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“I’VE GOT NO STRINGS ON ME”

Avoiding Marionette Theater with Peer Consultants in the Classroom

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Our writing center’s first forays into classroom work began unceremoniously, without any conscious thought given to the philosophical ramifications of going “on location.” A faculty member from the education department called one day during the writing center’s (and my) first year on campus and asked if I might be able to send a consultant to her evening graduate class to help her students “get off on the right foot” with their research projects. At the time we had on our writing center staff a senior student who was one of the finest all-round English majors the department had seen in years. I mentioned the request to Laurie and she cheerfully accepted the assignment to visit Dr. Templeton’s class.

Aside from marking the date on our calendar, I gave the project little further thought. Laurie (and the other three consultants on our staff) had been carefully trained in peer tutoring the previous spring by my compositionist colleague. In that term, Laurie had copresented a prewriting workshop at the student center in front of a large crowd and she was currently in the midst of preparing to give a paper at the 1999 National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing. Of her own accord, Laurie decided to demonstrate clustering to the class as a method for generating ideas. Laurie may have discussed her plan with me, but, swamped by the daily operation of the center, I didn’t press her about what she planned to do. I received the following note from Nan Templeton the day after Laurie’s visit:

Hello Susan,

I wanted to tell you how much we appreciated Laurie coming into my EDUF 7116 Applied Educational Research class last night. She is a knowledgeable young woman who generously shared her gifts with the class members. Laurie elicited questions easily and was fluid and cogent in her delivery. By the time her presentation ended she had given each student the opportunity to map out a topic based on the student’s research.

I know that the class members enjoyed Laurie's facilitation and benefited from her presence. They were effusive in their praise for her work. I hope we can continue to use the Writing Center as such a resource.

In the months following this first successful episode, Laurie visited another classroom to lead a similar presentation. I completely took for granted her ability to carry off such guest spots. I was pleased that we were easily able to meet special faculty requests. What I didn't realize at all was that we had experienced exceptional luck in having Laurie at our dispatch, a peer consultant with aspirations to graduate school and an academic career, and thus an eagerness for classroom experience.

The prospect of bringing peer consultants into the writing classroom holds so much promise: the consultants are excellent models for struggling students; the writing center and its director gain valuable opportunities to demonstrate and promote the kind of crucial assistance we exist to offer. Faculty outside of the English department are often grateful to call upon the "experts" to help with the difficult work of guiding students through paper writing. Nonetheless, my own experience with consultants in the classroom shows that, despite every clear advantage, it's still possible to mangle the enterprise. I'm going to offer my subsequent stories as "what not to do," but I do take comfort in Andrea Lunsford's warning that bringing collaboration to the classroom isn't the simple proposal it seems: "[W]e shouldn't fool ourselves that creating new models of authority, new spaces for students and teachers to experience nonhierarchical, shared authority, is a goal we can hope to reach in any sort of straightforward way" (2000, 71).

Lunsford's consideration of authority is central to my own critique of my efforts. I want to argue that the configuration of authority in the writing center is worth very careful examination, and, second, that we must proceed with caution and full awareness of our responsibility to consultants when bringing them into the dynamic arena of the classroom. When the administration of a writing center, even for very good reasons, usurps consultant confidence and control by choreographing classroom activities, the possibility of successful classroom-based tutoring is fundamentally undermined. Consultants become like marionettes asked to perform without betraying that the writing center administrator is holding the strings.

DESCRIPTION OF CLASSROOM-BASED TUTORING AT COLUMBUS STATE UNIVERSITY

The writing center at Columbus State University is very new (it opened in 1999 as an initiative of the English faculty in the Department of Language

and Literature), and our efforts in almost every area of operations are provisional; we are still very much finding our identity within the institution. The writing center plays no formal role within a writing program here, but serves as an undergraduate peer consulting center for student writers at every level and from any major. I choose to call our work *peer consulting* rather than *peer tutoring* because we are engaged in a critical mission here of educating faculty and students about the nature of the assistance we offer, and that terminology seems to more accurately describe what writing centers do. As a junior, tenure-track faculty member holding a partial teaching load, I am also still making an impression on my faculty colleagues and administrators. I inherited two major advantages at the time I was hired to direct the writing center: the conditional goodwill of my colleagues, who had long been troubled by a lack of resources for student writers, and the guarantee of being able to train new consultants annually in a semester-long course of my design, ENGL 3256, Peer Writing Consultation. Only students who earn an A or B in Peer Writing Consultation are eligible to become paid consultants in the writing center.

