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Mentoring Students with Special Circumstances

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Connecting the personal and the professional



Dr Katerina Koutsantoni

Having worked in education for fifteen years now has given me the privilege to meet students from a range of ethnic, racial, or religious backgrounds. I've taught and supported people of all ages, from 6-year olds to over 65-year olds. I feel rewarded when working with mature students (age 21+)^[1] as to me this involves contributing to their learning by presenting them with new interests, equipping them with new incentives, a new focus. I attribute this relationship to the fact that we have both lived through a few decades, acquired experiences which may be similar or radically different, are able to exchange these experiences, and can reach a stage whereby the learning is done on a friendly basis; where the relationship is not one between teacher and student, tutor and learner, superior and inferior, but one between two equals, two learners developing new skills and acquiring different sets of knowledge in a process of feeding each other with new information.

I was employed as project executive in a UK writing center based in a London university for just over two and half years, handling a range of responsibilities, from administrative to research and from one-to-one tutoring in discipline-specific academic writing to pastoral support for undergraduate and graduate students. What I want to share in this article is the experiences I had in offering mentoring support to students who were in difficult situations and who needed more than just academic writing support; these students were primarily seeking pastoral support in the sense of appealing to an active listener, an empathic and sympathetic ear, a person who would be willing to sit down with them and find out why the process of writing assignments and meeting deadlines was taking more time than normal. While I worked with more than three students, I wish

here to concentrate on those three to whom I felt closer emotionally and in a better position to assist, primarily due to similarities I saw with my personal experiences. I will be looking at each of them as a case study, providing a descriptive account and offering personal reflection in combination with theories extracted from counselling psychology to substantiate my thoughts[2]. I hope that my insights will be helpful to mentors who work with students in similar circumstances.

Case Study 1

Yvette: BA Carribean Studies and History

I had been in telephone contact with Yvette for several months before we met in person. She had contacted the writing center, wishing to book an appointment for a tutorial to receive help with a working assignment. Yvette was an undergraduate mature student[3], studying a BA in Carribean Studies and History.

Yvette failed to meet her appointment three times in a row and in a subsequent telephone exchange she explained that this was because she had been feeling unwell and was booked in for a scan at the hospital. Unable to shed my inquisitive streak, I asked her what was wrong. Blood tests had shown there were abnormalities in her uterus, therefore a scan was necessary to investigate further. I tried my best over the telephone to reassure Yvette that her health came first and that her academic responsibilities would eventually fall into place, and I for one would be more than willing to help her if she needed me.

She was in need of empathic understanding in the sense of simply being heard and understood.

Yvette did eventually come to the center on the forth or fifth attempt. I asked her how she was feeling, what the progress was on her condition, how it had all started. I tried to create a warm atmosphere simply with a smile and a firm handshake so she could feel comfortable and at ease. In the field of counselling, theorists like Mearns and Thorne argue that a genuine, spontaneous smile will be a means of communicating, while others will show their warmth by using words or physical contact (69). Similarly, Sharpley, Jeffrey, and McMahan remark that basic rapport, accepted as a building block of the therapeutic alliance, can be supported by the appropriate use of facial, among other types of, expressions which convey this interest and engagement from the counsellor to the client (353). Yvette was able to share with me that she had been in discomfort for years since giving birth to her second daughter and often in and out of hospitals. It had taken doctors a long time to discover that she had cancer of the uterus and that a hysterectomy was imperative. She had been coughing up a dark substance for a few days, yet she seemed oblivious to its seriousness and appeared fine with doctors' reassurances that they just needed to get it checked out as they couldn't be sure what it was.

All that did not seem congruent with the healthy-looking person I had before me, yet I thought it best to put that aside and focus on the help Yvette needed with her essay and about which she was becoming increasingly worried. A constructive session followed, with both of us going through her draft and making suggestions. Yvette had not written a conclusion as she felt she could not quite put down on paper what she wanted to say. I asked her to give me a verbal account of her idea and, afterward, I suggested that she write down exactly what she'd told me, thus encouraging a type of freewriting exercise.

She did and was astonished at herself and the shape her paragraph quickly assumed.

The session finished with Yvette feeling satisfied with her progress and agreeing to go home and complete her draft. She promised to come back for a second appointment to show me the completed draft; sadly, I lost track of her. I like to think today that Yvette has been able to complete her course and wish I had been able to help more.

Case Study 2

Haydeh: BSc Computer Science

Haydeh contacted me by email to say that she had heard I had helped other students in the past. She enquired about the possibility of meeting me to get advice on a personal statement she was writing for her Master's application to a different institution. I agreed to help her, and booked an appointment for the following day. Haydeh was Turkish, very close to me culturally (I am Greek), and very friendly, albeit quite hesitant and reserved. When I asked her to supply me with a few details about the background to her studies so I could help her formulate the statement, she mentioned that this exercise was taking her a long time because personal problems prevented her from concentrating.

