



WHO KNOWS BEST?: DEVELOPING WRITING IN CONVERSATION

CARYN DUDLEY

When I meet with a tutor in the Writing Center, I have a choice to make: I can either hand my paper over to the tutor and sit back to wait for their comments, or we can look through my paper together. If I surrender my paper to the tutor, I ask them to be the expert of my writing and submit to them my time, skill, responsibility, and voice. If we look at my writing together, I retain these things and remain the author of my work. My decision impacts the value I get from the session and represents who I think knows best what my writing needs.

If I do not engage in the session, I depend on the tutor to make my writing progress. If I uncritically accept the tutor's evaluation of my writing, I miss the opportunity to dig deeper into my ideas or better understand how I choose to express them. I falsely elevate the tutor's knowledge and burden them with the responsibility of my paper's success. I sometimes forget this is at stake even though I am a tutor.

The impulse to hand my paper over to the tutor may come from the dominant narrative in our education system that says to defer to the judgment and dictation of whomever "knows best." Most students, including peer tutors, are accustomed to altering their writing to please the evaluator of the product. It is not uncommon—even at Evergreen—for writing to come back "red-penned," ripped apart without any regard to what feedback the writer might have wanted. Student writers may fall into the assumption that tutors, like teachers, "know best," and therefore defer to their input. But there is no universal consensus on what is "best." While it is true that tutors are trained to give feedback and have general knowledge about writing, we can never be an expert on another's process the way they can.

At the Writing Center, we aim to upset the dominant narrative and empower writers to become the experts on their own writing processes. A tutoring session is a conversation that requires both writer and tutor to ask questions and explore ideas rooted in the writer's priorities for their writing. From this dialogue, writers gain a greater awareness of how they write and find new strategies to carry into future pieces of writing. They use feedback as a catalyst for more insight and new direction. It is not enough for a writer to walk away with a well-organized, grammatically-correct paper if they never wonder about their choices or question the feedback they receive.

We hope to help writers become more self-directed, yet our intent is not to render feedback unnecessary. To grow as writers, we all need other people involved in our writing processes. While there is plenty we can figure out on our own, some insight can only be found in conversation with another person, when both are actively participating in the exchange of ideas. This is what tutors offer in the Writing Center: conversation that brings about insight neither writer nor tutor could have generated on their own.