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Humming with Your Mouth Open: An Experiential Staff Education Pilot for Freelance Professional Tutors

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Over the past few years, writing center scholars have turned their attention to two populations of writing consultants who, while accounting for a significant minority of the writing center workforce, have been underrepresented in the literature of our field: graduate writing consultants who are enrolled in an advanced degree program at the institution where they are employed as consultants (Bell; Medvecky), and professional writing consultants. The latter category nominally includes any writing consultant with an advanced degree who is not a student at the institution where they tutor. Yet the literature on professional consultants focuses primarily on faculty members who find themselves working in their institution's writing center (Jewell and Cheatle; Reglin). However, many professional writing consultants work in writing centers as a primary source of their income and are more likely than graduate or faculty consultants to work in writing centers on multiple campuses, to bring many years of experience to their work, and, because they are not enrolled in a campus academic program, to have no clear end date for their service.

The three professional writing consultants who staff my center are hired as non-teaching adjuncts (NTAs). The NTA classification was designed by the City University of New York (CUNY) to allow for temporary, project-based assignments, but it has been used increasingly as a means of funding long-term contingent labor, especially in libraries and writing centers. NTAs are paid a relatively high wage but are limited to a small number of hours—225 per semester. Like many NTA writing consultants in the CUNY system, Hannah, Corrinne, and Kelly,[1] the participants in the project I will describe here, had all worked or were working as professional tutors in multiple writing centers within CUNY concurrently. Professional writing consultants pose unique challenges to anyone designing a program of staff education. Because of their longevity and their commit-

ment—whether simultaneous or sequential—to multiple institutions, they are likely to have participated in an array of disparate staff education programs and activities across multiple campuses and semesters over tutoring careers that can stretch across (and beyond) a decade. Prior to becoming a writing center director, I worked for a decade as a professional writing consultant. About halfway through this period, I reached a point of saturation with text-based staff development activities: a point at which reading and reflecting on writing center scholarship could sometimes feel like a rote exercise, and I wondered if the consultants in our center shared this experience. In these pages, I will describe a program of experiential staff education I developed for the professional consultants in our center, with the aim of presenting one possible model for staff education for this highly experienced and perhaps in some cases over-trained consultant population.[2]

The center I direct serves working class adult students pursuing mostly master's but also bachelor's and certificate degrees in urban studies and labor studies. Nearly all of our students work full-time, many while balancing family and other life responsibilities. The finding that adult students returning to school are more anxious about their ability to successfully complete academic work than younger students (Navarre Cleary, "Anxiety" 365; Krause 208) is reflected in frequent testimony from students who visit our writing center. A staff education discussion focused on Navarre Cleary's article, "What WPAs Need to Know to Prepare New Teachers to Work with Adult Students," led our staff to the consensus that we should create space in sessions for our students to talk about their anxieties when we can. Still, I knew that something was missing in our largely text- and discussion-driven training focused on helping our students manage their writing anxiety—a fundamentally affective issue.

Inspired by the principle of staff education activities focused on what Anne Ellen Geller et al. call "authentic experiences and reflection" (64) and an experiential staff education program they describe to illustrate this ideal,[3] I designed a staff education pilot that would allow tutors to pursue self-designed learning projects, asking consultants to identify a skill they wanted to learn that would involve a degree of discomfort, or what I called "learning risk." This criteria seemed especially important in a staff development activity designed for professional consultants, who in their sessions can draw on their professional expertise in areas such as, in the case of my staff, creative writing and performance. This pilot, which we called the Novice Project, aimed to offer writing consultants the chance to experience and reflect upon the range of emotions, in-

cluding anxiety, that inevitably accompany the process of learning an unfamiliar skill. I hoped that this experience of vulnerability in a learning situation, however limited and however dissimilar from the actual experiences of our students, would help us deepen our capacity for empathy for the writers who visit our center.

In spring 2019, I introduced the Novice Project at our pre-semester consultant orientation and presented a schedule listing dates for four Novice Project meetings that would be dedicated to discussing our learning projects and deadlines for posting four 200-500 word reflections on a private Novice Project blog. I asked consultants to design projects that would provide an experience of novicehood, connect to a need or interest in their lives, and promise the possibility of enjoyment. After introducing these criteria, I facilitated a brainstorming session that allowed consultants to share possibilities for learning projects, which included learning ancient Greek as well as studying trapeze. While consultants were encouraged to design projects that would not be directly connected with writing center practice, they were also asked to make connections to their writing center practice in blog post reflections.

