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Lost in Theory: Avoiding the Pitfalls of Using Theory in Training

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by *Chris LeCluyse*

How can we balance training in writing center theory and practice without leaving our values at the door?



Chris LeCluyse

Empowerment. Collaboration. Equality. More than many academic departments and services, writing centers are driven by their values. As writing center practitioners, we judge ourselves according to how we apply those values in working with writers. Much writing center theory focuses on expressing, developing, and interrogating such ideals and determining how they can be best realized in practice. In our eagerness to serve the needs of writers or to enter the theoretical conversation, however, we can skip over the most crucial component of any writing center: the writing consultants themselves. Focusing only on our services can confine values-based approaches to our clientele but not our staff: writers may be empowered, collaborated with, and approached on the level, but consultants may fall into a traditional student-teacher hierarchy. At the opposite extreme, professionalizing consultants by having them discuss and contribute to writing center theory may empower them as scholars but reinforce the notion that the most valued work takes place not in the center itself but in journals and academic conferences.

I make these observations as an administrator at a writing center (the Undergraduate Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin) that has only recently started to reflect on its own training practice. The pressures of conducting some ten thousand consultations a year in a space former director Rosa Eberly fondly compared to that of a one-bedroom apartment focused our

attention on our clientele at the expense of our own staff. Although our administrative group included two graduate students, other consultants were largely excluded from having a say in their own training. Our undergraduate consultants were more thoroughly trained than their graduate colleagues: other than an orientation and observations at the beginning of the year, continuing training for graduate students was limited to periodic all-staff meetings largely dedicated to administrative business.

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Eventually an expanded space, a funding increase, and a larger staff allowed us to pause and reflect. Making our training consistent with the values and fundamental theories of writing consultation, we realized, required us to draw more on the experience and knowledge of our staff. Rather than setting the agenda for training entirely on our own, we needed to let consultants in on the training process.

Doing so sent us searching for a way to approach training while avoiding the pitfalls of casting our staff entirely as students or entirely as scholars. Peter Vandenberg explains the dangers of either extreme. Approaching training as teaching may place trainers and consultants alike in traditional, non-reflective roles: "Our understanding of tutors as 'students' and our interaction with them as 'education' may mask the ways they sometimes serve simply and without reflection as extensions of values and desires written deeply into the institution, into us" (60). Even when trainers attempt to professionalize consultants by introducing them to writing center theory, Vandenberg argues, consultants can "remain oddly suspended in this economy of production as the informed rather than the informers" (64).

Empowering consultants to participate in the exchange of writing center theory does not necessarily address their vocational interests inside and outside the writing center, however. Like Vandenberg, Sue Denitz and Jean Kiedaisch present consultants delivering conference papers as vindications of their efforts to involve consultants in the development and interrogation of writing center theory. This outward spiral to scholarly authority ends in the conference hall, however, not the writing center and reinforces the equation of "*authority with authorship*," as Vandenberg admits (71). Overvaluing theoretical exchange can distract from the day-to-day business of helping student writers, however, and ignore that part of consultants' investment in writing center work that is neither as student nor scholar. Imposing the role of professional writing center theorist on consultants may take them places they don't want to go.

Empowering consultants as both thinkers and professionals therefore requires a balanced approach to training—balanced because it treats consultants as entire people: doers who think, thinkers who put ideas into action, students seeking jobs. Such training is best conducted in the same amphibious space as that of writing consultation itself, connected to the classroom but taking place outside of it. Extracurricular workshops that engage consultants in discussions of writing center practice and draw on their own experiences and ideas enable them to contribute to writing center theory without confining them to student roles. Training sessions on topics ranging from particular consultation strategies to writing in various disciplines can feature consultants as presenters as well as

participants. Like writers in a consultation, the consultants can thereby become dynamic sources of knowledge rather than passive recipients. Workshops that specifically relate writing center work to careers both inside and outside academia address consultants' vocational concerns. In the process, consultants can see the larger relevance of the work they do and realize how it can benefit their academic and professional lives.

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Like writing center theory itself, however, this vision of consultant training is packed with ideals that do not always play out in practice.^[1] Even letting staff choose which workshops to attend will not prevent some consultants from feeling forced to heed professional concerns that do not interest them. Just as consultants themselves often cannot escape the role of teacher, writing center trainers cannot always conduct training "on the level"; training implies a need for additional knowledge, and in an intellectual culture the one who knows supercedes the one who does not. And just as teachers often desire to make students in their own image, trainers may find it hard to let consultants have different interests and stakes in their writing center work.

Confronting these inconsistencies and adapting practices accordingly brings the same kind of self-reflective process to training that we hope to instill in writers. Like good writing, effective training takes multiple drafts and an openness to others' feedback. By resisting the institutional urge to calcify practices, administrators can respond fluidly to their own staffs' situations and ensure that collaborative values permeate every aspect of the center's operation.

Notes

[1] My thanks to Joan Mullin for raising counterarguments to an earlier draft of this article.

Works Cited

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