

Writing Center Knowledge Analysis

CDA of Evidence of Writing Center Knowledge:

Jen indicated her understanding of writing center theory through her discussion of how she realized that she did *not* use the Entrance sheet in a way that would help her co-construct the session with a student. In the first stanza of her reflection (See Gee, *How To Do Discourse Analysis: A Toolkit*, for a detailed description of this critical discourse analysis methodology),

Jen focuses on the start of the session and her concerns about putting Student A at ease:

I think the start of the session seems almost a little robotic with how I go straight into filling out the sheet and asking only the questions on it. Despite this, I do think the student felt comfortable. She told me what the professor has pointed out in her papers before, so she knew what she wanted to work on in the session. She said that she wanted to make sure that her paper and ideas were clear and connected. I don't think we could have really done anything differently for setting up the agenda of the session.

By immediately acknowledging that she has failed to participate fully in a process that is supposed to both gather information and set up a comfortable, conversational relationship with the student by sounding "robotic," Jen acknowledges the expectation that she will help to create a space for collaboration within a session. She then considers the student's comfort level, and constructs an identity for the student as a knowledgeable and responsible agent who brings to the tutoring session an understanding of her discipline, her assignment, and her professor's needs, as well as her own independent agency as a writer. Jen's switch to "we" when describing the setting of the agenda ("I don't think we could have really done anything differently...") is particularly appropriate because it indicates her awareness that both tutor and student share this

responsibility. In this way, Jen ensures that Student A's voice and both the assignment's and professor's "voices" are fully heard in this stanza, using what Gee calls "intertextuality" to weave all of the participating voices together. Jen does this by quoting Student A's words indirectly, describing the assignment, and providing Student A's report of her professor's views. This intertextuality creates a strong sense that Jen understands the kind of collaboration that should take place between herself and the student. By viewing herself in a situation where she did not encourage collaboration as well as she might have, Jen was able to see how she could use the opportunity created by the Entrance Sheets to create a more collaborative interaction with students.

Lori's description of how she set up her session with Student B indicates that she is struggling to fully internalize this institutional and procedural knowledge. Strong sentence-level evidence for this is visible in stanza 2 of her reflection:

At the start of the session, I am supposed to explain why reading aloud is important. This is something I tend to forget. I can see why it is important to start out the session this way.

Although I did ask the student who she would prefer to read the paper. Only after I began, did I realize that the paper was supposed to be an informal paper. This made me realize that the session should begin with a brief discussion of what kind of paper she was writing and what are the important aspects of this type of paper.

While Lori is indicating that she knows the "rules" of starting a session ("I am supposed to explain..."), her use of the verb "supposed to" suggests that she does not fully understand how or why this "rule" exists and what the benefits are of explaining to a new student why we use certain processes in sessions and constructing the plan for the session together with the student. She also presents herself as the "self" who is delivering information and the student as the

“other” who is receiving information by constructing each sentence with an “I” subject, thereby indicating that she is the agentive member of this pair. Lori also includes a sentence fragment in which she notes that she did participate in part of an appropriate procedure: “Although I did ask the student who she would prefer to read the paper.” This fragment has the feel of an afterthought, an add-on that has not yet been fully incorporated into the structure of Lori’s thinking.

While Lori does indicate some awareness that another strategy (discussing the assignment before reading the paper) would have been helpful, she is again looking at it from the position of a self who failed to perform a required operation properly and how that failure affected her own performance in this situation (she had to revise her thinking about the writing once she realized the assignment was more informal than she had assumed), rather than how having a conversation with the student about her assignment would have invited the student to participate more fully in the session by sharing important information about both the assignment and her understanding of it. While appropriate ideas are in evidence here, they have not yet been fully or meaningfully integrated into Lori’s practice.

Kate was an experienced tutor who chose to record two sessions with Student D, a regular of hers who Kate felt had become too dependent on her. In stanza 4 of her first reflection, Kate writes:

For the second reflection paper, the student would have to base her work on her experiences. We also looked at the assignment sheet together and compared what she had to what the professor was looking for.

