

Reflections on English 250: Training Tutors as Writers

By Bethany Lewis, Penn State University

At Penn State, we have a 3 credit English course that serves as a tutor training class for the WC. I had never even been in the WC, but I have some friends who tutor and I thought I would like to be a tutor (and I figured the course would be an easy A), so I signed up. I know this sounds really corny, but the class definitely opened me up to a whole new subculture of PSU. My favorite parts of the course included getting to form relationships with my classmates and future colleagues and gaining the skills to make me a confident and comfortable tutor. The course was not without its challenges, which included getting over my anxieties about tutoring and getting through the somewhat boring theory and making it practical. Now, a semester after I finished the course, I feel it also helped shape me as a person and a writer.

After about a month in ENGL 250, I was hopelessly lost in theory and jargon. The thought of another discussion on feminist pedagogy or collaborative learning was enough to put me to sleep. I had never been into the WC or ever been tutored, so I could not visualize how all of this was going to be relevant or practical. I expected that once I stepped in the WC, I would see a bunch of pretentious brains on English-major power trips. Once I went to the Center, I was surprised to find the exact opposite. As I observed veteran tutors, and began the practicum myself, it all made much more sense. With a firm grasp on WC theory, I felt armed to take on tough situations. Not that I would quote Bruffee to a tutee, but I felt like I knew when I was talking about when I offered advice.

Another great part of the course was the collaboration with other tutors. Because I had made friends with so many classmates, I did not feel like such a rookie around the veteran tutors. Having a sense of community in the WC may seem like an afterthought in a training course, but it really helps with little things, like finding shift replacements.

Shifting from observing to tutoring was the most stressful part of the course. I remember more than one class discussion when almost everyone took the opportunity to vent his or her frustrations and anxieties about beginning to tutor. I think part of the anxiety came from feeling uncomfortably placed in a position of authority in the tutorial. I think most of us felt that though we were pretty decent writers, but we did not want to look like the grammar police because we did not really feel qualified for that. For me, the only thing that helped more than these discussions was just sucking it up and going for it. One of my first sessions was with a first-year student working on a definition paper for his freshman composition class. He wanted to define what it means to be an Indian living in America, but he had no idea what to say or where to begin. I panicked when I saw that he did not have any notes or an outline. But as we began talking, I realized how much I could help in brainstorming just by asking him questions. I was proud to be able to point him to a book I had just read in my English class that was basically about the same thing. Now, brainstorming tutorials are my favorite because I love to see someone walk into the WC in a panic, and then rush out with tons of ideas for what to write. It has not always been easy, and I still get some questions that really stump me, but now it is a lot less stressful. I have tried to approach each session like a friend is asking me to look at their

paper. Now that I have a semester of tutoring under my belt, I feel much more comfortable in tutorials and I think I can be more relaxed and open-minded.

I feel the tutor-training course helped me most as a writer. All the time spent in discourse on writing, observing, and the practicum made me internalize the writing process. Now I am thinking of tutor-like questions at every stage of my writing. I am also much more comfortable showing my work to my peers and asking for help or a second opinion.

I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to be a part of the WC community and to have learned about it in such an interesting and dynamic way. Not only did the course train me as a tutor, but also it certainly helped to retrain me as a writer and member of the writing community.