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WHAT DO GRADUATE STUDENTS WANT FROM THE WRITING CENTER? TUTORING PRACTICES TO SUPPORT DISSERTATION AND THESIS WRITERS

Bethany Ober Mannon
Penn State University
bgo104@psu.edu

Graduate writers—who are experienced students and emerging experts in their fields—face a range of challenges in academic writing, including finding the confidence to write, integrating relevant literature, and interpreting data (Kamler and Thomson 1). Graduate programs require students to produce a large quantity of high-quality, varied writing, and without focused support, developing "these skills may be a function of chance rather than design" (Aitchison 907). Addressing this gap between preparation and expected performance, the Council of Graduate Schools *Ph.D. Completion Project* recommends writing support as a way to shorten doctoral degree completion time and improve retention. The project calls for writing assistance "through trained writing coaches or writing consultants," ideally senior-level graduate students, and advises universities to create opportunities for students to "focus on the dissertation . . . receive feedback, and build peer support" ("Executive Summary" 4). Since a lack of help and peer interaction contributes to high attrition rates from doctoral programs, particularly among students in marginalized positions, the stakes of this discussion are high.

I follow previous scholars in citing The Ph.D. Completion Project because writing centers are so well positioned to address the discrepancy between graduate writing requirements and graduate students' actual writing abilities. Several universities have established graduate writing centers (GWCs) staffed by PhD student consultants (a term I use to distinguish between graduate students and undergraduate tutors). These writing centers offer graduate students opportunities to collaborate with peers who write at the same level, though not always in the same discipline. Writing workshops, Dissertation Boot Camps, and smaller writing groups also take place at many universities. In this study, I examine graduate writers' understandings of the specific role writing tutorials play within this network of other available resources. After surveying and interviewing graduate writers who used one-on-one tutoring, I found that graduate writers have sophisticated understandings of their own writing processes and assemble resources from their departments and social networks that they use alongside—but differently than—writing tutorials. Their specific goals and preferences for GWC consultations depend on several factors, including their disciplines, perceptions of their abilities, and stages in the writing process. For example, one writer explained to me that her advisor saw early and late drafts, but GWC consultants advised her on intermediate stages. I contend that by recognizing graduate student writers' strategies for situating tutoring within an interrelated network of formal and informal writing support, writing center staff can better assist them.

Tutoring Graduate Writers: Perceived Obstacles and Limitations

This study builds upon research by Claire Aitchison, Tallin Phillips, Paula Gillespie, and Steve Simpson, who propose best practices for graduate schools and writing centers, and examine the ways graduate students learn advanced academic literacies. These scholars identify two obstacles that inhibit the tutorial format's success with this population. First, several argue that "traditional tutoring can't always provide the long-term, extensive support that graduate writers need" to write seminar papers or theses (Phillips, "Graduate Writing Groups," np). Other scholars point to the disciplinarity of graduate writing as a second obstacle. Gillespie prefers to employ consultants to advise others who share "a common disciplinary framework" and can therefore "see themselves as part of a shared community of thinkers and writers" ("From Design to Delivery" 1). Phillips concurs, stating that graduate writers prefer insiders' perspectives, and multilingual graduate writers "may have already determined that [generalist feedback] is ineffective" ("Tutor Training and Services" np). In particular, my study builds upon Simpson's argument that "Graduate-level writing programs must be strategic, balancing students' short-term needs while building infrastructure within campus departments for sustainable graduate support" (np). While Simpson explores avenues that add tiers of support to complement individual tutoring, I consider graduate students' perceptions of the relationships between those tiers and the purposes they attribute to one-on-one consultations. With a clearer sense of graduate

writers' strategies for using tutoring, consultants can expand the approaches that they use in their appointments. As a result, my research has implications for the practices of writing centers staffed by graduate students and recent PhDs, and also for centers staffed by undergraduate tutors whose training and experience emphasized collaboration with their peers.

