

## **Professional Boundaries: Understanding and Managing the Tutor–Learner Relationship**

The tutoring issue I will address involves the role conflict between being a professional tutor and being a social friend for your learner. What I will hopefully illustrate is how to mingle the two roles, in a manner that is tactful and does not jeopardize the feelings of the learner.

Chapter three of the Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors elaborately lists the “many hats” that the tutor wears. The cornerstone of being a good tutor is being a great encourager and a good ally, but balancing the role of the friend with the role of a tutor represents a clash of ethics that we as tutors–in–training are obliged to abide by: the tutor’s duty to be a source of sympathy and friendliness for their learner, and their duty to maintain a professional demeanor with that person. The issue here is, what does the tutor do when the companionable aspect of the tutor–learner relationship shifts to overly sociable? How does that happen, and what can it do to the tutoring session?

My own novice tutoring experience has involved such a situation where the learner has attempted to become more involved with me as a buddy. Ideally, we should hold it as a performance standard that all our tutees feel comfortable and connected with us enough to think of ourselves as their friends. However, the dynamics of a tutoring session can drastically alter when our learners anticipate a kind of extra–tutorial social interaction, involving the usually benign activities of getting lunch, getting together on weekends, and having long conversations about personal topics. Most of us inherently understand that the ultimate code of any workplace is to refrain from becoming involved in interoffice romances, but it can be difficult discerning if the same ethical boundaries apply when the work atmosphere consists of working one–on–one with a client, and encouraging them to trust you as their friend.

Sometimes, in attempt to earn a tutee’s trust, a tutor feels pressured to constantly take their relationship up another level. Typical, “benign” interactions like the aforementioned however can potentially intervene with the tutor’s capabilities, or the learner’s ability to gain from their sessions. The entire tutoring atmosphere can become different, and although we like to think of expanding our social network as a positive thing that can only enhance our

relationships with new people, it could be detrimental to the conductivity of a learner's progress during their tutoring sessions.

For example, say you've started meeting up with a tutee on afternoons to pick up Jamba Juice and swap tales of MySpace argument conquests. You meet up every afternoon, and one day the tutee informs you that he won't be at his session the following day. He cancels his next session as well, and asks about getting an extra hour for the following week. The following week, he just doesn't show up. You call him, and he tells you about his girlfriend that you already know is ornery, and although you administer a firm warning about your tutorial center's No Call-No Show policy, you can't help but be sympathetic. Finally, one afternoon later that week, the tutee confesses that he's panicked that he won't pass his EWRT class, primarily because he hasn't been to see you. He wants a free, impromptu tutoring session right then, outside of school. You concede, because such is the burden of having friends and being a hotshot essayist. Besides, what would be the point of waiting until you're on the tutorial center books, when it would be too late for the learner to pass his in-class essay?

Two days later, the learner shows up at the tutorial center when he's supposed to, angry and hurt that he's failed his midterm, and he holds you partially accountable. "Yeah, I know I wasn't showing up, but man, we worked for THREE HOURS the other day, and you didn't tell me anything to help me out at all."

What now? How could this have been prevented? More importantly, how can we curtail our tutee's social advances and maybe revisit them at another time? What sort of damage control can you do if it's already happening? What I will present is a set of guidelines for managing tutor-learner relationships without a social relationship overshadowing the tutoring one. We all want to be friendly with our learners, but no one wants to arrive at a point where they can't fulfill their duties, or feel their obligations as a tutor exacerbated because of their fondness for the learner.

"First things first: build open, effective professional relationships, and personal relationships will follow," Bob Wall says, author of *Working Relationships: The Simple Truth about Getting Along with Friends and Foes at Work*. Bill Wall's book deals with working relationships in the literal sense that is more familiar to people outside of the tutoring business; because tutoring has a bit of a different professional dynamic (i.e. in tutoring you work more with your tutee, or client, than you do with other tutors), I've altered the relative advice given by Bob Wall in his *Guidelines for Working*

Together, which might be helpful to think over just prior to a session with a new tutee:

**The Tutor's Goal:** What are you, as this individual's tutor, going to accomplish? For yourself? For them?

Some questions to think about, what were some of your weaknesses in your last tutoring session with a different learner? Did the focus shift too much, were they too distracted, were you? Do you feel like you're on the right track to success with that tutee? Think about some of the dynamics that interfered or enhanced your process as a tutor. What would you like to avoid, or implement, in your relationship with a new learner?

**The Tutor and Tutee's Roles:** What do you expect of yourself, and what do you expect of your learner?

What do you expect to facilitate through your involvement with your new tutee's learning process? Do you expect them to be compliant? Nervous? Overwhelmed? Think about how your and their feelings affect your roles, and how those feelings and roles will evolve over time—Always keep in mind that the relationship will naturally evolve from wherever it starts, and embrace that. The many hats of a tutor will revolve through your relationship with your learner possibly many times, and with each revolution will come a new perspective; about your relationship together and the tutoring session's process.

