Someone to Watch Over Me: Reflection and Authority in the Writing Center

Michael Mattison
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by Michael Mattison

I know I could always be good
To one who'll watch over me.

—George Gershwin

The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation.

—Michel Foucault

Journaling/Journeying

In the fall of 2003, I found myself in my department chair's office, curious as to what had prompted his invitation. It was my first semester as a faculty member and Director of the Writing Center, so perhaps this was a standard sit-down meeting for all new faculty, a mid-semester check-in to see how things were going. Perhaps it was a chance for the chair to offer some advice on how to cope with finals week, or (even more valuable) to share some fishing tips.

Instead, my chair opened our conversation on a disturbing note.

“A couple of your consultants came in to see me because they were worried that you were spying on them.”

There was no accusation on his part, no raised eyebrow or sidelong glance, but my mind whirled about, wondering what in the heck he was talking about and how I would be accused of spying and what this meant to my position and why all of a sudden the office felt so warm.

“Spying on them?” I said.

About the Author

Michael Mattison is Director of the Writing Center and Assistant Professor of English at Boise State University, where he spends a good amount of time pondering the view of the mountains from his window. He is also at work on a book about writing centers and Bob Dylan.
“Yes. They say that the new consultants are taking notes about everything that happens in the Center and reporting back to you.”

_Reporting back to...ab-ba._

That was it. All the undergraduates who work in the Writing Center have to take a 300-level course in the fall semester, and as part of the course they spend a few hours a week in the Center, observing at first and then consulting. This first semester, I assigned reflective journals; the new consultants were supposed to be taking detailed notes, so they could think through our practices and pedagogy, and then they turned their journal pages in to me so I could respond. Some of the veterans must have been a bit unnerved by the practice.

“Those are journals,” I said. “The students are supposed to write about their experiences in the Center and reflect on them.”

“It’s a pedagogical tool, then,” said my chair.

“Yes, definitely,” I said. “I’m not spying on anyone. I wanted to give the new consultants a chance to think through various issues and ideas, to do so in a relatively ‘safe’ textual space, one that’s read differently than a formal paper. And, the journal is a place for them to generate material that might be useful for them in their final essay.”

I took a breath, and was prepared to cite from Toby Fulwiler’s _The Journal Book_, and to run through John Bean’s taxonomy of journal assignments in _Engaging Ideas_. Or, if given enough time, to quote John Edlund, the Director of the Writing Center at Cal Poly-Pomona: “Journals focus the learner’s attention, help clarify thinking, and help both the student and the instructor figure out what the student knows and what remains to be learned. Journals also provide an opportunity for dialogue between the student and the material, and between the student and the instructor.” I was further going to argue that Donald McAndrew and Thomas Reigstad strongly suggest assigning a tutoring journal in a consulting course so that students can “jot down impressions and observations of their tutoring experiences [...] as the course unfolds” (137).

I was going to say all this, but my chair held up his hand.

“Well,” he said, “that’s what I thought. I just wanted to bring it up and let you know what I had been told.” He tapped a few papers on his desk, signaling the matter and the meeting closed.

I thanked him and walked back down the hall to the Center. Spying on my consultants? That hadn’t been my intention at all. Consider the assignment prompt:
Tutoring Journal

This is sort of a catch-all, a place to record your responses to readings and your ideas about your tutoring experiences. You should look to write 3-4 pages a week, and you should bring your journal to class with you. Sometimes, I will ask you to respond to specific prompts or questions, or to write an extended journal entry (such as an evaluation of a tutoring session), and I will occasionally collect pieces of the journal. I'll also collect the whole journal towards the end of the semester, along with a cover letter from you highlighting what you believe to be the most important sections and why.

Obviously it is a learning tool for the new consultants.

And, I told myself confidently, this whole incident undoubtedly had less to do with the journals than it did with the fact that this was my first year as Director. I had taken over for a retiring director who had run the Center admirably for more than twenty years; there was a well-established routine and, yes, I had gone and changed some things. I asked for evaluation forms from writers at the end of every session; I changed the long-standing staff meeting time; I asked the consultants to re-focus their energies during their scheduled hours—to read the latest articles on consulting strategies, to update our handouts, to revise our publicity materials. Admittedly, I was trying hard to impress the department with what I could do as a director, and I was asking the consultants to put forth a lot of effort, to change a few of their habits. No doubt, too, I probably was not always as genial as my predecessor—he is a very pleasant person. Some of the veteran consultants were understandably thrown off by the changes.

But spying? No. I was not spying on them. Heck, I was in the Center so often that I really didn’t need anybody else watching things for me. Besides, even if the journals did provide me with a few additional insights into the workings of the Center and the consultants, there was no harm in that. As the Director, I am responsible for the work that happens within the Center, so it is best for me to be as well informed as possible. If there is a difficult session, or a disagreement between consultants, I should know of such things. Would not most of those responsible for a writing center agree? We aim to provide a positive, productive consultation for every writer. We are in charge of maintaining our pedagogical integrity of the centers. We are keeping our reputations (perhaps our funding) secure. We need to have some measure of oversight. In addition, I think it is important that writing center directors and administrators have a window into how individual consultants are viewing themselves as consultants, to hear how their sessions go so that we are best
able to prompt them towards any necessary reconsideration. That’s not spying, but rather good mentoring. That’s part of the “dialogue between student and instructor” that Edlund talks about.

By the time I made it back to my office, I decided that the incident could be rather easily dismissed. True, I would need to address the discontentedness of the veteran consultants, would need to reemphasize the goals I had set for us as a center, but I could rest easy in knowing that I was not setting myself up as Big Brother.

