Deepening the Writing Center's Collaborative Identity

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Writing center identity is complex. At its theoretical core, it is sensitive, non-judgmental, collaborative and non-directive. At its metaphorical surface, it is experiential, practical and often puts its feet up on the coffee table and laughs with gusto. However, writing center theory is not easily separated from practice, so pedagogical practice should reflect this messy integration. In her article, "Using Tutorial Principles to Train Tutors," Muriel Harris maintains that to avoid training tutors to be generalists who don't consider rhetorical complexities, one should "open up the training to let in some of the muddy reality of tutoring, the exploratory discussions that may, indeed, lead down unexpected avenues" (302). One way to motivate explorations of the writing center's untidy mix of theory and practice and to train a new generation of writing consultants[1] whose approach is creative and complex is to bring in the experts—the experienced consultants themselves. But first, some background and a story.

In about 1976, I began work as a longshoreman, a job that I held for over six years. The waterfront and all it represented was foreign to me. All I knew about it was from the braggadocio of a few longshoremen friends, from Marlon "I coulda been a contender" Brando in *On the Waterfront*, and from Eric Hoffer, "longshoreman philosopher" and author of *The True Believer* and *Reflections on the Human Conditions*. From these sources I gleaned that the waterfront was a male bastion of an extreme sort. Because it was the 70s, I expected to be challenged, as I would be one of the first women ever to work for Local 1366. In the parking lot outside the union hall, I questioned my ability to get through the day with people who scared me. I was anxious and worried, but fortunately, Barney, a veteran longshoreman, mentored me that day, introducing me to the guys, instructing me about the work, and making my entry into that culture less painful than it would have been on my own. He helped make my abstract knowledge real. Now here's the big leap. New writing consultants experience similar anxieties as they consider entering the writing center. They perceive a community that is not totally open to them, a community of discipline-specific codes and practice. Over the past six years, the Write Place[2] staff and I have developed an approach to teaching new writing consultants, whereby, experienced consultant/mentors help flatten the learning curve and ease the acculturation process.

In the spring of 2005, my first year as a writing center director, I taught my first undergraduate writing center course. I originally planned this 4-credit, semester-long course, titled "Introduction to Writing Center Theory and Practice" to be conducted like a graduate seminar with students reading, responding, and discussing scholarly articles. I used other writing center directors' syllabi as models and asked for advice from these kind colleagues frequently as I created the course, syllabus, and assignment sheets. In preparation for the semester, I neatly divided my syllabus into the following units:

- History of writing centers in the United States
- Survey of key scholars
- Survey of theory
- Basic tutoring practice (including modeling and practice sessions)
- Tutoring underrepresented groups
- Tutoring ESL students
- Ethics and professionalism in the writing center

However, I began to realize that, while this seemed a solid plan on paper, the messiness and artistry of tutoring was not effectively conveyed through the guided discussion sessions and role playing. Several issues emerged not too far into the semester. Students worried about their grammar skills, struggled with the idea of a non-directive approach, and grumbled that role-playing sessions felt false. Moreover, they were terribly apprehensive about tutoring international students, and wondered how to answer questions about idioms and how they would explain grammatical rules they weren't comfortable with or didn't know. No matter what I said about not needing to know everything, and reassuring them that there was always someone around to assist them, they expressed anxiety. About mid-semester, I was in the writing center watching a consultant's antics as he acted out a student's paper to illustrate the importance of logical progression. He waved his arms and moved around the table as he transitioned from point to point. This scenario reminded me of other instances where writing center staff members had gone outside the bounds of textual material and traditional tutoring approaches—

walking with students, drawing pictures, and calling on other consultants for help until there were three or four people helping one student. Then it hit me like Homer Simpson. DOH! Why not use their talents to teach prospective writing consultants how to navigate daily tutorial contexts, those that went beyond course readings and exercises!

