Building Bridges: Ideas on Confidence and Motivation for 405 Tutors

The very act of writing is a very personal endeavor. Bouts of contemplation, peppered with the formulation of ideas into sentences and then the inevitable sharing of a writer’s thoughts on paper, are enough to make any student clam up. The first essay topic for English 101L tutees will probably be of a personal nature. What is easier than writing about what you know to be true or have at least experienced? Well, not so for any hesitant and inexperienced English 101L tutee. This assignment might seem daunting or downright terrifying. Even if the first assignment is not personal, as a 405 tutor you will encounter times throughout the semester when your tutees are less than enthusiastic or confident about writing on an assigned topic. Confidence and motivation can be dealt with similarly, although each is manifested by very different emotions. Lack of confidence denotes low self-esteem or fear of failure for many tutees. Motivation, on the other hand, is fueled by frustration over an assignment or a lack of understanding, either about the assignment or topic. Much of the problems regarding confidence and motivation with your tutees can be dealt with in a similar fashion. Here are a couple of things to keep in mind before jumping into the still pond of emptiness (motivation) or breaking your leg cheerleading (confidence) based on my first semester as a 405 tutor.

Laying the Groundwork

It is important to acknowledge the connotations of placement in English 101L. Tutees are bound to feel remedial or tainted from the start. Requiring extra help from a tutor, or even being singled out of 20 other students as a ‘bad writer’ could discourage anyone. M. Norman and T. Hyland’s article, “Confidence in Lifelong Learning”
published in *Educational Studies* in June 2003, discusses the benefits of learning in a positive and managed environment. The authors conclude that student confidence is best increased when they receive support, feel secure and have all of information. Therefore, attempt to quell the concerns of your tutees by being straightforward with them. Explain the procedures of English placement and be sure to highlight the advantages of having the support of a tutor like yourself. Make a connection with them if you have ever had a tutor, or know of the benefits of tutoring, like feedback and outside input.

Within my own group of five tutees there was a spectrum of reactions to my speech on their placement. Some grimaced and accepted and others declared an outright conspiracy against them. I made sure to give them enough time during our initial group session to process the information. Though at times the session was tense and awkward, I encouraged them to ask me questions. I did my best to explain the series of events that got them into this room with me, but also how I would do what I could to assist them throughout the semester. This balance of required tutoring with free help in their writing seemed to settle things down. Eventually, the conspiracy theorists seemed less chagrined and the eye rolling ceased. It is important to know the facts about placement and the necessary contacts if a tutee feels their placement in 101L is a mistake. Remember that you are merely the messenger and not the decider in their writing placement. Nevertheless, writing placement is not a perfected practice. Some of your tutees will not require much of your help, while others will demand much of you.

Though this may seem like an incidental first hurdle of confidence building, remember that first impressions last a long time and throughout the semester your tutees are bound to encounter more. Your treatment of this initial issue can further enhance or
diminish your relationship with them. Be considerate to your tutees and respect their concerns. In the end, remember the Golden Rule regarding the treatment of others and with any luck, everyone involved will escape without serious injury.

**The First Paper**

The first assignment shows the power of a writer, exposing their strengths and weaknesses. A student’s past writing experiences and their own lack of confidence can make this first paper a source of anxiety. Questions can arise like, “Is the professor a hard grader? What does the professor like to see in his/her papers?” Some tutees are ashamed of their writing and in fact, are fearful of someone, other than a professor, reading their work. Past writing experiences that were negative could deeply effect your tutees perceptions of their writing. After all, writing can do many things; empower a quiet voice or weaken a strong spirit. Many tutees know their writing weaknesses, but yet don’t know how to remedy them on their own. This is where a tutor can be valuable. As the tutor, you’re better equipped to handle the demands of college and are able to share your wisdom with your tutees. Sharing the knowledge of your writing processes can enlighten an inexperienced writer to attempt new ways of writing. As a member of their peer group, your suggestions may encourage them to see writing as less overwhelming and more manageable.

Modeling is an effective tool to use because of its interactive nature. Norman and Hyland’s “Confidence in Lifelong Learning” article also discusses the theory of social learning. Since relationships are the basis of most of human interaction, learning is most naturally achieved in this environment. A teacher/student modeling situation would be an excellent example of social learning because of the amount of interaction involved.
The authors also mention this setting as an effective way to foster the relationship. Though it is directive, modeling enables the tutee to see how the tutor writes. Once the tutor models a writing or planning style, then the tutee gives it a try. All the while, the tutor’s presence allows for questions and needed assistance. As the tutor you should be inquisitive about your tutees’ writing processes. When you sense a writing weakness, modeling is a user-friendly exercise that allows for direct instruction, but a lot of support at the same time. Since there is a constant exchange of ideas flowing between tutor and tutee, there is little room for the tutee to feel ‘on the spot’ about their writing.

