

Don't Stay on One Side of the Seesaw --- Balancing in Tutoring

During the tutoring practice this semester, I have two regular tutees, one other tutee who dropped the ESL015 course after our fourth session, and seven tutees who participated in our drop-in session. All the experiences with them made my tutoring challenging but also benefitted myself a great deal.

At the beginning of this course, before I met my tutees, I was nervous about how I could teach something I'd never taught before. Although I'd been doing one to one teaching prior to my tutoring in this course, mainly grammar, vocabulary and reading back in China for two years, writing was never what I was good at. I had no idea what I needed to focus on in every session; I was worrying about what if tutees asked me questions that I can't answer; I was afraid my suggestions for them would lead them into a lower grade. All these feelings were haunting me, pushing me to observe as many classes as I could so that at least I could get a sense of what I was going to tutor. I read through the handbook and the sample syllabus for instructors in order to act professionally upon first meeting with my tutees.

After reading the writing samples provided by my three regular tutees (including the one who dropped the course), I felt all of these were nicely written and I could hardly point out what could be improved except some very obvious defects. As time went on, I never have that feeling any more. I assume that I have improved after so many tutoring sessions. The essence of my tutoring philosophy is balancing. Balancing on both sides of the seesaw, on the perspectives of tutor and tutee.

Tutees' Perspective

Balancing On Words and Sentences

When reading my tutees' writing samples for the first time, I found a prominent problem shared by two of them, which is that they use too many oral forms in their written English. The reason for this could be that they have a similar experience, studying in an American high school for three years. Their oral English proficiencies are comparatively high, but they also feel really hard to put their ideas into formal words.

It's a pity that I didn't have much chance to work with them on sentence level, how to make a good word choice, how to produce a better sentence structure, but personally as a second-language writer, I know how much effort we need to put on balancing between the words and sentences. Words need to be wisely chosen, not repetitive. Sentences need to be complex but meantime intelligible. The control of language is an art that I would love to learn, to tutor and to keep developing in the future.

Balancing on Time of Planning and Writing

There is a common problem shared among my regular tutees, their writings flow with their minds, that is, they don't really plan what they're going to write, merely write what first comes into their minds. This seriously affects the unity of a paragraph, also the overall structure and organization of writing. This notion of planning before writing was neglected and not valued among them. This was the major problem I had dealt with all my tutees at the beginning of the semester. A variety of ways have been used in our session, such as drawing a concept map, brainstorming, listing examples and evaluating them. In a sense, I was forcing

them to plan, because I believe if we don't do this in the session, they won't plan before starting writing. Nonetheless, I hope by forcing them would eventually foster a habit of planning in the future. One tutee told me that he spent 2 hours planning, thinking and prewriting, and that when he started to write, it only took him an hour, which usually was a painful process. He indeed was excited about this change. Once they get to feel the advantage, they won't be reluctant to do it any more. Helping tutees to realize that by balancing the time between planning and writing was essentially valuable and effective was a success in my tutoring practice.

Balancing the Ideas in Mind and Words in Text

Besides the overall organization and structure, another major problem I focused on with my tutees in this semester was the sentence connection within a paragraph.

When writing a paragraph, trying to develop an idea, elaborate it, and put it onto a paper, it's so tough for a novice writer to show the connections in their minds. Missing bits of supporting information can cause misunderstandings or confusion to the readers. What makes it more complicated is that they can't find the lost connections until a reader asks.

One activity I always did with my tutees was to list out the points of a paragraph, talking through it and ask why. Why do you think sentence A has to be written before sentence B. Is there anything missing between sentence A and B, why? They would start to talk what's in their mind and then we compared it with the paragraph, so they could see what's wrong. In spite of that, it doesn't mean we have to write everything in our mind. Otherwise, it would be full of redundant information. That's the balance between ideas in mind and words in text.

Realizing this also helps me writing, because I believe this too happens to me. Tutoring is not just improving tutees' writing skill; furthermore, it's a reciprocal process.

Balancing Between the Creativity and Guidelines

Sometimes, having a motivated tutee doesn't necessarily mean they are easier to tutor. Some of them are "rebellious", trying to be innovative and resistant to follow the guideline, outlines that the instructor provides or conventional way of writing an essay.

It was frustrating to me because when I thought I was offering some suggestions that would make his essay better to one of my tutees, he tended to keep his writing in his approach. (In this case, the conventional way, also my suggested way, of writing a problem/solution essay is to present and refute the current solutions and argue why the proposed solution is better. While my tutee would like to put the refutation in the middle of the proposed solution.) He felt I was trying to remove his ingenuity from the essay. Despite the fact that we eventually came to an agreement that he would try my suggestion and then compare both to see which one is better, he accepted with a reluctant tone.

