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Meeting Them Half Way: My Life as a Teacher, Tutor, Consultant

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by *Judith Rosenberg*

By the time I arrived at the University of Texas Undergraduate Writing Center, I had already worked on writing with adult education students—at a Brooklyn community center—and with undergraduates at the State University of New York at Albany. My titles had been *teacher* and *tutor*, respectively. Then it became *consultant* at UT, and I began to think about the tone the title gives to everyone's expectations—my own, as well as the students'.

Tutor and *teacher* are more familiar and therefore reassuring but not always or equally. The titles carry both productive and unproductive connotations of authority—productive when writers take the terms to mean a knowledgeable collaborator and unproductive when they believe only remedial writers need to seek out an authority who should fix and judge their work. But because our education systems offer students few models for how one-on-one collaboration works, each tutoring session involves negotiating the writer's and tutor's expectations. Since most students see a tutor as an experienced writer who is ready to give them her attention, calling myself a tutor made that negotiation easier. However, in each place where I helped people with their writing, the title helped or hurt, but the political environment influenced the relationship decisively.

Adult education was the most volatile situation. In the late 80s and early 90s I was teaching in minority communities in Brooklyn while Congress was dismantling welfare and changing adult education into job readiness programs. Students sometimes saw me as a social service provider since I did in fact, act as a gatekeeper for public assistance funds.

When I moved to Albany to start graduate school at the State University and began tutoring writers, I missed the small Brooklyn classrooms; they had become a community, but I was also relieved to not be *the teacher* any more. At Albany I again encountered students from the inner city, many of them from Brooklyn and children of the population I had met in adult education. Many of them were the first in their families to go to college. Now I was a different kind of gatekeeper. As a tutor I was a native guide to a bachelor's degree. When students came into the writing center, which they may have called the "tutoring center," they were full of excitement about being in college, expectant about what it would mean for their identities and futures. They understood writing as a skill they needed and were happy to find a helper who could spend time with them.

My title, *tutor*, suggested that I was on their side, not judging and undermining, but just there to give tips, take an interest in their college career and meet them half way. Pretty soon, though, I passed through the honeymoon phase of

tutoring. The writers and I didn't always have the same ideas about what we might work on together, or whether it is possible to transfer skills from one person to another, or how that could be done. They wanted me to be a language consultant, a walking thesaurus. They might be willing to negotiate problems of diction or grammar but that was the limit. Other times they wanted me to "fix it" and give their writing some quality that neither of us could describe. They grew suspicious if I gave feedback on structure or clarity. In this new phase of tutoring I returned to some of my minimalist habits from the Brooklyn classroom. I asked questions; I stood back and waited. I tried to discern what they wanted versus what they were ready for.

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