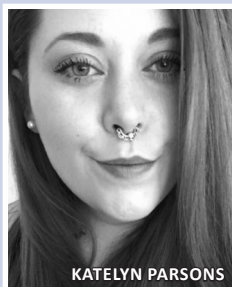


Tutors' Column: "Just Say 'No': Setting Emotional Boundaries in the Writing Center is a Practice in Self-Care"

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Just like the act of writing itself, you need to do *the thing* in order to *get it*; you need to work in a writing center in order to understand it. Sometimes you see your peers cry during their sessions because they have no idea how to start writing. There's no emotional distance; this is real life. As a tutor, you are granted the honor of getting to know writers through their sorrow, through their happiness, and most importantly through their writing. Writing itself is so inextricably personal—style, voice, rhetorical choices—all indicators of who you are. Some of the writers you help will tell you they aren't writers, that they can't write. As a tutor, you spend time assuring your peers that they *are* and that they *can*.

Before you start working in a writing center, they tell you to read *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring* (Gillespie and Lerner), or some other tutoring guide, or some set of tutoring articles. You learn the importance of being sensitive and flexible to the needs of writers and the dangers of "appropriating" and "reformulating" their work. You may read Isabelle Thompson's article "Scaffolding in the Writing Center" and learn that your role as a tutor is to make sure you're never working harder during the session than the writer.

Yet tutors work just as hard as most writers, but in a different sort of way. Elizabeth Boquet writes in *Noise from the Writing Center*:

What...if we were to...admit that the writing center is indeed a place where actual labor (gasp!) takes place, look our colleagues in the eyes and say, yes, we work with our hands. We take texts and we turn them around and over and upside down; we cut them into their bits and pieces; we tug at them, tutor to student, student to tutor, back and forth, to and fro.... (18)

Writing tutors work hard; tutors feel invested in their work and this can be emotionally and mentally laborious. In the paragraphs that follow, I will connect my own experience as a writing tutor to the guilt I have experienced in my work and the importance of self-care

in these instances.

Many writers are unable to remove their feelings from the act of writing itself, which can carry over to tutoring sessions. Writers often tell tutors that they “feel” better at the end of their sessions. Therefore, some tutors use this verbiage to measure the success of the session and, inherently, how guilty they should feel. Some tutors experience guilt if they think they failed to make writers feel better. In what situations do tutors feel the most guilty? Are these feelings of guilt common? Jennifer Nicklay insists that writing tutors feel more guilt when they employ directive tutoring styles rather than minimalist ones. Nicklay references Susan Blau and John Hall’s findings that “consultants in their center felt guilty for stepping outside the ‘rules’” (16). This guilt stems from the tutors’ ideas about what type of work they should be doing based on writing center orthodoxy (“rules”). I agree with Nicklay, but I also feel guilty when writers insist that I be overly-directive and I refuse.

I’ve tutored writing for three years, and certain writers have come to know, and appreciate, my personality and style. Writers often ask me to come in early, stay later than I’m scheduled, or be available to work with them over the weekend, and, because I feel guilty, sometimes I say yes. I say yes because I care about my peers and want them to succeed. For instance, I say yes when employing directive tutoring styles over minimalist ones during sessions. Nicklay’s “inquiry into minimalism and directivity...revealed the most acute feelings of guilt” (21). While directivity within sessions can be necessary and helpful, through my experience as a tutor I have experienced guilt over employing this pedagogical choice.

One writer I worked with consistently (several hours a week over a couple years’ time) taught me the importance of setting boundaries. It was typical for him to rush into the writing center without a scheduled appointment while holding an assignment in his hand that was due in a couple hours and was barely started. Sometimes, we would work together for two hours straight, and I would warn him that we only had five more minutes left of the session because I needed to leave for class. He would often beg me to stay later to help him more. I reminded him that other tutors were available to assist him, but he refused to work with anyone else. Because he always desired more help from me than I was literally able to provide, I felt like I had failed him, and the guilt negatively impacted my mental state. I would ask myself: *Were the two hours we just spent working together not helpful? Where did I go wrong?* Sometimes our sessions were challenging in other ways, particularly when he would expect me to tell him exactly what to

write. Often, the two of us would sit in silence and, in that silence, I forced him to plunge into the messy process of writing, revising, rewriting. Nothing frustrated him more than being forced to take the time to write.

My inability to say no does not exist solely in the realm of the writing center; it's pervasive across many facets of my life. I mention this because it isn't the work of the writing center, or even the policies in place at the writing center, that make me feel incapable of saying no. As a writing tutor, I want to help people become better writers, which drives me each session. Together, my passion for writing and the empathy I feel for others make me a helpful and effective tutor. Yet, taken to the extreme, this passion can be a tutor's undoing.

In "Tutoring a Friend," Adam Greenberg writes, "[i]f anything, we can 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" (27). Greenberg discusses the emotional component of writing center work that can make it hard for tutors to say no even though there are times when saying no is best for both the writer and the tutor. The most frustrating sessions I have participated in are those where writers were "forced" to seek help at the writing center by their professors. The student I discussed earlier began visiting the writing center because of his professor's insistence. It is this student's professor who is saying "no" here; when the professor says no (by refusing to help the student), the tutor may fail to say no and overhelp. Likewise, the writer may fail to say no and, instead, come to the writing center angry and frustrated.

According to Peter Bregman's article, "Nine Practices to Help You Say No," saying no is an essential part of setting and preserving boundaries. Bregman argues that people who ask you for anything extra most likely believe that you're the most capable to complete additional tasks, or, if you have a history of saying "yes," that you'll say yes again. Bregman suggests that it's important to "be appreciative" and remember that you're not rejecting the person making the request but rejecting the request itself. However, Bregman warns that saying "yes" all the time can easily lead to burnout.

So, I am here to tell you: tutors, it's OK to say no. In itself, saying no is a practice in self-care. Elizabeth Boquet insists that "[t]utors are placed, on a daily basis, in impossible positions... that im/possibility is the challenge, is the passion" (20). Tutors slip into and out of many different roles: tutor, friend, classmate, confidant. Tutors, it's OK to be flexible by using a more directive tutoring style over a

minimalist one. Choosing between a minimalist tutoring style or a directive one should depend on the writer's needs and not what writing center orthodoxy dictates is "right" (Nicklay). However, it's also important to refuse to be directive if you believe the writer is potentially taking advantage of your support. It's important to set tutor-writer boundaries in writing center sessions as well as beyond the walls of the writing center. It's equally important to set emotional boundaries; setting emotional boundaries is a practice in self-care.



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