47:1 | SEPTEMBER 2022

WLN

A JOURNAL OF WRITING CENTER SCHOLARSHIP

MOUSSU | PECK | DEVET | YOUNGREN

wln

Table of Contents

1 **Editor’s Note**
Ted Roggenbuck

3 **Blog Editors’ Note**
Anna Sophia Habib, Esther Namubiru, and Weijia Li

4 **The Ultimate Guide to Poorly Designed Research Projects**
Lucie Moussu

12 **Asking Students for Solutions: The Writing Center as Client in Project-Based Learning Partnerships**
Kimberly Fahle Peck

20 **When Classmates Know You’re a Writing Center Consultant**
Bonnie Devet

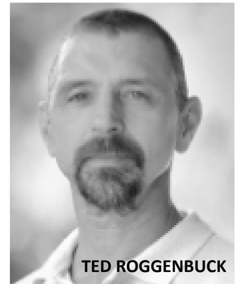
28 **Tutors' Column: "Leveraging Risk to Empower Writers"**
Kai Youngren

32 **Conference Calendar**

DOI: 10.37514/WLN-J.2022.47.1.01

Editor's Note

Ted Roggenbuck



This issue offers examples of writing center professionals attempting to examine multiple aspects of our work. Though what each author examines and their methods and even degrees of success vary, each exemplifies the importance of inquiry and reflection to our practice.

First, Lucie Moussu offers a compelling narrative of her efforts to record, transcribe, and study some of the important communication that goes beyond writing as well as how tutors cope with some of the emotional work that occurs within tutorials. She describes her mistakes and setbacks as well as what she gained from her attempt. During the COVID pandemic, many of us have experienced setbacks or feelings of failure at new levels (I know I have). So Moussu's frank accounting of what a messy project can feel like and how to recover from multiple setbacks seems particularly valuable at this time. As she argues, we have ample published examples of our successful projects but few examples of projects that haven't gone so well, although most of us have experienced those also, and we can learn from both.

Kimberly Peck presents her center's collaboration with students working on "Project-Based Learning" as class assignments, for which aspects of her center were the subject studied by two cohorts of students. Not only did her center benefit from suggestions students offered through those projects, but also the students involved in the projects became more familiar with the work of her center, raising her center's profile on campus.

Bonnie Devet describes the results of her national survey exploring peer undergraduates' experiences when their classmates learn that they work as writing tutors. She offers several examples of the pressures peer tutors face from their classmates and the tutors' responses to those pressures.

Finally, in our Tutors' Column, Kai Youngren describes how he ap-

plies the late psychologist Albert Bandura's theory of self-efficacy within writing tutorials. He offers a strategy for helping writers connect their current writing situation to non-writing experiences and guiding them to apply what they've learned from those experiences to their current rhetorical situation.

One note from the editorial team is that *WLN* is changing how we number our issues going forward. This is the first of four issues for the current volume. As usual, all previous volumes are available as open access on the journal's website.

GET INVOLVED WITH WLN

Interested in serving as a reviewer? Contact Karen Gabrielle Johnson (KGJohnson@ship.edu), Ted Roggenbuck (troggenb@bloomu.edu), Lee Ann Glowzenski (laglowzenski@gmail.com), and Julia Bleakney (jbleakney@elon.edu).

Interested in contributing news, announcements, or accounts of work in your writing center to the blog (photos welcomed)? Contact Anna Sophia Habib (ahabib@gmu.edu).

Interested in guest editing a special issue on a topic of your choice? Contact Muriel Harris (harrism@purdue.edu).

Interested in writing an article or Tutors' Column to submit to WLN? Check the guidelines on the website: (wlnjournal.org/submit.php).

DOI: 10.37514/WLN-J.2022.47.1.02

Blog Editors' Note

Anna Sophia Habib, Esther Namubiru, and Weijia Li

We're back from a fairly restful summer, and we've got some exciting news! Please welcome Graham Stowe, from Canisius College (NY). Graham is continuing "Dear CWCAB" that Stacia Moroski-Rigney started in March 2022. We've thoroughly enjoyed working with Stacia and are excited about her next big projects. We're looking forward to our new collaboration with Graham. Stay tuned for Graham's "Dear CWCAB" column on the blog and its new audio adaptation released on Slow Agency. By the way, have you subscribed to the Slow Agency podcast? You would enjoy listening to the interviews we've lined up with *WLN* journal authors and other colleagues from around the world. Subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.

We would love to hear from you too! Please submit a piece or pitch an idea to writinglabnewsletterblog@gmail.com. To see our submission guidelines, visit: https://www.wlnjournal.org/blog/submission-guidelines/

DOI: 10.37514/WLN-J.2022.47.1.03

WLN

The Ultimate Guide to Poorly Designed Research Projects

Lucie Moussu
University of Alberta

LUCIE MOUSSU

In 2020, for the first time since I became writing centre director, I challenged myself to do something that I hoped would have a significant impact on the field of writing centres; at first, I was very excited, and then I hit a wall, well, many walls really, at considerable speed, and each one hurt a lot. Fortunately, reflections, feedback, discussions, and creative thinking can give data new life—an important lesson young or unconfident researchers should remember. I want to share how much I learned through the mental, financial, and technical ups and downs of this project to demonstrate that a messy research process is normal and not the end of the world. The purpose of this article is therefore not to fill a gap in the scholarship but to illustrate the importance of providing support to inexperienced or struggling writing centre scholars, and to demonstrate that with a bit of perseverance, failed research projects can take on new (and exciting) life.

