

Freshman Tutoring Freshmen

By Travis Webster

I grew a beard, and that was it. That is my first memory of my first days in the writing lab. The beard was a sense of security, and I relied heavily on it, specifically for what I was lacking – age and college experience. It made me appear to be older, more mature, more qualified to tutor. I was somewhat intimidated that I was, in the most general, demographic terms, part of the tutoring center's target clientele: freshman. With underclassman status, would anyone (my clients, my co-workers, my writing program director) take me seriously?

You may ask what classification and facial hair have to do with tutoring. To be honest, I'm not sure. I've never understood my "logic" from those days. For at the time, I genuinely felt tutoring was all about age and "teaching" – not guiding, supporting, encouraging, and reinforcing. If one was a teacher, he was an authority, a credible, older student. As a result of this thinking, my first few weeks of tutoring were profoundly awkward, and my concern with my age was inhibiting any prospect of successful sessions. Through all of this, though, my biggest concern was my credibility. Were they taking me seriously? "They" referenced everyone under the sun: my clients, my co-workers, and my writing program director.

One day while scratching that blasted, uncomfortable beard, I had a client. It was a walk-in client guy that looked a lot like me, actually. He had on a ball cap and gym shorts, much like myself. I wanted to wave him away – warn him: "Hey, man, don't come over here unless you want to end up on academic probation," I thought. He sat down and, hoping to prove and establish myself as a *real* tutor, I decided to take a different approach. Prior to this session, I had always edited – a rather sophomoric tutoring approach I have to say (no pun intended), but I didn't know the dynamics of initiating a writing conversation, so I would take the "safe" route and edit. So, I decided to talk this time. Whether it was disastrous, whether it was awkward, I didn't care. Anything was better than editing.

So, I initiated a conversation – it was not about writing to begin with, just small talk. It was more about a cathartic sense of release. We were both freshman, as it turned out. Coincidentally, we both lived in the same dorm – both of us were away from home and fresh out of high school. We both were trudging through the boring freshman survey classes and looking ahead toward our scholastic careers and areas of interest. After laughing about the crazy elements of life in the men's dorm (the parties, the chaos, the intoxicated roommates), we set a foundation for the rest of the session. After a few minutes, we reviewed the assignment. I had him read his paper aloud to me. I talked it through, outside of just the mechanical and prescriptive grammatical elements. More importantly, we talked through the paper like roommates or friends instead of as

participants in a tutor/client dichotomy. In this particular case, my classification and age worked in my favor; however, these elements were not the basis for tutoring. On this afternoon, I realized the sessions with our clients are not about age, about classification –the sessions are ultimately about identification, camaraderie, support. They *were* taking me seriously. Soon after, I shaved off the beard.