6. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 20th Anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 1994), 152.

7. I would like to acknowledge Janice Sebestyen's comments on an earlier draft as the basis for this section of the chapter.

8. Gregory Clark, "Writing as Travel, or Rhetoric on the Road." *College Composition and Communication*. 49 (1) (1998): 16.

9. Ellen Barton, "Literacy in (Inter)Action." *College English*. 59 (4) (1997): 409.

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2

What Line? I Didn't See Any Line

Molly Wingate

It can happen in the middle of a tutoring session—maybe at the end. The pleasant exhilaration of working well with a writer is replaced by a queasy, uneasy sense that this session is not going so well after all. You may notice that the writer is relying on you, waiting for you to do or say something. Or you may notice that the writer has disengaged from the tutoring process, waiting for you to stop doing and saying. Either way, the session is no longer productive, and the weight of it is on your shoulders. When did the shift occur? When did this session slip over the line between being writer-centered, process-oriented, and effective to being tutor-centered, product-oriented, and fairly useless? How could you, an experienced tutor, have missed the crossing? Where is that line? How do you find it? What to do when you have crossed it? These are the guiding questions of this chapter.

Some Background

Most tutor training texts begin their conversations about tutors and their roles with the assumption that the job of a writing center is to "produce better writers, not better writing."[1] Of course, we do not have to sacrifice better writers for better writing or vice versa. Toni-Lee Capossela points out, "It's possible to make better *writers* AND [emphasis in original] better writing, but not if the writing is made better by another hand."[2] For a tutoring session to be considered productive, it is essential that the writer does the bulk of the work and learns something that can be used in future writing projects. As tutors, we know what our goals are, but sometimes it is hard to see the line between only

SEE DISCUSSION TOPICS #4 AND #5 AT THE END OF THIS BOOK

demonstrating to the writer what could be done with a paper and teaching the writer to do those things on his or her own.

Figuring out how much help to give "can be personally troubling," as Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood note. "The natural tendency to be helpful and supportive may conflict with a sense that doing too much of the student's work will not produce the desired result. . . ."[3] Here are their suggestions for how to proceed in a session:

- Give a candid opinion of the strengths and weaknesses of the work in progress; in the process, be sensitive to the student's reactions.
- Suggest ways to enhance the strengths and minimize the weaknesses in the student's writing.
- Recognize that every text and every writer is a work in progress.[4]

These suggestions can help a tutor negotiate the territory between helping and hindering.

In addition to guidelines for proceeding in a session, many tutor trainers discuss the roles that tutors can play, or as Leigh Ryan puts it, the hats that tutors wear—the ally, the coach, the commentator, the collaborator, the writing "expert," and the counselor.[5] Each of these roles is rich with possibility, just as each is fraught with potential line crossings. The tutor's task is to combine the suggestions for proceeding in a session with the roles tutors can play to create and maintain a tutorial that stays on safe ground and helps the writer. I have been tutoring writers in writing centers since 1981, and I still struggle mightily to create and maintain this balance.

What to Do

In staff meetings at the Writing Center at Colorado College, we talk about sessions where the struggle didn't turn out so well. In the beginning, tutors learn to spot when they have or are just about to cross the line in the most obvious situations. If a writer asks a tutor to proofread or edit the paper, we explain why we would rather teach proofreading. When writers try to pump us for information about the paper's topic, we can tell them in all honesty that we do not have the information they seek. And although plagiarism has many nuances, we have lots of tricks to subvert the writers who would love to copy down our every word. We can give them a variety of choices, give examples that are parallel but not appropriate for the paper, or give suggestions faster than anyone could possibly write. Once we have tutored for a while, these obvious situations are predictable, and we have quick, graceful, and face-saving ways to respond. We know that every writer and every situation calls for a different approach, and we know how to improvise within a set of guidelines.

Brainstorming Sessions

The line becomes obscure when the tutorial session is focused on the ideas of a writing project. A tutor can begin to wonder whose ideas make up the paper that comes out of a session. This more subtle form of line crossing comes up often in staff meetings but has few pat responses. Take the situation of helping a student who has trouble extending ideas. Perhaps the tutor shows a writer a brainstorming heuristic that generates a lot of material. The tutor then joins in the fun of debating both sides of an issue and helps the writer answer the who, what, when, where, and how of a topic. The writer comes out of the session with a great deal more material, and it seems genuinely insightful. Coming up with critical material for the paper was the purpose of the session, but the tutor wonders whose work it was. Did the tutor collaborate or commandeer? The same question can arise when a tutor suggests a tool for analyzing a draft that results in a radical reorganization, vastly improving the paper. While the tutor and the writer are no doubt happy that the paper is improved, who did the reorganizing and did the writer learn anything about being a better writer?

When a session is focused on the ideas of a paper, tutors can lose track of their role and step over the line. Many tutors talk about how they suddenly realized that they were doing all the work in a session, that the writer hadn't talked as much as they had, or that the writer did not look or sound confident. They realized that they were no longer teaching the writer something to use in the future because they had become too involved in dazzling the writer with the possibilities they saw in the paper. The writer, along with the tutor's role as teacher, had been left behind as the tutor pushed onward toward a better paper, not a better writer. These sessions were no longer effective.

The "Over" Sessions

There is yet another category of tutors crossing the line that creates unproductive sessions. I call them the "over" sessions: overempathizing, overwhelming, and overtaking. In staff meetings when we talk about problem sessions, tutors find the over sessions the most troubling because they aren't sure when they crossed the line into unproductive territory or whether they could have avoided it. The tutor sees that a writer is quite distressed with a professor, for example, so the tutor decides to listen, even sharing experiences with similar teachers. The writer goes on to give a history of every experience of writer's block since third grade. The tutor feels sure that the writer needs to talk about these blocks to get started. The writing project is forgotten, the session is almost over, the paper is barely begun.

By *over-empathizing,* tutors can make it hard for a session to be productive. In the example above, the tutor assumes that the writer needs to talk before he or she can start writing—probably a safe assumption. But when sharing

experiences did not move the session along to the current project, the tutor should have changed directions. Talking about past writer's blocks did not help the writer overcome them, while writing something might have. The tutor got too involved in the writer's history (a counselor's job) and lost track of the reason the writer came in—to work on a specific project.

