

Strategy-Centered or Student-Centered: A Meditation on Conflation

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Despite the possibility that non-directivity is no longer considered best practice among writing center directors and scholars, I continue to see consultants in my writing center attempting to use only non-directive methods in their sessions. In fact, in every one of the four writing centers where I have worked since 2007, I have found myself either consoling consultants who felt they had been too directive or trying to convince consultants that it is OK to sometimes write on students' papers. In each writing center, despite tutor training that did or did not push for non-directive tutoring methods, consultants (myself included) have expressed anxiety around the directive/non-directive binary. I believe that these anxieties remain, not because of a lack of clear training or scholarship on the topic, but because tutors (and perhaps their directors) are conflating the concept of student-centeredness with the concept of non-directivity.

As indicated in varying scholarship and WC listserv discussions, the non-directive/directive tutoring binary has been debated in scholarship, lore, whispered conversations between consultants, and tutoring training sessions. This binary focuses what is perhaps one of the writing center community's longest conversations. Stephen North's (1984) seminal work pushing for "better writers, not better writing" may have been the impetus for consultants and directors alike to see non-directive tutoring as the best means for developing self-sufficient writers and avoiding a "fix-it-shop" assumption of the center. Further, texts that advocated strategies for non-directive approaches like Jeff Brooks (1991) were likely at the root of the push for non-directive tutoring that guided my own initial tutoring strategies as an undergraduate writing center consultant. However, since North's and Brooks' pieces were published, multiple scholars have complicated and questioned the initial assumption of

non-directivity as best practice (Shamoon and Burns, Latterell, Carino, Corbett, Sloan, Sentell, Clark). Most writing center directors and scholars would likely agree that the non-directive/directive binary is no longer useful (Sentell), and that most sessions require a “shuttling back and forth” between directive and nondirective approaches based on the client’s needs (Grimm 22). Still, I believe that some consultants see non-directivity as the only means with which to have a truly student-centered session, despite evidence (as I have presented above) that suggests otherwise. I also believe that this conflation leads them to 1) try to tutor in an exclusively non-directive manner and/or 2) feel guilty when they cannot sustain non-directive assistance in a session.

In this piece, using personal narratives from my undergraduate, masters, and PhD tutoring experiences, as well as data collected from a small study conducted in a mid-sized Midwestern university, I will illuminate the ways that non-directive and student-centered tutoring are conflated, and I will provide some insights for how I hope to address this conflation in the future as a writing center director.

STUDENT-CENTERED AND NON-DIRECTIVE: A BRIEF MEDITATION ON TERMS

Student-centered education, at its core, refers to teaching methods that shift the focus from the teacher to the student; often this shift in focus aims to give students more agency and independence. The writing center’s peer-to-peer model offers just such a student-centered model, “help that [is] not an extension of but an alternative to traditional classroom teaching,” according to Bruffee (637). The writing center often provides students with more agency over their work; they gain that agency not through working with an “expert” who tells them what to do in order to get a good grade, but rather through collaboration with a peer.

Non-directive tutoring strategies likely stem from the push for collaborative, student-centered learning in a writing center consultation. Indeed, if consultations are supposed to shift the focus from the teacher to the student, it would be logical to develop consultation strategies that center on the client; those strategies might include asking more questions than providing answers. It may also look like Brooks’ concept of “minimalist tutoring,” which includes the suggestions to not write on the client’s paper or hold a pen, sit further away from the paper than

the client, and have the client read the paper aloud (3). These strategies, according to Brooks, are crucial because “the less we do to a paper, the better. The object in the writing center session is not the paper, but the student” (4). When I first read Brooks’ concept of minimalist tutoring as an undergraduate tutor, I immediately connected non-directivity to student-centeredness. I wanted to serve my clients the best I could, and it seemed that non-directivity was the only way I could keep the focus on the client instead of on myself. What follows is a personal story about my own conflation of the terms to illuminate the motivations behind such a conflation.

NON-DIRECTIVE = STUDENT-CENTERED: UNDERGRADUATE YEARS

Perhaps because they seemingly provided the clear-cut rules I craved as a new tutor, my initial uninformed readings of texts like North’s and Brooks’ led me to believe that my efficacy as a tutor was wholly reliant on my ability to foreground the power of the client with whom I was working. I believed the only way to put the agency in the hands of my client was to be as non-directive as possible. I (incorrectly) believed that being non-directive was the best way to embody the main ethos of the writing center because non-directive tutoring facilitated collaboration, and collaboration was student-centered. This understanding first caused me to conflate student-centeredness with non-directive tutoring. I tried for months as a new tutor to follow the rules: I never held the pen, and I never made suggestions.