There are precedents in tech, business, and other fields for allowing employees to dedicate paid work time to pursuing self-designed learning projects, including Google's 20% Time Policy, which allows employees to spend 20% of their work hours pursuing an independent project (Schrage). With these precedents in mind, I offered consultants the option of taking themselves off our student-facing tutoring schedule for one hour every two weeks, with the understanding that they would use this time to pursue their learning projects, whether onsite or (more probably) offsite. I hoped that providing consultants the option of using offsite time would open possibilities for ambitious projects that could not be pursued during downtime between sessions.

All four members of our writing center staff, including me, participated in the Novice Project pilot. Each of us had over five years of experience of either teaching college composition, working as a writing consultant, or both. All three writing consultants balanced their writing center work with the pursuit of literary and/or artistic careers. Kelly and Hannah, who hold MFAs in writing, have both published fiction and poetry in literary journals, and Hannah has published two books of poetry. Corinne, who holds an MA in performance studies, was working as a producer of documentary films. Both Hannah and Corrine were also working towards completing PhD dissertations in English literature.

Consultants weighed factors including scheduling, financial com-

mitment, and learning risk as they considered possible learning projects. Hannah ruled out clowning classes because of the time and cost involved. She ultimately decided to study singing, with private singing lessons from a professional opera singer friend. Kelly, who had initially wanted to dedicate herself to a longtime aspiration to learn ancient Greek, ultimately decided to begin a meditation and mindfulness practice. Two of us chose projects that were directly connected to our work, but that involved considerable risk. Corinne chose to develop a podcast about music. I chose to join a local chapter of Toastmasters, an organization designed to provide practice-based education for improving public speaking. Three of our cohort of four participants completed a learning project. Kelly began a meditation practice. Hannah took two singing lessons from her opera singer friend and practiced between lessons. I attended weekly Toastmasters meetings.[4]

Consultants' blog posts, in which they reflected on their progress in their learning projects, were the primary materials of analysis for this study, though I also took notes at each Novice Project reflection meeting. To analyze the themes that emerged from the blog post reflections, I created a table with three general categories: 1) anxiety, 2) positive emotions, and 3) connecting to practice. The anxiety category included the following three subcategories: feelings of intimidation by real or imagined performance ideal; uncertainty about ability to achieve progress; and feelings of isolation. The positive emotions category includes two subcategories: experiences of joy or pleasure; and recognizing progress and breakthroughs. After the final Novice Project meeting, I used the table to code our blog post reflections.

ANXIETY

An analysis of our blog posts shows that Novice Project participants experienced anxiety about learning as they pursued their projects. All three of us reported feeling intimidated by a real or imagined performance ideal. In Kelly's case, these feelings derailed her original vision for a project. When she was still considering a project focused on learning Ancient Greek, Kelly watched a video that showed an instructor teaching the Greek alphabet to a group of schoolchildren through a memory palace story in which the letters act as characters. "How silly I feel that the kids in the video are much faster at picking up the alphabet than I am," Kelly wrote of the experience, which prompted her to consider alternatives to learning a new language. Hannah reported feeling intimidated in her first singing lesson by the experience of exercising her untrained voice in the presence of her opera singer friend. I, too, wrote of feeling intimidated by more advanced practitioners I saw

speak at my first Toastmasters meeting.

Two participants reflected on feelings of uncertainty about their ability to achieve progress. For Hannah, the problem was not a lack of confidence, but a lack of discretionary time as she navigated the many commitments she'd made to herself and her various employers. In her third post, she reported feeling overwhelmed by her schedule, which included working as a writing consultant, teaching, and doing contract work as an event planner. She confessed that several weeks had passed since her last singing lesson. Kelly, meanwhile, reflected on a lack of confidence in her ability to learn to meditate. She wrote about struggling to establish a consistent practice routine, lamenting that the alarms she was setting to wake her up early to meditate "haven't been working." Even moments of success, she reported, quickly dissolved: "As soon as I find myself reaching a center of calm, I immediately get so excited that I have a thought about the calm experience I'm having, which fractures the experience…. I'm trying," she wrote, "to practice more self-compassion." Still, whenever she told someone about her burgeoning practice, she added, "but I'm not very good at it." Kelly was the only consultant who reflected on a feeling of isolation in her self-designed learning project, reflecting in her first post, "I'm actively aware that I'm alone in this process."