Overwhelming a writer is the second category of unproductive over sessions. Here, the tutor, trying to be thorough, gives the writer too much information to process. The writer wants to thoroughly revise a fifteen-page paper. As the writer reads the paper, the tutor stops to point out sentence level concerns in every other sentence. With the tutor's help, the writer revises passive voice, repairs focus problems, sorts out commas, and corrects citations. After 30 minutes, the writer's voice has gone flat. The writer stops reading, looks up wearily, and thanks the tutor for the time. "I will finish it on my own." The tutor buried the writer in too much information. Instead of picking just a few things to talk about, the tutor left the writer with the impression that there was just too much to do in the paper. With so much advice, the writer grew disheartened, and the session flopped.

On occasion, tutors cross the line by *taking over* a session. For example, a writer wishes to turn a paper on Anasazi archeological sites in the Four Corners area into a proposal for an independent study. The tutor finds this to be an interesting prospect and is genuinely curious about the Anasazi. What might otherwise seem like a perfect setup for a great session becomes unproductive as the tutor makes the project too much his or her own. Lines like, "Let me see if I can figure this out," "What do you think of rearranging this section like this?" and "I like this word better, don't you?" reveal that the tutor is fully engaged in his or her own thinking about the writing project. The writer withdraws a bit and lets the tutor do the work. The writer might be happy with the well-constructed and well-edited result of such a session but he or she did not learn more about becoming a good writer. In terms of tutoring, the session was unproductive.

There are several ways to cross the line between a productive tutorial where the writer learns about drafting, revising, editing, or some combination of the three, and an unproductive session where the writer gains little to carry into the next writing project. What can a tutor do to recognize the line and return to a productive session?

Getting Back on Safe Ground

My rule of thumb is this: If you think you have stepped over the line, you probably have. When a tutor senses that the session is not going as well as it might, the tutor should reevaluate his or her role in the session. Hallmarks of having overstepped the tutor role include talking more than the writer, noticing that the writer appears distracted or uninterested, and finding that the writer is always choosing the tutor's suggestions. Or, you know you've overstepped if you feel

tired at the end of the session while the writer looks refreshed. Body language gives clues, too. If the writer is not leaning in toward the paper, then she is probably not engaged. Eye contact is another sign. As you look into the writer's eyes, do you see boredom, frustration, anger? The crossed line may be clear from across the room at this point.

Having crossed into unproductivity, tutors can get themselves back on track. First they must stop whatever it is that has made the session unproductive. Quit talking, listening, doing, or suggesting in the way that is problematic. A tutor can even remark on this change. "Gee, I seem to have gotten carried away," "You know, I forgot to ask you to make these changes. Please look at the next sentence," or "Let's get to the business of the paper, okay?" Experience teaches tutors that it is possible to recover from line crossings and to move on.

To recover from overempathizing, tutors must remember that counseling is not their major role. Some tutors, especially those trained to work in residence halls, are better equipped than others to talk about personal problems and to know when they are in past their depth. Writing tutors generally do not have such training. Even if it seems a little rude, writing tutors must disclaim any ability to counsel. Although, as Muriel Harris points out (this volume), tutors can benefit from learning to use some of the conversational strategies that professional counselors use. A tutor can suggest some of the resources available on campus for stress management, study skills training, and so on. The writing center director can also provide guidance, especially when the tutor is concerned for the writer's well-being.

For tutors who might be concerned about overwhelming a writer or taking over a session, a technique suggested and used by a peer tutor at Colorado College can help. At the end of every paragraph or so, Amy Weible asks the writer how he or she feels about the changes they have made. This creates opportunities to change course in case the writer is uneasy with the progress of the session. Asking the writer about his or her feelings also helps to remind the tutor whose paper it is and who should be setting the pace and direction of the session. Especially whenever I feel a writer withdraw from the activity of the session, I ask, "Is this what you want to be doing?" or "Is this what you had in mind for your paper?" Writers sometimes apologize for thinking about something else or explain that they really do not have the energy for a full scale, sentence-by-sentence revision after all. Instead of continuing on my path and taking over the session or overwhelming the writer, I can easily redirect my energies and follow the writer's lead. The session can return to being productive.

Complicating Matters

While the advice I offer works in the cases I cited, experienced tutors know that no two sessions are alike. The safe ground of one session is quicksand in another. Some writers delight in having a real person to talk with about their

ideas. They have formed their own opinions and are unlikely to be easily swayed by anyone's suggestions. They carefully consider each change to a paper, making sure it is their own change. How different from the writer who is thrown into a tizzy when a tutor starts asking questions about the assumptions of a project or even to have technical jargon explained. They are no longer sure of anything about their paper. They take every question about content to be a weakness with the paper. The tutor must be alert to the writer's reactions to the session.

It is not exactly reassuring to realize that the line always moves and that tutors find it by crossing it. Tutors have to take chances, however. Being too cautious results in sessions that are dull and unproductive. Writers come to the writing center to move their projects along; what a shame to lose them because the tutors try too hard to stay on safe ground. Tutors should not worry about taking chances or making mistakes; we are human, after all. It is normal for someone interested in writing to get excited about ideas. I encourage tutors in our writing center to give themselves a warning when they get really excited about someone else's writing project. Observe the writer's reactions and watch out for the line. Although undoubtedly everyone will misstep a bit, everyone can recover.

As writing centers learn to respond to the needs of international and ethnically diverse populations, crosscultural tutorials can be occasions for plenty of missteps. Some of the advice offered in this chapter may take you in the wrong direction when there are crosscultural misunderstandings at work. This most welcome complication reminds us how important it is for tutors to explain their roles and to ask writers about their expectations for the session. As a writing center director, I'm reminded to include multicultural training in tutor preparation courses, particularly training in recognizing and putting aside generalizations about national and ethnic groups.[6] Each writer is different, each session is new.

Faculty members can add another layer of complication when it comes to crossing the line, especially if they are unaware of the philosophy that informs most tutoring programs. They may be uneasy about the relationship between tutors and writers, concerned about the roles that tutors play and how they help writers, and for reasons discussed earlier, unsure about whose work is being handed in for a grade.[7] Tutoring programs gain the trust of faculty members with productive sessions that are writer- and process-centered. Not crossing the line egregiously maintains that important trust. Without assignments from the faculty, few student writers would have the occasion or the motivation to seek out the writing center. Without support from faculty members, tutoring programs can wither. If tutors routinely cross the line without returning to safe ground, they risk losing the trust of faculty and undermining the entire tutoring program. Luckily, tutors do not routinely cross the line and writing centers work hard to communicate with faculty members.

