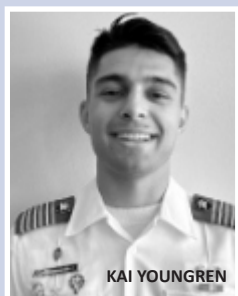


## Tutors' Column: "Leveraging Risk to Empower Writers"

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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 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.

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