

Difficult Tutoring Situations

At some time or other, all tutors will find themselves faced with difficult situations in a tutoring session. The following information will provide you with some common categories into which the difficulties may fall and some strategies to help you deal with them. There are no magic answers and no “one technique fits all” strategies. As you gain experience tutoring, you will be able to refine and add to these suggestions. Always feel free to discuss any questions or difficulties with your graduate assistant supervisor or the Coordinator.

Difficult Student Characteristics

1. Blocking

Characterized by:

Low frustration tolerance

Immobilization/hopelessness/freezing up

“It’s beyond me.”

“I’ll never get it.”

“I’m stuck.”

Approach:

1. Determine what the tutee does know and discuss that – show him that he has some foundation
2. Begin from what he knows and build, in simple steps, toward increasingly complex material
3. Offer continual support
4. Reinforce success consistently

2. Confusion (a variation of blocking)

Characterized by:

Bafflement/disorientation/disorganization

Helpless feeling about the class

“I just don’t know what to do.”

“I just don’t know what the professor wants.”

“I studied for the test and got a D.”

“I’m not sure where we’re going.”

Approach:

1. Utilize the above four approaches
2. Give **structure** and **order** to the tutee’s tutorial sessions, to his notes, to papers

3. Miracle Seeking

Characterized by:

Global interest or concern but with little specificity

Enthusiasm about being with tutor, but fairly passive in actual tutoring process

High (often inappropriate) level of expectation

Evasion or inability to concentrate on concrete tasks

Approach:

1. Return focus again and again to specific task
2. Involve student continually with questions, problems
3. Explain significance of active participation in the learning process

4. Over-enthusiasm (a variation of Miracle Seeking)

Characterized by:

High expectations and demands of self
Talk of limited time, long-range goals versus immediate tasks
Global interest/enthusiasm
Often found in older students

Approach:

1. Explain counterproductive nature of this eagerness
2. Be understanding, yet assure the student that he has time
3. Use suggestions under Miracle Seeking as listed above

5. Resisting

Characterized by:

Variations of sullenness/hostility/passivity/boredom
Disinterest in class/work/tutor
Defensive posture toward class/work/tutor
Easily triggered anger

Approach:

1. Allow small amount of time for student to "vent"
2. Spend first session – possibly even second – on building relationship
3. Be pragmatic, yet understanding (for example, "Look, I know this is a bore, but you need it to graduate – let's make the best of it.")
4. Establish your credibility/indicate past successes in similar situations

6. Passivity (a variation of Resisting)

Characterized by:

Noninvolvement/inattention
Boredom
Little discussion initiated/few questions

Approach:

1. Empathize (for example, "You're not crazy about asking a lot of questions in class, are you?" or "It's pretty much of a drag to sit in class, isn't it?")
2. Attempt to build a relationship and mobilize the student
3. Utilize as many mobilizing techniques as possible – questions, problems, minitasks to be accomplished by next session
4. Reinforce all activities and successes

7. Evasion

Characterized by:

Manipulation

Verbal ability/glibness versus focused comments

Global/nonspecific praise of tutor's skill, course content, and so on

Approach:

1. Play down your role; emphasize student involvement
2. Focus the student on specific tasks; involve him continually with questions, problems
3. If evasion continues, you should ask, in a non-threatening way, why the student has come for the tutoring and what he expects from you (for example, "You know, we've met several times already, but we haven't gotten much done – what do you think we should plan for future sessions?" or "My biggest concern is your success in this class; how, specifically can I help you with that?")

Difficult Scenarios

Scenario: *The student is forced to be there.*

While most students are here of their own choosing, occasionally, a professor will require a student to come to the UCLA for extra credit points or as part of a contract with the student. When students are required to do something, they may react negatively. In a counseling setting, it is not unlikely that a client may become angry at whomever they have to meet with, even if that person did not set the requirement. Similarly a student who is required to visit a tutor may resist a tutor's attempts to engage in any conversation. The student hopes he/she can leave as soon as possible.

What to Do: *Empathize about being forced to do something.*

Let the student know that you too have been in situations you were forced into and that you felt the same way he/she does. Try to help the student see that as long as they are here, you would like to help them make good use of their time.