POSITIVE EMOTIONS

All of us experienced moments of pleasure as we pursued our projects. Kelly had hoped hers would help her "try to reckon with the intense tension I often feel in my jaw." During one of her meditation sessions, she "felt the tension begin to ease." Hannah's posts reflect a sense of wonder and enjoyment as she ventured to practice singing on the breath, humming with her mouth open, and other foundational vocal exercises. I described my first full speech at Toastmasters, the Ice Breaker, as "surprisingly fun." Two of us also noted the gratifying experience of recognizing progress or breakthroughs in our learning projects. In her final blog post, Kelly reported noticing that meditating had changed her response to stress. "After meditating consistently for the duration of this project, I found myself breathing more deeply in everyday life, without really thinking about it. Sometimes if I get upset about something, instead of responding by freaking out, I find myself shifting into a meditation-breath mode." For me, I recognized my own progress as an impromptu speaker in my increasing comfort with falling (well) short of perfection.

CONNECTING TO PRACTICE

Hannah and Kelly both empathized with the psychological strain experienced by novice writers. Hannah compared her own difficulties

over the course of the semester to make time for her learning project to the challenges adult writers with significant work and family responsibilities face/meet in carving out time to work on required writing assignments.

In her fourth post, Kelly proposed an antidote to the negative feelings our students sometimes experience around writing: recognizing small intervals of progress–or "tiny milestones"–that a writer focused on the standard they are trying to achieve can often miss. Citing her own gradual recognition that she was breathing more deeply in her daily life as a result of her meditation practice, she wrote, "Witnessing progress gives us the motivation to move through the ambiguity of aspiration and helps us become the version of ourselves that we're only beginning to imagine." This insight led Kelly to a new vision for her work: "I'm already thinking more about how I can help students recognize even the smallest milestone," she wrote.

EVALUATION

As measured by our reports of feelings of increased empathy for novice writers and insights into their practice, the Novice Project was a success. While no staff education activity can perfectly simulate the experiences of a novice writer, Hannah and Kelly both reflected on the challenges of practicing a new skill and found new perspectives on their writing center practice, with both connecting their own struggles as learners to the challenges of adult writers returning to school. While Hannah's reflections led her to a new empathy for writers who persevere in their writing projects in spite of competing life responsibilities and negative feelings about their writing, Kelly reported a more visceral—and uncomfortable—response as she pursued her project: "I felt clumsy. I felt dumb," she said. For Kelly, the Novice Project not only deepened her empathy for the experiences of novice writers who doubt their capacity to learn, but also led to insights about how to boost doubtful writers' confidence by helping them recognize even the smallest manifestations of progress.

Participating in the project as a writing center director confirmed for me the value of experiential professional development as a supplement to text-based models. While this project's primary purpose was to simulate (however imperfectly) the learning and accompanying emotional experiences of novice writers, our projects also led all of us to broader inquiries about learning. Kelly recognized the importance of self-compassion; Hannah observed herself adapting to physically awkward vocal exercises such as humming with her mouth open; and I came to a new understanding of the role of mistakes in a learning process. Geller et al. explain that they

value experiential staff education for the way it "shak[es] up our worlds," leading participants to knowledge stemming from both action and reflection. This idea resonates with our experiences.

Confirming my original supposition, participants in the Novice Project pointed to an additional reason they preferred this experiential staff education unit to more familiar text-based models: burnout. In some cases, professional consultants' feelings of burnout around traditionally-structured staff education activities are likely manifestations of more pervasive feelings of burnout with their work, which they perform in the context of the precariousness of their contingent labor status. Whereas traditional text- and discussion-driven models tend to focus on preparing writing consultants to better serve a particular institution's students, the Novice Project allowed writing consultants to identify a project that originated with their own interests as creative people and that could be carried beyond their work in our writing center, thus allowing them, in a sense, to reclaim some of the time they devoted to a position that promised little to them in terms of status, benefits, or mobility.

Our execution of this pilot was imperfect. We were unable to find a common meeting time for our Novice Project meetings. The time we chose excluded Corinne, which may have contributed to her inability to follow through on her project. Still, I believe this project points to the advantages of experiential programs of staff development, particularly for professional consultants who may crave a novel approach and whose participation in text-based professional development activities at multiple campuses each semester has already provided them with a sound foundation in the scholarship of writing center studies.

NOTES

1. I have changed the names of consultants to protect their privacy.

2. I use the term "over-trained" as it's used in the context of endurance sports. An over-trained endurance athlete will find their progress halted in spite of their continued efforts.

3. Geller et al. describe a staff education project that asks consultants to learn—and then teach each other—unfamiliar skills, with the aims that included "provid[ing] a space to reflect on what it is like to always be a learner" and developing empathy for the kinds of students who might visit a writing center, whether a "student with dysgraphia faced with a writing assignment" or a student "two days off the plane from China" (62).

4. Because she did not complete a learning project, I have not included Corrine's project in the analysis of learning projects.

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