

A Systematic Method for Engaging Writing Center Consultants in Far Transfer

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Writing centers are a nexus for transfer of learning. At its simplest, *transfer of learning* means that “[t]he experience or performance on one task influences performance on some subsequent task” (Ellis 3). If you can drive a car, you can learn to drive a truck (Perkins and Salomon, “Teaching” 22). The mind, recognizing similarities to what is already known, extends what is similar to another activity (Devet 119). Clients engage in transfer when they realize, for example, that the rhetorical concepts of occasion, audience, and purpose apply to every writing situation. But, writing center consultants, too, use transfer. As consultants reflect on and discuss their consultations with fellow workers, they “detect, elect, connect” (Perkins and Salomon, “Cognitive” 250) what they have learned to their next sessions, such as realizing that encouraging a student writer to relax and to enter a productive mindset is a valuable strategy for future sessions. Such transfer helps account for how consultants evolve.



When reflecting on their sessions with clients and transferring what they have learned, consultants undergo two basic types of transfer: *near* and *far*. *Near* transfer refers to consultants’ recognizing connections for contexts that are roughly similar or closely related, such as assisting clients in identifying a comma splice in different parts of an essay. *Far* transfer, though, more appropriately describes how consultants begin to grow *as consultants*. In far transfer, the mind connects situations or concepts that seem distant and unrelated (Devet 122), abstracting from one and applying it to another (Perkins and Salomon, “Teaching” 26). A key example of this type of transfer is the invention of the WeedEater by George Ballas, who conceived of his ubiquitous garden device by watching the whirling nylon brushes glide around his car as it passed through a car wash (“Inventor” A-10). Ballas’ mind linked the brushes’ motions to the removal of weeds around trees and shrubs so that gardeners could protect tree bark.

Consultants undergo similar cognitive leaps between different circumstances when they closely examine a context to link it with previous knowledge. For instance, sessions with a recalcitrant client (“I don’t need to visit the writing center. I like the way my paper is written now.”) and with a crying student (“I can’t write. I never made bad grades in high school.”) may, ostensibly, appear dissimilar. One client resists the center’s help by projecting surety and confidence, while the other one exudes an air of inadequacy. Although each client’s situation is unique, in far transfer, consultants can look for the connections between seemingly dissimilar writing center sessions. Here, what links these two different types of clients is that both sound as if they are seeking some acknowledgment of their feelings. In the words of the playwright Arthur Miller, “Attention must be paid” (Act I). Consultants can show they recognize the recalcitrant writer’s concerns with “I understand that you may not want to talk to a consultant, but while you are here, let’s use this opportunity to look at your paper.” Consultants can also apply this strategy to the crying student by referring to the writer’s fears about adjusting to college (“It is tough to do college writing right out of high school.”) and by acknowledging the writer’s reaction to a low grade (“I know how you feel about receiving a ‘D’, but, together, we can look over the paper to see what needs work.”). In far transfer, then, consultants see connections between dissimilar situations so that their prior experience helps them deal with seemingly different types of clients. Such a connection or far transfer is exactly the type of development that directors want to foster in consultants.

To help consultants “detect, elect, connect” (Perkins and Salomon, “Cognitive” 250) their experiences, directors often encourage their staffs to craft a type of far transfer—an analogy—in order to describe the consultants’ work (Nordstrom). Writing such analogies is useful since far transfer is fundamental to metaphorical or creative thinking (Haskell 301). However, even more beneficial is to use analogies in order to encourage consultants to draw on their prior knowledge (experience as consultants) and carry it from one type of consultation to another, making them more conscious of what they are doing unconsciously. To carry out far transfer, consultants need explicit guidance, especially because far transfer is not automatic. It must be deliberate or an “extended cognitive effort and hence require[s] significant motivation and dispositional drivers” (Salomon and Perkins, “Knowledge” 251) so that consultants can examine their own “mental processes” (Perkins and Salomon, “Teaching” 31) and “sense the similarities and differences between learning situations” (Hill 79).

