such training, tutors go into sessions just as underprepared as their writers. Tutors must have training; without training, their sessions will continue to be ineffective, and tutors are placed in an unfair position of relying on their "good writer" reputations to support students.

The labor of training is worth it. If we market writing centers as effective resources for students, then the investment in the hired tutors should reflect this.