

---

## Sections

[Focus](#)  
[Columns and Reviews](#)  
[Consulting](#)  
[Training](#)  
[News & Announcements](#)

---

## Archives

[Browse past issues of Praxis](#)

---

## About Us

[About Us](#)

---

## Submissions

[Submit an article to Praxis](#)

---

[Home](#) » [Archives](#) » [Spring 2008 \(Volume 5 Issue 2\) - Authority and Cooperation](#)

## Centering the Writer or Centering the Text: A Meditation on a Shifting Practice in Writing Center Consultation

Spring 2008 / Focus

by **Matthew Ortoleva**, *the University of Rhode Island*

### Choosing your approach based on the writer's needs

Since I began working with students as a writing consultant in the **University of Rhode Island's Writing Center** two questions have vexed me: Where should the consultant's focus be during a consultation—on the writer or on the text? And when is it time to move to a more directive approach to writing consultation?[1] These questions have concerned me since the fall of 2005, when, at the request of the new interim director of our writing center, I read Stephen North's article "The Idea of the Writing Center." The new director wanted to remind us that North's axiom, "our job is to produce better writers, not better writing" (438), should continue to loom large in our center's lore. We were reminded to be writer-focused.



Matthew Ortoleva

However, during individual tutorial sessions the center's staff, deliberately or not, would frequently move between a "text-centered" approach and a "writer-centered" approach, between product and process. Such back-and-forth movement was in our practice but often left out of our discourse. Moreover, student motivations complicated the scenario. Students often come into the writing center text-focused. They, of course, are concerned with the grade they will receive on a particular assignment. There appeared to be dissonance between our discourse and our practice, and between our motivations and the motivations of the students we serve.

This problem was further complicated during one of our staff meetings when a writing consultant raised the concern of working with students outside of her discipline. Specifically, she felt uncomfortable consulting with students from the

science and engineering disciplines. This concern had developed, in part, over the writing of a senior organic chemistry major who frequented the writing center for help with his lab reports. The lab-report genre and the discourse of organic chemistry were foreign to the consultants in our center. The question of just how much a writing consultant can help a student without knowing that student's discipline became a hotly debated issue. Implicit in this debate was the argument that writing consultants could not effectively work with students from unfamiliar disciplines. The implications of this argument troubled me. Should an 18th century British literature specialist avoid students who were writing about 20th century American literature? Should every writing center have an astrophysicist on staff? What if, as in our case, a writing center is staffed primarily by English studies people — does the center become a resource only for that department and not for the university community? This on-going discussion led me to ask "what is it we do in the writing center?" And "what can I do as a writing consultant when I am not familiar with a content area?" I had to consider whether I could work with a writer to build a rhetorical sensitivity even if I can't penetrate the specialized vocabulary of a particular discipline, or, as Jeff Brooks suggests, work with a writer so he or she may learn to strengthen his or her own text. I soon found that working with a student from an unfamiliar discipline necessitated a writer-centered approach.

Samantha[2] , a doctoral student in clinical psychology, scheduled an appointment with me for a writing center consultation. I was unfamiliar not only with the discourses of clinical psychology, but also with the constraints placed upon the discipline's writers. I relied on North's "pedagogy of direct intervention" to guide the session and chose to focus on the writer's process. We talked, she wrote. I asked questions of Samantha *the writer*: questions concerning convention, clarification, and purpose. What does the assignment call for? Why this arrangement? Is this the only way to organize this essay, or is there another? Can you tell me what this term means? Will your reader know this term? I forced Samantha to make decisions about her writing based on the answers she gave to these questions. She slowly began to claim authority over her text. I worked on the writer, the writer worked on the text.