For far transfer to be deliberate, consultants should engage in

what Lauren Marshall Bowen and Matthew Davis call “multi-dimensional reflective approaches.” Drawing on Kara Taczak and Liane Robertson’s work, Bowen and Davis stress that consultants should look backward (review prior knowledge of working with clients and their own experience with writing), look forward (apply what’s currently learned to other contexts), look inward (examine the current situation to see how it affects the consultants’ development), and look outward (theorize concepts about being consultants and present their ideas to others). Crafting analogies can achieve such cognitive development if directors ask consultants a series of structured questions about the consultants’ analogies. Intentional analysis of analogies lets consultants reflect metacognitively (backward, forward, inward, outward), seeing links between dissimilar topics and abstracting from those contexts. In other words, monitoring one’s mental processes helps consultants understand that their comparisons (far transfer) use their prior knowledge (Perkins and Salomon, “Teaching” 31) about being consultants so that they can apply such knowledge to future situations. What follows, then, is a *systematic* method for fostering far transfer: crafting an analogy, analyzing the analogy, answering follow-up questions, and using the analogies in group discussions. Consultants who are thus “cued, primed, and guided” (Perkins and Salomon, “Cognitive” 19) can grow and develop.

SYSTEMATIC STEPS FOR ENCOURAGING FAR TRANSFER

After receiving IRB-approval,¹ I asked fifteen consultants, with one-to-three years experience, to fill out index cards, doing the following:

STEP 1: CRAFTING AN ANALOGY

“Write a metaphor, simile, or analogy about consulting in the Writing Center by completing the following: ‘Consulting in the Writing Center is like. . . .’” Here is a consultant’s analogy: “Consulting in the Writing Lab is analogous to a single stair on an immense grand staircase.”

STEP 2: ANALYZING THE ANALOGY

Consultants analyze their analogies by answering two questions. First, “How is this analogy useful for characterizing your work?” A consultant explains his staircase image: “You, as a consultant, can only see the student along one leg of their journey. But with your help and by joining together with your fellow consultants, you provide a much needed boost that is essential for the student to reach newer, greater heights all on their own.”

The second question is “How is this analogy *not* useful for characterizing your work?” By describing how the analogy falls

short of encapsulating their work, consultants experience “not” talk (Nowacek 117-21; Reiff and Bawarshi 315). “Not” talk—telling what something is not—leads consultants to abstract from their prior experiences in order to realize their analogies’ limitations. For the staircase analogy, the consultant writes, “It underutilizes the role of the consultant, implying we have a more passive role in the educational experience, when our function in aiding clients along their academic journey is much more *active*.” Using “not” talk poses another advantage. It addresses the objection that metaphors—like the ever famous “lab,” “clinic” (Carino), “storehouse,” “Burkean parlor,” or “garret” (Lunsford)—“oversimplif[y] the work of the [center] and by extension the complexity of writing” (Boquet 9). Using “not” talk forestalls the reductive quality inherent in crafting analogies because consultants are considering where their analogies fall short of encompassing their writing center experiences.

STEP 3: ANSWERING FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

Although having consultants explain how their analogy does and does not work is useful for fostering far transfer, directors can encourage consultants to engage in another cognitive component of far transfer: *mindful* abstraction (Perkins and Salomon, “Knowledge”), where consultants are attentive to their actions “with an attitude of curiosity, openness, and acceptance” (Niemic). That is, they are aware of their “immediate, real-time experience” (Featherstone et al.). Directors foster such mindfulness—a key part of all training—by asking, “What was most useful to you as a consultant from completing this exercise?” Seeing the connection between the analogy and future consultations, a consultant answered, “This exercise allowed me to step back and assess my consulting style and practice as a whole, rather than focus on the nitty-gritty of individual consultations” (looking backward and outward). Another consultant theorizes, “My analogy solidifies the idea that we are here to guide our clients in the right direction so they can learn, not just memorize the answer or fix one thing. We should help clients with their writing forever not just in the moment” (looking outward).