Workshops and conference presentations, undertaken as part of students' course work, have formed the main basis for consultants' preparation as classroom-based tutors. In Peer Writing Consultation, I introduce students to the composition theory from which the writing center movement has grown, as well as the interpersonal aspects of consulting, working with nonnative English speakers, working with basic writers, working with assignments from across the curriculum, and consulting via e-mail. Mandatory internship hours in the writing center are spent observing, role-playing, and consulting "for real." We keep journals, produce handouts for the center, write papers, and conduct generalized workshops, sometimes for very small audiences and sometimes in first-year composition classrooms. Adapting their research projects as panel proposals, students have presented papers at two major writing center conferences. For both on-campus workshop presentations and conference panels, choosing topics and methods of delivery are integral aspects of the students' work. The development of a group presentation assists tutors in training to more thoroughly understand the principles they are encountering in the course; they are teaching to learn. Secondarily, such workshops help us to promote awareness of the writing center, especially among first-year students. Coming directly to the classroom guarantees us an audience; English faculty are generally solicited by consultants in training to promote or host workshops as gestures of support for our apprentice consultants.

DIFFERENT SCENARIOS, DIFFERENT OUTCOMES

We had two things working in our favor at the time of our initial classroom-based tutoring foray, neither of which I understood because Laurie's classroom visits had gone well. The first was that Nan Templeton had done the necessary work prior to Laurie's visit of creating a collaborative classroom climate, one that accommodated shared authority among Nan, her students, and a peer consultant. Instructors who invite writing center consultants to participate in their classrooms generally do value collaborative learning, but we cannot always assume that this common value exists. Nor can we assume that students in any given class are prepared to embrace the authority of anyone other than the instructor of that course. Although an instructor may invite peer consultants to the classroom as part of a continuing effort to extend authority to his or her students and to encourage them to accept it, students sometimes resist the active role that collaboration demands of them because they have little experience in shouldering responsibility for their own learning. "Creating a collaborative environment and truly collaborative tasks is damnably difficult," Lunsford has observed, for reasons far beyond student resistance (1995, 39). The cultural and social weight of institutionalized education accounts for much of the difficulty we encounter in striving to create collaborative classroom environments. Institutionalized education thwarts our efforts to share authority in others ways as well: the spaces in which we work usually reinforce a centralized notion of classroom authority (desks rather than tables, seats facing in one direction), the length of the academic term sometimes cuts short the time we need to invest in collaborative relationships, and we are challenged to assign individual grades for shared effort (Lunsford 2000, 75–76). It's a tribute to our committed resolve that we attempt it at all.

The second factor working in our favor at the time of these first classroom ventures was that I was too busy to micromanage Laurie's visit, which left her entirely in control of the material she wanted to share with the class. Not only did Laurie choose an appropriate activity, she welcomed the opportunity to stand in front of a graduate class and introduce clustering to these students. Laurie's appearance in class that evening was comfortable for her, and it was comfortable for Nan and for Nan's students. While the class accepted Laurie's bid for authority within that setting, her role as presenter did not ask them to radically revise their expectations about how learning takes place. She apprehended the theatrical

conditions of the classroom and adapted them to her purpose. She commanded the attention of the class; she “elicited questions easily and was fluid and cogent in her delivery.” In short, Laurie performed well.