In Their Own Words: Studying Graduate Writers' Strategies

My interest in studying graduate students' use of tutorials developed from my experience as a consultant in the Penn State Graduate Writing Center (hereafter "GWC"). Clients occasionally volunteered their reasons for making appointments with me. One said he made appointments because he knew of no native English speakers in his lab and wanted help with sentence-level concerns that his colleagues were unable to provide. A postdoctoral researcher explained that consultations forced him to dedicate an hour each week to polishing grant proposals and conference papers (he reassured me that my feedback sometimes helped). After my GWC assistantship concluded, I made appointments to work on my own projects with a consultant. These included article drafts and fellowship applications, but never my dissertation, which I brought to my writing group and my advisor instead. I unconsciously developed a system where I used the GWC to make progress on short-term projects that paralleled my dissertation. I wondered how fellow clients envisioned their consultations, and how writing centers could tap into clients' self-awareness.

During the Spring 2015 semester, I received IRB approval for this research, distributed a survey among graduate students using the Penn State GWC, and interviewed twelve clients who indicated their availability. Three consultants—usually graduate students and post-graduate lecturers in the English Department—staff this GWC and receive training through meetings with the director and former consultants. Appointments are a sought-after resource, and clients report that the consultation schedule fills quickly each week. GWC reports from three semesters prior to my study confirm this popularity: in Fall 2013, 351 in-person appointments were offered (85% filled); in Spring 2014, 377 appointments were offered (94% filled); and in Fall 2014, 347 appointments were offered (85% filled).[1] In those semesters, the GWC recorded 121, 120, and 131 clients respectively, and many clients are "frequent fliers." The GWC drew clients from over fifty departments, and reached an even wider population through evening writing workshops. Clients may choose to submit anonymous evaluations that consultants hand to them as they leave. These evaluations are nearly all positive. Ratings of overall quality, on a scale from 1 to 7 (7 being highest), averaged above 6.90 during the three semesters I examined. Written comments that accompany these ratings express thanks for help with sentence-level matters, and for consultants' work on developing and clarifying ideas.

To gather information on graduate writers' strategies for incorporating tutoring into their writing processes, I invited students who attended workshops and consultations to complete an online Google Forms survey. In this survey, I asked for subjects' demographic information, departments, and degree programs, and whether they identified as native English speakers. I then posed the following open-ended questions:

- How often do you complete appointments with the Penn State Graduate Writing Center (GWC) in a semester?
- What types of writing do you (or would you) bring to meetings with a GWC consultant?
- Describe the ways that GWC consultations help you (or would help you) as a writer.
- What forms of feedback are you looking for (or would you look for) when you make an appointment at the GWC?
- What other resources do you use to help you in writing?
- Are there differences between the help you receive from GWC consultations and from these other resources?

These questions are similar to those that writing centers might use for assessment, and they elicited responses that demonstrate the need for greater attention to graduate writers navigating writing support in the university. Beyond assessing the effectiveness of GWC services, however, responses to these questions illuminate the feedback ecosystems that graduate writers access while they learn to write in their disciplines. Furthermore, I asked participants how often they completed consultations in order to distinguish between those whose perception was based in past experience, and those whose responses reflect the ways they hoped tutoring could be useful. Both sets of responses provide insight into graduate writers' needs and experiences, but I chose to interview writers who could discuss ways that the GWC had already become part of their writing processes.

Forty graduate students completed the survey in the three months after I obtained IRB approval and

began recruiting. Eighteen indicated their willingness to participate in interviews, and I spoke in person or by Skype with the twelve whose schedules allowed for meetings. My interview questions expanded upon the survey by asking about the timing of appointments, the affective components of composing and discussing writing, and the limitations of individual consultations. Most crucially, these interviews created opportunities for writers to narrate their writing processes and tutorial experiences. This approach, informed by Life Story research (Atkinson) and Narrative Research (Andrews), emphasizes the stories that participants tell and the highly subjective ways that they articulate their abilities, goals, habits, and achievements. Because writers' self-perceptions play such large roles in their decisions to seek out tutoring (or not), and the values they attribute to consultations with a peer, consultants, tutors, and writing center administrators can incorporate these perspectives into their practices.

