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“Just Chuck It: I Mean, Don’t Get Fixed On It”: Self Presentation in Writing Center Discourse

by Susan Wolff Murphy

“To be fully human is to know the joint construction of reality. Largely, for most people, this is constructed through discourse, because talk is central to everyday life….Interweaving bits and pieces of your own and another’s talk is the primary mode of creating a sense of your own place in the world.” (Ferrara 168)

As sociolinguist Kathleen Ferrara reminds us, talk defines our humanity and our “place in the world.” As writing center practitioners, we understand the importance of talk, not only as it connects us to each other and to our identities, or as an enactment of who we are and what we do professionally, but also as it allows us to help others clarify their thoughts, create sense, and construct realities.

What consultants say during writing center sessions is vitally important because it constructs what we are and who we are on our campuses, “we” in this instance being not only individual consultants but also the institutional place and entity that is the writing center. Each consultant’s and student’s personality, experience, age, background, and gender all play a part in the smatterings of discourse I speak, hear, and overhear in my daily activities in my writing center. In addition, the conscious choices we make about how we speak impact the direction, student-centeredness, and outcome of each interaction.

During the spring semester of 1999, using observation, audiotapes, questionnaires, and feedback interviews, I studied the discourse used by students and consultants in writing center sessions. This experience helped me to understand the

About the Author

Susan Wolff Murphy is an Assistant Professor of English at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. For the second year, she is inhabiting the “dual citizenship” role of Director of the First-Year Learning Communities Program and Coordinator of the First-Year Writing Program. Previously, she served as the Coordinator of the Writing Center. Two of her current research projects focus on the literate and language practices of Latino/a students and secondary-university writing center partnerships. Her writing has appeared in Writing Groups Inside and Outside the Classroom.
complexity of the phenomenon of writing center discourse in terms of nondirective pedagogy, and how in practice being nondirective moves irregularly and sometimes recursively along a continuum as a session progresses. The sociolinguistic theories of Goffman and others helped me to analyze the data, looking at how people use strategies of politeness and face-saving to keep conversations productive and in motion. For this article, I have focused on the discourse strategies of self presentation used by writing center consultants to determine how these strategies enact nondirective pedagogies, define consultants’ and students’ roles in conversation and create our writing center’s place in the university.

Being Nondirective

The results of this study do not simply support the claims of writing center literature and lore that nondirective tutoring is good, but complicate them by demonstrating that within sessions, consultants will shift positions of power with students/writers as they seek to achieve particular goals as well as collaboratively construct self presentations for themselves and their writing centers. Consultants enacted the writing center philosophy and discourse strategies that have been endorsed by everyone from Muriel Harris and Leigh Ryan to Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner. Generally, they were nondirective by using, for example, open-ended questions and reacting as a reader (Gillespie and Lerner 24; Ryan 19-20). What was surprising to me was the complicated and shifting nature of how “being nondirective” was performed. Consultants and students both adopted various forms of self presentation to appear nondirective but at the same time set an agenda, establish authority, and/or gain trust.

As a writing center administrator, knowledge of these results makes me slower to judge the snippets I overhear as being too directive or vice versa; it also makes me more aware of my own uses of discourse strategies. What I want to share with my consultants and other writing center directors is an overview of this study, a few of the moments that illustrate the various ways consultants present themselves in discourse, and how I see this kind of analysis working into consultant training and assessment, as well as how it can help us in the field to complicate our notions of what it is we do when we sit down and talk with a writer.

Study Methods

I performed a discourse analysis of the writing center sessions between eight English graduate-student writing center consultants and their clients at a large, four-year, public university in Texas. For this study, I audiotaped and observed three complete sessions for each of the consultants during the course of the spring
semester of 1999. I transcribed the sessions using the model of Kathleen Ferrara's transcription system from her analysis of the talk between psychotherapists and their patients in *Therapeutic Ways With Words* (174-175). I later revised those transcripts based upon a system of vertical transcription advocated by Gilewicz and Thonus in "Close Vertical Transcription in Writing Center Training and Research" (see Appendix). The transcripts and the observations made about them were shared with the participants for feedback. In addition to the audiotapes, transcripts and feedback interviews, I used field notes and questionnaires to interpret the strategies of self presentation used in these sessions.

