

Tutors' Column: "Will You Trust Me"

Qian Wang

Virginia Tech University
Blacksburg, Virginia



On a Friday morning at Virginia Tech's Writing Center, I am sitting at a table near the front, anxiously waiting for my client. Although most tutors are probably anxious for their first tutoring session and plagued with feelings of self-doubt, I have even more anxiety than most. I imagine the worst—my client will take one look at me and demand a tutor who can help him more than I can. Because, like the client who has been assigned to me, I am Chinese.

I spent my entire life in China until two years ago when I came to the United States for college. I have always loved writing in English as a second language. In high school, I was the president of the English writing club. After visiting the Virginia Tech Writing Center a few times, I thought about becoming a writing tutor. However, as a foreign student who is pursuing an engineering degree, I was worried that I would not be good enough at writing. When I discovered how much I loved my First Year Writing courses and how well I did in them, I gained the confidence to apply to the writing center tutor training course. Even after I was accepted into the course I still felt unsure, so I met up with the instructor, and she encouraged me to stay in the course. She explained that we would work together to find suitable clients for me. One of the assignments of the class is to meet weekly with a writing partner who is a first-year international student and assist them with writing, in addition to holding open hours in the Writing Center. I was assigned to two Chinese writing partners and no "open hours," for my tutoring experience.

I had plenty of assumptions about my writing partners. I was aware that we all came from China. Besides the fact that Chinese people tend not to value opinions of their peers as much as elders', I was also worried that my partners would not be happy with having a Chinese writing tutor. Naturally, Chinese students may trust Americans for their linguistic intuition, instead of any other

person whose first language is not English. To an ESL student, any American person who has been speaking English for their entire life is a living dictionary. In other words, I was extremely uncertain if my writing partners would trust me.

In the beginning of the semester, my experiences with my two writing partners were very different. My first meeting was with a student named Zan. He did not bring any written pieces to work on, so we talked in English to get to know each other. He was very approachable. After meeting with him for a few times, I found out that he would rather engage in small talk than work on his writing. I didn't worry about it. I figured that he just didn't have any writing to do yet, and we enjoyed talking in English during our weekly meetings.

My other writing partner, Xiruan, could not have been more different. From the beginning, it was obvious that Xiruan seldom trusted me. During our meetings, especially when I brought up some possible suggestions to improve his writing, he would murmur phrases like, "Are you sure?" or bluntly tell me, "I don't think you are right." Furthermore, he even canceled a couple meetings in a row. This confirmed my suspicions that Xiruan did not think that I could really help him. But my most revealing session about this issue ended up being with Zan, not Xiruan.

Finally, a few weeks into the semester, Zan brought a paper, in which he argued that in the future laptops will not be replaced by tablets. As he was reading his paper to me, I realized that I could not understand how he was distinguishing between laptops and tablets in some sections. After he explained to me what he was trying to say, I realized that although I knew his points were not clear, I could not suggest any English words to help him define his perspective. My lack of knowledge in this field, but most of all my anxiety about being Chinese, was paralyzing me. I sat, mute.

My heart felt discouraged, but also somewhat delighted. I felt affirmed in my role as a tutor because I was able to spot the problems in his writing, but I was regretful that I could not offer suggestions to help him fix them. I wanted to simply skip the issue and pretend it was not there, but I could not. My job was to help Zan with his writing, instead of ignoring the imperfections because of my limited knowledge of English. Besides, Zan was waiting for me to give him an answer.

I took a deep breath and finally told Zan that I truly did not have any suggestions for him. He looked very surprised and confused, as if I should know everything. Although he seemed polite and

told me it was fine, I saw the slight disappointment in his eyes. I started to explain that although I was his tutor, I was not teaching him, but learning with him. I then suggested we look up information needed for his paper on the internet, so that we could try to fix the problem. He then looked very excited to work on the paper. We continued along during the session, trying to sort out what needed to be revised. It felt like a joint effort, and our sessions continued this way during the semester.

After this session, I finally gained the confidence to tell Xiruan the same thing I had told Zan-- that I was learning with him. Then, I shared my interest of discovering and learning with him regarding his writing. Xiruan's attitude started changing gradually. He became more and more engaged during our sessions, often asking about specific parts of his writing where he was unsure. Instead of constantly canceling meetings with me, he would ask to meet me more than once in a week. Every time he was not sure about one of my suggestions or concerns, we would look for a reliable answer on the internet together.

At the end of the semester, I was finally brave enough to ask my clients how they felt about working with me. Zan told me that he enjoyed working with both American and Chinese tutors, but because I am Chinese, I made him feel more comfortable. He said, "Even though we didn't talk in Chinese very much, I knew I could talk in Chinese ... Sometimes when you communicate with Americans, you say a lot, but they don't get it. They misunderstand and can't help you." When I talked to Xiruan, what he said was similar to Zan's comments: "I think you are great. I think you didn't realize that you can offer a lot to me. It was much easier to explain things to you than to native speakers. I admit that I did not think you have enough English knowledge at first, but you were so genuine and willing to learn."

What my clients said helped me see my role as a writing center tutor from a different perspective. Several times at the beginning of the semester, I was worried because I am not an American tutor. The truth is, when it comes to English, I will never be a "living dictionary." No matter how hard I try to sound like a native speaker, I will always carry an accent, just like Zan and Xiruan do. No matter how long I write and read in English, I will always have other things to learn. But if I focus on trying to be an "American tutor," the special traits I have will fade away. I would not be able to relate to my clients as closely and honestly.

The author Julia Cameron once quoted Sigmund Freud, "Out of

your vulnerabilities will come your strength” (57). Although it is understandable for foreign students not to trust a peer tutor from their country, my clients made me realize I had a perspective which allowed me to relate to them as an English language learner. This trust could only develop when I allowed myself to show my weakness. There are many ways for tutors to build trust with their clients. Most of all, tutors need to show interest, be open, carry a humble attitude, and always continue to feed themselves with knowledge. There is no need to feel less qualified when you are being honest. Whether you are an American tutor or international one, knowing the worth of oneself is essential, and being humble and truthful is the key to earning the client’s trust.



WORK CITED

Cameron, Julia. *Walking in This World: The Practical Art of Creativity*. J.P. Tarcher/ Putnam, 2002.