

Tutors' Column: "Untangling the Story Within"

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Michelangelo seemed crazy to me for most of my life, and yes, I'm talking about the world-renowned sculptor. I learned that he believed the sculptures were already formed in the marble, and he merely chipped away to free them. Although I knew if I were to chip away at marble I would never find a gorgeous sculpture, I love to share this example with students who come into the writing center. As a writer I often know what I want to say, know the points I want to make, but cannot get them out onto paper and so become frustrated, doubting my own abilities and ideas.

The challenge of writing, then, is to untangle what I already know, and most of all to believe that I have the capability to do so. Sharing this idea with students has helped me listen to what they already know and to encourage them to get their own thoughts on paper. Empowering students' perception of themselves as "creators" instead of incapable writers by pointing out their own writing intuition, ideas, and strengths builds not only their trust in the tutor, but also confidence in their writing.

I worked with a student— I'll call her Sally— who asked for help on content development for a personal narrative assignment. She had great pacing, a strong introduction, and moving details throughout but struggled to connect and explain the purpose of details and different sections. As I read her work aloud, I noticed Sally was becoming uncomfortable. When I asked why she chose certain points or details and how they related to the prompt, she would squirm in her chair and say, "I don't know," or "they [the sections] probably can't connect." She would apologize when she didn't answer a question, delete entire sentences instead of talking through them, and keep saying "I can't do this." We looked at sentence after sentence, moved from paragraph to paragraph while I encouraged and praised her writing, but the guiding questions I had been trained to ask, questions to help students work through their individual writing process needs, were overwhelming her. If I suggested any-



thing, she would try to type exactly what I had said or quickly write down the thought on her paper saying, “that’s so much better,” “that’s good,” and “I’m not a writer.”

I realized I needed to change my approach. “Sally, can you just tell me why you chose to write about this and what you wanted it to say?” I asked, as she began looking at her computer screen for an answer. “No, not from there,” I said, “just talk to me for a little bit. Forget about the assignment. Why did you want to write about this, and why did you choose each of these details?” Sally poured out explanations, powerful points, and complex ideas and, as she talked, I scribbled away on my legal pad, trying to catch as many of her words as possible. When she finished, I read through my notes, which addressed the disjointed sections of her narrative and the areas which lacked detail. How Sally answered, through conversation, helped me see the bigger problem she faced. She said, “Yeah, that’s so good! Can I see that, so I can write it down? It sounds so much better when you say it.” She didn’t even realize I was reading her own words! I stopped her and said, “I didn’t write this— you did.”

Did I capture perfectly every word Sally said? No, but I was taking notes on her ideas, and she was shocked not by my feedback, but by her own. My job, as tutor, was not to create for Sally, but to help her understand her own creation. Sally saw writing like so many other student writers do, as something beyond their capability, and as a process that shouldn’t involve questions, multiple drafts, or moments of struggling. I have had countless comments from students like: “This is why I hate writing,” “I’m not a writer,” “I can’t write what I think.” When I respond to these comments with “you are already a writer,” I have received countless looks of bewilderment and even disdain. I understand their writing much like David McVey does when he says, “from published instructions for using a power drill to the most esoteric literary poetry,” all writing and writers “use the raw materials of language, experience, knowledge of textual sources and the authors’ own ideas and imaginations to bring something into existence that did not exist before” (289). As much as students fight it, they are all Michelangelos, except that some of them refuse or don’t know how to chip away at their own writing insecurities and hurdles within the writing process.

As a tutor I realized the most important thing I could help a student see is their own ability to work through their unique writing process. For Sally, that meant asking her why she wrote something, but for others it could be asking them why they say things certain ways, what they mean in a section, or what they want to convey. It

may mean taking notes, mapping concepts together, or even cutting up a paper and moving sections around, but each time I have reinforced a student's unique process of writing, their attitude and work has blown me away.

A prime illustration of both the significance of helping students see themselves as creators, as well as why it is especially important, is an appointment I had with a very nervous theater major I will call Mike. Mike had one paragraph of a research paper written and wanted to brainstorm. "Great, let's start drafting," I said, "What's the outline or topics you want to cover?" Mike froze, saying, "no you don't understand: I can't write," he said. "Okay, that's fine, you're not writing, you're talking, tell me your ideas." Mike very cautiously walked me through his research and ideas as I took notes, much like I had with Sally. Then, as I read points back to Mike I asked him to type them out, and we worked together to make them complete sentences, but Mike did not seem more at ease. "Okay, so I've got a question," Mike said, "I've been here before, and I leave and I think I've got it, think I'm okay, and then I go home and I can't write. I just look at the computer screen and freeze. I've not turned in entire papers before because of it. So, what should I do?" To be honest, I was nervous Mike was going to ask me to help write his paper, and I felt very sorry for him, as he was visibly nervous. But I knew Mike needed a way to write on his own, not just with me as a note taker. I offered a series of tips I could think of that might help: writing on paper instead of the screen, drafting outlines before, having a friend read through a draft first, but he said those all didn't help. "Well, you did well talking through the writing process. You could have a friend type as you talk, or, if you don't want to ask, you could record yourself and then type that out," I said. "Record myself?" Mike asked, "Yeah, maybe, I never thought about that; I hate hearing myself taped though."

Mike was so afraid of writing and lacking in confidence that he couldn't write by himself. Because I was a peer whose job is not to change his writing style but to meet him where he is, I knew the excuses needed to stop. He needed to become the creator. I shared with Mike a little of my own struggles and unique strategies to combat them; I wanted him to know that everyone has trouble and no matter what crazy things he needed to do to write, he had to be the one to take charge.

The power that comes when students see themselves as creators has far reaching applications. Carey Smitherman and Amanda Girard write that a major component in this problem is that students do not typically "think of themselves as writers," nor are they

“often pointed to texts that lead them to believe they are” (53). A student’s self perception is not only a first-year writing issue; the majority of students who visit the writing center need to be encouraged through their creative authority and creative writing process regardless of the assignment. This challenge is for both tutors and students, and while note taking and verbal encouragement have gone far in my experience, encouraging creators is not a formula. But tutors, by being conscious about meeting students where they are in the writing process, rephrasing and reframing what students see as “writing,” and working through those insecurities together, can help students chip away towards their sculpture.

WORKS CITED

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