Writing Center Tutors Have the Luxury to Focus on Individual Student *Care Giving* as Opposed to Formal Classroom Settings That Are Less *Care* Centered

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Abstract

Undergraduate and graduate students come to the writing center for consultations with peer tutors in order to improve their communication skills. During peer tutoring sessions (over the course of one semester) it became clear that these students were meeting with the tutors that I supervised, for more than just help with their writing. I observed six male and seven female students that needed help. There were five international students and they were considered ESL-English as a Second Language students. Interestingly, all the students indicated a high level of frustration (by a perceived lack of *caring* on the part of their Professors) who made comments on their assignments. They came to the Center, hurt and confused, and in need of some deciphering about just what their Professors wanted from them. The students were uncomfortable with approaching their Professors to discuss the papers. The Professors, were truly overwhelmed with department and research obligations making it hard to meet with students repeatedly. It became clear that the writing center tutor needed to fill this role by employing a more *caring* tutoring approach. A *caring* tutoring approach requires nurturing at all times and its application results in higher self-esteem levels. Other tutoring approaches that are not *care* centered tend to be less nurturing. They tend to focus solely on results that impact the tutee's grades, with little to no improvement in the tutee's self-esteem level.

Keywords: *Caring* tutoring approach, Individual *care giving*, Cozy writing center, Formal classroom setting

1. Introduction

A new phenomena in peer tutoring is the turn toward an examination of the role of *care giving* during peer tutoring sessions. Peer tutors can choose to be *caring* as they work in *cozy* "spots where talk about writing can happen" (McKinney, 2005).

Writing center directors place great emphasis on the objects and décor found in the writing center (McKinney, 2005). I agree with Jackie McKinney that the tutoring atmosphere influences tutoring sessions and I take that theory a step further by adding another dimension.   I posit that using the *caring tutoring approach* in a *cozy* writing center leads to closer tutor-tutee inter-personal relationships. Also, *care* that peer tutors show tutees often includes talking about writing anxiety in addition to emotional problems. The fact that writing centers deal with students on a *one-on-one* basis allows it to employ a *caring tutoring approach*. Whereas, a *caring tutoring approach* works less well in the formal classroom due to its time constraints, resources, and sheer number of students.

2. Why We Need to Train Writing Center Personnel to Employ the *Caring* Approach

Peer tutors should exhibit a *caring* attitude with tutees so the writing center not only feels welcoming but a tutee senses he is *one of the family*. Similarly, a family member is always there to help with problems and a tutee who visits the writing center should feel *cared* for. Hence, the *caring tutoring approach* occurs when the tutor does not mindlessly berate the tutee about every sentence in the tutee's paper and a *caring* tutor employs *constructive criticism. Constructive criticisms* are used to make an important point about recurring errors in the tutee's paper. There are pedagogical commentators who see links between *caring* and its role in education (Ritchie & Boardman, 1999). Nell Nodding, for example, explores the impact of *caring* on the *care giver* and the *one cared for* in her essay called *Why Care About Caring?* I agree with Nodding "as human beings we want to care and be cared for" (Nodding, 2003). The connection between *caring* and writing pedagogy is seen whenever tutors employ the c*aring tutoring approach*. This approach results in a strengthened inter-personal relationship that is more effective at addressing a tutee's heartfelt needs in addition to insecurities about writing. The distance between teacher and student within the context of the large classroom makes it impossible for this level of *caring* to happen.

2.1 An Example of this Caring Approach: Mothering Roles

It is imperative that it is clear to writing center personnel exactly what the *caring* approach is and what it is not. Through direction, they can learn how to employ it and with appropriate training they should feel comfortable

doing so. The *caring* approach features a deep understanding and will to personally connect with the tutee. Writing Center personnel and teachers, in general, have a strong sense of *caring* that is innate. Usually, it is their care and concern for others that leads them to the teaching field. This is another reason why these professionals can successfully employ the *caring* tutoring approach. We use mothering role to carry out the *caring* tutoring approach. Further, Mary Trachsel (1995) connects the *mothering* roles with writing center activities like tutoring. In her article called *Nurturant Ethics and Academic Ideals: Convergence in the Writing Center* she explores how being a mother helped her become a better teacher when she realized it was: "important to be accessible to those around me-to be receptive, to try to understand, and then to respond in a way that was supportive and beneficial to others' growth of understanding, whether those others be students, TAs, departmental administrators, or my own children" (Trachsel, 1995). Trachsel intertwines her job at home with her job at the writing lab and she manages home and family responsibilities (Trachsel, 1995). It is her nurturing skills as a dependable sounding board, advice giver, and *care giver* that are necessary and valuable skills for the work at the writing center. Therefore, it follows that any one can successfully take on the role of *care giver*. Men are also good *care givers* as *caring* is not restricted solely for women. *One-on-one* tutoring in a writing center's setting makes it, rather than the classroom (with its row of desks and the teacher's desk at the center) less of a hierarchy. This environment is more conducive to the *care giving* approach to learning.