**The Conversation**

Discourse analysis of writing center interactions and, more broadly, analysis of talk within writing centers have been developing as a field of study in the past decade. Although many of these studies remain unpublished dissertations, a few articles on the study of writing center discourse have been published. In addition to these recently published works focusing on discourse, there is a long history in writing center literature that recommends various discourse strategies for nondirective tutoring practice, which is often assumed to be one point of consensus for our field. For example, Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner suggest the use of open-ended questions in *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring* (24), and in *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, Leigh Ryan discusses the strategy of "reacting as a reader," by commenting, "I'm confused," and by "requesting information" (19-20). These strategies enable the tutor to enact the role of the confused reader and thereby achieve the goal of consulting nondirectively. Tutor-training guidebooks and theory about writing center practice often claim that "good" and "collaborative" tutoring is nondirective (Harris 71) and that questioning a writer's organization or content, as if the consultant were almost completely uninformed of the writing's topic, is a useful and effective model of writing consulting. If consultants use open-ended questions, for example, then they pass control over the writing to the client and lessen their own authority. Nondirective strategies are advocated broadly to keep the conference student-centered, to promote learning, to maintain student ownership of the writing, and to diminish charges of inappropriate assistance.

The assumption that nondirective tutoring is a good practice in writing centers arises, in part, from the model of the writing conference set forth by Kenneth Bruffee. Citing Richard Rorty's arguments regarding "normal discourse," Bruffee wrote that a peer tutoring writing conference is "a conversation within a community of knowledgeable peers" that operates as a model of critical thinking, but also as
the "normal discourse" that occurs in work and academic environments (8). It is important to note that the quality of interactants in terms of status and their access to or use of a "normal" variety of language is not questioned in Bruffee's text, in part because Bruffee is making a specific argument about the use of undergraduate peer tutors, not professionalized or graduate student/faculty writing consultants such as those I studied.

Bruffee's model of the writing conference as an egalitarian conversation and model of collaboration among peers has been used as a model for writing center conferences fairly pervasively in the literature of the field, although Bruffee's model has been complicated by several writing center theorists. One theorist who has pointed out the limitations of Bruffee's model is John Trimbur, who acknowledges the risk of the social pressure peer tutors might feel to "[maintain] the sense of cultural superiority the academic hierarchy has conferred on them" (24), and who argues that professionalization of tutors will only "[take] peer tutors out of student culture," thereby negating the possibility of the student and tutor being true "peers" in the consultation (27). Nondirective tutoring by all types of tutors, including professional and graduate student tutors, can be seen as an extension of Bruffee's collaborative peer-tutoring ideal, tempered by the warnings by scholars, such as Trimbur, who acknowledge the complicated nature of the writing center conversation. Another challenge to the "idealized" model of nondirective tutoring is posed by Conroy, Lerner, and Siska, who point out that nondirective tutoring works against the "mainstream and mundane cultural assumptions" that students often hold when they seek "authority and direction" from consultants (148). This tension between expectations and writing center practice causes the graduate student tutor's role in the writing center to be conflicted. In spite of these complications and the range of contexts, staffs, and philosophical groundings of writing centers, being nondirective has become a commonsense practice. Ironically, tutor training guidebooks are very directive when it comes to being nondirective. Elizabeth Boquet, in Noise from the Writing Center, recognizes this rigidity when she critiques some of the language used in these training manuals, referring to the advice as "lockstep repetition" (71). In spite of Boquet's critique, being nondirective is perhaps the only "default" writing center practice. As such, readers will find the results of this study to be broadly applicable. These findings help to provide layers of detail to what we assume about this default by illuminating how complicated and dynamic "being nondirective" is in practice.
Goffman’s Theory of Self Presentation

For this discourse analysis, I used the theoretical frame of self presentation from Erving Goffman and the politeness schema from Brown and Levinson. The complete results of these analyses are beyond the scope of this article; only the question of consultant self presentation is addressed here. Since the theories of Brown and Levinson and of Goffman have to do with the presentation of self and facework, they overlap and support one another and prove useful in the analysis of the discourse of the writing center consultation.

Erving Goffman, in his article “On Face-Work,” provides a starting point for the discussion of face, or what I am referring to as self presentation. Goffman defines face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (213). A “line” is defined as the “verbal and nonverbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself” (213). The collaborative nature of self presentation is evident in Goffman’s emphasis on the “others” in the interaction, rather than simply the speaker/author’s self-assessment. A verbal act that I commit, “I think this is a great session,” implies both my value and my colleagues’ value within that session, thereby claiming “social value” for me. The connections made between verbal act and implication, though, depend on others with whom I am in conversation, and in that way are a collaborative effort. The examples that Goffman provides suggest that speakers and writers always use a flattering self presentation to achieve their goals, although the data I analyzed demonstrate that sometimes speakers use forms of self presentation that are not flattering, that imply their limitations, ignorance, and/or confusion to achieve their goals.