However, as I gained experience, I learned the nuanced connection between hands-off methods and more forthcoming ones. I learned that it was possible to ask leading questions but also to provide straight-forward answers, to let the client write on their own paper but to feel comfortable writing my own notes where necessary. I began to see that student-centeredness, at its core, was about serving the needs of the individual student, even (and perhaps especially) when they would benefit from some directive tutoring. Despite the apparent efficacy of my consulting skills, I felt that I was not tutoring the “right way.” By the time I began my master’s program, I had three years of experience contending with my own perceived sense that, because I used directive strategies, I was unable to be student-centered.

GUILT= NON-DIRECTIVE + STUDENT CENTERED: A STUDY

Working as a tutor at two different writing centers during my master’s program, I noticed a similar preoccupation with

non-directivity among my fellow consultant colleagues, new undergraduate consultants especially. When asked about their concerns as practicing consultants, many expressed varying levels of guilt or shame following sessions where they felt they had been too directive, and therefore, unhelpful in their mission of being student-centered. Or they felt that, in an attempt to be non-directive, they had not helped the client enough. Seeing my past shame reflected in my undergraduate colleagues, I implemented a small study to investigate whether students in this center were feeling guilt about their tutoring styles, and if they were, whether that guilt was connected to a fear of directivity.

I modeled this study on Jennifer Nicklay's "Got Guilt?: Consultant Guilt in the Writing Center Community," in which she examines the responses of eleven writing center tutors in a survey geared toward understanding when and why tutors in her center felt guilty about their tutoring practices. Nicklay found that tutors who valued collaboration (as interpreted from Brooks and North) often felt guilty when they deviated from what they believed to be the embodiment of collaboration: non-directive tutoring. My own pilot study, then, borrowed heavily from Nicklay's initial example: I surveyed, in written, open-response form, seventeen tutors from the two writing centers in the university I worked at, asking students to list some of the concepts they had learned in writing center training or in texts they'd been assigned, what they knew about the non-directive and directive binary, what tutoring "principles" guided their tutoring (e.g. non-directivity, student-centeredness, better writers not better writing, etc.), and whether they ever deviated from those principles. Nicklay's findings suggest a correlation between tutors' guilty feelings and a valuation of non-directivity; in particular, she found that a strict adherence to non-directive tutoring was too limiting and caused guilt. My results were similar, and indicated a further correlation between guilty feelings and a *conflation* of non-directivity with student-centeredness.

One of the eight interview questions provided the most insight into the shame and guilt tutors sometimes felt. This question asked consultants how they felt when they deviated from the principles they used to inform their sessions (most tutors cited non-directivity). Though this question did not explicitly ask about guilty feelings, many tutors mentioned feeling guilty when deviating from non-directive tutoring practices. Tutors also often cited feeling either as though they had failed their

clients by (1) being too directive (and therefore causing the client to learn nothing) or (2) being non-directive but feeling as if the client did not learn anything through these methods. Here, I saw consultants assuming that being directive took agency away from the client, and so they would consult with non-directive methods, even when those methods did not seem to help the client. If tutors “accidentally” veered into directive territory, even when the session seemed to go well, they worried they had commandeered the session. This guilt manifested itself in two often combined ways: tutors felt guilty because they broke what they saw as a major “rule” of the writing center when they turned toward directive strategies, and/or they felt guilty because they worried their directive style had taken the focus off the client (essentially, I argue, they believed their directivity was the antithesis of student-centeredness).

Two of these consultants’ responses seemed particularly fraught with self-reproach. One consultant’s response may indicate that she views her tutoring as correlating to her own self worth. She writes,

. . . I feel like a bad tutor when I just give students the “answer,” because there usually isn’t one “answer”—it makes me feel like I’m not good at my job, that the student would have been better off with another tutor, or that I’m not particularly smart.

