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Consent?

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Abstract Reflecting on a few everyday situations, this “provocation” considers the question of consent at the writing center.

Keywords administration, equity, justice

In this essay, I write to writing center practitioners—especially administrators with decision-making power. Working in the U.S. nation-state, I write to be in community with those who are already on board with the risk-taking needed to cultivate racially just and healthy workplaces. I write with those who push back on exceptionalist narratives of the writing center—a resistance that requires us to deeply reflect on even the most mundane practices. I use this “provocation” to think aloud about the question of consent in a few everyday situations. Motivated by an uneasiness in my gut, I also acknowledge the dead-ends I’ve been encountering along the way.

Situation: Consultant A wants to refer a writer to consultant B. Do we ask consultant B for their consent?

This all came up one day during the height of the pandemic when a member of the consulting staff messaged me: “Can I meet with

you when you have a moment?” A white, genderqueer graduate student, the consultant had just finished a session with an Asian American cis woman working on a scholarship essay in which she engaged with her own Asian American subjectivity. Over the course of their time together, the consultant started to think that the writer might be interested in working with another Asian American cis woman. This led to the consultant (a supervisee, in fact) wanting to chat with me after the session ended: “May I refer the writer to you?”

The question blew my mind. They were asking me if they could refer someone to me—*And I could say no.*

The simplicity of the ask got me thinking. Shouldn’t I always have the opportunity to say no? How often do consultants have the chance to say no? Specifically, how often do *consultants who aren’t directors* get to say no? To fellow administrators: Is it possible to sustain a workplace culture that has an abundance of not only psychological safety, but of

love and care—so much that a staff member could say no with minimal risk? I already bristle when I think of the writing center as a customer service provider, so how can I facilitate more ways for consultants to say no? How can I structurally prioritize and operationalize consent at the writing center?

Referrals feel very “everyday” at our center, which employs professional and student workers from a multitude of majors and disciplines. “Oh, you want to work on a lab report? So-and-so has a lot of experience with those.” Questions of disciplinarity aside, the “lab-report referral” feels relatively benign (Is it, though? More on this later.). That day, the consultant and I started talking about how we each felt about subjectivity-based referrals. Sticky is the word that comes to mind. What’s it feel like when someone recommends you to a writer based on their interpellation of your subject-positions? And as the consultant pointed out to me, wouldn’t it be more reasonable and ethical to just ask your co-worker if referring them would be okay?

I’ll name what may seem obvious: The practice of subjectivity-based referral is loaded because it is based on the perceived affinities (e.g., gender and race) between two people—the writer and the referred colleague. The act of referral comes with the possibility of tokenizing and commodifying the referred consultant’s ways of knowing. In this way, subjectivity-based referral is arguably different from the lab-report referral, for now we are talking about the epistemic commodification of one’s embodied histories. It is no longer just about a learned skill set. Thus, what does the practice of subjectivity-based “referral without consent” presume of the embodied histories of both the writer and the consultant? (In other words, when you refer someone to me, are you sure the writer and I have that much in common?) Wouldn’t asking for consent anticipate and therefore be a solution to this problem?

I already have a “yes, but . . .” in my head, located in temporality and logistics: But I just worked with a writer at our drop-in location. It could be days later when I’ve gotten consent from my co-worker, and the writer needed

support right away. Or, but so-and-so’s biography says she likes to support BIPOC writers. (I wonder, is there such a thing as “blanket consent”?)

And still, maybe I have been overlooking the question of consent all along in another common occurrence at the writing center.

Situation: A writer requests a specific consultant. Do we ask the consultant for their consent?

I’m particularly thinking of times when a consultant tells me that they’re uncomfortable about working with a writer who keeps requesting and flirting with them. When this happens, I would bet that most directors support the idea of ending a consultation or moving the writer to a different consultant. I figure that most writing centers already have these practices in place, where we tell supervisors that they can opt out of a consultation if they feel unsafe. At my institution, moving the writer (or switching out a consultant) is indeed what we do in the moment. Our administrative response is therefore situational and improvisational: We have limited structural mechanisms to anticipate times when a writer repeatedly requests the same consultant.¹ I’m also thinking about how the consultant has to go out of their way to share that they want out. Spending social and political capital, they have to take a risk and hope that we will understand and believe them. Obviously, this doesn’t feel great to me as a director.

