

“SHOULD I TAKE NOTES AS YOU BRAINSTORM?”: EXAMINING CONSULTANTS’ IN-SESSION NOTES

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Because writing center pedagogy emphasizes individual client needs, there are few consultation strategies that might be considered “staples.” However, reading the client’s paper aloud and taking notes on scrap paper as the consultant are two such strategies. In fact, they are so entrenched in consulting pedagogy that many writing centers list them on consultant training “checklists.” While there is a respectable amount of scholarship examining the read-aloud strategy (see Block; Huang), there is a conspicuous absence of literature examining the type of note-taking that occurs during consultations. It is important to examine these notes because clients often leave with them, and may reference them throughout their writing process. Additionally, while many writing centers do email clients a summary of their consultations, the notes produced during the session can offer insight into the *dynamics* of a consultation. Finally, there is great variation in the way consultants employ the note-taking strategy. Given this diversity, it is even more important to examine consultant notes to establish efficient note-taking strategies for writing center consultations.

The widespread use of note-taking, as well as the diversity in consultant note-taking styles, are the impetuses for this study. As my time working in the United Arab Emirates attests, note pads, paper trays, and jars of pens sit on writing center tables across the world. In “Writing as Process,” Bariss Mills explains why any conversation on writing should be accompanied by easy access to scratch paper. Mills describes how by “writing out their processes,” his students were able to develop a visual trail to follow while composing (23). However, writing center clients may not be “writing out their processes” alone; a note-taking consultant may also contribute to their “writing-out process.” I discovered this when one consultant gave me her notes on my paper, which I referenced many times as I wrote my paper. But, more importantly, I noticed that my consultant’s note-taking style was completely different from my *own*, as a consultant. This diversity in note-taking styles made me curious to see what other consultants were producing during writing consultations.

While I have so far described the impetus for this study, it is also important to consider its larger significance. Through this study, I hope to contribute to discussions of writing “process-products,” i.e. writing that reflects the writing process rather than the written product. Second, understanding how different consultants take notes in different writing contexts may not only reveal effective note-taking strategies, but also make us more reflexive as consultants. Third, examining consultants’ in-session notes can address questions of authorship and plagiarism. While I am loath to distrust consultants’ in-session note-taking, there is no denying that it can be viewed with some suspicion by third parties. For instance, when I presented this research at the East Central Writing Center Association, two composition teachers in the audience asked whether note-taking by consultants could lead to “cheating.” Additionally, NCAA policy forbids consultants from giving athletes any notes from writing consultations to discourage favoritism. Although consultants receive rigorous training to ensure clients retain writing ownership, these concerns highlight the fear that any writing that is not done by the client can make ownership suspect. For this reason, it is particularly important to examine whether and how consultant notes reflect the writing *process* rather than *product*. Additionally, as writers are composing increasingly multimodal texts, notions of collaboration and plagiarism are changing (see Howard; Lunsford; Sheridan & Inman; Selfe). As a result, consultants will have to adapt note-taking strategies to address the multimodal texts clients bring to the consultation.

Given these concerns, my goal with this research was to focus on three things: what consultants generally put on paper; *when* they tended to do more in-session note-taking; and whether the notes bolstered writing center pedagogy. The following sections describe my research methods, findings, and present a few noteworthy case studies of in-session note-taking.

Data Collection

For this study, I collected notes and interviewed consultants from two writing centers: the first was a center in an American university in the Middle East, which employed approximately 30 consultants and saw close to 3000 clients per semester. The second was a large center at a Midwestern university that employed about 70 consultants and drew approximately 10,000 clients per semester. I chose to collect data from these centers because they were the largest writing centers in their respective regions, and I had been employed for at least two years at each center. The data collection took place over a two-month period.