I found this tool useful while showing planning styles, i.e. outlining, sequencing and web charts and thesis creating/identifying. I would write my version of the class writing assignment in various stages of development (free write, outline, short 1st draft). Though these assignments were never totally completed, it created a jumping off point during the initial individual meetings. These mock assignments highlighted different styles of writing and approaches to an assignment. Because I used my own writing, this took the pressure off my tutees of having to share their writing in the beginning. After the first paper was completed, tutee writing was used during individual modeling sessions. Modeling is bridge building work when it comes to garnering the understanding of your tutees. These trivial and short exercises can foster trust and acceptance, which is later enhanced by the next section.

**Listen Carefully and Talk, Talk, Talk**

Much of time you spend with your tutees will be centered on writing assignments; English 101 is a writing-intensive, so there is a lot of writing going on. During these sessions it is important to listen to your tutees concerns and ideas about a paper.
Individual sessions are balanced by your listening and discussion techniques. In “The Idea of a Writing Center” an article published in *The St. Martin’s Sourcebook for Writing Tutors* (2003), Stephen M. North proposes a writing center utopia in which there is a listener for every writer. Not only a skilled listener is suggested, but also a listener that can also talk about writing. North is concerned with the dialogue of writing just as much as he is focused on the writer. As a result, being an active listener will enable you to understand the intricacies of each of your tutees. Without really intending, your tutees will reveal much about themselves during these conversations, *if* you are paying attention. These revelations are about their own view of themselves as well as their interpretation of their writing. Listen carefully to them; it will give you a valuable source of knowledge. You are their sounding board, a source of trust and reliability to supplement their writing journey.

No judgment is necessary in listening, just the attentiveness of a tutor monitoring a tutee. I’m not proposing for you to psychoanalyze their mental state, but to be aware of them first as people, then as writers. Realizing perhaps the pressures of the first college-level writing course or the added stress of maintaining a college schedule can help alleviate the preliminary clash of tutor/tutee viewpoints. This realization allowed me to better assist a flustered and beaten down tutee. As a freshman, my tutee was overwhelmed with the five courses he decided to take during his second semester of college. I didn’t understand why he never showed up with drafts of his work. His demeanor was rushed and there was an aura of tension around him. After another workless individual meeting, I asked him how his semester was going. His well intentions of ‘getting through school quickly’ were thwarted once the writing
assignments started. Unable to keep up with all the draft requirements for each assignment, he soon became swallowed by all of the back work. In the end, he fortunately made it out of the semester alive and passed the class, but gave up all of his free time to catching up. I knew I couldn’t help him get the work done, that was his responsibility, but this exchange made me realize that tutees are just learning the ropes of college life, so be considerate and seek out their concerns.

Be sure to allow your tutees to vocally express themselves. These sessions are about them and their writing, not about you just talking to them about writing. Allow moments of silence to linger. These pauses afford your tutee time to collect their ideas before you bombard them with your interpretations. Although the answer may seem evident to you, not everything comes so easy to everyone else. Accommodate for a learning curve for your tutees; allow them the satisfaction of making a realization on their own. These quiet lulls allow you to regroup and focus on your tutee’s needs and if needed, to get the session back on track.

The conversation part is where your skills as a subtle questioner are utilized. After the paper has been read aloud, it is your turn to open the stage for high order concerns and to ask questions. These questions are purposeful because they are focused on the body of writing in front of you. Through the discussion of trying to better understand the intentions of your tutee, certain issues are bound to arise. The paper is the source of the discussion, but in the end the conversation revolves around the writer and his/her style. This conversation should also be dominated by the tutee. The tutor supplies the framework with questioning and the tutee fills in the holes/questionable spaces with ideas. It is a collaborative endeavor; much like give and take, but always
with effective dialogue being created. In order for the marriage of listening and questioning to take place, the tutee must have your understanding. Trust equals understanding and what better way to motivate or build confidence in someone, than by having it grow out of your constructive and conscientious manner.

**Try, Try Again**

When I think about teaching someone to write I always envision a bicycle. There is a synonymous connection between these two ideas for me. The relationship you have with your tutee is much like teaching someone how to ride a bike. In the beginning there are rules and precautions, fostering development and then eventually you need to let go and see how they do on their own. Anyone who learned how to ride a bike had help at first, support and training wheels, and then through their effort, peddled off into the sunset by their own power. Writing is about doing, experimenting and getting support. Nothing in life is ever done well the first time around and writing at the college level is less than likely to be successful for everyone. Explaining to your tutees that writing is a process, not an instantaneous combustion of waking up one day a proficient writer, is helpful in getting them to understand the time and commitment involved.

Moments of vacant thought and lack of motivation can plague anyone. Remedy these moments for your tutees by encouraging them to free write or start a conversation and have them talk through their ‘so-called’ lackluster ideas. So much of writing is just doing. Helping them push through these dry periods allow tutees to see that there is light on the other side. No matter what, a paper still needs to be completed and some amount of thought needs to go into it. As the facilitator you must ground the tutee in realizing that procrastination is futile; the writing is not going to happen on its own. As for
dwindling confidence, the focus of these sessions needs to be on establishing positive feedback. Make the tutee know that he/she is capable and focus the conversation on the work rather than looking at the negative aspects of doing the assignment.