Our overall lack of structural anticipation and response functions as a gesture of nonperformativity in which our practices do not change (Ahmed, 2021, pp. 317–318, footnote 1): As a director, I acknowledge the tutor’s experience with the appropriate form of (authentic) indignant anger, I thank them for telling me, I periodically check the schedule to see if the writer has signed up for another session, but after some time (maybe a week, a month, a semester), the urgency of the situation begins to fade—until it happens again to someone else. And still, another thought surfaces: I realize that for consultants, “yes” is the default starting position in all consultations. So, I wonder, what if a staff member had

the choice to opt into referrals and requests—not merely to opt out of them? That is, what if the default is a “no” and that we must ask for the yes? Even so, what is the relationship between the act of opting in and the act of giving consent?

My stomach gets tight. The dead ends and yes-butts surface again. Within my local context, I think of a number of things across the board. Some are inconsequential, others are critical: How can we possibly ask consultants for their consent on all of their sessions? What’s the difference between a request and a randomly selected consultant? What about sessions at the drop-in location? What if the tutor, who is paid (as they should be!) even when there’s no writer, just uses consent as an excuse to not consult so they can do homework instead? Or what if the tutor just doesn’t want to work with someone in a class that requires visits or is in a subject they don’t like? Or worse: What if the tutor themselves is ableist/classist/homophobic/racist/transphobic/xenophobic and uses consent-based practice as a way to get out of a consultation?²

Such questions make me look for structural solutions. For example, when a person accepts a job offer to work at the writing center, are they waiving their privacy and waiving their consent with regard to giving consultations? Is this the moment when they are opting in to all sessions? If they are, do we make this clear from the start? Is it in the job description? The offer letter? During orientation? In our *Consultant Handbook*? Would it be any different among student employees versus nonstudent employees? (If so, why?) However, wouldn’t such transparency and a demand for a waiver reflect a service-based approach to the writing center anyway (that is, when writers see themselves as clients entitled to whatever type of consultation they want, and this sense of entitlement is supported by a writing center’s policies and practices)?

My thought experiment stumbles when it comes to considering logistics and implementation. In the end, the writer’s needs appear to have more priority than the consultant’s needs. Can we as workers not break out of the institutionality and hard structure that writing centers are in and made of? For me, thinking

about consent reveals that the writing center continues to be a customer service center even for a justice-minded director who hopes to disavow such an approach. The writing center is not that unique or exceptional after all. Nor are we as directors.

The lab-report referral comes back here, too. At first, genre-based and discipline-based referrals and requests seem pretty straightforward, maybe even harmless. However, things get sticky when we are talking about consulting in disciplines that encourage self-reflexivity and/or focus on the experiences of historically marginalized communities. I’m thinking about what I have witnessed among tutors of color who are working with white students taking Ethnic Studies courses.

Situation: What happens when a white student signs up to work with a consultant of color in order to exploit the consultant’s embodied histories for their own academic gain?

For those of us at PWIs, if we want to enact our commitment to supporting and retaining students of color as consultants, then consent feels crucial, for practices such as referrals and requests can be (are always) racialized, gendered, tied up in language difference, language rights, and more.³ And who at a writing center *wouldn’t* benefit from consent-based practice?

My thoughts take another turn. Do writing center directors get to consent, too—or are we ourselves waiving consent as the official leaders at work? That is, do we get to say no, as supervisors? For example, if a white tutor wants to talk with me about race or racism, what if I said no? I honestly never have declined such an ask. I suppose I’m wondering, at the risk of flattening rigid hierarchies, can/should consent-based practice be enacted across *all* institutional roles at the writing center?

Again and again, questions about consent make me see how embedded the writing center is in the institution and in the project of racial capitalism. I suspect that at PWI writing centers, the terms and conditions of requests and referrals are different for tutors of color and multilingual tutors than they may be for

white tutors. To be sure, the terms and conditions were never great, either, for monolingual white folks.⁴ Maybe I need to challenge myself to view *all* my administrative decision-making through the lens of consent. This might mean fewer options for writers. For example, they may not always get to work with a particular tutor. We've got to be okay with this, and we may need to defend these decisions. And still, I don't think this is as simple as making logistical changes: I'm suggesting that consent should be a guiding principle in the administrative practices of directors who already want to cultivate healthy, equitable spaces. I should note that I mean consent as enacted in systemic, structural ways, not merely through isolated, improvisational acts.

