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The Power of Common Interest for Motivating Writers: A Case Study¹

by Natalie DeCheck

About the Author

Natalie DeCheck is a junior majoring in Genetics and Creative Writing at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She began her research on writing centers as part of the Undergraduate Research Scholar Program during her freshman and sophomore years. She hopes to graduate in May 2013 and pursue medicine.

Andrea, a doctoral student in education, has a demanding schedule. She has a young child, a job, a house on the market, and a spouse who travels so much that she can only see him on certain weekends. To cope with these unavoidable distractions to her research, she found the writing center and was paired with a fellow graduate student, Charisse.² Andrea claimed, “Even though I haven’t had a chance to just really sit and think and write the way I would like to, meeting with Charisse, at least that’s one hour a week that I get to dedicate to that. I’m at least moving forward in that respect.” Meeting with Charisse gave Andrea the opportunity to move ahead when she may have otherwise been at a standstill with her writing. In turn, Charisse supported Andrea and helped her manage her research at a time when it seemed nearly impossible. In order to draw our attention to the role of motivation in tutoring, this article shows how Charisse’s interest in Andrea and in her research served as a powerful motivating force by helping to move Andrea from a focus on external pressures to a place of intrinsic motivation where she could express excitement for her writing and research. As a case study, this research is limited in scope, but seeks to explain why a tutor’s interest—that is, deep curiosity in a writer’s work—is so

important in writing center tutoring.

Writing center sessions are described as some of the most meaningful educational experiences for both writers and tutors. For instance, in reporting the findings of the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project, Paula Gillespie, Brad Hughes, and Harvey Kail demonstrate that, through writing center work, tutors deepen their writing and critical thinking skills and learn to “work with others collaboratively and effectively” (41). Beyond these benefits for writing, thinking, and interpersonal relationships, writers and tutors also gain confidence, a powerful motivating force. As Harvey Kail argues, “Many former tutors write about gaining confidence in themselves through a new intimacy with and understanding of the writing process.” By working with others, tutors gain the skills necessary to better develop their own ideas and compositions. Writers, in turn, gain reassurance that their work is meaningful—that others see value in their work.

Drawing on and extending these claims as to the benefit of writing center work, I examine how a tutor’s interest leads to a motivated writer and so may serve as a powerful learning tool. I draw on research in educational psychology that focuses on what motivates students and the impact of students’ goals on motivation (Grant and Dweck). Through analysis (qualitative coding) of interviews with the writer Andrea and the tutor Charisse, I examine why writing conferences are considered meaningful by the participants involved and by researchers such as Gillespie, Hughes, and Kail. This analysis yields explanations of a tutor’s role in increasing the writers’ frequency in writing and in reciprocal, shared interest in building upon ideas under discussion during sessions. Further, I draw on research by psychologist Carol Dweck that finds that motivation is one of the greatest tools for acquiring new skills and knowledge, and I argue a deeper understanding of motivation can be used by tutors and incorporated in tutor education. Ultimately, I investigate what types of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation the writer experiences in and extending out of writing center sessions and the role the tutor plays in motivating the writer.

In addition to drawing upon the work of the Peer Tutor Alumni Research Project and Dweck’s research, my argument also builds

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upon a previous study by R. Evon Hawkins. Hawkins argues that students must be motivated to regulate, plan, and monitor their own writing processes to build intrinsic motivation for writing. Hawkins offers strategies for tutors to build this motivation and instill confidence in writers. Through my case study, I extend her findings by focusing on how the tutor's interest in the writer's work can improve the writer's motivation. I begin by explaining different types of motivation and the design of my case study and then provide a description of the writer and tutor and provide analysis of their relationship. This analysis concludes with a brief consideration possible pedagogical implications of this work.

Research Methodology

Research Context

I came to this project as an undergraduate research scholar interested in both the humanities and social sciences. My research mentor had collected a large data set of writing center conferences and interviews with both writers and tutors. As I stepped into the project and began transcribing interviews, I became particularly interested in how tutors described their interest in writers' projects. Specifically, when transcribing interviews with one writer, Andrea, and tutor, Charisse, I noticed the importance of motivation. This analytical observation led to my own study of these interviews, which I pursued over an academic year. Specifically, my qualitative study seeks to answer two questions:

- What types of motivation can occur in writing center sessions?
- What role can the tutor's interest play in motivating the writer?

The interviews were semi-structured and focused on Andrea's and Charisse's relationship, learning, and evolution of their sessions over a period of almost one year in which they worked together weekly in a writing center at a large, public research university whose students are predominantly Caucasian. They are both women of color and reported in interviews identifying with each other based on similar

experiences with discrimination throughout their schooling. Though they were studying in different departments and their research was quite different, they reported liking each other from the start, and the tutor Charisse said she learned from Andrea's research and found that their discussions helped her think more critically about her own research as well.

