

P Praxis: A Writing Center Journal (2003-2011)

Sections

[Focus](#)
[Columns and Reviews](#)
[Consulting](#)
[Training](#)
[News & Announcements](#)

Archives

[Browse past issues of Praxis](#)

About Us

[About Us](#)

Submissions

[Submit an article to Praxis](#)

[Home](#) » [Archives](#) » [Spring 2008 \(Volume 5 Issue 2\) - Authority and Cooperation](#)

Authority and Cooperation: Five Views from Writing Center Directors

[Spring 2008 / Columns](#)

by **Patricia Burns** and **James Jesson**, managing editors

Praxis surveys directors for their attitudes toward the roles of authority and cooperation in writing centers

For this issue of *Praxis*, focusing on authority and cooperation, the editors composed a survey exploring various aspects of the topic, which we sent to several directors of writing centers around the country. The survey asked directors to think about general writing center philosophy, directive versus nondirective consulting approaches, writing center dynamics, training methods, and the consultant's authority. The following article provides an overview of the responses we received. Readers can click on the names in the following paragraph to see each director's responses in full.

The seven directors responding to the survey come from four different writing centers:

- [Linda Bergmann](#) - director of the [Writing Lab, Purdue University](#)
- [Tammy Conard-Salvo](#) — associate director of the [Writing Lab, Purdue University](#)
- [Christopher Ervin](#) — director of the [University Writing Center, University of South Dakota](#)
- [Margaret Syverson](#) — director of the Undergraduate Writing Center, [University of Texas at Austin](#)
- [Anne B. Warner](#) — director of the [Comprehensive Writing Program](#); Terry Bozeman — assistant director of the [Comprehensive Writing Program](#); and Margaret Price — director of the [Electronic Portfolio Project, Spelman College](#)

Writing Center Philosophy

We must state clearly that the opinions discussed below are those of the individual respondents and do not represent the opinions of everyone at the writing centers they direct. As Conard-Salvo writes, "we have 45 different approaches and philosophies in our Writing Lab," one for each staff member; or, as Syverson puts it, "I can't say that a writing center can have a philosophy. There are provisional, dynamically realized understandings about how we function together in various kinds of relationships: director, administrative staff, consultants, students. Probably each person's perspective differs about these understandings." There are limits to how much a director's personal philosophy will direct a writing center's daily operations. Such an awareness of this limit constitutes something of an implicit philosophy regarding the balancing of authority and cooperation: whatever theories and philosophies a director holds, the writing center's character must develop through dynamic exchanges among administrators, staff, and students.

Another way of understanding the dynamic conditions under which decisions are made in the writing center is to recognize that the proper balance of authority and cooperation is always determined in response to a specific context. And a common theme running through these responses is the reminder that different contexts require different approaches and a flexibility to transcend any single philosophy. Conard-Salvo expresses this view in writing, "I'd like to think that we are context-specific—that when we work with students, we take into consideration the purpose and audience of the document as well as the student's own needs." Certain consistent guidelines, however, can apply across varying contexts. Conard-Salvo cites her "overarching philosophy" that "the student maintains ownership of the document," regardless of how directive or nondirective the consultant is. Another contextual factor influencing consultations is the nature of the technology involved. Conard-Salvo, who says she has been very "interested in and involved in technology" and its role in writing center work, states her faith that "technology enables students to be more proactive in their work." The educational "conversation" espoused by Kenneth Bruffee (whom Conard-Salvo cites as an influence on her personal philosophy) will occur within different contexts as new technologies assume greater prominence in writing centers.

For now, most writing centers operate predominantly in the familiar context of two or more people sitting together, discussing words on paper. And the respondents to our survey from Spelman College report that conversation is important in uncovering "the potential for productivity released by the student-to-student interaction." Warner, Bozeman, and Price write of their center's focus on the "empowering" nature of the peer conversation, the benefits of an emphasis on "process" and on "exploratory talk," and of the goal of developing "strong, interactive writers who seek mutual gains from 'talk.'" To these ends, the Spelman tutors have "proven skills in communicating and writing" and are "welcoming" to students. While much of their terminology is drawn from writing center theory, the sentiments still express an awareness of the specific context of the writing center consultation, in which consultants communicate with real people facing unique, individual challenges. Their very personal approach has allowed Spelman consultants to "engage the client as an individual in a conversation that may address situations beyond the paper itself."

