

Tutor Chemistry:

H ♂ w to Bridge the Gender G ♀ p

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Throughout this roller-coaster ride of life, it is likely that we have all experienced it: that inner alarm, triggered by the mere presence of the opposite sex. A flashing red light detonates and a deep, ominous voice bellows, “Warning! Warning! Member of the opposite sex approaching!” At the signal, an impenetrable wall swiftly erects and the whole anatomy becomes possessed by some unknown force. The body tightens up, resembling a fence pole. As the temperature rises, various parts cease to function normally. Sweat starts to gush profusely from crevices of the body, causing an embarrassing just-jumped-out-of-the-shower look. Blood rushes to the face, which you hope will not be mistaken for a tomato. Normally coordinated limbs begin to make stiff, jerky movements and your lips begin to feel as if 10 lb weights were hanging from them. You struggle to articulate something clever, but only incoherent burbles escape, something like, “Yumph, ern ol am oogle?” Obviously, this type of gender tension can hinder a tutor session unless valuable communication is used.

I may be a rookie tutor, but I can definitely recognize when this gender tension thwarts my tutoring session. During one particular conference, the awkwardness in the air was so heavy I felt like my suggestions could not penetrate the glutinous, hazy cloud between the tutee and myself. Needless to say, very little got accomplished and I left the session feeling frustrated and discouraged. To make matters worse, the symptoms of gender tension were rampant! But what caused this science project to backfire, to go terribly awry? I must have added a wrong ingredient to the mixture or missed some vital step in the chemical equation because there was definitely no productive tutor chemistry happening here. The solution to the thwarted session and the cure to all those

embarrassing side effects, is learning to understand the different ways in which men and women communicate.

What makes it so tough for men and women to work together productively? Often times, it is because we feel misunderstood by the other party. As tutors, it is our job to gently but efficiently guide students along the tedious path of the writing process. Sometimes we may stray from that path or become road-blocked by gender tensions, biases and misunderstandings. Communication is the key to effective tutoring; communication and cooperation will bridge the gender gap and make the tutoring experience and exciting and positive one for all parties involved.

The first key to effective communication is learning to recognize the different ways in which each gender uses communication. Deborah Tannen, author and linguist, argues that men and women approach conversation with a distinct set of rules and interpretations of talk. Men use communication to focus on status and independence while women use it to focus on intimacy and connection. These differences are enough to make communication between the sexes problematic. Not only do men and women communicate differently, but they think, feel, react and need differently (Aries 3). Women try to promote harmony and participation and they tend to skirt around the issues to prevent any hurt feelings. Men, however, desire to create a clear-cut impression that may come across as being insensitive. As a female, I have often found myself alarmingly guilty of beating around the bush. In giving suggestion and wanting to avoid hurt feelings, I sometimes find myself saying, “Oh, your paper is great! You might want to... and just maybe... think about doing this...” To a guy, this might come across as unconvincing and unconfident. Males on the other hand, tend to be more direct. They

might say something like, “This paragraph is wrong, didn’t you learn about subject-verb agreement in English 1010?” To a female tutee, this may come across as domineering or intimidating. Now these are all broad assumptions and it is not fair to generalize all males or females, but the point is that men and women communicate and interpret communication very differently. Learning to recognize these differences is an art that can be practiced and achieved; tutors can use awareness and cooperation to make any tutoring session a success.

The second key to effective communication is learning to cooperate and compromise in a tutor session. None of us have received training on how to communicate as women or men and unfortunately, Gender Communication 101 is not offered here on campus. Rather, traditional methods of communication have been deeply engrained in us by society; this programming operates beneath the surface of our minds—we don’t even notice it, yet we live by it. Here are the most basic ones. Women think they must relate in order to survive whereas men believe they must compete to survive in a conversation. Cooperation and compromise is necessary for productive two-way conversation to take place and it can prevent awkward tensions from overpowering the tutoring atmosphere. A grade school teacher described gender communications this way: for women, building relationships is a goal while men see it as a way to get things done. You can see the difference when little girls and boys play. When girls get into a disagreement, they have to resolve it then and there. But boys have no problem playing with boys they don’t like; they have rules for resolving conflicts fairly and impersonally (Simons 31). In the tutoring atmosphere, men and women can learn to cooperate with these means of communication. Women can learn to be more direct and still maintain a

harmonious atmosphere; being direct can help the tutee to see mistakes and suggestions more clearly. Men can learn to let go of competitiveness in a tutor conference and focus on teamwork. Learning to cooperate and compromise can help put both tutor and tutee at ease, making the path to the writing process a little smoother.

The third important key in effective tutor communication is learning to avoid common gender stereotypes. Girls are not always emotional, sensitive and fragile and guys are not always aggressive, forceful and competitive. Don't freeze up when you see your female tutee approaching, thinking that she is going to breakdown into marble-sized tears just because you marked up her paper a bit. Don't tremble when your male tutee enters the room, believing he will completely reject and ignore your suggestions. As tutors, we should learn from one another without abandoning these traits. Men can be collaborative and intuitive, yet remain result oriented and women need to give up being nurturing in order to learn to be comfortable with power and conflict (Simons 34). This is how we learn to bridge the gender gap; it is the antidote to all those nasty gender tension symptoms. As tutors, guys or gals, it is vital that we communicate and treat each other with common respect in order to avoid being misunderstood. What we put into our tutoring sessions is exactly what we will get out of them.

A skilled communicator does not command the conversation. Rather, using style and intuition, a good communicator will provide a listening ear and a helpful tongue at just the precise moments to benefit all. Don't worry if you don't quite have the art of effective communication mastered yet; like learning to ride a bike, it will take precious amounts of practice and fine-tuning. Throughout your training, there will inevitably be many crashes and burns; there will be many flat tires and even a few deflated egos. But

in the end, the thrill of mastering the art will be worth it. As tutors, we have the marvelous opportunity to mold and stimulate minds, and that job is too important to let gender tensions hinder the process. Let's face it, men and women communicate differently. There is a certain chemistry involved that must be balanced in order to produce the right results. Learning to recognize and understand the different communication elements, adding the right ingredients and following the correct chemical equations will help make any tutor session a success and not some grade-school science project gone terribly wrong!

Works Cited

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