

When Classmates Know You're a Writing Center Consultant

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Working in a writing center, consultants learn to assist clients with all types of assignments and to deal with clients' emotional demands. As a result, consultants develop their interpersonal skills (Devet and Barbiero). Outside the center, however, there is an additional interpersonal relationship that must be negotiated: how to navigate interactions in the classrooms when classmates realize a fellow student is not just another peer enrolled in the course but is a writing center consultant. As a long-time director, I have wondered how consultants handle the intellectual and emotional demands of this dual role of being both students and consultants.

To find answers, during fall 2017, I distributed an IRB-approved survey through the listserv WCenter, asking directors to send the survey to their consultants who then returned their responses to me. The survey, which generated 136 responses,¹ asked four questions: "What do your fellow students say when they learn you are a consultant?"; "How do you respond?"; "Do fellow students ask you to look over their papers outside of class? Yes, no, sometimes"; and "What strategies do you use to handle your fellow students' requests for help?" Responses came from consultants attending four-year public (58.5%), private (26.9%), and community colleges (14.6%). Responders were undergraduates (80.2%) and graduates (19.8%), with one-to-three years of writing center experience. Reading through the open-ended responses multiple times,² I grouped similar answers so that patterns emerged from the data, patterns about how consultants dealt with their classmates' reactions and about how they dealt with classmates' requests for help with their writing. Knowing how consultants handle the dual roles of being both students and consultants means directors can preview for their staff what may happen when classmates discover their fellow students work in a writing center.

CLASSMATES' REACTIONS WHEN LEARNING CONSULTANTS ARE IN A COURSE

Responses varied to the question, "What do your fellow students say when they learn you are a consultant?" Some consultants reported classmates were either indifferent or had no reaction (11%, n=14). One consultant stated, "They don't react weirdly at all. They see it as any other job on campus." Other classmates, however, had a strong reaction (4%, n= 5). A consultant noted, "Classmates are usually surprised to learn that someone 'just like them' could be a writing tutor." They are probably surprised because they do not often think of consultants as being students too. One consultant even noted a fellow student appeared perplexed because the consultant was enrolled in a non-humanities course, one where writing is not usually emphasized. "There is mostly confusion because we're in soil sciences," says this consultant. Other students reacted positively (21%, n=25), telling consultants, in the common college parlance, "Cool," "Wow!" "Awesome!" and expressing praise: "You must really be smart. I could never do that." Another consultant explained that fellow students "seem genuinely happy for me, and I also believe that they view it as a high achievement." Such positive reactions imply classmates realize being chosen to work in a writing center is an impressive achievement.

Besides indifference, surprise, and praise, consultants indicated classmates also cast them as experts on writing (16%, n=20), with students making comments like, "Writing must be easier for you" or "You must know a lot about grammar and citations." Because classmates saw consultants' possessing exceptional writing expertise, one consultant explained fellow students thought the consultant's writing "must be flawless," a pressure no students (consultants or otherwise) would wish to bear. Another outgrowth of the expert image was noted by one consultant: classmates assume, illogically, that the consultant must be a master of the course's content. This consultant explained: "Classmates think I am somehow more well-versed in the course material than other students in the class. . . . that I am even similar to a Teaching Assistant for the course rather than a student." This same student, commenting to the consultant, predicted, "You will get a good grade." With classmates attributing writing expertise to consultants, a few consultants (5%, n=7) reported fellow students could also feel "threatened," or as one consultant described the reaction, "I am seen as a walking dictionary or something."

Dealing with such concerns is not new. A key element to being a consultant is addressing the emotional labor or the "invisible work" (Caswell et al. 1995) so prevalent in consultations.³ Engaging in this

emotional labor means consultants must handle their own emotions, as when a consultant might think to themselves, “Oh, no. Not another client writing about Oedipus Rex.” Then, too, a consultant must also deal with clients’ feelings, like the student who confesses to the consultant, “I’m so frustrated. I just can’t write a thesis statement.” In short, consultants must confront their own emotions as well as those of students.

The survey reveals this emotional labor continues even into the consultants’ classrooms, with consultants describing their strategies for dealing with students’ feelings. For example, to dispel the image of a threatening expert, one technique is to speak directly to the issue, as in, “I don’t make a big deal out of being a tutor. I don’t want to make anyone feel bad about it. And I didn’t want to be seen as some kind of genius. I wanted to be just a normal dude.” A consultant also says to classmates, “My role as a Writing Center tutor does not make me an expert in the course, and I am learning the information at the same rate that they are and do not have any ‘insider secrets’ that they are not privy to.” To appear less of a threat, consultants also invoked the value of the writing center itself: “For those who are intimidated, I try to make sure they know that I got good at my job through practice and so can they; that’s why the Writing Center exists.” Interestingly, the responses never mentioned whether classmates questioned the consultants’ credibility or expertise. In fact, consultants work hard not to “stand out” simply because they work in a writing center.