Collecting In-Session Notes

At this point, it is important to define the term “notes,” since the definition affects the data I collect and examine in this study. For the purpose of this study, I define “notes” as any writing produced by consultants on a separate piece of paper during consultations. Notes that were created by the client and notes made on the client’s paper by the consultant (if any) were not included. The reason I didn’t include the latter was because both centers I collected notes from strongly discouraged consultants from making notes on client papers to reduce concerns about ownership. The notes themselves were produced by both graduate and undergraduate consultants. Because clients usually left with these notes at the end of sessions, I asked consultants to make photocopies of any notes they made (with the client’s permission). The consultants at the center in the Middle East scanned their notes and sent them to me on a weekly basis. At the end of the two-month collection period, I had amassed notes from 116 consulting sessions facilitated by 20 consultants. These notes were then categorized by consultants to facilitate the interview process.

The Interviews

To understand the context in which these in-session writings were produced, I conducted interviews with the 20 consultants who produced the 116 notes I had collected. 13 of these consultants were employed at the Midwestern writing center, and seven were consultants from the center in the Middle East. Prior to the interviews, the questions were sent to the interviewees to allow them to reflect on their in-session writings before the actual interview (see appendix for interview questions). Because the questions were fairly open-ended, the interviewees took the conversation in the direction they wanted it to go. The interviews took place face-to-face or over Skype, and were 15-30 minutes long. These interviews were transcribed and coded for patterns based on recurring words. The findings section below discusses

the four most frequently recurring patterns, and provides examples to highlight their pedagogical significance.

Findings

This section examines the data in two ways. First, it examines the patterns that emerged from the consultant notes themselves, then categorizes these findings based on frequency, and expresses them as percentages. Second, it places these patterns in the context of the consultant interviews to understand why these patterns recurred, and the consultants’ rationales for creating these notes.

Patterns in the In-Session Notes

Because the notes were so diverse in form and content, it seemed unproductive to attempt to classify each note separately. That being said, many distinct patterns emerged from the notes, and some notes displayed more than one type of pattern. Given the diversity *and* overlap across the notes, I decided to present (and discuss) the most frequently recurring patterns. Therefore, Table 1 (below) presents the four most frequently recurring patterns visible across the 116 consultant notes I collected, meaning every note demonstrated one or more of the patterns in Table 1.

As Table 1 shows, 27 of the notes (or 23.3%) contained “full sentences or long phrases.” This refers to all the notes that contained more dense writing than isolated words or phrases. While this description might seem vague, I should say that the remaining 89 notes were so sparse (containing just the occasional word, punctuation mark, or phrase) that these 27 “detailed” notes clearly stood out. Next, the most prevalent pattern (visible in 88% of the notes) was the consultation agenda for each session, listing the concerns that the client wanted to focus on. These lists included concerns like “grammar,” “flow” and “topic sentences,” and a few of the consultants had crossed out or put check-marks next to the concerns they were able to tackle in the session. Third, close to 20% of the consultant notes contained sketches and drawings. These notes ranged from simple sketches of inverted triangles (to show how introductions go from a broad to narrow idea) and shapes surrounded by arrows, to more detailed illustrations of web pages, PowerPoint slides and even stick figures. Finally, 31% of all the notes contained “meta writing,” i.e. questions the consultants wrote down to *remind themselves* to ask the client something. These included instructions like “check assignment prompt” and “spelling mistake or word choice?”

Table 1

Pattern Description	Number	Percentage
Full sentences or long phrases	27	23.3%
Consultation agenda written down	103	88.8%
Sketches/drawings	23	19.8%
Notes for consultants, or “meta writing”	36	31%

In the next section, I will draw on the follow-up interviews with the consultants to contextualize these patterns, and attempt to understand consultants' rationales for their in-session note taking.

Contextualizing the In-Session Notes

The follow-up interviews with consultants illuminated the context for the four patterns described above. To begin with, several consultants attempted to explain why some of the notes were more detailed, i.e. contained “full sentences or long phrases.” Interestingly, 19 out of the 20 consultants I interviewed stated they wrote more during sessions *when they perceived clients to be ESL students*. While some of these consultants mentioned this tendency in relation to the notes I had collected, others mentioned it as a general observation about their consulting style. The following interview excerpts illustrate this:

It's with [...] ESL students that I ended up writing more, way more, and so I don't know if that says something about me as – about my consulting style, or that I'm giving my clients what I think they expect from me.

