Coaching Writing

The teacher-student relationship, for all its positive points, is often fraught with apprehension. The figure of authority for most young students is seen as a shadowy, unapproachable shape-changer that holds all the right answers. What students don’t know is that what teachers want most times is the answers that they come up with on their own, given in their own voice. As tutors, we have the beneficial responsibility of helping young writers identify and enhance that voice. In the role of a writing liaison, we can work with them on strengthening their ideas, and fortifying the confidence to express those ideas clearly.

I see tutoring in much the same light as coaching. As a junior varsity basketball coach, I have helped young athletes mature in their careers. As a tutor, we will do the same; not necessarily show them things that they have never seen before, but instead help them to refine the things that they already know, or help them to see something differently. As a coach, I get to be on the same team as the athletes, just like as a tutor we get to be on the same side of the writer. Recognizing this helps to alleviate some of that natural tension that comes with being in a learning dynamic like tutoring.

For many first year writing students, the writing process is not a cognitive one. Coming out of high school, my own rituals for writing academically were less than impressive. I, like many of my peers, would sit down, churn out the right amount of pages, proofread, and hand it in. All in all, my papers would go from first to final in
usually the same sitting. Many of the students may have this same image in mind when they think about writing. But college level writing takes much, much more, and, as tutors, we must be involved in breaking down these bad habits, and welcoming them into the process of writing.

**Expert vs. Experience**

The first meeting between any two people can be a little awkward. To help break down those initial societal barriers we were given the task of interviewing our students, as well as having them interview us. This helps to not only engage a young writer off the bat, but also lets them find out whatever they want about us, so that we can get to know each other. Having an open and laid-back attitude towards meeting someone definitely helps ease the tension of the ‘blind date’ environment that is present at that first meeting.

Some of that tension is there because the younger students equate us, as tutors, to experts like their actual teachers. The misconception of tutors as language and composition experts can put a strain on any young writer as he or she seeks help. An effective way that I found to allay that pressure is to come straight out and confess that we are not experts like their teachers, most of whom have numerous degrees. But instead, we are simply more experienced at using a certain methodology that helps to clarify our ideas when we write. For me, I didn’t start playing basketball until high school; most of my players, however, played the sport from a much earlier age, which makes these two situations very similar. Having played basketball, instead of teaching them the game, I have the ability to draw on my own experiences as a player to help them. For writing it’s much the same; having found my own methods of writing, I can use my experience to help them in their collegiate careers. In breaking down the initial
misconception of being language experts, we have truly started to achieve what “peer” tutoring entails, students helping other students. I also tell them that to be a tutor we are trained by taking a class concurrently with our first semester of tutoring. This idea of myself learning, as a student like them, as we go along really seemed to make the more timid of the students relax and their apprehension lessen.

**Teacher vs. Tutor**

Perhaps the best tool in those initial sessions is having an open mind. Being flexible is key in really getting to know your students. Don’t expect to talk purely about academics; what first year student wants to talk about school anyway? Be open to letting them talk about themselves. This [openness] helps them get comfortable sharing with you, and opens them up to being much more receptive if they think that you will listen to them too, not just the other way around. At the same time some students will readily give those one word answers, so don’t be afraid to share a little about yourself or to ask interesting questions to ease them into talking. I know it sounds a bit corny, like a scene in a coffee shop, but it is important to be comfortable sharing with each other. You may even want to schedule that initial meeting in a café!

Tutors have the flexibility afforded to us by not having to deal with major lesson plans, twenty five students per meeting, and grading each one, unlike teachers. We have no direct control over the grade that a given assignment will receive. Again, this helps to put us on the same team as the student. The student-teacher relationship is often seen as adversarial in that the student will usually be at odds with the teacher who gives out their grades. As a coach, the relationship between my players and myself is much less strained
because we are on the same team; in helping them improve we are both achieving the goal (grade) that we want.