Since writing center work involves individuals acting within dynamic contexts, success can only be measured as part of an ongoing process. Ervin reports that his center "share[s] authority. Consultants share with students and vice versa; I, as the director, share authority with both undergraduate and graduate student consultants." He notes, however, the constant struggle—familiar, no doubt, to many writing center directors—to "'share' authority as much as we should" and to involve staff in decision-making and engage students in consultations. Warner, Bozeman, and Price recognize the "'conflict' between authority and democracy" conveyed by the title "peer tutors," and their strategies for engaging students help tutors balance these competing forces. But such a balance results only from continued conversation between consultants and students, and Warner et al. note that the "culture of collaboration does become more established, less conflicted, as the tutoring year goes on and repeat clients understand that their writing is a process which may be enhanced by several conversations along the way."

Directive versus Nondirective Approaches

Responses to our questions about directive versus nondirective consulting

generally reveal the sentiment that the two categories represent “a false dichotomy” (Syverson) and that consultants need to find a “balance” (Ervin) between the two approaches. Syverson writes that the “most important quality of a good consultation is a skillful balance of directiveness and nondirectiveness that is most appropriate to the student and the writing situation. It is very important to provide enough scaffolding so that the student is supported, yet enough openness so that the discoveries and the learning are the student’s.” Yet, as Ervin notes, finding the right balance can be “very difficult to achieve.” This difficulty ensures a continued discussion over the proper proportions to employ in achieving this balance. And different emphases in responses to this section of our survey reveal the variations in personal approaches that make this topic a site of ongoing debate.

Warner, Bozeman, and Price stress their center’s nondirective approach: “The conference process, like the writing process, is exploratory. Our peers begin by learning from the client what she wants and what focus would benefit her most [...] All attention to the essay is client initiated.” Bergmann’s emphasis differs. “While I do not suggest that our tutors take over students’ papers,” she writes, “I feel like I’m not as interested in pursuing a non-interventionist, non-directive agenda as many other administrators and practitioners in the Writing Center field.” Bergmann’s personal philosophy is informed by her belief that tutors who know about genre conventions and audience expectations have a duty to share that information with less knowledgeable students. She writes that “if we can push [students] to write in a way that their audience deems successful, and show them why, we give them a very useful skill.” Though Conard-Salvo “tend[s] to favor nondirective approaches to tutoring,” she echoes Bergmann in arguing that “[d]irective consulting should take place when a student cannot come to an answer on his or her own” such as “when a student needs information about genre conventions or simply doesn’t have experience writing a certain document.”

Context, again, is important in dictating the particular balance of directive and nondirective consulting strategies. And certain contexts can make nondirective approaches more difficult to employ. Ervin writes that consultants in his center can “move easily back and forth” between directive and nondirective modes during ESL conversation sessions that his center holds. In these sessions the focus is not on a text but on a spoken exchange, and “students often steer the sessions in the direction they’re interested in.” In consultations over written work, consultants can “struggle sometimes to draw students out, and the default then is to play “teacher.” These contrasting situations illustrate the challenge of initiating productive conversations about student writing.

Directors hoping to foster collaborative writing consultations offer different types of training and guidance to help consultants balance authority and cooperation. As part of their training, consultants at Spelman read essays from the St. Martin’s Source Book for Writing Tutors, and each consultant leads a presentation and discussion on one of the articles. Warner, Bozeman, and Price note that their “peer tutors, as one hopes, teach each other a great deal about how to facilitate the writing of their clients.” Syverson, meanwhile, believes “direct observation is the best way to support consultants as they learn to find this balance. It’s not possible to convey it through abstract discussion or theoretical models, although we do discuss it. It is an embodied practice. Some will intuitively recognize that balance, and others will have more of a struggle to find it. That is why the feedback from observation is so helpful.” For some consultants, balancing authority and cooperation will be more or less of a

struggle depending on how consultants are perceived by students, as well as how they perceive their own authority. At Purdue, Conard-Salvo observes that "it's easier for students to think of our undergraduate tutors as peers" and that "undergraduates often establish rapport with students through small talk and shared experience." Graduate students, Bergmann comments, are more likely to "worry a lot about being over-directive," though those who also use the Writing Lab as clients can find it easier to balance directive and nondirective approaches. But while employing nondirective strategies can reassure consultants that they have met a writing center ideal, Bergmann stresses the ultimate goal of serving students, which transcends more particular theoretical goals: "[T]he last thing I want a tutor to do is to withhold information/knowledge from a client because the client has not discovered it for him or her self. That is not the kind of writing center I'd like to go to, and so it is not the sort I want to direct."

