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Writing Centers and the Idea of Consultancy

William McCall

And if we are not properly understood, is it easier to expect our audience to change or is it easier to change ourselves to be more understandable? Is it more effective to complain about being victims or to take positive action to improve our lot? (Simpson 2)

At a staff meeting held shortly after beginning operations in the fall of 1992, the director of our writing center asked the staff to list and then discuss the values and practices we associated with the terms *tutor* and *consultant*.¹ Since she had, from the beginning, been using *consultant* rather than *tutor* to describe the work done by our undergraduate staff, it seemed to me like a loaded question: were we “with the program” as she envisioned it or not? To me, *consultant* was pretentious, more appropriate in the business world than in educational settings, and certainly I associated it with well-paid work. At that time, however, we depended on two English education courses to provide us with about sixty unpaid students that we needed to staff the center. *Tutor*, on the other hand, struck me as a respectable term, rich with meaning, history, and educational significance, despite its obvious associations with prescriptive learning. As I listened to my colleagues convey their associations with the terms, an uneasy feeling swept over me: they were decidedly with the program in a way I was not. Nevertheless, with what I like to think of as a certain amount of courage, when it was my turn to reveal my position, I voiced my reservations about *consultant* and my liking for *tutor*. After all, I had been a tutor, had willingly sought out students to tutor, and had done well by them and they by me. To denigrate or reject the term was for me to disparage a part of my past that I remembered fondly. The response from my

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colleagues was not stony silence or glares, but neither were any heads nodding in agreement as they had been before I took my turn.

This exercise was carried out several more times during the year with faculty groups meeting at the center and with six different groups of undergraduate writing consultants during our biweekly crosstalks that I conducted. The accumulated results stimulated a great deal of discussion, as the following list of typical associations might suggest.

Tutor	Consultant
Education	Business
Older/traditional	Newer/technocratic
Lower pay and prestige	Higher pay and prestige
Gives correct answers/prescriptive	Suggests options/dialogic
Needed to bring someone up to speed/remedial	Needed to advance beyond an already strong position
Sent to	Sought out
For kids/students	For adults/emerging professionals
Solve a problem	Avoid a problem
Better educated	Equally educated
Ongoing and more personal relationship	One-time and less personal relationship
Individual	Collective and collaborative
Works more broadly on larger topic/subject based	Works on particular topic/problem based
Asymmetrical/hierarchical relationship	Symmetrical/evenly balanced relationship
Common	Pretentious
Feudal economics	Capitalistic economics

Results like these, discussions with colleagues, and experience training new undergraduates for work in the writing center prompted me to reassess my allegiance to *tutor*.

That *tutor* may not be the best word to describe writing center activity is not an especially new idea. Lex Runciman and John Trimbur have voiced their concerns about the use of *tutor* in previous issues of this journal. Trimbur's article problematizes both *tutor* and *peer* without rejecting either of them, but he rightly notes that the title "peer tutor" is a contradiction in terms. Reflecting the educational hierarchy that they have been immersed in since their schooling began, tutors are likely to see themselves, at least initially, as "little teachers" passing down state-of-the-art knowledge about writing to those less informed; the adjective *peer*, however, suggests that the tutor is not really an expert but a co-learner engaged collaboratively with the tutee in a way that works against the hierarchical structure of traditional education. Trimbur's way out of this apparent impasse is not to discard either designation but to argue that the training of tutors should take place at two different levels and at two different times. Initially, tutors need, with one hand, to be cleansed of the "apprentice model" of writing workshop support which emphasizes their roles as paraprofessionals and, with the other hand, to be immersed in a "co-learner model" of support which emphasizes collaboration and their roles in the "formation of a student culture that takes writing seriously" (26). Later, when and if tutors have made a commitment to composition as a field of study, it may be beneficial to acquaint them with and expect them to exercise the theory-driven practices of professional teachers of composition.

While I appreciated Trimbur's point that our undergraduate staff needs first to understand the concept of collaboration before knowing the intricacies and professional debates about teaching writing when I read it, it now seems to me that much of the confusion tutors have about defining their roles stems from their already conceived associations with *tutor*. If we named them something else, might they more easily shed the "little teacher" mentality that works against the notion of collaboration? Neither Trimbur nor Kenneth Bruffee, who argues for an emphasis on the *peer* of peer tutoring in the belief that peer tutors can "act as agents of institutional change" by helping to forge a new educational system based on collaboration, considers the effects of *tutor* on the activity it is meant to describe.