That was then.

Today my argument does not seem as sound as it once did. In fact, it sounds a bit tangled, maybe even contradictory, certainly a little heavy-handed. For one thing, I talk about and defend assigning a journal so that consultants can reflect on their own behavior, but the complaint I received concerned consultants observing and reporting on the sessions of others. Those seem to be activities that should be bifurcated rather than conflated. And then, in defending the right of a director to oversee the activities in his or her center through such means, I hear perhaps the slightest echo of Alberto Gonzales’s Senate testimony of February 2006, when he defended the government’s right to eavesdrop on conversations:

> Our enemies operate secretly and they seek to attack us from within. In this new kind of war, it is both necessary and appropriate for us to take all possible steps to locate our enemy and know what they are plotting before they strike.

That’s a loaded comparison, yes, and it risks trivializing the national conversation we are having on security—but I also take my lead from Lad Tobin, in Reading Student Writing, who offers “profuse apologies for taking such profane license” in his comparison of British imperialism and student writing, and then goes on to make his point based on that comparison anyway. As Tobin says, defending his connection, “there is something important we can learn” (16).

For me, the comparison I am making highlights some of the complex issues on authority that are rippling below the surface of an assignment such as a reflective journal, especially one that asks consultants to watch (over) others. Regardless of the fact that I did not intentionally set out to spy upon my consultants, or to keep track of every movement in the Center, those journals in the first semester did offer a look at the Center and my consultants that I would not otherwise have had. For instance, one new consultant mentioned that she listened in on a session in which a veteran was short and sharp with a writer. I responded:

> I was disappointed, obviously, to hear about the one session you overheard, with the consultant being rude to the writer. It’s difficult to do,
but if you know the consultant, and think she might be having a bad day, you might just try mentioning to her how the session sounded to you. I'm not sure we always are aware of how we're treating people, especially if we have other things on our minds.

Another new consultant compared two sessions that she had as a writer, one positive and the second less so, and I responded to her thoughts:

The first session sounds productive and student centered, while the second one sounds like an example of how not to approach a paper. If nothing else, you can take that with you and remember how it feels to have the grammar brought up when what you're looking for is a response to LOC. I also apologize you felt disappointed with the session. I'm trying to make sure we have a positive attitude from all consultants, but that does not always happen. I do think, though, that when we have an unproductive session as a writer, it helps us as a consultant.

(That's looking for the silver lining, I guess.)

These responses trouble me now; they certainly were not initiating any dialogue between me and the consultants under discussion. Instead, I was criticizing certain consultants, without their knowledge and to their peers. I also, at least in my first response, asked the consultant to try and address the situation rather than taking on that responsibility myself—and certainly these observations put the new consultants in an uncomfortable situation in regard to their relationships with the veterans.

This exhibition of authority, as a teacher and as an administrator, seems wrong, and I would be hard pressed now to defend it with Fulwiler's or Edlund's or McAndrew and Riegstad's work. The journal in these instances was not being used so much as a pedagogical tool as it was a piece of espionage equipment—there was an Orwellian presence created. That presence, enacted as it was by the new consultants, worked to keep separate the two groups—veterans and new consultants. My assignment established (or enforced) an us-vs.-them relationship; the new consultants were seen as outsiders, arriving pen and paper in hand to observe and report back on the behavior in this strange new place known as a writing center. No wonder the two veteran consultants felt compelled to walk down the hallway to the chair's office.

Surprisingly, though, I still do not believe this incident to be of major concern. Rather, I find the difficulty due to a lack of communication on my part, and one that I can (and have) resolve(d). Though I took the time to explain to my class why I wanted them to keep a journal, I never had a full-staff discussion on what such a practice would mean for all of us. If a group of new consultants is observing, then
the veterans should be aware that they will be observed—there should be a dialogue about the process. Had I had the foresight to have such a discussion, I think I would have avoided this situation. That belief is strengthened by the fact that I have since had such discussions, and the consultants have responded well. For instance, each year I ask the students in the consulting course what recommendations they have for the following year in terms of assignments, course structure, etc. When I asked the class that did the journals what recommendations they had, they suggested a more formal observation report. I told them that they would be the ones under observation, and they, after a moment’s pause, agreed. We also decided we would encourage the new consultants to talk with the veterans after the observation, so that both could share their impressions of the session. This open communication now marks our observations of one another in the Center.

In addition, we schedule pre-semester meetings every fall, in large part so that the new consultants can meet the veterans in a relaxed setting. Over juice and coffee and pastries, the two groups talk and share thoughts about writing center work, and I emphasize that we will be working and learning together. This interaction helps defray, I believe, some of the anxiety that can naturally arise when a new consultant comes in to observe a veteran’s session. They are no longer pitted one against the other—a spy reporting back to the director—but rather collaboratively engaged in reflective work that will benefit them both.

Now, though I admit to poorly handling the request for observation through the journals, I will still defend my right to know of events in the Center, and I do not necessarily regret the outcome of the first year—the two consultants who voiced their concerns to my chair did not return to work in the Center the following fall. Neither was fired, but I also did not make any attempt to convince either to stay. The journal entries, though they spoke of specific incidents that I otherwise would not have noticed, did not provide a picture vastly different from one I already had seen through writers’ evaluations and my own observations. There were moments of unprofessional behavior that I would not and will not allow for in a center. I certainly do not view any consultant as an “enemy” and would not advocate taking “any step necessary” to observe a session, but I still think it beneficial to look in on the consultants’ work—that is my role as administrator and mentor. In short, I regret the display of my authority through the journals, not the authority itself.