AMBITIOUS GOALS OF THE PROJECT

Truth be told, I am an unconfident researcher—I prefer to teach, and after having conducted some quantitative research in the field of TESOL for my PhD, I never believed I had the authority to say anything significant to the writing centre community. So, when I was inspired by an IWCA conference presentation to undertake a research project, I unexpectedly found myself believing that maybe I could have a significant impact on the field after all. The presentation I attended was on how to support students with mental and physical disabilities. As I was listening to the speaker, I remembered some of the unusual events that have taken place in the writing centres I have directed. I decided I wanted to go beyond rigid categorizations of "disability" and "mental illness" to look at everything difficult or even traumatic that student writers bring to the writing centre: depression, racism, homophobia, failing grades, break-ups, homesickness, sexism, stories of abuse, social anxiety, and more. Writing does not happen in a vacuum and all these non-writing-re-

lated "life events," as I call them, impact not only the students who experience them, but also the tutors.

Although tutors are trained to respond to most common issues that may come up during their tutorials (e.g., stressed students), they may not know how to respond to more complex situations addressed in student papers or mentioned by the writers themselves (e.g., mental illness or abuse). Also, tutors might not know how to handle the potential impact these difficult student stories might have on their own mental states. A few studies have been conducted on student writers with special needs (e.g., Babcock and Daniels; Pemberton), and some scholars have made concrete suggestions on how to support students with learning and physical disabilities (e.g., Murray; Stark and Wilson). But very few studies have investigated the impact non-writing-related life events have on writing centre tutorials, and I could not find any studies investigating the impact of students' recounted life events on the tutors themselves. I thus decided to investigate 1) *what kinds* of non-writing-related issues come up during tutorials; 2) how tutors respond to these issues *during* the tutorials; and 3) how tutors deal with difficult information and emotions *after* the tutorials. I also wanted to analyze if students' first language influenced their discussions of different issues. Ultimately, I wanted to 1) make our writing centre more inclusive and useful to as many students as possible; 2) prepare tutors to deal with difficult tutorials while still providing outstanding writing support; and 3) build on support systems that already existed within the university to provide resources to tutors who experienced disquieting or traumatic tutorials. Of course, more experienced researchers will already at this point have identified one of my major problems, which was trying to do too much. But I had to crash into a few walls before reaching that conclusion.

THE FIRST WALLS I HIT

To understand my research topic well, I started reading in Disability Studies. Because I walk with crutches, you could logically assume that I sometimes think about that particular aspect of my life. But when I started reading Rebecca Babcock and Sharifa Daniels' *Writing Centers and Disability*, I fell into an abyss of emotions and questions I had unknowingly ignored until that moment. In fact, I felt so deeply hurt by the discrimination experienced by some writing centre directors with disabilities that I had to stop reading the book for a few months to examine every aspect of my professional life from the perspective of my own disability—something I had never done before. I almost stopped the study because of this strong emotional reaction.

Thinking about my distress, months later, I realized that this book forced me to face years of discrimination I had unconsciously chosen to ignore. Also, my work with students and tutors in the writing centre had always brought me incredible joy, and early literature always talked about "writing centre space" as a "safe place" (Harris), so it seemed unimaginable that such pain, struggle, and discrimination could in fact be happening in writing centres. To clear my head, I started looking for literature on student life, a topic I had never researched before. Thanks to the help of our Associate Dean of Student Life and the resources he suggested, I learned that a significant number of post-secondary students experience one or more difficulties personally, physically, and/or mentally (e.g., Baker et al.). As noted above, these "life events" can have an impact not only on the students' ability to write, but also on their behaviour during writing centre tutorials and on the emotions their tutors may experience during and after these tutorials.

However, I quickly realized that two or three articles were not enough to understand the complexity of university students' lives and challenges. My lack of knowledge of relevant keywords and resources, as well as the patchy information I found on the Canadian post-secondary context, resulted in a complete investigative fiasco. Like a novice researcher, I had underestimated the expertise of Student Life professionals. Ironically, I am often angered by people who think tutoring in writing centres requires expertise only in grammar and punctuation; yet I was doing the exact same thing with a complex and multifaceted discipline that requires years of study and research before it can be fully understood.

A FEW MORE BUMPS IN THE ROAD

I received Research Ethics Board approval on January 8, 2019. Then, from January 14 to April 5, 2019, I audio-recorded 251 writing centre tutorials. The plan was to have these recordings transcribed professionally, following the transcription suggestions of Magdalena Gilewicz and Terese Thonus. While tutorials were recorded, I started reading about discourse analysis (e.g., Mackiewicz). I wanted to find recurring mentions of different life events (e.g., mental illness, culture shock, discrimination) in the transcripts and study their impact on tutorials. Then, with the help of a psychologist, I wanted to evaluate the results of my discourse analysis to propose improved tutor education strategies, best practices to support students, and strategies to respond to the impact of traumatic tutorials on tutors.

Unfortunately, when I listened to some of the recordings, I realized that they had not captured what I was hoping to capture. I was ex-

pecting students to openly discuss personal issues with their tutors, the way they often do. However, because the tutorials were being recorded, both tutors and students seemed to make every effort possible to stay focused on writing issues. A few times in the recordings, I even heard students say, for example, "could we please pause the recording? I'd like to talk to you about my problems with this prof." The tutor then paused the recording and restarted it a few minutes later. In addition, despite the good-quality audio recording device I had bought, the soft voices or strong accents of certain participants prevented some recordings from being fully transcribed.

