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"Anybody there?": A Comparison of Writing-Center Coaching and Crisis Counseling

Fall 2010 / Consulting

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A volunteer crisis counselor and writing center tutor juxtaposes the skill sets necessary for each position.

Jenny Poon

It's 4:30 am. It has been a slow night, and I am sleeping fitfully on the pullout couch, tossing and turning underneath a small fleece blanket. The phone rings. I jump off the couch and run across the cheap, blue linoleum to flick on the light, grab a clipboard, and answer the phone by the second ring.

"Raft and ACCESS, how may I help you?" I say, trying to sound alert.

A melancholy voice, barely audible, answers, "Hi. I had no one else to call. I really want to hurt myself. I don't know how much more of this I can take."

"I'm really worried about you. Thanks for having the courage to call us. What's going on?"

Although I didn't expect it, I have noticed a significant number of parallels while volunteering at the local suicide/crisis hotline and working as a peer writing coach at the Virginia Tech Writing Center. Over the course of almost two years at the hotline, I have accumulated over 200 hours of paraprofessional counseling as well as a valuable set of skills and experiences that transferred remarkably easily to my new position as an undergraduate peer writing coach. Both peer tutoring and paraprofessional counseling require that I build rapport with the client or caller, ask clarifying questions, define his or her most pressing problem(s), effectively implement manageable steps for improvement, engage in problem-solving techniques, and utilize outside resources when necessary.

The most important characteristic for success in both roles is the capacity to use one's interpersonal skills to successfully build relationships with clients. Indeed, in an article entitled, "Freud in the Writing Center: The Psychoanalytics of Tutoring Well," Christina Murphy discusses a few ways in which teaching writing mirrors the psychoanalytic process, especially emphasizing the importance of the bond between the therapist and the client or, in this case, the tutor and the student. She contends that "the quality of that interpersonal relationship…determines how successful the interaction as a whole will be" (Murphy 12). Building rapport involves active listening, building trust, understanding and reflecting the client's concerns, giving feedback, asking questions, and being friendly, supportive, and non-judgmental. When talking to

both distressed callers and writing center clients, I acknowledge and praise their ability to ask for help and validate their concerns.

Setting priorities is an essential process for both the writing center coach and the crisis counselor that involves deciding whether to address the individual's global or local concerns.

One of the reasons it's so crucial to build rapport with a client is because, just as many of the people who call the hotline are hurt, many of the students who enter the doors of the writing center are also suffering in that "they display insecurities about their abilities as writers or even as academic learners" or exhibit "behavioral patterns of anxiety, self-doubt, negative cognition, and procrastination that only intensify an already difficult situation" (Murphy 14). With this circumstance in mind, it is clear that fostering a trusting, friendly, and supportive relationship from the very beginning of an interaction can go a long way in quelling an individual's anxiety. Being compassionate makes callers and clients feel more comfortable sharing their concerns with me, whether I'm on the end of a phone line, or seated right next to them at a table.

After listening to the client's or caller's concerns and gaining their trust, both my role as a counselor and as a tutor require me to define or help the client identify his or her most pressing problem. Obviously, it would be impossible for me to solve all of an individual's writing or emotional problems in a single session or phone call, so I must help him or her choose which are the most practical and significant to pursue. Setting priorities is an essential process for both the writing center coach and the crisis counselor that involves deciding whether to address the individual's global or local concerns. For example, at the writing center, clients often come in asking for help with grammar; however, it is our job as tutors, when necessary, to gently direct them from the minutiae to more global concerns, such as organizing their paper in a more coherent manner or strengthening a weak thesis statement. Similarly, at the hotline, I try to get callers to focus on the bigger picture. For example, if they are having trouble coping with stress in a given night, I'll help them brainstorm some ways they can manage their stress in general, such as going for a walk once a day or getting involved in a local community organization. By collaboratively developing with global strategies, I hope to instill a somewhat permanent change in their day-to-day lives that will increase that client's ability to handle stress. However, coaches and counselors alike have to be flexible when setting priorities, as there are always exceptions based on the needs of the particular client. If I am helping an international engineering student with her dissertation, I will mostly address local concerns due to both my lack of knowledge of the subject matter and the client's needs. Likewise, when working at the hotline, if someone is acutely suicidal or is about to experience a panic attack, for example, I need to focus on the local, or more immediate, concern of what is currently happening in order to effectively keep the client safe and relaxed as possible in the short-term.