Why Isn’t This a Conclusion?

The essay could conceivably end here. Short, yes, but quick, clean, and (the writer hopes) fairly efficient. Through my lack of communication about the process
of observation, I created an uncomfortable situation for several of my consultants. Recognizing that, I made some changes and have found good results; I would also encourage others who advocate for observation between consultants, whether through journals or more formal observation reports (e.g., see Lerner and Gillespie; McAndrew and Reigstad) to strenuously promote conversation between observers and those observed. Even better, I could conclude by saying that the students in this year’s consulting course, when asked for their recommendations, requested a more informal approach to observations in the Center—instead of formal observation reports they wanted, yes, a journal.

My course has come full circle.

Yet there is still the other half of the reflection equation—observation of one’s own activities. No consultant has explicitly accused me of forcing her to spy on herself, but I wonder if I could not make the accusation myself. Consider Lynn Fendler’s claim that journaling, “which is usually intended as a means by which teachers and students get in touch with their own and each other’s thoughts, can also be considered to be a form of surveillance and an exercise of pastoral power” (“Teacher Reflection” 23).¹ According to Michel Foucault, whose work Fendler uses, pastoral power “cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people’s minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets” (“Subject” 214). The journal, rather than a safe textual space for students to question, critique, and explore, is instead a window onto their world that can be utilized by a teacher (or director) to keep order (see also Anderson).

And what of McAndrew and Reigstad’s claim that a tutoring journal’s “main goal is to encourage tutors to capture insights into their tutoring experiences that might otherwise have been lost or forgotten, and to have them engage in continuous self-assessment” (137-138)? The journal, in this description, is a place to “capture insights,” to record what one does and then to continually ponder those actions—to assess oneself as a tutor.² That assessment might be viewed by those who are asked to do it as spying—much as the veterans considered the observation sessions an unwanted intrusion. Granted, I could hedge here, and argue that my journal assignment was intended mostly to have students reflect on the readings for class and on the happenings in the Center. It was to be a catalogue of the semester, an overview of all that they experienced, rather than an evaluation of their work as a consultant. However, I assign other reflective work to consultants, and that work is explicitly intended to prompt them to consider their own consultations. Every semester they record and reflect on a session with a writer; they read and reflect on their evaluations from the past term; they consider what they might change about

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their approach or their consultation style; they reflect on my work as director. In short, our writing center is heavy on reflection. And it is reflection that asks for “self-assessment.”

Not only that, my requests often assume (at least partially) a negative evaluation. For instance, when I ask the consultants to review their evaluations from the past semester, I prompt them to tell me what they want to “work on” for the coming term; what is it about their consulting style and approach that they would like to change? What comments from writers gave them pause and suggested a new approach? There is the assumption that there are aspects of their approach that need changing—just as spying assumes some unwanted activity that needs to be controlled. When they record a session with a writer, I want them to evaluate how well the conversation went. Was it mostly a conversation? Or more a directive exchange? How well did they establish the rhetorical context? How well did they establish a rapport with the writer?

Such reflective work is grounded in educational literature. Edith Kusnic and Mary Lou Finley write that “[e]ducators have long understood the importance of self-reflection, and the resultant personal development, as central to the college experience” (5). They go on to argue that “student self-evaluation makes learning real to students,” and that, as teachers, we should pay “attention to what students say in self-evaluations, [so] we can more appropriately guide their learning and development” (11). David Boud, Rosemary Keogh, and David Walker, in Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning, encourage “teachers and learners to adopt a clear view of the role of reflection in their own teaching and learning and consider the range of approaches which is available to them” (15). The authors claim that “the concept of reflection is an important and practical one in education” (17).

These are essays (and collections) that influenced me greatly as a writing teacher—reflection has been a cornerstone of my pedagogy. I wrote my graduate school exams on reflection: how reflective work can benefit students in a composition classroom and how reflective work can influence and enhance a (writing) teacher’s practices. I was informed and inspired by Kathleen Yancey’s Reflection in the Writing Classroom and Stephen Brookfield’s Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher. I wrote an article about prompting students to reflect in a composition course based in large part upon the work of Donald Schön (Mattison). The use of a tutoring journal in my course was built upon all of this past work—all the ideas and many of the reflective practices transitioned easily for me from the classroom to the writing center.
They have for others, too, as there is support for reflection in the literature regarding writing centers, specifically as it relates to staff education. For instance, Gail Okawa et al. “advocate critical reflection as being of major importance in tutor training, emphasizing the manifold nature of this reflection, the way it moves among text, tutor, student, and tutor trainer” (12). Their article describes the work of two different tutoring programs, and both programs “invite students to transpose theories of cultural difference to their own life histories and subsequently to the students they tutor” (12-13). Both programs mention the use of some type of journal. There is also Anne DiPardo’s emphatic request: “Most of all, we [consultants] must serve as models of reflective practice—perennially inquisitive and self-critical” (144).

Or there is Bonnie Devet and her practice of prompting consultants to consider their choices:

So that consultants have a chance to brag as well as to reflect on what they have done with clients, I ask questions that do not elicit only one-word answers, such as, “What do you think was your best technique you used with the last client?” “What problems did you encounter?” and, then, “If you could re-do the last session, what would you do differently?” Each of these questions evokes long responses. As consultants talk, they begin to understand what they have done well or not so well in their sessions. Such self-reflection is an effective means to learning.