The next serious issue I encountered was the cost of transcriptions. While friends and Google searches suggested plenty of transcription tools, I knew that if I wanted reliable transcriptions, I had to hire a professional transcriber who was familiar with the field of Writing Studies and comfortable with accents. Unfortunately, I had not realized that professional transcribers are very costly and can take hours to transcribe just a few minutes of conversation. I was thus able to pay for only 38 transcriptions out of the (randomly-selected) 251 recordings I had collected before my research money ran out.

I read several articles about different types of transcriptions and choices that can be made when transcribing writing centre tutorials (e.g., Gilewicz and Thonus). Still, after learning about the different uses for and ethics of transcription work (e.g., Bucholtz; Oliver et al.; Henderson), I realized my discourse analysis was also going to fail; indeed, the more detailed transcriptions are, the more difficult they are to read and analyze. Also, detailed transcriptions take more time and are therefore more expensive. So, because my transcriptions needed to be done relatively quickly and be easily readable, they could not indicate details such as tonal changes, hesitations, repairs, fillers, emphases, speed of speech, accents, or tone of voice. An example of why this lack of information was problematic is that the rudimentary indication of "hesitation" on a transcript could be interpreted variously as uncertainty, fear, shyness, unwillingness to speak, or lack of knowledge. Similarly, when a student was "laughing," the transcription could not indicate what kind of laugh that was—a nervous laugh? A sad laugh? A happy laugh?

I realized—too late—that every choice the transcriber made, every word they wrote (or didn't write) in their transcripts, would affect the data I was going to analyze and therefore the results. I did not want the transcriber to become an "interpreter" of students' and tutors' voices (even though I now realize that this is precisely and

inevitably what all transcribers do), and I refused to allow myself to assign potentially incorrect meaning to what I was reading in the transcripts. Looking back, I am not sure why I felt so strongly against this interpretation and "appropriation" process of the speakers' voices and meaning—maybe it stemmed from the fact that as a non-native speaker of English and disabled person, I am constantly afraid for my words to be misinterpreted or for my voice not to be heard. Whatever the case, I was unable to adequately understand and analyze the states of mind of the recorded students and tutors, even when personal stories were shared. These transcriptions and discourse analysis methods proved ill-advised, and I felt at a loss.

THE RECONSTRUCTION PROCESS

This messy and painful research debacle took eight months. After everything had fallen apart, I was left with one question: What should I do now? I had 251 tutorial recordings, 38 semi-decent transcripts, a discouraged mind, and a broken heart. I told myself that I was lucky to have so many recordings, and that there had to be something I could do with them. It seemed like a big waste of time, energy, and resources, not to mention a waste of the participants' willingness to contribute to writing centre scholarship, to not use these recordings.

When I was facing challenges or discouragement writing my PhD dissertation, my father always told me, "Imagine that you are doing a conference presentation about your current problem: How would you present the problem and what questions would you ask?" Fifteen years later, I remembered my father's advice, and I presented my "problem" at two conferences. Instead of sharing the exciting research findings I was hoping to present, I talked about my struggles and failures and my utter loss of faith in my research capabilities. At the end, I asked the audience for suggestions and feedback. While I did receive several interesting suggestions, what struck me the most were the stories of research failures and challenges that audience members—even experienced writing centre scholars—shared with me. I was also surprised to learn that many writing centre administrators and tutors were hoping I would eventually find ways to answer my initial research questions.

My father was right: talking about my struggles at these conferences made me realize that 1) even if my research project had failed, I *did* have a voice and a place in our field; 2) research can be challenging for everyone, at any stage of the research process and at any stage in one's professional career; and 3) thinking creatively could allow me to use my data for other research purposes. For ex-

ample, while reading some tutorial transcripts, I remembered Dianna Bell and Sara Elledge's study, which investigated, by analyzing turn-taking and time-at-talk, whether tutors or students dominated writing centre tutorials. Indeed, I noticed that my tutors often talked more than non-native writers of English. That might be an interesting topic to start investigating with my existing data.

I also realized that I could look at my data from a different angle and still try to answer my initial research questions. For example, I could select moments in the transcripts when students *almost* started talking about personal topics and organize focus group discussions with tutors and writers to talk about what *might have been discussed* in these typical non-writing-related interactions. In addition, I had discovered new areas of interest—transcription studies and disability studies—and my curiosity was piqued. This is why I started, with a friend (as collaboration is a safer avenue for inexperienced or wary researchers), a small research project called *Accessibility and Inclusivity Barriers in Writing Center Conferences*.

I know, now, that I must read a lot more about many subjects and talk with experts in these areas before blindly embarking on research projects. I could also learn more about the affective nature of research and topics that are "too close to home" by reading *Out in the Center: Public Controversies and Private Struggles*, by Harry Denny and Robert Mundy, for example. And finally, in mulling over my research difficulties, I found myself drafting this piece in order to think them through, more fully understand them, and possibly help others avoid them in future.

GRIT IS STICKING WITH YOUR FUTURE, DAY-IN, DAY-OUT[1]

So, why did this research project crash and burn so spectacularly, even though this was not my first research project? Maybe because this was my first qualitative research endeavor. But most importantly, my lack of faith in my research abilities, coupled with beliefs that "everyone else" does research easily and publishes perfect academic articles effortlessly, put too much pressure on me. My expectations were so high that I tried to answer too many questions, started collecting data without planning my project carefully, and did not take the time to learn the many skills I needed to be successful. Yes, exploring new areas of research and being enthusiastic is important, but with a more reasonable plan of action, I could have avoided some complexity-related failures while still making room for discovery and growth.

