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Becoming a Goat:
Leaving Mediocracy to the Sheep

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ENGL 4910
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Abstract

Many new tutors can become quickly overwhelmed by their lack of experience coupled with a driving desire to perform well in the tutoring session. This dream to become a great tutor can be quickly snuffed out by lacking the confidence and the knowledge of how to achieve our full potential as tutors. In this essay, I will discuss two specific ways that we, as tutors, can go from "good" to "great" and ultimately become the tutors we strive to be. Through adaptability and positivity, we can leave behind the anxiety-stricken herd of aimless sheep and strike out on our own to become free-thinking goat-tutors.

When I was a freshman in high school, I had a very peculiar physics teacher. He was a large, South African man with a habit of pacing around while holding a yard stick, gently swinging it rhythmically back and forth. For the life of me, I cannot recall his name, but there was something he said constantly that has stuck with me over the years. When it would come time to put into practice some concept he was teaching, he would say simply in his rolling South African accent, "Now it's time to separate the sheep from the goats."

In his own interesting way, this teacher was essentially saying that the practice and application of the principles we'd learned would weed out those individuals who really "got it" from those who simply nodded their heads obediently like sheep while hypnotically tranced by his yard stick. In short, it's always better to come out the goat rather than the sheep.

Though seemingly frivolous, the process of transforming from sheep to goat is rather complex and varies from subject to subject. Especially as tutors, it seems at times that every cosmic force of the universe pits against us to stifle our best selves and suffocate our potential. Often, this inhibition reveals itself in the form of "tutor anxiety," the feeling that we don't measure up to the task we've committed to do. As a result, we can find ourselves closing off and settling into a pattern of mediocrity. However, we can overcome our own anxieties and become the great "goat" tutors we strive to be through adaptability and positivity within the tutoring session. Doing so will help us achieve what we ultimately strive to do: bolster the confidence of our students.

Utah State University Library Writing Center. Week 2 of my new role of tutor. Up to that point, I hadn't had many sessions at all and was feeling restless and unsure of myself. Lucky for me, I thought, all the downtime had given me the chance to rehearse to a T the

perfect script for all my sessions. It was foolproof! Then, in walked Joe (name changed). As Joe

sat down, I briskly and easily started into my script of welcoming him to the Writing Center and

giving him the outline of exactly how our session was going to be. As I wrapped up my colloquy

by asking him what assignment we'd be working on that day, I was met with silence and a quick

shrug of shoulders. My words escaped me as I realized that my script was just rendered null

and was going to be absolutely useless for the remainder of the session.

      The first mistake we often make as tutors comes the moment that students enter the

room; instead of molding ourselves and our techniques to the students, we try to force our

students to fit into our methods. New tutors in particular tend to be so overwhelmed with

nerves and doubt that they try to find a fixed routine that has proven to work maybe once in

the past and use it on each student who walks through the door. This method may be

attributed to what Mike Rose explains as "rigid rules" in his dissertation on writer's block; the

same concept applies here. Sometimes, we develop patterns that "work" for us, and we fall

into the habit of relying rigidly on what we've set in our minds as being the right and only good

way of doing things (Rose 391). However, as I discovered in this particular session described

above, our comfort zones can quickly become uncomfortable corners into which we've backed

ourselves, resulting in panic and awkward moments of not knowing what to do or say. Instead

of focusing on set dialogue, I quickly learned that a willingness to adapt within my sessions is

what ultimately helps me help the students. I once read that one mistake people often make in

communication is thinking of ways to respond to an individual *while* they are speaking. This

manner of thinking on your feet can be very uncomfortable if adaptation doesn't come

naturally. However, in order to work with people in a way that helps them find solutions and

feel valued, we should be focusing *all* our attention on what they have to say while they say it instead of formulating our response in our heads. By applying this concept with our students, we can ensure we are adapting the tone and focus of the session, recognizing that we do not need to hold ourselves to any particular standard. By easing our own anxieties through adaptability, we ensure that we are helping the students achieve their potential.

It was a slower day at the Library Writing Center. At the time, there were only two of us tutoring. A student had come in and was receiving help from the other tutor, and their conversation was difficult to ignore. The student had a number of insecurities about his writing, and I am sad report that the tutor was unhelpful. In fact, the tutor was actively degrading the student and his paper by calling out every flaw in a cold, thoughtless manner. I was absolutely mortified. The student was silent.

It is evident that the walls in the Writing Center are relatively thin, sufficiently so that conversations and exchanges within tutoring session are easily overheard. While the noise levels can at times form a mild inconvenience, we can learn to use these thin walls to our advantage. They can be a bountiful source of inspiration on what to do (and what *not* to do) in a session with a student. My experience with the walls in the Library Writing Center opened my eyes to the damage that unkind words can have on a student's self-esteem. Learning to use positivity, especially through honest validation, can completely alter a student's outlook on writing as a whole and their own work. Jackie Goldsby, a former writing tutor at University of California-Berkley, kept a thorough tutoring journal in which she documented certain experiences she had as a new tutor. She tells of a time when her students were prepping to take a large written exam and were feeling anxious about their readiness. Goldsby explains

how all the students needed was encouragement and "positive thinking" (Goldsby 54). However, what is most fascinating is what Goldsby says as a follow-up to this encouragement. She says, "I hoped that they didn't think I was saying this just to calm them down; I really believed that each of them could write a passing exam" (Goldsby 54). They key principle here is Goldsby wasn't just validating her students for the sake of comforting them; she truly believed in the ability and potential of every one of them. As tutors, we must ensure we are validating our students to help them construct a sense of confidence in their ability as writers; however, it does no good to the student if the positive feedback we give is ingenuine or generic. We must strive to be completely honest in our validation, seeking for elements of students' work that legitimately stand out to us and deserve positive recognition.

Not long after my saddening experience at the LWC, I had a chance to put into practice what I'd learned from this other tutor's mistake. Shelly (again, name changed) came into a session with me and, beaming, began to tell me about her assignment to write a creative non-fiction personal narrative. Her smile faltered for a moment as she admitted that she felt she hadn't succeeded in being creative at all in her piece. As we began reading her paper aloud, I focused all my energy on finding areas where I truly felt her writing exceled and achieved what she was hoping. At those moments, I stopped our reading of the paper and remarked how a particular sentence or device really "added to the paper" or how I was impressed with her word choice or imagery. As we carried on with the pattern of reading, stopping, *genuinely* complimenting, Shelly became more and more eager about her writing. As she left, she told me that this newfound confidence was now urging her to think about pursuing a degree in English.

At that moment, I felt my own confidence grow in my ability to change the outlook of those I help in tutoring sessions.

      In all honesty, the process of becoming a goat is a simple cycle; we increase our confidence to help our students, and by helping our students, we increase our confidence. But this cycle really boils down to the two elements of adaptability and positivity. The sooner we are able to master these key principles, the sooner we will be on our way to becoming the cream-of-the-crop, top-notch, first-class, goat-of-the-sheep tutor we all strive to be!

Works Cited

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