Devet’s questions echo those I ask of consultants. And an assignment from Tammy Conard-Salvo, from her course that prepares students to work in the Purdue Writing Lab, echoes one of mine:

As we approach the end of the semester, I want you to be introspective and complete a self-evaluation of yourself as a tutor. Write at least 3 paragraphs and describe your sense of your own tutoring style. Identify what you feel your strengths and weaknesses are. Include some goals you have as a peer tutor. For example, what would you like to work on? What skills and attributes would you like to build and how can the Writing Lab help you accomplish this? (Emphasis original)

In short, those of us who educate writing center workers often require reflection. Jane Bowman Smith offers an argument for why we do so. Bowman Smith’s goal is to have her “tutors-in-training […] begin to think like tutors rather than like students” (13), which means they will be able to “tutor almost instinctually, moving away from consciously rehearsed questions to a natural conversation with the student writer” (15). The idea is to avoid a set response to a situation in favor of one
that appreciates the individual complexity of each. To achieve that transformation from student to tutor, Bowman Smith relies upon a series of observations/reflective papers, each building upon the last in order to help the students in class learn how to become “reflective practitioners,” a term from Schön, upon whose work Bowman Smith relies. And, she says, the connection to Schön’s work in our field is fairly easy to find: “What we generally have accepted as best practice in training tutors (observing tutorials, role-playing, tutoring in a mentored situation, writing about learning, conferring) is actually well-grounded in Schön’s theory” (6).

And I can return to Yancey’s work, particularly “Seeing Practice Through Their Eyes: Reflection as Teacher” and its discussion of reflection for writing center staff. She also links her use of reflective work in a consulting course to Schön’s ideas, distinguishing in particular between “reflection-in-action, a reflection that aids the tutorial as it helps determine both the shape and substance of it,” and “reflective transfer: the process by which a single tutoring event and/or several tutoring events are reviewed and understood as a part of practice theorized” (191 italics original). In other words, a consultant can reflect on a session during that session in order to choose the best possible route for a writer, or a consultant can reflect on a session after the session in order to understand that session within a larger picture—the session can provide guidelines for future sessions that might be similar. Most of the assignments I give consultants aim to prompt reflective transfer; what have they learned from a session that can help them in the coming weeks. At the same time, we talk as a group about reflection-in-action, about being aware of our choices during a consultation, and I have referenced Schön’s work and terms in these conversations.

For Yancey, as for Bowman Smith and others, the reflective work helps writing center staff grow and learn: “I expected that tutors, through reflection, would learn more about their practice, would learn to theorize it, would begin developing a tutoring identity” (195). And Yancey suggests, as one exercise, “keeping a log” of sessions, a similar suggestion to McAndrew and Reigstad’s tutoring journal. A reflective log, for Yancey, “fosters tutorial agency and learning” and it “encourages a habit of mind: of monitoring one’s own practice, of believing that the tutor can assess practice and enhance it, and can theorize” (197). Here again is the idea of continuous self-assessment.

What strikes me about most all of the literature on reflection is how firmly the authors believe in the positive power of reflection. This is a tool for learning, for growth, for coming to an understanding of theories and practices, for relating theory to practice. Whether the area is architecture (what Schön focused on) or writ-
ing centers, reflection can help those within to become more competent practitioners. When there are questions raised, they are not focused on the practice itself so much as on the design. For instance, Yancey notices that not all of her tutors develop as she expected, and she wonders how she could have “anticipated” and “intervened” in their process. One tutor in particular “overidentified” with the students he worked with; the solution, for Yancey, once she understood that a “duality of identity and separation/difference” was “part of the process of becoming a tutor” was to “include it in class as a specific exercise” (200). An appreciation for reflection begets more reflection.

I do not mean to mock or criticize Yancey’s decision; she makes solid arguments here and elsewhere for the benefits of reflection, as do others. What I do want to do, though, is put forward an idea from Fendler, about the seductiveness of reflective practice: “It seems that the idea of a reflective practitioner has won the acceptance of many authorities today. Cartesian rationality, Deweyian educational aims, Schönian professionalism, and individual agency endow reflective thinking with a seductive appeal that has tended to deflect critical appraisal” (“Teacher Reflection” 23).4 Certainly I can appreciate the seductive nature of reflective thinking, having been swayed by its charms for many years. Yet I recently have had reason to question more closely my appreciation for and acceptance of reflective thinking. Specifically, in the spring of 2006, I received from my consultants reflective letters that considered their evaluations from the previous fall and that talked about what they wanted to work on in the coming term. Two of those letters stood out.

In the first letter, the consultant wrote about watching herself as she worked with writers:

Maybe I’m thinking too much...I’ve been finding myself really self-conscious lately about everything I do: style of speech, choice of words, and so much more [...] I’m sure every tutor has these same concerns, but they seem to be daunting me in the process of consulting, though I also think being conscious and not just ‘going with the flow’ of a consultation is important. (Emphasis added)

The second letter also dealt with being conscious about one’s actions during a consultation, but in a slightly different manner:

In certain consultations when I am aware of why I am making certain choices, I feel that every comment I make, every direction I head with a writer, has a purpose. Not a minute of those consultations is wasted. There were times last semester when, usually after the consultation was over, I realized that I lacked sort of conscious awareness of what I

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was doing and why. Some consultations got away from me, and I think
in some cases, the writer, too. (Emphasis added)

For me, there are worrisome aspects to both letters: the idea of being “daunted” by
concerns about each choice made in a consultation, and the idea that every choice
should be watched lest a consultation “get away.” These consultants are monitor-
ing their behavior, are talking about reflecting-in-action during a consultation, and
they seem hindered by the process.  