At the same time, although my research failures seemed like a waste of time and money and the cause of a lot of heartache, they

provided me with valuable learning experiences (Rickly and Cargile Cook)—and that is *really* important for junior and struggling researchers to remember. These failures allowed me to learn about new tools, to meet great people, to discover that research is often complex and messy, to become aware of my unreasonable expectations, and to find inspiration for future projects. I am now aware that my own "life events" can both positively and negatively impact my assumptions and research inclinations. And I also know that as long as I am still asking important questions, speaking with interested and interesting people in the field, spending the necessary time to learn new skills, and thinking creatively, my project won't die.

In the end, I want to be a better writing centre director and an impactful contributor to our scholarship (at least in a small way), so I should never let a few crashes into walls and bumps in the road stop me. Indeed, failure will always be emotionally charged but should not be seen as fatal, as it will often afford new knowledge, open new paths, and provide new opportunities—even if not the expected ones.

NOTES

1. From Angela Duckworth's Grit: *The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. Scribner, 2016.

WORKS CITED

Babcock, Rebecca Day, and Sharifa Daniels. *Writing Centers and Disability*. Fountainhead, 2017.

Baker, Kerrie Q., Kathleen Boland, and Christine Nowik. "A Campus Survey of Faculty and Student Perceptions of Persons with Disabilities." *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2017, pp. 309-29.

Bell, Diana Calhoun, and Sara Redington Elledge. "Dominance and Peer Tutoring Sessions with English Language Learners." *Learning Assistance Review*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2008, pp. 17-30.

Bucholtz, Mary. "The Politics of Transcription." *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 32, 2000, pp. 1439-65.

Denny, Harry C., and Robert Mundy. *Out in the Center: Public Controversies and Private Struggles*. Utah State UP, 2019.

Gilewicz, Magdalena, and Terese Thonus. "Close Vertical Transcription in Writing Center Training and Research." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2004, pp. 25-49.

Harris, Muriel. Support for the Learning and Teaching of English Statement: "The Concept of a Writing Center." International Writing Centers Association, 1988. Retrieved from The National Writing Project https://lead.nwp.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Writing_Center_Concept.pdf

Henderson, Holly. "Difficult Questions of Difficult Questions: The Role of the Re-

searcher and Transcription Styles." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2018, pp. 143-57.

Mackiewicz, Jo. *The Aboutness of Writing Center Talk: A Corpus-Driven and Discourse Analysis*. Routledge, 2016.

Murray, Mary McDonald. "Assessing and Responding to Clients with Severe Mental Disorders." *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 32, no. 10, 2008, pp. 8-13.

Oliver, Daniel G., Julianne M. Serovich, and Tina L. Mason. "Constraints and Opportunities with Interview Transcription: Towards Reflection in Qualitative Research." *Social Forces*, vol. 84, no. 2, 2005, pp. 1273-89.

Pemberton, Michael A. "Writing Center Ethics: 'Special Needs' Students and Writing Centers." *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1998, pp. 12-14.

Rickley, Rebecca, and Kelli Cargile Cook. "Failing Forward: Training Graduate Students for Research." *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2017, pp. 119-29.

Stark, Savannah, and Julie Wilson. "Disclosure Concerns: The Stigma of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in Writing Centers." *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2016, pp. 5-13.

DOI: 10.37514/WLN-J.2022.47.1.04

WLN

Asking Students for Solutions: The Writing Center as Client in Project-Based Learning Partnerships

Kimberly Fahle Peck
York College of Pennsylvania

KIMBERLY FAHLE PECK

Writing centers have long enthusiastically embraced student participation in inquiry and research on writing centers, championing this opportunity for project-based learning (PBL). The Buck Institute defines PBL as learning experiences in which "[s]tudents work on a project over an extended period of time—from a week up to a semester—that engages them in solving a real-world problem or answering a complex question. They demonstrate their knowledge and skills by creating a public product or presentation for a real audience" ("What is PBL"). This definition aligns well with how Lauren Fitzgerald and Melissa Ianetta define writing center research: "method-based, systematic inquiry that generates new knowledge for both the researcher and the work's audience" (7). Discussions of PBL and undergraduate research in writing centers generally focus on work done by tutors (DelliCarpini and Crimmins; Fitzgerald). Tutors provide important insights, both for the field and for the individual writing centers where they work, but what about the perspectives of students not already embedded in our communities? In this article, I discuss how writing centers might extend their practice of embracing PBL through partnerships with courses across the curriculum. This form of PBL allows writing centers to improve and advertise at the same time, partnering with the students they hope will use the writing center and asking them to propose solutions to the center's real-world problems.

MY EXPERIENCE WITH PBL PARTNERSHIPS

For several years, York College of Pennsylvania, a private four-year college, has embraced PBL, exploring ways to infuse this "high-impact practice" ("Transforming Higher Education") throughout the curriculum. Often, professors and instructors new to PBL or those working with underclassmen seek campus clients to partner with for these experiences instead of community partners as a lower-stakes introduction to this kind of work. I was excited to serve as

one of these campus clients because I saw the project as mutually beneficial; the students would gain practice in problem solving and composing for authentic audiences, and I would get student help in addressing problems and complex questions in the writing center. I also saw it as a marketing opportunity for students to learn more about the writing center.

