

Chapter 30. Tragedy in the Writing Center

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Emotional labor is perhaps the most difficult and most ignored side of directing a writing center. Our evaluations rarely consider the emotional labor involved in looking out for the well-being of our tutors and helping them find stability. There is no quantifying the time we spend consoling our tutors, reassuring them of their skills, and talking to them about work/school/sleep balance, even though we may spend more time working with them on these issues than in training them in specific tutoring strategies. Given the nature of our job, we tend to know our students better than the average professor does. And, more often than not, that's a real perk of the job. But this IS emotional labor that often goes unaccounted for and rarely gets discussed.

As most of you have witnessed, the writing center is a crucible for all kinds of social dynamics. The most common seems to be camaraderie and care for each other, year after year. There are the occasional disputes, the spats, the complaints about dirty dishes left by the coffeemaker, the inequities of who opens and closes the space, etc. But far more often the tutors stand up for each other, back each other up, lift each other up, tutor each other, cover shifts for one another, and just bond. It can be a difficult job, but I have seen that the tutors truly support one another.

So what do you do when one of them dies? We're so accustomed to seeing students graduate, flourish, go on to grad school, go on to careers, and leverage their talent to make a difference in the world. But no one is prepared when one passes away. Suicide complicates the matter, as we are all left wondering what we could have done or said differently.

Five years ago, my dear tutor of three years, William, took his life. He had some medical conditions—more serious than he let me know about—that had apparently severely limited his future options. He came to my colleague's class the day before, more ebullient than usual, so it didn't make sense.

I met this young man in his first semester of freshman composition. He loved reading, which was reflected in his writing. I was in my second year as the writing center director, and I noticed his talent in the first few weeks of the semester. I normally seek out students who have both writing talent and excellent social skills. William, however, was weird and didn't feel compelled to connect to others. This weirdness is not rare for most of us, as writing centers tend to attract budding heretics and iconoclasts. Perhaps those sensitive enough to talk meaningfully about the written word tend to be more sensitive overall. I don't know. William wore those Vibram shoes, which were in style a decade ago, though they

were made specifically for barefoot runners, with each toe showing. The mean girls in class mocked him, but I don't think he noticed. I certainly did. Pointing at his shoes, I asked William if he was a runner. And he responded, "Not at all—I just like how these look." He wrote daring essays. He read thick science fiction books before class started. And he seemed comfortable in his skin and in his weirdness.

So, I hired him to start tutoring his sophomore year. Training was a breeze for him, as he was sharp and got along wonderfully with all of the other tutors. He loved to laugh and he seemed to really love tutoring. I could see him growing as a tutor—asking his fellow tutors and me questions (a sign of growing confidence) and giving smart and abnormally thoughtful feedback to his tutees. He seemed to adjust to college life so well. The mean girls went away to other majors and parties, and he found a home both in the writing center and in the English department, where he would crack jokes and write wild and hilarious essays about living on Mars.

He didn't seem to stress out like many high-achieving students, but instead went about his way with a genuine smile and a sci-fi book. Others gravitated to him, reading his weirdness and confidence as audacity and authenticity. He always returned the warmth and kindness he received from others. He was a special person.

During one training session in the spring, I asked all the veteran tutors to write down advice to give to the newly hired tutors. I'll never forget William's. He wrote, "Don't let your self-worth be harmed by one bad tutorial." It jolted me, as it gave me the distinct impression that he had let a bad tutorial or two hurt his self-worth at some point. And in this time of heightened anxiety among students, it has since become the first piece of advice I tell new tutors.

When William completed suicide, I was at a conference in Germany. I was woken in the middle of the night by a cluster of texts from my tutors. The first one I read was "Oh god, Vincent's in another time zone and probably hasn't heard." A week after I returned, we opened the writing center to all of the tutors and William's friends. We shared stories about him, we read poems to help us deal with our grief, and we made it clear how much we meant to each other. I later spoke with his parents and learned of his medical ailments and his difficulty switching from one medicine to another. They assured me that William had only positive feelings about the writing center and found real meaning in the work we do. They were so kind and grateful that William had felt at home in our department and in the writing center that they left us money for an endowed scholarship that we award annually to brilliant students who don't walk the same path as everyone else.

I still have the notecard William wrote his advice on. We have a large framed picture of him up on our "wall of people who inspire us to write well" along with one of his writing center articles. Though his death was unrelated to his writing center work, these are both reminders to me and our current tutors that camaraderie is more important than tutoring perfectly. Support is more important than knowing all the comma rules and conventions. Kindness and humanity are more

important than clear and concise topic sentences. The tutors tend to put enough pressure on themselves to tutor well that I don't need to add any more. What they really need is support and encouragement, even if they seem quite confident. Job ads for writing center directors do not ask for someone who can look out for the emotional well-being of our tutors, yet it's perhaps, in key ways, the most important part of our work. Our bosses do not assess emotional well-being, even though a healthy dynamic in the writing center is so dependent on it. Indeed, we need to train these tutors to be able to work well with their peers, to know where to find answers regarding mechanics and citations, to be able to identify what to help the tutees with first, to keep careful and accurate records. But first and foremost, we need to remember that these tutors tend to be high-achieving and sensitive people and to never lose sight of the sense of humanity and grace that should be at the core of every writing center culture. And perhaps we need to do better communicating to our colleagues and deans the unacknowledged labor we willingly perform for our tutors.