

# P Praxis: A Writing Center Journal (2003-2011)

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## Comfort Empowers

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by **Lindsay Sabatino**, *St. John's University*

### Taking the time to establish trust



Lindsay Sabatino

A student threw his paper at me demanding that I “fix it.” He could not admit the struggles he faced with writing and the university, juggling a tough schedule, feeling disconnected from his peers and professors, and constantly having his flaws magnified. He did not believe he needed help with his writing and thought he was unjustly forced to meet with me weekly. By discussing the demands placed on him both inside and outside the university, we were able to lay everything out on the table. He needed to vent and deal with other problems before he could confront his writing. Once a level of trust was developed, the sessions became easier and we could turn our focus to his writing. Without taking the time to establish trust, the barriers he constructed would never have been dismantled. Through our discussions, he realized I was not only concerned with his writing, but with him as a person.

**With the student setting the agenda, the goals of the session become clear, placing the student and tutor on the same page and giving the student the power to maneuver the session.**

As a tutor, I work hard to make the writing center environment a welcoming one. A student, like the one described above, will more openly voice his opinions without fear of being judged if he is comfortable and understands his writing. In order to have a productive session, it is essential to establish a rapport with the student the moment he walks in the door. If I had not taken the time to build a relationship with him, he may not have trusted me enough to share his ideas and opinions, allowing us then to develop his writing. By asking the student questions and putting the control in his hands, he becomes comfortable and empowered. When employing different techniques, balancing both direct and indirect instruction in a session, the tutor can supply the

student with a toolbox of useful skills to become a more independent writer.

**St. John's University Writing Center** at has given me the opportunity to consider the effects of providing groundwork to empower, establishing trust, and building rapport with students. While my experiences have shaped the concepts I am proposing and will be referred to on a one-on-one basis through the lens of a singular tutor and writer session, they are examples to be applied to all writers entering the writing center and collaborating on writing. By creating a more comfortable environment, making it easier for the student to voice his opinions, and balancing direct and indirect instruction, the student can become a strong, independent writer.

### **Setting up a Rapport with Students to Give Them Control**

As the student walks through the door, the tutor should be welcoming him. I always try to greet my students with a smile and inquire about their day. The students I work with are relieved that I am trying to get to know them and not jumping right into the stressful reason they are there, the paper. My first goal is to make each individual comfortable, for each student comes with different backgrounds and seeks guidance for various needs. By revealing these reasons, a relationship is formed and bond is built with the student, which eliminates barriers down the road that may hinder a productive writing session. This allows the student to gain the confidence to take control of the session knowing I am there to guide him and not dictate to him.

The tutor should spend time getting to know the writer and explaining the functions of the writing center. The student learns the tutor's job is not to point out all his shortcomings, but to assist him in becoming a strong writer. By knowing the roles of the writing center he can take full advantage of its services and utilize them at his convenience. If the student is given a few minutes to vent about class or his demanding schedule, he can put it behind him and fully focus on the assignment. Since St. John's has a diverse population, most students have jobs, athletics, and/or outside social circles that affect them daily. Students are not only students. These responsibilities and personal histories contribute to the student's responses to an assignment as well as the tutor. When he realizes the tutor is aware of these factors, the student will be more likely to lower his guard because he trusts the tutor and will be more receptive to the tutor's support. This allows the student to focus on his assignments, feeling empowered by the relationship that has developed with the tutor.

When it is time to focus on the assignment, starting with questions and turning to the student for answers, the student's responses direct the session and lay the groundwork for the conference. This gives the student a chance to voice his concerns. Since the tutor and writer have established a rapport, the student will trust the tutor with his concerns and have an active role in the process. With the student setting the agenda, the goals of the session become clear, placing the student and tutor on the same page and giving him the power to maneuver the session. Asking the student to explain the assignment gives the tutor insight into how he perceives it when approaching the paper. If he has a copy of instructions for the assignment, the tutor can view the expectations of the professor, clarify the student's questions and explain the guidelines. After reviewing the assignment, the tutor should always ask what concerns the student has about the paper. The student is able to dictate which road the session will take by stating his concerns about the piece, while the tutor

navigates addressing these concerns and other issues as they arise.

### **Balancing Between Direct and Indirect Instruction**

After the groundwork is laid, the tutor continues the session balancing between employing direct versus indirect techniques. With the direct approach, the tutor is hands-on, providing examples that supply the student with the skills to identify similar concerns outside the walls of the writing center. Indirect instruction requires the student to take control of the session; the tutor asks thought-provoking questions, collaborating with the student and helping him to think critically and problem solve. The continuum of direct and indirect instruction is thoroughly examined by Irene Clark in her essay "Perspectives on the Directive/Non-Directive Continuum in the Writing Center," proving that the level of directiveness in a session is not constructed in absolute conditions. Direct instruction can occur in an indirect session forming a productive relationship between tutor and writer.

When I first started tutoring a few years ago at **Drew University**, I tried to determine the best approach, researching theories and pedagogies to provide answers, deciding inaccurately on my own that indirect instruction was the only way. I have learned that each session is different and cannot follow a prescribed protocol, favoring one instruction. I still find myself second guessing whether I should write on the student's paper or give a grammar lesson, but I have become aware of how to incorporate higher order ideas with lower, surface ones. Now, I try not to push the student in one particular direction. I also strive to teach writing skills that any student can learn and utilize independently.