All these complicating matters have at their base the ideas of collaboration, ethics, and power. As Irene Clark puts it, "In writing labs and centers, . . . the kinds of assistance, which occurs regularly among colleagues, might raise questions, if not eyebrows, over issues of ethics."[8] The academy places different standards of acceptable collaboration on teachers, colleagues, tutors, and classmates. When an individual plays two or three of these roles, working with writers gets complicated. Debating whether these different standards are fair or even useful is a valuable part of any tutor's training. The debate hinges on questions of authority and power. For tutors, the questions about a particular session are many. Did the session diminish the writer's authority? Did the writer make all the decisions about the paper? Who directed the session? Who was in charge of the agenda? Was it a productive session? Did the writer learn something about writing that can be used in the next writing project? These perennial questions are at the base of any tutoring program. The answers point to how productive a session—and how successful a tutoring program—you have co-created.

Further Reading

Clark, Irene Lurkis. 1988. "Collaboration and Ethics in Writing Center Pedagogy." *Writing Center Journal* 9 (1): 3–12.

Clark discusses the many ethical concerns that have arisen around writing center tutoring, especially plagiarism. While agreeing that tutors should never do the bulk of the work, Clark points out that there are occasions when proofreading and editing can be instructive and ethical. She argues that tutors must be encouraged to be flexible about the help they provide writers.

Severino, Carol. 1992. "Rhetorically Analyzing Collaboration(s)." *Writing Center Journal.* 13 (1): 53–64.

Severino provides a set of situational and interpersonal features to look at when analyzing the dynamics of a peer tutoring session. She then analyzes tutorial sessions using these features determining "how much a peer and how much a tutor a peer tutor is." Among other things, such analysis helps tutors determine when to shift between a directive/hierarchical mode and a nondirective/dialogic mode.

Sherwood, Steve. 1995. "The Dark Side of the Helping Personality: Student Dependency and the Potential for Tutor Burnout." In *Writing Center Perspectives,* eds. B. Stay, C. Murphy and E. Hobson, 63–70. Emmitsburg, MD: National Writing Centers Association Press.

As the title suggests, Sherwood looks at when a tutor's tendency to be helpful can cause real trouble. He lists symptoms of neurotic unselfishness that lead to creating student dependency and other problems for writing centers and the profession. He suggests using detached concern to correct for this martyr complex gone awry.

Notes

1. Stephen North, "The Idea of a Writing Center," *College English* 46 (1984): 438.

2. Toni-Lee Capossela, *The Harcourt Brace Guide to Peer Tutoring* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998), 2.

3. Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood, *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 13.

4. Murphy and Sherwood, 15.

5. Leigh Ryan, *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* (Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 23–4.

6. Peter Mulvihill, Keith Nitta, and Molly Wingate, "Into the Fray: Ethnicity and Tutor Preparation," *The Writing Lab Newsletter* 19 (7) (1995): 2.

7. For an example of this, see Steve Sherwood, "Ethics and Improvisation," *The Writing Lab Newsletter* 22 (4) (1997): 1.

8. Irene Lurkis Clark, "Collaboration and Ethics in Writing Center Pedagogy," *The Writing Center Journal* 9 (1) (1988): 3.

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3

Tutoring in Emotionally Charged Sessions

Corinne Agostinelli, Helena Poch, and Elizabeth Santoro

Since peer tutoring is an interaction between human beings, each with their own ideas and experiences, the potential for conflict is always present.[1] Perhaps the writer has chosen a subject that is particularly close to his heart, so much so that he is unable to look at the writing objectively. Or perhaps the writer has particularly strong feelings about the subject she has chosen, making it difficult or even impossible for a tutor to work objectively with the writing. Situations like these come up often enough to present real dilemmas that leave us uncertain about what to do. In this chapter we will explore ways to handle emotionally charged sessions and offer different perspectives for thinking about them. As tutors, our primary responsibility is to see that the writer gets the help that he or she needs. We will focus on doing this in a respectful and productive way.

While much has been written about how to tutor, most advice deals with more practical matters such as how to ask thought-provoking questions or how to deal with time constraints. The literature about tutoring tends to focus mostly on the "brain," leaving out the "heart." However, our experiences in the writing center tell us that we need to be prepared for both aspects of tutoring. At least one recent book, Martha Maxwell's *When Tutor Meets Student,* informs our understanding of emotional issues by presenting a collection of stories written by writing tutors about their experiences. A few of these stories address topics such as how to handle sexist or racist writers, what to do when a personal tragedy affects a writer's ability to work, and how to build a trusting relationship between tutor and writer. Occasionally peer tutor newsletters like *The Dangling Modifier* or *The Writing Lab Newsletter* publish pieces about emotional conflict, or the topic is discussed at conferences like the National

SEE DISCUSSION TOPIC #1 AT THE END OF THIS BOOK

Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, which in 1998 was the impetus for this chapter.[2] For the most part, however, a tutor is expected to figure out the "heart" aspects of tutoring on her own. We've developed through experience our own ways of dealing with sensitive situations.

The following incident illustrates our point. A young woman's instructor gave the assignment, "Tell me about a moment in your life that says something about the rest of your life." She was having difficulty describing to her tutor what her problems with the paper were and elected, instead, to simply dive in and read the paper aloud. Two sentences into it, she choked up and began to weep. It turned out that she had chosen to write about her mother's rape as a teenager, and how hearing that story had made this young woman overly cautious and paranoid when she entered college. Her emotions had blocked her ability to work with the paper; she had, in fact, written a piece that was as confused as she was.

No tutor can be completely prepared for situations like this, but we can begin to imagine how intense feelings can impact a tutorial session and how we might respond most effectively.

What to Do?

When a tutor is faced with a situation involving a traumatic experience the writer had, it is tempting to want to make the writer feel better by responding sympathetically—patting him on the shoulder, sharing a personal experience, or allowing the session to become therapy instead of tutoring. It can be awkward to analyze someone's paper in a professional manner when raw emotions, perhaps some that hit us close to home, inspired its creation. Writers may become defensive or emotional toward our suggestions, unable to step outside the paper and fearful that revising will change its emotional impact.

What is most important in such situations is focus and firmness. We have the complicated responsibility of showing empathy to writers while not allowing them to lose sight of the reason that they came for help in the first place: to express ideas effectively. The problem with emotions, obviously, is that they cloud judgment and rationality on both sides, making for a potentially conflict-filled session. Deep passion for a certain subject or situation can also give otherwise overused topics an entirely new dimension. Imagine a discussion of the adoption process by a woman who surrendered a child when she was eighteen years old, or anti-war sentiments expressed by an ex-marine. When a writer decides to use a personal experience or a deep-seated personal value for an academic paper, it is a tutor's responsibility to help the writer articulate the ideas he has and to provide a fair-minded response, even if it means reaching deep inside ourselves to do so. This point is reinforced in a book by J. A. Kottler, who believes that people who help others can learn a lot about themselves when they have to deal with difficult situations, which may

> force us to be more flexible, creative, and innovative than we ever thought possible. And they require us to look deep inside ourselves to examine every one of our own unresolved issues that get in the way of our being compassionate and effective—both as professionals and as human beings.[3]

Developing a clear goal with the writer for the session is one means of getting some distance from delicate subject matter. This allows the writer not to have to delve into how he or she feels, and allows the tutor to decide whether she is prepared to give emotional support. While this is an easy suggestion to make, it is difficult and emotionally draining to implement. We are human beings, after all.