PBL with First-Year Students

In fall 2019, I was asked to participate in a pilot to embed PBL into first-year seminar (FYS) courses by serving as a client for introductory-level projects. I was assigned to two different FYS courses. At my institution, FYS courses are one-semester, themed courses (on topics as diverse as animal rights, women in sports, and the constitution) that introduce students to the kinds of thinking, reading, and writing expected of college students. In one section of FYS, Class A, which focused on the concept of belonging, the writing center was the specific client for the class, and as one project for the course, students were tasked with developing proposals to meet a need or challenge facing the writing center. In the other section of FYS, Class B, which was a special section focusing on academic success for underprepared students, I was one of two college representatives (the Director of Academic Advising was the other) who provided information and evaluated students' proposals for a project that answered the question: What is our college missing?

Not only were the foci of the projects different, the process and my involvement in the projects were different as well. The two instructors and I were all new to PBL, so I invited the instructors to determine how and in what way I would be involved in the process. In Class A, where the writing center was the sole client, a tutor and I were invited to give a brief presentation to the class about the writing center, specifically noting our concerns about lack of student knowledge about the center. Then, in teams of three or four, students conducted research and produced a formal proposal based on a template that the instructor and I developed collaboratively. In their proposals, students were asked to identify a problem, offer a solution, and discuss potential obstacles or challenges to enact their proposal. The instructor sent me each team's final proposal at the end of the semester.

In Class B, the director of Academic Advising and I attended a student-led question session where students in the class asked us a variety of questions about college life at our institution to determine what was missing at our college that would be beneficial for our students. Teams of three to four students then developed

projects around the topics of either student life or academic support. Teams working on projects related to academic support set up consultations with me to pitch ideas for proposals and get feedback on their initial ideas. I was then invited to attend formal presentations from the teams at the end of the semester.

The projects from both classes offered exciting ideas for our writing center to consider. Class A offered recommendations to increase knowledge about the writing center on campus. For example, one team focused on creating a social media marketing plan; another team shared ideas for informational videos the writing center could create; another submitted a proposal for the creation of a writing center site or module with asynchronous information and resources that could be accessed on our campus learning management system, Canvas. Two teams from Class B worked on proposals related to the writing center. In response to the question "What is our college missing?" one group put forth a proposal for the writing center to include tutoring support for presentations and public speaking. The other team proposed that the writing center incorporate an online chat or quick questions service as an additional support service we could provide writers. Some of these ideas we have already moved to incorporate while others we are still considering and researching. We have been able to use the social media plan from one team as part of our social media strategy and have created a Canvas site for the writing center. We are working with partners in the Communications and Writing department to develop plans for growing our support for oral communication and are researching possible tools for an online chat service. Essentially, we have been able to move on ideas for which we already had the tools and infrastructure to enact, but for other projects that require more resources, the proposals are serving as starting places for future consideration.

PBL in Disciplinary Courses

In spring 2020, the instructor of a Scientific and Technical Communication (STC) course approached me, looking for a client for PBL experiences in her courses. The PBL projects for the STC courses were more focused and more advanced than those from the FYS sections; these students specifically conducted usability research projects on our appointment system and processes for the writing center. In support of usability research in writing centers, Stuart Blythe claims, "Not only do usability research methods make users equal partners in a dialogic act rather than the subordinated component of a larger technology, the inclusion of end users into the design process can give them a significant voice, thereby allowing their needs to be represented more fully" (111-12). Blythe points

out the value of having end users participate in usability testing so administrators can make adjustments that better support these users. In our case, partnering with students in usability projects brought them in as student-partners who were not just representative possible end users of the technology and systems of the writing center, but active participants in the usability research itself. These student-partners were integral to the data collection process and provided solutions developed from their own analysis. Thus, these student-partners gained valuable experience collecting data and creating data-supported proposals, and the writing center received useful ideas to improve the usability of our services.

Students in two sections of this instructor's STC course partnered with me on a project specifically focusing on the usability of WCOnline, the system our center uses for appointments. I met virtually with the STC students, sharing my desire to determine how students broadly attempt to connect to tutors, whether students understand the types of tutoring appointments available, and whether they are able to easily navigate the system to make appointments, something that became increasingly important during the transition to remote learning due to COVID-19.

Since our campus uses WCOnline for writing tutoring, subject tutoring, and academic coaching, the STC sections determined five task scenarios to observe as part of their usability tests: 1) make an appointment with an academic coach, 2) cancel that appointment, 3) make an appointment with an online writing tutor, 4) cancel that appointment, and 5) find a drop-in session for organic chemistry. The students in STC recruited students from our institution who had never made an appointment with a tutor or academic coach. With an institutional grant supporting PBL projects, the instructor was able to offer $5 gift cards as participation incentives. The students in the course observed the participants, via Zoom, conducting the five tasks.

After students completed these observations, I received a usability report compiled by both sections of the course as well as written reports or video presentations from individual teams consisting of three to four students, each making recommendations for actions the writing center could take to better address the usability of WCOnline. In this round of usability projects, some key themes and recommendations were to have a prominent color-coded key within WCOnline to help students understand how to use the system, to embed links, and to include directions for making appointments into Canvas. Additionally they recommended we rebrand WCOnline to better encapsulate what it is and how it is used by our

institution, renaming it Spartan Learning Services, so it did not seem like it was just for writing center appointments. All of these recommendations were implemented by fall of 2020.

