

A Reflection on Reflective Writing Center Work

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INTRODUCTION

We—undergraduates, Julia and Zach, and staff member Renata—work in the Writing Center at Carleton, a small liberal arts college. Over the past two years, we’ve been exploring the use of reflective practice. Christopher Johns describes the basic idea of this strategy: “Simply, yet profoundly, reflective practice is concerned with learning through everyday experiences towards realizing desirable practice. Insights are gained through reflection that can be acted on in subsequent experiences” (3). In 1909 and 1933, John Dewey discussed the role of reflection in education, and Donald Schön, in the 1980s, expanded on Dewey’s work, as reflection became an integral part of teacher education. Writing consultants are not teachers-in-training, but as we work collaboratively with students to facilitate their development as writers, our task is, like teaching, full of moments about which reflection can be useful. Karen Noordhoff and Judith Kleinfeld say that “teachers must be prepared both cognitively and emotionally to understand and deal with complex and ambiguous educational situations” (165). On any given day in the writing center, so must we.

In our Program for Multilingual Writers we are using reflection as one form of professional development for a group of writing consultants who hold recurring sessions with writers for whom English is a second or other language (ESOL). In a 1991 article (reprinted in 2010), Gail Okawa and co-authors point out that to facilitate positive relationships in multi-cultural environments, “tutors must engage in various forms of critical reflection or inquiry that may include an exploration of their own assumptions, values, and world views” (43). While we are not linking the value of reflection exclusively to working with ESOL writers, cultural and

linguistic differences add a layer of complexity to consulting work that makes reflection especially valuable. We see the potential for reflective practice to benefit both consultants and the writers we serve. In this article we describe, from the perspectives of our various roles as coordinator and new and experienced consultants, the process, challenges, and rewards of reflection in writing center work.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN OUR PARTICULAR CONTEXT

Renata, Coordinator

I'd long been interested in the relevance of reflective practice for writing center work and was excited to realize its potential for the program I currently coordinate. Our program offers students with English as a second or other language the option of more individualized and sustained support than is typically possible through writing center visits alone. Each term, between ten and twenty of our consultants are paired with ESOL writers to meet at mutually agreed times outside our Writing Center for an hour or two each week; the pairs meet throughout the term, although sometimes a consultant/writer pair works together for several terms. Knowing they will have multiple appointments with the same student helps facilitate consultants' reflection on the ongoing work. Besides the idea that reflection could enhance practice, I was motivated by a secondary factor: when I first began to coordinate the program, I had only limited opportunities to interact with individual writing consultants face-to-face, and I believed that reading and responding to their reflections would both allow me some insight into how their work was going and help me serve as a more effective mentor for them.

Reflective practice is more complex than it may sound. According to Judith Harford and Gerry MacRuaric, Dewey's writings on reflection in education emphasize the "importance of active and deliberate engagement with problematic situations, underpinned by an awareness of one's own ideas and attitudes . . . open-mindedness, a sense of responsibility and wholeheartedness or dedication" (1885). In other words, Dewey seems to be talking about attitude and moral approach, as well as a thinking process. Schön, the other scholar whose works are most often cited in relation to reflective practice, describes the practice quite differently, elaborating on reflection-in-action (a sort of thinking on one's feet) versus reflection after the experience. Carol Rodgers and Thomas Farrell (along with many other education scholars) say that reflection is difficult both to discuss and to teach because its definitions are so numerous and vague. Joelle Jay and Kerri

Johnson offer a typology with three dimensions of reflective practice. First, they cite what Schön refers to as problem setting, in which the reflecters identify a situation or a moment from their real-world practice and describe it in some detail. Reflecters then use a comparative and critical approach, reframing the issue “in light of alternative views, others’ perspectives, research, etc.,” so that they can establish a “renewed perspective” (77).

Jay and Johnson’s typology of reflection is similar to the guidelines I used in eliciting reflections from writing consultants in our program. I offered open-ended prompts such as “Think about any awkward times or light-bulb moments you have had in your conferences so far. What have you learned from these? What would you do differently next time? What would you like to carry forward?” When they first began writing reflections, some consultants responded by simply describing an event or a consultation. After reading some sample reflections in which writers explored their own attitudes toward the event they described, or asked probing questions about its implications, consultants began to produce richer responses.

