“This is a redneck argument!”: The politics of tutoring paragraphing

When I finally sat down to write about this particular tutoring experience, I was certain that I did not want to preach, and I also realized that I still had conflicting voices in me about the situation. Attempting to convey fully all of these competing voices, I believe, does more justice to the entire situation than straightforward prose, which, I feel, by its very own linear nature, is too neat to talk about a complex tutoring situation. So, the following is my double-voiced account of a tutorial. As a reflective piece, this essay is comprised of two interlaced threads of prose: one, in italics like this one, reflecting the voice of me as an experienced tutor now, and the other, in normal characters, reflecting what happened during the tutorial based on my memory of that time in the past. (SG)

That day, like any other in our writing center, a folder was left on the table as I was wondering how on earth I would wrap up the current tutorial on time. As soon as I was done, I grabbed the folder, took a look at the name, and said it out loud, like I always do. John (not his real name) was a tall, white, male student wearing a baseball cap, jeans and T-shirt, typical college gear. After the usual civilities, John and I sat down, and he told me that his teacher referred him to the writing center to work on his paragraphing. He was having trouble with topic sentences and paragraph development.

As I read his paper, paying special attention to his paragraphs, I realized that he was writing an argument against publishing driver’s manuals in Spanish for the benefit of non-English speaking Mexican immigrants in our state. Among the main points in his argument were that this is the U.S. and that everybody had to learn English anyway, so why publish manuals in Spanish; that “these people” are illegal, and that they don’t do any good for this country anyway, so they should be sent back to where they came from. Although I was also simultaneously making an effort to follow his teacher’s marginal comments about organizational issues in the paper, I was constantly distracted by John’s interspersed comments that to me seemed strongly xenophobic. My entire reading experience was a true moment of indecision and conflict concerning how to handle the tutorial. As I was juggling these thoughts and concerns, the teacher’s end comment scribbled on the last page only helped to compound the problem: “This is a redneck argument!” and on a separate line, “Go to the Writing Lab to work on your paragraphs!”

One route I could have taken at this point would be to tell John about what is and isn’t acceptable in formal academic prose. I didn’t want to pursue this directly since I thought that such a strategy would be no more effective than what the teacher had done in the remarkably blunt end comments. John was certainly aware that what he had written was unacceptable in the eyes of some, though such a realization had ironically come in the context of his teacher’s inappropriate and possibly hypocritical comment, given the meaning of the term “redneck.” He was rather quiet and distant throughout the tutorial, possibly the result of the same unfortunate comment and its negative implications about where he is coming from. Knowing that such implications are off-limits and also following our lab’s policy of not discussing teachers’ controversial comments with tutees, I decided not to talk to him about why he thought his teacher reacted to his paper in such a manner, even though I was clearly taken aback by the comment.

Thus, and in hindsight, I saw that my task as a tutor was to get him 1) to talk to me as a tutor rather than as someone with a professed authority over him, and 2) to appreciate the complexity of the issue he is dealing with rather than to have him temporarily put on a “politically correct academic hat” and obediently satisfy the powers that be, who already chastised him for doing what he had done.

After a spell of indecision, I ended up working with John on two things during the tutorial: his particular use of the genre of argumentation with claims, evidence, and counter arguments; and his “voice” in the paper and how he would be “heard” in various ways by different audiences.

First, we read his paper paragraph by paragraph, and every time I came across a part of his argument that dismissed the issue without actually engaging it, I asked him to provide evidence for his particular claim. For instance, whenever he made blanket generalizations, I tried to guide him gently to think of “these people” as flesh-and-blood individuals, as real people, by asking him if he knew anything in particular about the living conditions and transportation needs of the persons to whom he was constantly referring. In addition, I reminded John of possible counterarguments related to his subject by asking these questions: Why did the city government decide to publish manuals in Spanish? Where do immigrants get jobs? Why is it important for them to get driver’s licenses as soon as possible? And so on.
Second, I emphasized to him how he sounded in his sentences. I was aware that his argument would be offensive to many, and it was my duty as his tutor to let him know about the possible repercussions of what he had written. However, as I said before, John had already discovered the effect of his writing on at least one person, his teacher. I still felt it was important to address this issue on some level, because I wanted him to genuinely see what his teacher's blunt manner might otherwise have obscured for him: that informed inquiry that is carefully and caringly worded is essential to the act of arguing, since beyond the classroom in the “real” world, arguments have a life of their own and resonate with audiences in powerful ways.

To illustrate these points, rather than talking “at” him about them, whenever I saw what seemed to be a xenophobic comment in his paper, I paraphrased it for him, showing him a more openly negative way his words could be interpreted by different audiences and asking him what exactly he meant to write and how he wanted to sound. Hearing and becoming aware of possible differing reactions to his writing, John agreed to revise most of his “ambiguous” sentences.

As I look back, this tactful manner of questioning did two things for me, and hopefully, for John: 1) Even though, like his teacher, I clearly disagreed with what he was saying, I was able to carve “a conversational space” where I could talk to him in a gentle, respectful manner without alienating him through brusque confrontation; and 2) rather than regarding me as just another condescending partisan, I hope he gave me the benefit of the doubt, listened to me, and maybe reviewed his point of view.

I believe that what we focused on during the tutorial helped get him to think about argumentation, the issue of voice in writing, and audience. Even though at first I was concerned because we could not get to paragraphing in his paper, these issues were more urgent and were perhaps conducive to writing better paragraphs in the long run through better understanding the genre of argumentation and determining what he wanted to say and exactly how he wanted to sound.

As I said, however, these are exactly “what I have thought then and still believe today.” I wonder what John thought about the tutorial. I am wondering about this on a couple of levels: First, we never got to talk about paragraphing per se, so I wonder if what we talked about throughout the tutorial was relevant, from his standpoint, to why he was there. I am thinking that if I had not been so insistent about the distinction between content and form and had instead linked the two by referring to paragraphing as a written form of his thinking, I could probably have done better in addressing his concerns and what I, as his tutor, considered important simultaneously.

On another level, I wonder what he thought about what I said during the tutorial based on who I am: a non-native tutor who is mistaken at times for a person of Spanish or Indian origin by persons who are unfamiliar with both peoples. As is the case with all other issues related to tutors’ personal ethos in tutees’ eyes, this is something I won’t ever know, but nevertheless, it still keeps me on my toes as a veteran tutor by driving home this point: who we are affects what we do in inscrutable ways at times, and just because of this, we need to be all the more aware of and sensitive about this fact in our everyday dealings with our tutees and students, tutoring gently without alienating them.

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End Note
1 Redneck n. Offensive Slang. 1. Used as a disparaging term for a mem-