Ethics of Peer Tutoring in Writing

Gary Lichtenstein

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Gary Lichtenstein is an undergraduate tutor at the University of California-Berkley.

A peer tutor provides students with, among other things, a model for independent learning. Perhaps the word "model" immediately conjures images of one student demonstrating to another "how it's done" by writing a paper for him, or with him, thus showing how to write by example. Certainly such an approach is one type of model. But it is not the kind of model that we provide at the Student Learning Center. What kind of model, then, do we provide?

When I began trying to define exactly what model for learning we construct, and how, I found myself only able to explain tutoring in terms of what we don't do, rather than what we do: "I never do a student's work," "I never make negative comments about grading policy of any instructor," "I am never late to appointments." Rather than reconstructing a coherent set of guidelines I adhere to while tutoring, I had collected a group of defensive assertions. My assertions were as useful for describing my tutoring as would be trying to explain how I swim by declaring I don't breathe under water.

Next, I thought I would define modeling by describing *what* I do during the tutorial. But, like many other writing tutors, I have developed my own process for helping students become self-sufficient learners, so to simply describe that process wouldn't explain the principles that my work shares with other tutors.

The question then became, *why* does it work: what are the motives behind the process? And the answer I came up with is that tutoring works because tutors, knowingly or not, adhere to certain values, ethics, which embody the spirit and principles of collaborative learning. Each tutor's approach is different; but the fact that we are all focusing

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on developing our students' thinking processes[1] unifies our purpose, and thus unifies underlying principles behind peer tutoring.

What I have done, then, is articulate six principles which I believe provide the foundation for the various thinking processes tutors model. I don't assume the following six ethics form a complete list. I do hope, however, that it will help generate an awareness of the complexity of tutoring, as well as help peer tutors understand more clearly their own process of helping students become independent learners.

I think all tutors and teachers will recognize the first ethic, that no tutoring relationship can develop unless a tutor *gains and maintains the trust of a tutee.* Most students correctly perceive their writing as a reflection of their ideas, but incorrectly perceive their poor writing as a reflection of stupidity. For this reason students feel quite vulnerable approaching any outside source for help in writing—especially a peer, even if she is a tutor. In order to help a student feel comfortable sharing intimate ideas, the tutor must display both a professional interest in her student's writing, and a sensitivity to a student's emotional needs.

In the November, 1981, issue of *College English* (p. 745), Kenneth Bruffee wrote that we must become more aware than we are of the emotional undercurrents in learning. As peer tutors, we must clearly demonstrate that we are willing to accept responsibility for supporting the fragile egos of our peers when they are threatened by their own writing and the grading of that writing. Also, we should understand that writing may not be the focal point of the lives of the students we work with. This means we shouldn't over-schedule a student, or assign an excessive number of exercises to a student. This is not to say that an extra meeting before a midterm or a pertinent grammar handout should never be recommended, but any extra work on the student's part should be as carefully considered as if the tutor had to put in the time to do it herself.

We can maintain the trust of tutees by establishing a professional relationship with them. Students have a right to expect certain considerations on our part. If we are late for appointments, if we violate the confidentiality of the tutor/tutee relationship, if we make promises about the student's work that we cannot keep, we risk destroying the confidence students place in us. Without that confidence and trust, a student will refuse to share his writing, and thus his ideas, making any possibility of productive tutoring impossible.

In order for students to create and present ideas on their own, they must develop a process they can rely on to guide them. The second ethic

proposes that *tutors should present writing as a process, rather than use the tutorial as a product review.*

Our ultimate goal with each of our students is to work ourselves out of a job. If a student comes to me with a paper she wants edited two hours before it's due, and I do it, her grade may improve, but her writing will not. I am more concerned about a student's writing improvement than I am her grade, even if she happens to be more concerned with the grade.

We tutor at Berkeley primarily on a continuing basis, meeting on the average of once a week with a student throughout the quarter. We use this time to discuss understanding the assignment, developing a thesis statement, outlining, prewriting, revising and proofreading. We emphasize those steps we believe the student needs most help learning. In this way we hope to get students to recognize that their final product is the culmination of a refinement process. Once students shift their emphasis from getting the paper written, to the process of writing the paper, they begin to formulate their own model for creating essays. Developing a working model for themselves fosters the confidence they need to attempt the writing process on their own.

The third ethic is closely related to that of presenting writing as a process, but is so important it's worth distinguishing. In order to focus on the process of writing, a tutor must *transcend the mechanics of it.* I'm not saying that tutors ignore grammar and spelling. In the writing center at Berkeley, written and computerized grammar exercises reinforce the effort we put into improving students' foundations in sentence structure. Sometimes our only success with a student during a quarter seems to be eliminating a verb tense problem or run-on sentences. But concentrating on grammar alone often amounts to nothing more than patchwork. A modification or coordination error can result not only from misunderstanding grammar, but also from confusion about content and organization.

Many students worry more about correct mechanics than they do about the communication of well developed ideas. A tutor has an obligation to let a student know that a grammatically perfect paper may not be a perfect paper. There is more to a sentence than properly placed nouns, verbs, direct objects. Tutors should help sutdents study beyond the sentence structure to the thought motivating the entire sentence. This means asking the student not only what is grammatically wrong with a sentence, but why he chose to place that sentence there in the first place.

