

Training writing lab tutors

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Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute has recently established a voluntary, drop-in writing lab which has had a very successful first year as measured by attendance and student evaluations. Because there is no required writing course at our institution and because attendance at the lab is totally voluntary, we emphasize one-to-one tutoring. Tutors teach by asking students to write and by giving feedback through a dialogue about the student's writing. With the emphasis on one-to-one tutoring, such a lab is only as good as its tutors, who must be trained in effective tutoring techniques. These are some of the basic instructions I give to my tutors, which I believe are essential to good tutoring in any kind of writing lab.

First of all, tutors are told that they are the writing lab and that their performance makes the lab a success or a failure. I encourage them to make suggestions, generate new materials, establish personal relationships with their tutees. In other words, they are encouraged to do more than punch in and punch out. Working with students on a one-to-one basis means personal involvement.

Secondly, I stress the importance of details like being on time and keeping accurate and thorough records. The lab's very survival depends on these mundane matters. A lackadaisically run lab does not inspire confidence, and records of attendance and students' progress are crucial to renewal, funding, and good public relations.

Third, before they can begin to work with students, tutors have to understand who and what the lab is for. Our voluntary, drop-in lab is open to all students, undergraduate or graduate, who want help with their writing or a writing-related problem. Tutors must be flexible enough to respond to whoever comes in for whatever reason. We do not turn anyone away. Some students want to come in regularly for a course in writing improvement; some want help on a particular assignment; some want a quick answer for a minor point of grammar; some want tips on resumes and letters of application. We also work with students with special needs, such as foreign students and those working on theses. Often we become informal academic advisers and personal counselors. For those in serious trouble, we act as a referral center. I regard the writing lab as a legitimate resource for all of these needs. Although we emphasize writing instruction, the one-to-one tutoring situation creates the opportunity for other kinds of interaction. Consequently, the writing lab is one of the few academic offerings on campus in which the student is treated as a whole person.

Once the tutors are aware of the basic ground rules discussed above, they are ready to begin tutoring. Again, I emphasize some seemingly trivial details because they are important to the success of a tutoring program. Tutors must keep an eye out for students hesitantly approaching the lab, go forward to greet them, and

begin introductions. Tutors should always try to seat the student *beside* them, to avoid distancing and formality. Sitting side by side is also the only effective way two people can work on a piece of writing. The tutor should begin the interview by asking questions about why the student has come to the lab and by giving positive encouragement about what the student can accomplish there.

All of these practices are good psychology for a voluntary lab. Students are often hesitant about coming in and revealing "weaknesses" or "problems." The tutor must give positive encouragement right away and establish an informal atmosphere so that an effective tutoring session can take place. Furthermore, first impressions are important since a tutor may not have an entire semester to "get through" to the student as in a traditional classroom setting. Strangely enough, however, these simple steps toward establishing a personal relationship are often difficult for tutors to perform. Some tutors may be uneasy about initiating conversations with strangers, projecting enthusiasm continually, or asking students to sit in a certain place instead of wherever natural inclination leads them. (Given the opportunity to choose, students will often sit across from the tutor in the teacher-learner position we've all been trained to assume.)

Actual tutoring begins with a piece of the student's writing, so the tutor must generate a writing sample if the student has not brought one along, which is not uncommon. The tutor's first job is to make students aware that they will improve their writing only by writing, and that they must devote some time to the process. Students who intended to drop in for five minutes must be persuaded to stay longer, to write something, and to return with more examples of their own writing. Students should be encouraged to attend repeatedly if they really want to work on writing.

Once the tutor and student have a writing sample, a dialogue can begin. The tutor should always begin by commenting about what students have done well because, as we all know, discussing people's writing is very close to examining their sense of self. People are very defensive about criticism of their writing and are more ready to see their flaws after they have been reassured about their successes. There is always something to praise even if the tutor is reduced to saying something like, "You've chosen a good topic" or "I can see you put a lot of work into this."

Immediately after praising the student's effort, the tutor should ask some questions. After all, if students voluntarily come to a lab with their work, they must have something in mind. Tutors should let themselves be guided by their students at the beginning because in this way tutors will tend to answer the questions uppermost in students' minds, allay false fears, and begin a learning dialogue in which the students are actively involved. When tutors follow this routine, the timid are reassured, and the tough-minded-you can depend on it--speak up and demand tough criticism.