So a lot of times my student will just say straightaway look, English is [...] not my first language, and I noticed those students really appreciated when I gave them notes. I would make sure to take more notes when students came in and said that.

This trend raises questions about directive consulting and the nature of “ESL-ness.” First, the excerpts above point to the complexity of the term “ESL” and its implications for writing center consultations. Writing scholarship shows that the term “ESL” could simply indicate that a client speaks another language more proficiently than English; it doesn't always mean a lack of proficiency in English (see Matsuda et al). However, some ESL clients (and indeed any clients) might still benefit from a more directive consulting style if they are unfamiliar with US-centered writing approaches. While my interviewees identified their tendency to take more notes for ESL clients, they may not have realized that this tendency reinforced writing center pedagogy.

However, while these consultants admitted to taking more notes during ESL sessions, it still wasn't clear why. Some consultants cited fairly obvious reasons – clients could not keep up with the quick pace of the conversation; consultants wrote down words clients couldn't spell or pronounce – but one consultant said something striking:

Talking about writing the way we do in writing centers is a – is widely accepted in [...] US schools. I mean, I know the conversation is the most important part of a consultation, but I sort of feel like a pressure to sell the writing center to ESL students by giving them detailed written takeaways.

In this case, the consultant recognized that *discussing* writing is a well-established pedagogical technique in the US, but that it may not be familiar (or seen as productive) by clients who are not from the US. This consultant was cognizant that sometimes clients equate more writing with more productivity in the consultation, and was actively using his in-session writings as incentives to bring ESL students back to the center. While this quote does make it seem that the consultant is assuming that all ESL clients are international students, that was not what he meant. He was referring to his note-taking in sessions with international students who also *happened* to be ESL speakers.

However, based on my analysis of the 116 notes, the notes produced for ESL clients were not markedly different from the remaining notes. During the interviews, consultants made it a point to identify the notes they produced in ESL sessions, which were only seven out of the 27 “detailed” notes. However, the remaining 20 notes were *not* produced in ESL sessions. The 27 notes ranged from “transcriptions” of client ideas during brainstorming sessions, to writing sentences demonstrating the use of different punctuation marks. However, while the more detailed notes may indicate a more directive consulting style, my findings reveal that consultants do not simply adopt a more directive approach with ESL students. This belies their *belief* that they were more directive with their ESL clients. While consultants may certainly be taking a more directive approach with ESL clients, my data shows that they are also willing to use a more directive approach with non-ESL clients.

The interviews also revealed another reason why consultants may write more “detailed” notes during certain consultations rather than others. 12 of the 20 consultants I interviewed stated that those detailed notes came from brainstorming sessions with clients. This is unsurprising since clients synthesize ideas rapidly while brainstorming, and consultants may record those ideas so that they are not “lost.”

While note-taking increased during brainstorming sessions, it rose again when clients brought in close-to-final drafts. Eight of the 27 detailed notes I collected were produced in sessions where the client brought in a polished draft. Some examples of these phrases were sentences like “cultural racism – but how is that different from other racisms? Doesn't all racism become a floating signifier?” and “the camera angles are important to the meaning, and there are high and low angles but no overhead shots.” These long sentences stood in stark contrast to the notes containing only isolated words and phrases, which may have been produced in sessions where a client came in

with a first draft. The consultants who produced these more descriptive notes explained that in these situations, they felt an additional pressure to focus on minutiae because clients expected fine-tuning:

As they read through their paper I'd just write down a bunch of sentences and phrases from their essay that were grammatically incorrect or just awkward. I mean, when clients say they're bringing in a final draft they don't want to change their main argument, they're kind of looking to focus on language issues. So I'd write down full sentences, and sometimes I'd notice patterns of grammar errors so I'd write down 'verb tense' and I'd know to come back to that.