Though neither consultant has walked down the hall to my chair’s office and sug-
gested that I am spying, I still, reading these letters, feel as uneasy as I did that day
three years ago in my chair’s office. There are similar concerns here about observ-
ing, about monitoring, about watching over someone. There are similar questions
about authority, about power relationships, about the interactions between the con-
sultants and me. Yet this line of discussion is more troubling than the previous.
Questioning the structure of an observation exercise is one thing, but questioning
the practice of reflection itself is another. In the first instance I was simply recon-
sidering the “how” of an activity—I looked to be more careful about the commu-
nication between veteran consultants, new consultants, and me. Questions about
the value of reflection itself, however, strike at the heart of my pedagogy.

But I am here following Yancey’s dictum: “Read the data” (196). She says that the
documents she collects from her tutors teach her “how tutors learn to become tutors,” if she is willing to examine the evidence: “From the data, I look for partic-
ularities, for difference, for patterns; I theorize.” The reflective letters from my
consultants are the data I have, and I want to read and examine them to see if the
learning and growth I had hoped to encourage have been hampered.

Keeping Watch

To help with my theorizing on the consultants’ responses, I want to bring in
thoughts from a couple of (perhaps expected) sources: Jeremy Bentham and
Foucault. In his “Panopticon Papers,” Bentham proposed a plan for the construc-
tion of a “Panopticon Penitentiary House,” a circular facility where “the cells” are
“occupying the circumference” and the “the keepers” occupy “the centre” (194).
Furthermore, the keepers are “concealed from the observation of the prisoners,”
which allows for an “invisible omnipresence.” The prisoners would never know
when they were being watched, unless the keepers decided to let them know. Such
omnipresence is driven home by the epigraph to the essay, Psalm 139: “Thou art
about my path, and about my bed; and spiest out all my ways.”
Bentham's work has been famously commented upon by Foucault, specifically in *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault argues that the Panopticon "must not be understood as a dream building; it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning, abstracted from any resistance or friction, must be represented as a pure architectural and optical system" (205). That system is "polyvalent in its applications" and "[w]henever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behavior must be imposed, the panoptic schema may be used."

Those under the power of the Panopticon—be they inmates, patients, students, workers (Foucault mentions all of those groups)—are affected by the possibility that they may be observed at any time:

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action. (201)

The keepers do not need to be watching at all times as the responsibility for overseeing behavior has switched to the inmates:

[The perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (201)

The inmates are constantly monitoring their own behavior, disciplining themselves without the need for oversight.

When I look back to the original reflective journal assignment and the observations of the veteran consultants, I can place the veterans in the role of the inmates and the new consultants in the role of the keepers. The surveillance, though, was not permanent, and the keepers were not hidden; they were in plain sight, taking notes. The power relationship was not independent of me, either, as the keepers/consultants were reporting back to me with their work. There was not a panoptic schema. Yet what of a request for "continuous self-assessment" on the part of the consultants? How different is that from "a state of conscious and permanent visibility"? When I ask consultants to question themselves and their actions throughout the semester, when I ask them to be reflective practitioners, am I not arranging for permanent surveillance? Though I do not watch every consultation or ask them to write on every one, I am still pushing them to be constantly thinking of
their behavior as consultants—to watch over themselves. They become keepers and inmates together, a fused identity that no doubt could prove troubling.

Look again at the first letter: “Maybe I’m thinking too much...I’ve been finding myself really self-conscious lately about everything I do: style of speech, choice of words, and so much more.” The consultant has become hyper-aware of her actions, of the choices she makes when working with a writer. Normally I would applaud that attentiveness, thinking that such awareness (reflection-in-action) would open up more possibilities during a session. Yet such awareness is “daunting” her, and she sounds overwhelmed. The second letter also speaks of the importance of being aware: “In certain consultations when I am aware of why I am making certain choices, I feel that every comment I make, every direction I head with a writer, has a purpose. Not a minute of those consultations is wasted.” The consultant is keeping watch on his actions, making sure he knows why he is taking each step. Otherwise, a session might “get away.” Every choice, then, is under surveillance; there is a permanence to his (and by extension my) gaze. Both consultants seem to be feeling what Foucault terms the “constant pressure” of the panoptic schema: “[T]he constant pressure acts even before the offences, mistakes or crimes have been committed” (206). They are treading carefully through their sessions, watching to avoid an offense or mistake.6

If, though, consultants are taking on the role of keepers, then one of the questions concerns what they are keeping—what is being guarded in this instance? Recall that the second letter speaks of purposeful decisions, of un-wasted time. There is an ideal consultation implied here, a perfect route through a session. I wouldn’t suggest, given my conversations with this consultant, that he believes there is only one way to handle every consultation, but it does seem from this letter that there is a correct way for each consultation. Or rather, a “normal” way. Reading the letter I cannot help but think of Foucault’s mention of the “binary division and branding” that often accompanies authority (199). We divide the world into distinct groups—“mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal/abnormal”—and look to supervise or correct those who do not fit into the ideal category. Grimm has pointed out, also through Foucault’s work, that writing centers and consultants can act as supervising agents in a university—“Writing centers correct, measure, and supervise abnormal writers in order to meet the standards set by the institution” (7)—but might not directors function as supervising agents for consultants? Can (and do) consultants believe there is a normal/abnormal divide between the sessions they conduct? The responses here suggest that they do.
So does another response, one from a consultant outside of my own center, one who took a peer tutoring course at Purdue and who was responding to the self-evaluation assignment from Conard-Salvo cited earlier. Here is the first line of the student's second paragraph: “My weakness is that I am tempted to take ownership of the paper (yikes!) but I also feel that since I am aware of this, I will be careful not to.” The consultant is arguing against a certain approach to her work—it is a “weakness.” There is a wrong way to interact with a writer, by taking ownership of the paper, but that can be avoided if one is “aware.” (And how rich that “(yikes!)” is in meaning. The word is emphasized with an exclamation point while simultaneously hidden within parentheses—it is a celebration of the observation while also a condemnation of the behavior.) Now, the question I raise is not whether or not a consultant should take ownership, but rather why the consultant views her choices as a matter of right or wrong. It is an either-or situation, a choice between normal and abnormal behavior. She will take care not to do something; my consultant will make sure that consultations do not “get away.” They will strive to avoid being “abnormal” consultants.

