First of all, DO NOT BE FOOLED. Tutoring is neither the laidback job of being a proofreader nor the powerful position of being a teacher. It is, however, a GREAT way to score some free food from tutees who believe in expressing their gratitude in the form of some Belgian chocolate cookies or a home-cooked bowl of *pho*. (True story!) Of course, besides the extra pounds from my gastronomical windfall (or downfall, depending on perception and level of vanity), there are so many other things I have gained from this experience.

Of all the lessons I have taken away from the class and from being on the job, the most important one would be that of How To Be A Tutor. The most simple and obvious concept turned out to be the trickiest to grasp. I started out, like most of the other tutors in the class, worrying solely about my rusty grammar knowledge. I thought that all I had to do was brush up on these rules and such, and I’d have gotten the job all figured out. Having a firm grasp on grammar rules definitely provided the backbone of a good tutoring session – and make no mistake, there will definitely be some homework here to be done on your part – but I soon learnt that there was a whole other world outside of grammar in the complexities of tutoring. I think this is especially true of weekly individual sessions, where the tutor/tutee relationship evolves over the weeks.

One issue I struggled with in terms of this tutor/tutee relationship was recognizing how involved I should be on both a professional and a personal level. The EWRT97 class did a really thorough job in setting down the professional and ethical guidelines of our roles in the WRC, such as how we are not supposed to be proofreaders or do the tutee’s work in any way; instead, our job is to explain concepts and prompt them to recognize their own mistakes. Beyond that, the lines get a little blurred. I started feeling affected when there seemed to be little to no progression in the weekly assignments they bring in. Even worse were the ones who did not seem motivated to learn at all. I felt like these were issues I needed to address, but was afraid of seeming too pushy or intrusive. This is the point I started to understand the different hats a tutor wears – that of a reader, a listener, a counselor and sometimes even a friend. It took a while for me to understand that the tutee’s level of motivation was out of my jurisdiction and was not something I could mandate. What I could do, however, was to communicate with him/her and try to understand if there were any underlying issues that were impeding the progress of his/her learning. Of course, it isn’t always a happy ending, in which case simply move on and don’t let it get you down.

A great way to maintain a positive relationship with all your tutees is to stay upbeat and supportive, and understand that these different individuals all come from different backgrounds and have different learning styles. For example, there is one tutee who really likes learning through theoretical exercises and knowing the exact grammatical terms (‘auxiliary verb’, ‘identifying clause’ etc.). For others, especially tutees belonging to Generation 1.5, these terms only confused them further. These students generally understand best when applying these concepts on an actual paper they are working on, or by looking at real examples of articles. You might also be learning certain techniques such as asking your tutee to read his/her paper aloud in order for them to realize their own mistakes. This, however, might not work for different levels of students, especially
for those in the ESL classes. They are not as linguistically comfortable with the language, and it might really help them if you actually read their paper out for them, so that they can hear if something sounds amiss. Now how would you actually know which way is the right way to go? The answer is, there is no way to know till you try! Whenever you apply a certain method or technique in your tutoring, ask your tutees for their feedback – Was the explanation clear? Was the chart helpful or confusing? Do they have a better idea or a previous experience with a learning technique which had helped them?

This brings me to probably the most important aspect of this whole experience – communication. You know how they say it’s a two-way street? Well, here at the WRC and in the EWRT97 class, it’s a free-for-all pedestrian scramble in New York City’s Union Square at peak hour. Communication is going to come and go in all directions – your tutee, your peers, senior tutors, the support team and of course your instructors Ken and Diana. For everyone who came in with their guards up and planned to leave the same way, they were happily mistaken. The time we spent in class was almost like a mini tutor therapy session. All kinds of issues were being reflected upon and discussed, we were encouraged to teach and to learn from each other at the same time – which is, essentially, what tutoring is all about. For example, you teach a student about how to write a thesis, and she applies it in her own unique way to a fantastic idea she has, and this in turn opens your eyes to a whole new style of writing a thesis. All in all, remember that it’s an open and honest process. Go in with everything you have to share, and you’ll come out with a lot more.