In my second year, two colleagues separately approached me with requests to involve the writing center in their classes; each instructor was looking for a new way to help students through the arduous process of research assignments. Neither instructor had a predetermined idea of what shape the collaboration would take; both were already teaching the research assignment very carefully and with impressive attention to students’ needs. On the whole, however, the situations differed greatly: the first class was a junior-level family communications course; the second was a second-semester first-year composition course. The family communications research assignment required students to produce a formalized literature review; the composition course asked students to produce a documented research essay related to literary texts. My reaction to both requests was to confidently suggest classroom-based tutoring. Privately, I imagined that I could expeditiously plan these activities without conferring with the consultants and count on my crack staff to carry them out. The enterprise would be thus largely under my control.

Communications professor Dr. Lang met with me ahead of time at his request and talked about what particular difficulties his students usually had and what kind of classroom activities might meet their needs. We settled on a small-group workshop that would take place after Dr. Lang’s students had located secondary materials but before they had written a full first draft. We would address their problems with organization by suggesting techniques for “mapping” the literature review and then follow up our session with a special invitation to bring rough drafts to the writing center for consultation. I did not negotiate any details of this plan with the peer consultants.

I designed a handout/instruction sheet for the workshop and, as a last step, I asked my entire staff of eight to participate in the event. The evening of the workshop, our staff met for half an hour before the class and I ran through the handout with the consultants. I would demonstrate the exercise in front of the whole class first, I explained, and then they would each lead a group of four or five through the exercise described on the handouts. Primarily, their role was to watch and encourage the members of their peer groups as the students “mapped out” the main ideas and supporting materials for their projects. The workshop was a modification of a clustering exercise that I thought reflected the specific vocabulary

and conventions of the literature review assignment. I assumed that once I'd explained it to the consultants, no special practice would be required, although none of them (to my knowledge) had ever actually composed a literature review. They were available to monitor the activity, more or less, so I considered the task to be rather straightforward. "The only reason I felt comfortable knowing what we were doing," one consultant confided in retrospect, "was that we had watched Laurie doing something similar as part of our tutor-training class." Though the consultants seemed unusually quiet and anxious, I let them know before we left to walk over to the classroom that I had total confidence in their ability to carry off the workshop.

The room where this survey course met was a midsize auditorium; the students were accustomed to sitting in seats that clearly designated them as the audience of their professor. While Dr. Lang, my very student-focused colleague, had evidently created a classroom atmosphere that reflected informality and approachability (he stood not on the platform, behind a lectern, but on the ground floor and to the side when opening the class meeting), the room itself was intimidating. Not only would it make gathering in small groups a physical challenge, but also its very size contrasted sharply with our intimate writing center surroundings. The seats were half full at best in this auditorium classroom, a factor that seemed only to emphasize the cavernous space. I wondered if class attendance was significantly down for the night and felt slightly defensive on behalf of my consultants and the writing center.

By the time I had been introduced and took to the platform (where the chalkboard was located, center stage), I was determined to win over any skeptics in the room and to launch the workshop with a compelling presentation. I actively solicited input from the students during my demonstration of our exercise. I marshaled all of my energy and enthusiasm toward convincing them that the services of the writing center and its staff were the solution to their research paper woes.

Because we wanted to keep the group size to fewer than six students, when we divided up the class, I jumped in to work as a consultant with one group. While I prodded the members of that group to think through how the materials they had collected related to their topics and to explain to me how they were creating their organizational clusters, I worried about how the other groups were doing. Eventually, I eased away from my on-task students and wandered around the room a bit. Some of the groups were engaged in lively conversations about their topics and their struggles

with research; others, however, had clearly given up on the exercise altogether and were killing time with gossip or were simply staring at the ceiling. I ambled over to a couple of bored-looking groups and asked how their work was progressing; everyone was feeling “fine” and apparently completely satisfied with the amount of effort they’d put into the exercise. The consultants who were leading these groups looked slightly pained.

Before his class was dismissed, Dr. Lang asked for any immediate commentary from them about the usefulness of the exercise. One student raised her hand and spoke earnestly about how much better she now felt about the direction of her review; another student seconded her praise of the workshop. Several other heads nodded in support of our work while the majority of students sat quietly. I announced our hours and the location of the writing center and encouraged the students to bring us their drafts in the next few weeks as they worked.