Besides classmates’ being neutral, positive, intimidated, or surprised, consultants said students asked questions (41%, n=53). The majority of these inquiries (90%, n=48) focused on details about the center itself: “What does the center do?” “Who is a good consultant to get, if I come in for help?” “How did you get the job? What does it involve?” “How much are you paid?” One consultant described how to deal with such questions: “I am always happy to encourage other students to use and/or apply to the Writing Center.” Another method is to promote the center, as recounted by this consultant: “I generally took the opportunity to explain the center is open to all students and that anyone can benefit from a visit. This seemed to put my classmates further at ease.” Through these simple responses to classmates’ questions, consultants become ambassadors for their centers.

In addition to focusing on the center itself, a few responses (10%, n=5) revealed that classmates are misinterpreting the consultants’ work. For instance, a consultant reported that a classmate had asked if the consultant would proofread. Another classmate in-

quired, “What do you do? Just grade people’s grammar?” and a classmate stated, “You must get really bad papers to edit.” Such comments (unfortunately, all too familiar) indicate a misreading of centers as handling only micro-level concerns, not unlike the way that Stephen M. North, in his venerable article “The Idea of a Writing Center,” describes faculty’s misinterpretations of writing centers as “fix-it shops” (437). These comments suggest classmates have falsely interpreted consultants’ work, not always grasping the complexity of the writing center’s services. The image of centers as grammar mills is hard to dispel.

In dealing with their classmates’ misinterpretations of the center and with their own emotional needs, consultants showed that their skills learned in writing centers transferred to their own classrooms. For example, when classmates misunderstood the center’s services, a consultant said, diplomatically, “I simply laugh it [the misinterpretation] off and explain that it’s not that simple. My job is not to be a grammar nazi; I just help people with any stage of writing; then, if they feel directionless with their work, I help them discover organization[,] etc.” When consultants needed to manage classmates’ emotions, consultants also used their experiences from their consultations. As they would with clients, consultants de-emphasized their supposed expertise through reassurance, encouragement, and self-deprecation. As a consultant reported, “In reality as a student tutor, I am there to help students relate and feel comfortable. I am not someone of authority who should be seen as ‘better’ than them.” Consultants gently, but firmly, educated classmates about the center as well as demonstrated patience with classmates’ inquiries, in hopes of not alienating them. Their diplomatic skills used in the writing center can be applied to their classrooms as well.

CLASSMATES SEEKING HELP WITH THEIR WRITING

According to the survey responses, classmates often placed pressure on consultants to help with the classmates’ writing. The survey asked, “Do your fellow students ask you to look over their papers outside of class?” Most of the consultants (77.4% n=99) reported “Yes” or “Sometimes.” Consultants also answered the survey’s open-ended question: “How do you respond?” When classmates requested assistance, consultants again showed they applied their diplomatic skills. Overwhelmingly, consultants (80%, n=80) suggested their fellow students should visit the center by making appointments either with them or another consultant. A typical response was, “My strategy was to politely decline my classmate’s request but direct him or her to the writing lab and mention the dates and time I would be on call as a consultant.” Other methods

also mitigated the classmates' pressure for assistance: consultants deflected requests by stressing that the writing center itself offers resources to aid students (6%, n=6). A consultant explained: "Knowing they had a fellow student working in the center would encourage them to maybe seek out those resources they might not otherwise have felt comfortable using." Referring to workplace policy was another way to deal with classmates who asked consultants to help them write papers (5%, n=5). Here was what a consultant told fellow students: "My contract says I cannot meet with people outside the center or else I could be fired." If policy is not sufficient, consultants, always mindful of what classmates value, appealed to their fellow students' monetary concerns (6%, n=6): "I tell them I get paid when I am at the writing center and not outside it, and besides, the service is free to all." When consultants emphasize writing center services are free, writers can be persuaded to take advantage of those services.

Another way to deal with requests for help was to use time arguments (6%, n=6). A consultant reported, "I would tell them that I'd be happy to help, but my schedule is usually packed," while another tells fellow students, "I don't have a lot of time to give proper attention to their papers." Closely related to stressing the best use of time is the following comment, where a consultant explicitly set conditions for assisting (5%, n=5): "I often looked over papers when these fellow students were friends, however only when I had the time and when the student's paper was not for an exam." One consultant was up front about time management when turning down a request for assistance: "I usually only absolutely say 'no' if I'm totally bogged down." In deflecting classmates' requests, consultants adroitly mixed references to money, workplace policies, and time management while continuing to promote the center with its appointments and resources. They, thereby, seemed to achieve a fine balance between protecting their own time and encouraging usage of the center.

