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Got Guilt? Consultant Guilt in the Writing Center Community

by Jennifer Nicklay

About the Author

Jennifer Nicklay received her BS in Biology, with minors in Social Justice and Global Studies, from the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities in May 2012. She worked in the University's Center for Writing for two years and previously worked in the Normandale Community College Writing Center for a year.

Staff meetings, classrooms, newsletters, and journals are filled with tales of individual and collective actualization, celebrating one-to-one teaching as deeply social, collaborative, and empowering.

—Harry Denny (39)

In my experience as a writing consultant, the writing center atmosphere Denny describes, and the collaboration it cultivates, results in a close community of consultants, staff, and students. Within this community, consultants and students alike collaborate and share their diverse knowledge, personalities, and words with each other, yet each individual student is looking for something a little different when she comes to us, and each has a different way of learning. This belief in the power of individuals and one-on-one learning suggests the importance of flexibility within collaboration. With a student re-organizing her paper, I might have her draw me a flow chart to visualize her ideas, or I might demonstrate how to do a reverse outline. During brainstorming sessions, I might write down the student's stream of consciousness responses to my questions, or we might search for Youtube videos related to her topic. We can read aloud, or I can watch as a student writes. The strategies are endless,

and my ability to adjust to the needs of individual students—as well as our collective needs during the session—is one of the most important aspects of my job as a consultant.

While I relished my flexibility during consultations, I discovered during my consultant training course that it can also complicate consultations—that, as Denny found, flexibility and collaboration are complicated by outside forces. During our class discussions, my fellow consultants would often lament consultations that could have gone better if they had only known the “rules” of how to handle the situation. They perceived that there were acceptable and unacceptable ways to approach certain situations, rather than a range of flexible choices. I began to wonder, then, what are these “rules” that infiltrated what I saw as the flexibility and collaborative spirit of the writing center?

Following this inquiry, I explored the current discourse in writing center literature about flexibility and collaboration, with particular focus on two foundational texts—“The Idea of a Writing Center” by Stephen North and “Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work” by Jeff Brooks—and critiques of them as well. I then questioned my fellow consultants about when and why they felt guilt following consultations. The pattern I discovered, within a small sample of eleven consultants, revealed that guilt originates in how the writing center community is situated within the larger university and how an individual writing center community is structured. These findings, while disconcerting, help highlight areas in which writing centers can better support their consultants through training and conversations to encourage flexibility, cultivate collaboration, and maintain the health of the writing center community.

Literature Review

I started by first exploring the literature of my own writing center community at a large research university; what are the “guidelines” or “rules” in this center? Before consultants receive any training, before any theory is read, the consultants interact with the center itself, where the guiding philosophy is that the writing center “helps you become a better writer. Through collaboration between the student

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and the consultant, we help you develop confidence and good writing habits. . . . [and] what you learn applies to all of your writing” (Student). According to this statement, consultants have a flexible framework in which to develop their own consulting style, principles, and methods. No limits are set, so it follows that consultants should not feel guilt for choosing the strategies they see fit in a consultation.

With this in mind, I looked beyond the flexible framework articulated in my own center’s promotional materials to the discourse in the wider writing center community for “rules” which might stymie flexibility and collaboration. Susan Blau and John Hall note that although “flexibility has always been the hallmark of writing center work . . . it seems that certain ‘guidelines’ have become ‘rules’” (43). As a result of hardening expectations, Blau and Hall found consultants in their center felt guilty for stepping outside the “rules,” perceiving that they crossed from acceptable to unacceptable during consultations. To better understand what expectations might form, I turned my attention to two seminal texts about writing center methods discussed at length in our class: North’s “The Idea of a Writing Center” and Brooks’s “Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work.”

North’s “Idea” is so prevalent in writing center scholarship that Elizabeth Boquet and Neal Lerner highlight “the ways in which one scholar—or, perhaps more to the point, one article or even one line—can come to define a field” (“Reconsiderations” 172). They reached this conclusion by analyzing citations in the 195 articles printed in *The Writing Center Journal* between 1985 and 2008. Boquet and Lerner found that North’s “Idea” was cited in sixty-four articles, fifty of which cited North’s statement that “in a writing center the object is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction” (“Reconsiderations” 177; North 38). This idea of focusing on writers, rather than their work, has permeated nearly every theory, ideology, strategy, or technique introduced and discussed within the writing center community, and, as a result, impacted individual writing centers.