**The Tutoring Session's Procedures:** How will you coordinate this inaugural, and future sessions, with your tutee?

What are the most necessary things to get done within this, and each, session? How far do you plan to go in each session? A good idea for a first session with someone you're going to peer-tutor is setting up a learning plan, to supplement working on their assignments with them; are there worksheets, or maybe exercises from one of their workbooks, that the both of you can access and set aside some time every session to work on areas they need the most practice in?

The idea behind these guidelines is to get you thinking about how to structure your relationship with every new learner you acquire. You should think about your goal, your role, and your procedures, and co-develop a style and plan with your tutee, and set up a system where the clear, resounding message is: We are here to collaborate! You are, after all, part of this person's support system, and part of making them feel comfortable and cared for (like a friend), is to set up a customized structure that solely acts as

a means for them to get the most out of the time they're giving up for your assistance.

These guidelines are offered as a means of avoiding new learning sessions from deterring into a distracted, formless ones; guidelines, however, be implemented in such ways as to hinder a major, critical component of the tutor–learner relationship from catalyzing.

Trent Mikesell, author of *Mi Amigo, Mein Freund, My Friend: Understanding the Language of Friendship in Tutoring*, tells other tutors: “We are not writing demi–gods who know all there is about writing and have the final say. We are a friend and a peer to those we tutor, and should help them with the humility and love of a friend.” Most people’s idea of “professionalism” denotes austerity and restriction. For tutors, we want to be professional, so that the learner trusts in our information and guidance, but friendly, to build up our learners’ trust, so they’re able to advance un–self consciously. Mikesell expounds on a cornerstone of tutoring that often times conflicts with the professional aspect of the job: no matter how trying being conductive proponent to every tutoring session is, a tutor contributes nothing unless they are a friend to their learner foremost. Part of the learning process, Mikesell advocates, is to not only enrich a student’s understanding of a subject, but to empower them in the ways that only intimate friends can.

Hence the dilemma about professional boundaries. Some good advice, both reflected upon by Bob Wall and Trent Mikesell, is that as a professional you should always regard the people you’re working with as human beings with extraneous lives and issues that can bleed into your most cooperative moments. The best damage control advice for dealing with a collaborative relationship that is deteriorating is to speak to your learner as a friend. You can explain: “My objective in meeting with you every week is only to help you get better in this class. Getting Panda Express and going to the movies, and the stuff we talk about and do during that, shouldn’t be here in the tutorial center at all. I feel like that stuff is starting to affect the way I tutor you/you’re learning.”

That’s the hardest step. Even saying this at the very start of a session with a brand new tutor can be awkward, but it does draw a boundary that might save someone who really needs help in a class from needing to reapply for another tutor. Of course, passing a learner that you’ve become too friendly with to another fresh tutor is perfectly acceptable, but should be done so with the same

tact and care, and friend's perspective, that you gave when you explained to the learner that your and their extra-tutorial friendship had become too much interference. The most important aspect of being a friend is to be caring, reliable, understanding, and honest; you are honest about their sentence structure and grammar, you can be honest about your relationship with your tutees.

Some extra options for curtailing a tutee's social advances (say, a request for getting Starbucks together, or picking up lunch), is to politely explain you won't be able to until the end of the quarter. If they really want to know why, you can explain: "We're doing really well in our sessions, and I just don't want to cross any personal boundaries until we get the most we can out of being tutor-learner, you know?" Chances are they'll understand, and you can always extend the same invitation back, when being their tutor no longer has to be your role for them.

What I've hoped to illustrate are some strategies for dodging sour situations in the tutoring session, while protecting the fragility of a blossoming friendship. What worked best in my situation with my sociable tutee was explaining how impressed I was with our progress in our sessions, and how I would prefer to protect that as it is while it serves us best. I suggested joining some campus clubs if she wanted to expand her social interaction (as was the case), and getting to know some of her classmates. Our sessions have actually improved in conductivity, as she feels more purposeful and less distracted with socializing. What I hoped Bob Wall's adjusted guidelines can do is provide some thoughtful considerations for other tutors to reflect upon just before they meet new tutees, and hopefully explain the blurry boundaries surrounding friendly professionalism.

#### WORKS CITED

Wall, Bob. *Working Relationships: The Simple Truth about Getting Along with Friends and Foes at Work*. Palo Alto: Davies-Black Publishing, 1999.

Mikesell, Trent. "Mi Amigo, Mein Freund, My Friend: Understanding the Language of Friendship in Tutoring." The Writing Lab Newsletter Jan 2007, Vol 31, Number 5

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