Kate’s use of “we” here indicates her understanding of the value of collaboration, but when I viewed the video recording of the session, I found that the interaction was not as collaborative as

Kate described. Instead, Kate held the assignment sheet and read it aloud to the student, then she explained the assignment to the student. By presenting the assignment to the student in this way, Kate situated Student D as a receiver of information rather than an active and, in fact, responsible participant in decoding the assignment. Kate then walked the student through her draft, noting where and how it deviated from the assignment. Viewing and analyzing the video and Kate's reflection made the discrepancy between Kate's understanding of how to co-construct a session with a student ("we also looked at the assignment sheet together") and her actual positioning of herself within a session visible to both of us, providing an opening for discussion about how Kate could have asked the student to explain the assignment or to read it aloud, thereby inviting the student to take on some of the responsibility of understanding the assignment. Oftentimes in tutors' session notes in our center, tutors will present what they have done with students in exactly this way: *we* read through their introduction; *we* revised their Works Cited page, etc. This analysis made me more sensitive to this wording: what do we mean, exactly, when we say that "we" did something together.

Reflections on session closings were another place I found examples of tutors' engagement with institutional and procedural knowledge. For example, in her reflection, Jen filled out the Exit Sheet with Student A in a helpful way, as she discussed in stanza 6 of her reflection:

We did go over the exit sheet together because this student had never been to the writing center before. I definitely think she was a little surprised by the first question ["What did you learn about writing from this session?"], like she wouldn't expect to have to think about what changes were made or how she learned from the session. Although she gave an answer, it was a little vague, so I added more to it to show her why what we did was important.

Jen notes that this student was a newcomer to the writing center and so she, as the tutor and more knowledgeable member of the pair in this interaction, needed to take the lead. She also indicates her awareness that one of the institutional priorities of the writing center is that students learn something from the session to take with them to other writing situations, and that tutors and students meet that priority together.

Lori also exhibited her understanding of the goal of student learning in her discussion of closing her session:

I was satisfied with how I ended the session, asking her what she learned about writing from the session. I feel that it is important for them to take something away that they can apply to another paper they will write in the future.

However, Lori also switches to the third person plural pronoun (“they”/”them”) in last sentence, which shifts her focus from speaking about the particular student she was working with (“she”) to students in general. This seems to depersonalize the encounter, again presenting Lori’s understanding as more of a rule to follow than an internalization of how writing center procedures should serve the purpose of co-constructing productive individual relationships with students, but it is a very good first step in that understanding.

Kate’s discussion of the use of the Exit Sheet with Student D reveals her frustration with her attempts to encourage Student D to become more responsible for her own writing, and illustrates why procedures need to be critically re-evaluated. In the last stanza of her second reflection Kate explains:

I have previously suggested to this student to keep the take-home part of the exit sheets by her computer so that she can review all of her common mistakes before bringing her paper to me; however, she clearly has not done this, for she repeatedly returns to the WC with the same errors.

She often waits for me to go through all of the questions I typically ask her, as when she is checking to see if she needs commas in [sic] coordinating conjunctions. I told her explicitly to ask herself these questions as she's writing so that she will have to revise less and so that her writing improves. I'm hoping that I get through to her, but I am unsure that I will.

Kate describes a process that she has developed and that she feels should be productive but that she has come to find both ineffective and frustrating: Kate creates a checklist of things to correct in Student D's writing as the student is reading through her paper in the session and they correct these items together, with Kate mostly taking the lead. Kate then sends Student D home with a list of things to check in her writing, but Student D returns in her next session so that Kate can walk her through that list, pointing out errors for them to correct together. This lack of responsibility and initiative on Student D's part was frustrating to Kate. Based on my many observations of Kate and Student D working together, it was clear to me that this student wanted Kate to be the authority and resisted taking responsibility for her writing herself. By giving her a checklist to follow, Kate was attempting to get the student to take on that responsibility, but Student D ignored the checklists and returned in her next session expecting Kate to again walk her through any necessary corrections. Since, as Kate notes, this was an ongoing dynamic with this student, Kate could have considered this situation more productively if she had been able to be more critical of her use of the Exit Sheet, rather than focusing on what she saw as the student's misuse of it. Maybe the checklist idea was not going to work for this student, as it seemed to be reinforcing Kate as the authority. This moment in her reflection presents an opportunity for Kate to look at this strategy and to consider other possibilities for the use of the Exit Sheet. For example, Kate could have encouraged the student to fill out the Exit Sheet

herself, identifying the one or two things she would want to look for in her own writing, thus encouraging the student to take more responsibility for her own revision.