

## Tasty Tutoring

By Kate Caughlan

Eslaamboli Polow with a side of Ghalieh Esfanaaj. I stared questioningly at the alleged "meal" placed before me. The foods were unfamiliar to me, and trying something new does not always produce favorable results.

The anxiety caused by testing an obscure cuisine is similar to that which Writing Lab peer tutors feel when faced with a paper on an unfamiliar subject. However, as there are many tactics one can use to gather the courage to try such an unusual dish, so there are many approaches a tutor can take to provide guidance to a student with a paper on a topic about which the tutor knows very little.

### **Ask for the recipe.**

Tutor: What is your assignment?

Student: The assignment is to write a two-page paper briefly describing the different types of radioactive decay. It's for my nuclear chemistry class. I understand the concepts pretty well, but I need help expressing in words what I want to say.

Tutor: Well, I will help you as best as I can. May I look at your assignment sheet?

The assignment sheet for the student's paper can be very beneficial to a tutor's understanding of the subject matter. After reading over the prompt with the student, the tutor can then ask questions about any foreign words or confusing concepts. This will give the tutor a general idea of what to expect from the essay. In addition, the assignment sheet will have information about the expectations of the professor, such as whether to write an analytical piece or a personal narrative. As explained in *The Writing Lab Handbook*, a tutor should "get the student talking, diagnosing, and prioritizing as soon as possible" (Hocks 7). Discussing the assignment sheet with the student will initiate the dialogue necessary to a productive tutoring session.

### **Chat up the chef.**

Tutor: Now that I have a better grasp on the assignment, let's begin looking at your paper.

Student: Sounds good. Here we go! "...When an element is broken down in alpha decay, it loses two neutrons and two protons. This means that the name of the element will change as well, moving back two places on the periodic table ("Nuclear Chemistry").

Tutor: Okay. Will you explain a few terms to me? I'm not much of a science person, so I don't even know the basic vocabulary. For starters, what is an element?

**"I've never tried anything like this..."**

Tutor: I think I have a vague idea of what your paper is about. I should be able to help you with your writing now. However, when we are done, you still might want to meet with your T.A. for assistance with the content of your paper. As you read your essay to me, I will have no idea whether or not what you say is correct, but someone in your field will.

As soon as the tutor realizes that the paper is on a subject unfamiliar to her, she should explain this to the student so he knows the limitations of her knowledge. According to Alexis Greiner, author of "Tutoring in Unfamiliar Subjects," this is "the most important thing to be concerned about" because both the tutor and the student need to be "in agreement on how best to approach the paper" (89). As the session progresses, the tutor might realize that she cannot be of any more assistance to the student, even though the student still feels anxious about his paper. In this case, or as a general way to end any tutoring session, the tutor should recommend that the student meet with his professor or his teaching assistant for more content-specific guidance. However the tutor chooses to handle the situation, she should not pretend to know more than she does about the subject of the paper. Deceiving the student will result in a poor tutor/student relationship, and the student will likely lose trust in the Writing Lab tutors. Therefore, not only will the student not receive any assistance on that particular paper, but he will also be less likely to return to the Writing Lab for help with future assignments.

#### **Trust the chef's culinary abilities.**

Tutor: What do you think about adding something to the beginning of the paper that will grab the reader's attention? I usually put a quote or anecdote at the beginning of my papers in order to draw in the readers.

Student: Most of my science professors have discouraged that sort of thing. They prefer that we put all our focus on the important information and leave out any frills.

Tutor: That's interesting. Well, I will take your word for it. Let's continue by looking at your thesis.

The tutor and the student both have unique writing styles. Throughout the session, the tutor should not try to adjust the student's writing style to match her own-especially because the student probably has a better grasp of how to write within his field of study. Muriel Harris explains this in "The Writing Center and Tutoring in WAC Programs." She contends, "[The tutorial should be] helping the writer through dialogue to develop her own ideas, not what she thinks will please or pacify me" (156). The tutor should not make a student feel like his writing is inadequate if it does not match her own. Instead, she should encourage him to embrace his own style and to trust his instincts as she guides him to improve the overall development and comprehensibility of the concepts in his paper.

#### **"Well, I have heard of some of those ingredients."**

Student: Here is where I talk about half-lives:

The half-life of a radioactive substance is the time required for half of the initial number of nuclei to disintegrate. The decay rate expresses the speed at which a substance disintegrates. The following equation represents the relationship between the number of nuclei remaining,  $N$ , the number of nuclei initially present,  $N_0$ , the rate of decay,  $k$ , and the amount of time,  $t$ :  $\ln(N/N_0) = -kt$

$NO)=-kt$  ("Nuclear Chemistry").

Tutor: I have never heard of half-lives, but in my calculus class last year, we learned about natural logarithms ( $\ln$ ). With that knowledge, plus your explanation of the other variables in the equation, I can understand what the equation is saying. That paragraph makes sense to me—nice work!

Even if the tutor is unfamiliar with the subject of the paper, she probably has had experience with concepts similar to those discussed. For example, a student's paper may be about William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*; even though the tutor has not read it, she might be able to relate it to another Shakespearean work that she has read, such as *Much Ado About Nothing*. The tutor may have a hard time relating outside ideas to the student's topic, but any knowledge she can draw from her brain will aid in her ability to accommodate the student's requests for his paper.

**Eslaamboli Polow and Ghalieh Esfanaaj: My new favorite meal.**

Student: Thank you so much for all your help today! I have several great ideas for how to improve my paper.

Tutor: No problem. Good luck with your revisions!

Even though a tutor can feel overwhelmed by certain paper topics, there are many techniques she could employ in order to lead an effective tutorial. With patience and curiosity, a tutor can overcome her trepidation in order to use her prior knowledge and her conversation skills to help the student improve his writing. A tutor should not feel limited to reviewing essays over subject matter she has already studied; she should embrace the opportunity and the challenge to guide each student with whom she consults to evolve into a successful writer.

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