In our writing center, we have found the following approaches to be successful in different situations. However, as with all things emotional, each of us has had to experiment to find what is most comfortable and what is appropriate for each new experience.

Acknowledge the difficulty of discussing a personal experience. Whether it is a disclosure of childhood abuse or a commentary on the death of a parent, whether the tutor has had a similar experience or not, it is best to acknowledge rather than ignore the burden of the writer's task. "Congratulations on being able to put this on paper. A lot of people would have a hard time sharing an experience like this," is one way to begin. While this suggestion seems elementary, the writer still needs to hear it. Human beings need to hear that they are being listened to and understood; taking a few minutes to empathize will establish a degree of trust. Now is also the time to remind the writer that tutoring sessions are, in fact, confidential.

Keep pushing the focus that the writer wants to achieve. This is not callous and insensitive when you remember that a tutor is not a therapist; we are limited to offering a tissue, a glass of water, and compassion. Tutors do not have the background or training to offer psychological analysis or counseling. Some would argue that writing itself is the best form of therapy, a theory that tutors probably *do* have the experience to share. (See Harris, this volume.)

Imagine, for example, a writer who arrives with a paper in which she is to describe her hero. She has chosen to write about her stepfather, a man who has been a part of her life since she was a very young child. As she wrestles with her gratitude that he is paying for her college experience, on one hand, and her guilt for loving her stepfather more than her birth father, on the other hand, the tutor is spurred to think about her own father and their close relationship. Through the cloudiness of emotions, though, it is clear that the paper is disorganized and lacks a thesis. The tutor's response might be as follows:

"You're so lucky to have had him there when you were growing up. Does he know that you're writing this about him?" After allowing the writer to answer, the tutor might then respond, "If you were going to let him read this, what would you want him to get from it?"

With this response, the writer is reassured that her emotions are valid; she is also forced to really think about why she is writing—not simply to tell about the nice things that her stepfather has done for her, but to thank him, perhaps, specifically for being a father when her birth father wasn't there.

If all else fails, suggest that the writer may need some more time. He may need to sort out newly surfaced emotions before trying to present them for a graded assignment. Someone who has recently battled a drug problem or whose best friend was just killed in a car accident should probably not force himself to write about it until the time is right. In this case, a tutor can offer to help in brainstorming another, equally suitable topic. Perhaps the writer will be relieved to learn that it's acceptable to put a piece of writing on a shelf for a while and that to do so does not show weakness or denial.

Remember that all tutors hope to achieve the same basic goal: to assist others in expressing the ideas they want to convey. Whether the writer's motivation is driven by ego, emotion, or personal growth, the goal should still be the same.

Complicating Matters

Further complicating the issue of sensitivity in tutoring are the tutor's own emotions and opinions and the writer's (intentional or unintentional) use of insensitive or offensive language in papers.

We live in a multicultural society where differences among people are commonplace, though not always respected. Tutors may also have expectations of people that grow out of their own prejudice, such as the mistaken belief that quiet students are unmotivated or that students in basic writing courses are academically weak. Occasionally our prejudices will reveal themselves, and the offended student we are helping may or may not react. This is one of those awkward, inevitable moments in life we all have to learn to deal with. The important thing for any tutor to remember is really quite simple. The moment you realize you have stereotyped or offended the writer, apologize. Then move on, and try never to do it again. Later, do your part to raise consciousness, and for your next staff meeting invite a speaker from your student affairs office to talk about problems of discrimination on campus and how to overcome them (see also Wingate, this volume).

Inappropriate References for Cultural, Racial, or Ethnic Groups

Sometimes peer tutors are in a unique position to let a writer know, politely but firmly, that he or she has made a racial or ethnic slur. Just about everyone who speaks English knows that there are highly derogatory terms used to refer to African Americans, Native Americans, Asians, Hispanics, Jews, and many other groups. Some, however, are less common: "Gypped" (as in "we had a deal and he gypped me"), for example, is an ethnically derogatory term whose root is

the same as that of an itinerant race of people. There are numerous words such as these that are inflammatory and insulting. In addition, tutors need to be prepared to talk to writers about other potentially demeaning references to people, like "Indian" for Native American and "girl" for an adult female. Because many derogatory references are local and regional, you might try exchanging ideas on how to deal with them with other tutors in a Tutor Notebook (see Eckard and Staben, this volume).

In some cases, the use of such terms is innocent in that it did not occur to the writer that the term was offensive. Even if the writer is using the term without malice, the tutor needs to make the writer aware of the offending term. Unless the writer intends to provoke a specific response from the audience, the tutor should tell him that some readers will react negatively to what he has written.

Though negative terms stand out and can be easily eliminated, the kind of stereotyping that can be most detrimental tends to lurk beneath the surface; it usually occurs in what the writer appears to be implying about others. This can be harder to talk about because it is easier for the writer to deny and for the tutor to ignore. If the negative implication is fairly clear, however, the tutor should point it out, not ignore it, because the writer needs to be made aware of the reader's response.

Tutors' Emotions

As if tutoring was not complex enough, tutors may also have to deal with their own emotions regarding a particular topic. Because we exhibit the same human vulnerabilities as the writers with whom we work, we are bound to encounter subject matter that we find offensive, hurtful, or heart-wrenching. Specific examples might include helping a writer with a paper about cancer when the tutor has just lost a loved one to the disease, or tutoring a paper about the immorality of homosexuality when the tutor is a homosexual. What should the tutor do when he or she encounters situations such as these?

Before attempting to help another writer, tutors need to evaluate their own feelings about the sensitive topic. Some questions that tutors might want to ask themselves include: Am I able to be objective with this paper? Are my responses going to be emotionally wrought? Can I separate my feelings about this topic from my professional opinion about the merits and faults of the work?

Often the session may go more smoothly if the tutor is simply honest with the writer about his or her feelings on the topic. The writer can then decide whether or not to continue the session. Consider, for example, a writer who presents a paper in which she colorfully expresses her distaste for the Greek system, and a tutor who happens to be an active member of a fraternity or a sorority. The tutor's response might be, "Now, you say that all the Greeks do is drink beer on the weekends and cause vandalism. Aren't they, historically, philanthropic organizations? Don't most of them, if not all, sponsor charities?"