Being open also allows us to keep in mind that learning itself is a two way street. I have never coached a team where I learned less than they did. For our writing students, all with completely different and individual identities, it would seem hard not to learn something from them. For example, in my latest meeting with “Kanoe,” we did a brainstorming activity where we created a mind-map web on the chalkboard and she came up with a suggestion that I had not considered. We explored that angle and found it to be particularly compelling because it had many tie-ins with Hawai‘i, while my ideas were mainly on a headline-news/national level. In that situation I let her know that that was a great idea, and she smiled proudly, having shown me something I missed.

Encouragement and Enthusiasm

While being sensitive to first year students’ feelings of stress and anonymity in a large system, it is also very important to be enthusiastic. Enthusiasm is naturally contagious. During our interviews I posed the question “who were your most memorable/significant teachers in the past and why?” Four out of the five students said that the teachers that they found the most memorable and engaging were those who had a high level of enthusiasm about what they were teaching, regardless of how hard the class turned out to be, or the grade that they earned.

Encouragement is a necessity and has obvious benefits. As a coach, I am a member of The Positive Coaching Alliance, which was formed after seeing the trend in coaching that puts winning at all costs, and consequently, the appearance of coaches who are so caught up in winning that they forget that sports are there for enjoyment. The PCA
talks about the “Golden Ratio,” which is five positive comments per each critique. I myself work hard to be a positive coach and have consistently been able to achieve a 4 to 1 ratio. The effect of positive reinforcement is that it alleviates fear. Constant criticism has the opposite effect, in that it enforces fear of sharing. Realistically, who would want to share something they did with someone who only criticizes them? Encouragement makes people feel good about what they did and all the more likely to continue sharing, as opposed to increasing the fear of being criticized.

**Individual Meetings**

Individual meetings should be all about empowering students. While we may come into the meeting with something planned to work on, like sentence construction, it is always good to give at least ten minutes, a third of a thirty minute meeting, if not more to what the student wants to work on. In this way, we are letting the student decide on the right path to take in their own learning, thus empowering them to think about what they feel they need to improve on. It also gives us a good opportunity to put to use some of the things we might have talked about in the beginning of the meeting.

**Group Meetings**

Group meetings are a great environment for forum learning. In the beginning of our meetings I find it always a good idea to ask how everyone is doing. For first year students who will sometimes need a simple outlet for all the stress they are under this is a good opportunity. Otherwise, I like to start our group meetings with simple brainstorming or mind-mapping sessions. These take only a few minutes and provide a good blue print for the way they can approach their papers. If a paper has recently been assigned, we try and choose a related topic to start with. Then we web all the things that
come to mind about that topic. When it seems like we have a reasonable amount of ideas, someone will choose an angle to follow, and together we outline it on the board. Then I take a stand on the angle that we have chosen, and together we try to come up with a concise thesis. I find this works well because it engages them in a non-threatening way at the beginning of our meeting. Everyone can talk and express ideas freely with no apprehension because it’s not like we’re actually looking at someone’s work. And it also models a good way to think about any assignment. After only a few minutes, everyone has had the chance to speak their ideas, and seen an effective organizational tool.

Keep in mind that you are the facilitator of the discussion, which means several different things. Don’t be afraid to ask lots and lots of questions, and being open to exploring the answers to those questions, even if they seem really “left-field.” Also, we’ve all been in situations where we felt a little fear in volunteering our own ideas, so don’t refrain from posing some of your own to see what they think, and to show that your meetings are a safe environment for them to speak in.

Success

Writers like young students go through many different phases of growth and expertise, and the best part is that there is always something that can be learned. In helping young people find their own methodology, that is, what works best for them, results will follow. Keep in mind that the expected “knowledge” that you are helping them to find can come in the form of practically anything; from grammar and punctuation to the location of resources in the library, or from comma splices to how to deal with a professor in a conference. So don’t get discouraged if your meetings don’t always go as well as you think they should; simply by being around them lets them know that there is a
mechanism within the University that is there to help them achieve. Remember, as coaches/tutors, we get to be on the same team as the students; we become resources for them to use in pursuing their own answers and ideas. The success they will encounter will be more rewarding than any single grade, as what they learn they will continue to use throughout their careers.