

Tutoring with the Vampire

Anya Smolny¹

Writing across the University of Alberta, 2023²
Volume 4, pp. 27-36
Published December 2023
DOI: 10.29173/writingacrossuofa58

Introduction

Dear Reader, you might find it strange that a vampire could make a good tutor. Well, Anya Smolny, in her paper from WRS 301 Introduction to Writing Centre Practice, shows us just that. This paper was written for a course that trains students to work as peer tutors; hence, the theme had to be related to tutoring. Smolny's paper examines the relationship between a student who struggles with writing and a friendly peer tutor.

Keywords: tutoring, ESL students, rapport, appropriation, tutor-tutee relationships



This work is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>.

¹ Anya Smolny is a 4th-year student in Linguistics and English at the University of Alberta.

² *Writing across the University of Alberta* (WAUA) publishes undergraduate student writing from writing studies courses and courses focused on writing studies practices and scholarship at the University of Alberta. You can find WAUA online at <https://writingacrossuofa.ca/>.

The paper in Danielle's hand read, "Tutoring with a Vampire." It was written in a simple font, black, with only an address and list of subjects illuminated by the flickering light down the hall. Danielle rapped on the door thrice, then took a step. With each second that passed, her shaking hands grew clammier. Danielle had never attended tutoring before, let alone share her writing with anyone, and images of belittlement and condescension danced in her mind.

As she stood in the hall, she wondered about her tutor. The only available hours were late at night, which had struck her as odd but explained why they called themselves a vampire, and based on the offered services, she suspected she would meet with someone on the eccentric side. With all their offered services, ranging from writing help to archery, they must either be a genius or a jack of all trades. "But," she thought, "a jack of all trades is a master of none."

"But it is far better than being a master of one," the man in the doorway replied. Danielle snapped out of her thoughts and into the present, finally noticing the redheaded man in the doorway. She felt anxiety crawling up her spine as she beheld her tutor, who could be no more than a year or two older than she, yet he looked at her with ageless patience. "My name is Lacsius. Danielle, correct?"

"Yes," Danielle whispered. Lacsius smiled in return.

"Please come in," he said as he stepped aside.

Past him, the apartment was only darkness, and together they walked further into the void. But the only sound Danielle could hear was her heart pounding in her ears. Her stomach churned, her breath laboured, and she began to think that—

"I like your jacket. It's quite nice," Lacsius said.

"Oh. Thank you," she replied. Lacsius turned on an overhead light in one swift yank, revealing a small yet spotless kitchen with a single round table in the center. The time on the stove clock shone 7:01.

"I'm sorry that I did not turn on the lights sooner. I forgot it was necessary." Lacsius sat down. "Please take a seat. I promise I do not bite during work hours." Danielle sat with him, unknowingly less nervous than she was before. "What has brought you to me today?"

“I have to write a paper about the Pre-Raphaelites,” Danielle began, “but I’m having trouble organizing it. Do you know what the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood is? Can you help?”

“Even if I knew nothing about the Brotherhood, I could still help. However, we are blessed, for I knew them personally. Therefore, let us do them justice.”

Danielle raised a single eyebrow in response, skepticism evident on her face. “They were alive in the nineteenth century.”

“Of course. That was only three centuries ago. Here, if I recall correctly...” Lacsius snatched a book from the nearby shelf, flipped through the pages, then nodded with satisfaction. “I remain eternal still.” He spun the book to face Danielle. A painting of a man reclining on a bed, moments away from a melodramatic death, was across two pages. As it had both the Pre-Raphaelites’ indulgence in beauty and meticulous attention to detail, she could not deny that the man in the painting and Lacsius were identical. The same red hair, the same agelessness in the eyes. Lacsius was as alive in front of her as he was when painted. Hearing Danielle’s confused thoughts, Lacsius said, “It said in the advertisement that I am a vampire.”

“I assumed it was because of your hours! Why would my first thought be, ‘I am meeting an actual vampire?’” As Danielle was not being unreasonable, Lacsius shrugged. “How do you even tutor as a vampire? Aren’t people afraid of you?”

“Many tutees are nervous, but not just because I’m a vampire. Many tutees often struggle with ‘getting started’ with tutoring at first and feel nervous, and this ‘is especially true for [ESL] students’ (Bruce “Breaking Ice” 33). ESL tutees often fear judgment or shame or feel intimidated when beginning tutoring, and ‘some may feel that a tutoring conference will be uncomfortable and even scary’ (Bruce “Breaking Ice” 33). While it may seem like common sense, it is important to recognize that a tutoring experience will not be as rich if the tutee is anxious. They may not return if they didn’t enjoy their experience, or they may struggle to open up about their concerns or questions. Therefore, the tutor must create a comfortable environment that reduces anxiety and fosters genuine learning.” Lacsius paused to look at Danielle.