Data Analysis and Coding Categories

As I transcribed the audiotaped interviews and then read and re-read the transcripts, a set of categories emerged through a process of qualitative coding. Qualitative coding involves an iterative process of reading and annotating the transcripts, noting patterns and exceptions. As I reviewed the categories with my research mentor and presented this research for feedback from other undergraduate researchers and audiences on campus, I collapsed and expanded sub-codes within three larger categories of motivation, assurance, and lack of motivation. I borrowed these largest coding categories from Vassilis Barkoukis et al. and Marylène Gagné and Edward L. Deci who describe the three types of motivation: amotivation, extrinsic motivation, and intrinsic motivation. Often one code was related to several types of motivation, so I found myself applying multiple codes to a single line of transcript and then redefining and eventually collapsing sub-codes. This analytical process allowed me to see the usefulness of Barkoukis et al.'s and Gagné and Deci's definitions, which eventually became my largest coding categories and helped me to interpret the patterns I identified in the interview transcripts. The following definitions describe the three types of motivation Andrea and Charisse discuss as impacting and emerging from their writing conferences:

Amotivation is a lack of motivation. Barkoukis et al. describe four types of amotivation: the belief in the lack of ability to perform an activity, the belief that adapted strategies will not produce a desired outcome, the belief in an activity is too demanding, and the belief that high effort is not adequate for a successful performance (40). An example of amotivation in the interview data arises when Andrea reported feeling pressure from a grant proposal deadline while

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managing other demanding aspects of her life and so avoided writing altogether.

Extrinsic motivation is centered around what motivates the writer externally. In other words, extrinsic motivation takes place when the writer is motivated by someone or something. External regulation, the type most often associated with extrinsic motivation, happens when the writer participates or does an activity to get a reward or to avoid punishment (Barkoukis et al. 40; Gagné and Deci 334-36). An example of this occurred when Andrea had to finish her grant submission by a deadline and used the deadline as a motivating factor. Integrated self-regulation, another type of extrinsic motivation, differs because the action is considered part of the self but is still performed for external reasons, as when Charisse got Andrea excited about her work by sharing personal anecdotes related to Andrea's research, which, in turn, helped to fuel Andrea's writing. Extrinsic motivation and its derivatives were the most frequent codes.

Intrinsic motivation covers the opposite side of the spectrum, relating to motivation the writer feels internally. Intrinsic motivation is defined as doing an activity for "the pleasure and satisfaction of performing it" (Barkoukis et al. 39). Gagné and Deci similarly state, "Intrinsic motivation involves people doing an activity because they find it interesting and derive spontaneous satisfaction from the activity itself" (331). When Andrea wrote and researched because she was interested in the material and wanted to learn more, she was intrinsically motivated. This is also a specific example of intrinsic motivation to know, which Barkoukis et al., quoting Vallerand et al., define as "engagement in an activity 'for the pleasure and satisfaction that one experiences while learning, exploring, or trying to understand something new'" (40).

Analysis

Andrea came to the writing center looking for someone to help her with the process of writing her dissertation proposal and related funding applications. She was looking to develop consistency in her research. She had been to the writing center twice before but found both sessions to be unhelpful. On her third visit, however,

she was paired with Charisse, a graduate student with similar interests in education and shared experiences negotiating the large, predominantly white university. Charisse explained that she aimed at helping Andrea by facilitating brainstorming sessions, by asking her to “push further” and to elaborate on theories. Andrea reported that after sessions she had a better idea of where to go next with her research and that she tried to repeat what she’d learned in the writing center sessions when writing at home. Andrea continued meeting with Charisse for almost a year, finding value in their writing relationship and responding to Charisse’s interest in her school experiences and in Chicana feminism, a topic connected with her identity as a woman of color and central to her proposed research.

Writing center sessions seem to be linked with intrinsic and extrinsic motivation—and in this way seem to counter amotivation. When Andrea first worked with Charisse toward a deadline for her grant proposal, she felt frustrated with writing. Her concerns seemed to be centered around her deadline rather than interest in her project. It was a task rather than something she had interest in doing. Andrea said, “I felt anxious because I didn’t have anything written” and was “frustrated because I could not get work done.” Initially after finishing her proposal, Andrea felt anxious because she did not have anything written, another form of “pressure” contributing to amotivation. As Andrea felt more comfortable “brainstorming” with Charisse, their writing center sessions became more conversational. I see these sessions linked with intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, as they often consisted of casually chatting about the topics of Andrea’s project, sharing anecdotes with one another, and brainstorming how to elaborate on key points of Andrea’s project. Andrea’s move from a feeling of anxiety to one of comfort reflected the move from having a deadline to not having one, from writing for external reasons to writing to write.