As with my own writing center’s promotional materials, however, North proposes a broad framework—no particular methods are indicated as preferable. Indeed, North strongly advocates for

consulting to consist of “talk in all its forms” in order to best fit the writer and her needs:

We can question, praise, cajole, criticize, acknowledge, badger, plead—even cry. We can read: silently, aloud, together, separately. We can play with options. We can both write . . . and compare opening strategies. We can poke around in resources. . . . We can ask writers to compose aloud while we listen, or we can compose aloud, and the writer can watch and listen. (43)

North clearly argues for flexibility in collaboration, thus avoiding the establishment of “rules.” Despite this, though, his one assertion that the writer (and not necessarily the writing itself) should be changed has come to be associated with minimalist tutoring in much of the literature—which does proscribe “rules” for consultants. Arguably, this association came to be because North’s “Idea” is often read through the lens of Brooks’ minimalist consulting method.

Brooks’ articulation of strategies that enact North’s oft-cited focus on the writer struck a “proverbial chord” in writing centers because it seemed to provide a practical way to implement North’s lofty goals (Lerner and Boquet 4). However, when North’s philosophy is read from the perspective of Brooks’ minimalism, the realm of acceptable strategies is narrowed significantly. Suddenly, as a consultant, I am faced with reconciling the very open philosophy North espouses, in which I can choose many strategies, with the four, much more limited, steps Brooks advocates, which include sitting beside the student, having the student closer to the paper, not writing on the paper, and having the student read the paper aloud. Brooks argues that “if you follow these four steps, even if you do nothing else, you will have served the student better than you would if you ‘edited’ his paper” (171). Thus, consultants are given concrete ways to enact North’s goal to change the writer. Minimalist methods also fit well within the writing center’s focus on collaboration because, as Blau and Hall elaborate, they are “grounded in collaborative learning theory, assuming that in an ideal collaborative session, the tutor and client build knowledge together, sharing power and insight” (32). As a result, a consultant stepping outside of these strategies could be perceived as straying from North’s goal as well as the principles

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of collaboration. We can now see how minimalist guidelines can become “rules” of engagement in a consulting session.

Adopting “rules” of using minimalist strategies into one’s consulting practice, though, is complicated because the “ideal collaborative session” (Blau and Hall 32), upon which the connection between minimalism and collaboration depends, only rarely occurs. Often, the “ideal” session is undermined because power between consultants and students is not equal, whether this is because of differing education levels, backgrounds, disciplines, or all the other factors that can impact our consulting practice. Minimalism attempts to empower students in this situation by guiding them to discover the answer themselves, which is often an invaluable learning strategy. But in a situation where power is not shared equally, it is possible that using minimalist methods to communicate writing conventions and discourse could instead reinforce the idea that, in the words of Boquet, “there is a body of knowledge ‘out there’ that some people (like me) have access to and other people (like them) do not” (119). This perception may or may not be true in actuality; a consultant’s use of minimalism does not necessarily indicate that she possesses such knowledge or, if she does, that she is withholding it from the student. However, if the student perceives that the consultant is withholding knowledge in her use of minimalism, collaborative goals can be undermined.

The options to address this student perception are limited if minimalism has been adopted as a set of “rules” in one’s consulting practice because, as Linda Shamon and Deborah Burns argue, an adherence to minimalism can limit consultants’ scope of imagination regarding writing center consulting strategies (174-75). For example, when power is not shared equally, directive methods may serve the students better because the work of both the consultant and the student would be placed on the table in an effort to, in North’s words, “begin from where the student is, and move where the student moves” (39). In this environment of sharing and demonstrating, Shamon and Burns argue, “The social nature of directive and emulative tutoring serves to endorse the student’s worth as an emerging professional” as she gains the skills necessary to communicate her ideas effectively (184). Which kind of authority the consultant adopts

in this situation—using minimalist, directive, or a combination of both strategies—should depend on the needs of the individual student, not on adoption of one strategy or another as a “rule.”

