

## Inventing the Writing Center

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Lack of student engagement during a writing center consultation occurs for various reasons ranging from personal issues to cultural difference. A particularly important reason for lack of engagement is simply insufficient understanding of the writing center philosophy. Students will often not engage because they have no idea that they are supposed to be engaged. Not only is the writing center a new situation and a new discourse, but it is also equally a venture into an unknown academic territory. However, with some understanding of the students' difficult situation in the university, consultants can assist them with both the discussion of writing and the charting of this academic territory.

A writing center offers an unfamiliar situation to a new student. It is unlikely that most students experienced writing consultations in the way that a university or community college writing center conducts them. Perhaps some students have had teachers or tutors that edited their papers and told them the way that writing should be. It is new to students to find that in the academic world, writers must attempt to attain writing independence and even develop skills they can learn to manipulate. In college, it is possible that writers will find there is scarcely a "right" way to write. This lack of concrete understanding would certainly lead to student discomfort during a writing center consultation. This consultation is often dynamic and involves the writer answering questions about his or her writing. These students may have expected editing sessions where their papers are worked on and they are detached from the document. With students that may already lack confidence in their writing, a consultation involving abstract communication would appear daunting.

Aside from the consultation being intimidating, the very language used can enhance nervousness or a reaction of increased distance. Many students are not fluent in the language of composition. Students often come to the writing center seeking help with one catch-all term: grammar. Grammar is not usually what they need to improve, but the writer commonly lacks awareness of more "global" concerns or the terminology of those concerns. Terms such as "cohesion," "concision," "synthesis" and even "flow" and "organization" could be strange. New concepts such as argumentation, fallacy, appeals, context, and rhetoric surface in these discussions. Expectations of "style" and "voice" and "audience" arise. But for many, even concepts such as the thesis and MLA format are new to them. When the consultant casually asks the student questions about these unclear things, the student may once again become disengaged or even embarrassed because of lack of comprehension. Treating these concepts as if they are obvious to the writer can make the consultation more difficult.

In David Bartholomae's essay, "Inventing the University," he explains that students are expected to jump in to the larger discourse community with little knowledge of the community or its rules. The institution of the university is thrust upon students and they must sink or swim. Students are even given conflicting messages, for instance learning about their voice and yet needing to suppress that voice to write within institutional confines. Achievement at this prescribed writing is necessary though the students come to the task with differing backgrounds and skills. Clearly, it is difficult for inexperienced students to immediately function successfully within this

structured (and still foreign) discourse. Aside from that, they also must recognize different audiences including the public forum and attempt to comprehend both their own voice and the affected voice of academe all while trying to function in their own discipline. Really, this is overwhelming! Bartholomae confirms that academic dialogue entails a "position of privilege" which would be hard to write from if the student is uncomfortable even with his or her own voice.

Bartholomae describes how this writing posture can be even more frustrating because students must write from a position they are simply not in. For instance, many undergraduates never conduct serious research or attend conferences so they do not see this discourse community in action. The academic audience is thus mysterious and abstract; with each paper, students must "invent the university." Often this writing must happen immediately, before essentials of critical thinking and voice have been thoroughly taught. If these basic things have yet to be understood, the new mask is even more difficult to wear. To add an additional element to this dynamic, most writing consultants are simultaneously involved in inventing the university. Consultants may only be a few years ahead of students they consult and in some cases the student is further ahead in their scholarship. Some of the writing that consultants are attempting to assist students with is completely unfamiliar. From the freshman biology lab report to the doctoral dissertation, there are diverse forms of writing that the consultant may need to learn while they are in the process of consulting. Thus a simultaneous invention process is taking place: the student is attempting to invent the university and the writing center while the tutor is attempting to invent the university and the discipline that is being tutored. The writing center process then allows both students and consultants to participate in this invention process together.

Thinking about the dynamics of the writing center process lends illumination to the task of the writing center. The writing center can function as an essential link between the elusive academic conversation and the insecure student. Though they may not always engage in pure research or conferencing, they can participate in an essential academic activity: the dialogue about writing. Writing centers facilitate that vital dialogue. Consultants should be aware that when they discuss writing, this may be a foreign language to the student in the same way that some of the writing structures students bring in may be foreign to the consultant. But in their knowledgeable peer role, consultants can help build self-confidence in the writer. They have the ability to lend an ear to the student's overall frustration, especially when that frustration is likely quite familiar to the consultant. Consultants can also help teach consultees the language of writing in many ways. They can guide students through the process and philosophy of the writing center. Through this discovery, students will be able to gain insight into aspects of the academic conversation and partake in it more easily. The writing center, with its unique place in the college community, can be an important place for students to grasp both writing and the communities they are expected to enter. But they do not need to grasp in the dark. Consultants have the capacity to help students "invent the writing center" with every dynamic dialogue they engage in.

Work Cited:

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