What were missing were concrete examples and illustrations of creative practice that my staff could supply. In a delightful essay in the *Writing Center Journal,* "Portrait of the Tutor as an Artist: Lessons Now One Can Teach," Steve Sherwood addresses the artistry of the experienced tutor, dividing artistry into four elements: "(1) surprise, (2) circumstance, (3) improvisation, and (4) flow" (53). Sherwood explains that an effective tutor/artist is much like a jazz musician or beat poet with the ability to deal with surprise and changing circumstance, while being able to improvise solutions and maintain the continuity or flow of a productive session. Although tutoring is based in rigorous and thoughtful scholarship, instruction, and modeling, the artist/writing consultant eventually begins to trust intuition based in his or her own experience. While textbooks offer practical taxonomies, concrete description, and theoretical grounding, writing center consultants could "flesh out the information and theory," make it real, talk about the wrinkles and the exceptions and the rhythms of tutoring.

The Write Place has been fortunate to have a number of these artists with expertise in specific areas like working with non-traditional students, sorting through a graduate thesis, motivating an original literary analysis from the novice, making progress with developmental students, working with ESL students, or calming the frazzled writer. It seemed a natural evolution, considering our much ballyhooed collaborative foundation, to make use of this artistry to train the next generation of writing consultants in our writing center.

Today, consultants collaborate in our current training structure in several ways. First, they visit the "Introduction to Writing Center and Theory" class as subject matter experts on specific topics that correlate with our unit topics. They speak for twenty minutes to an hour depending on how engaged the class is. These talks begin at the beginning of the term and go once a week for about four weeks. The consultants talk about themselves, their background and their real experiences in tutoring—approaches that work, some that don't.

For example, several non-native English speaking consultants at both the graduate and undergraduate level have spoken about their own experiences as non-native speakers struggling to learn idioms that made no logical sense. They talked about knowing when to be directive in tutoring non-native speakers. Other consultants, who have worked in the writing center for three or more years, act as an institutional memory calling up many tutoring stories from the past—some of them passed down from other staff members. A few have been especially effective in working with non-traditional students and those with learning disabilities because they have had similar challenges themselves. Also, I always ask consultants in the middle of their first year in the writing center visit the class to talk about their first year of tutoring. They often address things like what it is like to be the new person in a very bonded community, how they got past the big mistakes they made early on, what it was like to do their first synchronous online tutorial, or how it was to work with disengaged students who are required to make appointments at our center. Several have spoken about pitfalls like their own inclination to be directive when it isn't warranted. Students are pleased to hear that both undergraduate and graduate consultants struggle at first, and that no one is perfect or knows all the answers.

The second way that consultants collaborate in training is through a system of observations in the writing center. Briefly, students observe experienced writing consultants once or twice (their choice) and are given a chance to ask questions and talk with the tutors after the tutorials. Before or after the tutorial, consultants show the students our electronic resources, how to operate our online scheduler, and how to write up client notes. Before the observation stage, students are instructed that they are there to observe, not to interrupt unless asked a question by the consultant or writer. In the first year of this collaboration, I didn't anticipate that this would be a problem until an incident where two students interrupted a session in progress in ways that were appreciated neither by the experienced consultant nor the writer.

During the next step in this collaborative training process, students tutor a writer while the experienced consultant looks on. After the tutorial, experienced consultants offer feedback and later debrief me. Experienced consultants have been instructed to allow the novices to take control of the tutorial, to allow for silences, and only to jump in if asked or if the tutorial is absolutely road-blocked. The final part of the three-part practicum is a solo experience. Students take over an experienced consultant's tutorial without the consultant present.[3] Upon completion, the consultant assists the student in writing client notes[4] for the session. Then they discuss what happened in the tutorial. The students

are required to give an informal oral report of their experiences in observing, being observed, or tutoring solo in class. Their experiences often become subjects for the type of "exploratory discussions" Muriel Harris refers to earlier in this essay (302).

A collaborative training environment is in line with our writing center's social constructionist practice and offers a number of advantages to everyone involved, including myself:

Consultants

- Become more invested in the writing center. They take more ownership in the physical and professional environment.
- Reflect on their own practices more, especially since they are required to answer student questions and to debrief students after observations.
- Become more confident in their knowledge base and tutoring practices because I have invited them to participate in training as the experts.
- Build an ethos among their peers and the next generation of consultants.
- Develop and become more aware of their individual tutoring identity. Students frequently remark that they are surprised at the variety of tutoring styles.
- Have a voice in the hiring process, which means chances of dysfunction are lessened.
- Can use the mentoring experience on their résumés or vitas.

