Tutors' Column: "Reconnecting with Students' Needs: Resetting Tutors' Mindsets to Regain Lost Empathy"

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I first started tutoring when I volunteered in a writing center at a community college and then moved to a large university that offers everything from certificates to associate's degrees up to graduate programs. The university allows anyone, from students to the community, access to all its resources, which means our writing center sees a large variety of clients including many students from the same classes. When I started working in writing centers, I had already written a few annotated bibliographies for my own classes, and within a short time of tutoring, I had seen enough of these assignments from students that I began to get sick of them. Admittedly, I fell into a routine where I would teach annotated bibliographies the same way almost every time. This habit was helpful for a lot of students as I could quickly tell them how the assignment was supposed to look, but I started to notice a pattern with myself. I would explain the assignment to get the tutorial over with and then forget to give students a chance to practice creating an annotation for themselves. I became so accustomed to my pattern that I would fail to adapt my methods for students who needed more than just an explanation for the sake of getting through what I wrongly perceived as another of the same tutorial. As I noticed this, I tried to break myself out of this pattern but only succeeded occasionally.

I began to realize that when I teach the same concepts in the same ways, these patterns caused me to lose touch with the struggle students go through when learning new genres of writing. We are taught in training to treat each tutorial like it is new and to tailor our approaches to the needs of each student. Due to a kind of burnout, we tutors can become disconnected and lose empathy for students who are learning a new genre of writing we have helped previous students with many times. In working through this problem, I found a possible solution. We as tutors can take on new projects or research topics that we know little about to help us re-

gain our empathy for the struggles students face and to adapt our tutoring practices to meet writers' needs.

Bonnie Devet and Alison Barbiero talk about how tutors can fall into habits like the one I described. They refer to this habit as "stagnation of practice," which means falling into habits of tutoring where all students are "handled the same way" (12). They present three reasons for this: human nature, time pressure, and tutors' self-assurance (12). While time pressure and self-assurance play key roles, the first reason deals more with what I experienced. We all want to help students as best we can, so using the same tutoring strategy feels like the best and easiest way to help a larger number of students. Devet and Barbiero focus more on how students' interpersonal behaviors cause stagnation. For me, it was caused by getting burned out while repeatedly working with the same assignments, and I wanted to find a way to get past it. As was the case with me, even new tutors can deal with stagnation of practice. So, how can we as tutors maintain our connection to individual students' struggles with writing?

For my final unit of the College Reading and Learning Association training, I took on a project that gave me a new perspective. I was given several choices for what type of project I could complete, and I decided to choose one that I knew the least about. For me, this was one centered around social media and marketing. I don't normally use social media and had never even looked at Instagram, the platform my writing center primarily uses for our social media posts. I thought because I knew a little about design and plenty about rhetoric, I could learn something from this project without it being completely alien. Turns out, this project ended up being a lot harder than I thought.

I was told to create a series of hiring posts for our Instagram. While working, I ran into several problems, most of them revolving around images. I was told that the best posts have pictures with people, so I tried to find some of our tutors in our employee Box, the cloud program we use. The issue was that the only pictures we had were a few years old, back when I was a newer tutor, and were mostly of people who didn't work in the center anymore. This led to many drafts of each post, weeks put into what seemed like a simple project, a lot of frustration on my part as I needed to repeatedly change the pictures, and ultimately, only three posts ended up with images of people. I even had to learn a new program and spent two entire shifts in Photoshop trying to get just one picture to work.

In what was, I think, my third meeting with the director of our

writing center to ask questions about this project (I don't remember how many times I had to message the assistant coordinator, who runs our social media and marketing), our director brought up an interesting connection between my process with this project and the experiences of students who come see us. This learning process for writing in new genres is familiar to us tutors, as we see it with students all the time. They too must take on assignments they know little about and learn new skills, programs, and conventions just to complete what may, at first, seem like a relatively simple task, only to find out they too have no idea what they are doing. I was experiencing that same learning process of trying to figure out a new way of writing for the first time, so with each new draft of Instagram posts I turned in, I could feel the connection to students' struggles that my director brought up. We sometimes forget how hard writing in new genres can be since we have already gone through the learning process and taught the concepts many times.

The solution I found for this assignment burnout is a sort of reset on a tutor's ability to empathize with the struggle students face when learning new genres of writing. Kelsey Hixson-Bowles and Roger Powell discuss tutors' self-efficacy and how it relates to their confidence with both tutoring and writing. They bring up the idea that when tutors participate in new and challenging tasks where they intentionally lose self-efficacy, they can regain empathy for students because they get out of their comfort zones and are "reminded what it's like to be a novice…. These new experiences could involve writing, tutoring, or something else; the important factor is simply that they be truly new." Like with my project, tutors, new or experienced, could try taking on new projects to regain empathy for students struggling with this same lack of confidence and, as a result, help lessen assignment burnout as I experienced to avoid the stagnation of practice.

I found that by taking on things that are new and challenging, we better connect with students because we can reflect on and remember how it feels to be a student facing the same challenges. In other words, by working through and remembering the insecurity and frustration that comes from learning a new genre, we can better empathize, focus on, and adapt our tutoring to students' needs.

Since I had this reset, I feel less burned out when working with students on repeated assignments and am able to go into tutorials with a more empathetic mindset towards tailoring tutoring sessions, rather than just getting through fixing the assignments. When I help students with annotated bibliographies now, I remem-

ber more often to help them practice writing annotations instead of just explaining how to do them, like I did before. This practice comes from when I was given a task during my project but not told how something from that genre should appear. My challenge of dealing with stagnation of practice hasn't completely gone away, but I now strive to better empathize with students' struggles with new genres and to adapt my tutoring to better meet student's needs. Hopefully, other tutors can take on new experiences and reflect on them in order to better help students, too.

WORKS CITED

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