I partnered with the same faculty member and her three sections of STC in fall 2020 to conduct two follow-up usability studies. The first repeated the task observation protocols of using WCOnline after the writing center had made modifications based on the recommendations from the spring 2020 proposals. The second project focused on the new Canvas site we developed for the writing center based in part on a proposal from the FYS PBL project described above. This site was launched in fall 2020 as what is called a "public Canvas course," which means that students are not automatically enrolled in it as they are for Canvas sites for their academic courses, but can instead enroll themselves at any time to access the materials and resources within. I shared with the STC students that I wanted to explore whether students were able to easily access and navigate this site to find resources they might need. Due to anticipated pandemic-related challenges for participant recruitment and a lack of funding available for PBL that could be used to incentivize participation that semester, the instructor had her students serve as both researchers and participants. Each section was split in half, with half serving as researchers and the other half as participants for the first project and vice versa for the second. While this was not an ideal scenario, it allowed students to complete these usability studies during the challenging time of a pandemic.

Once students had collected data, I received a usability report for each project. The first, the follow-up on the usability of our appointment system after modification, showed significant improvement of usability and made no specific recommendations for future action. The second project, which explored the usability of our Canvas site, showed that while students had little difficulty navigating the site once they had gained access, finding and self-enrolling in the site proved to be challenging. Since this project yielded specific issues to be addressed, all teams of students addressed this issue in their recommendation reports or presentations. Some of these recommendations included finding a way to automatically enroll students to access the site, incorporating an instructional presentation as part of orientation that covers the resources available on the site and guides students to self-enroll, and scheduling a marketing campaign with enrollment instructions shared with students each semester. We are considering these options, working with other stakeholders such as our IT department and orientation organizers to determine which strategies we want to employ to address the usability concerns these projects raised.

PBL'S IMPACT ON WRITING CENTER USAGE

One of my interests in collaborating with faculty on PBL projects was also to expose more students to the writing center. In their research on the effectiveness of writing center class visits, Holly Ryan and Danielle Kane examined how different intervention strategies to introduce students to the writing center impact students' knowledge of the writing center and the likelihood of their usage of its services. While PBL is distinct from the interventions they explored, I similarly wanted to examine the relationship between participating in a writing center PBL project and actually using the writing center.

In total, across the seven course sections that I partnered with (2 FYS, 5 STC), there were 127 unique students. Of these 127 students, 106 had not had an appointment in the writing center prior to working on the project. Table 1 shows the total number of students in each course and the number of students from that course who worked with a writing tutor either the semester of the PBL project (either for the PBL course for another project or for a different course) or in subsequent semesters within the timeframe of this project (Fall 2019-Spring 2021 semesters).

Table 1. Writing Center Usage during and after PBL Project

	FYS-Class A	FYS-Class B	STC-Sp20 (2 sections)	STC-F20 (3 sections)
Total Students in Sections	**25**	**24**	**33**	**49**
Students with WC Appts during/after Project	**4**	**20**	**4**	**8**
% of Students with WC Appts during/after Project	**16%**	**83%**	**12%**	**16%**

While this is a very small data pool, each course had at least a small percentage of students use the writing center, a percentage that is in line with the usage we see reflected with other more traditional outreach efforts like class visits or workshops. FYS Class B had a very high percentage of writing center usage, but it is not clear whether that is from engaging in the PBL project or if the instructor encouraged students through additional means.

Thus, PBL partnerships were as effective as more traditional forms of outreach to encourage tutoring usage. Additionally, these partnerships were a mutually beneficial experience both for students, who participated in a high-impact practice that allowed them to engage in active learning for an authentic audience, and for our center, which received ideas to improve our services and accessibility.

REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

All of the PBL projects looked different, and the outcomes varied, but they provide a picture of the different forms that PBL can take and how writing centers can partner with faculty and students from across the curriculum to create mutually beneficial experiences. The final projects from the PBL partnerships created great starting points for new initiatives for our writing center to consider, providing a window into what these students were looking for from a writing center. I will caution those undertaking PBL partnerships, though, especially those with first-year students, to have clear expectations for what the students will produce. Many solutions offered required additional research and planning from our staff. Thus, those engaging in PBL projects should not expect that students will necessarily give them plans or ideas that are ready to be immediately implemented. Instead, they can help provide a clear direction for future work and projects.

I have offered detailed descriptions of the processes and products of my experience with PBL partnerships to provide models of possible projects for writing center administrators who are interested in implementing this practice at their institutions. PBL will look different based on institutional context, availability of funding, writing center needs, and courses and students available for partnerships. In whatever form it takes, however, PBL partnerships have great promise for writing centers to help us gather ideas and solutions from the students we want to support. They also provide an opportunity for students to learn more about writing centers while inviting these student-partners into our communities not just as clients, but as contributors. PBL partnerships build connections and relationships with students and faculty from across the curriculum while supporting and championing a high-impact practice at our institutions, thereby positioning writing centers as collaborative and innovative forces on their campuses.

WORKS CITED

Blythe, Stuart. "Wiring a Usable Writing Center: Usability and Writing Center Practice." *Wiring the Writing Center*, edited by Eric Hobson, Utah State UP, 1998, pp. 103-16.

DelliCarpini, Dominic, and Cynthia Crimmins. "The Writing Center as a Space for Undergraduate Research." *Undergraduate Research in English Studies*, edited by Laurie Grobman and Joyce Kinkead, National Council of Teachers of English, 2010, pp. 191-211.

Fitzgerald, Lauren. "Undergraduate Writing Tutors as Researchers: Redrawing Boundaries." *Writing Center Journal*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2014, pp. 17-35.

Fitzgerald, Lauren, and Melissa Ianetta. *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutoring: Practice and Research*. Oxford UP, 2016.

Ryan, Holly, and Danielle Kane. "Evaluating the Effectiveness of Writing Center Classroom Visits: An Evidence-Based Approach." *Writing Center Journal*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2015, pp. 145-72.