In doing so, however, what is lost? Perhaps we want consultations (and writers) to “get away” sometimes. Consider Elizabeth Boquet’s desire to have consultants operate “on the edge of their expertise” in a “higher-risk/higher yield” model of consulting (81). For Boquet, “we do our tutors a disservice when we ‘train’ them in ways that suggest that we are more concerned with their being competent than with their being truly exceptional.” In her re-conception of staff education, consultants will be urged not to worry about mistakes, but rather accept them as part of the process and incorporate them into the consultation: “The real skill lies in figuring out what to make of those mistakes” (81). Making mistakes, though, means that a consultation has “gotten away.” Something did not happen as it was supposed to, as the script said it would. My worry in reading the consultants’ work, strangely enough, is that reflective assignments are hindering the very pedagogical flexibility they were designed to encourage. When I ask my consultants to be reflective practitioners, I hope that they will be better able to respond to the twists and turns of any consultation, that they will be able to assess their work in the midst of a conversation and change direction accordingly. Yet the responses here suggest that being asked to be aware of their choices leads consultants to view some choices as correct/normal and others as incorrect/abnormal. Asked to explain and defend themselves and their work, they are put in a position where they look for the “right way” to consult. Lost is the ability to improvise and play. The reflective assignments
have contributed to a “continuous self-assessment” that does not allow for much freedom or exploration. It aims more for competence.8

From the Tower

Obviously, such a situation bothers me. Before, with the reflective journals and my request for observations of others, I was bothered by the display of authority, not the authority itself. I am comfortable setting certain professional parameters. Here, it seems the inverse: I am not bothered by the display of authority—assigning reflective exercises designed to prompt thought and growth as consultants—but by the authority granted me through these practices. The consultants seem to be finding certain pedagogical parameters that I had not intended to create. Foucault writes that, “In this central tower [of the Panopticon], the director may spy on all the employees that he has under his orders […] he will be able to judge them continuously, alter their behavior, impose upon them the methods he thinks best” (Discipline 204). In the writing center, where every consultation is unique, I cannot claim a “best method” approach to working with writers.

So where does this leave me?

Well, for one thing, I am rethinking the relationship I have with my consultants. As much as I might wish to describe the relationship as one of teaching, or mentoring, the more proper term, I believe, is “governance,” as defined by Foucault: “To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others” (“Subject” 221). It is not so much that I am dictating particular actions as I am creating an environment that will “encourage” those actions.9 For Foucault, “what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future” (“Subject” 220). My actions as director do influence what is possible for the consultants—professionally and pedagogically—and I believe I have been trying too hard to finesse my authority in different situations. That point was brought home to me by one of my consultants, commenting on an earlier draft of this essay: “It seems to me that in looking for places to share power, experienced practitioners often share it only in situations that are relatively easy for them to control, should something go awry. […] Constant consultant self-assessment is great, but how about consultant assessment when it comes to something that materially matters.’ Why couldn’t I self-assess myself into a $3/hr raise, or self-assess my grade last fall?” He’s right. And his comment pushed me to try and better come to terms with the authority I already hold, rather than trying to re-imagine a different con-
sultant-director relationship. I do govern, and I do not necessarily need to resist that role. I am "guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome" (Foucault, "Subject" 221) for consultations.

Yet power can be wielded in different ways; not every government needs to inculcate fear in its citizenry. As I structure the "possible field of action" for consultants, I can look to make that field as open and inviting as possible, and look to revise what Foucault terms the "regulated communications" that help "ensure apprenticeship and the acquisition of aptitudes and types of behavior" that I believe are necessary for writing center work ("Subject" 218). The reflective assignments are such communications.

One change I am making is to have consultants share more of their reflective work with one another, as they now do with their observations. Too often in the past, I think, I have been their only audience for these self-assessment assignments, and as Foucault notes in Discipline and Punish, part of the power of the Panopticon is derived from keeping the subjects within separate from each other:

Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication. The arrangement of his room, opposite the central tower, imposes on him an axial visibility; but the divisions of the ring, those separated cells, imply a lateral invisibility. And this invisibility is a guarantee of order. (200)

The consultants need to be subjects in communication; they need to have lateral visibility. Listening to one another, sharing their self-reflections, will help them expand the possible choices they have during a consultation.