Results

Survey responses clarify the role of the GWC by gauging graduate students' other writing support. When asked "What other resources do you use to help you in writing?" twenty-eight (70%) respondents said they discuss writing with their advisors, and twenty-nine (73%) discuss research with their advisors; twenty-three use informal conversations with colleagues. Other resources include writing groups (mentioned by six), dissertation boot camp (five) and GWC writing workshops (nine). One benefited from a graduate-level writing course, and another said that exchanging writing within a research group "ends up significantly improving the quality of writing as people from different backgrounds notice different issues in the text." Susan,[2] a regular client, implies that an ability to discuss writing, not research processes or disciplinary conventions, is most useful. Two other responses concur, stating, "GWC Consultants talk to people from diverse backgrounds so their experience should be a unique one, very different from someone who already is familiar with the field" and "it helped my scientific writing to turn more accessible to readers from out of my field." Two responses identified the "one-on-one" nature of tutoring and "objective" or "honest" feedback as valuable aspects of appointments. The only constraint that survey participants raise is the limited number of appointments. As one wrote, "There are not enough graduate writing center appointment slots for it to be a reliable resource."

The sample size of forty does limit the knowledge these surveys provide, and because I recruited subjects through the GWC, I contacted writers who had largely found consultations with the generalists there useful. I did interview two writers who never returned after a first appointment, and their recollections and the alternative strategies they developed are also relevant to this study. Moreover, two subjects had experiences by which to compare generalist tutors against tutors who specialize in their discipline, (suggesting a way that further research on the roles of tutors' disciplinary backgrounds might be structured). However, these surveys usefully name the resources that writers recognize in their social and academic networks, and combine with writing center consultations.

Interviews added detailed personal narratives from writers, in which they discuss their abilities, expectations, and resources as they negotiate tiers of support available in the university. Graduate student writers described the following four strategies:

First, many writers decide to bring certain projects to the writing center but not others. Their reasons differ. Susan brings grant and fellowship applications to her appointments, and described her reasoning to me: "there are other things higher on my priority list that I need to show to my advisor and my committee, given their limited time." Because of this, she reserves what she calls "academic writing" for meetings with her advisor. Susan feels no need to have consultations for articles and dissertation chapters, which she explained with the remarkable assertion "I'm in my dissertation stage and I know what I'm doing." MJ, a client who attended one appointment, has an accessible advisor who reviews his writing. He came to the GWC with an article draft in which he reported research from his previous degree program. MJ felt that it would have been inappropriate to consult with his current advisor on that earlier project. In her interview, Ima reflected, "my purely academic writing, no one has any problem with," but explained that she began working with the GWC when a clinic supervisor told her to review "semantics" in the educational evaluations she wrote. One-on-one tutoring, therefore, helps students to balance their work on multiple projects with different audiences and requirements.

Second, several interviewees regard the GWC as their chief resource for assistance with sentence-level concerns. This was true for writers who described themselves as monolingual or native English speakers, and a number who did not. Susan worried that misspellings or grammatical errors would disqualify her funding applications. Jordan spoke at length about a similar need. She sought consultants' perspectives while writing grant applications because of the pressure she experienced from knowing that "a typo or grammar error would be the first thing that would make [a reviewer] say 'I won't keep reading.'" Ima also

expressed a need for her writing to be "impeccable." Despite her confidence, she was aware that she had learned "British English," and American readers (including her supervisor) thought she made frequent mistakes. Many writing centers focus on global concerns and work to counter perceptions of tutoring as a proofreading service, but this philosophy does not always match the needs graduate writers bring.

Third, graduate writers use GWC appointments when they prepare to meet with advisors, when they question the quality of their work, or when they cannot access faculty. That is, consultations bridge a gap between drafting and submitting a piece for evaluation by an advisor or reviewer. Jordan recalled that she "felt very ashamed" of her writing before appointments, but viewed meetings as a preliminary stage preparing her to show projects to department colleagues. Aileen described her advisor and research group as involved "at major milestones like my proposal and defense," and consultants as involved when she "was getting over that hump of 'I know what I'm going to talk about but I don't know how to talk about it.'" Susan spoke of feeling confident after consultations when she received concrete, even directive advice on "re-writing a sentence or rearranging a paragraph." After developing a rapport with a female consultant, one of her strategies is to work on personal statements in the GWC, rather than show these documents—which she perceives as sensitive—to people she sees regularly and who are in a position to evaluate her. Consultants do not always recognize the emotional labor of tutoring (and might perform it unconsciously), but many clients appreciate this service.

