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Practical Techniques for Training Tutors to Overcome Defensive Blocks

Loretta Cobb

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Since Mina Shaughnessy and others have given us “permission” to view the basic writer with more humane eyes, even the most traditional teacher of composition is more aware of the feelings that block communication. In fact, as Prof. Shaughnessy points out in *Errors and Expectations*, “it is not unusual to find among freshmen essays a handwriting that belies the maturity of a student, reminding the reader instead of the labored cursive style of children.” Because they have had such limited experience as writers, they are often ashamed about their handwriting as well as their content. Those of us who work exclusively with basic writers see countless students who are capable of competent writing, but who must first peel away the layers of defenses they have used for cover. They “hate to write.” They “can’t write.” They had either a “lazy high school teacher” or one who relentlessly murdered their thoughts with her red dagger/pen. Perhaps the one comment that prompts even the most dedicated lab director to yawn is, “I went to the prom the night before the ACT.” I feel strongly that a writing center staff should understand these defenses and should learn practical techniques to help students peel them away. When a mind is blocked, no tutoring really takes place.

Recently I had an experience that may have done more to improve my performance as a lab director than a summer’s reading in current composition research. I’ve been driving for 18 years...ok...sorta. I’ve never had a serious accident or a ticket. I’ve been “getting by.” I have a

lot of students who've been talking and writing for 18 years...ok...sorta, just "getting by." However, I'm not sure I've ever empathized as much with them as I did when I decided to take a traffic safety course in High Performance Driving to improve my skills. My husband has owned a T.R. 7 for five years, and I've never been able to master driving it. My friends still think I'm cool anyway, but students are horrified. I have a hard time steering, shifting gears, working the clutch, and thinking about driving simultaneously. It's the way some freshmen feel when they have to simultaneously think about a topic, keep the essay organized, and remain alert for mechanical errors. I am a competent, worthwhile human being, but I certainly didn't feel that way as I entered my class. I felt dumb and foolish and nervous. I had to clear my throat frequently; in order to cover that evidence of my nervousness, I did something very bright—I started chainsmoking. As my classmates began to arrive, I was amazed. I was not sure that I—a mature woman—could survive a day with them. (Since there were only three in the class, I survived.) The young man arrived first in a bright red M.G. revving up the motor and making whoooooom-whoooooom sounds. I decided, after some awkward attempts to talk, that I could dismiss him as the arrogant type who is "into cars." Then, of all things, a young lady arrived in a souped-up Trans Am, making whooom-whoooooom sounds. She was elated and began making conversation with the boy—in terms I couldn't understand—about cars and driving and what fun this course was going to be. Fun! To me this was frightening, even though the instructor assured us that we could not possibly have a wreck. At the end of the day, I felt like a wreck, but I had learned a lot, and as I pieced my confidence back together I discovered that my driving skills had, in fact, improved.

This incident sums up, for me, what we're about in writing centers: piecing confidence back together and improving basic skills. Since we use undergraduate staffing exclusively at my institution, I find it imperative to train our tutors to understand the defensive behavior of our students and to help the students overcome the blocks and move on to productive work in writing skills. This training actually begins in the initial interview when I ask each tutor how she feels about working with developmental students. I am always quick to point out that this work can be frustrating and that it requires a special kind of dedication.

In an early training session, we ask a consultant from the Counseling Center to talk with tutors about Values Clarification. Since they are outstanding, intellectual English majors, they often need to stifle a sigh. However, as the session unravels, they find it truly enlightening

and a very practical session. We begin by asking them to list, as a group, qualities that they value. Invariably, we get such responses as: punctuality, academic achievement, perseverance, loyalty, enthusiasm for intellectual pursuit, etc. We list all these qualities on newsprint and then have a discussion concerning values. We ask such questions as:

Why are these qualities valuable to you?

As a result of these values what immediate rewards do you obtain?

As a result of these values, what long-range rewards do you expect?

Why do we admire people who share our values?

The discussion always flows well and provides insights that many tutors have not considered before.

Next we present an “entirely different segment” in the program about dealing honestly with feelings. We ask them to list some words that describe the students they are working with. They are usually slow to believe that we really want honesty but as they warm to this exercise, they could go on forever. Again, invariably, we get such responses as: lazy, dependent, lacks initiative, no-shows, no respect for course content, no enthusiasm for writing, etc. Most tutors have known that they have these negative feelings about the values of many tutees, but they’ve seldom been given permission to discuss those feelings with other tutors and with professional staff. It often shocks them to realize that others share these frustrations. In fact, I remember being surprised myself to discover what hidden feelings I had. It is such a relief to discover that we don’t have to be perfect martyrs to assist the students we work with. Then we proceed with the following questions:

Why do tutees experience these feelings?

What techniques might we use to change their attitudes?

More specifically, how can we teach them to touch their own power—to help themselves?

Generally, we discuss the importance of recognizing the worth of each individual, nurturing self-confidence and instilling in the tutee a respect for his writing and the importance of punctuality and loyalty concerning appointments and commitments. We have often found that setting up short-term commitments helps. Rather than saying, “You need to work two hours a week for the entire semester!” we have found that students build trust faster if we suggest a commitment of four appointments. At the time of re-assessment, they often realize that they need to work longer.