The ubiquitous preference for *tutor* in our professional publications and conferences, however, can undermine writing center theory as we currently understand it, and its persistence may well curtail and distort not only how others in academia perceive writing center work but also how our undergraduate staff conceives of its own work. As Lex Runciman explains,

We recruit students to staff our writing centers, and we call these students tutors; we call the writers they work with tutees. Then in our first training session we find ourselves obligated to very carefully spell out the roles that writing assistants play. *We find ourselves explaining why writing assistants aren't tutors and why student writers aren't really tutees.* (31)

How writing consultants see themselves is, of course, of paramount importance to the success of a writing center, and a couple of training sessions may suffice in getting them to think of themselves as something other than what they normally associate with their title of tutor. On the other hand, it might reasonably be argued that as long as we call them tutors, they will, despite their efforts not to, eventually slip back into the role designated by their title. But even if such training successfully washes the notion of *tutor* out of our consultants' minds, the wider perception held by others in the community we wish to serve remains largely outside of our reach and control.

To continue to use *peer tutoring* to describe current writing center activity makes our job harder by encouraging others to see us in terms which we no longer really embrace. A similar need for new terminology was evident in the transition which took place some years ago from writing *lab* to writing *center*, a topic addressed most thoroughly in an essay by Jim Addison and Henry L. Wilson who assert that the rejection of *lab* and the "metaphorical baggage" associated with it represented "dramatic alterations in the underlying philosophy, role, and functions of a writing center in the academic community" (56). The changes described by Addison and Wilson are real enough, although the essay places more weight on the metaphors—lab as a site of illness and cure, the center as a site of health and growth—than they can actually bear, prompting Muriel Harris in a review of the book in which the essay occurred to say, "Although metaphors can be powerful guides for our thinking, they can also cause us to oversimplify when we become too enamored of them" (98). While this is a caution that should not be ignored, neither should we ignore the power of language to guide thinking, especially that of our colleagues who at times struggle for an understanding of writing center work.

In "The Challenge of Innovation: Putting New Approaches into Practice," Jeanne Simpson poses the questions which began this essay. She answers them by acknowledging that "we must be willing to move out of our old contexts, to be amenable to change," and she singles out awareness of audience as the primary lesson to take to heart if we want to further our effectiveness as educators (2). The audience we wish to serve would understand the work we do better if we used more precise language to describe it.

Replacing *tutor* with *consultant* is not an easy change, as I well know, and what Simpson says of the academy is just as true of writing centers: "while the academy is the source of new ideas, it is very slow to change itself. Its fondness for its own institutions is large" (3). So there is a certain amount of inertia, a built-in reluctance to change that which has served us well and in which we have invested time and emotion. While it may seem simple to change a name, I think that just the opposite is true: it is much easier to revamp how we train our staff than it is to call them by a different name. But naming is an important prerequisite to defining, and, as the list of associations people have

with *tutor* shows, it is a title which, for the most part, misrepresents the work of those it names.

Consultant, on the other hand, more precisely connotes the work actually done in the writing center. Whereas tutors are expected to know the correct answers and to prescribe the proper and rigid structures into which the students' thought must fit, consultants are perceived as supportive listeners who work flexibly with clients to help them achieve what they have identified as their goal. And as the title of consultant implies, those who work in a writing center must consciously avoid becoming final authorities on papers brought to them. As Tilly Warnock and John Warnock explain, "the best and perhaps the only way to change student writing is to help students revise their attitudes towards themselves as writers and towards writing. A crucial part of the change is to restore to students the sense of their own authority and responsibility" (19). Thinking like a consultant rather than a tutor is one step toward this goal because, unlike the tutor/tutee relationship, the consultant/client relationship connotes a symmetrical interchange between equals rather than a hierarchical interchange between unequals. The consultant advises and suggests; the client decides whether or not to act on the consultant's advice.

In terms of having students take primary responsibility for their work, there is another benefit to *consultant*. Consultants are most often sought out through the client's own initiative, unlike tutors to whom one is most often sent for remediation after failing at some academic task. And even if students are sent to consultants, as sometimes happens at our writing center though we discourage it, they generally come in with a better attitude because there is simply less stigma attached to seeing a consultant than there is to seeing a tutor. Tutors are for failures and consultants are for those who want to improve, a subtle but important difference when attitude often determines student success or failure with writing.

