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Subjectivity in the Tutorial Session: How Far Can We Go?

Stacey Freed

As a new tutor in a writing center, I find that **WHAT** students have to say is often more intriguing than **HOW** they say it, that the language of their ideas is intricately tied to their perceptions, that some of them have ideas that go beyond my capacity for compassion. I must admit I struggle not to lose my sense of impartiality and get drawn into a moral, political, or religious discussion. But how does one deal with a paper that goes against one's fundamental beliefs? More importantly, is it our job as tutors to question a student's beliefs and move from objectivity to subjectivity?

Suppose a student were to read aloud the following from his essay:

The work of an individual is no longer determined by his character, by the importance of his achievement for the community, but solely by the size of his fortune, his wealth.

The greatness of the nation is no longer measured by the sum of its moral and spiritual resources, but only by its material goods.

All this results in that mental attitude and that quest for money and the power to protect it which allow the Jew to become so unscrupulous in his choice of means, so merciless in their use for his own ends. In the autocratic states he cringes before the 'majesty' of the princes and misuses their favours to become a leech on their people. (Maser 214-215)

This example may be far-fetched (as you may have guessed, the author of this work is Adolf Hitler, and not a Comp. 101 student); however, the point I'm trying to make is, do we ignore what this says and focus on "higher-order concerns" of structure? Do we ask this person to back up his argument with examples? Hand this student over to another tutor? How far do we go in discussing the student's views? Teachers do ask students to respond

to questions that have no definitive answers and to prepare essays on controversial, emotionally-charged topics such as nuclear weapons, gun control, and capital punishment. We would be doing students a disservice by not voicing our own opinions, forcing them to scrutinize their work.

In grading proficiency exams this past summer, I was given a sample paper by a student who was asked to write a response to the following George Orwell quote: “serious sport . . . is war minus the shooting.” The student wrote:

[Mr. Orwell] reveals a misunderstanding on his part about not only sport, but also war, and even, perhaps about human nature itself. For even war, as horrible as it may be, can be viewed in positive and appealing respects: love of country and family and way of life. Does not war produce heroes as well as villains?

Overall, the essay was well-written and presented a fairly clear argument. This student passed the proficiency exam, but had he come into the writing center I wonder how I would have reacted. I am a pacifist, and I do not believe there is anything appealing about war. Yes, this is my view, and I am allowed to have it as much as the student is allowed his or her view. But, am I allowed to voice it in a tutorial session?

I think most tutors would say it is not our job to attack the personal viewpoints of our students, as much as we want to help them to think, and I agree. As Donald Murray points out, “the student comes to conferences to receive the evaluation of the draft and suggestions for future writing behavior” (148). They do not come to argue. But I wanted to find a more definitive answer to my query, a look at the way someone may have handled a similar situation. In searching for answers I went through many of the books on tutoring techniques and writing and found that even those which have sections on problems in the tutorial session, such as Muriel Harris’s *Teaching One-to-one: The Writing Conference* and Donald Murray’s *A Writer Teaches Writing*, talk about structure or, in Murray’s case, problems of office environment. There wasn’t much information on dealing with ideas, although many of the books discussed tutoring for analysis or opinion papers, which included asking the student pointed questions about various sides of an argument. (For a good look at this, see *The Practical Tutor* by Emily Meyer and Louise Smith).

I decided to speak with tutors in various university writing centers, mostly in the Northern Virginia/Washington, D.C., area to find out how they may have handled, or think they might handle, this type of situation. Responses varied but I found most tutors had the urge to enter discussion/debate with their students, but saw the writing itself as the first priority and then looked at subject matter in an objective way. I also discovered that many tutors believed themselves to be more liberal than their students. The

Assistant Director of Purdue University's Writing Center, Rick Anderson, says he is in constant disagreement with the mostly conservative student body. However, with a student population of 39,000, and a 20-person tutorial staff, there isn't enough time in their 30-minute sessions "to get embroiled in discussions over content." Anderson finds it refreshing when students have different viewpoints, but during a session he works on rhetoric, style and mechanical problems first. Then, after that, he may deal with other viewpoints.