CLASSMATES' EXPECTATIONS FOR CLASSROOM PROJECTS

In addition to classmates asking for writing help outside of class, consultants handled the pressure arising from peer editing. While the survey did not specifically ask about classmates wanting assistance in these areas, a few consultants (7%, n=7) described difficulties these requests posed for them. During an in-class peer editing session, a consultant recounted how classmates felt "nervous, thinking the consultant would destroy the writing." A consultant quelled this fear: "I always explain to them [my classmates] that my job isn't to rip their paper apart but to help them recognize where their writing is strong and where it needs work." Like in a writing

center, this consultant was aware of others' feelings, a key characteristic for dealing with classmates so they can work together as collaborators who are exchanging ideas and talking through concepts.

Group projects also created difficulties (6% n=6). The group automatically relied on consultants, assuming they were the superior writers, who would become "point persons": "I seem to default into the leadership role" as one consultant described. Another consultant commenting on group projects was also aware of the consultant's unique position in group writing: "It is my strength to bring to the team so I am willing to help." However, being placed on a pedestal made this same consultant uncomfortable: "[I]t feels like it creates some power distance between us [consultants and classmates]." The group could also force consultants to become proofreaders. A consultant explained: "They often will rely too much on me and see me as an editing service. It's difficult because my grade is on the line, and I want to do whatever I can to get the A." In addition, the group often expected consultants to judge or even grade the papers since the consultants work in a writing center. Being put in such a position, a consultant reported they would say the same thing as they would to clients who expected them to grade or proofread papers: "I do not say 'I think you will get an A on this paper' or 'Let me mark this paper up with a red pen for you.'" This same consultant explained their role is to "exercise the utmost ethical standards in my position as a consultant." Another consultant also deflected the group's request to write the paper by saying, "I have my partner/partner team members think of what to type or write." So, for group projects, consultants worked to balance their consultant and student roles, pushing back when the group assumed they would write the entire document.

CONCLUSION

The survey examined consultant responses from a broad range of institution types, with consultants at different stages of enrollment. Future studies, though, might look only at embedded tutors assigned to courses, at variations in the role of the consultant-student depending on the type of school (community college, four-year, R1 institution), or at what happens when consultants are in classes for their majors.

The current survey, however, does reveal consultants were navigating emotional and intellectual terrain in their classes and receiving unwanted power from classmates, not unlike when, in the writing center, clients see them as all knowledgeable, even about the course's content. The student-consultants also attempted to

“fit in” at the same time they brought the spirit of the center with them into the class. To do so, they called on their intellectual and emotional skills honed in the center for negotiating with writers: reassuring when they must, defusing a power position as an expert when needed, and setting limits or boundaries as they would do in consultations. Calling on their expertise for supporting clients, consultants used these strategies to defuse difficult classroom relationships in their dual roles as consultant-students.

By helping consultants anticipate what may occur in classrooms, directors are providing their staff a valuable service: how to negotiate classrooms when fellow students know about the consultants’ roles in writing centers. Besides describing possible problems, directors should also stress that carrying over writing center techniques into classrooms means consultants already possess the skills to deal with their classmates. As a result, directors can show that learning to deal with interpersonal relationships in the center is essential, especially since the center’s work transfers to other circumstances, such as the consultants’ classrooms. Then, as consultants experience this transference, they should begin to develop their emotional intelligence or what is called EQ (“Emotional Quotient”) (Nelson et al. 169). In other words, they will acquire “the ability to recognize/monitor one’s own and other people’s emotions, to differentiate between different feelings, and to use emotional information to guide thinking, behavior, and performance” (Shkoler and Tziner). With this EQ, consultants can function effectively not only as consultant-students in their own classes but also in the world beyond the university’s ivied walls (Shkoler and Tziner; Nelson et al. 169).

NOTES

1. Because answers overlapped, responses will not add up to 100%; also, not all consultants answered all questions.
2. Thanks should be extended to the former peer consultant Will Allen for tabulating the numbers and to Courtney Brown for reading the draft.
3. Thanks, also, to the 2021 IWCA Collaborative for its help with this concept.

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SECONDARY SCHOOL WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION

March 17-18, 2023

Arlington, VA

Host: Christian Brothers University

"Writing at the Center: SSWCA & NVWP"

The Secondary School Writing Centers Association is partnering with the Northern Virginia Writing Project for the in-person conference. There will be a virtual conference experience for those unable to attend. Deadline for proposals: Nov. 4, 2022.

Contact: conference@sswca.org; conference website: <http://sswca.org/conference/sswca-2023/>

SOUTHEASTERN WRITING CENTERS ASSOCIATION

February 9-11, 2023

Memphis, TN

Host: Christian Brothers University

"Navigating the Rivers of Change"

Conference website: <https://southeasternwritingcenter.wildapricot.org/conference>