

Tutors' Column: "Forms of Magic: Navigating Chaos as a Tutor in Training"

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Throughout my time as a tutor in training, I have been exposed to many methods, techniques, and heuristics for working with students. From directive and non-directive approaches, to scaffolding, to nutshelling, the literature has a wealth of tips and tricks for the one-to-one conference. However, tutors are not always told exactly how to decide which techniques are most appropriate for any particular student or situation.

When I first arrived in the writing center, I felt that the other tutors were practicing forms of magic. They all seemed confident about how to approach each session, as if the connection between theory and practice were self-evident. As I worked with more students and moved through the college's tutor-training program, I gained some of that confidence but then quickly lost it when I began an independent study focused on writing tutoring. The writing center literature presented me with exponentially more approaches than I had already studied and left me, once more, deeply insecure about the choices I was making. Faced with such a wide variety of possible methods, I felt like a brand-new tutor again, questioning whether there might have been a better approach for a given session or student. As a result, when a student, who I will call Jenny, brought in a paper one afternoon with extensive corrections and a request from her professor to go over them with me, I saw numerous possibilities but did not trust myself to choose one.

The particular session I am referring to was not scheduled through the writing center. I was the designated tutor for an introductory writing course, and Jenny was one of the students I met with weekly throughout the term. Introductory Writing is a required, "remedial" course for incoming freshmen with "weak" writing skills. This course description introduced a slightly punitive undertone, one which I was constantly trying to combat in my interactions with students. I tried to give Jenny as much agency in our sessions as possible, as I do in my normal role as a tutor; however, I also

felt some responsibility toward the professor and his agenda for the class. Just as the course was mandatory, so were the sessions themselves; each student was required to meet weekly with either the professor or me. This method further reduced the students' agency, which made me, as a tutor, feel even more uncomfortable. Despite the unusual conditions, I had worked hard throughout the term to develop the same atmosphere that I strive for in my regular writing center sessions, and felt I had succeeded to a degree. Shifting the agency to Jenny as much as I could had helped me to keep our sessions as pleasant and productive as possible.

On this particular afternoon, when Jenny arrived for our weekly conference and produced a paper covered with suggested revisions, I was deeply conflicted. She seemed unhappy about the corrections and did not want to go over them but also needed my help to interpret comments and make suggested changes. By accepting the professor's request, I risked reinforcing the punitive, "fix-it" undertone that I had worked so hard to dispel. I would have much preferred to focus on the content instead, reminding Jenny of her own agency in the writing process, and then use that motivation to tackle the grammar, but we did not have time. Caught between the professor's request, Jenny's reluctant needs, and my own high hopes, I could not figure out how to approach the session. I sat at the table, trying to chat with Jenny while masking my frustration and weighing my options. Finally, frustrated and overwhelmed, I made a decision. With a small sigh of resignation, I put my head down and slogged through the laundry list of corrections, allowing the professor's comments to control the agenda.

After the session ended, I was frustrated—with the professor for limiting my options and with myself for not handling the situation differently. I had spent weeks immersed in writing tutor literature, being told that we are "not the writer's coauthor" (McAndrew and Reigstad 19) and "it is not [the tutor's] responsibility to correct the paper line by line" (Fischer and Murray as qtd. in Harris 30). Based on these readings, I was convinced I had made the wrong decision. There had to be a method that could have helped me better navigate the conference, but it was not clear to me what that method was.

Returning to my independent study, I read literature, reached out to writing center professionals, and talked with my fellow tutors, hoping to uncover the elusive method that I had been missing in my conference with Jenny. However, my research and reflection slowly revealed that there was no "right" answer that applied directly to my particular situation. My struggle had not been the result of inadequate training, but rather the product of a particularly

complex session. I realized that none of my previous meetings had been so fraught with power dynamics and conflicting agendas; consequently, I had never had to make difficult decisions about how to guide a given conference. My previous confidence as a tutor had been established in relatively straight-forward conditions, whereas the meeting with Jenny directly challenged my ability to balance the conflicting priorities that the student, professor, and I brought to the conference.

After searching desperately for one “correct” approach, I have now realized that success in complex sessions is not about knowing a technique; it is about trusting my instincts. Despite all the resources I have encountered during my training as a writing tutor, the only tools I use in every single session are the instincts I have honed through my training. No piece of literature, no specific technique or approach applies exactly to the session I am in. Every meeting presents unique variables and challenges. Even now, after my independent study—which equipped me with many specific, practical skills—I still find myself improvising, adapting to new situations using a combination of techniques, experience, and experimentation. My success depends on my ability to not just tolerate but embrace the “chaos of tutoring writing” (McAndrew and Reigstad 27). But to realize this, I had to let go of the notion that there was a right and a wrong approach and trust myself to instinctively guide each session.

The perfect solution is a myth, and the tutor’s instincts are essential. That simple concept allowed me to stop judging my choices in the meeting with Jenny and review the whole experience. It was clear just how detrimental my rigid view had been; as soon as I had decided that my training was inadequate and my subsequent decisions had been wrong, I then assumed the whole session was a loss. But looking back on it, I realized I had actually made a reasonable decision given the difficulties I was facing. While we focused on the professor’s comments—which deeply contradicted my tutoring sensibilities—going through them together, I had done my best to explain to Jenny the reasoning behind the comments, demystifying them for her and helping her see them in the larger context of writing. In doing so, I had tried to show my recognition of and respect for her as a fellow writer.

My struggle to find a middle ground—one that respected the professor’s request and served Jenny’s needs while offering her agency and authority—had paid off in the final minutes of the session. As we were wrapping up, Jenny paused for a moment and asked me, “What is the first thing you think about when you start writing?” Questions like these—which show a genuine interest

in the writer and the writing process—are my favorite, and what followed was an inspiring and amiable conversation about the impetus of writing. Despite the somewhat dreary work of our session, Jenny had seemed grateful and in good spirits on her way out the door.

My shift from a rigid approach to tutoring—which privileged the literature as the final authority—to a more dynamic one which privileges the tutor and their instincts has significantly changed my experience of the one-to-one conference. Rather than dreading the “chaos,” which can be truly difficult to navigate, I look forward to it, celebrating it as the unique privilege of being a writing tutor. While this role can often be difficult, even discouraging, its unpredictability also allows for questions like Jenny’s—moments where the student learns something specific and personalized about their writing or themselves. To foster those moments, we must move toward the “chaos” by questioning simplistic approaches, embracing complex power dynamics, staying sensitive and open, and most of all trusting our instinctual ability to improvise—using our knowledge of the literature, our past experiences, and our commitment to address students’ needs.



WORKS CITED

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McAndrew, Donald A., and Thomas J. Reigstad. *Tutoring Writing: A Practical Guide for Conferences*. Boynton/Cook, 2001.