Reflections on teacher comments: Lessons from the tutorial

Once he grants students the intelligence and will they need to master what is taught, the teacher begins to look at his students’ difficulties in a more fruitful way: he begins to search in what students write and say for clues to their reasoning and their purposes, and in what he does for gaps and misjudgments.

- Mina Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations

Scene One: The tutee

1991. As an undergraduate English major at a small women’s college that has the reputation of being “the writing school,” I write a lot of papers. I love my English classes and respect my professors, but the idea of visiting their offices to discuss my work in progress is intimidating. The accepted practice here is that professors only comment on papers after they are turned in. Still, when Dr. Ames surprises me by encouraging those of us enrolled in his Modern British Novel class to bring drafts of our final papers by his office, I take him up on his offer. As he reads over my draft—full of ellipses and parentheses marking places where I plan to further develop ideas or haven’t yet found the right word—I am keenly aware of his raised eyebrows and concerned expression. I quickly explain that I like to get everything down first, skipping over sticky points and going back to them. But his brow remains furrowed. When I receive the final paper back, with an A and mostly positive comments, he notes that he was glad to see where I had taken my ideas, because he was “a little worried” when he first examined my draft.

When I initially began to reflect upon my tutoring days as an undergraduate, the scene that came to mind most readily was not one in which I was the tutor; it was not, really, a tutorial scene at all. Instead, I recalled this moment, sitting in my professor’s office, and his confession, later, that he was distressed by the condition of my draft. Looking back, I find that conversation curious on several counts. Surely, as a writer himself, my professor knew that essays did not magically appear on the page in perfect form on the first try. Didn’t he? Had he never seen a student’s draft before, one that was truly drafty?

And yet I cannot recall a time during my undergraduate career when either I, or another student, went to the Writing Center to discuss a professor’s comments on a piece of writing in progress. Perhaps my professors regularly encouraged students to stop by with their works in progress, and I simply didn’t take them up on their offers. But I don’t remember receiving any such invitations other than that of Dr. Ames’, and that experience left me feeling less as if I had gained insight and more like my inadequacies had been laid bare for all to see.

So, instead, I turned to the Writing Center. On the top floor of Buttrick Hall, the cozy, sunny room was inviting, and there, the tutors gave me permission to understand, and participate in, writing as a process. They allowed me, even encouraged me to “write wrong,” as Peter Elbow terms it. Perfection was neither expected nor desirable: in the Writing Center the assumption was that the essay, whatever form it was in, could always be improved. Professors could make pronouncements about my final products; tutors gave me the space to negotiate the process—the messy, convoluted, and exhilarating process.

Scene Two: The teacher

1994. It is my third quarter instructing first-year composition as a graduate teaching associate at a large midwestern university. I am reading my students’ final essays, an assignment that asked them to reflect back on the quarter and their progress as writers. The essays are generally positive, the students increasingly self-reflective. I am almost ready to pat myself on the back when I read Martha’s paper. It had taken her a while to warm up to making use of my written responses, she wrote, because she was used to reading teacher comments as negative criticism, unproductive pronouncements about her failings. She thought she had been proven right when she received a draft back from me in which it appeared that I was questioning the value of her relationship with her boyfriend. Following a sentence that read, “My boyfriend doesn’t tell me what to do or say,” I had written a “yet?” It wasn’t until she angrily asked someone else to read the comment that she realized I was making a stylistic suggestion that she use “yet” to connect that sentence to the following one (which I had tried—and apparently failed—to indicate with arrows). It hadn’t seemed like something I would do, she concluded, and she felt silly about having gotten so angry. Astonished, and feeling rather silly myself, I search through her portfolio to find the essay in question. I can see the source of her misreading, yet my arrows and marks are in many ways still perfectly clear to me.

Now, I am the writing teacher, and now, it seems, I am the one making pronouncements—even when I don’t intend to. Having been powerfully influenced by my experiences as an un-
dergraduate writing tutor and tutee, I wholeheartedly embrace a process pedagogy as a graduate teaching associate. My students write two drafts of each essay before submitting a final copy; I review the first draft, their peers the second. I ask questions, make suggestions in the margins, hoping to stir their thinking but leave the decisions up to them. That was the idea, anyway.