Yet another similarity between writing center coaching and crisis counseling involves helping clients and callers implement steps for improvement. First and foremost, it is important to demystify the situation at hand. Both novice writers and callers with mental health issues often have trouble even getting started on a pressing problem, whether it is freshman composition assignment or an overwhelming amount of tasks to complete. It's important for both coaches and counselors to demystify the situation by breaking the problem or assignment

down into small, manageable steps to make the task less daunting. In order to do this, one must develop an individualized coaching or counseling strategy that is congruent with the client's priorities, values, and needs. If a client feels overwhelmed at the prospect of writing an essay, he or she can collaborate with the writing coach to come up with an outline and focus on writing, perhaps, just the first paragraph. If a caller feels anxiety when she thinks about all of her bills that have been piling up on her counter, the counselor and caller can try to formulate a schedule that she can follow in order to accomplish the task. It's important to be flexible; not every solution or alternative I suggest will work for everyone. In order to gauge whether or not a particular counseling or tutoring technique is working for the writing center client or hotline caller, I'm sure to ask lots of questions, such as "How do you feel about this change in the order of your paragraphs?" or "Do you think you will be able to use these breathing techniques to help you calm down when you start to feel yourself getting angry?"

The most important similarity between the role of a tutor and that of a counselor is the art of allowing clients and callers to think for themselves. Instead of overtly giving writers better words to use or dispensing imperative advice about what callers should do in a particular situation, a good tutor or counselor utilizes similar skills, such as the ability to explore the problem, ask intelligent, open-ended questions, and otherwise help clients and callers elucidate their own ideas and generate their own solutions. Ideally, a coach or counselor should act as more of a facilitator, cheerleader, and/or sounding board than a drill sergeant. After all, much of the burden of fixing the problem, be it a weak focus or difficulty coping with stressful situations, is ultimately on the shoulders of the student, not the teacher, therapist, or volunteer. As Melissa Weintraub suggests, "most of the work of therapy is done outside the session, in clients' real lives; so, too, is learning how to write" (Weintraub 11). Therapists, paraprofessional counselors, and writing coaches alike all provide support, listen to the clients, help them clarify their thoughts and feelings, and give constructive feedback for them to utilize on their own. Whether they're experiencing anxiety about writing a paper or are in a state of deep depression, my goal is to give students and callers the skills (e.g., organizational techniques, coping mechanisms, and so forth) to help them make the unmanageable a little more manageable.

Another issue that sometimes comes into play in both counseling and tutoring settings is that of "cultural competency," or acceptance and sensitivity to people of diverse cultural backgrounds. As a psychology major, I'm interested in how people of various ethnicities, cultures, and backgrounds express and cope with their feelings of, for example, depression or anxiety, and how their perceptions may differ from those of Americans. For example, generally speaking, Asians come from a more collectivistic society and think more in terms of "we," while American society is very individualistic and people tend to view things from the perspective of "I." This issue was brought to light in my very first writing center session with a young, Asian graduate student named Meo. Her cover letter was very detailed in terms of her past work and academic experiences, but did not mention any of her individual interpersonal qualities. I asked her about her experiences and qualifications for this specific architecture-related internship, and it was clear that, albeit modest and quiet, she had often played a leadership role when facilitating many group design projects. However, when I pointed this out, she said she didn't want to sound "cocky." I lightheartedly explained to her that, in America, it's not called "cocky," it's called "qualified,"

and that it's important to convey to the company that she is both a team player, as well as a leader. She laughed and agreed, thanking me for this valuable cultural insight. In this instance, by acting as a "cultural informant," I challenged Meo's beliefs about her audience and she successfully adapted her writing to an American audience.

