

(Non)Meeting of the Minds*A Study in Frustration*

Nicole Kraemer Munday

Why do we need to study the dynamics of tutoring? Often a session goes well and it is easy to see how and why the writer benefited. Sometimes, however, both the tutor and the writer leave disappointed. What went wrong? That's often hard to figure out—an unfortunate thing because the stakes can be high. For the writer, a tutoring session may be the first time in her life when anyone has given more than a few minutes of undivided attention to her writing. Or it may be that success on this particular assignment is important to her in ways no one but the student will ever know. For the tutor, the session may represent the most thoughtful and skilled approach she is capable of. Or it may be an attempt at necessary and constructive criticism of a paper whose writer wants none of it.

As with any social interaction, a tutoring session always retains a hint of mystery because the true motivations and feelings of each participant are seldom explicitly stated. Tutors and writers can only guess at these based on the verbal and nonverbal feedback they receive. Taking on the role of a voyeur can help us interpret this feedback in a more careful and deliberate way. It can help us understand why some sessions seem to go so smoothly, while others appear more turbulent.

Perhaps you have had the opportunity to observe a session in person. If so, you have probably noticed that it's like a minidrama, with an unfolding conversation, changing facial expressions, expressive body language, a struggle for understanding, the relief of accomplishment, and hopefully, a happy ending. While reading the narrative of a session is not the same as seeing one in real life, it has the benefit of slowing down the interaction so that you can examine it and imagine how the outcome of the session was affected by the steps that led up to it.

The following narrative provides an opportunity to observe a tutoring session and then discuss it with your fellow tutors. As you read the narrative, try the following:

- Put yourself in the tutor's seat and then the writer's. How does this change the way you understand the session?
- Imagine how you would have handled the session if you were the tutor.

It's a rainy Monday morning when Portia strides into the writing center, prompt for her appointment. She has a no-nonsense, efficient demeanor as she checks in at the front desk, holding a checklist for the session on top of her pile of books. This is not your typical first-year visitor to the writing center—timid, fumbling, unsure whether to stand or sit. Portia is a fourth-year English major who works part-time at the public library to help pay for college, and the good grades she receives make her hard work in and out of the classroom seem worthwhile. She is a highly organized student who likes to begin assignments several weeks before they are due. Portia receives mostly Bs on her essays but usually manages to get As and Bs in her classes. She has hopes of going to graduate school and knows that writing well will be even more important there.

A second-year tutor, Sally works ten hours per week in the writing center and is highly regarded by other members of the staff for her intelligence and good nature; overall, she receives very positive evaluations for her tutoring. She is plain-spoken and has a knack for saying what other people are thinking but are reluctant to express.

Sally has done some reading in the field of writing center theory and she knows that the debate over whether it is better to be a nondirective or directive tutor remains unresolved. Both approaches have their supporters and detractors. The nondirective approach puts the writer in control, relies more on the writer's involvement, and usually takes longer. The directive approach is arguably more frank and straightforward. It can take less time, and it is often what students expect. Sally, familiar with both sides of the debate, has decided that what students want is what benefits them most—and it is also the tutoring style with which she is most comfortable. So, she tells students what she knows and thinks, and from there writers are free to make up their own minds. Besides, she says that being nondirective makes her seem “fakey,” and that doesn't suit her. Her approach is to tell students what she thinks—politely but frankly.

When Sally calls Portia's name and they exchange greetings, Portia chooses a table near the wall and they soon settle in.

Portia: My paper is due tomorrow, and I've never been here before . . . but I figured maybe I should have somebody look at it before I turn it in. It's finished, basically.

Sally: Okay, well here in the writing center we . . .

Portia [Interrupting]: Have you ever heard of Kiefer? This is the first time I've had a class with her. Have you had her before?

Sally [Shakes her head]: I'm an international studies major, so . . .

Portia: Oh. Well, she grades hard. My paper's about Frost's poems—Robert Frost? [*Sally nods*]—and connecting with other people and being open and sincere about it.

Sally: So you're writing an analysis . . .

Portia: Yeah, a lit analysis paper, which I've written a ton of already, but like I said, the grading in this class is ridiculous, and I guess I don't give her what she wants.

