

Analysis of Interpersonal Knowledge

CDA of Evidence of Interpersonal Knowledge:

In stanza 4 of her reflection, Jen illustrates her interpersonal knowledge by detailing an interaction in which she negotiated a revision with Student A:

When I thought explanations might be missing [from her paper] that I thought could have been helpful to have, I did the best I could to explain why I think it might be helpful to have it in the paper, trying to remind her why her professor might want to see it. She understood why I felt the idea might appear in the paper, and agreed that her professor would probably like to see it, but then she seemed hesitant because she would have to rearrange her entire paper to make it fit.

Ultimately, she came to a decision that we both agreed would be helpful for the paper in which the idea was included and explained in a way she would not have to change her whole paper.

Jen brought together her writing knowledge and rhetorical knowledge to explain to the student what she saw as missing from the paper. Then she relied on her interpersonal knowledge to be able to see and understand the student's hesitancy to make the changes Jen had suggested, and to open up a space within which the student could ultimately decide whether and how to accept Jen's feedback and make her own decision about revision. The last line quoted above is a particularly strong example of a collaborative moment in which Jen and Student A are both asserting individual and compatible expertise in a positive way: "Ultimately, she came to a decision that we both agreed would be helpful for the paper in which the idea was included and explained in a way she would not have to change her whole paper." The final decision on the revision is made by the student, with input and agreement from the tutor.

Jen also presents herself as someone who cares about both the student's feelings and her learning. At various points in her reflection she writes statements that indicate her concern: "I do think the student felt comfortable"; "...so the student...wouldn't be upset if we didn't reach the end"; "I felt like she was a little thrown off by this." But then at other points Jen worries that she "gave too much": "I am afraid that I gave her too much in creating her thesis by starting to state it for her..."; "...instead of pausing and asking her what she might add to make it clearer, I just gave her an answer." Jen's language presents a common dilemma for writing tutors: In many social interactions we would think about giving things as a way to make someone comfortable—giving attention, a cup of tea, etc. And in many ways, writing center best practices call for making sure students feel comfortable. But there is also the conflicting imperative in a writing center session, which Jen is clearly cognizant of, to *not* give too much, to encourage the student do the "work" of the session. This is the dilemma we contend with when working through how to be collaborative with a student. There is a dichotomy set up here because the actual work of the session might well make a student feel un/comfortable since she is being asked to provide information or ideas, or to consider rearranging her ideas, to in some way struggle with her own writing. Jen appears to be caught in this paradox, though she does not seem fully conscious of it, except to note how her own manner could have been more friendly, or how she might have mitigated the work she was asking the student to do, which she actually did quite well. This leaves me to consider the question of what we mean by "comfortable" in the context of a writing center session. Do we mean to make welcome, to construct as a valued collaborator, to understand as someone who is struggling with work that is challenging? All of these at once, always? Some mix of them as best fits the given student and context? Or do we sometimes want to make a student un-comfortable by asking them to do uncomfortable work of rethinking their

writing? Jen's struggle to grapple with these issues, albeit implicitly, presents an opening for productive discussions for future staff development.

Lori's reflections illustrate how a tutor's understanding of a student's expertise or reading of a student's need for help can affect how the tutor conceives of a relationship with a student and, therefore, how the tutor responds to the student. In her first reflection on her session with Student B, Lori positions Student B as a grammatical object throughout her reflection: "After watching my video session with a student..." "I told the student..." "I let her know..."

Student B is only given the subject position at the very end of the first reflection in the last clause: "I think that the session was successful and I was working with a bright student who understood everything I was saying, but if the student was not as tuned in, she may have missed out on a few things." This phrasing does several things that indicate Lori's positioning of Student B as a passive rather than an active agent in the session. It moves from discussing Student B as a particular student to "the student," a hypothetical student, thereby depersonalizing her. It also focuses solely on attentiveness, rather than Student B's potential agency as a writer, and therefore suggests that Lori saw this particular student as less capable of being a full and active participant in the session. And, indeed, in the video, Student B sits quietly slightly behind Lori who is closer to the computer screen and who is reading through the paper making comments and suggestions as she goes.