Further, Goffman focuses on face as a means of smoothing differences between interactants to promote the continuance of conversation. He writes, “maintenance of face is a condition of the interaction....To study face-saving is to study the traffic rules of social interaction” (216). The maintenance of face, then, is usually a cooperative effort, where the objective of an interlocutor is not to “better” the other, but to maintain whatever self presentation a person appears to have chosen for him or herself to keep the conversation moving. Goffman assumes that people will make efforts to “make whatever [they are] doing consistent with [their] face,” a process he titles “face-work” (216).

Brown and Levinson’s Theory of Politeness

In 1978, working from Goffman’s idea of face-work, as well as Grice’s conversational maxims, Brown and Levinson used “a model person” to illustrate their
theory of polite conversational behavior in *Politeness*. Politeness is defined as the use of "linguistic strategies as means satisfying communicative and face-oriented ends," in a strictly formal system of rational 'practical reasoning'" (58). Brown and Levinson assume that "the mutual interest of two MPs (model persons) [is] to maintain each other's face," with face defined as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself, consisting in two related aspects: (a) negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distrac-

Politeness and self presentation are closely related because both function to move the conversation, both work to preserve face, both are constructed and maintained cooperatively by the interlocutors, and both are contextually specific and constantly negotiated. Writing center practice is full of acts of politeness; of course, bringing in one's writing to the center could be seen as an act that would "intrinsically threaten face," so one might say that politeness is intrinsic to the writing center consultation.

I have selected four cases that illustrate different forms of self presentation: (1) linguistic expert, (2) educated-but-confused reader, (3) uninformed reader, and (4) mentor/co-learner in literary analysis. These forms of self presentation are primary in each session, although each shifts and is constructed throughout. These forms of self presentation enact varying strategies of directiveness/nondirectiveness and create "a sense of [the] place in the world" (Ferrara 168) occupied by these writing center consultants and students.

**Example 1: The Necessity of Expertise**

An example of the shifting dynamics of authority and expertise that demonstrates the necessity for cooperation between interactants in the maintenance of face (as Goffman emphasizes above) is evident in Transcript G1. In this case, both the consultant and the student were male; the consultant was in his 50s and studied linguistics and rhetoric in the English doctoral program. The student was an upper division Iranian studying engineering. The student has the greater knowledge of his native language and, therefore, has a native speaker's authority and expertise.
The consultant's ability to demonstrate some linguistic expertise in the characteristics of Persian and Arabic language systems and writing styles leads the student to corroborate his claims. In this interaction, we can see the collaborative building of self presentation as an expert.

The consultant's claim that one of the characteristics of Arabic is the use of very long sentences, and that this cultural phenomenon might be being translated into the student's writing in English, starts this exchange. (Transcriptions conventions are provided in Appendix.)

Transcript G1: Unnecessarily Making It Long

91 T: Arabic has, um, their, um, punctuation system?
They don't have the same thing.
They go on and on and on and on
92 S: [You know Arabic?
93 T: No, but I've studied-
I know people that-
Um, um ( ) read the Koran, and that have talked about it, and you know I've looked at ESL problems, and this is one, when related to English (.h)
94 S: But I do not speak Arabic, [so don't make-
95 T: [No, no, no, but that same system,
96 S: Yeah
97 T: Persian, I know.
98 S: Yeah.
99 T: But, uh, the Koran is written in ancient Arabic, basically,
100 S: yeah
101 T: And that's the Bible for you, so a lot of those forms are just this is the way to do it, right? So, and this <taps table> is kind of a carry over from that. And that's fine, that's great,
102 S: Yeah,
103 T: [As long as you recognize it, it is still (American English)
104 S: [But it is, this is very much, very much a Persian: um,
105 T: Right.
106 S: Unnecessarily making it long.
107 T: Right! () Well, for an English speaker.

The client is very defensive until the consultant demonstrates that he knows what he's talking about. It is not necessarily his claims to knowledge, a position, or a title that give him authority, but an actual demonstration of his knowledge that con-
vinces the client. The consultant's "line" that "Arabic has, um, their, um, punctuation system?" and the implication that this categorizes the student as an Arabic speaker, which is incorrect, as well as potentially criticizing his and/or their communicative style, present the breakdown of conversation and the risk of offense being taken. The consultant's explanation, that Arabic is the language of the Koran and that he has studied ESL, does not satisfy the client, who does not wish to be identified as an Arabic speaker. This breakdown is visible in the student's self presentation, "But I do not speak Arabic, so don't make," which is an act of negative politeness, or a "claim to territory[ y]" in Brown and Levinson's terms (61). Even here, while the student is staking his linguistic turf by contradicting the consultant's apparent claim, he does not attack him verbally; a level of politeness is still maintained.