Normally I – I don't focus too too [sic] much on grammar and punctuation if it's an early draft of the paper, but if a client wants to polish a final draft then I get super nit-picky. Like I'll write down stuff like 'paragraph one: awkward' or 'topic sentence three: semi colon use' and things like that to remind me what we need to talk about in case I forget later.

Once again, these excerpts illustrate that consultants lean towards making notes about the writing process, rather than the product, particularly when clients come in with a nearly finished draft. But, more interestingly, it also appears that consultants were using note-taking to teach grammar rules and focus on lower-order concerns. The samples I collected reflected these grammar and punctuation “lessons,” where consultants had written down sentences illustrating the proper uses of semicolons and different verb tenses for the same verb. Because writing center practice encourages working on lower-order concerns at the *end* of the writing process, it was intriguing to see consultant notes mirror this so clearly.

The next two patterns the interviews revealed were taking “meta notes,” (where consultants were taking notes for themselves rather than their clients) and writing down consultation agendas. 14 of the 20 interviewees stated they did this, while others said they weren't even sure their notes would be intelligible to their clients. Why, then, did they bother making those notes? They offered several different reasons:

I like to write down the agenda at the beginning of the session, because it keeps – you can use it sort of like a checklist, and *I like to tick things off when we're done with it*, like once we've made finished [sic] tackling topic sentences or citations for instance [...] *it makes me feel good about getting stuff done*, and I

usually make that list for myself and it helps me as a consultant, but sometimes clients want to take [the list] with them *so they can see what they've got let to do if we didn't get to it* in the session. (emphasis added)

When my client is reading aloud, I will write words and use a sort of short hand to remind myself which sentences or paragraphs I want to come back to. Sometimes they'll freak out that I'm writing stuff down, and I'm like '*no, I'm doing this because I'm listening closely, I'm not writing critiques about your writing!*' So I'll write down a single word, for example, and I'll remember I want to talk about the sentence that word is in. This system works for me, and even if [the client] takes the notes with them *it's not like they can copy anything off it*. But yeah, they ask for the notes any way. Most of the times [sic]. (emphasis added)

There are two noteworthy aspects in these excerpts. First, some consultants use note-taking as a way of demonstrating their own engagement as clients read their writing aloud. Second, consultants who write down the consultation agenda are able to provide a writing-process-takeaway that enables the client to "continue" the consultation after they leave the center. This clearly reinforces writing center pedagogy because it ensures that an agenda is created and followed throughout the consultation, which is a key part of consulting technique (see Harris). But, perhaps more importantly, sending clients home with the agenda demonstrates a commitment to writing *process* over *product*, a key writing center principle, as the agenda itself is a process-product. While some writing centers do have consultants send a follow-up email to clients outlining their way forward on their assignment, other centers that do not could encourage consultants to produce written agendas during consultations that clients can take away.

Finally, the fourth pattern in the data was consultants' tendencies to create images in their notes. And while the consultants did not directly address these images in the interviews, they did make some remarks about multimodality that were interesting. Of the 116 notes that I examined, 23 contained images including maps with arrows, shapes, and tables, and a few were sketches that contained no words at all. While writing centers are becoming more cognizant of multimodal composition (see Sheridan & Inman; Selber; Blythe), it appears that this multimodality is even becoming visible in notes produced during consultations. At the Midwestern writing center, consultant training included learning to work with

software like iMovie, Illustrator and Comic Life to understand the composition processes these media entail. As writing centers begin to see more clients working on movies, comic strips, posters, etc., it is interesting to see writing *processes* also embody such multimodality. Consultants must be willing to use non-alphabetic processes to help clients compose both alphabetic and non-alphabetic products.