Charisse’s informal tutoring strategies also facilitated Andrea’s movement from amotivation to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Charisse showed a genuine interest in her project, one factor that boosted Andrea’s confidence. Charisse claimed, “There was a huge common interest for me there because I’m very passionate about education, as is she . . . I shared anecdotes of my own and she

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shared anecdotes of hers.” Through these sessions, Andrea was extrinsically motivated by knowing that another person (Charisse) found value in her work, and she also gained intrinsic motivation as a result of conversing about her topic. Andrea’s description of the writing conferences aligns with those of Charisse, as Andrea said she experienced the most changes when she and Charisse chatted and brainstormed during sessions with “little to no agenda.” Charisse explained that after several months, conferencing “was more brainstorming which [Andrea] said she found really helpful.” Andrea similarly reported, “I usually come away from [these sessions] feeling good about myself. I usually come away feeling like I have good ideas.” This sense of self-worth led her to experience integrated self-regulation, a form of extrinsic motivation. Charisse described these sessions as “not pressure filled,” which increased their effectiveness by lessening the chance of Andrea experiencing amotivation due to pressure. She may have felt an increased motivation to write because Charisse’s interest helped her feel that she had valid ideas. Arguably, Charisse’s interest in Andrea’s project seems to have been the most important motivating factor for Andrea. As Charisse said, “I actually was interested in her project and wanted to talk about it. I think having those same specific common interests helped us both be more interested in both of our projects.” This interest seems to have motivated Andrea to think more about her project and to write outside of sessions. This self-initiated writing can be described as intrinsic motivation to know and integrated self-regulation.

The role of interest connected with shared experiences and comfort suggests the importance of common backgrounds among writers and tutors. Based on this one case study, we might ask in writing centers, how do we work toward a diverse tutoring staff so that all writers are ensured of finding a tutoring partner with genuine interest in not only their writing (their research and ongoing projects) but also their experiences in the university and in navigating the complex writing situations we find ourselves in? Tracing movement from amotivation to extrinsic and intrinsic motivation—in this case, from avoiding writing to writing because another person cares about the work—calls attention to the role of the tutor’s interest in tutoring success.

Conclusion

For those of us working in writing centers, additional attention to motivation can help us to improve writing sessions. From my results, I have concluded that fostering motivation involves providing a writer with direction for where to go next, helping a writer improve his or her writing process, and showing the writer that his or her project is meaningful or interesting. These strategies go beyond what Hawkins proposed, as these strategies focus on long-term tutoring relationships, suggesting the importance of meeting over time and helping writers and tutors build on the one-time session. Charisse particularly motivated Andrea when she helped Andrea elaborate on her own ideas and to continue writing on her own and so get out of a cycle of avoiding writing altogether. In addition, she helped Andrea further her interest in a subject in which she already had a strong interest. Based on the interviews, Charisse accomplished this through informal talk and the interest she herself had in Andrea's topic. Charisse succeeded in motivating Andrea because she informally discussed troubles Andrea had with writing and asked her a range of questions about her project. Often, these questions were based on Charisse's personal interest in Andrea's project and made Andrea think about additional ways to approach what she was trying to say. Charisse's interest played a vital role in helping Andrea submit multiple grant proposals and move much closer to completing her dissertation proposal. This movement suggests that writing centers can increase their effectiveness by matching tutors and writers with similar interests or even by asking tutoring partners to consider their interests during conferences.

This project brings to writing centers both a framework and vocabulary for talking about the power of motivation in writing conferences. We often think of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, but there's an equally important and complimentary concept of amotivation that helps enrich our understanding of motivation. As shown in this case study, interest is a powerful learning tool that plays a large role in motivating a writer. It drives the writer to want to explore a subject and strive for a better understanding

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through research and writing. Writing center tutors play a role in heightening extrinsic and intrinsic motivation by talking with writers and encouraging them to go deeper into their projects. As I model here, we can trace the power of writing centers by observing how ongoing partnerships develop in them and how ongoing meetings provide the structure for tutors to inspire and motivate writers, facilitating movement from amotivation to extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

NOTES

1. I would like to acknowledge Beth Godbee, my research mentor, and the Undergraduate Research Scholars Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for their resources, help, and encouragement throughout this research project.

2. Andrea and Charisse are the participants' chosen pseudonyms. This research received IRB approval, and I completed IRB training when I began analyzing interview data already collected as part of a larger study in my campus writing center.

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