Even so, the consultant backpedals quickly, "No, no, no," to repair the damage and to rectify the misunderstanding: "Persian, I know." These moves are affirmed by the student. His linguistic identity has been affirmed; an act of positive politeness, the maintenance of self-image has been accomplished. He restates the claim of wordiness of Persian writing for himself, echoing the consultant as a means of connecting and creating solidarity and thereby evaluating himself and the consultant in a positive light.

104 S: But it is, this is very much, very much a Persian: um,
105 T: Right.
106 S: Unnecessarily making it long.

It is the demonstration of the knowledge, the presentation of self as a scholar of language, as well as mitigating acts like backpedaling, hedging, and backchanneling that save the consultant from offending the client and restore the "traffic flow" of conversation. The consultant's ethos convinces the client to listen to the consultant and his statements about different rhetorical styles. What begins, in Goffman's terms, as a breakdown in the traffic flow of the conversation, ends with a very successful road repair.

The consultant's display of expertise is not an act of domination, nor is it detrimental to the goals of the writing center; quite the contrary. The consultant must show his expertise to make this session succeed. In this session, the display of expertise and the reason why a consultant chooses to show his knowledge are tied inextricably to the workings of politeness and self presentation.
Example 2: Being an Educated-but-Confused Reader

One strategy that serves as self presentation and as an act of politeness, but also enacts writing center training and responds to the immediate context of the English department within which this writing center was situated, occurs when consultants present themselves as educated-but-confused readers. The “educated” part of the role satisfies the need for positive face (Brown and Levinson), while the “confused” part hedges any threat to the student’s positive face that might be incurred by direct criticism of the writing. In other words, this strategy preserves the face of both interactants and therefore facilitates communication. At the time of this study, an anonymous-but-educated reader was the audience most often specified in the assignment prompts in the English department’s writing courses. The confusion may arise from the client’s wording or from the use of source material; in either case, the necessity of revision is implied by the expression of confusion. Questions based upon a lack of comprehension appear often in the data and appear to work well in terms of introducing the idea of revision while reinforcing client self-esteem and maintaining face, thereby smoothing differences and continuing the conversational “traffic flow.” In Transcript H1, both interactants are female. The consultant is in her 50s, was previously a middle-school English teacher, and is studying in the English masters program. The student is a young woman enrolled in a sophomore-level literature course. The “confused reader” strategy is seen below in consultant H’s presentation of herself in turn 49:

Transcript H1: “Heart of Darkness” Thesis

45  T:  Ok, ok,
46  S:  So.
47  T:  So the: uh the theme then,
       Give me-
       Give me a short-
       Can you give me a short sentence saying what the theme is.
(3)
46  S:  I, I would say it’s this sentence right here:
47  T:  Ok. ( )
       Marlow conceals him-
       Marlow conceals from himself the truth of his needs as well, I see.
48  S:  um hm
49  T:  Ok.
       <h>.
       Ok.

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I see

.................................................................................................................. <T Discusses punctuation choice>

51  T:  Ok, so um. (2) I don't understand the truth of his needs. What does that mean?

In turn 45, the consultant is trying to ascertain what the client's thesis statement is. The client points to a sentence in her written draft in turn 46, and the consultant reads it aloud in turn 47. She states her lack of comprehension in turn 49, "I don't understand the truth of his needs." This presentation of self as a confused reader counteracts her non-verbal presentation of self as a graduate student in English and a gray-haired, older woman of great self-possession. It also counters her presentation of self within her discourse as "a seventh grade English teacher" (Transcript H1, turn 471). All of the positions of authority that this consultant inhabits in this consultation are ethical appeals, both constructed and contextual/historical. The question, "What does that mean?," which appears in turn 51 complicates these positions of authority by constructing the face of the confused reader and giving the client the authority to define the meaning of her words and to own her writing by explaining it. This move fulfills exactly what tutoring handbooks suggest for nondirective tutoring, as well as our commonsense notions of writing center discourse.

It is interesting to note, however, that the tendency in some consultations was to move away from open-ended questions to more directive language, usually as consultants became frustrated with lack of progress towards their perceived goal. This movement towards authority is accomplished gradually. For example, in this same consultation, the question in turn 51 leads into a series of questions as the consultant tries to clarify the client's thesis. The consultant continues to take the position of confused reader by stating the fact that she has not, in many years, read Heart of Darkness, the subject of the client's essay. Because of this fact, she expresses an inability to assess the client's interpretation of the text or provide alternate ideas to those expressed by the client. She does not, however, maintain this persona throughout the consultation.