I thanked my staff profusely as we left the building that night, feeling strangely that somehow I’d betrayed them or that I needed to boost their self-confidence even more than had been necessary before we entered the classroom. Over the next week or two in the writing center, we saw one student from the class for multiple sessions, but in general almost no one from this large class came for a follow-up session. Dr. Lang and I suspected that our lack of evening hours at the center might have been the reason. We were both disappointed that the kind of ongoing student collaboration we’d hoped for did not materialize. The consultants expressed a similar disappointment: “I really wish we could have read a few of those papers,” one of them related, “or found out whether or not the papers were any better because of our help.”

If leading a large upper-level class through a small-group workshop presented certain challenges, I could comfort myself that my next scheduled writing center adventure was a simple “Laurie-style” repeat performance. I was bringing two of my strongest consultants, one at a time, to different sections of an English colleague’s first-year composition course. I reworked our clustering handout and explained to the tutors that all they’d need to do was stand in front of the class, read through the handout step-by-step, and draw sample clustering circles and lines on an overhead projector. Their role in the classroom was not only to offer useful help, but also to put a friendly face on the writing center and thereby encourage students from the class to come visit us on future occasions. They seemed willing but scared. I promised I’d be there for moral support.

At both classroom appearances, I was completely surprised by how suddenly artificial and stiff the consultant became as my colleague Dr. Cooper, and then I, relinquished control of the “front and center” space. In each case, the consultant was visibly nervous but working very hard to overcome her stage fright. The students were cooperative and followed the exercise determinedly; while Dr. Cooper remained seated to the front side of the room, I made awkward forays up and down the rows of seats and watched as students scribbled assiduously on their pieces of notebook paper. My movement about the room was hampered by overcrowded rows of desks; the classroom was at full capacity. I was impressed, however, by the work I could see going on; the students had obviously been convinced by Dr. Cooper in advance that the consultant from the writing center would have something valuable to offer them. In each case, though, the person who still needed convincing that something valuable was happening in the room was the peer consultant. After these classes ended, I was effusive in my praise and reassured each consultant that the workshop had gone quite according to plan and that she had done a good job. “I wasn’t really nervous,” insisted one of these consultants a month or so afterward. “I just wasn’t exactly sure what you wanted.”

SORTING IT ALL OUT

This series of classroom visits was not entirely unsuccessful, but something about the experience of performing them troubled me. My first thought was that the physical limitations of the classroom spaces were to blame. I also considered attributing the problem to the lack of time I had allotted for the consultants to practice the exercises. But I knew that the actual classroom activities had been carefully planned, and the more I fretted over my workshop designs, the clearer it became that the tight control I had maintained over them constituted my real mistake.

My introductory demonstration in the upper-level auditorium class backfired, for instance, because my zeal to win over the students focused the students’ attention on my own performance, making it more difficult to then diffuse that energy and authority among the tutors and the students at large. My presence at the first-year composition classes, although well intentioned, only put pressure on the consultant and probably confused the students, who may have wondered why they were under the surveillance of the writing center director. Lost was the principle behind all of these appearances—consultants working as models and as advocates for student-centered learning.

The roots of the problem were twofold: I had asked the consultants to lead classroom-based workshops without eliciting from them either a wish to conduct the workshops or a chance to become comfortable with that role. I hadn't allowed the consultants to come up with their own workshop ideas: I had control over the handouts, the structure of the class meetings, and the methods of delivery. They were performing like marionettes for me with no (visible) strings. Naturally, there was anxiety about that performance. If I had allowed enough time prior to our class appearances for the consultants to practice my own preplanned activities, that would have helped. But empowering the consultants to design the workshops would have critically shifted that balance of authority for the whole enterprise. I have no doubt that they would have designed better and more creative workshops than mine, too.

Further, I needed to look at the reasons for my wish to control, especially my desire to promote writing centers in the eyes of the institution. For new writing centers like mine, whose credibility and status within the university are vulnerable, the prospect of sharing responsibility for public duties (outside of the writing center) with fledgling undergraduate tutors can be worrisome. My reputation and the reputation of my staff were on the line, as I saw it, in the eyes of important audiences.

