



FORWARD TO *TUTORING AS A RADICAL ACT: CHANGING THE WORLD ONE BY ONE*

The inaugural issue of *Inkwell* appeared in September 2006 after a whirlwind summer of figuring out what the publication would be and how to put it together. Victoria Larkin's "Tutoring as a Radical Act: Changing the World One by One," was the natural choice to be the first article for its insight into the revolutionary possibilities of what can happen when tutor and writer meet. All the more remarkable: Victoria wrote this essay in her tutor training class. She had yet to hold a tutoring session in the Writing Center. Little did she know that "Tutoring as a Radical Act" would influence every subsequent class of incoming tutors as a cornerstone reading in *Cultivating Voice* and spark many writers to visit the Center.

- SANDRA YANNON

TUTORING AS A RADICAL ACT: CHANGING THE WORLD ONE BY ONE

VICTORIA LARKIN

One Spring here at Evergreen, some friends who knew my penchants for writing and talking to people suggested I sign up for the tutor training class, *The Practice of Professional Tutoring*. I'd been writing for most of my life; I was known for being good at "English," and from time to time friends and schoolmates would ask me to glance over their work before handing it in. I always felt honored and humbled, and gave it my best. This made me think I would enjoy tutoring, so I signed up for the class.

As part of our homework we were to tutor and be tutored every week. I'd never had difficulties with essay writing, so it had never occurred to me to go to a writing tutor. I just didn't see how it could help. But that's because, until this class, I never knew what tutoring could be.

In a tutoring session, one person functions as "tutor" and focuses their attentions on the needs of the "writer." As "writer," I would sit down across a table from someone I'd never met before and expose to them my mind and its thematic musings. At first I was uneasy. But whatever I'd expected to happen didn't: no one told me what to say or how to say it. Instead, I was questioned and encouraged to question myself. In order to answer, I had to reach deeper, and through this process I became more secure about what and why I was writing.

This was the first time in my life I'd ever talked with anybody about my writing: my material, my process, and my choices. I was exposed to choices I hadn't thought to make, new paths to explore. I began to see my writing as dynamic, alive, and interactive. I became an advocate of multiple revisions. These sessions were a revelation: two minds working together helped me to craft a piece of writing that often exceeded my original vision.

I understood what a powerful tool tutoring could be, for any writer. Tutoring wasn't just about grammar rules: tutoring was about having my mind opened, and my work polished. I wanted to open the minds of others in the same way. I wanted to guide others to questions their material and themselves. I wanted to direct my energy toward helping people uncover what they think and why, to help them reach inside themselves and find their own voices, and then use them. Tutoring seems like a radical act to me.

Writing is about more than just putting words onto paper to be handed in to a professor: writing is about saying what you know. When it comes to communicating through the written word, many factors influence a writer's choices: familiarity with the subject will determine the depth of a piece; sometimes audience needs to be considered; languages have their inherent stylistic freedoms and limitations, mentally as well as physically; cultures and eras can both shape a writer's thoughts and expressions.

Some cultures put more emphasis on the “We” voice than others. Writers, especially in essay form, are encouraged to speak from a more global, less individualistic perspective. Having grown up in a country known, for better and worse, for its independent spirit, I am a believer in the “I” voice. To write in one’s “I” voice, one must think in one’s “I” voice. Thinking in one’s “I” voice encourages one to be less swayed by “them.” It can foster critical awareness, use of one’s own intuition, and responsibility for what one writes. When writing in one’s “I” voice, one speaks for one’s self, which in all times and all places is a radical activity. Besides, “I” is what the “We” is made up of.

Of course, to write about anything using one voice or another, one must have something to say. The more one knows, the more one can say, with confidence, from their own mind. A tutoring session can help a writer find out if they know enough to call a draft “final.” Discussing a paper, or its subject matter, can help writers hear loopholes in their arguments, or where they might be stuck in their own heads. By engaging in focused conversation, tutors help writers examine their material, analyze it, and get it into a form fitting their purpose. Tutors help writers speak from a place of knowing.

Writing tutors are interested in just about everything: we love to ask questions and listen to answers. We often have our own minds explored and expanded during the tutoring process. I learn about my own writing, and writing in general, by engaging with others who are working on writing. Being a tutor means that I get to sit and talk with all kinds of interesting people about all kinds of fascinating things -- things that make me want to write essays about them! It’s like having a taste of every subject I get to tutor someone in. I get exposed to more inspiring ideas than I have time to catch up with. Along with all this enriching stimulation, I get to work with intelligent, good-hearted people, who are cool, who create amazing works of art and philosophy, and who love what they do. I’ve never had such an amazing job.

The Writing Center is a highly democratic meeting place. People of all ages, genders, ethnicities, and countries come in here: people who write well but would like an objective perspective; people who want help getting their ideas out and down on paper (brainstorming); people who want guidance analyzing and organizing; people who want grammar tips and essay basics; and people with desires I can’t even think of right now.

Writers frequently come in with specific goals for their session, but the goals may change as the session progresses; the writer finds they have concerns they hadn’t anticipated: *Have I said what I want to say? If not, why not? Was the assignment confusing? Do I need to do more research? Do I need to talk about it some more? Or do I just need to trust myself? There’s something good in here that really wants to come out—I just need to focus...* The writer often walks away excited and ready to tackle a revision with a richer grasp of what they are trying to and what they can accomplish.

There are people who don’t want to come to the Writing Center at all, and are “forced” to, but they are just another category of writer, perhaps ones not yet used to seeing themselves as masters of self-expression in 3 Larkin • Tutoring as a Radical Act this medium. Sometimes people come in wanting nothing more than to have their papers fixed up and shipped out: they haven’t thought of their papers as anything more than a way to get a grade, or credits. Maybe they have no idea of the value of their own mind. Maybe they don’t even care anymore.

My job as a tutor is to try and re-awaken the so often-squashed spirit of inquiry and excitement one has as a child eager to express one's self in the world, and to give a writer tools to help them analyze and present their ideas on paper. My job is to encourage the spark to grow into a flame.

When what is asked for and given all around us is conformity, teasing out an original thought in original language is subversive. The Writing Center is therefore a place of radical activity. Our goal is to encourage critical thought, clarity and uniqueness of expression: to get a writer thinking about what they want to say, and to help them say it, as clearly as possible, from their own perspective. We hope to pass on the ideals of collaboration, analysis, and self-expression to all who enter, perhaps tentatively, and see them go out into the world confidently, with a keener sense of the importance of their individuality, and of their own voice.

I've had moments of profound transformation with many of the writers I've tutored. They have inspired me with their courage and their tenacity, their intelligence and broadness of mind, and their talents. If I've inspired just one of them, to question, to trust in their instincts, to decide for themselves, and to speak/write for themselves, well then, this seems to me, especially at this point in history, the most empowering and radical thing I can do.