PROCESS AND REWARDS OF REFLECTION: TWO WRITING CONSULTANTS AND A COORDINATOR SHARE THEIR VIEWS

Julia, New Consultant

When I began my first reflection on working with Yanhan¹, the ESOL writer I’d been assigned to meet with regularly throughout my first term as a consultant, I struggled to decide on a topic. I had only read the two examples of reflective writing provided by Renata. As a novice consultant and reflecter, I didn’t fully understand the purpose of reflections or the process of writing one. My inexperience as a consultant paralleled Yanhan’s inexperience with writing in English. Her Chinese-language high school had offered her few opportunities for her to write in English, and she was extremely aware of and dissatisfied with her English syntax. I thought about the inner conflict I felt about offering her options for rephrasing sentences. Yanhan was always excited to see how the same sentence could be arranged in many ways. However, as a new consultant, I worried that I was being too directive and appropriative by offering her sentences I knew she could not write without my assistance. Beyond the issue of syntax, I constantly worried that I was helping too much or overstepping my consultant role. I had been unconsciously feeling this concern for a while, but I was not directly acknowledging or confronting it. As I wrote my first reflection about my consulting experience with Yanhan, I had the growing sense that I was

addressing an important issue. Through writing my reflection, I identified for myself the assistance I felt comfortable offering, and I differentiated between merely editing Yanhan's work and actually helping her learn more complex syntax. I did not edit her work by replacing her sentences with my own; rather, I offered her several rewordings to illustrate syntactic possibilities. She could then use her original sentence or choose one of my suggestions. Even more powerfully, she could identify phrases within my sentences that captured her ideas, and then work those fragments into her writing with my assistance. Reflecting on our process helped me recognize behaviors to avoid, like attempting to edit or take control, as well as the benefits of offering example sentences. By noticing my successful techniques, I could actively choose to continue using them, helping Yanhan clarify her current essay while also broadening her knowledge of English syntax for future writing.

Now that I have become more accustomed to the process of reflecting on my consulting work, I realize that writing reflections is the main opportunity I have to carefully consider how I approach my job. Since consultations engage my whole attention as I intently listen, read, and respond, I don't have time during a session to think more abstractly about my approach. Reflections give me the ability to return to past challenges and contemplate how I handled them, which I could not do while I was actively consulting. Reflections also allow me to consider how I might want to adjust my approach when a similar situation arises in a future consultation.

Zach, Experienced Consultant

When I want to start writing a reflection, I think about a moment in a conference that has been bothering me and try to locate the source of my discomfort. Exploring my discomfort forces me to examine the moment from a variety of angles. When I am satisfied with my analysis of what originally troubled me in a conference, I find myself trying to generate solutions to address the problem I've identified. I could not have engaged in such brainstorming for solutions without first choosing an appropriate organizational framework to conceptualize and analyze the original troubling moment. The potential solutions I generate give me concrete actions to try in my next consultation with an ESOL writer. More often than not, the process of identifying solutions for one problem reveals additional insight gaps and further areas for my improvement.

As I have become more comfortable working with students and thinking reflectively, I have found reflections increasingly useful. The process not only helps me make concrete adjustments to my writing conferences but also develops my abilities to empathize with the ESOL writers I work with and to examine critically the power dynamics at play in my relationships with them. I have been amazed at how much reflection reveals about my conferences and my understanding of the pedagogical practices I employ. Reflection keeps the writers, rather than the texts they bring to our conferences, foremost in my mind and enables me to focus on collaborating.

Renata, Coordinator

I respond to consultants' reflections by email, addressing whatever seems most significant with advice, reassurance, affirmation, or an invitation to talk in person. After collecting all the reflections, I assemble and reread the entire set to track common or interesting themes for further discussion. Themes brought forward by reflection have included the various roles consultants play when meeting a writer on a regular basis, building student confidence, power dynamics that may surface, negotiating cultural differences, supporting better word choice and syntax, balancing answering questions and being overly directive, and many more. At two or three meetings each term, our group of 10-16 consultants discusses issues raised by their reflections, which indicates how our reflective practice has facilitated effective sharing of challenges and strategies. Farrell claims that reflective practice requires open-mindedness or the "desire to listen to more than one side of the issue and to give attention to alternative views" (15), and our group conversations reflect this attitude as they enhance the value of individual reflections. As an unanticipated benefit, I have used some of the themes generated by written reflections to develop activities for our whole Writing Center staff.