“Who is Bruce, and why do you keep saying those numbers?”

“Shanti Bruce is the author of ‘Breaking Ice and Setting Goals,’” he said, “and those are the page numbers. It is important to always cite others’ works. Should I keep going?” Danielle urged him forward with a nod. He could hear her thoughts bubbling, her wondering how a vampire could make a tutee comfortable.

He decided to indulge her. “I remember, before 58 BCE, I was approached by a Roman in my homeland, the region of Gaul. He could command a room with ease, and his people adored him, but while his grasp of spoken Gallic was commendable, his writing was not fully comprehensible. Holding papyrus and ink, he found me and asked that I help him write. Thus, I brought him to my home, a haven for writers, poets, and peers to gather, and sat with him as I am with you. And like you, he was anxious, but for different reasons. The ancient Romans were proud people; thus, he was embarrassed to be seen getting help, which Bruce identifies as a common problem among tutees (“Listening” 220). Knowing this, I brought him to a private room to address the issue and help him feel comfortable (Bruce “Listening” 220).”

“Was he okay after that?” Danielle asked.

“He felt better, but not fully,” said Lacsius, “Before we started, I asked him about his goals and worked with him to make a plan. Planning with the tutee is another way to reduce anxiety (Bruce “Breaking Ice” 34). First, it gave him a chance to voice what he wanted to work on while understanding that I respected his thoughts. Second, if the tutee or I were uncertain about what to do at any point, we could refer back to the plan, and we became equally responsible for our time together (Bruce “Breaking Ice” 34). By listening to his concerns and asking about his goals, I helped alleviate some of his anxiety, treated him as an equal, and created a constructive learning environment.”

Danielle piped up, “Was he anyone I might know?”

Lacsius replied casually, “He was Julius Caesar.”

“Why wouldn’t you start with that?!” she blurted out.

“It was not relevant. We are talking about tutoring, not ancient Romans.”

Danielle mocked him internally, thinking about how obviously anyone not immortal would care if you were talking about Julius Caesar. Lacsius could hear her but chose not to comment on it. He had been in her mind enough for one day. Finally, after deciding that her annoyance was less important than her curiosity, she responded, “So that’s all you have to do? Make a plan, go somewhere private if they want, and then, BAM! You have a comfortable tutoring environment?”

Lacsius shook his head and replied, “You should understand that it’s not that straightforward. There are precautions a tutor must take to ensure that they are providing a positive environment. Cynthia Lee said, ‘Advice-giving is not an easy act’ because the way tutors ‘give advice may threaten the tutee’s self-image and limit their freedom of action’ (430).”

“How could someone be affected like that? You either take the advice or don’t.”

“Let me pose a scenario to you,” Lacsius said. “Close your eyes.”

Danielle closed her eyes. Lacsius continued, “You enjoy painting. You meet up with another artist and show her your piece. You worked hard but need help bringing it to the standard you want.”

Before she could get the chance to speak, Danielle suddenly found herself in an art studio, standing next to a painting of Lacsius. Then, the clicking of heels caught her attention, and she turned to see a woman, a pompous artist personified, meeting her eye.

“You ask her—” Lacsius’s voice rang through Danielle’s head as she felt her mouth move in sync with his words, “—for help. She takes one look at your painting and tells you—”

The Artist sneered, “I can tell what you wanted to do, but you aren’t doing it like a Pre-Raphaelite artist. Let me show you how I would do it so you can do it right next time.” She snatched a paintbrush from the air and began painting. She painted over Danielle’s strokes, covering details and replacing them with something that looked more natural but less Danielle. Danielle watched hopelessly, knowing that she could never duplicate The Artist’s work. As more changed, the more she doubted her own abilities. Danielle realized as the repainting finished, with new vibrant flowers and verdant greens, albeit beautiful, that the painting was no longer hers.

Danielle opened her eyes and looked at Lacsius. “Did you feel listened to?” he asked.

“No! I know she tried to help, but she changed it without asking me anything! I know the painting doesn’t exist, but I knew I cared about it and worked hard. She took what was mine and made it... hers.”