Most surprisingly, many interviewees' strategies specifically depend on meeting with generalist consultants; others perceive generalists to be as helpful as consultants from their disciplines. Without prompting, interviewees praised feedback from readers outside their departments. Susan reflected that academics outside of her specific field help to make her applications easy to read and jargon-free. When I asked Aileen if she would prefer a consultant who knew her field, she replied "Not necessarily. Not for the questions I'm asking." I asked if she might raise different questions, and she underscored her previous answer with an unqualified "no." Xuan, likewise, told me that her writing was "not just being seen by the people in [her] major," and stated the purpose of her consultations: to identify when "the language I use works for me but does not work for the reader." Susan finds "ample opportunities to get feedback from people in [her] discipline." The ability to discuss writing, rather than research or disciplinary conventions, is the quality she and others seek in a tutor.

One graduate student, Ava, offered a contrasting perspective on consultants' disciplines. After one satisfying consultation early in her graduate program, Ava attended GWC writing workshops but never returned for individual appointments. She attributes this to having "access to really involved advisors who read [her] things and are really good writers." Ava confirmed that she passed over tutoring because she did not lack writing support (available resources include an English faculty member, her advisor's wife, who reads Ava's grant proposals). However, when I asked if she might see consultants from her field, Ava mused, "If I felt like they knew what I was talking about, that might be more intriguing to me." I interpret Ava's ambivalence about consultations with generalists or specialists as stemming from her lack of need for feedback on her discipline-specific writing, which she receives elsewhere. While consultants in her discipline might give the GWC a new relevance to writers like Ava, this added service would not necessarily mean the GWC would meet a need that it currently fails to address. Taken as a whole, I interpret these responses as evidence that graduate writers gather advice from *several* sources and perspectives, and need generalist advice at particular times in the writing process.

Discussion

I began this research with the question of what role graduate writers see the writing center consultation taking in a larger feedback ecosystem. Interviews revealed four primary strategies: clients identify certain types of writing for tutorials, address sentence-level concerns, meet a gap between their ability and the expectations of evaluators, and obtain feedback from academics outside their disciplines. Two additional questions emerged as pressing and significant from these interviews, and I now turn to these.

First, graduate writers' emphasis on accuracy and clarity suggests that work on sentence-level error drives visits. While this is not exclusively the case, grammar and other sentence-level concerns weigh heavily on many graduate writers who complete consultations. Notably, native English speakers and English language learners both identified this aspect of writing as a critical need for their visits. Writers including Susan, Ima, and MJ gave additional information that clarified their confidence writing in English in certain contexts (like a dissertation or "purely" academic writing). All three perceived their writing as very similar to that of native English speakers—MJ shared that he had once taught English language and literature in a high school.

Their focus on sentence-level corrections reflects their anxiety with this stage more than their ability or fluency. The distinction is significant for consultants to realize. In attending to grammar and punctuation, they perform vital emotional labor that they may not acknowledge as part of the position, and which is neither reliably taught in training courses nor rewarded.[3]

Here I join Phillips in making a case for "offering true support for sentence-level correction and style instead of discounting those issues as lower-order concerns" ("Multilingual Graduate Writers" np). Her explanation focuses on multilingual writers, but resonates with the needs of the graduate population as a whole: "Even if a writer's sentence-level mistakes do not create comprehension barriers for the reader, they may still represent legitimate global concerns. Correctness is tremendously important for MGWs, who are composing projects for fields where competition is high and correctness plays a larger gatekeeping role" (np). Since "critical writing is intertwined with performances of professional identity, voice, and persona," writers understand correctness in writing to be a marker of professional identity (Micchiche 478). Surely anxiety over correctness, with its strong connection to professionalism, gives rise to much of this emotion. When consultants linger over prepositions with clients, they support those writers in learning to perform professional identities and voices—processes of learning that are all the more frustrating when done in solitude.

