

## Notice, Ask, Explore: Transforming Peer Observation into Dialogic Reflection

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"I wanted tutors to see themselves as and act as a necessary part of a community of learners whose work as tutors included making sense of the work of tutoring" (Camp 1).



"After [...] discussing our video clips and following the notice, ask, explore technique, I had a few takeaways ... we had very similar questions/concerns for our own consulting, but our questions for each other varied based on the context of the video" (consultant reflection).



Our writing center's pandemic-prompted shift online has changed how we see consulting. We mean that literally: our approach to observation—a foundational practice—has been unexpectedly transformed. Zoom has helped us see recorded consultations as preservable texts that allow consultants to teach and learn from one another. Before this shift, our observations were synchronous and in-person; consultant or director observers would seek permission from writer and consultant, sit nearby, take notes, and then debrief. In spring 2020, our abrupt transition online prompted us to ask new questions about these training and reflection practices: How could we observe in Zoom? How could we prioritize peer-centered approaches when physically distanced? How could we redesign observations to facilitate learning? These questions have changed our practices: our consultants now "observe" not by sitting in on consultations but by choosing clips of their session recordings to share and discuss through the framework of *noticing, asking, and exploring* (NAE).



This article demonstrates the value of reframing observations, using recorded consultations as texts (Hall, *Around*) that promote dialogic reflection in small-group discussions (Mattison; Hall, "Theory"). R. Mark Hall prompts us to "recast [reflection] as dialogue among tutors" (84), and we expand this under-

standing beyond written reflection to include conversation. These recordings—and the noticing, asking, and exploring—circulate in our Writing Center and enhance our understanding of *what*, *how*, and *why* we observe.

In the process of solving an ostensibly simple problem—how can we facilitate meaningful observations in Zoom?—we have redefined key ideas about what we’re observing, what observation involves, why it’s important for consultants to discuss their own and others’ consulting, and how those conversations matter. Having consultations preserved as texts helps us articulate what we’ve captured and reimagine what observation can do. Whereas conversations about consulting once relied on memory and note-taking, consultants now engage with a concrete audiovisual text. Just as important, they observe their own practices; they pause, analyze, and view again. This activity, in small-group discussion, fosters growth and transformation through dialogic reflection.

#### **NOTICE: OBSERVATION IS NOT JUST OBSERVATION**

Our Writing Center has always prioritized observation. As directors, Juli and Megan work with a staff of about 30 undergraduate and graduate consultants who consult in synchronous in-person and online consultations and participate in assessment and design. Kelly and Olivia, former consultants, played pivotal roles in developing the model we discuss here. Our staff engages in observation-based reflection year-round. This begins with introductory training, including a course on writing center theory and practice, when they watch or participate in and reflect on consultations from three perspectives: observer, writer, and consultant. This process helps staff learn how consultations work. After initial training, consultants participate in at least one observation each quarter: sometimes with peers, watching and reflecting on one another’s sessions; other times with directors. In all cases, observers take a descriptive, non-evaluative approach that seeks to name what observers notice without centering the observer’s judgment, attempting to ascribe the consultant or writer’s intent, or inferring the effects of particular choices.

Pre-pandemic, we worked to articulate our observation goals, guided by key questions: *What is our goal?* and *Who is observation for?* (Camp; Hall, “Theory”). We acknowledged that observations play a role in norming practices and formative assessment, but in situating our work in reflective learning theories (Yancey), we positioned observed *and* observer as learners. This approach was informed by Kelly’s background in Montessori instruction, where the point of the observation often is not the evaluation of the observed

but the critical reflection of the observer (Montessori). Helping consultants understand observation as an essential consulting skill and practice noticing and describing before evaluating is pivotal. Many writing center practitioners claim observation as key to training, as “one of the best ways you’ll develop as a tutor” (Gillespie and Lerner 61). Through observation, consultants discover new options (Gillespie and Lerner 66), receive peer feedback based on individual consulting goals (Camp 4-5), and engage in peer-focused assessment while reflecting on individual practices (Van Slembrouk). Research has also explored consultant impressions of the evaluative nature of observation and reflection, as well as how to transform those impressions (Lawson).

Two threads of this conversation have resonated with us: observation as a method for peer learning and reflection’s potential dialogic role. Scholars have discussed how peer observation during training can build rapport among tutors (Munger, Rubenstein, and Burow 3) and create a “community of learners” (Camp 1); however, conversations have mostly centered on one-to-one observations or individual reflections, less often exploring how groups might discuss the text of a consultation together (although Hall explores this in his analysis of written reflections in a community of practice; see “Theory”). Many have also considered reflection’s essential role in observation, including journaling as observer and tutor (Munger, Rubenstein, and Burow 4-5), completing prompts in post-observation forms (Van Slembrouk; Lawson), and responding to questions as part of the observation (Gillespie and Lerner 65). We ground our understanding in Kathleen Blake Yancey’s concept of reflection as “*inventing practice, in the course of which the tutors invent themselves*” (192, italics in original).