Further, when we operationalize consent, we need to be responsive to local, regional, and national contexts. I may work in Minnesota, a state known for its liberalism and progressivism (Edelman, 2023), but settler colonialism and white supremacy thrive in such environments, too (e.g., Holbrook & Mura, 2021; Jacobs, Thompson Taiwo, & August, 2021; Waziyatawin, 2008).⁵ Taking into account local and regional particularity, I should pay attention to the edges and uncertainties of my practice, pedagogy, and administrative philosophy. In short, given our respective contexts and political landscapes, what practices within our spheres of influence disregard consent?

Situated within this inquiry, differential risk is always at play for practitioners in precarious positions—for example, those (including student tutors) whose jobs are contingent (Fels, Gardner, Herb, & Naydan, 2021) and/or those who are multilingual, people of color, and/or from historically marginalized communities. I am a nondisabled and neurotypical, U.S.-born Asian cis woman administrator in a full-time, non-tenure-track position at an R1 writing center that has four locations and modalities. Over the years, in response to a workplace atmosphere of precarity, risk, and yes, some harm, I've been slowly forming meaningful relationships and collaborations at work and in my personal life. There is much I can do.

I turn to Roderick Ferguson's (2012) study of the university's incorporation of difference,

as he directs our attention to the grand *and* granular:

A syllabus, a job ad, a recruitment strategy, a memo, a book, an artwork, a report, an organizational plan, a protest—such are the little things that we can deploy in order to imagine critical forms of community, forms in which minoritized subjects become the agents rather than the silent objects of knowledge formations and institutional practices. (p. 232)

Holding onto such hopeful reimaginings, I think about my context and ask myself, How might prioritizing consent-based pedagogy and practice affect the writing of postsession notes, the use of feedback forms, and even the way we welcome writers to the writing center? How might focusing on consent change the ways we hire, supervise, and facilitate professional development with staff, including graduate assistant directors? And what about our outreach practices and promotional materials across campus, as well as what's on our webpages (such as biographies and photographs of consultants)?⁶ Finally, as a consultant crucially pointed out to me, what about the posting of consultants' *walk-in* hours, even if this information can only be accessed by current students? There's more that I'm not thinking about, I am certain.

Deep breath, full body. I have no tidy story to end with, but I do know I'm tired of the yes-butts that keep emerging in my thinking. Each one I encounter feels like a reminder of my assimilation in the neoliberal university (nothing new here). In fact, I want to hold on to this dull ache, this sense of the work as troubling and ongoing. And while I do not seek reassurance from colleagues that I'm "doing the good work" or "the best I can," I feel hopeful about what my loved ones, co-mentors, and I can critique, brainstorm, and dream up together at our workplaces and beyond.

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Notes

1. Further, the act of changing consultants is potentially problematic, placing a second employee in a difficult position to say no, if we ask them in the first place. Depending on the situation and on what consultants are thinking, would this be a moment for a director to intervene and/or step in to consult?

2. Azima, Hixson-Bowles, and Simpkins' (2022) "(De)Constructive (Dis)Comfort Matrix" can help parse out invocations of discomfort. Wang (2022) further unpacks the terms of discomfort for WPAs and tutors of color.

3. As we consider the retention of consultants of color and multilingual consultants, there is a scary cousin to this discussion about requests: when writers select or request consultants in discriminatory ways (e.g., "I want to work with a native speaker") or when tutors whose names "sound" foreign or not white have more empty slots than others.

4. While I focus primarily on the effects of racial formations, we can't be facile here and rank oppressions.

5. In my citation practice, I include all authors' names (instead of using "et al.") so that every author is recognized.

6. For example, consultant biographies can be consequential. At the writing center where I work, a team of consultants and directors (a shout-out here to Gabrielle Farrell, Sourojit Ghosh, Megan Herzog, Katie Levin, and Asma Naeem) did a self-study that resulted in an overhaul of our consultant biographies webpage. We removed photographs of consultants and expectations about word count, and we let go of a need for consistency across biographies, with hopes that consultants would have more control over the amount of information they shared. While our revised practice supported our

goal, we realized that there's more to consider; for example, what if a staff member does not want their name on a webpage at all?

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