Writing Center Dynamics

While writing centers have become a staple on college campuses, the composition of writing center staffs varies across institutions. The staffs of the centers we surveyed ranged from 100% undergraduate to 80% graduate students. Two of the centers that employ both graduate and undergraduate tutors said that graduates and undergraduates both hold administrative positions but that graduate students are the ones that usually get these positions. At the same time, however, no respondent recorded any conflicts between the groups. Ervin says that, in his center, this is because "none of them feel they're 'expert' enough about WC work to be able to be an authority over the others." Bergmann notes that while her center is encouraging undergraduates to take on roles that graduate students usually fill, she feels that when graduate and undergraduate students work together on projects, graduate students usually take the lead because they have more experience. At the same time, she says, "they also work to make the undergraduates feel like full working participants, and a considerable amount of mutual respect seems to be developing."

Diversity in writing centers rests not only in the composition of their staff but also in how they assign roles and allow these roles to overlap in their centers. In several of the centers we polled, consultants (both graduate and undergraduate) hold administrative positions in addition to their consulting duties. Bergmann says that "without our student administrators, we could not do as much as we try to do." Here, student administrative work is a vital part of the day-to-day functioning of Bergmann's center, and this appears to be the trend among our respondents' centers. Additionally, all of the respondents said that non-student administrators spend at least some of their time consulting. Warner, Bozeman and Price say that because of this, "the tutors are reassured of our mutual commitment to our mission." Syverson says that when administrators and directors consult, "the overlap is helpful in understanding the issues consultants are facing day to day." At the same time, however, some respondents admit that while they will consult on occasion, their other duties in the writing center often take precedence.

Looking at writing center management in a larger, structural sense can yield comparisons between management policies and writing center philosophies. When asked if directive/nondirective consulting strategies were mirrored in management, several respondents admitted that they saw no such connection. However, some directors found the question helpful in describing how they

balance authority and cooperation in their centers. For instance, Bergmann reflects that she tries “to put as much responsibility in students’ hands” as possible while at the same time helping to solve problems and taking on a mentoring role. This is very similar to what she sees as her center’s approach to consulting. Warner, Bozeman and Price respond similarly in that in their center “there is a minimal exercise of hierarchy.” Syverson, seeing a direct connection, says, “as the Director, my aspiration is to make sure that everyone is well-supported, has a voice, and can participate in decision-making as appropriate. Again, it is a balance between being ‘directive’ and ‘nondirective.’”

There may also be visual and spatial elements to a writing center’s projection of authority and cooperation. All respondents agreed that open rooms with small tables for consultations seems to comprise the most functional and encouraging space for writing consultations. Many respondents also mentioned break rooms, libraries, and quiet spaces for concentration or more private consultations. Administrative offices in all cases were said to be easily accessible with doors, if any, kept open. For example, Conard-Salvo says that the offices of the directors and secretaries “clearly demonstrate authority in the Writing Lab,” but “because my door is always open, tutors often drop by with questions, comments, suggestions, etc.” Ervin says that having open doors creates a space in which “the administrative person can be available but also be removed from the central space so as to avoid intrusion in sessions.” Conard-Salvo says that a recent redesign has grouped tutors according to the function they are carrying out rather than along lines of tutor groups (e.g., undergraduate and graduate student tutors) and that this has had a positive effect on employee interaction in her center.

It can be important to remember that how consultants are identified in online consultations influences how students may view issues of authority and cooperation. Ervin’s center has a synchronous online tutoring system (WebCT), and he points out that when the associate coordinator logs on, “his online identity is anonymous and his personal identity is masked by the ‘master’ identity of ‘WRITNG CENTER,’” whereas other online consultants are listed by name. While the virtual space of synchronous web-based tutoring may pose new challenges and require new training techniques in regards to authority and cooperation, for most of our respondents, these virtual spaces are yet to be created. Because these consultations will lack a face-to-face dimension, considering how authority and cooperation are encoded will be vital when creating these new areas of exchange.

Training Methods

No writing center can expect tutors to go to work without proper training. While this training should help consultants develop confidence in their ability to consult student writers, many centers also train consultants in their favored consulting strategies — often working to de-center a consultant’s authority while establishing their confidence. Training methods vary between centers and, like management strategies, can mirror a director’s philosophy in regards to authority and cooperation. Warner, Bozeman and Price tell us that each fall they hold a full-day workshop that includes “familiarization with the *St. Martin’s Sourcebook*, role playing, instruction on information forms for student clients, and discussion of the standards of the program.” This is in conjunction with “a one-hour course required of all new tutors.” In addition, consultants are asked to produce presentations, conduct research, and keep journals as well as attend workshops on library use and on tutoring students with disabilities.

