

## Sharing Stories and Building Bridges: Storytelling in Tutoring Sessions

By Anna Beth Blevins

There are books upon books written to try to help tutors break the ice with a student. However, one tried and true method of making a student feel at ease in a tutoring situation can be summed up with a simple phrase: tell a story. According to Sandra J. Eckard's "Telling Tutor Tales," there are several different kinds of stories that a tutor can tell: fictive, memoir, and autobiographical. Since these acts are modes of conversation, my article will determine their efficacy using hypothetical scenarios. As we will see, by using these storytelling techniques in a tutoring session, a tutor can build a bridge and create a more comfortable environment where the student's needs may be better met.

One of these techniques is the fictive story. A fictive story, defined as the retelling or discussion of a fictional occurrence in a TV show or a film, can be extremely helpful in almost every situation, because most people watch television and go to the movies. Consequently, a tutor can more easily make connections to facilitate the tutorial process by thinking of an example from a common film or TV show and sharing it with the student to start a dialogue. If the tutor is successful, one positive outcome is that the student may begin to see that the tutor is just another human being, not an impersonal authority on all things related to writing.

This strategy is also particularly effective if a student comes to the tutoring session in an extremely emotional state. As stated in "Tutoring in Emotionally Charged Situations," peer tutoring is first and foremost an interaction between two human beings. In order to achieve this interaction whenever a tutee is overly emotional, lending an ear to an upset individual can do no harm, but the fictive story can help create a soothing environment, thus canceling out obstacles that prevent interaction from taking place.

To see how this works, consider the following hypothetical: Monica is one such student who is carrying her emotional baggage to her tutoring session. Having just broken up with her boyfriend, she has been unable to stop feeling hurt and confused, let alone write her paper about William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Monica is unable to discuss anything other than how hurt she is and how much she hates her ex-boyfriend. Realizing that, in the present state of things, they will never get any work done, the tutor decides to tell Monica a story from a popular TV show, *Grey's Anatomy*. Afterward, the tutor tells Monica that even though the surgeons of Seattle Grace Hospital experience more trials and tribulations than most people, they still do their jobs to the best of their ability. With that simple story, Monica understands that she too has a job to do. Because she still seems too sensitive for the tutorial to

continue, even with that realization, the tutor advises her to have a tutoring session at a later date, when she feels better.

No doubt this tutor had to deal with a difficult situation. Monica was very emotional and unable to focus on her paper. But the tutor's story, which focused on a popular television show, was extremely effective in part because it addressed an emotional situation. Also, the tutor's explanation at the end helped the tutee to realize that starting on her project was important. The tutor understood that Monica needed some time to take care of herself, but still encouraged her to come back and really work.

Another kind of story is the memoir story: the sharing of a dramatic experience that someone else had. Whether it's the experience of a friend, classmate, or famous writer, the point in using the technique is so that the student can relate to the story, identify with the tutor, and feel more comfortable with his or her writing problems. Though sometimes less interesting than a fictive story, the act of sharing someone else's dramatic experiences is still an effective way to expedite any tutoring situation.

The memoir story is especially helpful for making a shy student come out of his or her shell. In her article "Talk to Me: Engaging Reluctant Writers," Muriel Harris argues that use of empathy is key to making less confident students feel more comfortable. With the memoir story, storytelling and empathy go hand-in-hand: by trying to understand a student and share in his or her emotions, a tutor can know what kind of story to tell. By the same token, the telling of a real-life story helps the writer to understand the tutor while mutually sharing in the emotions and drama of the anecdote that is being related. Thus, while the idea of trying to make a shy writer feel comfortable may seem difficult at first, a student may be able relax after hearing a comforting or stimulating story if it is appropriate and appears to have a basis in real life.