Lacsius’ expression was kind and, as he spoke, there was a tenor of empathy. “I understand that it was upsetting. Experiences like that are never pleasant, and I assure you that you will not feel that way working with me. Unfortunately, what you experienced can happen with writing as well. A tutor may ‘reformulate’ a tutee’s work to allow the tutee to see the difference between their work and a native speaker’s, which is an acceptable method when there is proper tutor-tutee communication (Severino 52-53). However, tutors may ‘appropriate’ their tutee’s work if they exert too much control over the work and cause the tutee to feel like they lost agency over, and ownership of, their work (Severino 53-54). Carol Severino explains that appropriation in writing ‘usually involves the writer feeling... loss of voice, ownership, authorship, or emotional and intellectual connection to the writing’ after a tutor vigorously revises the tutee’s work (53). Like you, a tutee may even feel ashamed

(Severino 52). Because appropriation causes a tutee to feel negative, an appropriating tutor is not providing a positive, let alone comfortable, tutoring environment.”

“How do you know if you're appropriating? How do you avoid it?”

“Appropriation is an ‘issue of control over composing and revising’ a text, so when it gets to the point where a tutee has less control over their text than the tutor, there is a higher chance of appropriation (Severino 54). There are three ‘especially important’ criteria for not appropriating a tutee’s writing: first, communicate the tutee’s needs and feelings; second, make sure they participate in the editing process; and third, don’t misrepresent the tutee’s abilities (Severino 62). Allow me to demonstrate appropriation avoidance.”

Danielle blinked, and she was in the art studio again. All that stood in the room was Danielle, The Artist, a painting of Lacsius, and Lacsius's comforting presence behind her. Danielle looked at The Artist anxiously, ready for condemnation and belittlement. The Artist spoke. “How much like the Pre-Raphaelites would you like to paint?”

Danielle eyed The Artist before replying, “I want the painting to look like I was a Pre-Raphaelite.”

The Artist nodded. “Let’s talk about that.”

Whereas The Artist tyrannically altered Danielle’s work before, conversation flowed between the two now. Together, they discussed Danielle’s expectations and needs before looking at the painting. After focusing on one particular part of the painting, they worked together to revise what Danielle considered important. Any change from The Artist was discussed, explained first, and Danielle now held a brush too, as The Artist encouraged Danielle’s participation.

Danielle took a step back and admired the work—her work. The painting changed, that much was true, but as each detail was filled with her agency and input, she was content with the changes. With all its beauty, it was still her painting.

“I’m glad you’re happy, Danielle. What do you think now?” Lacsius and Danielle were back in the apartment.

“If appropriation is a control issue, respecting the tutee’s agency over their work will help them feel respected and not ashamed. If they feel respected and comfortable, the tutor has provided a positive tutoring environment,” Danielle mused.

“Excellent analysis, Danielle!” praised Lacsius, and Danielle beamed with pride.

“And by simply talking to me before making changes and listening to what I needed, I felt equal, like you with Julius Caesar. I was comfortable around The Artist and felt like I had learned something.”

“I’m glad you brought up the power of conversation,” Lacsius said, “because Paul Kei Matsuda and Michelle Cox wrote, ‘When we listen... we treat ESL writers with the respect they deserve, regarding them as peers rather than as uninformed learners... It is only in such an atmosphere of mutual respect that the collaborative pedagogy of the writing center can turn differences into opportunities for growth’ (49). Respect is vital for the tutoring environment; thus, talking and listening to the tutee is important. In fact, even the way the tutor speaks affects the environment.”

“But how? That seems really minor.”

“I will answer your question with a question. How did you feel about attending tutoring?” he asked.

“Terrified,” she answered honestly. “I thought I would throw up just from anxiety, even before I knew you were a vampire.”

“But are you scared now?” Lacsius questioned. Danielle contemplated his question. He was an ancient vampire and a tutor, two things she had assumed she feared, yet here she was. Comfortable.

“How did you do it?” she asked immediately. “Is this a vampire mind trick?!”

“Not a trick,” he assured her, “but rapport. Rapport allows you and I to speak easily, openly, and honestly with each other. Building rapport can help ‘the tutee better integrate into the tutorials’ because they’ll feel comfortable, and it will ‘implicitly impact [their] participation and involvement in the learning process’ (Lee 447).”

“Is that why you complimented me on my jacket?” she asked.

“Yes, it was a small icebreaker to establish friendliness between us. Showing genuine interest is one way of helping someone feel more comfortable and ease anxieties (Bruce “Breaking Ice” 53). A friendly greeting, small talk, and getting to know each other are rapport-building strategies that allow us to bond (Lee 438). It is easier to be comfortable with someone familiar than a complete stranger. As such, it is important to put effort into introducing yourself and getting to know your tutee. Can you recall what else I did?”