Bergmann and Conard-Salvo note that their undergraduate consultants must “take 1 of 2 training courses before they are even considered for tutoring positions.” These training courses are either “designed for tutors of first year composition students or tutors of business writing.” Their graduate students must have taught composition for at least one year and must “attend a weekly practicum usually taught by the Director, in which they read important articles about tutoring writing, write responses, and discuss their own tutoring experiences in terms of their reading.” Ervin says, “two systems are in place: A Writing Center Theory/Practice/Research course and a faculty-nominated training system.” Syverson says that undergraduates at her center take a one-semester course and graduates have an orientation in the fall. She adds, “there are regularly scheduled cohort meetings on topics such as personal statements and working with ESL students.”

The training methods of these centers seem to be effective in that most respondents see their new consultants as successfully collaborating with students rather than attempting to edit a student’s work. Warner, Bozeman and Price say that “peer tutors understand from the beginning that the client remains in control of her paper.” Conard-Salvo tells us that her consultants “receive specific training on minimalist tutoring techniques” and observe and practice tutorials before they are hired. Theory and practice seem to combine in this area to help consultants avoid the impulse to edit another’s work.

The Consultant’s Authority

The responses to whether a center assigns different levels of authority to graduate and undergraduate students were highly varied among the directors surveyed. Conard-Salvo notes that her center tries to “discourage any view that somehow the graduate tutors are ‘better’ or have more authority than the undergraduate tutors.” But at the same time she notes that “there are more administrative positions available to graduate tutors” and they are more visible because her center’s graduate consultants, as opposed to her undergraduate consultants, work as generalists tutors at their main location. Similarly, Syverson says that while Assistant Directors are selected from among graduate students, she is “not aware of any difference in the levels of authority.” Ervin, on the other hand, says that he assigns “grad students to positions of authority, but they seldom feel like they know more than the undergraduates, so they don’t really inhabit those positions.” He also wishes that his graduate students would take on more of a mentor or leadership role than they typically do. Finally, Bergmann admits that if she were a client, she “would value the authority of a graduate tutor (having taught a year of fyc [first year composition] before applying to the position) ... Not to recognize this difference in experience,” she concludes, “ would be silly.”

Writing center directors may work to minimize the apparent differences in authority assigned to their undergraduate and graduate consultants, but students writers may simply be looking for the best help they can get. *Praxis* asked if student writers demonstrated a preference for either graduate or undergraduate consultants. Conard-Salvo feels that in her center, because “undergraduates have a very specialized role and area of expertise,” the impulse to assign large amounts of authority to graduate students (because they are also teachers) is minimized. Bergmann notes that if she visited the writing center she would “want the most critical reading” she could get and suggests that “there’s a lot more research” needed in the area of student expectations of the writing center. Ervin admits that “some do [assign more

authority to graduate students]—they ask for graduate students—because they feel like undergraduates can’t offer effective feedback and direction.”

Observing consultation dynamics is an important part of directing a writing center and maintaining a center’s goals. When asked if they saw a difference in the way that consultees treat graduate and undergraduates and if they encountered any conflicts in peer-to-peer sessions, respondents overwhelmingly responded that they had not observed any conflicts when undergraduates consult undergraduates. Ervin states that he believes that students who visit the writing center believe that consultants at any grade level “hold positions of authority based simply on the fact that they’re hired to work in the writing center.” At the same time, however, he says that the consultations themselves often challenge this designation of authority and tend to promote peer interaction instead. Syverson says that her undergraduate consultants are “comfortable and confident assisting peers in this environment” and has observed no significant difference between graduate and undergraduate relationships with visiting students. Similarly, Conard-Salvo says, “sometimes I perceive a difference in consultation dynamics, but not usually.” Like Syverson, she feels that “undergraduate tutors are able to create a positive rapport with their undergraduate tutees.” Both Syverson and Ervin point out that they have had minimal feedback in this regard and that their answers come from their observations alone. Bergmann, additionally, feels that observation should be augmented by empirical research. She asks, “how much genre and audience knowledge do peer tutors have? How do undergraduate tutors compare with graduate tutors in this regard?” She concludes, “I’d like to see some systematic study of this before I comment on it.”

[< Affirmations: How to Inspire Students to Revise](#)

[up](#)

[CFP: Fall 2008 Issue of Praxis >](#)

Praxis is a project of the [Undergraduate Writing Center](#) at the University of Texas at Austin

[Editor login](#)