By turn 190, consultant H is suggesting revision, although this suggestion is mitigated by the use of the plural first person. The impression that the client and consultant are collaborating is supported by her use of "we" in turn 190. This moves the consultant from the persona of a reader to a writer or collaborator and expresses the consultant's frustration with their lack of progress toward her goal for the session (stated in turn 190).
Transcript H1: “Heart of Darkness” Thesis

189 S: But overall I mean the point is that ( ) all the people in the story are superficial.

190 T: Yeah.

<tsk> (2) We still haven't come up with a, a-

With a good thesis, [I think that's where we need to uh, alright, so, so you’re-

191 S: [Sure

192 T: The point you’re making is that ( ) um, let me read back through it [cause I can’t read-

193 S: [Ok

The transcript shows that the consultant and client have been discussing this thesis and its wording for approximately 145 turns, and they still have not reached “a good thesis.” The use of “we” in this case marks the attempt at collaboration and mitigates the face-threat of the meaning of the statement, but is neither echoed nor rejected by the student. Whether or not the client is aware of the consultant’s intent during all this discussion is debatable, but certainly the facts that her paper has already received a poor grade from her instructor and that a writing consultant finds her thesis statement unclear combine to suggest that lack of clarity and direction might be a crucial part of her problem. In spite of these factors, however, the client continues to blame her teacher for her grade, a factor that contributes to the shifting nature of the consultant’s discourse as they progress through the session.

Transcript H1: “Heart of Darkness” Thesis

533 T: So.

Um. I don’t know. [Well, she-

534 S: [She-

She’s tough, [I mean,

535 T: [Yeah. Well-

536 S: And, and it makes, like when she asks questions [like, theme,

537 T: [uh-huh, uh-huh

538 S: You know, and like what is this what is [this,

539 T: [uh-huh

540 S: I mean,

72 “Just Chuck It: I Mean, Don’t Get Fixed On It”
I mean the paper could go forever if you, like,

explained-

541  T:  explained every little thing.

542  S:  Yeah.

543  T:  What you try to do is just find as few words as you can to, you know, to uh explain it.

The excerpts from Transcript HI reveal that the consultant moves from “I don’t understand” (turn 51) to the more authoritative stance by setting an agenda (mitigated by the use of the plural first person), “We still haven’t come up with a good thesis,” (turn 190), to the more directive (but not imperative) “what you try to do” (turn 543).

Even though she is acting throughout as a questioning reader, the consultant also uses an increasingly authoritative self presentation (for example, the description of herself as an English teacher in turn 471) to direct/guide/encourage the client towards revision. The questions counter the defensiveness of the client that is evident in this transcript at the same time that the consultant’s position of authority reinforces the teacher’s assessment and the necessity for global revision. Given the client’s resistance, however, it is unclear what she will do with the paper once she leaves the writing center. Is the resistance at least in part due to the consultant’s use of this strategy of confusion? Does she undercut her authority and knowledge to such an extent that the client is unwilling to follow her advice? Or is it simply that this student wants to complain more than she wants to revise her paper? I would assume that given writing center pedagogy, most writing center administrators and consultants would say that, even in this case, encouraging the student’s ownership of her work is more important than creating a better product, which might have been the end result of a more authoritative session.

Example 3: The Uninformed Consultant

Another variation on the confused-reader strategy is the profession of ignorance by consultants that usually marks the boundaries of their knowledge in a subject area. This “line” in Goffman’s terms might be seen as self-critical, but it is usually mitigated by statements of expertise in other areas, thereby preserving the speaker’s face and self presentation. Sometimes the claim of ignorance on the part of consultants is a prompt for the client to explain the topic, thereby bestowing the rank of expert in the exchange on the student and reinforcing his/her positive face (Brown and Levinson). This dynamic might occur, for example, when the writing assignment discusses a text that the consultant has not read. It also fits with com-
monsense notions of how tutoring discourse is supposed to be student-centered, and it raises similar issues to the previous example. How limitations of specialized knowledge work into the discourse of consultations is demonstrated in Transcript D2. The consultant is a male doctoral student in his 20s who is studying literature. The student is enrolled in a first-year, second-semester writing course, which is literature-based. Whereas the previous consultant in H1 does not claim her authority in such as way as to direct the student toward action, the consultant in D2 does eventually give specific direction to the student. Even in this case, however, he is not taking control of her text, but her research and writing processes.

In spite of where it ends, however, the session begins with a confession of ignorance. In Transcript D2, which is a consultation devoted to brainstorming ideas and organization for a paper on Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the consultant admits in turn nine that he has not read the novel, but has seen the film.