Scenario: *This subject is not important to this student.*

Many students see some of their courses as something that has little to do with their lives or their future careers.

What to Do: *Acknowledge the lack of interest in the subject area and try for a small success.*

Acknowledge the student's attitude as something many individuals share. Try for a small success and talk about when the student might need this information or skills. Unless the student can see the importance of the material, the probability of changing his/her attitude is unlikely.

Scenario: *The student may be anxious about revealing ignorance and he/she may be nervous about being critiqued.*

Students may be apprehensive when coming to visit a tutor. When we have no idea what's expected of us and we feel shaky about whether we are going to be ridiculed or asked to demonstrate what we don't know, we do sometimes respond by withdrawing until we can get a better handle on what's happening or figure out how we can retreat from the situation with minimal embarrassment.

What to Do: *Help the student talk about his or her fears.*

Try to establish an atmosphere of trust, perhaps by being friendly, and explaining that you are not a teacher and that your job is to help and to listen. Invite the student to talk about his or her anxieties. Empathize and reassure the student that these fears are not uncommon and can be overcome.

Scenario: *The student is overwhelmed by other concerns.*

The student may have just found out that he/she is running out of financial aid, learned that he/she did not perform well on a test, or had a fight with a close friend. Students bring with them a variety of other problems and worries and disappointments that affect their ability to attend to what's going on in the tutorial.

What to Do: *Reschedule for a better time or listen and move on.*

Ask the student if he/she would prefer to reschedule for another time. If you are comfortable, ask the student if he/she would like to talk about what is bothering them. A few minutes of conversation are likely to help clear the air and ease the student's frustrations. If you sense that the person starts bringing up other problems because he/she has found a listening ear, it is likely the student has decided to use the time as a support session in which to air his/her troubles. One strategy to get back to work is to acknowledge that you have heard the student and that it is time to move on. For example, "Wow, it sounds like this has been a crazy week for you. Let's try to focus on this chapter so you have one less thing to worry about. How can I help you with this topic in our remaining time?"

Scenario: *The student doesn't have the language to talk about his or her problems.*

Effective resolution of difficulties in a course requires the ability to detect problems and develop a strategy to solve those problems. The students who come to see you often do not have these abilities. Therefore, they do not know how to explain to someone else what they would like to work on. These students are likely to come in frustrated and unable to say more than, "I don't understand," or "I need help." They sit in silence because they do not know what to say or how to say it.

What to Do: *Offer the student some questions he/she can ask herself.*

"Could you tell me where in the problem you start to have difficulty?"

"Do you think you lack information from a previous section?"

"Are you wondering if your work doesn't meet the assignment?"

You might have to keep listing questions and problems that the student might have until something triggers a response from the student.

Scenario: *The student is simply a very quiet person.*

Some students are naturally shy or quiet, and they are not given to a lot of chatter or small talk. Introverts prefer to deal with the world by taking things in and reflecting on them quietly.

What to Do: *Give the student some quiet time to think and work.*

Ask the student if he/she would prefer to work some problems by himself/herself while you work with another student or look over your notes. Assure the student that you will come back to continue working together. Set a specific task for the student to accomplish.

Scenario: *The student knows that if he or she shuts up, the tutor will do all the work.*

These students wait for the tutor to tell them what to write, how to fix their assignment, or maybe – if they sit silently for a long period of time – the tutor will do the problem for them. In large lecture settings, these students have learned to be quiet and wait for the instructor to tell them what to do.

What to Do: *Try minimalist tutoring.*

Try to ask questions that indicate you are interested in the student's knowledge on this subject. Avoid answering your own question if the student does not respond. Instead, give the student plenty of time to answer. If there is still no response, show the student where to find the answer, but don't answer for him/her.

Tough Session Practice Problems

1. **“My assignment is due tomorrow. Will you help me do these problems?”**

POSSIBLE TUTOR RESPONSE:

2. **“I’ve already done my homework. I just need you to check it for me.”**

POSSIBLE TUTOR RESPONSE:

3. **“I’ve written this paper that I have to give in Spanish to my class. Will you help me?”** (Translation: “I did get it written in English, but I can’t write it in Spanish. Will you do the translation for me?”)