I could not help but ask what those problems were. She explained that she had an older sister who had in recent years developed symptoms of schizophrenia making her very aggressive and violent. She had two children, both of whom she had to look after, in addition to caring for her sick sister. Being alone in the UK with no support from her parents or other family was causing her mental and physical exhaustion and taking a toll on her academic performance as well as her chance to simply live her own life while she was still young. It was an emotional hour with Haydeh collapsing into tears and expressing despair about what to do, how to help her sister, and how to help herself be free from such obligation. She was in need of empathic understanding in the sense of simply being heard and understood. She needed a listener who would try to see things from her perspective and be open to her experiences so that she could move from a position of alienation to one of intimacy (Culley and Bond 61). I tried very hard to listen to Haydeh, calm her down, console her, talk about the logistics of what she could do, offer suggestions.

To take her mind off the issue, we then worked on Haydeh's statement. I tried to help her list factual details chronologically for more coherence as well as elaborate further on her academic achievements in order to strengthen her statement. Here was a bright person who had graduated with a distinction from university and even got a conference paper accepted, which is rather unusual for someone at the undergraduate level. With input from Haydeh and extensive collaborative work, the experience of eventually seeing a complete statement by the end of our session was very gratifying to us both.

Case Study 3

Greg: Graduate Diploma in Law, Common Professional Examination (CPE)

Greg was a profoundly deaf student and a regular user of the writing center. During the times I met him either face-to-face or through email correspondence, he appeared a rather stern student who was well aware of what he wanted and demanded to have it. A few months elapsed between the times Greg used the center and had tutorial sessions with mentors and the

occasion I met him to discuss our potential collaboration.

When Greg spoke to me at the center, he explained that he needed to see someone to help him finalize his last two assignments before completion of his course. He stressed that the Disabilities and Dyslexia unit in Student Services was unable to help him as it did not seem to have knowledge of British sign language or of helping a profoundly deaf student. He asked me in passing whether I knew anything myself and was ready to dismiss me assuming that I did not, when I told him that my parents were in fact also profoundly deaf and that I was very much familiar with their difficulties having grown up in a quiet environment. Greg looked surprised, and I was relieved to notice an instant shift in his attitude from a stern, serious look to a very soft, friendly one. While not a person who lacked self-confidence, Greg had learned to be very self-conscious, guarded, defensive about his disability and eager to secure acceptance by others. Such acceptance consisted of recognizing and respecting his difference and prizing his uniqueness (Culley and Bond 17).

A personal interest one may have in a student's case, because of a gender, cultural, or disability affinity need not be the definitive and indispensable factor in utilizing skills that such training or knowledge can give.

Greg remarked that because of my personal experience I could probably understand the difficulty deaf students faced when trying to express themselves in writing, precisely because of not being able to hear speaking intonation and subsequently sentence construction in writing. He was worried about the quality of his assignments and, as they were the final ones, he wanted to make sure they were of an acceptable standard. I reassured Greg that I would do my best to help him. He was free to email me his assignments, and I would go through them and provide extensive feedback for his consideration and subsequent revision.

In the course of the following weeks, I checked two very complex pieces by Greg. These were at times significantly poor, not however missing evidence of knowledge in the subject area (very much the contrary as they demonstrated clear evidence of extensive research and reading), but lacking hearing people's ability to write, which is precisely what Greg had identified himself. Sentence structures were often incoherent; there were long chunks of text with consecutive clauses but no pauses in between; definite and indefinite articles were often missing — all completely understandable errors as, according to my personal experience at least, deaf people tend to use key sentence components when they speak or write (i.e. main verbs, nouns, adjectives) while they are also addressed in the same manner to ensure understanding of basic concepts.

In the space of a couple of sessions, it was difficult to help Greg significantly improve his writing. I encouraged him to pause more between sentences using basic punctuation; to avoid producing convoluted chunks of text which were more likely to confuse both him and his readers; and, to read and re-read his writing to ensure coherence. I don't know how Greg did in his assignments but kind emails of thanks that followed our meeting felt particularly rewarding.

Conclusion and Reflections

These experiences had a profound impact on me. Following the end of that academic year, I went on to study for a one-year course in Counselling Skills, one of the university's professional development courses, which changed my life

both personally and professionally. Especially with regard to female students, I developed a strong desire to be empathic and attempt to forge a bond with them, which might help towards alleviating their problems. After all, as Sasaki and Yamasaki report, personal and interpersonal problems are particularly stressful for women, more so than men, with the former suffering more from internal problems (64).

While I am not suggesting that this type of training is essential for writing center tutors, it can certainly bring invaluable benefits in understanding students' mindsets, especially in cases where personal problems become entangled with their academic responsibilities, can demonstrate that the boundaries between academic and pastoral support are not clear cut, and can render the help that the tutor can offer even more comprehensive. A personal interest one may have in a student's case, because of a gender, cultural, or disability affinity need not be the definitive and indispensable factor in utilizing skills that such training or knowledge can give.

Notes

[1] "Mature student": term used in the UK Higher Education system to refer to students aged 21+ for undergraduate programmes, and 25+ for graduate programmes.

[2] Permission to use the story of all three students was requested and received before the article's submission to the journal. The names used are fictitious.

[3] Please refer to endnote 1 for an explanation of the term "mature student."

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