Being a good tutor not only requires knowing what to teach, but also have to know how to negotiate to push tutees into the right direction in this kind of situation, which I didn't do so well at that time. The importance of balancing creativity and guideline, how to combine the creativity, the personal writing style with a conventional writing rules together comes to light. More skills of negotiation need to be learned.

Tutors' Perspective

Balancing of Roles

When I was teaching in China, due to the fact that I always did one to one teaching in a private language training school and I didn't have the authority like their normal school teachers to ask them do their homework, I tended to develop a better relationship with my students, so that they would feel more willing to cooperate with me. Tutoring here became a different situation. After I started a good rapport with them, they began to treat me like a "buddy". One complained about his roommate during the session, and the other called me on Friday night to ask me how to fix the APA style. One started to change time constantly for he might think a good "buddy" wouldn't mind this. All these made me wonder if I was too close to them. I don't deny that tutors can still be good friends with their tutees, but balancing the roles is important. Setting the "friend role" aside in the session and set rules between this relationship. After all, the central bond between us is a professional relation of tutor and tutee in a college setting for the purpose of learning to tutor and learning to improve writing. In order to avoid getting a phone call during private time, use the time efficiently in the session, and try hard to solve tutees' problems in the time constraint. Make clear that tutee is not the only one who is too busy to meet tutor regularly, and choose the meeting time wisely. Balancing the role of tutor and friend would make the communication and tutoring smoother.

Another "role issue" lies between my regular tutees and casual drop-in tutees. When I begin to be familiar with my regular ones, we always jump right into the point. They say or I point out what kind of problem they have, and we collaborate to solve it. While I did the same thing to drop-in tutees, they felt I was rude to them. Maybe I was being too straightforward, which made them think all I did was criticizing. Therefore, when I did the

drop-in tutoring for the third time, I was trying to be a facilitator, mainly asking questions to stimulate tutees to figure out how to solve the problems by themselves. It's always hard to ask the proper questions, but worth trying, and more beneficial to them. The role of a tutor of regular tutees and drop-in tutees are distinct because of the subtle differences lying in the relationship. Balancing the role and strategically coping with them according to tutees seems vital.

Balancing the Prioritization

In my session, I always ask, "what problem do you have/bring this time?" I want to solve what they are eager to solve, but then I notice it's not always the case.

Once my tutee came to me to inquire about APA style. We solved this problem together by looking up online for I didn't know that very well. When I read his assignment he had turned in during the next session, I found the organization very messy. It appeared to me that he needed more help on the organization instead of on APA style, which he could probably look online by himself. I came to think of a process of "problematizing and prioritizing". Tutees may be lack of the awareness of priority, i.e., which one to solve first. As a tutor, helping tutees to see the priority becomes urgent. If I could do that session again, I would just tell him the website he could consult with, and move our focus onto the main problem. Tutees' needs sometimes conflict with the real priority, and what tutors should do is to prioritize the problem, and balance and allocate the time we spend on it.

Balancing the Way of Tutoring

Tutees always have different personalities, some are hard working, and some are less

motivated. Various strategies have to be used when we face different tutees.

Tutoring APA style is again an example of balancing the way of tutoring. In one session, we've already solved our main problem in the writing with my tutee, and we still had some extra time. I proposed to check his references together to make the assignment more error-free. While another tutee asked me to check his format of references as a way to avoid doing it himself, I refused. I opened the website and let him do it on his own. Although the final goal was the same, what I did, and how I did, was based on what their level is, what their attitude is, and what their foundation is.

As mentioned earlier, I used concept map, brainstorming, etc., to create an outline. For some motivated tutees, I also use debate to stimulate their thinking, which is for the purpose of idea development. However, for those less motivated ones, they feel it too much work, and they are less willing to do that. A simple well-listed outline waiting for them to fill in will most likely to be a better choice. Balancing the way of tutoring, adopt reasoning teaching is a more effective way to accomplish goals.

In conclusion, I learn that tutoring writing requires balancing in different aspects. On the tutees' perspective, they need to know how to balance the words and sentences in the text, the time they spend on planning and writing, the ideas in mind and words in text from the tutors. On the other hands, tutors need to balance their role with tutees, the priority of a session, their way of tutoring to different tutees.