During a session multiple problems arise and occur on all different levels, from grammar and punctuation to transitions and content. The tutor needs to prioritize a focus if more than one problem presents itself in the paper, taking three things into account:

- What the student presents as his concern,
- What the professor of the course (if the student or tutor knows this information) believes is most pressing,
- What the tutor perceives to be most important.

On occasion, all of these concernsâ€”student's, professor's, and tutor'sâ€”align. Most often, they do not, and the tutor needs to decide which path to take.

Since professors have different concerns, our job at the writing center can be difficult at times. I have had students say that if they have too many grammatical errors, the professor will not continue reading the paper. A great deal of pressure is on the tutor to address every error and sometimes forces the tutor to pay less attention to content. Often the student is so adamant about this one-dimensional approach, not even considering another angle. The tutor must find a way to address these grammatical concerns through higher order issues.

When focusing on the paper, the tutor must determine what skills the student applies to his writing. If the student truly does not know the skillsâ€”building a strong argument, transitioning from one idea to another, revising the paper, organizational techniques, etc.â€”the tutor must instruct him and explain the rules. If the student is able to come up with the answers, the tutor should

proceed general questioning. The tutor should not overpower the student, but must always let the student's voice be heard. Through discussion, the tutor should push the student to generate ideas. In order to get the student's concerns voiced and his ideas shining through the paper, the tutor should not impose his own thoughts, moving the paper in a completely different direction and detracting from the student's work. As tutors, our job is to help the student gain control and authority of the piece.

**The student may also enter the writing center feeling as though he hit a road block and does not know how to continue. (...) The student becomes more focused and confident when he can view the questions then concentrate on answering them.**

The best way to expose the student's thoughts is by brainstorming through discussion. Leading questions replace the student's ideas with the tutor's. General questions force the student to evaluate his own work, encourage him to discuss concepts, and develop his own innovative ideas. These questions empower the student to cultivate answers on his own and give him the power to move the session in the direction he chooses. Through negotiation, the student can debate topics discovering what does and does not work for him.

Not every situation can benefit from indirect instruction. Situations arise where the tutor needs to be more directive within the session. Even though some tutors are conflicted because they do not want to overstep boundaries, there are times when demonstration is best. Providing examples shows the student patterns which leads him to make changes in the future. Through directive tutoring, the tutor can offer the writer other options so he does not feel powerless to the demands of the university and lacking potential untaught skills.

Some students will not be able to figure out what questions they are supposed to answer when an assignment is written in paragraph form; it is not evident what specific questions the professor is posing. How can we expect students to fulfill the requirements of an assignment if they do not even understand what they are? No matter how many times the student uses discussion to formulate the questions, he still is confused. I find it helpful to pull out the questions for the student and actually write them on a separate paper so he can view it more clearly. Showing him how to find the questions hidden in the paragraph, the student can then apply these techniques on his own. The student becomes more focused and confident when he can view the questions then concentrate on answering them.

The student may also enter the writing center feeling as though he hit a road block and does not know how to continue. While asking general questions and discovering the student's ideas on the topic, I like to write down what the student says, verbatim. Through our discussion, I draft an outline for the student including all his thoughts about the paper, overcoming the hurdles he presented. By sketching an outline, the student is presented with a structure that contains a transcription of his thoughts and has something tangible from the session so he will not forget all his great ideas.

Some circumstances within a session simultaneously require a balance of direct and indirect instruction. Elizabeth Boquet, in her book *Noise from the Writing Center*, states that dialogue in the writing center presents a noise that can act as an interference of a clearly directed transference of information. Boquet

further describes the role of this noise as, “when we concern ourselves with how to transmit information from sender to receiver in the most efficient manner, with the least possible distortion—with, in other words, the least amount of noise—we are constructing a theory,” where the third party’s involvement is disregarded as mere static (51). Boquet continues by proposing the writing center as the third party who welcomes the noise to reorganize the educational system and amplify the concerns of students by “turning up the volume on the kinds of demands that students make on institutions of higher learning” (67). The writing center is the hub for conversation giving the student a voice about his education and negotiating new ideas through tutor discussions. The tutor can retransmit the noise in a productive way by asking the student to be more vocal and utilize it as a place to dictate the modes of instruction to best assist the student.

Having the student speak up in the session and read the paper aloud intensifies the noise because, more times than not, the student will recognize his own errors. In some cases, the student may identify that there is a problem, but does not understand what is wrong or how to correct it. The tutor needs to take the opportunity to explain the rule and show the student how to rewrite the idea through a discussion about why it does not sound correct. The tutor should not simply make the adjustment and continue on without allowing the student to speak into the idea he constructed. It is important that the student understands why a change was made because it will give him the control to make the adjustments in the future. Once the student grasps the rule and identifies the error, he will see the pattern and change future errors on his own. Without direct instruction, the opportunity for the student to self-correct his errors would be missed.

### **The Result: Independent, Empowered Students**

Through a session with a tutor, the student can become empowered. The balance of direct and indirect instruction will teach the student useful strategies to implement when he is working independently. As tutors, we can empower the student by providing him with the tools to improve writing skills and create a structure for his writing. We should not only point out mistakes, but also places where area of writing are effectively composed. The student needs to be aware not only of what aspects of his writing need improvement, but also what he does well so he can build on the strengths in his writing. When the session ends and the student works on his own he will have learned skills, through a balance of indirect and direct instruction, to make him a better writer and not just walk away with an “A” paper.

### **Works Cited**

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