But as Scene Two reveals, communicating my intentions to my students via comments was not so easy. My word was gospel: suggestions were read as commands. While some might revel in such power, I did not, because I saw how easily my comments could be misread. "Reading is not an innocent activity," as Jonathan Culler reminds us (116). It was bad enough when a student unthinkingly adopted a revision I had actually suggested, solely because I "told her to"; but when a student misread my response and made a change without even understanding why I had written what I did—then I felt a terrible sense of responsibility for having misguided the writer.

How could I help students reform their ideas of what teacher comments were for? I tried taking a sample essay, printed onto overheads, into class, so they could witness my commenting process—for it was a process, of reading and thinking, re-reading and re-thinking. What did the writer mean here? What question can I ask that will encourage the writer to expand this idea further? In this way, I brought the tutorial into my classroom. If we could talk though my writing process together, if they could see my thinking as I commented, then maybe they could learn to read my comments as I read their drafts—as invitations, attempts to engage the reader—as part of a process, instead of as a final pronouncement.

Scene Three: The student 1995. I am sitting at my kitchen table across from my neighbor, friend, and graduate student colleague, Janet. We have just returned from a late afternoon Renaissance literature class in which our first writing assignment was returned to us: short exploratory papers, which were commented on but not graded. The two of us pore over the remarks written on our respective essays.

"This is a fine paper," he says—what do you think he means by 'fine'? I say to Janet. She wrinkles her nose. "Well, that comment sounds more positive than 'All in all, a good intervention.' What's with the 'all in all'? And why doesn't he say anything about the writing itself?"

We continue in this vein for nearly an hour, lamenting our lack of context. "If we had ever seen his comments on anything else, we might be able to tell what he really meant. Does he ever use the word 'excellent'?" We toy with the idea of approaching our professor in a conference, asking him to unpack what to us are coded phrases. We hypothesize about what he "really meant," and, of course, about how what he had written would translate to a grade. Our readings of his comments are multiple and complex, even a little suspicious—and we refuse to be satisfied by the obvious.

In this scene I am a student again, puzzling over a professor's comments on my written work. While one might imagine that having been a teacher myself for several quarters would have assuaged some of my anxieties, given me an insider track on how to interpret professor comments—no such luck. Feeling so at sea certainly shore up my empathy for my students, but interpreting the words scribbled in the margins was no easier than it had been five years ago. A little knowledge, in fact, is a dangerous thing, as they say, and some of my frustration was a result of new insight: I now understood that every professor's comments were expressions not only of their personalities but also their pedagogical preferences. As such, they were individual, idiosyncratic, and since these were the first comments my friend and I had ever received from this professor—and since the comments did not coalesce into a grade—we had very little interpretive apparatus to guide our reading.

What interests me in this story is the way in which we each instinctively turned to one of our peers for help. We created our own private tutorial space at my kitchen table, sharing a pot of tea as we shared our questions and anxieties. As I recall, we ultimately "sent" one another back to meet with the professor, in the time-honored fashion of tutors sending students back to the instructor when the tutor does not feel she has sufficient information to answer the writer's questions. Professors send writers to us, we send writers to them, keeping the dialogue about writing going. Sustaining the conversation is the key.

Scene Four: The tutor 1996. My second year of graduate school, I elect to work as a Writing Consultant in the University Writing Center. I tutor fifteen or so hours a week, and while I am thrilled with the return to the one-to-one teaching space of the tutorial, I sometimes feel overwhelmed. On this particular day a young woman, eighteen or nineteen, comes in to see me. She is enrolled in a first-year composition class taught by another TA, a fellow from Colorado who is a year behind me in the MA program. I have not had much contact with him beyond a conversation we had shared at the very beginning of the school year, when, sitting at a restaurant with a passel of other grad students during pre-quarter TA training, he had waxed eloquent about how deeply he loved literature and how much he was looking forward to studying it. Disappointed and a little jaded by a year of grappling with critical theory—not what I had expected to
study in my graduate literature courses—I felt a little sorry for him, but he seemed personable enough, if a bit naïve.

As my tutee and I sat down at a table, I read anger in her face. She is clutching a copy of an essay my colleague had returned to her, and within moments, she is in tears, telling me that he had made “mean” comments on her paper, and she couldn’t understand what he wanted, anyway. Dismayed, I read over the remarks inked in the margins. As a student myself, I could see how the student had read his questions about the clarity of her prose as “mean.” But, having instructed first-year composition, I could also read his scrawled questions through the lens of the teacher: one who wants to push the student writer to think harder, articulate ideas more fully. I take a deep breath, and begin the tutoring session.