During the process of tutoring, tutors must consciously reinforce the fact that it is the development and presentation of the student's ideas

that tutoring is concerned with. Tutors achieve this by adhering to the fourth ethic: *while it is our purpose to involve ourselves with a student's thinking, it is contrary to our purpose to interfere with it.*

One criticism of tutors is that sometimes we haven't read the books we help students write about. Critics wonder if this isn't a case of the blind leading the blind. It isn't. Our goal as tutors is to help students learn to communicate *their* insights to others. While it can be helpful to familiarize ourselves with a text, it is not our job to generate interpretations or answers to essay questions. We as tutors are interested in the presentation of the ideas our tutees formulate. For in tutoring, and in writing, there are no such things as right and wrong answers, only good and bag arguments. Often our asking a student to clarify her viewpoint leads to her finding a flaw in it, but that remains the student's discovery.

Involving ourselves with a student's thinking means that we can question anything a student says, in just the same way a reader can question anything a writer prints. I spend many hours simply responding to a student's ideas with the question "Why?", forcing her to give me a "because". I have a right, if not an obligation, to interrupt a student and ask, "Now, why is this the case when a minute ago you told me that...?" "What is your evidence for this idea?" "How did you come up with this conclusion?" This kind of critical involvement with a student's thought process helps her learn to clarify her ideas to a reader unfamiliar with them. After hearing the same probing questions throughout the quarter, students begin to anticipate them, and, more important, ask themselves the same questions of their own writing. Telling students our answers is not only unethical, but presumptuous. We know students can struggle with their ideas until they formulate them into quite complex, logical, creative arguments. Our challenge is getting them to do it.

The fifth ethic expands the focus of the tutor and tutee to include the instructor, the grades, and all of the requirements of the academic setting. I would describe this ethic as *incorporating into the tutorial the expectations of the academic audience.* This ethic mainly involves understanding the motives and goals of the tutee's instructor. If the tutor and tutee don't read the printed assignment instructions, if they ignore the written feedback from the teacher, and if they don't personally approach the instructor when necessary, the tutorial functions in a vacuum, and worse, neglects the primary needs of the tutee. A tutor complements the instructor's role in the course, and only when the three work together is the learning triangle[2] complete.

For tutoring to be an integral element in the student's education, we must constantly check that our efforts are coinciding with the expectations of the course and the instructor. In addition to matters of content and form, tutors must be cognizant of meeting deadlines, budgeting time, mapping overall strategies for progress throughout a quarter, and interpreting the grades on a paper. In short, addressing the practical realities of the academic setting. The student, so immersed in his own anxieties and frustrations, is often reliant on the tutor to provide the perspective needed to objectively measure his progress. The tutor in this sense is a guide. He must avoid letting the student become like an ant, so intently laboring over the pebbles that it can't know the larger terrain.

The sixth ethic is perhaps the most difficult for a tutor to practice. For while the tutor part of us acknowledges our objective of transferring responsibility for learning entirely to the student, the peer part of us aches for that student to succeed in the process. Yet success is not always part of student life. What personal price am I willing to pay for my students' success? While taking care of my students, I also have to be careful to take care of myself. The same empathy we tutors have for the success of a tutee can become an impetus for over-burdening ourselves. A tutor eventually learns to *understand the physical and emotional limits of tutoring.*

Just as a student cannot be expected to be overburdened with excessive appointments, a tutor cannot expect himself to spend all of his spare time with his students. Receiving one-in-the-morning phone calls from panicky students, or tutoring twenty hours a week is excessive when a tutor needs time for his own classwork.

I have found that maintaining personal priorities in the face of seemingly desperate students can be a wrenching task, especially when it means having to say "no" to accepting a new tutee, "no" to just one extra appointment, "no" to a midnight phone conference. While on the one hand such a stance may foster the independence of a tutee, it can also be the move that pushes him over the brink to a loss of confidence and a poorly written paper.

In a lifesaving class I once took, the swimming instructor said that just as important as knowing how to carry a person is knowing how to release him. In the same way, a peer tutor who can so easily identify with the plight of her struggling students, must also know when to distance herself from their anxieties. We must adopt a philosophy in which we reward ourselves for any part we may have in their success, and do not submerge ourselves in their failures.

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The six ethics I've enumerated constitute the fundamental values on which I base my tutoring. Some of them many of you will recognize as ethics of teaching as well. This isn't surprising when we consider that while perspectives may differ, the objectives of the teacher and tutor do in some ways overlap.

To summarize, tutors must strive to *gain and maintain a student's trust* so that the student will have the confidence necessary to share her ideas. Building on this confidence, the tutor can *present writing as a process*. A tutor should *transcend the mechanics of writing* in order to focus on the development of the tutee's ideas, and should *involve himself with her thought process without interfering with it.* While fostering independent thinking, the tutor must also *incorporate into the tutorial the expectations of the academic audience to* help the student not only in her writing course, but other courses as well. If the tutor remains sensitive to the student's needs, while at the same time *understands the physical and emotional limits of tutoring,* he can effectively lead her toward academic independence.

Notes

¹See Susan Salkind "Function of the Peer Tutor: Subject Complement." Paper presented at the 1982 CCCC Convention, San Francisco, CA.

²See Jackie Goldsby, "Communicating with Faculty". Paper presented at 1982 CCCC Convention, San Francisco, CA.

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Further Reading About The Berkeley Program

Beck, P., Hawkins, T., and Silver, M. "Training and Using Peer Tutors." *College English,* 1978, *40* (4), 432-449.

Goldsby, Jackie. *Peer Tutoring in Basic Writing: A Tutor's Journal.* Bay Area Writing Project, Tolman Hall, University of California, Berkeley, California 94720, 1981.

Hawkins, Thom. "Intimacy and Audience: The Relationship Between Revision and the Social Dimension of Peer Tutoring." *College English,* 1980, *42* (1), 64-69. Also in Harris, M. *Tutoring Writing.* Scott, Foresman and Company, Glenview, Ill., 1982, 27-34.