Transcript D2: “Handmaid's Tale” Interpretation

8  S:  We're reading this novel.  
  <Student pulls book out of her backpack> (2)
9  T:  Ah.
10 S:  You have? 
11 T:  Yup, but I have not read The Handmaid's Tale. 
12 S:  Ok. (2)
13 T:  Exactly. 
14 S:  But you know what it's all about. 
15 T:  Yeah, there's a- (4)
    There's like some problem women can't have kids, and then, but 
    there's a few women who can, 
16 S:  Um hm.

It is interesting to see how the consultant first claims his knowledge with, “I've seen the movie,” but admits his ignorance, “but I have not read *The Handmaid's Tale,*” followed by the hedge, “exactly,” which is added after two seconds of silence. Even though the consultant seems to have a vague memory of the plot of the film at best, when the client says, “You know what it's all about,” he responds, “Yeah.” In these ways, his claim of ignorance is much more heavily mitigated than that of the consultant in Transcript H1, who repeatedly refers to her lack of familiarity with *Heart of Darkness.* The differences in these styles may result in the dynamics of the two sessions, one student-centered but frustrating for both consultant and student and the other fairly directive, but possibly less frustrating.
This consultant moves toward a more authoritative face by the use of English (literary) studies jargon. Consultant D, in turn 37, uses jargon like "flashback," "rhetoric" and "foreshadowing" to mark himself as an expert in literary analysis. In all cases, the client responds with a denial, "I don't think" or "I didn't notice," which, if the consultant were being more attentive to the student's needs and wants, might change the course of the session.

Transcript D2: "Handmaid's Tale" Interpretation

37 T: Having you giving me a general plot summary, I would expect in these flashbacks the origins of the present. That is to say, uh, do we find in these flashbacks the basis for her current society, anywhere.

Is there any strand throughout these in the rhetoric of various characters uh, uh, any semblance of foreshadowing of the society that's about to be.

38 S: I don't think, I mean, you mean like whenever she would flashback she could see the society coming on? [Is that what you mean?

39 T: [Yeah.

40 S: I don't- I didn't notice that.

41 T: That's not so much what I was looking for, what I was looking for was something very paternalistic that uh, presupposes that she wouldn't have any rights.

42 S: Oh.

43 T: In the rhetoric of the characters, in the rhetoric of, of, the situation, the language.

44 S: I don't think.

45 T: Ok.

In this case, the consultant seems to wish to teach the client something about an analytical reading of a novel as a means towards figuring out what she can write for this paper. What seems to get in his way is the fact that he has not read the book himself, and therefore he cannot assess the client's ideas in a "teacherly" fashion. His extensive use of jargon and formal language, when combined with the fact that he ignores and doesn't respond to the client's denials, changes this conversation temporarily into a one-sided lecture. In this case, it seems a particularly authorita-
tive act because he is doing it even after professing his lack of familiarity with the novel being analyzed. The consultant gives himself more authority as an English teacher by saying, “Well one of the things that you might want to do and this is something I advise students when they're having trouble just getting started” (Transcript D2, turn 99). Now, he is an advisor, not a consultant, and not a collaborator.

Even when we have lost hope that this consultant will ever give up his authority, he presents himself as more of a peer to the client when he speaks of his own troubles as a writer in the student’s situation.

Transcript D2: “Handmaid’s Tale” Interpretation

101 T: Uh, is to go to the library and look up criticism ( ) on the work at hand ( ) uh, uh

......................................................<T explains library databases>

But whenever I'm having trouble just thinking of where I'm going to start,

102 S: um.

103 T: That's almost always what I do.

This move to describe his own writing process, which acknowledges that all writers (English teachers are presumably good writers?) sometimes have trouble coming up with ideas to write about, serves to counter the previous authoritative presentation of self as an English teacher and to move client and consultant back into a more egalitarian relationship, at least with regard to the presentation of self.

However, the consultant does not maintain any one position, either of authority or peer/collaborator. Almost immediately, when it becomes clear that the client has not even finished reading the novel herself, the consultant expresses his frustration at his inability to guide her to an effective thesis and outline for her paper.

Transcript D2: “Handmaid’s Tale” Interpretation

109 T: Uh, and I haven't read The Handmaid’s Tale like I said I've only seen the movie,

110 S: Um-hm.

111 T: Uh, and so I don’t really know ( )

Uh, where to begin either.

Uh, uh. (2)

And so we don't know what we're going to say we don't know what the thesis statement's going to be,

For right now what I would do is you know whatever you want to write your paper about, just chuck it. I mean don't get fixed in on
it. Uh, go read some literary criticism. Develop some ideas about the book. About what you think it means.

