

ADVENTURES OF A VOLUNTEER WRITING TUTOR

BY MARY KENNAN HERBERT

Recently, for four semesters I worked as a writing tutor at a college and at a university in Brooklyn, New York. At first, this effort was on a volunteer basis.

For one entire semester, I never received one dime in salary,

but—as it turned out—a million bucks in terms of psychic gratification and spiritual rewards. I cannot pay the rent with the emotional satisfactions that I received from my work as a volunteer writing tutor, but the experience has been a pearl beyond price. I offered to tutor

students two afternoons a week, thinking it would be a useful and altruistic activity for a few weeks. I had no experience in tutoring in an academic setting, although I had spent more than 30 years in book publishing. Would my background have any relevance or carry-over into the world of education at a small college or a large, urban university in downtown Brooklyn?

The Challenge

The directors of the writing centers at both schools took a chance and welcomed me to their staffs. Their acumen about



people and managerial strengths were about to be put to the test. It was a case of matchmaking: a tremulous ex-editor versus an exciting new generation of students. I did not want to let them down, and was eager to see if I could prove myself in these new academic settings. I discovered that tutoring has its own dynamics, its own challenges. Tutoring is a real job in every sense, an essential link in the educational process.

As the weeks went by, I found myself more and more emotionally engaged with the task of tutoring. At first, I came into the writing centers two afternoons a week for two hours. The people and energy in these centers were like a special class in educational pedagogy, awaiting me alone. I never knew what to expect. Sometimes there would be a hubbub of activity. For example; the entire basketball team might be jostling for computer time, while urgently requesting editorial assistance on term papers. On other occasions, the room would be as quiet and peaceful as a monk's cell. I might find one lone student nervously revising a research paper, hovering like a medieval scribe over a manuscript, seeking advice on illuminations—or the past tenses of verbs. The director, with a cheerful wave of her hand, would put me to work, one on one, matching nervous tutor with nervous student.

And then, after several weeks of providing paramedic grammar “fixes,” like many beginning teachers and other professionals in education, I had a wonderful epiphany that convinced me that what I was doing was worthwhile. It was something more than mere proof-reading or grammar checking.

The Rewards

For me, the moment of epiphany came when Wei Chang—a petite, vivacious Chinese student—flew through the doorway to the table where I was idly flipping through a plump book on grammar and pontifical counsel on how to write a research paper. I was wondering if I could ever master this haystack of information and rules, much less convey its essence to a multicul-

Tutoring is a real job in every sense, an essential link in the educational process.

tural army of 18-year-olds dealing with the realities of a college education. Wei raced around the table to my seat and flung her arms around me. “I got a ‘B+!’” she shrieked, “the first ‘B+’ I ever got in my life!” I had helped her organize a brief paper on Robert Browning’s poem, “My Last Duchess,” and then had put the incident out of my mind, never expecting a response like this—or any response at all. Many students, once their goal of a decent grade has been achieved, understandably race on to other, happier things in their lives. Like many teachers, I did not hold my breath waiting for immediate feedback.

Those four semesters that I spent as a writing tutor were the equivalent of student teaching. Now I do it for a salary, albeit a small one, but the advantages of working as a volunteer are worth a comment. I really did feel like a student teacher. I could make mistakes and allow myself the luxury of finding out if I really liked tutoring, of learning whether I really liked the job. Like many a new teacher, I discovered the pleasure of being appreciated.

Another student, a black woman of Caribbean heritage, brought in an essay that earned her a “B.” She was very proud of this grade, since her previous efforts had earned only a series of “C’s.” She had revised the “B” essay five times over several tutoring sessions. Her hard work paid off, and she was rightfully jaunty the day she arrived in the writing center with her graded paper in hand. By the end of the academic year, she was turning in “A” papers, and received an “A” for the

course. Most recently, I have had the pleasure of helping her organize an essay for a graduate-school application.

Tutoring is very labor intensive, as any professional who works one on one with clients will confirm. A tutor is therapist, coach, parent surrogate, sibling stand-in, teammate, counselor, proctor, hector, nurse, nanny, squad leader—and teacher. A tutor, unfortunately, is much lower on the educational pecking order than classroom teacher or teaching assistant. In terms of job satisfaction, however, it is the equal of any position in the helping professions. My tutoring experience led to a teaching assignment, and I could never have dealt with that responsibility without my boot-camp experience in tutoring.

One of the best things a teacher can do is to give the gift of time—and to encourage others to do so. By tutoring a new student one or two hours a week, one can invest something of oneself into Christian education and the new generation of students. Believe me, it is a rewarding experience, and students do appreciate the tutor’s concern, guidance, and “street smarts.”

Tips on Tutoring

In my semesters of tutoring, I learned a few things, and am happy to share these tips. Here are a dozen specific pointers that I learned during my apprenticeship. You may want to add your own ideas to the list:

1. *Tutoring is listening.* Like any good salesperson, a writing tutor must learn to listen carefully and try to ascertain what the student is really saying. I found that students often rush into the problem at hand, expecting fast-food results, a quick fix. A savvy tutor will back up a little, get the facts, and help the student slow down. Find out everything available about the assignment under discussion. Back up a little more. Look at the previous assignments. Try to discern patterns of writing behavior that may indicate what direction the tutoring should take. Ask the student to express in his or her own words what that pattern/problem may be, and then listen carefully.

2. *A writing tutor must be flexible.* If a student is upset, listen to what annoys him or her. Perhaps conversation is what is needed, rather than the dissection of sentences. Elicit opinions and feelings and listen. Go with the flow.