With this response, the tutor is able to reveal his or her bias while also being devil's advocate as a means to help the writer think about her argument. An opinion paper is nothing, really, if a writer is simply "preaching to the choir," and so part of a tutor's job is to get the writer to consider how this paper might be too simplistic and why he needs to develop a more complete, thoughtful picture. (See Rafoth, this volume.)

There are times in which playing devil's advocate can be inappropriate. If a writer comes to the center with a paper that decries homosexuality and the tutor is a homosexual, this is probably not the best time for the tutor to come out. In cases such as this, if another tutor is available, it would probably be better to switch tutors or have two tutors work together to control emotional responses. If no other tutor is available, then tutors must deal with the situation according to their center's policy.

In all cases, if a tutor feels that his or her personal safety could be threatened as a result of working with a particular writer (as might be the case with a homosexual tutor assisting a homophobic writer), then the police or campus security should be called. While such cases are rare, it is vital that they be discussed in staff meetings or with the director.

In conclusion, for a writer to make the decision to pour his or her emotions onto paper and open those emotions up for a classroom grade shows a tremendous amount of strength. Oftentimes writers will come to the writing center for validation that their topic is important and appropriate, not necessarily for the purpose of receiving help, but still making our jobs that much more challenging.

Like any profession that involves more than one person expressing ideas and discussing experiences, tutoring writing is complicated by the emotional responses of everyone involved. Thinking and planning in advance about how to handle emotional situations can make all the difference in a tutoring session. Although highly sensitive sessions remain the exception and not the rule, dealing with them is part of the essence of what we do as tutors: creating an open, respectful, and productive environment for learning to write.

Further Reading

Daniell, Beth. May 1994. "Composing (as) Power." *College Composition and Communication* 45 (2), 238–46.

Colleges and university professors, and some tutors as well, are not always receptive to students who write about their religious faith. In this article, Daniell argues that it is a mistake to ignore the connection between religion and empowerment, and she observes that spiritual and religious motives throughout history have actually motivated people to seek literacy. It is troubling, she says, when academics dismiss the spiritual and religious aspects of students' lives. Tutors who are interested in nontraditional students and feminist issues may be especially interested in the interviews Daniell conducted with six women about how they use literacy in their spiritual lives.

Maxwell, Martha, ed. 1994. *When Tutor Meets Student.* 2nd ed. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press.

This is a collection of 54 diverse and interesting stories written by tutors at UC Berkeley. Their accounts depict life experiences in the writing center on such topics as gender relationships, cultural diversity, plagiarism, and tutor dependency. These stories are told in the tutors' own words and make for great reading.

Payne, Michelle. 2000. *Bodily Discourses: When Students Write About Physical Abuse, Sexual Abuse, and Eating Disorders.* Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

This book explores ways in which writing teachers can be most helpful to students writing about these topics.

Notes

1. This point is developed nicely by Steve Sherwood in "Ethics and Improvisation," *Writing Lab Newsletter* 22 (4) (1997): 2.

2. National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, The State University of New York at Plattsburgh, Nov. 6–8, 1998. More information about the NCPTW may be found at http://www.chss.iup.edu/wc/ncptw/

3. J. A. Kottler, *Compassionate Therapy: Working with Difficult Clients* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1992), xi.

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Kottler, J. A. 1992. *Compassionate Therapy: Working with Difficult Clients.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Sherwood, S. 1997. "Ethics and Improvisation." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 22 (4): 1–5.

4

Talk to Me: Engaging Reluctant Writers

Muriel Harris

Every tutor, no matter how dazzlingly effective he or she is, will meet up with a student who responds—or fails to respond—like the one in this all-too-familiar dialogue:

Tutor: Hi, Alisa, how are you doin' today?

Alisa: (Nods silently and briefly, begins searching in her backpack for her paper, and then settles far back into her seat, hands in her lap.)

Tutor: Were you at the game this weekend? I knew we were going to lose, but it was a good game to watch.

Alisa: (Shakes her head slightly, to indicate she didn't go.)

Tutor: Well, what do you want to work on today?

Alisa: Here's my paper. (Alisa looks down, avoiding eye contact.)

Tutor: Why don't you tell me a bit about it. . . . What your main point is, what the assignment is . . . you know, all that stuff that we'll need to know to work on it.

Alisa: It's about cloning. For my Ethics class. It's due in a couple of days.

Tutor: OK, interesting subject. That's a hot topic, and there's lots to say about it. What do you want to work on?

Alisa: Could you see if it's OK?

Tutor: OK, let's start with the main point. Why don't you just tell me first what your main point is. (Waits while the silence grows and expands around them.) Is cloning ethical? Are there ethical problems we should consider before going ahead? Should scientists try to do it?

SEE DISCUSSION TOPIC #1 AT THE END OF THIS BOOK

Alisa: It's OK, I guess.

Tutor: Are you supposed to discuss the ethical implications? Or argue a point of view? Are you writing to people who think cloning should be stopped? Or to people who think it's important to do, like for possible medical uses?

Alisa: It really doesn't much affect me. I don't know. (Alisa shrugs, slumps farther down in her chair, and stares at the people at the next tutorial table.)

Tutor: Did you have a hard time writing this paper? If so, let's talk about that for a bit.

Alisa: (No response.)

And so it goes with the unresponsive student. You try to coax, nudge, or invite the student to get involved in a discussion about the paper. But the student resists and continues to sit there refusing to make eye contact or lean closer to the table. Nothing seems to engage the writer into the conversation you'd like to have about that paper lying limp and forlorn on the table between you and the student. You recognize the student's sense of being withdrawn from the tutorial by the student's body language, voice tone, the long silences that meet your attempts to chat, the monosyllables that pass as answers, and the shrugs that follow.

Some Background

The reasons for students' unresponsive behavior range widely, and clues as to why a student is not responding to the tutor's efforts are usually inadequate. Some possibilities to consider:

- ***The student is forced to be there.***

When we are required to do something, some people react negatively. They may blame whoever required their attendance or whomever they meet in the process of fulfilling what was required of them. Psychologists who prepare therapists and counselors explain that it's not unusual for clients to become angry at whomever they have to meet with, even if that person is not involved in setting the requirement. Similarly, when an unwilling student is assigned to come to the writing center, the student is likely to resist a tutor's overtures to engage in any conversation. She doesn't want to be there and hopes to be able to leave as soon as possible.