We will work through another hypothetical to see how such a process may unfold. Our writer is Will, an extremely shy student. Terrified of meeting new people, Will has finally worked up the courage to come to the Writing Lab to get help on his paper about Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (a topic that he chose). Will hates his conclusion, but has trouble expressing his frustration, due to his social anxiety. The tutor, who is confused by this at first, assures Will that it cannot be as hopeless as it seems, but Will still acts completely discouraged. Refusing to read his conclusion aloud for the tutor, he tries to close himself off. At this point, the tutor finally recognizes what the problem is: Will is so shy and self-conscious that even a simple task such as reading aloud his conclusion is a daunting task.

The tutor probes a little further, and Will finally admits that he is afraid people will judge his writing harshly and not like it; fortunately, his tutor thinks of the perfect

memoir story to help Will's confidence. The tutor tells Will that all great writers do not write easily - a fact proven by Hemingway himself, who rewrote the end of *A Farewell to Arms* thirty-nine times. This fact astonishes Will, immediately lessening the anxiety in the tutorial. After discussing aspects of Hemingway's personal life, they proceed to the first phase of the tutoring process. As we can see, through telling this simple anecdote, Will's tutor gave him the opportunity to relax and see that his situation was not hopeless.

Will's tutor's use of a memoir story in this situation was extremely effective. Note that the choice to write about Ernest Hemingway offered a clue as to the student's tastes. Picking up on this clue, the tutor could see that Will admired Hemingway, and thus decided that discussing the author's struggles with writing might help Will overcome his fear. In this particular case, we see how using an example of a prestigious author for a memoir story can be effective. It makes this lauded author seem human, and in turn the student feels less anxious about the writing process during the tutorial.

The last of these storytelling strategies, and possibly the most effective, is what's known as the autobiographical story. This is when the tutor shares a personal experience that appears similar to the situation that the student being tutored might be in. The upshot is that students feel at ease because they see they are not alone in their troubles. The important thing for a tutor to remember with the autobiography is to make sure the story is as relatable to the student's current experiences as possible. With a little luck, after the telling they are both on the way to bridging a gap and making a connection.

To see how the use of a personal story might create productive connections among students, let's see what happens when a tutor uses this technique to help an English Language Learner. Suh is an ELL student from China. He has come to America to study Engineering, but he is having difficulties writing his papers in the standardized American English style. Suh tells his tutor that when he wrote his first paper for his English class, the teacher gave him a failing grade because she said it was plagiarized. The tutor asks him to show which parts his teacher had found problematic. While this happens, the tutor sees the problem: Suh directly wrote his paper without properly citing his sources, an error that might have resulted from different expectations about the writing process.

Now that the tutor understands what went wrong, he proceeds to explain the necessity of observing citation procedures when writing in different contexts. When Suh explains that he is confused as to why citational information is needed when the source being quoted is already well known, the tutor shares a personal experience in order to impart the importance of proper citations. The tutor recalls having to write a Philosophy paper and being confused about the expectations involved, particularly

those concerning citing sources and using a proper writing style. This story clears some of Suh's apprehensions, and he is now ready to learn the methods of citation.

The tutor's use of an autobiographical story was extremely effective here because the student and tutor were able to make a connection, even across potential barriers of language, culture, and education. Just as the Great Wall of China connects different areas, so too were the tutor and Suh able to connect to each other, through reflecting on a common, cross-cultural experience of confusion. Besides being able to identify with the tutor, Suh also learned that everyone struggles with different rules of writing, no matter the cultural context or academic situation.

By sharing Eckard's stories in these ways, a tutor can build a bridge with a student, and in turn strengthen the tutorial process overall. In the telling of a fictive story, a memoir, or a personal experience, the tutor becomes a relatable human being, better able to act as an intermediary between the student and the teacher. Of all the strategies, the most effective, and the easiest to tell, is probably the autobiographical story. Because it is the most personal, it truly expedites the process of inter-personal connection. While a tutor is not always a true peer, he or she can still seem like one in finding and telling a story to try to become an equal with the student. Fictive and memoir stories are very effective, but it is the autobiographical story above all that truly accomplishes the two goals of every tutoring session: striving to come across as a peer and building a bridge to help the student pass over any troubled waters to reach the shores of effective writing.