Sally: Okay. Well, let's look at your paper and see what you've got.

Portia: Wait. [*Places assignment on the table*] Dr. Kiefer gave us an assignment with a list of things to do in our papers. I don't know if this is going to make sense to you since you're not an English major.

Sally: Well, let's see. [*Reads the assignment and list*]

Portia: Maybe you could just check to make sure my commas are good and that my intro is catchy enough.

Sally: I don't see those things listed here, but one of the items on your list is diction and it's circled. Does that mean . . . ?

Portia: . . . she doesn't like my writing style. Ya know, sometimes I feel like throwing this paper out the window.

Sally: Don't do that . . . I'd have to call campus police on you—for littering! [*Portia is not amused*] Let's do this. Go ahead and read it to me and then we'll talk about the whole paper and the best way to . . .

Portia: You want me to *read* it to you? Out loud?

So far, Portia feels this session is not helping her. She has asked for help with commas and the introduction because she doesn't feel that an international studies major really knows how to address problems with a paper in a senior-level English course, and she doesn't want to waste a lot of time. Sally, meanwhile, never got a chance to give her opening speech on what-to-expect-from-the-writing-center, and she has struggled to figure out how best to help Portia. When she saw *diction* circled on the assignment, she asked Portia about it, but that's when she noticed that Portia's attitude headed south. Hoping to put the session back on an even keel, Sally asked Portia to read the paper aloud, but now thinks this was a mistake, too. Portia decides to go along and she reads it, reluctantly:

For poet Robert Frost—a genius who encaptured the hearts and minds of his readers—practiced restraint is an important and vital part of human relationships. If a person exhibits restraint, they have slowed down long enough to think about the best way to have a meeting of the minds with

another person or people. Too often, humans fill their lives with “turning to fresh tasks” (“Wood-Pile” 35) or chasing after some “final goal” (“On a Tree Fallen Across the Road” 10), instead of caring for one another. Unfortunately, when people start to ignore one another, friendships wither like the faded beauty of wilted rose blooms. The bottom line is—people need to walk a fine line between giving each other space and being there for one another.

Basically, there are three surmountable attitudes one can have when it comes to reacting to others—reckless abandon, avoidance, or restraint. Reckless abandon means showing intense emotion—whether it is joy, anger, or grief. People who give themselves up to reckless abandon really cannot seem to control themselves—they may appear to others as off their rocker or as off the wall. Their behavior actually could be a conscious decision because they do not want to take responsibility for thinking about their actions—or maybe they have not given the situation any thought at all and have fallen into reckless abandon because they just never really stopped to figure out the right way to act.

When Portia reaches the bottom of the first page, she sighs and rolls her eyes. They are about fifteen minutes into a forty-minute session, and Sally decides it's a good time to stop and sort things out.

Sally: Okay, that was really helpful to me, to hear you read the beginning of your paper so I could hear what it's about. I think we need to decide what's the best way to spend the time we have left. The paper is due tomorrow morning, right? You mentioned commas and your introduction—is that still what you want to work on? [*Portia stares blankly*]

Sally: What about diction?

Portia: I think my interpretation is good.

Sally: I totally agree. What do you think about the way you present yourself . . . you know, your tone?

Portia: What do you mean?

Sally: Like when you talk about friendships withering like “wilted rose blooms” . . . that's kind of flowery, you know? No pun intended. [*Smiles*]

Portia: I think you're missing the point. That's just some description I used to pull in my readers, to paint a picture for them.

Sally [*Sits up in her chair*]: Okay, but this is a literary analysis paper. Sometimes it's good to take a step backward and take a more neutral or objective tone. It's not like you're trying to write poetry here, you're wanting to *analyze* it.

Portia: Hmm. . . . What else?

Sally: Okay. Here are some other spots. In the second paragraph, where you say “off their rocker or off the wall.” The language is really informal. Is your professor okay with informal writing like this, or . . . ?

Portia [*Slides her paper across the table closer toward herself*]: You know, I'm just not seeing what the big problem is. All my teachers tell me how they love the way I write. I try to be more creative than other students.