"Transforming Higher Education through Project-Based Learning." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 5 Nov. 2018, https://www.chronicle.com/paid-content/worcester-polytechnic-institute/transforming-higher-education-through-project-based-learning.

"What is PBL?" *Buck Institute for Education PBL Works*, https://www.pblworks.org/what-is-pbl, Accessed 11 Dec. 2020.

DOI: 10.37514/WLN-J.2022.47.1.05

WLN

When Classmates Know You're a Writing Center Consultant

Bonnie Devet
College of Charleston

BONNIE DEVET

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. 195) 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.

WORKS CITED

Caswell, Nicole I., et al. *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors*. Utah State UP, 2016.

Devet, Bonnie, and Alison Barbiero. "Dear Labby: Stressing Interpersonal Relationships in a Writing Center." *The Writing Lab Newsletter,* vol. 36, no. 5-6, 2012, pp. 11-13.

Nelson, Matthew T., et al. "Making Visible the Emotional Labor of Writing Center Work." *The Things We Carry: Strategies for Recognizing and Negotiating Emotional Labor in Writing Program Administration*, edited by Courtney Adams Wooten, et al. Utah State UP, 2020, pp. 161-71.

North, Stephen M. “The Idea of a Writing Center.” *College English,* vol. 46, no. 5, 1984, pp. 433-46.

Shkoler, Or, and Aharon Tziner. “The Mediating and Moderating Role of Burnout and Emotional Intelligence in the Relationship between Organizational Justice and Work Misbehavior.” *Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2017, pp. 157-64. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rpto.2017.05.002.

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”

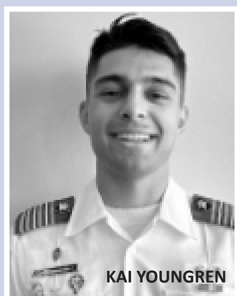
Conference website: https://southeasternwritingcenter.wildapricot.org/conference

DOI: 10.37514/WLN-J.2022.47.1.06

WLN

Tutors' Column: "Leveraging Risk to Empower Writers"

Kai Youngren
United States Military Academy, West Point



I am not a typical college student, and neither are the clients I consult with in the Mounger Writing Center. We are cadets at the United States Military Academy at West Point. While we are students during the fall and spring semesters, our summers are spent training to be officers in the United States Army. In our military training, we face daunting physical challenges designed to test our resilience. Every cadet, for example, confronts the "Slide for Life," a 50-foot-tall zipline over a lake from which cadets are required to drop at the halfway point and plunge into the water below. The fear is palpable and the danger of knocking yourself unconscious is real. As a Cadet Writing Fellow (Cadet Writing Fellows are selected through a competitive application process to take coursework in writing pedagogy, engage in in writing pedagogy research, and consult in the Mounger Writing Center), I have noticed that some cadets are just as apprehensive of writing—seemingly without risk—as they are of free falling. Why is that? And, if we acknowledge that writing involves risk, can the same confidence that inspires cadets to release the zipline similarly inspire them to confront their written assignment?

While most would not be surprised that military training involves bodily risk, the intellectual risks associated with writing often come as a surprise to inexperienced writers. However, intellectual risks can be found everywhere in the writing process. They can be as complex as adopting an unconventional structure, or as simple as, according to Nancy Sommers, revising your work (152). Just as every cadet approaches the Slide for Life with varying levels of apprehension, so, too, do individual writers experience intellectual risk differently. And successful completion of a risky move in writing can bring a sense of pride and accomplishment to a writer. Intellectual risks are, therefore, essential to the educational and personal development of young writers. For example, opening an academic essay with an anecdote might confuse readers, but it can also vivify

an argument. As writing center consultants, we can empower clients to take those risks and guide them toward more effective communication.

The self-efficacy research of the late Albert Bandura, an influential psychologist, provides some guidance. Bandura's theory on self-efficacy underpins modern understanding of risk-taking. He defines self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments (191). This self-efficacy develops from an individual's recognition that they have faced similar risks before—they have a transferable experience. And the likelihood of their success facing this new challenge depends on their ability to identify and mobilize the requisite transferable skills. For example, many skills necessary to be an effective speaker, including orienting and sequencing information, can transfer to the written word.

Several studies have demonstrated that Bandura's model is effective for cultivating academic self-efficacy and intellectual risk-taking by presenting students with real-world risks and then asking them to compose essays reflecting on their experience (Taniguchi et al.; Freeman and Le Rossignol; Cassanave). These studies demonstrate Bandura's theory's effectiveness in classrooms, particularly in written reflection. But this theory can be as powerful in writing centers via conversational reflection. To apply the theory, consultants can mobilize the power of self-reflective exercises with their clients to help their clients see they have transferable skills, embolden them to take risks, and improve their self-efficacy.

Since cadets regularly face risk, the Mounger Writing Center at West Point was the perfect place to experiment with using these self-reflective techniques. Last semester, I was consulting with a Firstie, or a senior, who asked for advice on how to cut down his word count for an International Relations research paper. After I read through his draft, it was clear that he was writing around his argument, which remained undefined. I asked him to reflect on his experience leading a platoon of younger cadets during our summer military training. This leadership experience represents an uncomfortable risk for many cadets at West Point who are asked to submit their leadership styles to scrutiny. Knowing this, I asked, "How did you teach military skills to your subordinates while avoiding the possibility of totally confusing them and having them question your competency?" He replied that the most effective verbal instruction excluded superfluous or contrived explanation; rather, he "cut to the point" and explained only key information with precise detail so the younger cadets would not get lost. I suggested that the same

concision and clarity needed in delivering orders or in teaching military skills applied directly to writing his research paper. In effect, I was able to identify and explain to him a transferable skill that relates verbal communication to written communication. Relating his academic dilemma to his previous summer leadership experience allowed the Firstie to realize that he possessed the skill to edit his paper and bolstered his self-efficacy to undertake the risk of writing more direct sentences; he cut to the point. After all, his writing objective—to educate the reader on the topic—did not differ materially from what he had successfully done in the past. So, he conceptualized the essay as a tactical lesson, and cut out any information that was not fundamental.