The third segment involves putting all the newsprint back up and searching for a solution to this stressful clash of values. Obviously, tutors cannot be honest with their feelings all the time or none of us would have jobs. Nevertheless, we find it necessary for them to honestly recognize these differences in values and then learn to understand and care about the people they work with. We also assure them that we will provide them with appropriate channels to vent their frustration in professional and confidential settings.

Regular staff meetings provides such a setting. Yesterday, we met for an hour and discussed the students they are having problems with. These are typical examples:

Tutor problem:

Leopoldo—a Spanish speaking student has great difficulty speaking and writing English. His teacher has asked him to work extensively in the center, but he is proud and somewhat reluctant to do so. When he does come, he wants all my attention.

Group solution:

He is a very intelligent engineering student. Discuss math with him and compliment his success. Make sure that he knows you are aware that language limitations make us feel “dumb” when we are not. Try to learn a little Spanish from him; exhibit a respect for his native language. Learn to get him started on an assignment, tactfully excuse yourself and work with other students, and then come back to check on him periodically.

Tutor problem:

Susan is a sorority girl who is very outgoing and attractive, but she doesn't really feel that it's “cool” to have to work in the writing center. She's willing to go through the motions, but she is not really committed to hard work and concentration, which is vital since diction and coherence are her major problems.

Group Solution:

Appeal to her pride. Point out to her that she is (only because it's true) attractive and articulate. She can use her voice, which is well modulated, her eyes, her smile, and her hands to com-

municate when speaking. All of this makes her a confident speaker, but it leaves her in a bind when she communicates as a writer. If she understands this discrepancy, she may be more motivated to bridge the gap between her spoken and written English. Incidentally, it is fortunate that her tutor happens to be a sorority sister.

These are only two sketches of the six students we discussed, and we will continue to share progress reports. The tutors appreciate the support and suggestions they receive from each other, as well as guidance based on the experience of the Lab Director.

Another excellent and very practical channel for monitoring progress is to have the tutors keep a journal. When professional demands such as conferences take the director out of the lab setting, tutor training can still go on. On such occasions I have asked my tutors to keep a journal regarding various topics. This is an especially helpful activity when contact with the supervisor is limited. The journal entries enable the tutors to express frustration and/or exhilaration about their tutoring experiences, with the knowledge that the entries will be read with concern and that appropriate feedback will be given by the director and/or the other tutors. I feel that this sort of communication provides an avenue for that vital support that makes good tutor morale possible.

Recently, I asked the tutors to keep a journal about “difficult” students, citing specific examples of tutoring techniques that they used to overcome resistance. The following excerpt was especially helpful:

How to put a student at ease:

Our center is relatively informal. The atmosphere helps to create an easy-going mood. If a student seems really uptight and nervous, I’ll suggest we move to the couch or the easy chairs in the corner and just talk. Sometimes a student is eager to talk about himself/herself; that’s okay up to a point, but I usually try to steer the conversation back to English.

Sometimes, it’s not a matter of overcoming defensiveness in a student. It’s overcoming defensiveness in a tutor. I’ve had one or two students in the past who seemed eager to jump all over my explanations and tear them apart with insidious questions. Let’s face it, occasionally I wanted to just cry! Then, I began to realize that the student’s aggressive manner was a cover-up for—yes, that’s right—his inadequacy in English. In other words, it is just another type of defensiveness. Once the student is encouraged to give up those feelings of inadequacy and realize that everyone doesn’t know everything, he/she can be one of the most rewarding students to work with. I say rewarding because this student has an inquisitive nature. Otherwise, how could he/she possibly manage to destroy our explanations in the first place?

One of the best ways to train tutors to overcome resistance is by having weekly meetings with the lab director and other tutors. This helps tutors let out their frustration over a particular problem student and also offers feedback on how to deal with that student. It's not at all unusual for me to wonder, "What would Amy or Sandy do with this student?" Keeping in touch with the other tutors and the director is important because it gives you moral support, added resources to draw on, and a good working relationship.

—Michele Frankenberg

After several years of experience, every director has a list of do's and don'ts that must become second nature—immediately—to any tutor. This is the portion of our list that deals with defensiveness:

- Greet students immediately
- Learn names quickly
- Recognize non-verbal signals—and be aware of your own
- Don't just have a good layout and comfy sofa—use it
- Laugh when it feels natural—it helps
- Compliment, but never lie—you can always find something nice to say
- It's okay to make a little small talk
- Let students vent their hostility, but be professional

The list could go on, and so could this paper, but I think I'll conclude with my favorite incident from this semester. We had a regular Wednesday "group" that just meshed spontaneously. Three boys and one girl started working on the same unit, and as they checked their answers, they actually started arguing. I heard, "Hey man, that's dumb! Don't put no comma there; it's only two verbs!" They were friends, so that was okay. Then the other two woke up and joined the fun. These students were so witty and attractive that we looked forward to the Wednesday afternoon performance. They were terrific and we told them so. Of course, they loved it. I also checked with their teachers, and each of them made marked improvement in a month's time. I also called the "leader" of the Wednesday Afternoon Players and asked him what qualities about the center helped him overcome any defensiveness he might have felt. He said, "Without a doubt it has to be the sense of humor. Your tutors recognize wit and talent when they see it." I also asked him what kind of car he drives, and he said, "A T.R. 7...whooom, whooom!"