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[Consulting](#)
[Training](#)
[News & Announcements](#)

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[Home](#) » [Archives](#) » [Spring 2010 \(Volume 7 Issue 2\) - Professionalization and the Writing Center, Part II](#)

Toward a More Hybrid Discourse: Re-evaluating (NNS) Client/Consultant Relationships

[Spring 2010 / Training](#)

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Thinking of non-native speakers as guides in the tutoring moment



Matthew Schultz

In a 1987 interview with Beth Wald, Wolfgang G lllich, a respected German rock climber, said, "In climbing you are always faced with new problems in which you must perform using intuitive movements, and then later analyze them to figure out why they work, and then learn from them" (70). Re-reading the G lllich interview, I'm reminded how much the writing process resembles climbing, and how — in most instances — climbers talk about their sport like writers talk about their craft, because it is equally true that "In [writing] you are always faced with new problems in which you must perform using intuitive movements, and then later analyze them to figure out why they work, and then learn from them." Like climbers, writers collaborate to solve problems: they consult colleagues and mentors for guidance. And just as guides cannot climb the rock for their prote g s, writing center consultants cannot write papers for their clients. Both the climber and the writer must take risks in order to succeed.

Sometimes the first move is the hardest; sometimes it is the last move that causes greatest difficulty; sometimes we get stuck in the middle. Many professional rock climbers spend their entire careers trying to solve a single bouldering puzzle, or figuring out a particular route up a rock face. And what is amazing about the sport is not that single, charmed attempt when the climber is able to reach the top, but that each subsequent attempt tends to be

successful because the climber in collaboration with his or her guide, has figured out the proper sequence of maneuvers combining strength, dexterity, and knowledge of the rock itself. Climbing guides are not necessarily better climbers than their protégés, they simply provide a different perspective of the rock-face: from the ground they are able to easily maneuver around the rock to recognize routes that the climber, stuck in a position that limits his or her field of vision, might not see. A similar logic applies to writing.

American universities and writing centers are seeing an influx of NNS students and clients.

I have found Cultural theorist, Azade Seyhan's work, especially her discussion of diasporic literature in *Writing Outside the Nation* (2000), particularly useful when thinking about issues surrounding non-native speaking (NNS) writing center clients. Seyhan refuses the terms 'ethnic' and 'immigrant' literatures because those designations change as groups assimilate into the dominant culture. She prefers the terms 'diasporic' or 'transnational' because these words call for hybridity, 'space between' that represents the hyphen that diasporic people carry (ie. African-American, Asian-American). Seyhan's suggests that the hyphen draws closer even as it divides — if the dominant culture allows it. I initially read Seyhan's book while thinking about the ideological underpinnings of composition assignments, but I also began to apply her theory of cultural translation to the university's writing center.

American universities and writing centers are seeing an influx of NNS students and clients. And as Nancy Hayward reminds us, "it is important to acknowledge that the concept of culture is a value-free concept. In other words, there is no 'right' or 'wrong' culture. What we want to accomplish is simply a better understanding of our own and other cultural beliefs and behaviors" (2). More often than not, then, I find myself relying on my training as a post-colonial literary critic and amateur rock-climber during consultation sessions in order to step outside of established cultural binaries to approach a more dialectic client/consultant relationship. Basically, this means doing two things: explicitly discussing the client's understanding of rhetorical theory, and risking my 'authority' as cultural ambassador — or guide — in order to allow the process of cultural translation to occur.

If NNS students begin drawing rhetorical agency from their unique experiences as non-native speakers in the American university, they may be able to take on the role of cultural informant in the classroom thus instigating a more collaborative and hybrid environment.

Recalling Julie Bokser's examination of Carol Severino's three political stances to ESL or NNS students (assimilationist, accommodationist, and separatist), I began to question what it means to belong to an academic community, be it the university as a whole or the writing center specifically. Bokser lays out one of the fundamental problems of 'belonging' that consultants encounter when working with NNS students: "While helping ESL students to write promised liberation via academic and economic advancement, it simultaneously posed constraint by imposing uncomfortable standards and even threatening loss of a home culture" (49). Consultants (and instructors) often find themselves defining their reaction to this issue in one of three ways: "assimilationist — a teacher (or tutor) who advocates standard English and the loss of home culture; accommodationist — one who advocates joining mainstream discourse

but also values biculturalism; and, separatist — one who wants ESL students to keep their native, accented voice” (Bokser 51). But is there a way out of this seemingly closed response system in which the consultant or instructor holds the authority to make this decision for a client/student? For these students, there are seemingly only two positions: they can become proficient writers in English, erasing all trace of their native accent, or they can retain their native accent and have their ideas judged as inferior because of their unwillingness to conform to foreign strictures.

Despite the claim of non-evaluative collaboration, writing centers often operate within an organized hierarchy of consultant (expert authority)/client (novice student) — and certain studies argue that collaboration requires at least some level of consultant authority. This binary, however, becomes even more extreme when the client is a non-native speaker who is charged with the task of crafting an American-styled argument for an American audience. On one hand is the consultant who acts as the representative or ambassador for the American university; on the other hand, the client, who with increasing regularity may be a non-native speaker, is defined as the minority ‘other.’ Whether the consultant identifies him or herself as an assimilationist, accommodationist, or separatist is of little concern because each stance grants the consultant/instructor the authority to choose how clients negotiate cultural difference. In this schema, the client never expects the consultant to compromise her cultural authority, and in such a relationship, no cultural translation can occur, no hybrid discourse can be created.