Sally: Creativity is great. But some of these clichés don't come across as creative, to me at least.

[*Portia says nothing, but gives Sally a hard, icy stare*]

Sally: Look, I just want to point out some things that I noticed when you read me your paper, some things that I think might relate to your assignment. Then, you can decide whether you want to change them or not. It's totally up to you.

Portia [*Slowly*]: Right.

Sally: Another thing is, I see a lot of dashes. It's okay to use them sometimes, but when they're overused they lose their effect. So if this diction thing is important, I'd say you should work on editing for things like that, and extra words, redundancies, clutter. Maybe just take the clutter out.

Portia: Anything else?

Sally: Well, we've got about five minutes or so left. What would you like to do?

Portia: I don't know, but I've got to go now. [*Portia starts packing up to leave*] Thanks. I'll work on this some more.

When Sally rehashed the session with a fellow tutor, she said she was distressed that her interaction with Portia had been so tense. Sally explained, “For me, the personal relationship between me and the writers is the most rewarding part of working here. But I can't tell people everything is fine when I believe they need to do more work on their papers. I couldn't develop any kind of rapport with her, and I'm not sure she wanted to develop any with me.”

One way to look at this scenario is in terms of mismatched expectations. Over time, Sally had developed a routine way to open each session, one where she carefully explained what writers could expect during their time at the writing center. Sally expected first-time visitors, such as Portia, to listen attentively to her spiel. But Portia's take-charge attitude and preprepared tutoring agenda caught Sally off guard. At the same time, Portia figured writing center tutors would operate the same way the reference librarians did where she worked. She thought she'd sit down, she'd tell the tutor what kind of feedback she needed, and then she'd leave as a satisfied customer. Portia did not expect Sally to challenge her to think about her paper in a substantive way; she was looking for validation as a writer and perhaps a few minor proofreading tips. How could their mismatched expectations have been reconciled? Were their goals for the session so incompatible that their impasse was inevitable, or was there a way for each of them to articulate their objectives more candidly?

Interpersonal interaction offers another lens through which we can see this session. We can analyze Portia's and Sally's nonverbal clues to understand significant turning points and missed opportunities during the session. For

example, in the beginning, Portia interrupts Sally several times. Does Portia do this because she is trying to establish dominance during the session or because she is working to maintain authorial control? Is she interrupting because she is especially anxious about her assignment or because she is uneasy about visiting the writing center for the first time? Whether Portia's interruptions come out of impoliteness, fear, or something else altogether is a critical question—each possibility begs for a different response from Sally.

Also, if it is as important to Sally as she says it is to establish a rapport with writers, did she do enough to call attention to what Portia did *right* in her essay? The old adage about attracting more flies with honey than with vinegar still applies (as does Mary Poppin's tip that "just a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down"). Most writers want to hear their work praised, as well as criticized, and fortunately there were a number of legitimate strengths in the paper that Sally could have mentioned. For example, Portia defines her terms nicely at the start of her essay, she explains the relevance of the poetry lines she cites, and she uses punctuation correctly and in a sophisticated way (despite her being overly enamored with em dashes). Did Sally recognize these qualities in Portia's writing or was Sally blinded to them because she felt defensive and threatened?

Writing center sessions are dynamic and unpredictable events. Like a theatrical production, at any moment the plot can take a hairpin turn, leading writers and tutors to unexpected revelations or disastrous endings. There's one major difference, though, between the theater and the writing center: in real-time sessions, there is no script.

Further Reading

Clark, Irene L., and Dave Healy. 2001. "Are Writing Centers Ethical?" In *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing Center Theory and Practice*, eds. Robert W. Barnett and Jacob S. Blumner, 242–59. Boston: Allyn & Bacon. Reprinted from *WPA: Writing Program Administration* (1996).

Shamoon, Linda K., and Deborah H. Burns. 1995. "A Critique of Pure Tutoring." *Writing Center Journal* 15 (2): 134–51.

Together, these two articles offer tutors some good insights into the debate over directive versus nondirective tutoring, and they add a new perspective to the session with Portia and Sally. These articles show that choosing one approach or the other is not a simple matter.