Students

- See concretely that there are many approaches to tutoring issues and problems.
- Begin to understand the collaborative/social constructivist nature of the writing center—that we are all there to help, so no-one needs to fear not knowing an answer. One student remarked in her analysis that when she got stuck on an APA rule, the experienced consultant brought in another consultant, and eventually, got me out of my office to help.
- Become more confident as they work through the low-risk mentoring process.
- See the practical side of tutoring up close.
- See theory applied to practice—one of the most frequent comments. I make a conscious attempt to connect the two in our classroom discussion about their practicum experiences.
- See the humor, the rhythm and the personality of our own writing center.
- Develop a sense of community with the staff and an ownership of the space.

Writers/Clients

- See that our training is rigorous, but humane as they witness our training in action.
- Consider taking "Introduction to Writing Center Theory and Practice" after they have taken part in the practicum.
- In addition to the consultant-in-training, they have the benefit of a well-trained consultant, who has been exposed to a variety of tutoring contexts. They get two for the price of one.

The Director

- Gets a richer picture of the applicant because of consultant feedback. Immediately after their encounters with student consultants, staff members offer their opinions about how well they think the specific students would do as a member of our very close family. Their concerns might signal that the applicant needs mentoring or additional training.
- Has a better-trained staff, one that is more prepared for the muddy extra-textual experience of the real writing center.
- Has a staff that is more invested in the excellence of the writing center.
- Initial oversight and orientation of new consultants diminishes.
- Class time is energetic as students and consultants interact or as students relate their observation experiences.
- Builds an ethos with consultants and students because of willingness to include everyone in training and hiring. Shows that the director is not just paying lip service to the idea of collaborative methodology.

A final, but no less important, method I use to bring peer experts into the writing center training course is to offer teaching internships to graduate writing consultants. These grads often serve as assistant directors in the writing center and would like a career in the field. They receive graduate-level teaching internship credits for the internship, which fulfills a pedagogy requirement. During the classroom experience, they learn about managing a class, evaluating writing, developing lesson units, and guiding discussion. This experience also gives them a teaching component for their résumés or CVs. In return, they offer anecdotes and examples from their experience in the writing center, providing a connection between theory and praxis. Their names are listed on my syllabus, along with their own office hours. They form close relationships to "their" students, and if they are in the center the following

semester when their students begin their work in the writing center, they serve as mentors to them.

My end of semester course evaluation asks students to comment on texts, the three-part practicum, and the in-class discussions with consultants. They consistently give the highest marks to the interaction with the writing center staff. Although I conscientiously choose books and readings that, I believe, will be relevant and timely to students, textual material has its limits. Muriel Harris explains, "[W]e can open up training to possibilities that our ocean of scholarly literature and training manuals are useful, but limited because reality can be quite different" (302). Veteran peer writing consultants fill the gap between text and experience, providing a real window into the everyday messiness of the writing center through their passion and their stories.

Notes

1. At our writing center, we call our tutoring staff *consultants* because the assignment has become more complex as we have moved from our core activity, face-to-face tutoring, to group tutoring, group facilitation, online consultation, workshop presentations, and the development of traditional and digital support materials. In this essay, the word, *consultant,* is used when referring to the Write Place staff. When discussing articles that refer to writing center staff as *tutors*, I use that term for the sake of consistency and to avoid confusion.
2. The Write Place is the name of St. Cloud State University's writing center.
3. Students are only assigned to tutorials that they can handle at their stage of experience. For example, students are never placed with graduate students. We also don't allow them to tutor our "regulars," who have ongoing appointments with the same consultant.
4. These are summary notes of what was addressed in the tutorial. Sometimes these notes are sent to instructors per student request. They must be error-free and judgment-free.

Works Cited

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