- ***Writing is not important to this writer.***

Writing is seen by some students (usually mistakenly, but they don't learn this until they graduate and have to communicate on the job) as a requirement that has little to do with their lives. They envision themselves as engineers in design labs, as programmers of the next generation of cool software, as pharmacists or farmers who will be far from the world of reports and memos. They assume that the business world proceeds via cell phones, not written memos or letters

(which, if needed, secretaries will clean up). And, finally, they see no need for a tutor's help with writing any more than they would attend closely to someone explaining how to build mud huts. It's simply not relevant to their lives, and they most likely came to the writing center because it was required, because they thought they'd earn extra points with the teacher, or because they want the tutor to fix the paper so they can get a higher grade.

- ***The writer may be anxious about revealing ignorance or poor writing to anyone and nervous about being critiqued.***

For a study I conducted to learn about students' concerns in writing tutorials ("Talking in the Middle"), I read hundreds of student responses on anonymous evaluations filled out at the end of tutorials in our Writing Lab. Over and over, they commented how relieved they were that they weren't "slammed" or "laughed at" or "ripped" by the tutor. They were surprised that the tutor didn't talk down to them. They announced that the tutorial was successful because they now felt more confident, though it was usually not clear if they meant more confident about themselves or their writing—or perhaps both. From comments like these, we become more aware of how apprehensive students are when they come to writing centers. Under such emotional strains, they may be very likely to shut up, to wonder what they're supposed to do, and finally, to be as unengaged as any tutor might be in a strange situation. When we have no idea what's expected of us and we feel shaky about whether we are going to be ridiculed or asked to demonstrate what we don't know, we do sometimes respond by withdrawing until we can get a better handle on what's happening or figure out how we can retreat from the situation with minimal embarrassment.

- ***The student is overwhelmed by other concerns.***

The student who doesn't want to engage in tutorial conversation may have just heard that he's running out of student financial aid, that there was a major quiz in the chem lecture he missed, or that his girlfriend has dumped him. Students bring with them a variety of other problems and worries and disappointments that affect their ability (or inability) to attend to what's going on in the writing tutorial. Issues that can affect students' writing are categorized by Leigh Ryan as academic (grades, study skills, test anxiety), social (separation from family and friends, peer pressure, roommates), and lifestyle (finances, independence, job responsibilities).[1]

- ***The writer doesn't have the language to talk about his or her writing.***

Researchers on cognitive processes involved in writing and revising (Flower, et al.) have explained that like other problem-solving tasks, effective revision requires the ability to detect problems in the draft of a paper and to find strategies to use to solve those problems. Without such abilities, which are often lacking in beginning writers, they don't know how to explain to someone else

what they want to work on or what their problem is. Such students are likely to come in flustered, ill-at-ease, and unable to say more than "my paper's too short," "the paper doesn't flow," or "I just don't like it," or "it's not what I wanted to say" and hope that the tutor somehow understands what they mean. They lapse into silence because they don't know what to say or how to say it. Like the patient in a doctor's office, they hope that by sitting quietly while the doctor examines them, the doctor will diagnose their problem and prescribe a treatment.

- ***The writer is simply a very quiet person.***

Much research on personality type has helped us to define personality preferences, those ways of interacting with the world that are neither right nor wrong, simply ways that people differ. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), one of the most useful and most well-researched ways to sort out personality preferences, has stimulated a great deal of research on how personality types interact with writing and tutoring. A particularly helpful collection of essays about this is Thomas C. Thompson's *Most Excellent Differences: Using Type Theory in the Composition Classroom.* In the introduction to type theory Thompson defines one of the MBTI dimensions as Extraversion and Introversion, noting that introverts prefer to "play out potential actions mentally before deciding whether they actually wanted to follow through with them."[2] A further picture of how introverts prefer to deal with the world shows us how we might interpret their unresponsiveness as not being engaged when, in fact, they are simply taking things in to reflect on them quietly—on their own at a later time. Here's Thompson's picture:

> Because [introverts] like to rehearse their answers before speaking, they may be slow to respond to questions about new material. Introverts often choose to sit near the edge of the classroom, where they can observe class activities without being caught in the middle of them.[3]

And, of course, some people are just naturally shy or quiet, not given to a lot of chatter. Some of us love to pour out words; others use them sparingly. Some find silence in a conversation awkward; others appreciate it as time for reflection.

- ***The student knows that if he or she shuts up, the tutor (or teacher) will do all the work.***

Some students who have been in school for a number of years learn how to play the teacher/tutor game to their advantage. In lectures, large classrooms, and even small ones, they've learned that they are expected to shut up, be passive, and wait for the teacher to answer her own questions. This role is all too familiar. Less familiar is the one that tutors are trying to get the student to play—to be active learners who take charge of their own learning. So they wait for the tutor to tell them what to write, how to fix the paper, or maybe—if they sit quietly long enough—even do the rewriting.

What to Do

While it's not always clear which of the possibilities listed above looms largest in keeping the student withdrawn from the situation, here are some strategies to try:

- ***Empathize about being forced to do something.***

When you ask the student if her visit is required and she indicates morosely that she's there because she has to be and her actions indicate that she has no interest in doing anything much beyond sitting there until the time is up and she can leave, you can try talking openly and honestly about her not wanting to be there. Empathize, let her know that you too have been in situations you were forced into and that you too felt as she does. After all, it isn't the worst trait in the world to be an independent person who isn't exactly pleased when others tell them what to do. Try to help the student see that as long as he's bothered to come to the lab, you'd like to help him make good use of his time. If your center sends notes to teachers, explain—after you've managed to get the student to see that you are interested in his welfare—that you have to report on what was worked on and if nothing was talked about, the teacher isn't likely to consider the requirement fulfilled. Have the student help you write the note (or let him write it himself). If none of this mobilizes the student into some minimal conversation, you have probably done what you could. You need to let the student leave, but you've warned him (in friendly terms) that sitting there won't satisfy the instructor. Just as we encourage students to make their own decisions about what they want to write, letting them make the decision to leave without really satisfying the requirement at least keeps students in the driver's seat. Some tutors find that these students return later, on their own, when it's not required and after they've realized that tutors aren't there to force them to do anything.