This consultant’s guilt suggests a fear of only offering one of potentially many answers, a legitimate concern. However this tutor’s anxiety also appears to be a symptom of giving any answer at all, instead of posing a question or merely offering up some suggestions. Her concern that providing the “answer” does a disservice to her client is similarly reflective of Brooks’ argument: “A student who comes to the writing center and passively receives knowledge from a tutor will not be any closer to his own paper than he was when he walked in. He may leave with an improved paper, but he will not have learned much” (2). A directive session, implied by Brooks, is not just unproductive; it is *harmful* to the client. A consultant like the one above may see the act of giving an “answer” as taking a learning opportunity from a client, thus focusing more on the consultant’s ideas than the client’s. In this way, the consultant may believe that the only way to provide student-centered instruction is to be non-directive. Similarly, the tutor in my pilot study believed that she herself had in some way done such a disservice to her client that the client should have seen someone else.

Another tutor compares her divergence from non-directive tutoring as failure. She writes,

I attempt to use non-directive methods, but I am currently not very good at it. I try to use questions and if I inadvertently frame the question wrong, the session turns directive [. . .] I feel like I ~~fail~~ let down the student, because I want to help them, not tell them what to do.

This consultant crossed out the word “fail” on her response, but the word remains on the survey as an indicator that she does not just feel guilty—she believes she is a failure as a tutor. This tutor’s thoughts are similarly reflective of North’s oft-cited dictums: “Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing” (438) and “in a writing center, the object is to make sure that writers, not necessarily their texts are what get changed by instruction” (38). These two dicta have become shorthand to express a value of student learning over paper improvement. It was easy for me as a new consultant to believe that “better writers, not better writing” meant that the *client* should be doing the work, not me. I (mistakenly) believed that being student-centered meant not being paper-centered; directive tutoring meant focusing on the paper, while non-directive tutoring meant focusing on the client. When I took the reins in a session, offering a suggestion instead of a set of leading questions, I felt I had failed the client, just as the consultant above does.

SO WHAT? REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE PLANS

Leaving my master’s program behind for a PhD program at a Midwestern R1 institution, I wondered if consultants would express similar feelings of guilt. In the semester-long training course, this writing center’s directors are clear about the complexities of non-directive and directive tutoring, advocating for consultants to use a multitude of varying strategies throughout a session as needed. Still, I recently had a conversation with a new undergraduate consultant who indicated she refused to write on a client’s paper: “I don’t want to give any answers. That’s not my job.” Her response mirrored a conversation I had last year with our associate director who lamented overhearing consultants announce to clients, “we don’t *do* grammar here,” even though our directors advocate for grammar-based consultations if clients request them. Both of these statements from consultants in this center remind me of Jay Sloan’s contention that the writing center’s identity is often “defined first and foremost in

terms of what they are *not*. We do *not* proofread. We are *not* fix-it shops” (3). The consultants in our center, in adhering to what they believe is the student-centered model, enact non-directive strategies, sometimes directly opposing the requests of the client. Indeed,

When a student asks for line editing, extensive hands-on direction, or micro-level grammatical instruction, the tutor is thrust into the unenviable position of balancing these requests with our process-driven, facilitative ideals. . . those tutors who adhere to the order of concerns and our non-directive principles risk ignoring the desires of the student—who, ironically, is supposed to be at the very center of our practice. (Sloan 5)

While the two consultant examples I have provided do not mirror the guilty feelings of the consultants I surveyed at my master’s institution, they do embody the description Sloan provides. At the heart of this description is a conflation of student-centeredness with non-directivity that leads some consultants to privilege non-directivity in the interest of “improving” the students but “not necessarily their texts” (North 438), a dictum that could be construed by a new tutor as student-centeredness. Inevitably, this conflation of terms is harmful because acting upon it can lead consultants to feel guilty about their tutoring strategies or ignore the desires of the clients who are supposed to be at the center in the first place (as is the case for Sloan’s consultants).

I hope the next step in my writing center journey will be to take a position as a writing center director. In that position, I hope to address the conflation of these two terms by facilitating conversations about the complexities of the non-directive/directive binary, and by addressing the distinct differences between the concepts of non-directivity and student-centeredness. Such conversations that put some much needed space between the two terms can allow consultants (particularly those who are new) to develop their own consulting strategies and practices free of guilt or perceived mandated agendas. Making the client the top priority of a session comes in many different forms; acknowledging this point allows tutors to have more autonomy and to claim ownership over their own tutoring instead of feeling like an enforcer of rules mandated from above. This space can allow tutors to discern which kinds of tutoring methods they might be best at, which can in turn allow them to develop multiple strategies for various students’ different needs. Developing nuance in

the concepts of non-directivity and student-centeredness opens a new kind of space for tutors to claim their own agency and free themselves from unnecessary guilt.



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