

Tutoring - Schwarzenegger Style

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Cory sat at the table with me in Practicum class all semester. He'd good-naturedly make fun of me and the strange, random things that I'd say month after month. He informed me that I do the worst Arnold Schwarzenegger impression he's ever seen. He's probably right. But the imagery is all that concerns me...even with a bad Austrian accent, he still got the idea. "So sit back and listen to my story about the things I have learned about tutoring." (*Yeah, you were supposed to be imagining Arnold's accent just then.*)

My tutoring experience this semester has taken me on an interesting journey. Difficult at times, yes. Definitely. Sometimes, it seemed too difficult to manage. But - in true Schwarzenegger fashion, one must get tough and conquer whatever's waiting in the shadows. (*Okay Schwarzenegger buffs... honestly, I've never seen any Terminator movie and I think I've seen only one Schwarzenegger flick in my life, but the imagery works, I think. Stay with me.*) By getting tough and conquering my fears, my insecurities, and extreme challenges, I think that I've learned a lot about myself and have maybe (just maybe) helped others, too.

My very first tutoring session was the most memorable experience of the semester. I had an appointment with P--. I dutifully found her folder, checked my schedule, and made sure all her paperwork was in the purple '57 folder. I waited expectantly. Sitting near the front desk, I watched as a young woman approached the reception desk and began a discussion with the receptionist about her tutoring session. I thought I heard the young woman say P--. I wondered if that was my appointment... my very first tutoring session. I moved closer to the desk and quietly asked, "Are you P--?" The woman curtly nodded to me. I took the opportunity to introduce myself. She responded with an icy sneer, "Yeah, well... I figured as much since you came over to talk to me." Oye. This was not going to be an easy first experience. I'm sure she's just a little flustered. Maybe she feels a little out of place, I rationed.

We took a seat in the "Cowboy Booth" and looked at her '57 folder. I noticed that she chose to write three sets of 4 poems. That's cool, I thought. Poems. I like poetry. This is going to be neat. I tried to make a little small talk with P-- and let her know I was excited to be working with her. She just sat there and stared at me, like I had horns growing out of my head or I had sprouted an extra nose. Okay, I thought. Let's just move on to the work. Maybe she's just really motivated and wants to get right to it. I asked her if she had brought any poetry with her. She said she did and produced it. "It's only handwritten," she mumbled. "That's totally fine!" I replied. "Let's have a look." It was a fairly short, free-form poem. It was good... full of detail, with a strong, vibrant ending. I told her so. Not even a tiny smile or any recollection that she had even understood what I had just said. No response... none. We talked (or I talked) about the expectations of the course and about what types of things she wanted to work on. No response, not even to my most direct questions. The only thing I was able to extract from her was that she mostly wrote free-form poems right now. I asked her if it would be okay if she brought in a revised copy of her current poem and another draft of a different poem. She mumbled, "Okay." I told her I would take a look at different forms and types of poetry and maybe we could experiment with other forms together.

"Okay," she mumbled.

I couldn't believe it, but our time was actually up. I remained cheerful (even though I felt like crying my eyes out) and told her I was looking forward to our next visit... even though I was secretly hoping the ground would swallow me up and I'd never have to tutor again. I thought I was worthless. A terrible tutor.

A stupid idiot who was not cut out for this. I was dreading my next session with P--. I had another '57 learner come in the following day for a tutoring session and she was congenial and very easy to work with.

But still—my spirits were down. I had to face P-- again next week.

My next session with P-- was almost as bad as the first. A tiny piece of writing to work with (although *very* well written) and not so much as a peep from the learner. More icy stares. One of my instructors stopped by the booth to share some information with me and commented to me after the session that she suspected I had a genuine challenge on my hands. I asked if I was doing something wrong. She told me I wasn't. She told me I was exuding warmth and was doing just fine. Well, that took a little pressure off. So I didn't really have something sprouting from my head, even if P-- kept looking at me as if I did. I'm doing okay. That was a big step for me to admit that I was trying and doing okay. My instructor asked me if I wanted to give the learner over to a more experienced tutor or if a senior staff member should take over for a session. At that point, I made a decision. I told my instructor that I'd give it one more shot and then we could sit down and talk it over. I was doing okay. So I wasn't gonna let P-- win... not like this. Time to get tough. Schwarzenegger tough. "Oh, yah."

Third meeting with P--. It was a "make or break" scenario in my mind. If she continued to be rude, nearly completely silent and icy this time, I just didn't think I would be able to get through the rest of the semester. It wouldn't do either of us any good, I decided. The time had arrived. Showtime.

P-- walked in, sour as ever. "Damn," I thought. "Let's do this." I felt like I was getting ready to stand up to the school bully. I remained warm, cheerful, and professional while we made our way over to the booth.

But inside, I felt like Arnold Schwarzenegger... tough, man, real tough. I was careful not to be too chipper for fear of appearing condescending. I asked her if she brought in a poem for us to look at today. She barely looked at me and responded with a poisonous tone that she wouldn't have come in today if she didn't have anything written. Yikes... okay. Still icier than ever, eh P--? I told myself not to give up. Think Schwarzenegger, I told myself. She produced a list poem out of her folder and we read it. Surprisingly, it was quite witty and charming. I told her I was kind of having a rough day (even though I really wasn't) and that it was nice to read something that brought a smile to my face. She replied (with extra ice) that it was good that she didn't bring in something dark. I softly chuckled and told her that would've been okay, too. I told her it would have fostered my dark, brooding, artistic side. I'm not going to let you win, I thought. We talked a little about what she liked to write about. She *actually* engaged in a conversation with me. She sort of let on that she hasn't really brought in anything that reflected her "true" voice because she didn't think I would like it. I told her that I liked lots of different things and am very open-minded. I told her I love art and poetry and that writing - any kind of creative writing - *is* an art. I told her to do it... bring something in... try to shock me. I thought to myself, "Yah - dat's right." Peek over that wall. It's okay. I won't judge you. Let's write and be creative and have some fun. She was quiet for a few moments and asked to see the poetry forms book again. Right on! I eagerly ran for the forms book and brought it back to her. No smile yet, but man! *She was talking to me*. Sometimes she would say some very rude things, but what an improvement! I just let the comments roll off my ducky little back and kept her talking.