However, when we asked consultants to do this work before the pandemic, the observation structure constrained what was possible. Typically, the observer would sit near a consultation, take descriptive notes, and generate questions. If time allowed, the observer and consultant might talk. The disconnects were logistical and conceptual. We were asking consultants to do complex work in a short amount of time without showing how each observation was a chance for them to develop their skills. That is, we emphasized the act of watching at the expense of the more important activities of noticing, asking, and exploring, activities made more generative through discussion.

### **ASK: WHERE’S THE DIALOGIC IN OUR DIALOGIC REFLECTION?**

While our original process focused on individual observation and reflection, our evolving model has turned Yancey’s “inventing prac-

tice” into a dialogic, collective, peer-learning process. We have found that participating in small groups allows consultants to “expand the possible choices they have during a consultation” (Mattison 45). The absence of the dialogic in our pre-pandemic model was less pronounced because consultants talked in informal ways, such as debriefing after a difficult session. Our physical presence in the Writing Center enabled a community to form around shared practices that were observed and enacted, however casually.

Early on in the pandemic, we tried recreating physical observations in Zoom, where, after writers gave permission in our appointment form, observers watched with video and microphone off, but this approach could not replicate that larger ecology of informal observation and conversation. With everyone in separate breakout rooms, consulting remained private, invisible. Additionally, we noted staff and writer discomfort at the specter of the Zoom lurker. We asked our staff what we should change, and their answers prompted innovation that shaped our practice during the pandemic.

First, we *recorded*: Zoom made this easy. Recorded consultations could be watched and discussed outside the immediate moment. This technology helped make something ephemeral more permanent; consultations could be shared and circulated. However, our schedule would not permit us the leisure to watch every video. As important, we resisted a structure requiring that all work be visible. Issues of surveillance persisted; consultants knew recordings could be accessed and watched at any point, and a few expressed reluctance. However, we only archived recordings with permission. Second, we *selected*: this mitigated surveillance. When consultants chose clips, the range of consultations our staff could reasonably view expanded, as did the range of consulting moves they could observe. Consultant choice emphasized their agency. Third, we *refocused*: watching short clips allowed more time for dialogic reflection, specifically for noticing, asking, and exploring (NAE). Olivia drafted a framework to use NAE in small-group discussions that gave our staff more time to learn and develop those critical moves.

Over the course of the next four quarters, we developed the model we now use: consultants choose when to record, always confirming writers’ permission. Before scheduled small-group meetings, each consultant selects one or two 5-10-minute clips to share. The groups meet, watching and discussing each clip, with the NAE sequence structuring the discussion. As a last step, each consultant further reflects in a brief note, naming one thing noticed, one

asked, one explored. Whereas we previously valued written reflections as the primary site of learning, we now recognize the importance of the meeting itself, when consultants use the NAE framework in conversation with each other and engage in this dialogic reflection.

### **EXPLORE: PEER LEARNING AND INSIGHTS**

Our dialogic reflection model centers agency and gives consultants practice in resisting evaluation, an important and difficult stance to take in consulting. Developing skills in listening, noticing, asking questions, and considering alternatives helps consultants learn to describe texts and consultations instead of critiquing or evaluating them. While observations tend to generate primarily written texts for limited audiences, clip discussions create opportunities for consultants to place “familiar and unfamiliar ways of seeing [...] into dialogue with one another so as to produce insight—knowledge” (Yancey 192), and to share these ideas directly with one another. As consultants watch and discuss clips, they engage in a reflective process that makes observing like consulting: dialogic and developed in community.

This model is still relatively new, and we have not had the opportunity to study its impact on learning in a systematic way, but we can share some early, anecdotal feedback from consultants’ written reflections. We are listening to their perspectives and considering their insights as we evolve and refine our process. Early reflections suggest that clip discussions encompass a wide range of concepts and approaches that we address in our training: the emotional connection between a writer and their writing, trauma-informed approaches to consulting, power dynamics, writer agency, body language, silence, and choices about sentence-level interventions, to name a few. The discussion framework seems to support self-awareness about individual consulting, as consultants observe their own work reflected back to them in new ways. At times, this awareness helps them articulate why they do what they do; other times, it opens up possibilities.

