

The Seldom Heard Voices in Mary Lyon Basement: An Interview With Three College Writing Center Consultants

Alys Culhane

It was a dark and snowy afternoon. Some of the members of the WAC editorial board were sitting around in the basement of Mary Lyon Hall, deliberating about what the upcoming issue of the WAC journal might contain. I didn't come to the meeting with any ideas of my own.

I heard whispers, turned my head, took note of a College Writing Center student consultant and a student writer talking about the writer's paper. Both were visibly excited. This was a scene that I'd seen repeated here so many times that I take it for granted. This was something I'd like to tell other PSC faculty members about.

"Ya know," I blurted, "I'd like to write an article . . . about the writing center consultants . . . I want to write an informational piece, one in which I provide readers with a better overall sense of what consultants do, how they're trained, how they themselves put theory to practice."

"Great idea!" said the journal editor, who quickly made note of

my idea and thus committed me to writing this piece. What I most wanted to do, I decided, was to interview three PSC College Writing Center Consultants, since this would demonstrate that there is no exception to the rule—by and large, there is the shared collective view that the goal of the College Writing Center (as Compositionist Stephen North says) isn't to make better writing, but better writers. I also decided that I'd like for my article to be in question/answer form, so that I might better capture the consultant's voices.

My interview choices were arbitrary. My teaching schedule coincided with those of College Writing Center Consultants Stacey Lucas, Tony Koschmann, and Laura Douglass. However, in the process of interviewing them, I realized that I got lucky; their differing ages, interests, and genders supported one of the primary tenets of writing center pedagogy, which is that in having a diverse staff, writing centers are better able to respond to a wide range of writing-related interests.

I also realized that in my article I'd be indirectly commending Stacey, Tony, and Laura for taking on a job that requires a great deal of time, energy, and dedication. I also knew that being modest individuals, if they ever read what I wrote they'd squirm. Since I didn't want Stacey, Tony, and Laura to squirm alone, I decided to also make note of the fact that their ideas and attitudes about writing center pedagogy are similar to those of other members of the PSC College Writing Center staff, as is their unwavering belief that they are making a difference in assisting their peers. Other College Writing Center Consultants include students Chris Reeves, Tim Markle, and Amanda Ouellette, Assistant to the Director Jane Weber, Dr. Robert Miller, and Director Roy Andrews.

What follows are a culmination of a series of interviews, all of which took place at the end of the Fall 1999 semester and the beginning of the Spring 2000 semester.

The Interviewees:

Stacey Lucas, 20, hails from Woodsville, NH. This is her second year as a College Writing Center consultant. Currently a junior,

Stacey is majoring in graphic arts. She aspires to be a writer/illustrator, perhaps work for a greeting card company.

Tony Koschmann, 19, is from Hudson, NH. Tony has been working in the PSC Writing Center for three semesters. Currently a sophomore, Tony's major is Computer Science. He's unsure of his future career plans, but he's thinking about getting a convertible.

Laura Douglas, 19, is in her third year on the writing center staff. She is a junior, majoring in Physical Science Education and minoring in Theatre. She is currently giving serious thought to teaching high school physics and chemistry.

1. *What prompted you to become a writing center consultant?*

Stacey: In high school, I was the editor of the literary magazine and school newspaper. I began studying art here, but wanted to get back into writing. I figured that I could use my skills as an editor when helping students.

Tony: Before coming to Plymouth State College, I got a letter from Roy Andrews saying that he was interested in talking with me about being a consultant. Roy interviewed me, then offered me a job as a consultant.

Laura: Like Tony, I received a letter from Roy, who wondered if I was interested in working in the College Writing Center. I came in for an interview in April 1996. It (the interview) was quite an experience. After talking for a bit, Roy invited me to sit in on a consultation. It went well—and so they hired me.

2. *Describe your training as a consultant:*

Stacey: I worked for several weeks alongside Roy. I learned about how writing centers work and how to use a non-directive approach. This involved working more indirectly with students as opposed to taking a paper and marking it up with a red pen, which was what I was used to doing.

Tony: I followed a progression. Prior to coming to PSC, I had no experience in working one-on-one with students. My first semester I mostly observed consultations, and did mock consultations with Roy and other members of the CollegeWriting Center. I was also required to do quite a bit of reading. This included *The Harcourt Brace Guide to Peer Tutoring* and articles. I also attended staff meetings.

Laura: I first sat in on a lot of conferences with (consultants) Bryan, Michelle, Tim, Sheileagh, Jean, Jane, and Roy. I took in a lot of information on how writing centers work, how people learn. Then I started to work one-on-one with individual clients.

3. *What are your strengths as a consultant?*

Stacey: I'm open, honest, enthusiastic. [Jane Weber, sitting on a nearby couch, interjects: "You're also good at modeling creative approaches such as mapping and brainstorming."] Yeah, another one my strengths is that I'm able to help people put their ideas into visual forms.

Tony: I have no idea. Well, I'm modest. I'm pretty good at listening, for a guy. I'm amazed at how patient I've become. I'm a better listener than I am talker.

Laura: I'm empathetic. I was one of four kids, born into an empathetic situation. I learned how to empathize, not to be judgmental about people. I try not to develop preconceived notions of why people are here. [Pulls out a wallet-sized family photograph.] My father, a doctor, has a lot of wisdom. Like him, I'm a logical thinker. This helps me to see the flow of papers, see possible sequences, what the writer is relaying to the reader.