Second, interviews raised the question of whether graduate students perceive undergraduates as competent consultants. Interviewees' affirmation of generalists' helpfulness indicates that writers might likewise incorporate consultations with undergraduate tutors—well-versed in writing, though not in the discipline—into their writing strategies. I discussed this possibility with clients who had completed appointments at Penn State Learning, a separate physical space where tutors are not specifically trained to work with graduate-level writing. Their responses were guardedly optimistic and suggested that undergraduate tutors could be beneficial, with some requirements. These should be experienced tutors; Jordan surmised that age differences could be a barrier, and wondered if she could trust an undergraduate who seemed immature. Aileen suggested that undergraduates might not understand "graduate school culture" or "the stakes" of her work. Undergraduate tutors would need to recognize the performances of professional identities and voices in graduate writing.

Implications and Recommendations

Participants' responses demonstrate that writing center clients consciously use tutoring in specific ways that help them make progress. Many writers expressed greater concern with increasing the number of available appointments than with consultants' disciplines. Their responses support the creation of new graduate consultant positions. Writing centers can also support graduate students by creating and sustaining writing groups, which often require a dedicated space and an individual committed to organizing meetings. Writing centers are ideally suited to house writing groups, and consultants are positioned to facilitate groups because of the academic and emotional labor that they perform in one-on-one appointments. Interview subjects' reflections on their strategies suggested to me that writing groups serve many of the same purposes of facilitating exchanges of ideas and recommendations between peers. Certainly, forming and sustaining writing groups would address shortages of appointments by extending resources to a larger population. Approaching the formal curricular space of a writing course, but without the additional pressures of evaluation, writing groups "create space, community, and rhetorical awareness/flexibility to brainstorm, create, and sustain a wide variety of critical writing projects" (Micciche and Carr 478). My interviews reveal that those who benefit from reliable writing groups would incorporate these meetings as another strategy for making progress in their writing projects.

Do these writers' enthusiastic uses for generalist consultants mean they would also include undergraduate tutors in their network for writing support? Since participants use one-on-one tutoring to improve clarity and hear perspectives from outside their field, I argue that they would. Preparing tutors for appointments with graduate students, therefore, means addressing differences between graduate and undergraduate education, and differences in writers' goals. Popular tutoring handbooks like *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring*, edited by Lerner and Gillespie, and *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors*, edited by Murphy and Sherwood, say little about working with graduate writers. Discussions of graduate-level writing in a tutoring practicum course or a staff meeting could do much to demystify the needs of this population and their writing projects.

I have outlined four strategies that graduate students have for including tutoring in their writing processes, and I hope these might provide a basis for preparing undergraduate tutors to work with thesis and dissertation writers. A tutoring course could ask

members to interview graduate students and faculty, and, where possible, observe seminars or research. Tutors might explore the structures of graduate programs at their university, and read samples of graduate writing—research that prepares them to discuss (in Aileen's words), "not what to write, but how to write it." Such work could contribute to the tutors' own preparation for graduate or professional school, and might prove a pedagogical tool for discussing the discourses that shape writing and learning at all levels. These exchanges also have the potential to promote relationships between the writing center and academic departments. Most significantly, tutors who collaborate with graduate writers should begin a meeting with dialogue. Along with creating a better draft of the writing project and creating a better writer, the tutor and client might set a third goal: determining what advice and support the writer carries to this conversation, and what resources they will access to continue the project after the appointment concludes. Graduate writers are self-aware and strategic, and eager to engage tutors in these conversations.

Notes

1. These numbers exclude online consultations with graduate students in distance learning programs, a population who merit attention in a separate study.
2. All names used in this article are pseudonyms selected by the interview participants.
3. Consultants suppress any frustration or boredom they feel, and "invoke or display" enthusiasm that builds the writer's confidence (Guy and Newman 290). However, the work of managing emotions is frequently regarded as part of the worker's personalities, neglecting the fact that such relational work is a practiced skill. As a result, emotional labor that furthers writing center goals of creating supportive, collaborative environments and lively cultures of writing may be neither taught nor rewarded (295).

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