

It was the Best of Tutorials, It was the Worst of Tutorials

Sarah Wiltzius

Like so many other first time tutors before me, I sat petrified at the table; half hoping my learner wouldn't come. But he did, like most learners do. To add to my anxiety, I was informed that my learner was also an ESL student. More fears crept to the surface. Would I be able to explain things well? What if I didn't know what I was talking about? I wish I could write that I had the best learner ever, that we formed a lasting friendship and made huge progress on his writing style. Unfortunately, I cannot tell a lie.

My initial hour in the booth didn't go exactly as I had planned. "C" and I did not hit it off at all. A comfortable rhythm eluded us, and awkward moments were as frequent as a recurring nightmare. I didn't, however, underestimate the challenge of tutoring an ESL student. Not only do you have to worry about communicating difficult grammar and structure comments, but in some situations communicating simple terms is difficult enough. The language barrier wasn't an easy hurdle to jump -and you could still cut the tension with a knife. While the first session was a little rocky, with the two of us getting to know each other and whatnot, I wasn't too discouraged. I certainly wasn't eager for the next week to roll around either.

The next week did roll around, just like it always does, and "C" was on time. He put his paper in front of me like he did the week before. But this time he whipped out his red pen. I may be a rookie, but I'm not stupid. I know there is no red pen editing in the booth. So, I counteracted his move with a brilliantly clever move of my own. I ignored the pen. To me it wasn't even there, but "C" kept mentioning how he wanted me to proofread his paper for grammar mistakes. We started to read through the paper and I tested him to see if he could identify his errors. From there I began to tackle some of the higher order concerns, such as transitions and sentence fluency. With *The Bedford Handbook* as my guide, I dove into explanations as to the importance of these two elements in writing, but he seemed bored. My dazzling display of knowledge didn't seem to penetrate "C"'s skull. My head was spinning with other methods to reach him. How else could I explain how to write an effective transition?

A trip to the file cabinet bought me some time to pull an astoundingly amazing strategy out of thin air. I thumbed through the folders and handouts, my mind racing. When I got back in the booth, I received a stern talking to. "C" was not pleased with the approach I was taking with him. He pushed his paper directly in front of me and again laid down that dreaded red pen. Much to his dismay, I refused to utilize the instrument he valued so highly. Most students would simply accept this and the ways of the TLC that I explained to him, but "C" was not the typical TLC learner. His volume elevated. His tone became stern and serious. This guy meant business. I tried to keep the most confident front I could. I did NOT want to let him think he was going to get me to crack. His criticisms of my tutoring cut me to the quick and being the emotional person I am; I wanted more than anything to curl into a ball, roll in the corner and cry.

My butt was glued to the chair and I fought the urge to flee the scene. I listened intently to everything "C" threw my direction and once again I railed against my natural instinct to throw it all back in his face. Instead, I calmly restated the purpose of the TLC and how our main goal is always to help students help themselves. As soon as "C" left, every muscle in my body relaxed and I started to shake from the sudden release of tension. Looking back on the situation, I'm glad I had Practicum immediately following this booth session. I sat through class in a daze, shell shocked that I had actually received a lecture in the booth. My mind was a whirlwind of thoughts and I

failed to link two phrases, much less write a coherent log. Only one thing was clear in my mind: I had to talk to Mo or Bobbie. As Practicum drew to a close, one question burned in my mind like a brand on a cow's rump: "Did I do the right thing?"

My discussion with Mo was very reassuring. Multiple times she told me I did everything exactly the way it was supposed to be done. I resisted the desire to drench his paper in red ink, addressed higher order concerns, and allowed "C" to unload his concerns without becoming outrageously defensive. While all these things permitted my heart to beat a little slower, I was still really apprehensive about future tutoring sessions. Deep down in my heart of hearts, I knew I didn't want to face "C" again.

Then, like game show a contestant, I was presented with three doors. Door number one opened to show Mo and/or Bobbie sitting "C" down for a discussion of TLC practices and the lack of red pen editing found in LRC 018. Door number two revealed Dr. Dietrich having a heart-to-heart with "C." Finally, we came to door number three. Behind this door I saw Cheryl reassigning "C" to another tutor. This was the door for me. As soon as Cheryl made the change official on the computer, I felt like a proverbial weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

Perhaps my horror story belongs around a camp fire instead of in a collection of tutoring testimonials. However, there is good news: that session with "C" was by far the worst one I had all semester, and, according to Bobbie and Mo, learners like "C" are as rare as digestible Debot dinners. I'd hate to leave you thinking that every learner will be a royal pain in your bottom, when that really isn't the case. To prove my point, I'd like to offer an example of a '57 learner that was the exact opposite of "C."

I was still nervous the day I met "B" for his first '57 tutorial, but I covered my fears with a big smile and firm handshake. I relaxed a little bit when he grinned back at me. In the booth, "B" and I hit it off like a homerun hitter and a good pitch. We were comfortable just shootin' the breeze about the weekend or classes or the weather whatever. By the end of the semester we had a rhythm. He would come into the TLC, I would grab his folder and off we'd go into the booth. He'd sit in front of the computer and print off his paper for that week and I'd ask him how his weekend was. We'd chat, he'd get his paper from the printer and we'd get down to business. We'd, of course, stray off topic once or twice during that half hour, but ultimately we were really productive.

I had one of my proudest moments with "B." It was about halfway through the semester and we had been working on the same gosh darn paper on Brett Favre the whole time. That week he brought in what he said was his penultimate draft. I leaned back in my chair and said, "How 'bout you read the whole thing to me?"

"Ok," he said. It was at that moment I witnessed my first booth miracle. I listened to "B"'s steady voice read his own writing and then it stopped. "Well that's not right," the voice said. Pencil hit paper and made the change. It happened again and again, at least four more times before he was done reading. My heart skipped a beat. I swallowed hard and began to grin like a Cheshire cat. I had done it! A wave of pure pride washed over me as my brain connected the dots of the spectacle before my eyes. I had taught "B" to recognize his own mistakes! I wanted to leap out of my chair and shout for joy. Once again I denied myself the pleasure of giving into my gut instinct. My recollection of the rest of the tutorial is quite poor since my brain was off doing a victory dance somewhere on cloud nine.

At this point I could cite a laundry list of lessons I've learned from these two very different tutorials, but I'm pretty sure you'd be snoring long before I reached the end. So, to save some trees, I've summed up all these lessons into two very important points. Number one: Don't hesitate to ask for help when you need it. The people

around you - supervisors, colleagues, family, friends and peers - are some of your most valuable resources.

Number two: Let your guard down in front of your learners. You'll both relax and each half hour tutorial will fly by.