For instance, this semester the veteran consultants are writing their reflective letters not to me, but to our incoming graduate assistant. Though he is not new to writing center work, he is new to our center, and his status will allow the consultants to teach him about their practices while describing how those practices fit in with the particulars of our center. That type of letter establishes a different role for the consultants as writers than does a letter to me. In addition, we are going to institute biweekly forums on our BlackBoard website this year, the forums to be led by the consultants and focused on questions and concerns that they have. (Our first forum was already claimed by a consultant who has been wondering, based on her own observations and on a few of the evaluations we've received, how everyone talks with writers about reading their work out loud.) Both of these changes should move
the consultants away from being “objects of information.” I also want, in coming years, to design a more structured mentoring program between new and veteran consultants. The former do currently observe the latter, and afterward they often talk over the sessions, but I also imagine that the veterans could write introductory letters to the new consultants, again giving the veterans a new audience as they reflect on their work, and that those letters could grow into a longer correspondence that benefits both parties.

Another change I want to make is to give the consultants more of my own reflective work. I have previously discussed their reflections with them, and certainly shared my own thoughts and opinions on their choices during the consultations in question, but I have not recorded and talked on my own consultations, at least in a forum available to them. They have not really observed me at work (the hours I consult do not overlap with a majority of the consultants’ schedules), and the act of demonstrating is key when creating reflective practitioners, according to Schön: “A coach demonstrates parts or aspects of designing in order to help his student grasp what he believes she needs to learn and, in doing so, attributes to her a capacity for imitation” (107). No, I do not want my consultants to conduct their sessions as I would mine, but Schön is not advocating total imitation; he only sees it as part of the learning process. Coach and student (director and consultant) need the opportunity to see one another’s work, to talk about the choices each made and why: “The coach’s or student’s reflection on his own or the other’s performance can yield a description that highlights subtle moves, or reveals the understanding that informs surface variations” (112). In my push to avoid too much authority as an administrator, I think I have neglected to understand how my own work and experience should be part of the learning process for consultants. They need to hear me talking with writers and then explaining my choices, and they need to be able to analyze and question those choices.

In addition, I can continue to offer explanations on why reflective work is considered valuable. When consultants read the handbook we have in our center, they find the following: “Every semester we will talk about how to improve as consultants, reflecting on our work and on that of our co-workers. We will read articles on consulting/tutoring, and talk with various members of the campus community about writing and responding to writing.” We will do this type of work, a phrasing that does aim to indicate that everyone (director included) will be engaged, but that also carries an “or else” quality—the practice can be viewed as more of a disciplinary procedure than a learning opportunity. But if this article (along with Yancey’s,
perhaps) is offered to the consultants, then maybe they will be less daunted by the process, more able to use reflective work to hone their consulting ability.

**Pessimistic Activism**

By no means are these suggestions about reflective assignments intended to truly conclude the matter. I am hopeful the changes I make will prompt the consultants in productive ways, but I am also aware that I will need to pay attention to their responses, to be wary of how my requests can affect them and their work. I have to avoid the “seductive appeal” of reflective work and constantly remind myself that there is a danger in asking consultants to watch over themselves. This danger does not mean that I avoid such assignments, but that I remain alert to the possible repercussions. In other words, reflective work is like a sharp knife. You wouldn’t try working in a kitchen without one, but you would also take care when handling it.

To be aware of danger is what Foucault recommends as well: “My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy, but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism” (“Genealogy” 231-32). The experiences I’ve described here have heightened my understanding that the administrative decisions I make can possibly damage the relationship between me and my consultants, or between consultant and consultant, or even between consultant and writer. This does not mean that any assignment or practice—journals, observations, letters of reflection, taped consultations—should be excised, but that each should be carefully considered from various angles.

To end, I want to offer one more snapshot from my center, one more instance where questions of authority are raised. Our writing center conducts email consultations, and our consultants respond to submitted essays in letter form. After a consultant types up a response letter to an essay, she saves the letter to a shared folder. The folder can be accessed through any one of three computers—my computer, the graduate assistant’s computer, and the consultants’ computer. After the letter is saved, the graduate assistant emails it back to the writer (to avoid any overlap or lost responses). One of the graduate assistant’s responsibilities is to read through the responses and to work with the consultants as they shape their letters. I, too, on occasion, read through the responses. In the spring semester of 2006, I read one of the response letters and was bothered by it. Mainly, the approach was not one I was comfortable with (e.g., “you have a focus problem,” wrote the consultant, placing the difficulty with the writer rather than the text). So, I printed the response letter, asked my graduate assistant to delay sending it, and scheduled a meeting for the next morning with the consultant.
When the consultant read his letter, he immediately sensed what was off in the tone, and was a little shocked at himself. And I was happy with his reaction—we were reading the piece in much the same way. He then went and revised the response, putting together a marvelous letter, in fact. But what did I demonstrate in that interaction? We got to talk on how to respond to a writer in a letter—a conversation that has been ongoing in our center since we began email consultations—and we brainstormed ways of talking about a particular essay that would encourage the writer to return to revise the essay. These are positive outcomes, aligned with the type of reflective work that Schön would endorse. But did I not also demonstrate that I can find and read any response at any time? That my gaze extends outward to each of my consultant’s sentences? This is the panoptic machine at work, and exactly what Dave Healy worried about in 1995, in his article “From Place to Space,” which considered various administrative issues for an online consultation service. He wondered about “the prospect of self-regulating behavior among tutors aware that every response they make to a client’s writing can be monitored” (190), and he too brought in Foucault and the idea of panopticism.

So, did I truly consult with my consultant in a way that will encourage him to return to his work? Will my consultant now write with me looking over his shoulder each time? Should he? He said he will “slow down” in his future responses, and I wonder if it might be because he feels my hand gripped figuratively to his shirt collar, or to his pen. As Foucault argues, “[h]e who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power” (Discipline 202).