Consultants were sometimes slow to submit reflections in a timely way, and I wanted to find out why. I was also interested in discovering whether or not they perceived writing reflections as beneficial. On an anonymous survey, I asked questions about our reflections such as "How clear is the purpose?" and "How could we improve the process?" The survey revealed that for approximately 50% of consultants, time constraints were a barrier to reflective writing. One response suggested that slowness to complete the task does not necessarily indicate lack of interest: "Even when I do not actually write a reflection, I find being

prompted to reflect is helpful for tutoring. I like taking time to reflect [even though] the actual writing feels like an obligation/busy work.” In answer to a survey question concerning to what extent consultants felt reflection writing enhanced their work, seven out of twelve responses were positive, five were neutral, and none were negative. Jim Bell pointed out in his 2001 empirical study that tutors in his writing center responded positively to reflective practice, but there was little evidence that they changed their tutoring behaviors. In the absence of empirical research on consultations, we at Carleton cannot claim to have evidence of changed practice either, but we are encouraged that more than half of our tutors perceive that reflection enhances their practice. Responses to the survey suggest that reflection has—at the very least—been effective in prompting consultants to think about their own assumptions and methods in their work with ESOL students.

Since the use of reflective writing has been somewhat experimental for our center, and the reasons for requiring it have evolved and shifted over time, it is not surprising that even consultants who were open to the idea were unsure about the purpose of our reflection activities. Referring to her early experience writing reflections, Julia recalled, “I thought of it more as a report or check-up for other people to read about my work, rather than something I was writing to benefit myself.” She was partly right; as mentioned earlier, I was hoping to learn more from reflections about how the consultants’ work was going, although not in the spirit of “checking up” on them. Julia’s words were a good reminder that I needed to state the purpose(s) for reflection clearly and to restate them intermittently, offering ample opportunities for consultants to ask questions.

I also learned that explaining what reflective thinking and writing involve is indeed a challenge. As discussed earlier, and as Rodgers points out, “it is unclear how systematic reflection is different from other types of thought” (843). A typology such as Jay and Johnson offer is helpful in providing guidance, and I also found it useful to discuss with consultants sample reflective writing attempts by their peers. Like writing center work itself, for many of us reflection is best learned through the direct experience of simply doing it. And, like tutoring or consulting, reflection is not always an easy task. Producing a meaningful reflection can involve trial and error and needs to be supported. Support might include staff mentors sharing our own reflections and difficulties, more frequent group discussion of prompts and models, as well as the issues that arise

from reflecting. Initially, I imagined reflection only as a solitary activity, but our experiences over the past two years indicate that reflective work is much enhanced by discussion because we can help each other develop new perspectives.

OUR HOPES AS WE MOVE FORWARD

We would like to find more ways of using reflection to strengthen our work. One interesting possibility would be to practice reflection about recorded sessions. Writing about teacher education, Harford and MacRuairc point out that video can be a useful tool in meaningful reflective practice because peers can watch and analyze recorded sessions together, which allows them to “view a wider spectrum of practice” (1884). These authors see reflective dialogue about sessions captured on film as a way to scaffold and promote reflectivity, which they acknowledge can be challenging to elicit.

For us at Carleton, our online “Forum,” has the potential to play a larger role in how we share reflections with each other. Besides posting excerpts from reflections as the basis for discussion at our face-to-face meetings, we could also use the Forum to engage in more online discussion of the problems, ideas, and triumphs consultants encounter. In this way, reflections would encourage consultants to share best practices with each other even more than they currently do. We also hope to make more direct and functional use of our individual reflections. For example, taking the time to revisit written reflections after discussion and to develop plans for change might facilitate more action-oriented application. Although reflection requires time and focus, we have found it helpful as a form of consultant development. As Julia observed, “No matter how my reflection ends, I come away with more knowledge about my tutoring approach and a sense of heightened awareness of the choices I make in consulting sessions.”

NOTES

1. Not the student's real name.



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