

Productivity and Power Dynamics in Peer-to-Peer Relations

By Sarah Elze

In most writing centers, tutors are trained to promote a supportive environment by employing a nondirective approach, which allows the student to create solutions while the Writing Assistant (WA) acts as a guide and a support. Nondirective strategies, such as: the use of leading questions, timed writes within the session, and an attitude of "I don't know, it's your paper" (Brooks 222-223) emphasize Socratic conversation and student-centered problem solving and limit the tutor's influence on how the session proceeds. This dynamic of equality between student and tutor is held as the ideal, and actually is often a satisfying and effective approach; however, in my experience there are instances where a more directive approach is most productive. This paper will provide examples of situations where the power dynamic shifts away from a model where neither student nor tutor has power to a model where both parties are empowered differently according to the specifics of the situation.

I am a Writing Assistant for the University of Portland's English department, yet have assisted students from many other disciplines, along with graduate and ELL students. I know I am not alone when I assert that cross-disciplinary and ELL tutoring are challenging and illuminating and require different skills than tutoring students from one's own discipline. Although students from other disciplines and cultures may respond to the normal tutoring methods, often in these cases a tutor may need to deviate from the accepted non-directive power dynamic in order to have the most productive session.

Tutoring a non-native English speaker offers a particular challenge, for not only is their rhetorical background different than the WA's, but their cultural background is as well (Powers 370). Because of this, common non-directive approaches are often not helpful when working with an English Language Learners (ELL) student. For example, many sessions begin with the student reading his or her paper aloud, which allows him or her to hear awkward sentences and discern punctuation mistakes, but because an ELL student's rhetorical background is in a different language, they do not recognize errors aurally and thus cannot correct by ear (Powers 371); therefore, it is necessary that the tutor become more directive in order to make the student aware of the problem, as well as explain why it is incorrect and how to revise it. Instead of simply being an academic collaborator, in this situation the tutor must also adopt the role of "cultural and rhetorical informant" (371); point out the error, and explain how it can be corrected.

A tutor may encounter a similar situation when working with a student with a form of learning disability. A learning disability is an appropriate term to refer to a student with normal or above-average intelligence yet has difficulty accessing information, whether innate or learned (Neff 383). In this instance, the student may have difficulty with some methods used by tutors to jump-start the writing process, including brainstorming, free-writing, or outlining. If this is the case, the tutor must once more become directive, either by initiating a directed conversation geared toward producing ideas for the paper (383) or by taking notes while the student works to access and communicate their ideas (385). It is important that the tutor relay information in a way that is clear and straightforward, therefore non-directive conversation should be avoided as it may become very frustrating for the student.

A similar method may be necessary with a student who is unfamiliar or uncomfortable with writing at a college level. Even if the student doesn't have a learning disability, they are still at an academic disadvantage, and may not know to complete the most basic elements of paper writing, such as formulating a thesis. Though it would seem unlikely that such a student would be active at the university level, I have encountered numerous such students at the U of P Writing Center, who are intelligent and capable but inexperienced and under-instructed. Students whose papers show a high level of disorganization and disconnect are not able to discern problematic elements, and if they do, they are unable to solve them, and therefore are not prepared to take responsibility for their paper within the session. I must admit, in several such cases I have suggested specific organizational changes or have written a model thesis in order to give the student an example, a context that will help as they continue to write outside of our twenty-minute session. I feel that such methods are appropriate as they provide the student with tangible examples of what they are striving towards, and limit frustration while maximizing productivity, both in terms of improving the paper and filling in the gaps in their writing instruction.

Although the director of the UP Writing Center empowers us to conduct our sessions as we deem appropriate, I have occasionally felt guilty for deviating from the tenants of minimalist tutoring. Many texts about Writing Centers so strongly assert that the tutor should "never hold the pen, never write on a students' paper, never edit a student sentence or supply language in the form of phrases or vocabulary" (Carino 98) that it is no wonder directive tutoring is somewhat of a guilty secret, albeit a pervasive one. This sense of guilt is non-productive, as it makes the tutor distrustful of their instincts and forces them to adapt their intuitive methods to fit theory rather than applying theory where and when it is helpful. Instead, it is important to appreciate the value of learning moments that are student-initiated, but also accept that learning moments can occur when initiated by a tutor. As the student becomes more experienced in the English language or more comfortable with writing college papers, the power will shift again and enable the student to participate more fully.

Now that several examples have been given regarding situation-specific power dynamics, it is necessary to reduce them into a general rule about power within tutoring sessions. Overall, what is the most productive power dynamic in a writing center session? Michael Pemberton argues the ideal session demonstrates "parity," which is a balance of power, as opposed to "egalitarianism," which implies a total lack of power (Pemberton 450). Parity isn't all that difficult to achieve; it is in some sense built intrinsically the session. For example, the student brings to the session knowledge of the subject matter, the assignment, and the professor's likes and dislikes, whereas the tutor brings insightful questions and expertise on citations and writing style, as well as tips on how to brainstorm and edit. The only difference is that in more directive sessions the tutor is more apt to share his or her expertise openly, rather than waiting for the student to bring up points to improve upon. This brings a sense of richness to the session, for "it allows both student and tutor to be the subjects of the tutoring session," allowing both to learn through collaboration (Shamoon and Burns 236). The idea of parity also illuminates the term "peer". While the tutor and student may not be equal in terms of expertise, they are equal in their empowerment and mutual interest.

Ultimately, the choice between directive and non-directive tutoring is the tutor's own. If the tutor feels the student, because of language or learning barriers, would not respond well to a

nondirective approach, it is his or her decision whether or not to take a more active and vocal role in the session. On the other hand, if the tutor feels uncomfortable with the subject matter, he or she should rely on the student to carry the session and then assist the student's, and their own, understanding by asking questions about the assignment and the topic. Tutors are human; occasionally the power dynamic may become misaligned, causing a disengagement of the student. However, power can shift multiple times in a session, and it is possible to clarify the situation and reengage the student by utilizing a slightly different approach. Regardless of the alignment of power, the student is sure to benefit from the collaboration and one-on-one attention given to all students at the UP writing center and centers across the country.