

Tutor's Column: "Tutoring a Friend"

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A defining feature of our writing center is the fact that we only tutor other undergraduates. Because we work with our peers, we have an exceptional opportunity to foster, if not a tight-knit community, then an intellectual space where we can safely challenge one another, ask questions, and take risks. As we contemplate how we'd like this community to look—after all it's up to us to form it—this brings us to an important distinction: there is a difference between being *friendly* towards someone and being *friends* with someone.

Assessing a collection of comments from peer tutors at University of California, Berkley's writing center, Thom Hawkins writes, "Tasks are accomplished because there is a mutual effort between friends, a situation of closeness, not distance, that fosters a sense of community" (66). Upon reading this, I find myself asking what Hawkins means by "a mutual effort between friends." Perhaps it is different for Hawkins, but in my experience it is rare to see tutors helping friends in the writing center. In the words of one of Hawkins' anonymous tutors, "If someone keeps after you enough, maybe, just maybe, a trusting relationship will emerge" (66). If this tutor's comment is any indication, closeness is as rare as it is possible.

In my experience, it has never been an issue that tutors need to be friendlier with their students. If anything, we can often stand to be a little less friendly, as when a student tries to get you to do his work for him, or when blunt honesty about an essay's deficiencies will do a student more good than the usual dose of cheerleading. Perhaps all Hawkins means to say is that tutors should strive to foster an environment that maximizes the potential for close relationships to eventually bloom, at which point tutoring will be most effective. If this is Hawkins' point, then I most certainly agree. Nevertheless, I lack answers for how

to arrive at this level of friendship with new acquaintances. I'd like to focus instead on how to treat students who are already our friends.

A good friend recently sought my help in the writing center, surprising me with her visit. I had never imagined a close friend coming to my office hours, so I was forced to adapt on the fly. On the one hand, I wondered if I'd been too directive in my approach. I knew that my friend would report her grade to me, and perhaps this had caused me to instruct her rather than allow her to come to her own conclusions. On the other hand, maybe I had overlooked her paper's most significant faults. I know I couldn't stand to insult her intelligence, and though I wasn't conscious of it at the time, maybe I'd walked on eggshells in a way I wouldn't with another student. It was difficult, then, to draw any tangible conclusions.

Still, I found our familiarity helped our ability to communicate. When students normally agree with me, I might struggle to discern whether they're just nodding their heads. Even when I check for understanding, they might be too shy to admit they're confused. With my friend, on the other hand, because I was familiar with her body language and because she felt comfortable enough to be vocal, I had a better sense of whether I was confusing her and could adjust my strategy accordingly. In addition, I often feel awkward during moments of silence. As tutees twiddle their thumbs, I start to feel the time pressure, and I may misinterpret their arguments or jump to hasty conclusions about how best to revise. Fortunately, with my friend I felt no such tension; I knew I could take my time thinking and responding. On the whole, I was at ease with my friend. I was able to relax.

When I asked my fellow tutors what they thought, I was surprised to find that there were two polarizing schools of thought. First there were the *helpers*, tutors who delight at the chance to tutor a friend and who welcome the opportunity to use a more directive approach. As one tutor said, failing to acknowledge friendship in a session could undermine the relationship. Another tutor called friends a "godsend" in the writing center. No time or energy is wasted on developing a tactic because it can be found from within the friendship itself. If advice needs to be nuanced, phrasing it for a friend can be much simpler because effective methods of communication have likely been previously established.

To my surprise, however, there was a significant constituency of *avoiders*, tutors who would prefer to leave friendship outside of the writing center. They point out that the personal nature of the tutor/tutee relationship can complicate the chance for honest discourse. It can be difficult, maybe even impossible to tell friends that their writing is flawed, and the added element of likely finding out what grade they get on their papers inevitably influences the process. Another strange side effect, one tutor identified, we might call the “How do I look?” problem. If a friend comes into the writing center hours before his paper is due, there may not be enough time to offer adequate help. It’s hard enough to tell someone his shirt and pants don’t match as he walks out the door. Now try telling a friend that his paper isn’t ready to hand in.

After I talked with these tutors, it seems the reason we don’t often see friends in the writing center might be that we give them special treatment. If a friend thinks to ask, many tutors are glad to help—outside of the writing center, that is. Even though I had a positive experience tutoring my friend, she admitted that the only reason she came for help was that her professor had all but required it. As tutors, perhaps the fault is our own. Perhaps too many of us are afraid of patronizing our friends by fitting them in with our other appointments. Perhaps we want to edit our friends’ papers because it’s efficient. But at what expense? It might seem awkward to invite friends to the writing center, but isn’t this preferable to editing their papers elsewhere?

When I set out to write about this topic, I thought I might be able to draw some conclusions about the best approach to tutoring a friend. I’ve realized, however, that just as every tutoring session is different, so is every friendship. Ultimately, what makes our writing center a unique site on campus is the fact that it is free of hierarchy. Friends or not, students are able to work together with nothing to lose. If the session is not productive, no one gets a bad grade, and more often than not we learn by failing anyhow.

Trent Mikesell, a tutor at Brigham Young University, proposes that “we must approach [all] tutees as friends,” but I think this is the wrong conclusion to draw (14). Once again it is important that we not gloss over the friends/friendly distinction. When I say that we hardly need to work on being friendlier with the tutees we don’t know, I mean to say that good tutoring is pred-

icated on honest discourse. It's not important how friendly we are but rather how honest we are. The advantage of being a peer is the chance to treat tutees as equals, and this is not the same thing as treating everyone as a friend. It is impossible to share the type of closeness with non-friends as with friends, and there is no sense in pretending otherwise.

By the same virtue, when it does come to tutoring our friends in the writing center, perhaps it's not how we do it that matters but that we do it. If there's one thing we can do as a community, it's to convince the avoiders among us to welcome their friends to the writing center. With my friend I felt less constrained than usual, and I think this only facilitated open discourse, collaboration, and experimentation, the processes that I want to engender when I tutor. While I firmly believe that friendships worth maintaining will endure a dose of honesty, ultimately I can never devise a formula that every tutor can apply to every session with a friend. What I do know is that if we don't do more to convince our friends to come to the writing center, we'll only be letting them down. That is, I say we begin to treat all students as our peers—even our friends.



Hawkins, Thom. "Intimacy and Audience: The Relationship between Revision and the Social Dimension of Peer Tutoring." *College English* 42.1 (1980): 64-68. Print.

Mikesell, Trent. "Mi Amigo, Mein Freund, My Friend: Understanding the Language of Friendship in Tutoring." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 31.5 (2007): 14-15. Print.