As consultants try to support writers, then, it is clear from the discussion of North, Shamoon and Burns, and Boquet that both directive and minimalist methods will be an integral part of our repertoire, depending upon the situation and student. Even without this deeper reading of writing center literature, this need for flexible methods is communicated in recent consulting handbooks. For example, the consultant training course I took used the *St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors*, in which Murphy and Sherwood encourage an expansive consulting repertoire when they write, “If there is any one truth about tutoring, it is that no single method of tutoring, no one approach, will work effectively with every student in every situation” (1).

Frameworks that encourage flexibility in collaboration are, therefore, clearly present in writing center literature. In light of this, in the rest of this article, I explore how flexibility in scholarship becomes “rules” and guilt in actuality. What is at the root of consultant guilt? How do individual tutoring principles and methods interact with feelings of guilt? And, perhaps most importantly, how does this guilt relate to other consultants, students, and the writing center itself?

Methods

In order to elicit information about what prompts consultants to feel guilt, I distributed a survey to fifty writing consultants, including faculty and graduate and undergraduate students. Participants were provided with a consent form, and responses were immediately de-identified. The survey consisted of six demographic and three short answer questions. The goal of the short answer questions (Figure 1) was to elicit how consultants perceived the theory and principles that they utilized to structure sessions, methods used as a result, and when the consultants felt guilt. For the purpose of the survey, several definitions were provided to respondents:

“Theory”: principles and methods supported by writing center literature

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- “Principles”: tenants upon which consultants based their consulting decisions
- “Methods”: how consultants enacted their theories and principles in individual sessions

This structure for analyzing consultant approaches to sessions was based upon the methods developed by Jenna Krause, a former writing center consultant at the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities (3). During analysis, principles, theories, and methods used were compared to the situations in which consultants felt guilty to highlight correlations, contradictions, and trends in answers among consultants.

1) What are some important principles and/or theories which guide your consulting practices within the subject of writing?

2) Consulting Methods:

- a. What are some writing consulting methods you use as a result of these principles? Some questions for thought, though you are *not* limited to answering these, include:

How do you start a session? How do you choose what to focus on? How do you communicate with the student? Where do you place yourself in relation to the student? Where is the paper in relation to you and the student, and who writes on it?

- b. Do you utilize minimalist and/or non-directive tutoring methods (i.e., using Socratic questioning, writing on the paper very little, etc.)? In which situations have you found minimalist tutoring to be most effective?
- c. Do you utilize directive tutoring methods (i.e., providing wording, grammar, examples, ideas, etc.)? In which situations have you found directive tutoring to be most effective?

3) Have you ever used methods which you feel do not represent your principles? Have you ever felt guilt as a result of doing so? What factors led to this decision, and why did you feel guilt?

Figure 1: Consultant Guilt Survey Short Answer Questions

Results

Eleven consultants from the writing center responded to the distributed survey. Within this sample, there was a great deal of similarity in the principles that guided individual consultants (question 1). Many consultants referenced several principles in their answers, though only consultant eight directly stated that “one single theory wouldn’t be able to provide a useful set of guidelines for every consultation.” Five consultants specifically cited collaboration as a main principle that structured their sessions (unsurprising given its prominent role in our writing center’s philosophy). Each consultant, though, had a slightly different perspective on why collaboration was important, with responses specifying that it created a positive dialogue, placed the student as the expert on his writing, promoted student ownership of the writing, and cultivated the relationship between consultant and student as fellow writers. With collaboration as a guiding principle, nine consultants indicated a session was structured around both the goals the student presented at the beginning of the session and their concerns as consultants (question 2a). This process was best characterized by consultant three: “After the student has identified his/her concerns, I read through the paper and mentally keep track of my own concerns. For the rest of the session, we discuss our concerns together.”

Within this framework, the consultants also explained their use of minimalist and directive methods (questions 2b and 2c). The most important trend was that all consultants felt there were situations in which minimalist methods could be utilized well (such as in brainstorming sessions, addressing focus, and thesis statement discussions) and, likewise, there were situations in which directive methods were more appropriate (such as during later stages of the paper, when modeling outlining and grammar). It was this inquiry into minimalism and directivity that revealed the most acute feelings of guilt.

