

Minimalist Tutoring: Making Students Do All the Work

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A writing center worst case scenario: A student comes in with a draft of a paper. It is reasonably well-written and is on a subject in which you have both expertise and interest. You point out the mechanical errors and suggest a number of improvement that could be made in the paper's organization; the student agrees and make the changes. You supply some factual information that will strengthen the paper; the student incorporates it. You work hard, enjoy yourself, and when the student leaves the paper is much improved. A week later, the student returns to the writing center to see you: "I got an A! Thanks for all the help!"

This scenario is hard to avoid, because it make everyone involved feel good: the student goes away happy with a good grade, admiring you; you feel intelligent, useful, helpful – everything a good teacher ought to be. Everything about it seems right. That this is bad points out the central difficulty out the central difficulty we confront as tutors: we sit down with imperfect papers, but out job is to improve their writers.

When you "improve" a student's paper, you haven't been a tutor at all; you've been an editor. You may have been an exceedingly good editor, but you've been of little service to your student. I think most writing center tutors agree that we must not become editors for our students and that the goal of each tutoring session is learning, not a perfect paper. But faced with students who want us to "fix" their papers as well as out own desire to create "perfect" documents, we often find it easier and more satisfying to charge, to muscle in on student's paper, red pen in hand.

To avoid the trap, we need to make the student the primary agent in the writing center session. The student, not the tutor, should "own" the paper and take full responsibility for it. The tutor should take on the secondary role, serving mainly to keep the student focused on his own than he was when he walked in. He may leave with an improved paper, but he will not have learned much.

A writing teacher or tutor cannot and should not expect to make the student papers "better"; that is neither our obligation, nor is it a realistic goal. The moment we consider it our duty to improve the paper, we automatically relegate ourselves to the role of editor.

If we can't fix papers, is there anything left for us to do? I would like to suggest that when we refuse to edit, we become more active than ever as educators. In the writing center, we have the luxury of time the classroom teacher does not have. We can spend time talking and listening, always focusing on the paper at hand. The primary value of the writing center tutor to the students as a living human body who is willing to sit patiently and help the student spend time with her paper. This alone is more than most teachers can do, and will likely do as much to improve the paper as a hurried proofreader can. Second, we can talk to the student as an individual about the on paper before us. We can discuss strategies for effective writing and principles for structure, we can draw students' attention to features in their writing, and we can give them support and encouragement (writing papers, we shouldn't forget, is a daunting activity).

Assumptions

All of this can be painfully difficult to do. Every instinct we have tells us that we must work for perfection; likewise, students pressure us in the same direction. I have found two assumptions useful in keeping myself from editing:

1. The most common difficulty for student writers is paying attention to their writing. Because of this, student papers seldom reflect their writers' full capabilities. Writing paper is a dull and unrewarding activity for most students, so they do it in noisy surroundings, at the last minute, their minds turning constantly to more pressing concerns. It is little wonder that so much student writing seems haphazard, unfocused, and disorganized. A good many errors are made that the students could easily have avoided. If we can get students to reread a paper even once before handing it is, in most cases we have rendered an improvement. We ought to encourage students to treat their own writings as texts that deserve the same kind of close attention we usually reserve for literary texts.

Our message to students should be: "Your paper has value as a piece of writing. It is worth reading and thinking about like any other piece of writing."

2. While student writings are texts, they are unlike other texts in one important way: the process is far more important than the product. Most "real world" writing has a goal beyond the page; anything that can be done to that writing to make it more effective ought to be done. Student writing, on the other hand, had no real goal beyond getting it on the page. In the real world, when you need to have something important written "perfectly," you hire a professional writer when a student hires a professional writer, it is a high crime called plagiarism.

This fairly obvious difference is something we often forget. We are so used to real-world writing, where perfection is paramount, they we forget that students write to learn, not to make perfect papers. Most writing teachers probably have a vision of a "perfect" freshman paper (it probably looks exactly like the pieces in the readers and win a Bedford prize); we should probably resign ourselves to the fact that we seldom see such a creature. Most students simply do not have the skill, experience, or talent to write the perfect paper.

Basic Minimalist Tutoring

Given these assumptions, there are a number of concrete ways we can put theory into practice. Our body language will do more to signal our intentions (both to our students and to ourselves) than anything we say. These four steps should establish a tone that unmistakably shows that the paper belongs to the student and that the tutor is not an editor.

