

Peer Observation: Maddie

I had the pleasure of observing Maddie McGann's University of Iowa Speaking Center appointment on March 6, 2018. In the thirty-minute appointment, Maddie worked one-on-one with an international graduate student. Prior to the meeting, Maddie only had access to brief notes supplied by the student when she made the appointment, which indicated that she hoped to work on a presentation. Consequently, I was able to watch Maddie first direct the conversation to get a clear sense of the student's project and to identify the most effective means of aiding the student. As I soon learned that the student would be returning later in the day for a second appointment, I recognized the value in Maddie's efforts to create a welcoming environment while simultaneously establishing a foundation that they could build upon in their next meeting.

Once the student entered the private Speaking Center room, Maddie immediately endeavored to make her feel comfortable and to allow her to direct the conversation. We learned that the student hoped to develop and practice a midterm assignment. In two days' time, she would deliver a five-minute presentation with six corresponding PowerPoint slides. Maddie quickly reassured the stressed student that she was doing well working with complex material and offered suggestions for how to use their time together most effectively. I was surprised when the student rejected her suggestion to practice pronunciation by reading her abstract aloud, but Maddie handled her resistance with grace and smoothly transitioned to an alternative approach, where she read over the student's abstract.

Even while independently reading, Maddie made an effort to encourage the student's active participation, asking questions for clarity and working to get a better sense of the assignment's expectations. It was clear that Maddie was eager to determine how she could prove most useful to the student in their short meeting time. She shared her ideas with the student, who was once again resistant to practicing reading aloud. Without a pause, Maddie suggested that she practice 3-4 sentences, after which point Maddie could offer constructive feedback. As the student read, Maddie offered both verbal ("Mmm," "good," "exactly!") and nonverbal (nodding along) feedback, which encouraged the student to continue reading aloud. This was especially noticeable when the student correctly pronounced some of the complex words (we're talking five and six syllables!) that filled her PowerPoint slides. It became clear that the biggest hurdle with this particular student was the mere act of getting her talking, so Maddie made no effort to stop her after a few sentences. Instead, they seamlessly slid into a more conversational approach to editing the content, where Maddie would ask questions and help the student puzzle through specific issues on a slide-by-slide basis. Maddie offered sentence-specific suggestions (such as changing "first age" to "early age" for clarity) and also helped the student with organizational issues and more substantial language concerns.

One thing that stood out to me was how Maddie repeatedly used the word "we" rather than "you" when engaging with the student. It was evident from the get-go that Maddie and the student were a team, working together to strengthen her project. I didn't envy Maddie's task of trying to improve a presentation that employed so much complex terminology and so many high-level concepts, but Maddie handled it beautifully. By the end of the meeting, they determined that their main goal was to shift much of the jargon-heavy language to more accessible phrasing so that the student's audience would be able to follow along. At the

appointment's conclusion, the student left, already planning for her second meeting with Maddie, where they would extend their previous conversation and further develop her project.

Though I noticed there were a few points where Maddie could have quickly paused to look up the pronunciation of specific words or pointed out common errors for international students (such as dropping the “s” in plural words, which the student repeatedly did, though Maddie did identify and correct places in the PowerPoint slides where the student was missing definite articles), I recognize that her main priority was developing the content, rather than interrupting the flow to work on delivery. When I discussed those ideas after their meeting, Maddie was receptive, and I am confident that she adopted them into their second meeting, when the student had more finalized material in hand. I was lucky enough to watch the student enter the room, nervous and unsure of what she really needed, and leave with a newfound confidence and a clear purpose for further revisions. Though the Speaking Center students' needs and skills vary dramatically, Maddie handled this particular meeting incredibly well, building a space of comfort, encouragement, and productivity in a short time span and establishing a clear path for future engagement.