- ***Acknowledge the lack of interest in writing and try for a small success.***

For writers who admit that they have little interest in writing and say that it isn't relevant to them, you can start by acknowledging this attitude as something many students share. But then try talking about when the student might need writing skills—in classes (exams, reports) or for that person's career (job applications, memos). Harold Hackney and Sherilyn Cormier, in their book on how counselors can help clients, warn us that "unless clients can determine some personal goals for counseling, the probability of change is minimal."[4] You won't win over everyone because some students will remain unconvinced that being a better writer is a personal goal of theirs, and they will continue to expend as little effort as possible. Then, it's time to try for a minimal bit of success. The student has some piece of writing to work on or she wouldn't be there. What can be done with that one paper? One tutor in our Writing Lab, when backed into such corners by students who merely wanted to pass the course and not worry about writing any more, would explain that he realized the student's time was valuable and didn't want to waste it. What could they do together in the few remaining minutes of the tutorial to make it useful for the student? Sometimes that might result in little more than helping the student set up his two citations in MLA format or learn the difference between "it's" and "its," but at least the time together was not a total waste.

- ***Help the student talk about his or her fears.***

If you sense the student is quiet because he is overcome by anxiety or fears of some kind related to meeting you and talking about his writing, try to establish an atmosphere of trust, perhaps by being friendly, by explaining that you're not a teacher and that your job is to help and to listen. Then invite the student to talk about his or her anxieties. In their suggestions to counselors who work with fearful clients, psychotherapists Randolph Pipes and Donna Davenport (see Further Reading) tell us that such clients often cannot overcome their resistance to getting involved until the underlying fears are expressed. Then, it is important to empathize and to reassure the student that such fears are not uncommon and can be overcome. The core of such a conversation might sound like this:

Tutor: You don't seem to want to talk about your paper. Would you like me to read it instead, or would that bother you? When I was in freshman comp, I hated having my paper read by anyone, especially out loud in class and in front of others. I wouldn't even let my roommate read my papers.

Writer: I'm not a good writer. My teachers hate my writing. I'll never be good at it.

Tutor: I honestly don't know a whole lot of people who think they're great writers. Writing takes work, and you probably aren't happy with what you write. That's pretty usual. And we can work on your writing together. I bet there's lots of good stuff here to work with.

Writer: I hate when someone criticizes my writing. I won't show it to anyone except my teacher.

Tutor: Hey, I'm not going to criticize. Really. My job is to help you. In fact, I like the first paragraph here, especially when you start out with that good question in your first sentence. Talking about your writing with someone else usually helps a lot.

- ***Reschedule for a better time or listen and move on.***

For students who seem withdrawn or remain unengaged because there might be other, more pressing problems on their minds, you can ask if they want to come back some other time. Or if the student starts to talk about what's worrying her, listen. Give the student a few minutes to vent or explain what's really on her mind, and really listen. Pipes and Davenport distinguish between "social listening," which is often largely a matter of not interrupting, maybe nodding from time to time, or thinking of what you're going to say next, and "therapeutic

listening," which requires much more. The therapeutic listener attends closely, really hears what the client is saying and both processes cognitively what the client is saying while empathizing closely with what is being said. A few minutes of such conversation is likely to help clear the air, but if you sense that the person starts bringing up other problems, having found a listening ear, it's probably clear that the student is deciding to use the time as a support session for his life, his troubles, his frustration with his roommate. One strategy to get back to work is first to acknowledge that you've heard the student and that it's time to move on. You can show that you were listening by reflecting back to the student what she said: "Yeah, getting a speeding ticket really upsets you. But now let's focus on something positive, like getting that paper revised." Or "You sound like you're fearful about what's happening with your mom, but I'm not trained to help you with that. There's a good psych services here on campus. It's free, and a couple of my friends went there and were glad they did. I can help you make an appointment. But, for now, since we only have about 20 minutes left, what can we do in that time to help you revise this paper?"

- ***Offer the student some questions she can ask herself.***

When a student can't offer much beyond general unease about the paper (not liking it, thinking it doesn't flow, etc.) and you suspect that the student is quiet because he has nothing else to say, try giving the student some possible questions to ask himself:

> "Could you tell me if part of the problem is that what you wanted to do in this paper—what's in your head—doesn't match with what's here on the page?"
> (or)
> "Do you think the lack of flow is because there aren't words to tie the sentences and paragraphs together? Or maybe you think it doesn't flow because it jumps from topic to topic? Sometimes, people get that 'lack of flow' feeling when the order is jumbled or when they're not sure whether the different parts are in some kind of logical order?"
> (or)
> "Are you wondering if the paper doesn't meet the assignment? Or the kind of paper it's supposed to be, like a persuasion paper or a definition paper?"

If this helps the student to start talking, you can remind him that these are good questions to ask himself when he's working on a draft and wants to improve it. You may have to keep listing questions and problems the student's paper might have until something strikes a responsive chord. When he hears something that begins to sound right, he will begin—probably hesitantly—to talk more easily about what he wants to work on.

- ***Give the student some quiet time to think and write.***

If you meet up with a truly quiet person who has little to say, you don't have to fill the silence with talk. Let that person process what is being said and leave some quiet time for her to think about your question. Ask if she'd prefer to try writing about it herself while you work with another student, assuring her that you'll come back to continue working together. Try to set a specific task for her to work on:

> *Tutor:* "If you're having difficulties making the paper longer, why not try the journalist's questions—who, what, where, why, when, how? Maybe who's going to benefit from more student parking on campus; where such parking would be; why the administration should consider your proposal; what the administration might bring up as arguments against your proposal. Want to write down those question words to think about? I'll be back in awhile to see how you're doing, OK?

In their discussion of how to use personality preferences to work with writing, Sharon Cramer and Tom Reigstad found that for those who score highly as extraverts on the MBTI scale "an opportunity to brainstorm with fellow writers would be welcome [while] . . . individuals with the 'introverted' preference . . . would more likely benefit from independent brooding in private and would write best in a sanctuary, like a study carrel."[5]

- ***Try minimalist tutoring.***

When the writer keeps looking to you to do all the work and is willing to sit there silently and out-wait you, you can try Jeff Brooks' "defensive minimalist tutoring." Drawing on his experience in tutoring such students, he recommends mimicking the student's body language. If the student slouches back in his chair, getting as far away as possible, the tutor can also physically move away, also slouching back into her chair. Jane Wilson, another tutor who has encountered such students, seconds this strategy: "If the student acts tired out and disinterested, the tutor can lay back in his chair and wait for something to happen. In this case, the pressure is now on the student to do something."[6] Even if being a defensive minimalist tutor is not your style, too over the top for you, try to ask questions that indicate you are interested in the student's answers, refrain from answering your own questions, and give the student plenty of wait time to answer. Eventually, most students get involved, at least minimally.