When Lori and I viewed the video of this session together, I encouraged her to look for moments when Student B seemed left out of the intellectual work of the session and to consider ways that she might have encouraged the student to bring in her own voice. For example, at one point in the session, Lori asks Student B about a term in the paper that Lori does not understand. The student begins to explain it, but Lori continues to puzzle out the meaning herself, talking over the

student. This interaction, which Lori did not notice on her viewing of the video nor address in her reflection, was a good example of a moment when Lori needed additional interpersonal knowledge in order to be able to conceive of the student as a capable participant in the session, and it seemed that viewing the session together and discussing it helped her to develop in this area.

In her second reflection on a session with Student C, a graduate student who presented herself as very knowledgeable and in control of her own writing process, Lori finds it much easier to see the student as a co-participant in the session. In the seventh and final stanza of her second reflection, Lori writes: “The experience of working with a student who was an extremely capable writer who was writing a scientific research paper was interesting. I enjoyed helping her make her own decisions and it allowed me to see why tutors can be essential in the self-editing process.” Being able to appropriately reposition herself in her second recorded session from a take-charge teacher to a facilitator based on the needs and expertise of the student illustrates positive interpersonal knowledge. And seeing the change in her response to two different students, based in part on her understanding of their abilities, will hopefully help Lori be more aware of what assumptions she is making about students’ level of expertise and how that is affecting her tutoring.

Kate also struggled with applying interpersonal knowledge in a way that would help her co-construct sessions with Student D, as stanza 5 from her second reflection indicates:

Previously, I had re-explained grammar rules over and over to this student. This time, however, I caught myself. As I always do, I had taken notes while she was reading her piece aloud to let her know which issues I saw reemerging in her paper. I said, “I know you know [these rules], so I’ll leave it to you,” which clearly suggests to her that I will not be her copyeditor, which she has

previously regarded me (as I could tell from her behavior—she used to return to the WC so that I could proofread her documents once more to ensure that she hadn't missed any changes and so that she would definitely not be penalized by her professors). I asked her if she was comfortable doing this on her own, and when she expressed her doubts, I worked on the least familiar/mundane of topics, one that I don't think we had ever gone over (or at least not in several semesters), so that she felt comfortable going back to revise on her own. When she read through her second assignment and I saw the same errors, I told her that I was not going to point them out to her (which I did not do for her first assignment either) and that I knew she was capable of handling them on her own.

Kate describes an unhelpful dynamic that has developed over several semesters with Student D. She begins with the statement that she has “re-explained grammar rules over and over to this student,” and indicates that she decided to change that strategy in this session. Rather than consider the interpersonal dynamic that might have led to this situation, Kate's focus in this stanza is on her own actions. She puts herself in the subject position for every independent clause except one in which she is describing how the student has positioned her as “copyeditor”: “—she used to return to the WC so that I could proofread her documents once more to ensure that she hadn't missed any changes and so that she would definitely not be penalized by her professors).” This clause is presented as an aside, within parentheses, and further separated by a dash, which has the effect of removing the student's behavior from the main action of the stanza. It would have indicated more effective use of interpersonal knowledge if Kate had made this issue—Student D's reliance on her and how her own behavior might have been contributing to that—the subject of this stanza. Instead, Kate characterizes their relationship in this stanza as if she were the gatekeeper of knowledge who will decide what knowledge she will share with the student, as

well as when and how she will do that, a factor that might have helped to enable Student D's presentation of herself as unable to take responsibility for her own writing. Kate's assertion in the last sentence illustrates the missing connection in this relationship: "When she read through her second assignment and I saw the same errors, I told her that I was not going to point them out to her (which I did not do for her first assignment either) and that I knew she was capable of handling them on her own." Kate appears to be presenting herself as the gate-keeper of this knowledge who can see errors the student cannot, so her assertion at the end of this sentence, "I knew she was capable of handling them on her own," seems problematic. While students might certainly attempt to shift the responsibility for their writing onto a tutor, and Student D does seem to be doing so, tutors would ideally employ their interpersonal knowledge to attempt to figure out why students are reluctant to take responsibility for their own writing and how to help them learn to be more comfortable and competent with writing tasks they find challenging.