Again, these simple preliminaries toward establishing a working relationship are also often difficult to put into practice. Our own schooling has trained us as teachers to look at student writing with a critical eye, searching for errors. We must train ourselves to look for strengths first and to let students voice their concerns before we impose ours on them. We must train our tutors to do so, too.

I help my tutors shift from a negative to a positive approach by encouraging them to begin a discussion of a student's writing by considering what the student

wants to say and how to say it most effectively. Discussion of an instructor's requirements will also enter in here. Students should be asked to make corrections and revisions right there in the lab, the tutor allowing them to work alone and to return for further comment. Tutors should refrain from making corrections on students' papers: students should write everything themselves. Our lab is intended to be a place where students spend time actively working and learning. Again, it is often difficult to keep this process going, but this learning situation is the ultimate goal of the tutoring process.

After discussing what students want to say, tutors should select the most important problems to work on and discuss and revise them one at a time. Giving students too much criticism at once is counterproductive: students are often mentally paralyzed by excessive negative criticism; they are unable to distinguish between major and minor errors when bombarded with a list of "everything that's wrong"; and, from a practical point of view, a person is capable of analyzing and correcting errors only one at a time, not all at once. One of the most important teaching tasks that a lab tutor performs is selecting the most important areas for revision in a student paper and guiding the student through the revisions sequentially. I help my tutors to determine what to discuss with students by stressing the primary importance of critical thinking, that is, the organization and development of ideas. This means that prewriting and composing should be dealt with before looking at details of style and grammar, even for students who have serious difficulties with the latter. I also remind my tutors to maintain the dialogue approach when advising the students on major revisions. All revisions should be discussed, and students should do all the actual rewriting. Through questions and discussion the tutor should help students formulate their own ideas rather than adopt the tutor's opinions.

My emphasis on teaching writing through writing and dialogue leads to a secondary role for texts and other instructional materials. I encourage my tutors to familiarize themselves with the lab's materials so that they can use them appropriately, but I also stress that books and exercises are less important than a dialogue about students' writing. I ask my tutors to use prepared texts to keep students occupied while waiting or to reinforce a point made in the context of a student's work. I further encourage them to make readings and exercises a part of the dialogue by always discussing such work with students after it is done.

Three problem areas are typical of this type of tutoring service. One is getting students to spend enough time at the lab to benefit in any perceptible way. Voluntary drop-ins expect quick results and find it difficult to give the lab much of their time. There is no easy solution to this problem except to continue to be as positive, encouraging, and productive as possible while students are in the lab. Students will respond to positive experiences and rewards, like better grades, which often do result from writing lab tutoring.

A second problem is that students coming to the lab because of poor performance in class may be hostile. Tutors can be valuable counselors to these hostile students by deflecting their hostility and channelling their emotions into productive work. Since the source of students' anger is seldom the lab or the tutor, most tutors should find it relatively easy to remain calm and discuss the students' feelings in a detached manner. Most students will eventually agree that they have to

satisfy their instructors regardless of how they feel about them, and can feel ready to get down to work once they accept the idea that extra help in the lab just may do the trick. Under no circumstances should a tutor criticize a teacher or allow the student to create a rivalry between the lab and the classroom teacher. After all, a lab exists not to compete with teachers, but to help students perform better in the classroom. Students should always realize that they alone are responsible for understanding the nature of an assignment and for the quality of the work they turn in. Although the lab can help, the lab cannot guarantee a specific grade. It is best to state these facts very clearly to a student who is having problems with a particular course.

A third common problem is the tendency of passive or manipulative students to try to get a tutor to do their assignments for them. If the tutor insists on dialogue, practice, and comment as described above, the passive learner will be forced to think and write actively. Sometimes tutors need inhuman patience to avoid telling a student what to do or seizing a pen to make corrections themselves. Sometimes the tutor must simply stop and tell students that they have to continue on their own. Of course, there is a thin line between helping and taking over, but once tutors are aware that the line is there, they should be prepared to back off.

These are the preliminary instructions my tutors receive based on my own years of experience as a tutor, teacher, and lab director. My methods are based on a belief that people learn to write by writing, getting feedback, and revising. An effective tutor facilitates this learning process and adds one very powerful ingredient: personal attention. Similarly, people learn to tutor by doing it. Once tutors receive some basic orientation, they become expert only by practicing under supervision and by imitating experienced tutors. The positive response that the new writing lab at RPI has received has shown that this kind of tutoring can be effective and make an impact in a very short time.