

Tutors' Column: Validation

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“Holy hell,” I whispered as tears filled my eyes. The words of the personal essay, sitting between the author and me, painted a painful experience of a teenage girl loving a drug addict. I couldn’t keep my voice from quivering as I read about the suicide of the young author’s first love and first experience with death. When I finished,

I didn’t know what to say. “Wow. You have a powerful story.” I paused, staring at the essay on the table, moved by the intimate emotions fixed on the pages, “I give you major props; that is not something easy to write about. I can’t fathom.” I paused again. She smiled nervously, playing with the strings on her sweater. She wasn’t planning on writing this story at first. It just came out, flowing from page to page until it was finished. She said she just couldn’t stop writing. It needed to come out; she needed to tell it.

The young woman’s essay exceeded the required number of pages and contained grammar mistakes, mediocre diction, and far from perfect formatting; however, the content of the writing was alluring. In my opinion, content is more important than getting the technical stuff right; writing is more than just getting a grade. As writing tutors, we can encourage students to explore their experiences on paper as a way of self-discovery and healing.

When I expressed to the writer that the hardest things are often the most important ones to write about, she absolutely agreed. She told me how she simply could never talk to anybody about her experience. Despite the essay being a required assignment, the student wrote it for herself. Writing her story meant seeing her altered Prince Charming for the first time from beginning to end without people judging her for loving him. She discovered that no matter what hell he had put her through, she would

always love him. Accepting these discovered feelings helped ease the agony she felt. I often tell my writers that when you don't think anyone will listen, your pen and paper always will. Even if you crumple up the paper or burn it afterwards so you never have to look at it again—it is freeing to get the thoughts out of your head, to explore them on paper, or to symbolically rid yourself of them. For writing tutors, it is vital that we teach students the power of writing for oneself.

Louise DeSalvo teaches in her book *Writing as a Way of Healing* about the therapeutic methods of writing to clinically improve the writer's health. In order to do this, DeSalvo explains that the writer must describe in detail the traumatic or distressing events and connect present and past feelings with the details of what happened. It's not therapeutic writing if writers only state their emotions or experiences alone on the page (DeSalvo 25). Instead, writers must write to explore their feelings and examine why they are feeling a certain way. By representing themselves and their experiences on the pages, they connect these feelings with the plagues of their life tragedies. Only with critical thinking can writing become a true act of healing. As tutors, we can bring these elements into the tutoring session as techniques for expressive writing with magnificent depth of content. Writing in such a way helps the writer psychologically, and it helps them write a powerful essay.

It is vital that tutors first react appropriately to the context of the student's paper in these types of situations before tutors approach writing techniques. Only then, after the story itself has been addressed, can tutors move to the fundamentals of writing. It can be stressful for some students to share their deepest darkest secrets with a complete stranger. Sometimes when young authors place their essay in the tutors' hands, they are metaphorically placing themselves in the tutors' hands. Thus, many of these young authors may need validation from their reader.

Ben Rafoth's *A Tutor's Guide* tells us that in these types of emotionally charged tutoring sessions "it is best to acknowledge rather than ignore the burden of the writer's task. The writer needs to hear it. Human beings need to hear that they are being listened to and understood; taking a few minutes to empathize will establish a degree of trust" (36). Addressing ways to improve their writing without validating the experience may shut writers down by making them feel rejected.

After validating the writer's life experience, recognizing the process it took the writer to write it, and sharing enthusiasm for the therapeutic healing power of writing about traumatic events, a tutor must maintain the purpose and focus of the writing center session. This can be accomplished by giving the writer reassurance that their emotions are valid while asking questions that focus their attention on the writing and on what they ultimately want to achieve with the essay. Imagine a situation where the writer is expressing her experience being molested as a child by her much older cousin, but the paper is lacking purpose; it is purely raw, painful emotion. The tutor can recognize the student's efforts by saying: "Wow... I want to congratulate you on being able to put this on paper. Many people go their entire lives bottling up and suppressing emotional trauma, when the best thing is often to let it out. Writing can be very therapeutic" (Rafoth 36). Then, the tutor can refocus the task by framing a thought provoking, reinforcing question such as, "What do you want to share with your story? Do you want to help others who have been in similar situations? Do you want to create awareness and warn others that this kind of stuff really does happen? If you could tell someone something through your experience, what would it be?" Formulate the questions in a helpful, encouraging manner. Saying something invalidating such as, "So what's the point you're trying to make?" would definitely make the writer shut down and discourage their sharing. Be conscious of the writer's emotions because it is our job as writing tutors to create a respectful and safe environment for our peers to learn and grow as writers.

If these heartening tactics fail and the author is unable to concentrate or take the necessary step back to approach the paper from an appropriate perspective, then the writer may not be ready to address the experience. In such cases, validate the student for writing the experience and express the healing process of connecting past and present emotions to tragic events, but suggest that the writer take time to heal and gently encourage another approach for the graded assignment. As tutors, we could offer alternatives by brainstorming different ideas instead of trying to tackle something of that grand scope without appropriate clinical experience.

In such cases where clinical expertise may be needed, as tutors, we can gently encourage students to seek professional guidance. We should recommend the school's counseling center and

provide the necessary contact information. Most universities provide free clinical psychological services for their students. Tutors may also seek advice from a supervisor or writing center director. The author’s psychological state should not be ignored.

Sometimes it’s not the author who is unable to step back from the situation and look at the experience from a healthy distance. Occasionally the story is too close to the tutor’s own emotions so that he/she is unable to tutor the session. Perhaps the essay is portraying the student’s exhausting experience growing up with a drug-abusing brother, while the tutor’s own brother recently passed away from an overdose. In situations like these, it really is okay to ask for a substitute tutor to take over the session. Both lives involved “include much more than the writing assignment at hand, and often other issues and concerns interfere with getting the assignment done” (Ryan 24). It is important to acknowledge these types of situations in writing center meetings so that tutors can plan how to handle emotionally charged sessions (Rafoth 39). Acknowledging and planning for such emotional incidents and essays can make all the difference for both individuals involved in the session. We must be honest with our emotions, because both the tutor and the writer’s life experiences deserve validation.

Give students validation for their hard times, for writing about them, and for exploring themselves and their emotions on the pages of an assignment. Discuss possible emotionally charged situations in writing center meetings. Be conscious of the student’s emotions and your own emotions as the tutor. Allow for therapeutic writing while maintaining focus on writing skills. Words are powerful healing tools, so encourage them to be used as such by creating a safe environment in the tutoring session by validating the writer’s experience first.



WORKS CITED

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