

# R-E-S-P-E-C-T, I'll Show You What It Means to Me, As a Tutor of Course

Travis Peterson

Human beings are creatures in need of connections, and for that reason, I became a reading and writing tutor. My endeavor to become a tutor has, at times, been long and arduous, but I've prevailed among sloppy poems and slipshod argumentative essays to become what one might call an experienced provider. My feelings towards my tutoring position at the TLC are that of one who facilitates thinking, learning, and writing, while also helping a learner find his or her voice. My own experiences as a learner have provided me with countless piles of information that I am now able to apply to being a tutor. I constantly hope to invoke emotion, truth, voice, and style in my learners so that they ultimately make a connection with me in order to feel comfortable with themselves and their own abilities.

I started my journey my first year at UWSP, with a tutor named Sheila. I firmly believe that she gave me the starting point for my views towards being a tutor, while also showing me that I can be who I am without worrying about what anyone else thinks. A good freshman writer will already know where his or her writing stands and I fell into that category. I was good, but not that good. I wanted to write a short story and I had absolutely no experience, but I went at it anyway. I typed away at my computer for weeks, handing in little copies of it to Sheila as I went along. Finally, I came up with a 47-page final rough draft and I took it in to Sheila. I think any tutor would be daunted by such a manuscript, but Sheila took it in stride, told me she'd take it home to read, and tell me what she thought next time. To my surprise, Sheila did just that.

My story was a complicated one, about a gay man with AIDS who befriends a younger boy having major problems with his girlfriend. It was sloppy and unorganized, but it was my first major work. I was proud of it. I was proud that I was finally finding my voice through my stories, writing what I actually wanted to write without having to worry about what a professor might think. I wanted to write about AIDS, friendship, love, lost love, fighting, and even death. So I did, and Sheila went along for the ride without fear, embarrassment, or too much structure. I think that Sheila was proud of it too. That first tutoring experience taught me everything I like about tutoring and everything I try to employ while I tutor.

It is my belief that all human beings simply want to feel comfortable where they are at in life. Starting new schools, new careers, or new relationships are always scary and uncomfortable, just like coming into the booth for the first time. My goal in tutoring is to make my learners feel comfortable, and no matter what we are working on, I feel it is my duty to make them want to come back the next week. I always try to create some kind of connection that the learner can find nowhere else, especially with a learner who is working on creative writing projects. He or she needs to have someone who he or she can trust with his or her inner-most secrets, desires, fantasies, and ideas. Without that connection, everything written and talked about in the booth is completely superficial.

The only way that I was ever made to feel comfortable in the booth was through Sheila, who taught me that not all people in central Wisconsin are closed-minded and bitter towards "different" people. In a University setting, ideas can be acceptable no matter what they are and she showed me to simply find my voice and go with it; say what I want to say. She is my model for the way I tutor. I have a few learners working on poetry and I make sure to tell them that they should not hold anything back "What are you feeling?" I ask, or "Where does this poem come from?" "Are you connected to it in some way?" - All important questions. The connection to the writing is

the key element in creative writing, but the learner also needs to trust and confide in his or her tutor in order to write from the heart; to not hold anything back and to write with conviction and feeling.

Therefore, tutoring is a connection-oriented experience. I have a learner this semester who is working on poetry and I can tell that she has a feminist tone to all of her writing, and knowing that, I try to push her towards that even more because I know that it evokes feeling and emotion in her. Her explanations, ideas, and complications all stem from the ideas she is trying to formulate about what it means to be a woman. Just as I was trying to formulate ideas about what it means to be a gay man with AIDS, she was forming her ideas about the good sides and bad sides to being a woman. She is a rather inexperienced writer, but that makes no difference. I feel just as good helping her, if not better, because I am helping her, in a way, to find who she is and to find the voice inside of her that so desperately wants to come out. I have connected with her in some way so that she feels comfortable telling me that she does not like women who act like Barbie, nor does she ever plan to be like one. I do not think that is something a learner tells just anyone. Writing poetry can be a very personal experience and it can be hard to share it with people, especially a semi-stranger trying to critique it. The importance of that connection, is now, I hope, obvious.

There is also, sometimes, a need for learners to take a break from the standard academic setting. So much of University education stems from remembering and regurgitating information. The tutoring environment provides me, and learners, with the ability to escape that for a while and actually think about human issues and ideas outside of a solely academic setting. For a half an hour each week, I am able to sit down with someone and truly get to know her or him; sit beside him or her and get inside his or her head. Sitting in classes all day can become such a tedious activity - listening to professors drone on about mitosis or the emergence of absolutism in the eighteenth century - but where is the personable aspect of the University education? When is there time for the learner and the professor to sit down and really get to know each other? Will my learner ever be able to sit down with her history professor and tell her that she is really interested in the feminist aspects of history, or is taking a feminist class the only thing that lets that interest shine through? All students want to feel like they are important to the people who are teaching them, and I try to give them that when professors seemingly aren't always able.

I feel, however, that it is *multiple* connections that help students to learn; connections to the material and themselves, not only the professor or the tutor. The truly great student knows exactly who he or she is and what he or she wants to get out of a particular class or assignment. I try to facilitate those kinds of ideas in my tutoring sessions by leaving everything completely open-ended. I try not to impose too much on my learner by sitting back and letting him or her explore the material him/herself. Of course, there are occasions that are different. This model of finding connections and voice works most well for freshmen, or 157 learners who are new to the idea of writing. For a 357 learner, a voice has probably already been found and all that needs to take place is a connection. However, the connection is just as important in a 357 class because the learner will still only write superficially until that connection is made. But I do think that for a 157 learner, finding him/herself even more important than writing well. Finding what interests him or her, what makes him or her angry, sad, or happy, will do more for his or her future writing than telling him or her what is right and wrong with his or her writing. Correction is part of the tutoring process, but I believe it should be a very small part. The bigger part should be the emotions and feelings towards a piece. "Why did you write this?" I ask, and the reply might be vague or it might be exact. Either way, the process towards becoming a good writer who knows him/herself has started.

I don't feel that I can take full credit for my connectedness theory, however, because I owe most of my knowledge to Sheila, even though that was two and a half years ago already. I didn't know then that I would

become a reading and writing tutor, but I remember being incredibly impressed with how well Sheila understood me and my voice - how she was able to see that I was enjoying my writing experience and didn't stop me when the requirements were finished. She went home and spent her own time reading my work, dedicating her time to me. I found a connection with Sheila, and my goal is to find a similar connection with all of my learners. Not every learner is going to find who they are as I tutor her or him, but it is a possibility, one that I like to keep open to every learner that comes my way.

Similarly, not every learner is going to be like me, or like the learner I have now, but tutors can always try to evoke voice and emotion. Even now, as I am in a 357 course, I am able to find connections to my tutors even though I am already a pretty decent writer. Now that I have found my voice in my poetry and fiction, we are able to transcend that and my tutors are able to give me great feedback, but more importantly, friendship.

My tutors since Sheila have also been very open-minded when I wrote about my favorite things: destruction, death, sex, drugs, all of the sometimes grotesque things in life. They never shied away from me or my voice; they grew to respect me and who I was, forming that great connection. I try to do the same thing, and I have modeled all of my tutoring activities on that same tradition. As long as there is a mutual respect between the tutor and learner, nothing can come in the way of a good learning experience for both of them. E.M. Forster once said "only connect." That is all we really need to do as tutors and everything will come in time: the laughter, tears, emotions, voice, style, truths, and ultimately, the human being who knows who he or she is.