In contrast, at the hotline, I was trained to "never discuss [my] beliefs with the caller, regardless of the issue at hand" (NRVCS). However, even though I cannot disclose my own personal beliefs, I still try to broaden the caller's perspective by asking open-ended questions in order to get the person to start viewing their thoughts as hypotheses that can be accepted, refuted, or modified based on evidence or probability. Like the situation with Meo, I'm not telling them that their beliefs or feelings are right or wrong, I'm simply helping them to appreciate another point of view that they might not have considered before. For example, if a young woman calls and tells me, "I just can't live without my boyfriend," I can first validate her concerns (e.g., "I can see why you feel that way; you were very comfortable and committed to one another for a long time"). Then, I can try to help her examine the evidence for this thought by asking her a series of questions (e.g., "So what was your life like before you guys started dating?") in order to show her that she can be independent.

Yet another similarity between tutoring writers and volunteering at the hotline involves encouraging students and callers alike to seek outside help. While it is sometimes difficult, both counselors and writing tutors must acknowledge and address their own limitations, which may preclude them from assisting a client with a particular set of needs. In other words, there is no "one size fits all" approach for counseling or tutoring, and a good counselor or tutor can admit when they cannot adequately serve the needs of the client and may need to point the individual in the right direction for additional help. For instance, at Raft we make a variety of different referrals, depending on the individual circumstances of the client. Those referrals range from facilitating emergency admissions to psychiatric hospitals to giving the client information on pro bono counseling services offered in the area, such as local support groups for battered women or parents of children with autism. While working in the writing center, I often encourage students to speak with their professors to clear up any ambiguities in the assignment or to ask them specific questions that they may be unsure about, I help them find handouts pertinent to their writing problems, and I suggest online resources to assist them with formatting issues and other general grammar concerns (e.g., the Purdue OWL website). Again, I'm not an expert on many topics, such as the format of a aerospace engineering research report or how to parent a child with Asperger's, so it would be irresponsible to not give the caller as much information and as many resources as possible.

Writing center coaching and crisis counseling are similar in that they both involve building rapport, effectively setting priorities, implementing steps for improvement, facilitating the clients' independence, increasing their perspectives, referring them to outside resources, and ending the call or session on a positive, future-oriented note.

Finally, when ending either a phone call or a writing center session, I always try to summarize or review what has been covered in the phone call or what we've accomplished in the coaching session and help them generate a plan for the

future. For example, I might encourage a student to work on the final draft of his paper over the weekend, and perhaps make an outline of his finished product in order to ensure that his paper is well organized before turning it in. I would also let him know about our writing center's evening hours, in case he wanted to bring in his essay for a final read-through. Ending the conversation on a future-oriented note is especially important when talking to the hotline callers; before ending the call, I almost always ask them what their plans are for the evening (or the following day), and encourage them to call back at any time if they need to talk to someone. It's always important to thank the student or caller and try to end on a positive, upbeat note, whether it's noon or 5:00 in the morning.

Writing center coaching and crisis counseling are similar in that they both involve building rapport, effectively setting priorities, implementing steps for improvement, facilitating the clients' independence, increasing their perspectives, referring them to outside resources, and ending the call or session on a positive, future-oriented note. However, there are also notable differences between the two. In contrast to working in the writing center, as a volunteer counselor, I don't have a "draft" of the person's life laying in front of me and, unlike many students in the writing center, the callers are generally not looking for a one-time session, but rather continued support over an extended period of time, or at least for the duration of their crisis. In fact, sometimes callers do not want me to give them any type of advice or guidance at all but simply need someone to listen to them with an open ear and provide empathy. On the other hand, virtually all of the students who come into the writing center are looking for concrete help on a particular assignment or essay. Finally, in the writing center, the object of focus is split between the writing task at hand and the client, whereas at the hotline, the entire focus is on the actual (often fragile) person. However, despite these points, there seem to more similarities than there are differences, and there are many implications inherent in this claim. Even though writers who make mistakes are able to erase them, while callers cannot, one thing remains true: just as people need help collaboratively working on their papers for the better, sometimes people need help collaboratively working through their lives as well. As writing tutors, I feel like we do a little of both. Indeed, lives and essays are both works in progress that are truly never really finished.

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Praxis is a project of the **Undergraduate Writing Center** at the University of Texas at Austin

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