In response to why and when consultants felt guilt (question 3), ten of the eleven respondents discussed directive methods. In fact, while the final question itself did not mention directive methods, five of the respondents answered the question as if it had asked, “Do you feel guilt for being directive?” For example, consultant five

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(the only faculty respondent) stated that “I think being directive is warranted in some situations, so I do not feel guilty about it. . . . To withhold information would not be fair. . . . where else can they go to get this information?” The other nine respondents all indicated that being overly directive, particularly in grammar-focused sessions, was the main cause of their feelings of guilt. Of those who valued collaboration as their main principle, three felt guilt as a result of being overly directive and three as a result of giving too many answers—or, in the words of consultant eleven, “I worry . . . I spoon-fed them excessively.”

Within the responses addressing guilt and directivity, there were three particularly surprising answers from undergraduate consultants. Consultant one wrote, “Sometimes I let my mouth run off and a few minutes go by before I realize I’ve been exclusively running the session. This makes me very self-conscious and I immediately wonder whether my colleagues were able to hear me enjoying the sound of my own voice.” This consultant expressed the fear of being judged by other consultants but diffused this worry with humor. The two other responses, however, revealed no such relief for the anxiety experienced. Consultant eight articulated that, “I feel especially guilty when those methods were directive and go against writing center dogma”—a statement made all the more intriguing because this same consultant espoused that she followed “no single theory.” The sentiment of her statement was echoed by consultant ten: “I felt guilty, largely because I feel I broke some sort of ‘code’ and my co-workers would be ashamed of me.” In these final two responses, it is notable that both refer to writing center “rules” and “dogma” as reasons why they experienced feelings of shame and guilt.

Discussion

Consultants indicated that they most often felt guilt for being directive in sessions focused upon lower order concerns, but all also indicated, when queried about their methods, that directivity was an appropriate method to use in those very same sessions. In other words, consultants felt guilt for using a method they realized was appropriate. One reason for this might be that those consultants who

felt guilt for being directive were also those who valued collaboration. These individuals likely view collaboration as a meeting of equals, of peers, to work together in order to improve the writer and the writing; this was indicated by the prevalence of responses which indicated consultants viewed themselves as allies and fellow writers and worked to establish a relaxed, peer dynamic. With this interpretation of collaboration, a feeling of guilt is understandable; if a directive method is utilized, it suggests that the consultant is taking the role of an expert, which in turn can undermine the collaboration.

This view of collaboration, as previously discussed, is a very limited view. It is a view predicated on Brooks' contention that, "the student, not the tutor, should 'own' the paper and take full responsibility for it" (169), which, as illustrated earlier by Shamoon and Burns, limits our imagination concerning what collaboration can be. To understand this phenomenon, though, we need to look beyond minimalism in our practice to the position of the writing center within the educational institution—and particularly at the academic definition of ownership.

In academia, individual ownership of ideas and writing is considered of utmost importance (Lunsford 52), and it is a norm which is embodied in Brooks' view of student ownership. As Clark and Healy argue, "Such a philosophy [of minimalist tutoring] perpetuates a limited and limiting understanding of authorship in the academy. By privileging individual responsibility and accountability and by valorizing the individual writer's authentic 'voice,' the writing center has left unchallenged notions of intellectual property" (36). Nancy Grimm builds on this idea, arguing that perpetuation of minimalist collaboration serves only to protect the privileged place of consultants within the educational system, as the consultants have obviously succeeded within academia by conforming to the established ideas of ownership and individual authorship (114-15). If knowledge is viewed as individually held and obtained, it is very difficult to be open to the idea of knowledge gained within the social interaction of consultant-student sessions (Lunsford 48). In using directive strategies, therefore, it is understandable that consultants would feel guilt because they are stepping outside the expectations of the academic institution. In doing so, consultants may be attempting

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(even unconsciously) to help students gain membership in the academic institution, but they are violating the very norms upon which their own success in academia was predicated.