Two examples of such "multimodal note-taking" stood out in the data. The first was a sketch of a website home page, which I recognized even before interviewing the consultant who sketched it. This rough sketch included a "menu bar" for navigation, a side panel, and a central space for key text. The client had come in with an idea of what the website should contain, but not what it should look like. The consultant then initiated a conversation about website conventions, and sketched the homepage for illustration. In doing so, he demonstrated that it was just as important to talk about conventions in multimodal texts as it is with traditional texts. When I asked why they didn't just browse through actual websites, he said that he thought the conventions would be more visible in a minimal, 2D version on paper. His other reason: "sometimes the Internet is way slow."

The second example of "multimodal note-taking" was one that came out of the writing center in the Middle East. It was created by an artistically gifted consultant majoring in graphic design, and was a sketch of a tattooed ogre carrying a club, with a small man and a duck on his back. The detail was remarkable, and the consultant explained that it came out of a consultation in which the client was writing a sci-fi short story. When they were mapping out their agenda at the start of the session, the student said she was concerned that her characters and setting weren't as clear as she'd like them to be. Her professor wanted more descriptive detail, which was especially necessary for fictional/extra-terrestrial settings and characters. The consultant told his client that as she read her piece aloud, he would draw the characters as he pictured them based on her descriptions.

While this note was perhaps the most striking of the 116 notes I had collected, it is also worth remarking on this consultant's willingness to engage in play during the session. In "Incorporating Play and Toys into the Writing Center," Chad Verbais talks about why creative approaches are so important to writing center pedagogy. He argues that play offers much more than a distraction; it offers a diversion that frees up the mind to focus on the task in a big-picture way without becoming consumed by details (136). By giving her a sketch at the end of the read-aloud, this

consultant offered his client a playful distraction, as well as a way to renew focus. There is a reason writing centers are decorated to look welcoming and *playful*. They are not a classroom space or a living space, but, as Grego and Thompson describe, a thirdspace: a safe space to use creative approaches that would be difficult to implement in first or second spaces. Additionally, writing centers employ consultants with different professional backgrounds, both writing-related and otherwise. By applying his background in art, the consultant demonstrated that writing processes don't have to be "written," and that high-stakes products can be created through low-stakes interactions.

Conclusions

This study has some limitations. The data was collected over just a two month period at only two centers, and only a few of the collected samples have been examined in depth. However, the few patterns described in this paper are pedagogically complex, and the follow-up interviews provided insight into the judgment calls consultants make during sessions. For instance, we see that the data occasionally contradicts consultants' reflections about their consulting approach. This was especially evident from the consultants' beliefs that they primarily take more notes for ESL clients, when the data shows that consultants produce detailed notes for a wide variety of reasons. Additionally, the findings reveal that the agenda is what consultants are most likely to write down during consultations, implying that consultants rely on the agenda as a "contract," and guide for the consultation. Furthermore, consultants are sensitive to the *stage* of the writing process their clients are in, and modify their note-taking strategies accordingly. This is an especially empathetic move, because consultants (who are students themselves) recognize the importance of transcribing ideas while brainstorming and paying extra attention to drafts that are about to be submitted.

Undoubtedly, the notes produced in consultations engage issues of authorship, ESL strategies, multimodality, and the value of play. Because these samples engage so many pedagogical concerns, it is worthwhile to continue inspecting in-session writing in future studies. For instance, it could be useful to examine whether in-session note-taking affects client satisfaction. This research also highlights how notes from consultations form an archive within

writing centers that tell a multitude of stories, as they provide organic records of the diversity of consultations and composition processes. This does not mean that we need to inspect every note from every consultation, but it does remind us that if we are looking for stories to tell from within the center we need not look very far.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

Why did you create these writing samples that came out of your sessions?

Do you usually use put something on paper during sessions?

Do you think a consultation might be different if you had no access to scrap paper?

Do you find yourself writing more in certain consultations than others?

Do you find yourself writing more when the client is at a particular stage of the writing process?

Do you ever sketch when writing notes?

How do clients react to your in-session writing?

Do you think there are any downsides to consultants making notes during consultations?