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Chloe Truong, *Algonquin Regional High School (MA)*

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The Dread of Judgment: How Friendship Impacts Tutoring

Chloe Truong, *Algonquin Regional High School (MA)*

We all have insecurities. Do I have something in my teeth? What if I failed that math test? Is my best friend going to judge me if my writing is bad? Insecurities fester in our minds and are extremely apparent in the hallways of high school. One common stressor for students is being judged by their peers, and this fear extends to the writing center. When we write, we express our voices, vulnerable and real, and sharing personal ideas with potentially unfamiliar classmates can be intimidating. How can students and secondary school writing centers combat students' omnipresent fear of being judged by their peers, especially the peers whose opinions carry the most weight?

Recently, I had the opportunity to tutor and be tutored by my best friend. We had both been tutors at our high school's writing center for about a year, and while working on our CommonApp essays for college, we decided to peer tutor each other. If you're unfamiliar with the CommonApp essay, it is usually regarded by high school seniors as one of the most important pieces of writing we will ever create; it gives colleges insight into our personalities and is rumored to greatly influence our admissions results. We wanted to tutor each other as we worked on this essay because we knew that we would be able to provide unique and substantial feedback to one another and we trusted each other with the content of our essays. We both wrote about details from our pasts that were not common knowledge for the student body. Both of our sessions were over an hour and a half (double the length of a typical session at our writing center). We found ourselves delving into more details than we would have in a typical session because we both knew how important each essay was to the other person and wanted to make sure that we got/gave the best advice possible. I think that the experience was invaluable.

Being tutored by a close friend was definitely a new experience. All of my previous trips to the writing center have been for vanilla, academic papers, and I've been tutored by acquaintances but never close friends. These sessions were usually pretty robotic, starting with a review of the grading rubric and following with whatever concerns I wanted to address. These sessions were always pleasant but never exactly comfortable. In this case, my close relationship with my tutor resulted in a relaxed, enjoyable experience. Before the session, I'll admit, I was a little nervous about being judged for the content of my essay, the quality of my writing, and even how I read the piece out loud. However, I should not have worried. The comments she gave me carried more weight because she was able to accurately assess how well my personality came through. Because she knew me so well, she could tell me whether the essay sounded like me and suggest changes to make it more genuine. Also, I found that my trust in her outside of school extended to her comments and feedback. I am familiar with her academic standards and track record, so I was able to make more informed decisions about what feedback to keep on paper and what feedback to keep in mind. These factors helped me complete an essay that I was confident about sending to colleges, and our friendship survived the experience. I did not feel judged or embarrassed about my work, perhaps because I had the opportunity to read her essay as well.

I found tutoring my best friend to be exponentially more nerve wracking than being tutored by her. I felt more pressure to be helpful and provide meaningful feedback. I think that I felt this way because I was personally (not just academically) invested in her success and wanted to be as helpful as possible. This tutoring session

was unlike all of my previous experiences tutoring because I was able to phrase things bluntly and knew how she would interpret my comments. In a typical session, I try to soften any suggestions with a specific compliment to maintain a positive rapport with the writer. For example, in a typical session I might say something like “I think your introduction is really strong. Are there any elements of it that you think you could incorporate into your conclusion?” In this case however, I was able to say things like “your conclusion doesn’t really tie your essay together well” and “the intro is by far my favorite part.” Overall, tutoring my best friend was a different experience, but once again, I didn’t feel uncomfortable or judged throughout the session. Reflecting on the experience, I think that one of the most important takeaways was the importance of sharing vulnerability with the students. For example, by saying something as simple as “I always struggle with conclusions too,” the tutor can help the students see the tutor as more of a peer and hopefully help make them more comfortable.

Obviously, not every tutor and student will be best friends. In fact, I think my experience was very rare, but I think that we can learn from it. Having genuine rapport with students outside of just academic purposes can have positive impacts on the ability to help them with writing. Specifically with creative and personal writing (I am not sure how important personality is in history papers), having a genuine understanding of the student outside of school can help tutors provide more authentic feedback. One way tutors can get to know the student better is by asking questions such as “What’s the main thing you want your reader to know about you from this piece?” or “How would you tell this story if you were telling it to your best friend?” Getting to know students as people before writers can help both students and tutors have more positive experiences with the writing center.

Chloe Truong is a senior at Algonquin Regional High School in Northborough, Massachusetts. She has been a tutor at the Algonquin Writing Center for two years. She is planning on attending George Washington University in the fall and studying engineering.