We can see in turns 109 and 111 that the consultant uses his ignorance of the book to excuse the fact that he doesn't know "where to begin either." The "either" here acknowledges the client's lack of direction and the consultant's inability to create a paper idea or organization for her, especially given his lack of familiarity with the topic. It is interesting that he moves into the plural first person in turn 111 to say, "we don't know what we're going to say we don't know what the thesis statement's going to be," again acknowledging the client's lack of preparation but couching it in this plural first person so as to implicate himself in that behavior, which builds rapport and reduces the face threat of the accusation. His next statement, "just chuck it," is even more threatening, but he downgrades it to "I mean don't get fixed on it" in the next sentence. Finally, he gets to the crucial suggestion, which is stated as an imperative: "Go read some criticism. Develop some ideas about the book." Without ideas, the client has nowhere to start her paper and the consultant has nothing to work with in terms of helping her organize her thoughts. However, the fact that he prefaces the client's development of ideas with the command to read literary critics, and thereby imbibe the authoritative voices of English studies, denies for her the ability to think on her own about the text. The consultant not only imposes his own authority, but also the authority of the critics of English literature, upon the client. In this session, we see a more aggressive example of the move from nondirective to directive self presentation on the part of the writing center consultant, but even here there is shifting, a negotiation of authority and expertise.

Example 4: Consultant Authority of English

When consultants lay claim to expertise by claiming status as English students, graduate students, and/or teachers, as I have shown, they gain authority and take a more directive stance in the consultation. Sometimes, as in the "Handmaid's Tale" Interpretation Transcript and in the next example, consultants use a plural pronoun to identify themselves with English studies. Consultant E's presentation of herself in this use of "we" is interesting because it is more complex and tentative than the previous example. In Transcript E2, both interactants are female. The consultant is a masters student in her 20s, while the student is an undergraduate who is very tentative about how to incorporate sources into a piece of writing.
Transcript E2: Identification with Literary Critics

84 T: No, you really want to [try to integrate it with your [ideas
85 S: alright [ok
86 T: Because the, the reason we use literary critics is because we want
to say we realize that we: don't have the authority always to say
this.
87 S: Ok.
88 T: Um, therefore I'm standing on the authority of these other crit-
ics who've gotten published or whatever, something like that.
That's why you'll see professors a lot of times don't use as many
sources because they've already established their authority.
Or sometimes they will, [you know, if they're writing in
89 S: [yeah
90 T: a new area, but-
But, um, that's really why we use sources.
91 S: Ok.

In this transcript, the use of "we" may be taken as an effort to include the client
in the "we," the students of English, and thereby build rapport, but it may also be
taken as a "we" that means the students and professors of English, which does not
necessarily include the client with whom she is working. Although the consultant at
first distances herself from "literary critics" in turn 86, she contradicts that idea of
distance in turn 88 when she says, "other critics," suggesting that she is one herself,
just that she is not among those "who've gotten published" quite yet. When she
refers to "professors" and their habits, she again seems distanced, but in turn 90 she
again says, "that's really why we use sources," and this "we" seems to include the
"professors" mentioned in the previous turn. This consultant's dance with the
authoritative identity of English studies seems to be a result of a desire to both claim
and reject the authority that comes with her role as graduate student, teacher, and
consultant. This complicated self-evaluation or "line" (Goffman) allows the con-
sultant to accomplish her goal of apprenticing the student into the ways of literary
scholars and critics, or the discipline of English studies. In this case, there is not a
steady progression from nondirective to directive; the consultant seems to struggle
with these faces of authority, even though she has the expertise to address the
client's questions. While she makes claims to territory (negative face), her self-
image or positive face seems to require being humble while being smart; part of
being humble may be an effort to maintain not only her own self-image, but the
self-image of the student as well.

78 "Just Chuck It: I Mean, Don't Get Fixed On It"
Consultant Self Presentation: Implications for Practice and Research

These four categories of self presentation represent just a few ways in which authority, directiveness and knowledge interact in the discourse of writing center consultants. The Unnecessary Long Transcript demonstrates how knowledge and expertise can provide a consultant with the authority to make certain claims about student writing which might help students to be more conscious about their writing. The confused reader strategy can give way to more directive discourse strategies as consultants struggle to move toward their goals, as is demonstrated in the “Heart of Darkness” Thesis Transcript. In the “Handmaid’s Tale” Interpretation Transcript, a consultant moves from a nondirective (uninformed) self presentation to more a directive statement, (“Just chuck it”), to a less directive form of self presentation, all within one session. The Identification with Literary Critics Transcript demonstrates how one consultant can vacillate between being inside or outside the know to help a student. Often, the consultants’ frustration peeks through the discourse as their stance gets more directive. In some cases, the relationship with authority presented in the consultant’s discourse is more solid and at other times less so.