Consultant is not without its problems, nor *tutor* devoid of its merits. Because tutors are associated with education rather than with business, they seem to connote a warmth and a personal concern for the student's success that consultants may lack. Consultants, who are most noticeable in business settings, seem colder, more interested in problems clients are either experiencing or trying to avoid than in the people or person who face the problems. Part of this conceptual difference stems from the fact that tutors most often establish ongoing relationships with their tutees that may last a whole semester or even years. I am still friends with a Japanese student whom I tutored through four years of college, not a surprising development since I met with him, on average, once a week. Consultants, on the other hand, are typically contacted for help on a particular problem, and while they may be called on again and again, it is always with a specific idea or piece of writing in hand. Another likely origin for the "cold" and "warm" connotations of *consultant* and *tutor* is that tutors are often integrally bound up in the success

or failure of the student in a particular course or subject, and they are usually hired specifically to help a student achieve a passing grade. Since consultants have historically not been part of the educational landscape known to students, they are associated more with general efficiency and success than with graded evaluation, and this is true even while their focus remains on a specific task or topic. For writing consultants working in writing centers, this attitude is best reflected in Stephen North's axiom that "Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing" (438).

That business is the best-known site for consulting practices should not be allowed to dominate how we think about the term. There are, after all, political consultants, educational consultants, computer consultants, architectural consultants, environmental consultants, and a host of others. And despite the contemporary associations *consultant* has with late capitalism and technocratic societies, it has a rich history of its own, appearing as a verb in English at about the same time, 1565, as *tutor*. *Tutor* as a verb first appeared in 1592, but still carried with it the earlier (1377) noun sense of *tutor* as a guardian, protector, or defender. *Consult* is, of course, related to *counsel* and carries with it the attendant meanings of advice, discussion, confer, and deliberate, all of which describe common practices of writing center personnel. More importantly, the literature on consulting produced by and for people in business and the professions includes some very sound information useful to writing center activities. One much-used book on professional consulting, for instance, begins this way:

Consultation is fundamentally the act of helping. As such, it holds the dramatic vibrance and reality which characterizes life itself. Consultation is not simply the mechanical tossing of expertise toward a painful client; it is an experience in shared resources. . . . [I]t is the substance and spirit in the helping process which gives consultation its unique humanness. (Bell and Nadler 1)

Besides the obvious emphasis here on collaboration, I am more struck by the tone of the statement, its sensitivity toward the client and its clear recognition of consulting as a dynamic human process. This is not an isolated occurrence. Chapter two of Bell and Nadler's book consists of an essay by the psychotherapist Carl Rogers that discusses the "helping relationship" and how one can best promote "growth, development, [and] maturity" in an individual (22). Another book on consulting discusses the reasons clients seek consultants in terms of bafflement, uneasy feelings, and changing standards of evaluation (Blake and Mouton 2-3), all familiar scenarios to writing center consultants who help writers understand assignments, allay their fears, and clarify the grading standards expected of college writers. Other books on professional consulting discuss topics such as establishing rapport, accessing the client's needs, negotiating a plan of action, keeping the responsibility on the client, choosing appropriate intervention strategies, and disengaging

gracefully (Schein; Margerison). These examples from the literature written by professional consultants are not meant to suggest that they, the people who have been working with the notion of consulting for the past twenty-five years, have already covered the ground we have recently entered, but the examples should at least make us more aware of how the current use of *consultant* does, in fact, describe much of the work we do.

No designation for writing center staff is without its shortcomings, and this is as true of *writing consultant* as it is of *tutor*, *writing fellow*, or *writing assistant*. But we might ask ourselves which term offers the best and most complete description of our work not only in the center but also out of the center, and, in this regard, the consultancy model also has much to recommend it. Most writing centers, for instance, function as either official or unofficial information houses for writing-across-the-curriculum efforts, and, as faculty associated with the center, we are often called upon to act as consultants to faculty from other disciplines who want to incorporate more writing into their courses. Although we have expertise in writing and in designing writing assignments, we engage our colleagues as equals in a symmetrical relationship. They feel no stigma in seeking us out, and we feel no sense of superiority in assisting them in articulating and accomplishing the goals they have set for themselves. This is essentially the same situation present with our undergraduates who work in and visit writing centers. It makes sense to describe the activity in the same terms, especially since faculty who have drawn on the expertise of faculty writing consultants are probably less likely to raise the question of whether or not students who have visited the center have actually done their own work, an otherwise common reason given by some for not sending students our way. While we have often heard of the tutor who steps over the line between assistance and ghostwriting, it is less common to hear of consultants who confuse their role with that of the client. Additionally, as it becomes more common for writing centers to send student consultants into classes for presentations or writing group support, it seems reasonable to strive for coherence and clarity in describing our services by referring to writing center consultants, faculty consultants, and classroom consultants.

Note

¹As I have come to appreciate, Patti Stock, director of Michigan State University's Writing Center, believes that practice benefits when it is continuously problematized—when practitioners practice research by researching their practice. In keeping with this sense of the interrelatedness of research and practice, her invitation to consider *tutor* and *consultant* prompted us to a greater self-consciousness about our practice in the writing center and to a deeper, albeit still tentative, understanding of the consultant's role.

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