At issue, too, was the need to promote collegiality between tutors and teachers, as Laurie and Dr. Templeton had exemplified. Laurie's relationship as a tutor with the classroom instructor was largely unmediated; I was not even present for the workshop. As Carol Peterson Haviland et al. have written about the ideal relationship between disciplinary faculty and writing center tutors: "Tutors need disciplinary faculty to reimagine the tutor-professor relationship as that of coinquirers, to expect to learn as well as to teach, to risk not knowing everything in front of a student, even a graduate student. Also, tutors need disciplinary faculty to model this regard to students; when they show students that they see tutors not as handmaidens but as collaborators, students will be more likely to follow their lead" (1999, 55).

Nan Templeton modeled this ideal in the very act of requesting an undergraduate peer consultant to visit her graduate classroom. When Laurie arrived, material solely and authoritatively under her own control, the collegial work of coinquiry could begin. Such a model was likewise possible in the later classroom-based tutoring events, but my interference in the program prevented this collaboration from becoming fully realized. Consultants must be able to perform this work with autonomy.

What I'm advocating here is a model of collaboration between director as trainer and consultants in order to foster consultants' autonomy. How can directors expect to serve as trainers/trainers/supervisors *and* collaborators on an equal footing with student consultants? The transition from teacher/trainer to collegial collaborator involves predictable and continual movement back and forth. Tutors in training need directors to guide them in traditionally authoritative ways as they begin their apprenticeships in the writing center. James S. Baumlin and Margaret E. Weaver use psychoanalytic theory to describe the process of relieving students from their dependency on a teacher/trainer's sole authority and inviting them to seek sources of knowledge among themselves: "Transference—students' projections of trust and authority onto their teachers—is an important, even necessary facilitator of learning, but most effective only so long as teachers remain themselves unseduced; teachers must ultimately repudiate the role of inviolate authority and refuse to remain, in Lacanian terms, the 'subject supposed to know'" (2000, 82). Conducting the training period within a conventional for-credit course framework does not mean impeding future collaborative relationships, but it does mean that the teacher/trainer must plan for that relationship to change.

The director should be providing a model of collaboration that tutors can use as they work with directors, classroom teachers, and other students. When consultants-to-be collaborate on serious projects (writing research papers, designing workshops), they learn that negotiation and the shared construction of knowledge are prized values at the writing center. Allowing them to watch or participate with experienced consultants working in classrooms and offering them the chance to practice on-location consulting enables them "to achieve their own knowledge and become their own authorities" (Baumlin and Weaver 2000, 77).

Ultimately, we must keep our responsibility to tutors squarely in mind when preparing to work in the classroom. Directors should be sensitive to tutors' own maturation as learners. We should explicitly examine with them the subjects of collaborative learning and peer tutoring in the writing center and shared authority in the classroom; we can offer them opportunities to reflect on their own development as thinkers and as writers in the academic community. We must be particularly wary of placing tutors in positions of authority for which they are not developmentally ready or adequately prepared; we must consider whether they will be fairly compensated for duties beyond their normal repertoire of writing center

skills. Although they may seem of pressing importance, the needs of the classroom students, the interests of the writing center director, and the satisfaction of the classroom instructor must be of secondary concern.

The dynamics of classroom authority are complicated even before we bring consultants onto the scene; my suspicion is that going on location will never work in the ideal (or even effortless) ways we might imagine. Given that we can't reasonably expect things to work smoothly, however, there are good reasons why bringing consultants to the classroom is still worth trying. I do believe that the presence of experienced writers demonstrating an enthusiasm for writing and an interest in other students' academic work can have a profound impact in the classroom. I believe that bringing consultants on location is an excellent way to establish and maintain positive relationships between the writing center and faculty across the curriculum; we deserve the support of many allies on campus. I don't plan to give up on visiting the classroom, but I am resolved to make these events truly collaborative and that will mean allowing my peer consultants to help decide when, where, why, and on what terms we will do it.