

Overcoming the Fear of Age: Consulting Older Writers

By Alison Van Dore

It's a crowded day in the Writing Center. Finding myself without an appointment, I call a name on the walk-in list. An older woman stands up with a smile and moves to the back of the room with me. Sitting across from this woman, I notice her hair in tidy bun and her small reading glasses, reminiscent of those worn by my favorite teachers. Suddenly, I cower at the thought of my own inadequacy. Who am I to consult with this woman who probably has more wisdom than I? Isn't it a bit pretentious of me, barely an adult, to expect to be able to provide any insight?

Thinking back, I realize I was afraid - afraid of an inability to communicate clearly, to make a connection, to present anything new. Raised on the idea of the unquestionable authority of elders, I was hesitant to critique or offer suggestions to this older writer at first. Besides, since we live in a society that values youth and individualism, friendships between younger and older adults are often not fostered, let alone encouraged. This disconnect between generations leaves interaction between age groups, for many people, awkward at best - particularly in a university setting. As a result, in this specific consultation, my lack of familiarity with older writers caused me to be jumpy. I started to doubt myself, as well as the overall productivity of our tutorial.

To remedy such awkwardness experienced among different age groups in the Center, consultants must be willing to analyze their own prejudices. And, in the case of older writers, younger tutors must reevaluate their conception of the adult as authority. But the best way to deal with establishing a productive environment for the consultation is to simply treat the older writer as you would a peer. Ask a few questions about their writing process and what they intended to convey with their work, after your greeting at the start of the consultation. This will enable the consultant to get a feel for the meeting. It is especially helpful if the consultant is feeling nervous. If the writer talks about his or her piece, this additional communication may put both parties at ease, while also providing the consultant a good idea of the writer's particular needs.

Consultants should keep in mind that the writer may be nervous, too. Let them vocalize their concerns and describe their stage in the writing process. This allows writer and consultant to become comfortable with one another, and helps both acclimate to the writing process. Throughout the consultation, also be sure to pause and check in with the writer. Check every so often to make certain you're addressing their concerns effectively. This is important for all consultations, but when it comes to writers of different ages, one's nerves, in my experience, may be apt to get a consultant off track. Again, it helps to remember that the older writer is probably just as anxious about bridging the age gap in the university, particularly in an area as youth-dominated as a Writing Center. Establishing a calm and encouraging environment can sometimes be a challenge, but it is necessary for a constructive consultation. It is also important because pleasant interactions with older adults can enrich the consultant in other aspects of life.

Consulting older writers has become one of my favorite types of consultations, but it certainly didn't start off that way. Evaluating my own notions of cooperative work, and even my own socialized ageism, allowed me to broaden my perspective. Now I consider older adults as peers. This kind of self-reflection is essential to continued development as a writer, learner, thinker,

consultant, and person. By trying to bridge the gap between generations, we are able to overcome our socialized prejudices and become productive consultants to a wide variety of writers. As always: analysis is key, not only to writing, but to one's interactions as well.