2.2 Why caring?

Trachsel views *caring* "not as an instinctive and purely emotion-powered response to young or otherwise vulnerable others, but as an intellectual and ethical choice" (Trachsel, 1995). Therefore, the act of c*aring* in the writing center context is not so-called women's work" merely because it involves an act that is associated with women. Trachsel explains that *caring* is an ethical obligation for both males and females and   with similar gender neutrality, commentators Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule use the term *midwife* to describe writing tutors because both tutors and *midwives* assist in a *process* (Ritchie, 1999,   note 3). And this *process* results in a changed circumstance as neither the tutor nor the *midwife* bring forth the changed circumstances without help from the one who is *cared for*. Hence the tutor (the care giver) and tutee (the one cared for) work together to revise, organize, and edit the tutee's paper akin to the way the *midwife* directs the mother to push the baby out of the womb. The *midwife* continues to show the mother (the one cared for) *care* and concern as she directs the mother during the infant's delivery. Likewise, tutors must also continue to show *care* and concern for tutees throughout the tutoring session. As a consequence, this feeling is new to the student who did not feel *cared for* (when they were in the classroom setting) and that prompted the writing center visit.

3. Tutor-Tutee Relationships

The work at the writing center has been compared to a psychological consultation. Christina Murphy (2001), for example, compares the tutor-tutee relationship, reflecting that clients come to psychologists due to problems handling anxiety and life's *setbacks* (Murphy, 2001). Similarly, students go to peer tutors to ease their anxiety about the pressures they face from teachers. It is this need to fulfill both their minds and their hearts' desires that impels them to seek both mental counseling and writing help (Murphy, 2001). Jay Parini (1988) contends that students want professional help for themselves in "A Writing Teacher Is Like a Psychoanalyst, Only Less Well Paid" Parini, 1988). Parini writes that a teacher's role is akin to the role played by a psychologist during a session (Parini, 1988). Likewise, Murphy and Parini argue the same traits and skills are being employed by both psychologist and teacher (peer tutors).

These traits require psychologists and peer tutors to exhibit compassion, knowledge, and concern since it is necessary to *care* in both situations. This is where one difference between peer tutors and classroom teachers occurs since a classroom teacher can be effective without being *caring* at all. A peer tutor, however, would be ineffective (in such a *one-on-one* situation) if he or she were *uncaring*. The *one-on-one* situation of peer tutoring makes it so much like the counselor-patient relationship that *caring* becomes a necessary part.

4. Raising Self-Esteem Levels

Patients also attend psycho-therapy sessions because they feel sad and hurt (Murphy, 2001). Often, students go to peer tutors because they are hurt by comments made by Professors who demand academic excellence. Murphy (2001), for example, cites the following statements from students, "I know you're going to tear this paper to shreds, but here goes anyway. I've never been able to write. This is hopeless. I know you can't help me, but I thought I'd try the writing center anyway" The aforementioned statements invite psychological analysis because the tutee seeks someone who *cares* as the statements signify the tutee's low self-esteem level. How can tutors ignore the emotional aspect that is a large part of a tutee's needs? Tutees come to the writing center for help with their writing but they also expect to find someone who *cares* and understands their frustration. Such tutee low self-esteem levels are far too crippling and debilitating to be ignored and just as a professional therapist would not ignore these statements neither should a *caring* tutor. Classroom settings can and do ignore such student cries

because most classroom teachers advise the troubled student to go to the writing center for help. Troubled students are being referred to the writing center and peer tutors must be ready to develop an interpersonal relationship that is unachievable in the classroom setting.

5. Quality of the Relationships Formed

For similar reasons, Murphy (2001) suggests, "As in psychoanalysis, the quality of that interpersonal relationship between therapist and client, tutor and student, determines how successful the interaction will be as a whole." The quality of the relationship can be measured by how comfortable a tutee feels with the tutor. A tutee is more willing to share information with a tutor when there are no trust issues between them and trust is earned through a tutor's demonstration of *care* and concern. This c*aring tutoring approach* involves asking a tutee clarifying questions to show interest in his welfare. These questions can take the form of how well their day is going or they can be about the tutee's paper. Peer tutors can also ask how and why the student chose to come to the writing center. Many students report that they missed something in class and feel confused and alienated from the majority of classmates.

5.1 Positive Regard

The importance of *caring* and the creation of an interpersonal relationship (whether its physician-patient or tutor-tutee) continues to be stressed by many commentators.

Carl Rogers (1957), in particular, describes *positive regard* as a person's ability to love, show affection and a person's *positive regard* is linked to the person's self-esteem, it is the self-image (Rogers, 1957). People achieve this positive *self-regard* by experiencing the positive regard others showed them when they were children (Rogers, 1957). This *self-regard* is vital to humans trying to reach their full potential in life (Rogers, 1957). Tutors who *care* about helping tutees become better writers need to consider their roles in aiding tutees to improve their self-esteem elevating a tutee's *positive regard.*

5.2 Actualizing Theory

Rogers is similar to Freud as he based his theories on years of experiences with his clients whom he used to test the effectiveness of his counseling methods. In short, Rogers (1957) *actualizing theory* is defined as every person has the potential to fully develop and achieve beyond mere survival (Rogers, 1957). How can the *caring tutor* utilize the *self-actualizing theory?* Perhaps, the theory can be used to strengthen a tutor's resolve to *care.* The tutor may view himself as the one who helps the tutee reach his full potential. Certainly, for the *caring* tutor, satisfaction is gained from helping the tutee reach a lifetime goal such as graduating from college.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, using the *caring tutoring approach* requires tutors to switch roles from the *pseudo-psycho* therapist to the *caring midwife* as the circumstances require it. For example, if a tutee cries during the session such emotions need to be discussed in *caring* ways in order to develop the tutor-tutee's inter-personal relationship. It has been said that any tutor can employ the *caring tutoring approach* in order to cultivate better interpersonal relationships. The establishment of a *caring* environment during sessions facilitates the implementation of the *caring tutoring approach.* Finally, remember that students come to peer tutors because they are struggling to learn within traditional classroom settings that are plagued with hierarchy.

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