Gymnastics in the writing center: how to give a good spot
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Full Text:

In life before graduate school, I coached gymnastics, which helped prepare me for tutoring. I learned how to read a gymnast, to know who needs a kind word of encouragement, who needs a mini-lesson on technique, who needs an honest bit of criticism, and who needs to be left alone to practice. Writers in the center are similar to gymnasts, each one needing a slightly different kind and amount of support. Based on my experience spotting gymnasts as they learn new skills, I've developed an informal heuristic for "spotting" writers in the Writing Studio. Exploring the metaphor of spotting and pointing out links between coaching and tutoring will help other tutors to think through the process of supporting writers and slowly removing support to promote independence.

Spotting is providing support for a skill a gymnast is not quite ready to use on his own. To help explain how spotting works in gymnastics, I'll explain the process of learning a back handspring. When first teaching the body positioning for the handspring, the coach uses a lot of muscle to carry the gymnast slowly through the movement. Once the gymnast understands the skill, the coach sets up activities for independent practice of the parts of the skill. When each part is individually mastered, the coach uses her hands to propel the gymnast through the back handspring with a little extra "oomph" and is prepared to catch the gymnast if he falls. Each time the gymnast improves the back handspring a little, the coach withdraws a tiny bit more support, until the gymnast is essentially using the skill on his own. Eventually, when the gymnast can do a back handspring completely on his own, the coach stands nearby to provide a "mental spot," a supportive presence to encourage confidence. After using the skill independently many times, the coach removes her physical presence so the gymnast sees he can do a back handspring now without any support. This technique of providing the right amount of support and then gradually removing it is often called scaffolding in education circles. (1)

We all know writers need different levels of support as they learn new skills, but I have found it very hard to know when to remove scaffolding and how to judge if I removed the right amount of support. I don't want students who work with me to become dependent on my help (a danger of too much spotting), and I don't want them to go away feeling unsupported and overwhelmed (a danger of not providing enough spotting). I've developed a mental heuristic to help me determine how much to help and when to withdraw my help.

STEP 1: JUMP IN SOMEWHERE: This step requires listening to students' concerns, reading the writing they bring, and noticing body language cues about their level of confidence and their feelings. For example, a student mentions grammar as a main concern and shares the first few paragraphs of his paper with me. I notice a pattern of mistakes in joining sentences. Since there is a pattern of errors, expressed student interest, and nonverbal cues that he is nervous, I opt to give the student a lot of support on this issue. I start with a "heavy spot" to increase his confidence, to build trust and rapport, and to ensure a confidence-building, immediate success. In practice this means showing him an example in his own writing of the mistake, explain the rule, and show him exactly how to fix it. I don't ask a lot of open-ended, Socratic-style questions and am more directive at this point. I associate the moments when a tutor uses more directive techniques with the heavy spot a coach might give a frightened gymnast.

STEP 2: EVALUATE THE RESPONSE: Does the student show signs of not understanding or of low confidence about what I explained? If he seems to understand and feel confident about what I said, I move on to step three. If he seems unsure or expresses confusion, I return to step one and provide a heavier spot. For example, I explain the rule again with a much simpler example sentence. I use different words or try to make my explanation more visual. I find a way to give more emotional or intellectual support, since the student has shown me he is not yet ready for the next step. I continue to reevaluate his response and only move on to step three when the student shows understanding and confidence about joining sentences.

STEP 3: SET UP INDEPENDENT EXERCISES FOR THE STUDENT: When the student has shown he is ready for more independence, I don't remove all of the support immediately. I don't want the student to experience an immediate failure because I ask him to take on too much, and I want to make sure he has a chance to practice his new knowledge with my support. Instead, I do what gymnastics coaches do: I break down the skill into pieces I feel the student can handle independently. I might ask the student to find a similar mistake in another sentence, but I don't ask him to fix it himself right away. I only ask him to do one part of the skill independently at a time. Alternately, I might find the next mistake for him and ask the student to fix it himself. I continue to show him how to do some of the task, but I ask him to take responsibility for other parts.

STEP 4: EVALUATE: Was the student able to do the smaller pieces of the task (sentence joining) by himself? If so, I move on to step five. If he wasn't able to complete the parts of the task independently, I return to step three with a heavier spot. I might give him more clues about where the mistake is, or I might provide the rule as the student tries to...
fix the sentence himself. There are many ways I could provide a little extra support, but I mustn't leave the student alone to use a skill he has shown me he can't quite succeed at yet.

STEP 5: GIVE THE STUDENT A CHANCE TO PRACTICE THE WHOLE SKILL WITH A LITTLE BIT OF A SPOT:
Once the student can handle the pieces of the task, I ask the student to find and correct mistakes on his own, but I continue to provide support and advice as he goes. Think of the coach giving the gymnast a little more "oomph" to complete the back handspring and being there to catch the gymnast if he falls. In this step, my role is to catch any mistakes as they are happening and provide guidance.

STEP 6: EVALUATE: Was the student able to find and correct his sentences with my support? If so, I move on to the next step. If not, I return to step five and support the student through as many repetitions of the skill as he needs to be ready to move on. Different students might require more supported practice, while others might fly through this step. Remember that very few gymnasts go from a back handspring with a spot to an independent back handspring without a lot of repetition, supported practice, feedback, and encouragement. Writers sometimes need to practice new skills many times as well before they reach independent mastery.

STEP 7: THE MENTAL SPOT: Many writers need the emotional support of working with new skills in our presence without our help. In this step, the student works on correcting his grammatical errors independently, perhaps editing a paragraph or two, while I sit supportively by. It can be hard for me to stay quiet, to watch passively, and to let the student be independent, but this step is essential if he is to carry these skills out side of the writing center, where he will not have a writing tutor with him as he writes. I bite my lip and sit on my hands, if necessary.

STEP 8: EVALUATE: Did the student work confidently on his own writing? If he made a lot of mistakes or became frustrated with the task, I return to step seven and continue to provide supportive watching and listening or go back to an earlier step and provide more help. If the student was able to complete the skill on his own, he's ready for step nine. Though he is ready to work on sentence joining independently, he may still need coaching and support on other writing issues. Occasionally students and gymnasts have trouble moving past the need for a mental spot. They might know how to do the work independently, but they might still feel dependent on us and less confident than they should be about their ability. As a coach, I sometimes had to remove myself gently from the situation (a bathroom break with instructions to keep going sometimes worked), and I use the same technique in the writing center. If a student doesn't want to let go of my help, sometimes I say, "I'm going to go get a coffee refill while you finish this paragraph. Want some?" And then I walk away.

STEP 9: INDEPENDENT WORK: At this point, the student is ready to work on sentence joining independently. However, in my experience, students at this stage need to hear what we are thinking about their progress. "I can see you are ready to do this on your own. What other concerns do you have about the paper?"

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