3. *A writing tutor should try to focus on the overall goals of the student rather than on how to write a perfect paper.* It is more important for the student to develop a sense of growth in his or her work over time. I applaud the use of writing portfolios (now growing in popularity in college composition courses) to develop a cumulative record of growth. Try to link writing assignments to a student's professional interest and career goals.

4. *Sometimes a paper is, quite frankly, a mess.* One should keep a sense of humor

about doomed essays, encouraging the student to dump such disasters and start over, rather than laboriously and painfully trying to rewrite. Objectively evaluate the material to see what is salvageable and what is not. Ask: What can we keep here? What should be re-done? What should we shred?

5. *A writing tutor must help students focus on developing a*

main idea and a few supporting points rather than nitpicking individual sentences. (This is important!)

6. *When a student is stumped, a tutor can be a big help by encouraging him or her to make a "grocery list" of ideas to be covered in an essay or paper.*

List-making is less intimidating than formal outlining. (Students often hate to make outlines. The outline can even be constructed after the paper itself is written. Don't let the scaffolding hide the main idea.)

7. *Use of doodling, drawing, and decision trees can help the student visualize the sequence of ideas.* You can help the student visualize an essay by literally drawing a picture of it so that he or she will see it as a series of paragraphs and a sequence of ideas.

8. *Tutors should encourage students to do library research and to read a newspaper daily.* It is surprising how many students do not read widely. Often the daily paper contains articles that will shine a bright light on a current writing assignment. TV usually will not give this



kind of breadth and depth to reflective writing.

9. *The tutor-student relationship is conversational, one-on-one.* Ask the student to tell you what the essay or paper should say. Ask him or her to explain what "needs" to be said. Ask again. Listen.

10. *The tutor should read the essay or paper aloud with the student.* Take turns. Show how grammar and punctuation often become clearer—and more obvious—when the paper is read aloud. This is easy and obvious but often overlooked as a pedagogical technique.

11. *Tutors should always try to help students see writing assignments from a professional writer's viewpoint.* Tell the student: Imagine your essay is going to be published. Who are the readers? What do they want to find out from this paper? If it is an essay, what is the title? What is the "hook" that will lure readers into continuing to read it? A journalist's or copywriter's approach to writing can make the assignment seem more intriguing, and sometimes easier and more fun to write.

12. *Realistically, writing tutors are often expected to simply proofread and edit students' papers.* If this is the policy, be sure to discuss with the student what is happening in the editing steps. This can be a useful learning device. For example, you might add an "ed" to a past tense verb. Point out the correction to the student and ask why the "ed" was necessary.

A Broader View

Above all, as a writing tutor, I have tried to emphasize students' strengths as writers. I suppose this should be self-evident, but it is easy to forget when the writer is in a panic mode. Ask to look at the student's writing for other courses, not just English, and try to get a feel for his or her academic skills. Discuss with the student his or her previous courses and background, including high school writing experiences. Look at the whole student. Talk about his or her best work, in any and all courses. Search for and pull out positive memories and build on them.

You will notice that I have said nothing

A tutor is therapist, coach, parent surrogate, sibling stand-in, teammate, counselor, proctor, hector, nurse, nanny, squad leader—and teacher.

ing about specific aspects of style or grammar. It takes five years to deal competently with academic discourse, and learning to communicate is a lifelong job. I am still learning how myself! Each achievement is to be cheered, and as a writing tutor, I am delighted to participate in and observe my students' small victories. By building a caring relationship, the writing tutor can be a catalyst for growth and change.

Recently, a student at the writing center confessed that he had minimal skills in written English, even though he was a business management major. He told me he dreamed of owning his own Brooklyn firm someday. This would be a challenge, since English was not his first language. I suggested that he try to write one paragraph each day; and I gave him a small notebook to use as a journal. He expressed his appreciation, but there was very little in it when he came for his weekly tutoring session. "I don't know what to write about," he said sheepishly. However, he agreed to write a paragraph while I looked over his shoulder.

"I have no ideas for writing," he

said. He waited expectantly, hoping that his tutor would provide an intellectual jump-start. So I asked him about his work, his courses, his life. What might trigger the written word, the flow of ideas? He revealed that he was in the U.S. Air Force Reserve, in charge of basic training for a squad from Brooklyn. "What do you teach your new recruits?" I asked him.

"Oh, how to read maps and how to parachute." He was matter-of-fact, not bragging at all.

Incredulous and impressed, I asked: "You teach guys how to jump out of airplanes?!"

He looked shyly down at his journal, pencil nervously clenched in his normally competent hand. "Yes," he replied. "But it is nothing. It is boring." He looked up at me, and then at his paper. "This," he said, gesturing toward the pencilled words, "is much harder." And so it is. ☞

Useful Books for Writing Tutors

- Bartholomae, David, and Anthony R. Petrosky, *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts: Theory and Method for a Reading and Writing Course*. Upper Montclair, N.J.: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1986.
- Lindemann, Erika, *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, 3rd edition.
- Murray, Donald M., *A Writer Teaches Writing*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985, 2nd edition.
- Tate, Gary, and Edward P. J. Corbett, eds., *The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1944, 3rd edition.

Based on an essay previously published in *The Terrier: The Alumni Magazine of St. Francis College*, Brooklyn, N.Y., and the newsletter of the National Tutoring Association.

Mary Kennan Herbert is an Adjunct Assistant Professor of English at the Brooklyn campus of Long Island University, New York, and has also taught at St. Francis College, New York, and at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey.