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QUESTIONABLE BEHAVIOR IN THE WRITING LAB

Abstract

In the setting of a writing center tutoring world where calibrated questioning is typically a core strategy of connecting with, evaluating, and ultimately counseling student writers, my work is an attempt to discover by examination and evaluation the effectiveness of questioning tools and techniques used by writing tutors and teachers. My purpose is to offer potential refinements to common questioning methods so as to help tutors better facilitate student writers in generating their own solutions to writing quandaries, as opposed to being led to preconceived tutor-generated solutions. The content of this paper is based upon my observations of tutoring sessions conducted by experienced tutors in the Utah State University Writing Center and my own experiences as a writing center tutor as informed by the recommended questioning strategies of *The New Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* and supplemental readings of educational theorist Paulo Freire, and FBI Chief Negotiator, Christopher Voss. Ultimately this paper concludes that though tutors and teachers often use open ended questions, they use them in sequences of leading questions, the result of which is the transformation of seemingly open-ended questions into highly constrictive questions.

Keywords: writing center, questions, isopraxism, mirroring

A QUESTIONABLE START

I love the paradox of the writing center. Students come through the doors, papers in hand, seeking answers to questions about their writing and we as tutors greet them, not with the answers they seek, but if we are following the advice of the *Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* and establishing “a comfortable acquaintance”, we greet them with questions. Lots of questions. “What can I help you with?” “What are you working on?” “Who is your audience?” And after we have asked our initial questions, according to the *Bedford Guide* the tutor is to “seek clarification with follow-up questions” (Ryan 2016, 14). According to the guide, questions are the tools by which tutors connect with students, orientate themselves to student writing and triage student writing to determine where focus might be most effectively directed so as to accomplish as much as possible in the limited time of a writing center visit. And it’s finally time to tackle a student’s paper, according to the *Bedford Guide*, it’s time for more questions. The first the “Four Effective Powerful Tools” introduced in the book is “asking questions” (Ryan 2016, 15).

So in this environment of questions, questions, and more questions, I couldn’t help but begin to question my own questionable behaviors as a writing tutor and teacher. As a result this paper is an attempt to discover, through examination and evaluation of the questioning tools and techniques I use as a tutor and teacher, more refined methods of using questions to influence success in student writers.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

According to the *Bedford Guide* there are two types of questions: closed ended and open ended. Closed ended questions are asked when seeking specific information and typically have short direct answers, questions like “When is the paper due?” and “Who is your teacher?” “Do you feel like you hit all the points of the rubric?” (Ryan 2016, 15). Closed ended questions are often

diagnostic and move the tutor quickly toward the specific needs of the student. Open ended questions tend to contain what, how and/or why, and require the writer to open up and articulate in depth typically beyond few word answers. Some of the open ended questions used by the tutors I observed were: How would you add that idea into your thesis statement? What could you use to better achieve a sense of finality? Using your own advice how would you better articulate that point?

There is one classification of questions, not mentioned in the *Bedford Guide* (actually, often a formulation of multiple of questions), which I frequently employ and which I noted other tutors using in all my writing center observations. That classification is leading questions. As tutors and teachers we often see exactly where a couple of missing pieces of a writing puzzle will fit together and make a picture whole for the writer. But instead of telling the student exactly which pieces and how to make them fit, we want them to learn through discovery, so we guide them with questions. In the writing center as well as in the classroom the constraints of working to advance students to a certain level of competency within a very limited time, while honoring the premium placed on learning through discovery, seem to both promote and justify the use of leading questions as a valid and important tool in the tutor/teacher arsenal.

QUESTIONING QUESTIONS

For the sake of illustration, the following is my best recollection of a scenario that played out with a student I tutored in the writing center who came for help with an ad analysis assignment.

Student: I'm not seeing how ethos, pathos, and logos apply to my ad.

Tutor: You've talked about ethos in your class, right? How would you say you defined ethos in your class discussions?

Student: It's kind of like trust. Getting people to trust you and your message.

Tutor: Okay, so if ethos is trust, instead of saying we're trying to find ethos in your ad, is it the same if we say we are trying to find ways this ad makes you trust that Skittles are great candy?

Student: Yes.

Tutor: So by changing the word to trust, does that help you find what you're looking for?

Student: I don't know. That's where I'm stuck.

Tutor: So let's look at the ad. What's happening in the ad?

Student: Business people are eating Skittles and talking about it like they're little kids.

Tutor: Okay, so we have business people eating Skittles. What are they wearing?

Student: Suits and business clothes.

Tutor: So what does that tell you about them?

Student: Maybe they're successful business people.

Tutor: Where are they sitting?

Student: In a boardroom.

Tutor: So we've got successful business people, sitting at a big conference table in a boardroom.

What do well-dressed successful business people usually do around boardroom tables?

Student: Talk about business and important things.

Tutor: And make decisions about them, right? So if instead of talking about business and important things and making decisions, they are eating Skittles... What is the message?

Student: Successful business people would rather eat Skittles than take care of business.

Tutor: So now put it all together. What does all this have to do with candy lovers trusting that Skittles are great candy?

Student: If successful business people who make big decisions are eating Skittles instead of doing their work, Skittles must be great candy.

Tutor: Does that give the Skittles brand credibility? And does that make you trust that Skittles are great candy?

Student: It does.

Tutor: There's your ethos.

Though the session had been successful, something about relying so heavily on leading questions to guide the student to a moment of discovery didn't feel quite right. I didn't have an answer as to exactly what wasn't quite right, but because of my heightened sensitivity to questionable behaviors thanks to the *Bedford Guide*, a new question was brewing.

A few weeks later I was introduced to the work of educational theorist Paulo Freire and his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire is all about shifting power to the students and about teachers having the faith to create open ended opportunities for learning and trusting that students will respond with their own creative solutions to whatever problems are presented (Freire 1993). In the light of Freire the something-not-quite-right feeling associated with situations where I felt I had relied too heavily on leading questions started to make sense. In retrospect it dawned on me that I was asking open ended questions, but wasn't really creating open ended opportunities for students to pursue their own solutions. In fact, in many ways I was very carefully doing just the opposite. I was leading students to *my answers* to their posed problems and in calculated ways I was actually progressively narrowing their thinking until they arrived at *my* predetermined solutions.

JEDI MIND TRICK QUESTIONING

Outside of my roles as teacher, tutor and student, I am a corporate headhunter and work in a world where strong negotiating skills are critical for success. In hopes of upping my negotiating skills I recently picked up the book by Christopher Voss, former Chief Hostage Negotiator for the FBI, titled *Never Split the Difference - Negotiating As If Your Life Depends On It* (Voss 2016). As it turns out, Voss' book is a Master's course in the power dynamics of questioning particularly in high stakes scenarios with irrational people, not an obvious parallel to the writing

center setting, but in the thick of Voss's work I discovered a simple questioning (but not quite questioning) technique that when applied to a tutor/student dynamic squarely places all problem solving power on the student's shoulders in a way that only allows for open ended student-driven solutions. The technique is called isopraxism, or mirroring (Voss 2016, 35).

According to Voss, in negotiating situations proper first response questions always begin with an open-ended "how?" and are then followed up by mirroring. As Voss describes it, "for the FBI, a "mirror" is when you repeat the last three words (or the critical one to three words) of what someone has just said. Of the entirety of the FBI's hostage negotiation skill set, mirroring is the closest one gets to a Jedi mind trick" (Voss 2016, 36).

"Give us a million dollars by noon or we blow up the writing center."

We love the writing center, but how do we get you a million dollars by noon?

Get the alumni involved. There's lots of rich alumni.

Get rich alumni? (wait).

One of the most 500 influential people in LA is an investment banker from USU. Get him.

LA investment banker? (wait).

His name is Don Something. He was in the Huntsman magazine. His name is Don. Get him...

I realize this seems almost too simple to be credible, in fact Voss calls it "laughably simple", but having put it to the test in the writing center as a tutor, in the classroom as a teacher and as a student addressing teachers, it is amazing how effective this simple combination of an open ended "how?" question, followed by a series of 3-4 word mirroring phrases, followed by a pause, and then repeated is at shifting power and provoking critical thinking and creative self-generated solutions.

ARE THERE ANY MORE QUESTIONS?

Whether genuinely checking for understanding, or simply out of custom, the question “Are there any more questions?” invariably signals the approaching end of an academic discussion. And paradoxically it is when this question goes unanswered that we collectively conclude that the discussion is over. Despite the fact that “Are there any more questions?” is a closed-ended question, intended as an open-ended question, that dangles power in front of an audience only long enough for it to be snatched away by a definitive statement, “Thank you very much”, I want to be clear that there are always more questions, and that it’s critical these discussions remain open, and not just open but also as open-ended as Jedi possible.

As Jedi possible... (wait)...

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