

Tutoring a Subject You Know Nothing About

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As you walk into the Tutoring Learning Center you notice many things such as the tables, colorful posters, cubicles, and the many different students who make the TLC their home. There are nervous freshmen, ESL students, and the noisiest group of all, the tutors. The Tutoring Learning Center is home to a wide variety of students from all different majors and backgrounds. These tutors have answered the question of, "What is your major?" so many times, that they have come to expect the, "How can you help me with this when it isn't even in your major?" that inevitably follows. Although the tutors smile and have a pat answer handy, the question is a valid one. How can you tutor something you know nothing about and feel comfortable doing so? The answer to this lies in several different places. First of all, reading and writing is not a subject the tutors are ignorant of. As tutors, we are students who are successful at reading and writing papers; as students, we have learned the ropes and have discovered what it is that professors want from their students. Secondly, much as becoming a successful student is a learning process, so is becoming a successful tutor. An important distinction to make at this point is that the tutor is not responsible for teaching a subject; that is the teacher's job. A tutor is, however, responsible for helping the student understand and process the information that a teacher has given them. By this definition, it is not necessary for a tutor to know everything about every subject; it is only necessary for the tutor to know how to help the student. Therefore, the tutors are qualified to help learners with many different types of subjects.

One common aspect of all the reading/writing tutors is that they are chosen because of their success at reading and writing papers. The tutors are generally upperclassmen who have experience in writing papers across disciplines and gleaning content from their readings. This experience may come from General Degree Requirement classes, classes within their major, or even leisure reading. The tutor's knowledge of reading and writing should help decrease the worries of the tutor and the student. Generally, when confronted with a paper outside of their area of expertise, what the tutors do is not correct the factual information, but ensure that the arguments are well-supported and seem logical. This may take the form of asking the learner questions about their writing or talking through what the tutor has comprehended from the reading.

This all sounds good in theory, but what happens when a tutor who has never taken a film class is confronted with a film paper? First, a sense of panic or self-doubt will probably set in. However, after taking a deep breath, the tutor will plunge in. Again, armed with the knowledge that the tutor is a successful reader and writer, they can feel confident reading the paper and giving feedback on it. Perhaps all that is needed is for the tutor to ask for clarification of a sentence or the purpose of the piece; or it might not be that easy, the tutor and learner may have to make a trip to the filing cabinets or bookshelves to figure something out. Several tutors have found that the best way to deal with a learner who brings in an unfamiliar subject is to be up-front with the learner; the tutor should explain that they are unfamiliar with the subject matter but would be happy to read the paper for the learner. This often puts the learner at ease since most first time learners in the TLC think that the tutor will be a demi-god when it comes to the subject matter. By showing the learner that they are on equal footing when it comes to the subject matter, mutual respect can more easily be developed.

Chris Anson in *Teaching Composition* states that, "in teaching writing we are also teaching people how to explore who they are and, in the process, change what and how they think" (1995, p. 396). However, the learner is not the only one who can change what and how they think by exploring the ideas presented in papers. The tutoring process is therefore a learning one for both the learner and the tutor. As tutors we want the learner to

"outgrow" their tutor. "Tutorial conversation may also deal with the writer's anxiety, poor motivation, cultural confusions, ineffective or dysfunctional composing strategies, lack of knowledge, or inability to follow assignment directions" (Harris, 1992, p. 373). By focusing on these items instead of just strictly focusing on reading and writing, the tutor helps the learner to expand as a writer not just produce writing.

As a tutor I prefer to be a "sounding board" for ideas. I want the learners to feel comfortable asking questions or proposing answers to questions asked about their writing. Tutors are not proofreaders nor are they editors; they are peers. Much like life, tutoring is a learning process. No one instinctively knows the perfect questions to ask; the skills are developed over time. Not knowing a subject is sometimes the best way in which to help the learner see what someone else will read in their paper. In this way I feel that the learner is able to grow more than if we as tutors just correct their writing.

Works Cited

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