1. Sit beside the student, not across a desk – that is where job interviewers and other authorities sit. This first signal is important for showing the student that you are not

- the person “in charge” of the paper.
2. Try to get the student to be physically closer to her paper than you are. You should be, in a sense, an outsider, looking over her shoulder while she works on her paper.
 3. If you are right-handed, sit on the student’s right; this will make it more difficult for you to write on the paper. Better yet, don’t let yourself have a pencil in your hand. By all means, if you must hold something, don’t make it a red pen!
 4. Have the student read the paper aloud to you, and suggest that he hold a pencil while doing so. Aside from saving your eyes in the case of bad handwriting, this will accomplish three things. First, it will bypass that awkward first few moments of the session when you are in complete control of the paper and the student is left out of the action while you read his paper. Second, this will actively involve the student in the paper, quite likely for the first time since he wrote it. I find that many students are able to find and correct usage errors, awkward wording, even logic problems without and prompting from me. Third, this will help establish the sometimes slippery principle that good writing should sound good.

I am convinced that if you follow these four steps, even if you do nothing else, you will have served the student better than you would if you “edited” his paper.

Advanced Minimalist Tutoring

Of course, there is quite a bit more you can do for the student in the time you have. You can use your keen intelligence and fine critical sense to help the student without directing the paper. As always, the main goal is to keep the student active and involved in the paper. I have three suggestions:

1. Concentrate on success in the paper, not failure. Make it a practice to find something nice to say about every paper, no matter how hard you have to search. This isn’t easy to do; errors are what we usually focus on. But by pointing out to a student when he is doing something right, you reinforce behavior that may have started as a felicitous accident. This also demonstrates to the student that the paper is a “text” to be analyzed, with strengths as well as weaknesses. This is where the tutor can radically depart from the role of the editor.
2. Get the student to talk. It’s her paper; she is the expert on it. Ask questions – perhaps “leading” questions – as often as possible. When there are sentence-level problems, make the student find and (if possible) correct them. When something is unclear, don’t say “This is unclear”; rather, say, “What do you mean by this?” Instead of saying, “You don’t have a thesis,” ask the student, “Can you show me your thesis?” “What’s your reason for putting Q before N?” is more effective than “N should have come before Q.” It is much easier to point out mistakes than it is to point the student toward finding them, but your questions will do much more to establish the student as sole owner of the paper and you as merely an interested outsider.
3. If you have time during your session, give the student a discrete writing task, then go away for a few minutes and let him do it. For instance, having established that the paper has no thesis, tell the student to write the thesis while you step outside for a few minutes.

The fact that you will return and see what he has accomplished (or not accomplished) will force him to work on the task you have given him probably with more concentration than he usually gives his writing. For most students, the only deadline pressure for their paper is the teacher's final due date. Any experienced writer knows that a deadline is the ultimate energizer. Creating that energy for a small part of the paper is almost the best favor you can do for a student.

Defensive Minimalist Tutoring

So far, I have been assuming that the student is cooperative or at least open to whatever methods you might use. This, of course, is not a very realistic assumption. There are many students who fight a non-editing tutor all the way. They know you know how to fix their paper, and that is what they came to have done. Some find ingenious ways of forcing you into the role of the editor: some withdraw from the paper, leaving it in front of you; some refuse to write anything down until you tell them word for word what to write; others will keep asking you questions ("What should I do here Is this part okay?"). Don't underestimate the abilities of these students, they will fatigue you into submission if they can.

To fight back, I would suggest we learn some techniques from the experts: the uncooperative students themselves.

1. Borrow student body language. When a student doesn't want to be involved in his paper, he will slump back in his chair, getting as far away from it as possible. If you find a student pushing you too hard into editing his paper, physically move away from it – slump back into your chair or scoot away. If a student is making a productive session impossible with his demands, yawn, look at the clock, rearrange your things. This language will speak clearly to the student: "You cannot make me edit your paper."
2. Be completely honest with the student who is giving you a hard time. If she says, "What should I do here?" you can say in a friendly, non-threatening way, "I can't tell you that – it's your grade, not mine," or, "I don't know, it's your paper." I have found this approach doesn't upset students as it might seem it would; they know what they are doing, and when you show that you know too, they accept that.

All of the suggestions I have made should be just a beginning of the ideas we can use to improve our value to our students. I hope that they lead to other ideas and tutoring techniques.

The less we do to the paper, the better. Our primary object in the writing center session is not the paper, but the student. Fixing flawed papers is easy; showing the students how to fix their own papers is complex and difficult. Ideally, the student should be the only active agent in improving their paper. The tutor's activity should focus on the student. If, at the end of the session, a paper is improved, it should be because the student did all the work.