How people present themselves to others in conversation is a dynamic process, and these brief moments cannot represent a complete vision of the self presentations of the speakers involved. Each of these excerpts represents a brief moment when, motivated by face threat, the need to set an agenda for a consultation, or another reason, consultants spoke self-consciously about themselves, presented themselves in very specific ways and constructed the reality of themselves and their writing centers in particular ways, ways that were recursively nondirective and directive.

What we can learn from these examples, however, is that consultants should be trained to be self-reflective practitioners so they can use their judgment effectively while in sessions. In addition, they must be given opportunities to grow and learn more sophisticated and refined, theoretically grounded means of viewing discourse, so that they are aware of the ways in which power is enacted by language in conjunction with other social/cultural realities: gender, age, education, class, etc. Shifts of self presentations are both unavoidable and necessary to maintain the conversational traffic flow and to achieve the goals of writing tutoring. More conscious awareness of these shifts would, I expect, lead to better practice; certainly, this claim is one that would be a possible avenue of further research.

This study leads to more questions about writing center practice:
• If we are more aware of what we do, does it make us more effective?
• How can we measure/assess consultant learning and self-reflectivity?
• How can we measure/assess improvement in tutoring based upon consultant learning?
• How can we assess the learning outcomes of a discourse analysis based reflective practice upon our clients as well as upon our staffs?

Changes to consultant and administrator practice, encouraging reflection, and building knowledge of actual writing center practice and how it does or does not enact writing center theory are possible results of performing a discourse analysis in a writing center. I am sure that every center would find its own particular, contextualized meanings and uses for such a study. I hope that by focusing here on self presentation, I have brought readers to a more complex understanding of writing center discourse, how power and identity work within these verbal interactions about writing, and how those complexities might be recognized and affirmed in writing center staff development sessions and literature.

NOTES

1 At the time of the study, I was not consulting or directing the center, but I had previously served in both positions. The consultants at this writing center had been trained in minimalist, student-centered consulting methods and theories, referencing mainly The St. Martins' Sourcebook for Writing Tutors by Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood, first edition. Role playing was also used in tutor training.

2 Some dissertations focused on discourse in writing centers include those authored by James Bell, Susan Callaway, Diana Cardenas, Christine Fox, Kathleen Hunter, Kerri Jordan, Youn-Kyung Kim, Neal Lerner, Kathleen Mclnerney, Jennifer Ritter, Terese Thonus, and Virginia Young.

3 Including those by Janet Bean; Thomas Hemmeter; Nancy Welch; Susan Blau, John Hall, and Tracy Strauss; two by Magdalena Gilewicz and Terese Thonus; and several by Terese Thonus.

4 While Goffman uses a masculine pronoun when publishing in 1955, I am sure his intent was to theorize the face-work of women and men.

5 Positive politeness is defined by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson.

WORKS CITED


Bell, James H. "Tutoring in a Writing Center." Diss. U of Texas at Austin, 1989.


Brown, Penelope, and Stephen Levinson. Politeness: Some Universals of Language


Appendix: Transcription Conventions

I borrowed the transcription conventions used for this article (listed below) from Kathleen Warden Ferrara’s *Therapeutic Ways with Words*, and modified Ferrara’s conventions by adding some of the conventions outlined in Gilewicz and Thonus’s article, “Close Vertical Transcription in Writing Center Training and Research,” to demonstrate further the complexity of actual writing center talk.

. End of intonation unit; falling intonation
, End of intonation unit; fall-rise intonation
? End of intonation unit; rising intonation
- Self interruption; break in the word, sound abruptly cut off
um, hmm Filled pause
[ ] Overlap starting point. Overlaps between speakers are marked by using brackets aligned directly above one another
uh-huh, yeah, ok Backchannels. Contributions made that do not claim the floor
Uh-huh, Yeah, Ok Minimal responses made when participants do have the floor
Distinguished from backchannels by capitalization
: Lengthened sound
underline Emphatic stress
() A pause of less than 1 second
(n) A pause of more than 1 second (n=number of seconds)
h Exhalation (laughter or sigh)
.h Inhalation
......................... Break in transcript (skipped turns)
() Uncertain Transcript
< > Transcriber comment or nonverbal noise or action
S Student/Client/Writer
T Tutor/Consultant