To a certain extent, this form of guilt, stemming from ideals of authorship and ownership that are engrained in our academic lives, is very difficult to overcome. Nonetheless, it is my belief that it is possible for individual writing centers to enact collaboration if our community, both as a profession and in individual centers, is strong. Nurturing such a community will involve close attention to how writing center philosophies are communicated, how interpersonal relationships in individual centers are developed, and how guilt is processed by consultants individually and in group settings.

In explaining when they experienced feelings of guilt, two consultants specifically referenced transgressions of writing center philosophy by using directive methods. Using the terms “dogma” and “code,” these consultants articulated that they felt that using directive methods went against the philosophies espoused by the writing center profession. Perhaps, as Joan Hawthorne suggests, part of the reason for this view of directive methods is that consulting manuals often emphasize minimalist methods (3). More broadly, Tom Truesdell found this emphasis on minimalism as he explored literature about writing center theory and practice: “Many of the articles I was reading seemed to endorse a purely non-directive approach to writing sessions, and I felt that any use of directive tutoring was a transgression against writing center orthodoxy” (8). In Truesdell’s view of directive tutoring as a “transgression,” we can see a mirror of the consultants in this study who felt shame, self-consciousness, and guilt for using directive strategies. However, as demonstrated in the literature review, there is also significant writing center scholarship devoted to complicating our focus on minimalism and promoting more imagination and incorporation of other strategies into our practice. Thus, in recognizing that the full breadth of the existing literature may not be grasped by consultants, we must ask ourselves how the full acceptance of multiple consulting strategies can be better communicated with consultants.

Two strategies to improve the effectiveness of this communication in individual writing centers have been proposed. First, as Hawthorne

enacted in her writing center, a deeper exploration of the literature can be initiated (2). This, however, assumes a certain kind of tutor education that may not be in place at every writing center. However, even without engaging more deeply in the scholarship, writing center philosophies can be more effectively communicated with newer consultants through discussion with more experienced consultants. These more experienced consultants are often more comfortable with flexibility in consultations—particularly with directive methods, as evidenced in my survey by the faculty respondent’s defense of directive methods. Whether this comfort was gained through delving into writing center scholarship or because of more consulting experience (or both), experienced consultants can help newer consultants as they wrestle with applying writing center philosophies in their sessions. Hawthorne also successfully used this strategy at the University of North Dakota writing center to re-establish a firm, less guilt-plagued community; after discussing directive methods as a group, the writing center members came to the conclusion that “When we conduct directive sessions, we’ve learned to think about it but not to feel bad about it” (6).

I would propose that the success of Hawthorne’s discussions was also predicated on the culture she helped create in her writing center, particularly evidenced in her statement that “I promised them they wouldn’t have to find their way through this thicket [navigating writing center taboos] by themselves” (5). In my own writing center, a similar culture of care, respect, and protection of your fellow consultants is palpable. Renata Solum, a former consultant in our center, articulated this when she praised our staff blog as a conduit of communication and relationship building, expressing gratitude that “there is a center full of allies to back us up even while things are going down” (12).

In light of this strong community within our own writing center, it was distressing to me when the surveys revealed that individual consultants felt guilty for betraying the perceived expectations of our center and fellow consultants. The three consultants who worried other consultants judged them for violating writing center “dogma” or “code” were clearly distressed within this community and did not feel they could count on the protection of a “center full of allies.” The

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thought that other consultants would worry I would judge them—that I would be ashamed of them—was truly terrifying because it indicated that our community was not as strong as I perceived. Thus, for me, the most important finding in the survey was the importance of focusing on cultivating interpersonal relationships and a writing center culture, as a whole, that values care and respect. By creating this environment, we can more effectively support each other as we navigate our very complex job as writing consultants.

In addressing consultant guilt in the writing center, it is important that flexibility and a deeper analysis of collaboration are integrated not just into our center philosophies but also into our personal and professional conversations of consulting strategies, training, and research. Further research could help these conversations occur. A better understanding of how consultants interpret and enact collaboration would help clarify why consultants may feel guilt when using directive methods. On a wider scale, analyzing how community forms in individual writing centers would help ascertain how perceived expectations are disseminated, and then further inquiry into when “guidelines” become “rules” could be explored. If such steps are taken, I feel we can build an even stronger, closer, and more productive writing center community.

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