

Tutors' Column: "'Enough to Write the Papers': Reading and Reflection in the Writing Tutorial"

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It is early in the spring semester at my large public institution when a visibly stressed student enters the writing center to talk about a one-page summary/response paper that is covered in red markings. I put my hand over the paper in front of us to shift his focus and ask him some general questions about himself and his interests as a student. Before getting back to the paper, we look through the syllabus, and I note the course description emphasizes critical thinking, writing, and reading.

"What's the reading like for this course?" I ask. "Dave" explains that he tries his best—often reading during his short work breaks—but it takes him a very long time to complete the readings. He is pretty sure he comprehends the readings, but he is unsure about how much he is retaining. "Enough to write the papers," he says nonchalantly with a thick New England accent.

By "papers" he means the short, red-splattered documents he has brought to our tutorial session today. Analyzing his response, I get the sense that this session is not about the writing in front of us. It is about the reading and thinking Dave needs to attend to before typing his papers. Because I am also observing composition courses as part of my graduate teacher training, I'm noticing that students often aren't spending enough time critically reading, but this is the first time I've meaningfully discussed reading in a tutoring session. I suggest some strategies: turning off his phone, timing his reading, and annotating. We run out of time in our session, and I try not to feel guilty about not addressing the writing he brought with him. I help him make an appointment to see me the following week at the same time.

When Dave sits down with me again, he starts our session by telling me he used the suggested reading strategies and they have worked for him. He pulls out a short summary of a reading he wrote before our first session. It has a lot of red on it. I look

over the comments, one of which reads: “I know you’re seeing a tutor this semester, but I’m not sure tutoring will give you the amount of writing help you need to complete this course.” Dave seems unfazed by this comment, so I don’t mention it to him, but it bothers me. Looking at this example of Dave’s writing, maybe I would have thought the same, but I know that his flawed writing is a direct result of his reading. He pulls up the response he has written for this week, and it is much more thorough. Although he has multiple issues, he is already making progress. I see that he is articulating the larger points of the article and copying his own reading notes into his summary. His writing comes across as choppy, but Dave is beginning to engage with the genre more appropriately.

With Dave’s experience, there was an opportunity for the professor to see an example of his writing early in the semester; however, it is not uncommon for some professors to go weeks without getting a writing sample. As tutors, we see certain issues right away, and thus we become triangulated with the student and instructor and have to negotiate these types of teaching moments in a way we hope is not contradictory to the pedagogy of the course. As tutors, we blur the lines of teacher/peer/student, but we always want to have the professors’ goals in mind. In this case, Dave needed to read an article, offer a summary, and write a response in order to showcase his critical thinking skills. While he wanted to zoom through all of this at once, as his tutor I knew we needed to slow down and take it step by step.

When I ask Dave about his reading habits for a Self-Inventory—a chart that we create together to think about the type of work he has to do and how to best manage it all—he reports that it takes him a long time to read course texts. He works forty hours a week at a big department store and reads on his breaks or before bed. Simply creating this inventory prompts Dave to realize there are certain time management strategies that can help when it comes to his reading comprehension. Finding a quiet, comfortable space is an idea he knows will help. While a seemingly small realization, this type of self-reflection is a major breakthrough for Dave during our *writing* session.

When I see Dave the following week, he is excited to show me that he has indeed improved on his writing—fewer red marks! He wants to work on his next response, but he has to finish the reading first. I suggest he finish it during our time together. I’m pleased to see him reading with his pen in hand, underlining

and making small marginal notes. After he finishes, Dave begins writing his response. I feel guilty again that I am not “tutoring” him but just sitting next to him trying not to be awkward. When he finishes, I am genuinely proud of the way he has revised his notes into more formal sentences. Is Dave’s progress due to his interactions with his fabulous writing tutor, or is something else going on here? Something, perhaps, I could bring forward to other sessions?

In her article “Reading Across the Curriculum as the Key to Student Success” Alice Horning writes, “Developing students’ writing skills requires developing their reading skills. If they haven’t read and worked with nonfiction prose models in the genres of their major discipline, it will be much harder for them to produce such prose.” Dave’s instructor, presumably someone with much experience in the discourse community of the class’s discipline, was assessing Dave on the form and content of his summaries, both of which were somewhat new to him. It seems that when exposed to this discourse community through close reading, Dave was able to emulate the prose in a way that made his writing clearer and fit this instructor’s expectations more closely. Although I felt uncomfortable being silent during our tutoring session, I was facilitating a *mindful* reading practice. Ellen C. Carillo describes mindfulness in an academic reading context as “a particular stance on the part of the reader, one that is characterized by intentional awareness of and attention to the present moment, its context, and one’s perspective” (11). With Dave’s schedule and previous reading habits, it would have been very difficult for him to experience such mindfulness, but with proper coaching he was able to make some good strides in our tutoring session.

This is not to say that teaching students to be mindful readers will automatically make them better thinkers and writers. Yes—Dave needed help with reading before writing, but the difficulty of the course material seemingly hindered his ability to respond. As Mariolina Salvatori and Patricia Donahue explain, reading should be thought of as a “transaction between *reader* and *text*, where both play a role in the construction of meaning” (6). Difficult texts come across as a type of authoritative discourse that can stifle the “transaction”: students sometimes feel silenced by words and ideas that are not easy to understand, no matter how mindful they are in those moments. Because we are not content tutors, sometimes the best way to help the student is to talk about asking the instructor for help—whether that’s crafting an email together or even roleplaying what to do during office hours.

Nowadays in my primary role as a writing instructor, I find myself reflecting on students like Dave and how much writing conferences and tutorials can benefit when we make it a point to ask about reading as well. Students often come in focused on the product at hand—particularly if there are grade concerns—and, because there is writing in front of us, we naturally focus on improving it. We know that reading and writing are connected, but how often do we step back and ask students to reflect on their reading practices in the writing tutorial? Whether a peer tutor or full professor, now more than ever with the instant gratification of our digital lives, we need to teach students to slow down as we emphasize the relationships between both reading and writing and reading and revising, as a type of mindful conversation. By encouraging the dialogic nature of mindful reading, I have found that students like Dave can become better prepared for discovering and making meaning through their writing.



WORKS CITED

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