Most tutors agreed that we must press students about their point-of-view without arguing. Michelle Kayal, a tutor at Georgetown University says, "attacking their point-of-view is not our job. People are entitled to their own views." She believed, however, that a tutor couldn't discuss a paper without discussing the subject but made it clear that she remains objective when doing so. Denny May, a tutor at the Alexandria campus of Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC), says he is very sensitive to this problem. He feels that he personally takes controversial positions and has a great interest in current issues. He works mainly with basic writers and knows he has a tremendous influence on these students, who "are often vulnerable, and without the qualifications to argue social issues." His method is to look at the paper's content and its basic argument and pose questions that make the student probe more deeply. "We can't push our own political agenda on them," he says. May is lucky in a way that many tutors are not—he also teaches a class, and in this way "arms the students with information or facts on a number of viewpoints." Then, he sees these same students in the writing lab.

Another type of problem comes with the student of another culture, who may have a very different value system. I have tutored a number of Hispanic and Latino men who believe that men "make better bosses" than women. I have worked with a young Muslim woman, wearing a veil, whose parents won't allow her to participate in sports. And, I've tutored a Japanese woman who writes papers about her new husband—a man she barely knew before marriage and who wants her to quit school, stay home, and be a traditional wife.

These are sensitive, personal issues, not hypothetical, esoteric musings on the state of the nation, and they are ones I feel strongly about. I feel obliged to tell these students about other worlds, other ways of seeing, thinking, being. When does my help become interference? At what point am I overstepping the boundaries of being a tutor and becoming either an adversary or a counselor? In *Teaching One-to-one*, Muriel Harris discusses the roles of the teacher as coach, commentator, counselor, listener, and diagnostician. On being a counselor, she writes:

Like other counselors, teachers in writing conferences also look at the whole person, not merely the perpetrator of fragments or rambling paragraphs. To move beyond the observable errors on the page, it's necessary to inquire into the writer's previous experience, prior learning, motivation, outside problems, attitudes, and composing processes in order to form an adequate picture of how to proceed. (36)

She focuses on using counseling techniques such as paraphrasing to probe deeper into a student's problems to find out "what might be derailing the student's efforts to write" (38). Might not this type of "off-the-cuff" counseling lead to depression or anger, triggering defensive, frustrated students? But how else can we help students improve their writing without getting a full picture of them ideologically and emotionally? Meyer and Smith in *The Practical Tutor* write that

Helping a student to develop self-discipline, self-esteem, and confidence can be legitimate forms of assistance. But whenever you feel that the issues raised by a writer are too complex or disturbing for you, that you are out of your depth, then it is time to make a referral as gently as possible. (14)

These authors offer good advice when they remind us that we should always focus on the student's written work. In a tutorial session, no matter how personal it becomes, we must always go back to the task at hand, the writing. But, in the same way that we want to and are expected to deal with personal problems, we should be prepared to question students on their beliefs, to check them on the validity of their arguments. If a student discusses issues in his or her paper, then tutors must act not only as a springboard but also as a foil, a devil's advocate. In *Teaching Tips*, Wilbert McKeachie quotes from a portion of the code of ethics for psychologists published by the American Psychological Association that is relevant to all college teachers:

Teaching frequently and legitimately involves a presentation of disquieting facts and controversial theories, and it is in the examination of perplexing issues that students most need the guidance of a good teacher. Disturbing concepts should not be withheld from students simply because some individuals may be distressed by them. When issues are relevant, they should be given full and objective discussion so that students can make intelligent decisions with regard to them. However, presentation of ideas likely to be difficult for some students to accept should be governed by tact and respect for the worth of the individual. (254)

Perhaps this sort of code of ethics is needed for tutors, for we too are teachers, perceived by students as authority figures. We deal with fragile egos, undeveloped thoughts, unfulfilled promises, and yes, we must not let our opinions get in our way. But in our objectivity, our "respect for the work of the individual," we must make students aware of other points of view that may be "disturbing" to them and may "distress" them; and we

should, if we believe an individual case warrants it, overstep the boundaries and be subjective—without being judgmental—in expressing these views.

More discussion needs to be held on this question of how far we can go in discussing our own beliefs. It is an important issue that seems easily ignored when we view it as a matter of “objectivity.” Yet, as teachers, we have an ethical or moral responsibility to face head-on the power of ideas and the written word. We won’t be able to change students’ minds in one tutorial session, but we can open them.

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