### **Consultants need to abandon their concept of the Ideal Text and focus on helping students close the distance between intention and effect [...]**

Lil Brannon and C.H. Knoblauch's article, "On Students' Rights to Their Own Texts: A Model of Teacher Response," serves as an important point of intervention when considering a text-centered or writer-centered approach. Although Brannon and Knoblauch's article addresses classroom pedagogy, it is readily applicable to writing center work. Brannon and Knoblauch provide a deeper understanding of what North considers "the old writing center work" of being text-focused, and "the new writing center work" of being writer-focused. To Brannon and Knoblauch, when classroom teachers become fixated on a notion of the "Ideal Text," they take away the student writers' authority to make their own choices about their writing. Brannon and Knoblauch are clear about the potential harm: a reduced desire to communicate, a feeling of not having anything important to say, and a reduced desire to write (159). Is it possible that a text-centered tutorial session in a writing center can cause or exacerbate this harm? We, as writing center consultants, must be careful not to allow our fixation with the Ideal Text to duplicate the harm that such a classroom approach may cause.

Brannon and Knoblach's solution to this problem is to restore the student writer's authority. To Brannon and Knoblach "the teacher's role is not to tell the student explicitly what to do but rather to serve as a sounding-board enabling the writer to see confusions in the text and encouraging the writer to explore alternatives that he or she may not have considered" (162). This sounding-board approach echoes North's recommendation to talk and listen to students about their writing. Writing center consultants serve as ideal sounding boards for student writers. Extending Brannon and Knoblach's pedagogy to the writing center helps define a writer-centered tutorial session. Consultants need to abandon their concept of the Ideal Text and focus on helping students close the distance between intention and effect, or what "the writer meant to say and what the discourse actually manifests of that intention" (161). Following Brannon and Knoblach, we should no longer see errors in a text — a remnant of the current traditional paradigm — but rather see opportunities for clarification and refinement as the student writer moves through the writing process. I believe this is the approach I used when Samantha, the clinical psychologist, came into the writing center.

However, soon my faith in a writer-centered approach ran into an obstacle. A student named Maria approached me for help with her graduate school essay. Maria wished to pursue an advanced degree in international relations. She was an exceedingly bright and talented student but ran into some ESL trouble when writing in English, having moved to the United States from Columbia only a few years earlier. However, her ability to speak effectively and communicate interpersonally was profound. When the university's **Center for Nonviolence and Peace Studies** was asked to help secure the return of a Columbian official from kidnappers, Maria was asked to serve as a translator because of her intimate knowledge of the region's dialect and customs. Maria had letters of recommendation from both the president of our university and the distinguished scholar that runs our Center for Peace Studies. Still, Maria was concerned about her essay.

**I may have slightly improved Karen's paper, but she left the same writer as when she entered.**

North suggests that, regardless of the type of project, we must "look beyond or through that particular project, that particular text, and see it as an occasion for addressing our primary concern, the process by which it is produced" (438). However, I made the decision to focus on Maria's text. I have to say that I didn't care about building a better writer, only about doing anything I could to help her get into the graduate school of her choice. I helped her clarify points and re-write sentences. I gave specific and directed instructions to the extent that I felt I was still ethical and not writing the essay for her. The two of us worked on the text as if it were a child's model airplane, taking painstaking steps to make it just right, to make it "ideal." I don't know how big a role, if any, her essay played in her acceptance to a half-dozen top international relations programs, but I can say with some confidence that she never had to worry about her essay hindering her chances. I'm not sure North's axiom had any place in my work with Maria. And her situation was not unique.

Karen, a graduate student pursuing an M.B.A., needed help with a twenty-four page business analysis for a graduate accounting course. A number cruncher at heart, Karen was also a solid writer. She had written six or seven drafts of her analysis. She felt that she had reached a point where she could no longer

recognize what she called "errors," even when she read her paper carefully. I said I would read through her paper and see if I spotted anything. I became text-centered. Karen obviously knew her own writing process well. The text was clean, well organized, and easy to follow. I spotted half a dozen or so small mechanical and punctuation errors, mostly comma usage, and one typo. I walked her through the corrections and she left happy with the session, feeling good about her paper. I may have slightly improved Karen's paper, but she left the same writer as when she entered.