The teary tutorial: who among us has not lived one of these? And yet, as many painful experiences are, this one was highly instructive. Though neither my first nor my last tutoring session in which I was charged with interpreting instructor comments, this tutorial was the one that clarified my understanding of the tutor as translator and mediator. The conversation felt a bit like walking a balance beam, carefully placing one foot in front of the next as I alternated between acknowledging the student’s reading of the comments and gently explaining what I thought her instructor had “really meant”; wobbling wildly when she gazed at me accusingly; regaining my poise and progress when she begrudgingly began answering my questions and making her own notes in the margins. The session, as I recall, was exhausting. We had not simply worked on her paper, her writing; we had worked on her student-teacher relationship, a relationship which by its very nature is “subtle, dynamic, and highly charged,” as Lad Tobin describes it (15).

Tobin notes that “any [classroom] relationship that fosters the writing and reading processes is productive; any that inhibits them is not” (16). Tutors, while not usually present in the classroom with the other actors, nevertheless play a pivotal role in shaping student-teacher interactions, and tutors’ responses to scenes like the one I described above may have profound effects. This is not news: many writing center manuals instruct their tutors never to editorialize on professors’ behaviors, assignments, or comments, since doing so is unprofessional and potentially damaging to the student-teacher relationship (not to mention the writing center-professor relationship). And while this is good advice, it only tells tutors what not to do so as not to inhibit productivity. What we need to consider further is what tutors can do in order to foster productive relationships.

Scene Five: The director 2001. Fast-forward seven years. PhD in hand, I am now an Assistant Professor of English at a small state university whose student population hovers around 3,700. In my second year of employment, I am asked to take over direction of The Writing Center, which I agree to do gladly, if with some small trepidation. My tutors and I have weekly class meetings, and during these sessions we tell “tutoring tales,” stories of tutorials gone madly awry or astoundingly right. During one such storytelling session, one of the tutors recounts a tutorial in which she had asked the tutee to read aloud any of the professor’s comments written on the paper that the tutee didn’t understand. “I couldn’t believe it,” she says. “When he started reading the comments aloud, it was in this nasty, sarcastic voice.” Other tutors quickly chimed in; they had had similar experiences. “If that’s how they hear their professor’s comments in their heads, it’s no wonder they get defensive and don’t know what to do,” she continued. No wonder, indeed.

Every time I tell this final story, it disturbs me deeply. As I picture the student reading aloud, I flash back through the scenes described above, remembering my own struggles to interpret comments accurately, to write comments encouragingly. And I can hardly blame the student who hears harshness and sarcasm in his instructor’s written voice, if, as Lunsford and Connors tell us in their history of teachers’ comments, the “attitude [...] toward the job of the teacher was almost universally in support of critical/judgmental rather than editorial/interventionist relations with students” since as far back as the 1800s (446-47).

But a long history is no excuse for perpetuating the problem, or shrugging it away. So I do what I can. In my classes, I turn to tape-recording my comments in response to student papers. I can say more in the same amount of time it usually takes me to write comments, and I can control the tone. The students can hear the curiosity in my voice when I ask them to develop a point further. They can hear the excitement when I compliment a particularly well-turned phrase. And they can hear the genuine interest and puzzlement—not sarcasm or meanness—when I tell them I am confused, that I don’t understand what they are trying to say.

As writing center director, I hold a workshop for faculty where a panel of students talks about their responses to their teachers’ comments. On publicity posters, I bill this as “straight from the horse’s mouth” enterprise. The students are wonderful: bright, engaged, full of insightful observations and suggestions. But only six faculty attend.

So I turn back to the tutorial once again. I encourage my tutors to intervene when a tutee assumes the voice of the villain when reading a professor’s comments aloud. I encourage them to walk the same balance beam I did, pro-
ceeding carefully, placing one foot in front of the next, one word after the other, until the voice of the professor is the voice of an ally, not an enemy. And so they learn, and I learn, and the writers who come to see us learn. And in the end, that is all any of us can ask of the others.

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Works Cited