Consultants also address another follow-up question: “What was difficult when you had to explain how your analogy falls short of describing your work?” A consultant who compared her work to that of a personal trainer explains the inadequacies inherent in her far transfer: “It doesn’t acknowledge the back and forth or two-way input that occurs in a consultation; thus, I had to start comparing the two components of my analogy on a deeper level so that I could begin to figure out where the disconnects were” (looking inward and backward). Answering questions about their

far transfers encourages consultants to consider modifying their present circumstances (Haskell 32), thus, grasping the depth of their work.

AN EXAMPLE OF FAR TRANSFER WITH FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

The cognitive process of far transfer is evident in a consultant's analogy about the multiple roles that she plays during a consultation: "It is like working in a hat shop." The consultant then analyzes this far transfer by answering, "How is this analogy useful for characterizing your work?" The consultant states, "We wear all kinds of hats while working. Sometimes we are encouragers, or teachers or simply listeners or commentators. It is good that we are prepared to play the most appropriate role for our clients."

Then, "How is this analogy *not* useful for training?" Further analyzing the far transfer, the consultant states, "It implies clients cannot put on their own hats as they advance in their skills and knowledge, but rather they may only borrow the hats of the Center for a short time. This is not the type of learning the Center seeks to foster in students, but rather one of self-motivated, independent learning." Her "not" talk lets the consultant abstract from her prior knowledge (looking backward) and theorize about her writing center work (looking outward).

To gain more insight into her analogy, the consultant next answers the follow-up question: "What was most useful to you as a consultant from completing this exercise?" The consultant explains, "This exercise made me think more like a teacher and articulate where the pitfalls in my choice of an analogy were." Judging her far transfer, the consultant evaluates herself (looking inward), draws on prior knowledge (looking backward), and projects into the future (looking forward), all reflective practices that allow consultants to mature in their work.

Finally, the last follow-up question, "What was difficult when you had to explain how your analogy falls short of describing your work?" reveals the consultant is again engaging in self-evaluation:

It was much more challenging to pick apart my comparison (because what could be wrong with my beautiful hat analogy?!). It was not enough to simply say, 'One hat was blue and another green, and it was too bad that Student A didn't like the green hat; therefore, it didn't work for them.' No, I had to think about it from a student's and a consultant's perspective, and then figure out how I might feel and/or interpret the analogy just posed to me. As a writer and a consultant, I had to step out of my own shoes

as best as I could and into the shoes of the person working with me at the table.

Her thoughtful reflection shows she has transferred across dissimilar contexts (hats and consulting) and abstracted principles from the contexts to anticipate how her knowledge and skills may be applied to other sessions (Driscoll). She has, in short, experienced mindful abstraction and far transfer.

USING ANALOGIES IN GROUP DISCUSSIONS

During a training session, the consultants' analogies were read aloud so that all consultants could comment and elaborate on them, with small prizes (clip-on reading lights, phone chargers) awarded for the analogies that consultants thought were most original. As can be anticipated, consultants' examples of far transfer varied. Hearing a range of analogies gave them insight into the multiplicity of roles they play in a center. One consultant, for instance, described the center's work as "doing a jig-saw puzzle. You just want the pieces of the puzzle to fit together," while another compared a consultant's work to "that of a 9-1-1 dispatcher who has to calm the client down and assess quickly the situation (i.e., the writing style) before we can offer suggestions," or "It's like driving a car. We must concentrate and stay in the present (in our lane) to give a full range of help to clients, or there could be an accident." By hearing all these themes generated by far transfer, consultants were engaging in "public reflection" and "shared metacognition" (Gardner and Korth), abstracting insights about their work.

CONCLUSION

This systematic method for fostering far transfer does ask consultants to be imaginative, an activity a consultant resisted, saying, "I found this exercise to be fairly difficult because I am not the best at creative writing." Most comments from the consultants, though, were positive: "I had the freedom to be creative in comparing something else to what I had already experienced, and this helped me to come up with my simile." While being creative is vital, far transfer—as presented with guiding questions—offers another benefit. It lets consultants learn more about their work and about how they are developing as consultants. A consultant explains: "Having to really put some thought into what I have gained through this job gave me some insight into how beneficial it has been to me." The act of far transfer, then, through a systematic set of questions, aids directors in their training and lets consultants flourish in the center.

NOTE

1. Consultants granted permission to quote all responses.



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