Complicating Matters

The strategies offered here come with a number of caveats. They may not work, but if they do, they may work in ways you don't want them to. For example, if you are successful in helping a writer talk through her fears or anxieties, she may become overly dependent on you. You begin to suspect that some of her visits to the center are mainly to talk with you as a comforting listening ear or to have you look over the paper because she has come to depend on you to approve every paper before handing it in. Then, you have to think about how to help her become independent. It's also possible that by talking to you, the writer is not seeking the kinds of professional help she ought to be getting. You

can prepare for this by learning more about the professional resources on your campus. Perhaps professionals from those services can visit your staff meetings and help you to recognize symptoms. Similarly, if you are successful in turning to off-topic conversation, you may find it hard to get the student back to work. By offering an escape valve for what he doesn't want to do, you may have let him continue to avoid working on his writing. His teacher will be equally disappointed, especially if the teacher hears that he went to see a tutor and had a good discussion about changing his major. The teacher will be less likely to refer students to a place where the required work wasn't done. This is also a possible outcome when you tried and tried to get the writer to become engaged in a tutorial and finally had to let him go because he wouldn't or couldn't focus on his writing. Teachers who aren't familiar with tutorial principles and assume the tutor will take control of the session and tell the student what he needs to know will consider the tutor—and the writing center—ineffective.

It would make tutoring much easier if the strategies I've listed above came with a guarantee that they will work. They don't. Every student is a different human being, and as we all know, we all act differently at different times. Moreover, your tutoring style differs from other tutors'. You may be able to be a minimalist tutor, but you may also not find that a comfortable stance because it strikes you as rude. You may welcome students' personal conversations about their lives and problems, or you may be the kind of person for whom this is awkward. While you know that others on your staff can try these counseling strategies, you recognize that you can't. And some days you start off eager to help, and by the end of your assigned time, you really are exhausted and can't listen as closely as you know you want to. So, while strategies sound useful and easy, they aren't recipes. Sometimes the best we can hope for is a repertoire of strategies to draw upon. When one doesn't seem to be working or doesn't fit the way we tutor, we move on to another one. That's what makes tutoring so challenging and finally, when we're successful, so rewarding. In the Writing Lab I work in, we agree that when you've had a bad tutorial, you should try to reflect on what went wrong and learn from it. When you conclude that part of the problem was the student and there's nothing more you can do, let it go. When you've just had a great tutorial, take a moment to just sit and enjoy the feeling.

Further Reading

Bolander, Becky, and Marcia Harrington. 1996. "Reflectivity: Finding Gold in the Crevices of Tutorials." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 20 (10): 1–5.

The authors of this article note that when a student begins to talk about other problems or frustrations in her life, and when tutors listen attentively, valuable information and insights (the gold in the crevices) about the student and her writing can emerge. Bolander and Harrington explain that such listening helps to remind us that students come to tutorials with experiences that affect their writing.

Parbst, John R. 1994. "Off-topic Conversation and the Tutoring Session." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 19 (1): 1–2, 6.

When meeting with a nervous or shy student, John Parbst recommends that tutors try moving away from a tutorial agenda to off-topic conversation. This can result in relaxing the student and, as a side-benefit, may turn up ideas for writing. Possible clues that Parbst suggests for starting off-topic conversation include a student's name that might lead to conversation about the origins of the name and further conversation about the student's background; a student's athletic clothes or sport logos that may lead to questions about the upcoming sports season; or books in a student's backpack that can lead to conversations about other courses or the student's major and future plans.

Pipes, Randolph B., and Donna S. Davenport. 1990. *Introduction to Psychotherapy: Common Clinical Wisdom.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Because tutors encounter similar problems that therapists or counselors meet with, this book offers suggestions for tutors as well. Topics include fears counselors have, such as the fear of looking foolish and the fear of not being competent to help; fears that clients may have that will influence how clients act; ways to start the first session; levels of listening and signals of poor listening; methods to deal with the client's resistance to help that is being offered; and so on.

Notes

1. Leigh Ryan, *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1994), 48.

2. Thomas C. Thompson, ed., *Most Excellent Differences: Essays in Using Type Theory in the Composition Classroom* (Gainsville: CAPT, 1996), 5.

3. Thompson, 6.

4. Harold L. Hackney and L. Sherilyn Cormier, *The Professional Counselor: A Process Guide to Helping,* 3rd ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1996), 117.

5. Sharon Cramer and Tom Reigstad, "Using Personality to Teach Writing," *Composition Chronicle* 7 (2) (March 1994): 4.

6. Jane C. Wilson, "Making the Sale: Helping Students to 'Buy' Writing Skills," *Writing Lab Newsletter* 21 (10) (1999): 13.

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Cramer, S., and T. Reigstad. March 1994. "Using Personality to Teach Writing." *Composition Chronicle* 7 (2): 4–7.

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Hackney, H. L., and L. S. Cormier. 1996. *The Professional Counselor: A Process Guide to Helping.* 3rd ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Harris, M. 1995. "Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Writing Tutors." *College English* 57 (1): 27–42.

Ryan, L. 1994. *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors.* Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press.

Thompson, T. C., ed. 1996. *Most Excellent Differences: Essays in Using Type Theory in the Composition Classroom.* Gainsville: CAPT.

Wilson, J. C. 1999. "Making the Sale: Helping Students to 'Buy' Writing Skills." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 21 (10): 13–14.

5

Telling Tutor Tales

Breaking Down Barriers with Stories

Sandra J. Eckard

The silence is deafening despite the sounds I know are present: the muted conversations between tutors and writers, the hum of the lights, the rhythmic tapping of computer keys. Yet all I hear is silence that hangs between us.

I've asked him to tell me what he notices about this passage; he says he knows what's wrong but doesn't know how to fix it.

We are at an impasse, facing an invisible yet impenetrable wall between us.

I take a deep breath, smile, and try something else. We need to find another space—one that is safe, comfortable, a space we can share. "You know, transitions are always difficult for me, too. I have tons of ideas swimming around, yet when I try to get them all down on paper, they sometimes don't seem to go together or say what I want them to. Do you know what I mean?"

He nods and smiles. There has been a subtle, positive change.

This situation—writer and a tutor at a standstill—happens every day in our writing centers. What can we do when other tutoring strategies fail to break through the wall that stands between you? One option, much like my beginning narrative, is telling a story. Although the concept of story may have you envisioning pajamas and the refrain "Once upon a time," storytelling may be found in many tutoring sessions. Between the words on the page and the talk of revision, a different type of exchange can occur, a story of life or experience. "When I was in Freshman Composition . . . " or "Like you, I always have to watch for . . . " have replaced "Once upon a time," but they are transitions into stories nonetheless. Though overlooked, stories can create a positive tutoring environment when things seem to be going nowhere.

SEE DISCUSSION TOPIC #1 AT THE END OF THIS BOOK