We have found NAE to be a powerful heuristic for guiding consultants in discovering different ways of asking questions and in naming alternate strategies, as the following excerpts from their notes suggest. For example, NAE—as a lens to review consultation moments that might otherwise be lost or forgotten—invites consultants to notice practices they weren’t initially aware of:

“[W]e caught me talking a lot and very fast; it gave little room for the writer to add their own comments.”

"I found myself asking more leading questions or not asking as in depth questions because I thought I already knew the answer. This also led to more evaluative language."

They also *ask* new questions about their consulting:

"This conversation has caused me to reflect in (sic) my own writing and writing in general. To what degree is an emotional connection to writing necessary or helpful for a writer? How can we frame discussions about this topic and/or strategy for writing?"

The discussion "reminded me that my unconscious mediation of silence could be more conscious. Do I actively consider when silence would add to my sessions, rather than just 'feeling it out'? What are some silence strategies I can use that would avert the anxiety I am currently trying to avoid in my sessions?"

And they *explore* possibilities for future sessions:

The "content and area of focus for the consultation directly intersected w/my racial identity (and happened to be triggering), and I chose not to name that element of identity as present in our consultation. In retrospect, and after today's conversation, I wish I had."

"What I am taking away from this session is 1) there are so many ways to approach consulting and 2) when in doubt, just ask questions!"

In both discussions and reflections, we see the kind of learning we hoped for; consultants name specific strategies, consider possibilities, and generate insights that develop their approaches. They notice, ask about, and explore their own and their peers' consultations. We also find evidence of how hard it can be to resist evaluation, in consultations and during observations; this skill requires consistent practice. Further, though consultants recognize the importance of asking questions, we continue to explore how to move consultant learning from recognition to application by asking more genuine and generative questions during consultations.

It is worth noting that the NAE model invites consultants to recognize the limitations of recordings, which don't capture everything that happens during a session. Consultants have noticed, for example, that when working in Google Docs, as opposed to sharing a screen, the recording shows only consultant's and writer's faces, not the writing or how it was engaged. These observations are useful for discussing body language or question asking, but reorganization or sentence-level work is more challenging to discuss. Recordings also don't capture Zoom chat, which we encourage consultants

to use to make note-taking visible in online sessions. Consultants notice what is not there as well as what is; as we continue to develop the model, we will work to explore alternatives that offer a range of visible and invisible consulting moves.

## CONCLUSION

In person again, we are discovering new exigencies for developing and using the “notice, ask, explore” framework. We are curating a library of representative recordings that showcase consultants demonstrating curiosity, asking genuine questions, and guiding writers in productive and generative ways. However, consultants recording and selecting their own clips and watching them with peers remains a vital part of this process. We continue to have a high volume of online consultations, but even in person, consultants can use Zoom to record via a laptop set up on the table. We are also working to understand the limitations of a model centered on watching videos to consider how to revise for accessibility. Emphasizing discussion over viewing is a step in the right direction.

In each iteration of our model, we have recognized that observation is a skill in itself; consultants must learn how to observe just as they learn how to consult. Hall articulates well this relationship among observation, reflection, and tutoring: “underlying reflection is the assumption that one has an informed critical framework already in place for thinking about tutoring practices” (“Theory” 82). NAE creates a “critical framework” based on the idea that tutoring and observing are analogous processes. What the consultant does with the text/writer is what the observer does with the consultation observed; both are—ideally and with practice—descriptive and reflective. Selected clips from recorded sessions ground collaborative discussion and transform observation into a process of dialogic reflection.

At the same time, these methods prompt consultants to have agency in improving their skills and in shaping conversations about future practices. For example, our consultants regularly conduct research, and our initial observation model and the NAE framework were designed by Kelly and Olivia while they were consultants. Kelly and Olivia’s participation in this design shows another kind of agency and peer learning: they were not just using their observation experiences to teach and learn from one another but also taking an active role in developing new approaches to training and consulting for the center as a whole.

We hope that other writing centers might adapt our practices to their own contexts. That might involve recording online consulta-

tions in Zoom or using a laptop to record an in-person consultation. More critically, it might involve finding new ways to implement our notice, ask, explore framework—which has emerged for us as the unexpected, and lasting, outcome of our pandemic-prompted use of Zoom—with in-person consultations. We hope to apply NAE to other practices, from the structure of a consultation itself to our observations and assessments of the writing center’s day-to-day procedures, while continuing to invite collaboration among consultants and directors. Without noticing what’s happening, asking questions, and exploring the possibilities emerging in our transition to Zoom consultations, we would not have recorded and created the replayable consultation texts that have become essential to consultant discussion and training, and which helped us develop the dialogic reflection we’d been missing.

## NOTES

We are grateful to Eliana Schonberg, Sarah Hart Micke, and the many consultants who have participated in and helped to shape our observation practices. Author names for this article are listed in alphabetical order.

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