My last example is Alicia, a senior who came into the writing center for a consultation. She had an enviable grade point average and was planning on graduate nursing school. She wanted to work on a cover letter for an internship program that she thought would help her get into the graduate school of her choice. We met in the writing center and began work on her letter. Our first meeting was very collaborative and I was happy when she began asking questions about audience, genre, and purpose, questions she had learned to ask in her freshman writing course that still stayed with her. We talked, and she made revisions to her letter. I agreed to carry on an email consultation with her until she was happy with the letter. She emailed me drafts with thoughts, concerns, and explanations about revisions that she had made. I would comment and send them back. Alicia called on the writing skills that she had built through four years of undergraduate study. Her goal was an effective letter. In the end our collaboration yielded the letter she wanted. I remained writer-centered by offering my thoughts on her decisions.

**As writing consultants, we must balance the student's desire to leave with an improved text and our desire to help students internalize the lessons learned during the improvement of that text.**

These are examples of situations in which I had to choose to be either writer-centered or text-centered. In each case, however, the choice was mine. Marilyn Cooper suggests that North's axiom of "building better writers" in practice can lead to conflict between a writer-centered tutor and a text-centered student. Cooper observes that students come for help in making their document perfect and "are confronted with tutors who have their own primary concern, a concern for the process of writing" (100). How do students' own purposes and motivations for writing affect our understanding of text-centered vs. writer-centered tutoring? Is there a way to align the motivations of writing consultant and student? It may not always seem practical, but collaboration between writing consultant and student should start with a discussion and mutual agreement about the goals of a session, particularly if writing centers are going to move beyond the remedial "fix-it" model. Cooper suggests that "tutors build personal relationships with their students and come to understand how their students' lives and experiences shape their writing practices" while helping students "negotiate a place within the confines of writing assignments for interests and abilities that arise out of their experiences" (109). At the same time, however, we must realize that the text the student carries into the writing center is always the student's primary concern. As writing consultants, we must balance the student's desire to leave with an improved text and our desire to help students internalize the lessons learned during the improvement of that text.

Still, I'm drawn back to Maria, who sought to change the world of international relations. What would Maria have thought about a writer-centered approach

while writing an essay that she believed could influence the rest of her life? Did she need a sounding board for her writing, or did she need directed criticism and a text-centered focus on her graduate school essay? Did she need to internalize lessons learned, or was that best left for another day? And I think of Samantha, the clinical psychology doctoral student, who needed a sounding board to discuss her writing process and the confidence to make her own choices about her writing. She saw the importance of honing her writing skills so that she could successfully navigate and contribute to the conversations within the clinical psychology community while at the same time revising and improving a particular text.

How can we avoid falling, unknowingly, into a text-centered session which focuses on the Ideal Text? Is there a time when we need to make a strong intervention into a text and put our concern for developing the writer in the background, at least momentarily? Attempting to answer these questions may help writing centers become places of sustenance for writing consultants, and for our student-writers.

### Notes

[1] This essay grew from a presentation given at the 2007 **Northeast Writing Center Association** Conference and from a collaborative research project with my writing center director, Dr. Jeremiah Dyehouse. My many thanks to him for his guidance.

[2] All student names in this essay are pseudonyms.

### Works Cited

Brannon, Lil and C.H. Knoblauch. "On Students' Rights to Their Own Texts: A Model of Teacher Response." *College Composition and Communication* 33:2 (May, 1982) 157-166.

Brooks, Jeff. "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 15.6 (1991): 1-4.

Cooper, Marilyn M. "Really Useful Knowledge: A Cultural Studies Agenda for Writing Centers." *The Writing Center Journal* 14:2 (spring 1994): 97-111.

North, Stephen M. "The Idea of the Writing Center." *College English* 46 (1984): 433-446.

---

Matthew Ortoleva is a doctoral student and writing center tutor at the **University of Rhode Island**, where he holds a teaching assistantship. His article, co-authored with Jeremiah Dyehouse, entitled "SWOT Analysis: An Instrument for Writing Center Strategic Planning" was recently accepted for publication in the *Writing Lab Newsletter*. Matthew is currently working on his doctoral dissertation, which considers environmental rhetoric, ecomposition, and the rhetorical construction of Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island.

---

Praxis is a project of the [Undergraduate Writing Center](#) at the University of Texas at Austin

[Editor login](#)