POSSIBLE TUTOR RESPONSE:

4. **“Come on. Help me out here. I need you. I can’t come during your scheduled times. Can’t you make an exception for me?”**

POSSIBLE TUTOR RESPONSE:

5. **“This instructor is really crazy. She won’t even listen to reason. I think she’s out to get me.”**

POSSIBLE TUTOR RESPONSE:

6. **“Nothing works. I just can’t get it. I study all the time. I don’t know what to do.”**

POSSIBLE TUTOR RESPONSE:

Tough Session Practice Problems Possible Responses

1. "My assignment is due tomorrow. Will you help me do these problems?"

POSSIBLE TUTOR RESPONSE: "Let's take a look at the type of problem you have. We'll work on something similar, so that you'll be able to do the assignment."

Remember: It is not your job to do students' homework assignments. If you do, the students will not learn how to do the work on their own. Waiting until the last minute to do assignments may also be a sign of poor time management skills. If appropriate, suggest a "Time Management" workshop or coaching session.

2. "I've already done my homework. I just need you to check it for me."

POSSIBLE TUTOR RESPONSE: "Well, you know, we don't proofread assignments. But, I'll tell you what I can do. If you'll show me the areas you're worried about, we'll discuss those problems in general and take a look at your book. Then, you can check your homework."

Remember: It is not your job to make sure that everything a tutee turns in is perfect. Helping students with specific homework problems is not what you were hired to do. Review similar homework problems and help the student develop the critical thinking skills necessary to do his/her homework assignment independently. Tutees must learn how to check their own work and how to have confidence in the answers they give. If they can do this, they will:

- Be able to defend their answers.
- Understand more completely.
- Develop better self esteem.
- Become more independent.

3. "I've written this paper that I have to give in Spanish to my class. Will you help me?" (Translation: "I did get it written in English, but I can't write it in Spanish. Will you do the translation for me?")

POSSIBLE TUTOR RESPONSE: "You've gotten off to a good start. You have the paper written. Do as much of the translation as you can. I can't do that for you. But, once you've done as much as you can, right or wrong, then I'll see what type of problems you're having. We'll work on those areas. Then, you can go back and finish your paper."

Remember: It's not your job to do students' assignments. You cannot be with the student forever. They need to learn how to do work on their own.

4. “Come on. Help me out here. I need you. I can’t come during your scheduled times. Can’t you make an exception for me?”

POSSIBLE TUTOR RESPONSE: "I know how tough it is. With my classes and work, I rarely have any spare time either." "Have you considered forming a study group with others in your class" "Have you checked to see what your instructor’s office hours are?"

Remember: It's really hard to say no - especially to someone who considers you as their source of help. Although it is difficult, saying no will help the tutee take responsibility for his/her own learning. You should not be the sole resource for your tutee.

5. “This instructor is really crazy. She won't even listen to reason. I think she's out to get me.”

POSSIBLE TUTOR RESPONSE: "Sounds like you're having a bad time. I'm sorry you're finding it difficult to succeed in this class. Perhaps you could show me some of the problems you are having difficulty understanding. I may be able to help clarify them for you. We may also need to review how you are studying for this class. You may have to invest more study time so that lectures are more meaningful and less stressful."

Remember: Regardless of how an instructor is performing, it will not help the student by complaining with them. The student will still have to find a way to understand the material and pass the course. Avoid talking about instructors. Students sometimes use this as an excuse for doing poorly. The more you help them find ways to learn effectively, the less dependent they will be on learning ALL the material through lectures and class time.

6. “Nothing works. I just can’t get it. I study all the time. I don’t know what to do.”

POSSIBLE TUTOR RESPONSE: “Let’s take a look at the list of available workshops on study skills. Maybe one of them would be helpful. Or you may want to make an appointment with a study skills coach to discuss your particular situation.” “If you want, you can take a quick test to determine your learning style. Once you know whether you learn better by seeing, or by doing, or by hearing, we'll both be able to figure out study strategies to help you. Then, we'll take a look at your book.”

Remember: Sometimes the students really are studying, but in a non-beneficial manner.