On another occasion, I was consulting with a client on a philosophy essay. A key component of the essay was to formulate a philosophical argument about a controversial moral issue—an intellectually and personally vulnerable exercise. This student, who was on mock trial team, chose to study abortion. Upon reading her essay, I realized her adherence to a five-paragraph structure introduced many gaps in her logical argument. I asked her if she agreed that written essays were similar to verbal arguments or debates. She did, so I suggested that she reflect on mock trial and explain what her approach was to arguing cases. She replied that to be convincing, her team needed to present evidence in a manner that connected and built upon previous findings. In a moment of realization, she understood my point, and we spent the rest of the session outlining her written argument, letting function drive form. With my help, she similarly leveraged her other experiences to understand the transferable skill of sequencing arguments.

These examples reveal how consultants can employ reflective lines of inquiry in writing centers. In both cases, the clients had to take intellectual risks, primarily radical revision and experimenting with new structures. To support them, I first identified a key skill necessary to help them strengthen their essays or achieve their writing goals. Then, I employed a self-reflective technique, one based on interpersonal connection and shared experience, to tie previous challenges to the specific intellectual task.

While it may be a difficult interpersonal task to prompt meaningful reflection in writing centers, consultants could rely on common experiences, such as shared risks during orientation, to do so. For example, when consulting with first-year writers, a question like "How did you introduce yourself in your college interviews?" would encourage students to relate the natural customs of introduction to the risks associated with creating an intriguing hook in an essay.

"Have you ever had a lively debate at the lunch table?" would empower students to conceptualize their essays as logical arguments to be supported with evidence and analysis. "How did you manage the stress of playing in your first high school sports game?" may help students address the stress of embarking on a risky process of writing their first collegiate essay. After the client engages in self-reflection, either written or verbal, the consultant can help the client recognize the transferable skill and explain how it relates to writing. To promote this method, consultant training could highlight principles of effective communication that transcend academic writing and can also be found in physical or social experiences. Following Bandura's psychology, the likely result will be a client with a higher self-efficacy prepared to carry out intellectual risk successfully. These strategies go beyond teaching writing and seek to reveal to writers the skills that lead them to success outside academia can be applied to challenges inside academia as well.

WORKS CITED

Bandura, Albert. "Self-Efficacy: Towards a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change." *Psychological Review,* vol. 84, 1977, pp.191-215.

Cassanave, Christine Pearson. "Taking Risks?: A Case Study of Three Doctoral Students Writing Qualitative Dissertations at an American University in Japan." *Journal of Second Language Writing*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2010, pp. 1-16.

Freeman, Robin, and Karen Le Rossignol. "Taking Risks—Experiential Learning and the Writing Student." *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2010, pp. 75-99.

Sommers, Nancy. "Responding to Student Writing." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 33, no. 2, 1982, pp. 148-52.

Taniguchi, Stacy T., et al. "Self-Efficacy of Risk Taking in Outdoor Recreation as a Predictor of the Self-Efficacy of Risk Taking in Essay Writing." *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership,* vol. 9, no. 4, 2017, pp. 425-38.

Conference Calendar

September 16, 2022; **Nebraska Writing Center Consortium, in Omaha, NE**

Contact: Katie Kirkpatrick: kirkpatrickkatherine@clarksoncollege.edu.

October 26-29, 2022: **International Writing Centers Association, in Vancouver, BC, Canada**

Contact: Shareen Grogan: shareen.grogan@umontana.edu; conference website: https://writingcenters.org/events/cfp-2022-iwca-international-writing-centers-week

October 27-30, 2022: **National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, in Omaha, NE**

Contact: Travis Adams: gtadams@unomaha.edu; conference website: https://www.thencptw.org/omaha2022.

February 9-11, 2023: **Southeastern Writing Centers**

WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship

***WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*,** published quarterly, from September to June, is a peer-reviewed publication of the International Writing Centers Association, an NCTE Assembly, and is a member of the NCTE Information Exchange Agreement. ISSN 1040-3779. All Rights and Title reserved unless permission is granted by TWENTY SIX DESIGN LLC. Material can not be reproduced in any form without express written permission. However, up to 50 copies of an article may be reproduced under fair use policy for educational, non-commercial use in classes or course packets. Proper acknowledgement of title, author, and publication date should be included.

Editor: Muriel Harris (harrism@purdue.edu)
Blog Editor: Anna Sophia Habib (ahabib@gmu.edu)

Managed and Produced by
TWENTY SIX DESIGN LLC
52 Riley Road #380, Celebration, FL 34747
www.wlnjournal.org
support@wlnjournal.org

Subscriptions, Archives, Resources, and Submissions:
Visit www.wlnjournal.org for subscription information, free archive access, resources, and manuscript submission guidelines.

A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship
TWENTY SIX DESIGN LLC
52 Riley Road #380
Celebration, FL 34747

wlnjournal WLNjournal

PRSRT STD
US POSTAGE
PAID
ORLANDO, FL
PERMIT 3172