She poured over the forms book and saw the sections on songs. She looked at me (yep, looked at *me*) and asked if she could write some song lyrics. Right on, I replied. Do it! She almost cracked a smile. She asked me if she could use a few words from a foreign language in her poetry. Yes, I responded. I asked her about her language background and she prattled on for a few moments. I was practically bursting at the seams. Our time was up, so we chatted a bit about what she would be working on for the next session. I said good-bye and

she just walked away without responding. "Hasta la vista, baby!" You made progress today, P--. I'm not your enemy. I'm just your tutor. I fairly skipped into my instructor's office to tell her the "make or break" session was a make. Definitely a "make." In my head, I was so tough - like Schwarzenegger, man.

After that last session with P--, I found myself anticipating the next appointment with mixed feelings. Although we'd made a lot of progress, I was still sort of dreading our next meeting. It took *a lot* of energy to get her to contribute, and she was still so rude. Buck up Schwarzenegger, I told myself. This is what you're here for. The really rewarding, important stuff is *never* easy. It'll make you a better tutor and a better person. It will be a growing experience. "Okay, yah...let's get dis shindig staarted."

I then asked her how her sonnet was going... She had been working on a sonnet last week to bring in, but I had yet to see it. She said she scrapped her first draft and was starting over. Disappointed that she never shared her first sonnet with me, I asked her about the new draft and if she was having problems with it. She let on that she was still really unsure about her ability to write sonnets. I gently encouraged her to bring in a draft, even if it wasn't finished or she wasn't happy with it.

We still had some time left and I asked her what she would like to do with the remaining time. She asked me if we could do a poetry exercise together. I nearly fell off my chair. I went to the file cabinet to find an appropriate exercise to do with her. I came back with a "Do you see what I see?" exercise and we looked over the details together. It took us forever to decide on a topic to write about. Everything I suggested, she didn't like. So I told her to decide. And I sat in silence forever (I know it was only 30 seconds, but it felt like forever). She said she wanted to write about the cover of a puzzle box. I told her that was a great idea and we started writing. Then, we shared our writing. I made a joke about what I had written and she actually laughed. Holy cow! She was laughing with me! The mood in that booth actually got silly for a few moments. I could hardly believe it. I was close to hyperventilating... it felt so strange to be laughing with P--. Good. But so, so strange. Our time was up and I jokingly told her I wanted to see the sonnet. She laughed and said next time, her poem would be a surprise... she wasn't going to tell me what she was going to bring in. I told her that was fine and I would be looking forward to next week. She walked out with a short "good-bye." Wow - what a trip. I felt completely discombobulated.

Our next few sessions moved along. There were still challenges, but many improvements. P-- even shared with me in one of the sessions that she had won an award for a poem in high school and that she was working off of this piece to write her new sonnet. I encouraged her to bring in both the original piece and whatever she had on the new sonnet. Every week, I'd cross my fingers and hope that the poems would surface from her folder. Then, something kind of cool happened. P-- was scheduled to come in for her session on my birthday. And wouldn't you know, P-- brought in her old piece and her new sonnet. Happy Birthday, Amanda "Schwarzenegger." Both pieces were amazing. And I couldn't help it. No more Schwarzenegger. Not today anyway. I took a chance and told her how talented I thought she was as a writer. She let her guard down and told me she's really struggling this semester (her first semester in college!) and that she feels like she "sucks" as a writer. I told her I disagreed and that the voice she portrays in her writing and the subjects she writes about say a lot about who she is as a person. I told her it showed me that she's not afraid to think outside that preverbal box and that she's smart and witty and thinks really, really deep. I told her how exciting that was and how much these attitudes and writing styles would help her in her college career. She sheepishly told me that she hasn't decided on a major. The rest of the session was no longer about poetry. But that was okay. We were okay. I told her that freshman courses and General Degree Requirements were tough. But I told her to follow her instincts and take one class a semester, just one class that instinctively feels like a "guilty pleasure." If you dug that class, maybe you've found something you want to major in. Maybe not. Then take another "guilty pleasure" the following

semester... see where it leads you. She just stared at me. But not like before. Suddenly, that thing (whatever it was) was not sprouting from my head. She was just - I don't know - at a loss for words. I apologized for my sentimental outburst and blamed it on the fact that I was nearer to thirty than I was last year and maybe I was getting sappy in my old age. She told me no, I wasn't. She genuinely smiled at me. I could see she was still scared. That was okay. I just smiled back. I didn't really need to be Schwarzenegger anymore. The battle was won.

I learned so much from P--. I hoped she learned a little bit from me. She is a great writer... so very talented. I still feel miniscule in my writing abilities if I compare myself to her. *No way* can I write poems like she does. So what in the world was I doing tutoring her? *What in the world was I doing tutoring her?*

I don't know. I'm still trying to figure that one out.