“Sometimes you said ‘we’ or ‘us’ instead of ‘you or ‘I,’ and it made me feel like we were a team. Like something wasn’t just my problem but our problem, and you were here to help me with it. Does Lee talk about that?”

“Very good. Lee does identify using ‘first person plural pronouns’ like ‘we’ or ‘us’ as another rapport-building strategy because it indicates commitment and helps to ‘share ownership’ (440),” said Lacsius.

“What about kindness? After The Artist appropriated my work, I was upset, but I started to feel better when you were understanding. And you’re also really encouraging, which makes me feel better about myself.”

“Indeed. ‘Empathy, encouragement and praise as a sign of association’ also build rapport (Lee 441). It may seem obvious, but—”

“When you think about it,” Danielle jumped in, “kindness would be a good way to make someone feel comfortable. Kindness makes you seem less intimidating, and if someone feels insecure, being kind to them can help lessen their anxieties.”

“Excellent. As you can see, ‘establishing rapport between tutors and tutees may be crucial, as it can help both parties achieve their goals collaboratively in a friendly environment’ (Lee 432). Building rapport takes a lot of small pieces, but the small aspects of how a tutor talks work to create a good environment and help build a tutor-tutee relationship. Those were all but one of the rapport-building strategies I have done with you. In conclusion, young Danielle, a tutee, may feel nervous attending a form of tutoring, and it is the tutor’s responsibility to provide a comfortable environment that fosters learning.”

“And tutors must actively work towards that environment.”

“Building rapport throughout the session will help the tutee be comfortable, and establishing a plan helps reduce anxiety, and both help to establish a relationship.”

“Avoiding appropriation will show the tutee respect, include them in the learning process, and keep the environment comfortable!” exclaimed Danielle.

“Yes!” rejoiced Lacsius. “Developing a good environment means knowing what to do and what not to do! What these methods all have in common is an emphasis on conversing with the tutee. Conversation helps establish equality, helps to learn their needs so you can respect them, and helps establish rapport.”

“But Lacsius, you didn’t talk about one of the ways you built rapport. So, what’s the last one?” Danielle asked.

“I was saving that,” Lacsius smiled, fangs gleaming in the overhead light, “for last. This conversation was my attempt to build rapport with you, Danielle. Off-task talk is another method Lee outlines” (436).

“Ooh. I wondered why you spent so much time talking about tutoring instead of tutoring! Do we even still have time for tutoring?”

“We have plenty of time. There are... advantages to being an ancient vampire tutor.” The stove clock read 8:00. Lacsius snapped his fingers.

Now, the clock said 7:05.

“I would never waste your precious time. I have infinite, while you have finite.” Lacsius took out a notebook and some pencils. “The entire conversation took place in your head in about ten seconds. Think of it as something akin to a hypnotic dream, with hours or days of your life only lasting seconds. Still comfortable? Good, I’m glad. Why don’t we get started? You said you were working on a paper about the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, tá? I will give you a choice that I never had. Please tell me what you’d like us to work on, and let’s see what we can do.”

Works Cited

- Bruce, Shanti. “Breaking Ice and Setting Goals: Tips for Getting Started.” *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*, edited by Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth, 2nd ed., Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2009, pp. 33–41.
- Bruce, Shanti. “Listening to and Learning from ESL Writers.” *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*, edited by Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth, 2nd ed., Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2009, pp. 217–29.
- Ede, Lisa. *Situating Composition: Composition Studies and the Politics of Location*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2004.
- Fulkerson, Richard. “Composition at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 56, no. 4, 2005, pp. 654–87.
- George, Diana, and John Trimbur. “The ‘Communication Battle,’ or Whatever Happened to the 4th C?” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 50, no. 4, 1999, pp. 682–98.
- Lee, Cynthia. “More than Just Language Advising: Rapport in University English Writing Consultations and Implications for Tutor Training.” *Language & Education: An International Journey*, vol. 29, no. 5, Sept. 2015, pp. 430–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2015.1038275>
- Matsuda, Paul Kei and Michelle Cox. “Reading an ESL Writer’s Text.” *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*, edited by Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth, 2nd ed., Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2009, pp. 42–50.

Severino, Carol. "Avoiding Appropriation." *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*, edited by Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth, 2nd ed., Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2009, pp. 51–65.