I can’t answer those questions about my consultant. Yet. But I do know I can now better recognize the danger in such a situation, and I can work (and am working) to make such an interaction with my consultants productive rather than punitive. Should this consultant slow down in future responses because he feels me over his shoulder as a coach, prompting and reminding and suggesting approaches to use, then the conversation we had was a good one. If he becomes tentative in his approach, worried that he might somehow make a “mistake” when responding to a writer, then I have not handled the situation in the best way possible. The only way to determine how he, or any other consultant, is affected by my authority over their responses is to check with them. I need to build upon the conversation we had about his response, talking about that conversation and its effect upon his work as a consultant. Through such dialogue I make myself more visible; through such dialogue the consultant has a say in our relationship; through such dialogue we can begin to disassemble the panoptic machine.
NOTES

1 Fendler elsewhere ("Making Trouble") gives an extended analysis of the practice of journaling from two stances: critical modernism and postmodernism. One of the key points as relates to this article is Fendler's claim that "postmodern analyses of pedagogical practices such as journal keeping have tended to highlight multiple and contradictory ways that power was exercised" (184-185).

2 I do want to make explicit the connection implied here between journaling, reflection, and self-assessment. McAndrew and Reigstad seem to assume that the first necessarily leads to the third, even though they suggest that the writing in a student's journal might be "impromptu or reflective" (137, emphasis added). Certainly they make a good case as to why to ask students to reflect on their work in the course, but they are less clear as to how and why the journal work can lead to such reflection. And, they give little space as to the specific type of reflection that would be termed "self-assessment." It is one thing to reflect on the happenings in a center, to muse about the pedagogical implications of an author's argument; it is another to focus on oneself as the object of reflection, to offer an evaluation of the work that one does as a consultant.

3 I have elsewhere (Mattison) discussed various forms of reflection, as well as the process of "self-assessment" as described by Hilgers, Hussey, and Stitt-Bergh. The point most important to echo here is that the type of self-assessment asked for in McAndrew and Reigstad's consulting course would most likely follow the "Kafner Model," which says that "self-monitoring provides an individual with feedback that allows the individuals to discriminate between his or her current level of behavior and some significant social or individual standard" (5). Consultants new to a writing center are not necessarily looking to change regular behavior as they are looking to develop their behavior as consultants, and develop it in a way consistent with the current practices and pedagogy of the center they are associated with. However, the reflection activities I assign to veteran consultants align more with the model from Cavior and Marabott, and Bellack, Rozensky, and Schwartz, which "holds that the power of self-assessment derives in part from the way it interrupts stereotypic behavior change" (5). As long-time consultants, the veterans (and I) need to interrupt our common habits in order to re-see them. The distinction is by no means hard and fast, but it is helpful to consider reflective practice beyond the general sense of the term.

4 In "Tutor Training and Reflection on Practice," James Bell questions whether or not "systematic reflection on practice [would] help tutors conduct more sessions where students were active and learning more" (81). Bell concludes that "[t]en hours of reflection-on-practice exercises do not necessarily change tutors' thinking in ways writing center directors might regard as positive" (88). It is a "cautionary" tale about reflection, but Bell's caution is more that reflection alone cannot educate consultants/tutors, not that reflective practices have a negative effect on them.

5 The possible fusing of keeper-inmate identities in writing center staff reminds me of Sonda Perl's work on the composing process of experienced and inexperienced (skilled and unskilled) writers. Perl describes how the latter can be slowed down by the editor in their heads—they are constrained by a desire to get it right that keeps them from producing material. Perl writes: "Editing intrudes so often and to such a degree that it breaks down the rhythms generated by thinking and writing" (333). That editing sounds much like a type of surveillance, a continuous assessment of one's writing that prohibits the generation of material as it looks to follow the rules and regulations of well-written prose. A writer is unable to peer beyond the sentence.

6 I do want to note that these letters are from two consultants whom I consider to be excellent, and my reading of their letters in this manner should not reflect negatively on the work that they do. They are caring, concerned readers who receive outstanding evaluations from the writers they work with. My thinking here is that I, and my emphasis on reflective work, have somehow limited the consultants in terms of the options they feel they have available to them. They have, too, read this work and have graciously given me their permission to use these excerpts.

7 The self-evaluations were posted online, on Conrad-Salvo's course site; I wrote to the consultant and she generously agreed to allow me to cite her work.

8 The distinction between "being aware" and "going with the flow" is also reminiscent of Elbow's between "first-order thinking and second-order thinking." As Elbow writes, "First-order thinking is intuitive and creative and..."
doesn't strive for conscious direction or control. We use it when we get hunches [...] Second-order thinking is conscious, directed, controlled thinking. We steer; we scrutinize each link in the chain" (55). And while Elbow values both, the consultants cited here seem to distance themselves from "first-order thinking." There is not the trusting of hunches, the willingness to be undirected and to perhaps make mistakes. There is instead intense scrutiny of each decision.

9 Consider too Margaret Weaver's "Censoring What Tutors' Clothing 'Says.'" In the article, Weaver talks of how her tutors resisted the idea of a "dress code" for their center, but did express a desire for Weaver, as director, to "encourage appropriate attire" (19 emphasis added). How delicate that shift from rule to encouragement.

10 An earlier version of this essay was presented at the 2006 Rocky Mountain Peer Tutoring Conference, and the author thanks his fellow directors for their feedback, particularly Clint Gardner. Also, thanks to Christopher McGill for his careful reading, and to the two WCJ reviewers for theirs.

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