According to Peter Carino, “[writing centers] have almost uniformly maintained their identity as nonhierarchical, friendly places where students can feel welcome” (101). But, Nancy Grimm argues that non-hierarchical, non-directive consultation methods “protect the status quo and withhold insider knowledge, inadvertently keeping students from non-mainstream culture on the sidelines, making them guess about what the mainstream culture expects” (31). In order to take the guesswork out of writing center consultations, especially when dealing with non-native speakers who are asked to intuit not only the American argumentative model, but to negotiate a new and sometimes antagonistic culture, writing center consultants must discuss cultural differences with their clients. The key word here is *discuss*. This is an instance where one-on-one discussion in the writing center can influence the composition classroom. If NNS students begin drawing rhetorical agency from their unique experiences as non-native speakers in the American university, they may be able to take on the role of cultural informant in the classroom thus instigating a more collaborative and hybrid environment.

To call the work we do in writing centers collaborative, consultants must be willing to forfeit cultural authority and endure the same critical questions that are posed, and criticisms that are offered, to non-native speakers.

Michele Eodice claims, “The best thing we can do (indeed the thing we do best) is to help students see how several dimensions of their lives are collaborating in a text; after all, the act of visiting a writing center isn’t the only thing that constructs a student as a writer” (119). What Eodice describes is a method that I refer to as holistic consulting, wherein consultants and client converse dialectically about the whole rhetorical situation. Often times, and again, this issue seems to be magnified when working with non-native speakers, consultants feel that there is not enough time in a forty-five minute

consultation session to address issues that are ostensibly larger than what we consider traditional higher-order concerns. For example, in traditional consultations we often engage with an author's message and issues of audience (Does the essay contain an argument? Is the argument properly supported with valid evidence? Is the essay well organized? Does it transition from idea to idea so that the audience does not have to piece the narrative together?). Yet rarely is there time to discuss the *author's* role in the rhetorical triangle. And this perceived lack of time leads to silence and confusion about what is expected of the writer. But as Anne Ellen Geller insists, "Laments about a lack of time are never simply about a lack of time. They are statements about priorities. They are expressions of fear. They mask concerns about exposing inadequacies" (91). We often overlook foundational questions that are above both lower- and higher-order concerns such as "Why do you write?" or "How do you understand or define rhetoric?" Even more often we neglect to spend time in a consultation talking about the author, and instead we privilege the 'message' and 'audience' points on the rhetorical triangle. By explaining and exposing the underlying rhetorical framework of any given assignment, clients may better understand their rhetorical role as well as the consultant's role as collaborator.

If consultants engage clients in a dialogue that helps both achieve greater transparency in the writing process, perhaps we can approach a more hybrid discourse in which NNS clients become leaders of the conversation and consultants begin to learn about foreign cultures and rhetorical systems. Marilyn Cooper offers one way to make the writing process more transparent to clients: "by helping [clients] understand how and the extent to which they are *not* owners of their texts [,] by helping them understand, in short, how various institutional forces impinge on how and what they write and how they can negotiate a place for their own goals and needs when faced with these forces" (*italics original*, 108), consultants can instigate a conversation that begins to demystify academic writing. "Too often," writes Catherine Latterell, "[students'] experiences teach them that the cultures and literacies that have given them a sense of identity are *not* privileged by academic institutions" (*emphasis added*, 108). Writing center consultants have an opportunity to work with students to help them maintain their sense of identity within academic boundaries by clearly defining those boundaries. The trade off is that that we might be better equipped to explain the American rhetorical model if we understand the complexities of foreign argumentative styles. Transparent dialogue leads to a better understanding by both consultant and client of different types of argumentative models, and could ultimately lead to more successful consultations and more confident NNS writers. But consultants must be willing to learn, not just coach/guide/tutor, which are all words that place the consultant in an authoritative position based on cultural hegemony.

Despite our best attempts to promote collaborative learning, we must honestly ask ourselves, are we successful? Like Diana Calhoun Bell and Madeleine Youmans in "Politeness and Praise: Rhetorical Issues in ESL Writing Center Conferences," I don't think so. To call the work we do in writing centers collaborative, consultants must be willing to forfeit cultural authority and endure the same critical questions that are posed, and criticisms that are offered, to non-native speakers. We must not be so focused on teaching our NNS students about American popular culture that we fail to acknowledge the importance of the client's cultural identity in his or her writing.

Like rock climbers and their guides, writers and consultants rely on one another's unique perspective of an assignment or writing process to negotiate

the most effective strategies for producing a successful piece of writing. The participants in both relationships later analyze those strategies to figure out why they work. If this hybrid, dialectic discourse does not take place, we risk sending the message that the American rhetorical model is 'right' and the client's native model is 'wrong' — a distinction that is not only unproductive, but also culturally destructive.

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