4. *What was your most memorable experience as a consultant?*

Stacey: I'll have to think about this for a minute. I can picture a few sessions where people walked away grateful – there was good energy between us. I worked with someone on an interdisciplinary proposal. It was his third attempt at trying to get it passed. We fit everything together in a logical way. I ran into him at the bagel shop downtown, and he thanked me for helping him.

Tony: Wow! Gee, that's tough. When do you need this by? Hmm. Well, I created that marketing report for the writing center last spring. And the friends I've made working at the College Writing Center. And reading that Dragnet creative piece at staff meeting with people who are great listeners. All that's been memorable.

Laura: Once a gentleman came in with a poem. He needed to analyze it, to write an essay about the poem. We both had trouble understanding the poem. You see, poetry is my weakest point. There was this one word; neither of us knew what it meant. We got a dictionary and looked it up. Once we had a definition it changed the whole conference. We had an understanding, a collaborative experience. He came back all excited. He'd gotten a B+ on the paper.

5. What are the most important things that you've learned as a writer/consultant?

Stacey: I've really grown as a writer. I've learned that it's important to share work. In the past, I've been afraid to put feelings on paper and share them with others. But in working here, I've kinda gotten over that. Sharing is the first step we take in improving our work.

Tony: To be empathetic and use a nondirective approach. This helps both parties. I've also learned not to procrastinate. When you put things off, it can become a real mess. I've also learned that you'll like your job more if you have the attitude that you are doing it because you like it, not because it's required.

Laura: The non-directive approach, this is something that I struggle with. Some people have a lot to say if you ask the right questions, leave them as open-ended as possible. [Pauses.] I've learned so much here, to not push people in directions they don't want to go. I've had the experience of working with different types of people. Everyone wears a different pair of shoes; no one has the same take. We're subjective creatures. You can be objective to a point, but at some point subjectivity enters into it.

6. In your mind, what are the characteristics of good writing consultation?

Stacey: Open communication. If there's communication, both the consultant and the student will walk away with a real sense of accomplishment.

Tony: In a good consultation, both the writer and the consultant seem to be enjoying themselves. Both parties are listening to one

another, smiling, making eye contact with one another. If the writer jumps up and leaves, it might mean the session hasn't been that good.

Laura: The writer leaves with a smile. [Pauses.] It's a session in which the writer feels that progress is being made, even if I don't. Signs of progress? They'll tell me. The comments start rolling. You're done talking and they're writing like mad. The student is more excited when they leave than when they first came in.

7. Okay. Let's be a little more specific: what do you see as being the characteristics of a so-called nondirective approach to writing consultation?

Stacey: It starts with making sure you're not coming across as an authority figure who knows everything there is to know about writing. Instead of telling the writer what's wrong, you get THEM to ask questions and think about ways in which they might improve their writing. When I worked for my school newspaper, I edited the work. I didn't have a personal relationship with the other writers. In being nondirective, you come across as a peer rather than as an editor.

Tony: You (the consultant) ask a lot of questions. You need to pay close attention to the writer. And you have to be critical yet positive.

Laura: Lots of genuine, well-thought questions, and a good ear for listening.

8. *What are some of your outside interests?*

Stacey: 24-7 (24 hours a day, seven days a week) I carry around a sketchbook. I write, draw, record things. I'm also the editor of *Exposed*, the PSC Art Department newsletter. The first issue came out in December, the second will come out this semester. [I point to the graphics on the walls, colorful figures in various poses.] Yeah, I did those over break. I modeled them on Keith Haring's work, one of my favorite artists. I also designed the writing center posters.

Tony: I'm currently working at the PSC radio station. I'm now the promotions director. I solicit business ads. This may be ambition talking, but a few of us are talking about writing radio plays and airing them on a bi-weekly basis.

Laura: Deep, thought-provoking conversation which is something I don't get much of. I love a good argument, to hear differing points of view. I'm interested in learning where people are coming from, where they want to go. Actual interests? I'm a theatre minor; I didn't want to be stuck in Boyd Hall for all eternity. I love acting. What draws me to the theatre is the people. They are the most open-minded and are not afraid to be themselves.

9. *What would you like for PSC teachers to know about the College Writing Center?*

Stacey: The College Writing Center is for everyone. Everyone is welcome, no matter what kind of writing they're working on, no matter what stage of the writing process they're at. We get a wide variety of people in here, a whole slew of people with differing majors. We're also fun. At the risk of sounding like a commercial, we're for everyone.

Tony: We take a nondirective approach. Students shouldn't expect us to do the work for them. We give advice, feedback, but push writers to do it on their own.

Laura: I'd like for the teachers to know that we're a valuable resource, and to emphasize this to students. Also, if they give us their assignment sheets, we'll have a clearer idea of what they're looking for.

Between bursts of sound (emanating from the first floor of Mary Lyon Hall) Stacey, Tony and Laura patiently answered my questions, then (because I'm a poor note-taker) answered them again. What emerged were some questions, some answers, enough to show my readers that there is a core group of individuals who are adept at putting writing center theory to practice. As important, my Q and A sessions confirmed what I had only suspected: the PSC College Writing Center student consultants are changing how their peers view writing – and themselves.