"A Movable Object": Props and Possibility in Writing Consultations

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Abstract

While writing center scholarship has occasionally engaged the role of objects in the writing center, generally through conversations about play, consultant education models remain, with a few important exceptions, heavily focused on the verbal interactions between writer and consultant. This article argues that the relationships between materials and bodies in writing centers are essential to writing center practice, and that consultant/tutor education can help writing centers more intentionally engage these practices. The article introduces a study and consultant education framework that reframes consultant orientations by considering objects as "props," as things consultants and writers intra-act with to create multimodal possibility and access in consultations. Situated in conversation with conversations surrounding play, embodiment, access, and space in the writing center, this article outlines the findings from this study and education framework and analyzes those findings in conversation with Sarah Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* and Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. This analysis explores the intra-actions and reorientations that emerge when consultants work with props and writers and considers how props education and practices have shaped, and might continue to shape, the writing center. Presenting props as integral elements of consultation phenomena that help determine what is and is not possible for us to measure or do in a consultation space, this study suggests consultants can co-construct differently embodied and multimodal approaches, creating opportunities for access and encouraging new orientations, turnings, and possibilities.

In a face-to-face consultation at our writing center, a writer and consultant sat at a round table. The consultant had been encouraged to engage objects—"props"—they had not previously used in a consultation. The consultant handed a highlighter from a nearby prop cart to the writer, inviting them to mark different structural elements. Then the writer and consultant wrote paragraph topics on sticky notes, rearranging them across the table. As they considered different word use, the consultant pulled up the Microsoft Word thesaurus on their computer, discussing options with the writer. After the consultation, the consultant wrote that the writer's excitement about the sticky notes surprised them, that they thought the writer felt "ownership," and that they would try engaging different props in future consultations: "I do think that [the props] break up the monotony of paper after paper, scribbled remarks after scribbled remarks."

This description, paraphrased from one consultant's log about their interactions with objects during consultations, highlights the important, and often undescribed, ways that physical objects transform the experiences, orientations, approaches, and effects of writing center consultations. A small initial inquiry into how consultants used objects in consultations developed into a year-long project to change our writing center's training approaches and practices. We now think about and educate consultants to consider objects as "props," as things we act and move with, which help constitute our actions and make new actions possible. We became even more aware of the scope and importance of props when we moved to online consultations in Spring 2020 and many props suddenly weren't there.

In this article, I articulate how prop education practices might help writing centers access the potentially transformative interactions among bodies, objects, and spaces, and recognize that all are agents creating and transforming a consultation. Scholars including Thomas Rickert, Roxane Mountford, and Margaret Price persuasively remind us that spaces, and the many materials that construct them, "are *productive* of meaning as well as endowed with meaning" (Mountford 58, emphasis original). These "kairotic" spaces, and their impacts on the body, shape power dynamics and determine possible access for consultants and writers (Price 156). Scholars including William De Herder, Jackie Grutsch McKinney, and Wonderful Faison importantly complicate the metaphors and assumptions that create and construct writing center spaces; I build on these complications to ask consultants and directors to look, specifically, at objects in writing center spaces, and how these objects shape what is possible in the consultation—our objectives, what choices we make, how we communicate our ideas, and which practices we enact and value.

This project recognizes the ways spaces, objects, consultants, and writers interact in moments of difference, and shows how consultant education that provides intentional introduction to, conversation about, and practice with different props can invite consultants to explore diverse approaches and practices. This work asks, with Elizabeth Boquet, "what would happen" if writing centers were to "look our colleagues in the eyes and say, yes, we work with our hands. We take texts and we turn them around and over and upside down; we cut them into their bits and pieces; we tug at them, tutor to student, student to tutor, back and forth, to and fro, tug-tug-tug" (Boquet 18). Prop education introduces objects as props and reorients consultant

practice toward an *acting with* the props and people within our writing centers; this reorientation helps consultants acknowledge the ways we work with our bodies (which might include working with our hands). Prop education invites consultants and, through them, writers, to work with available props (and seek new props) to explore the writer's process and to diversify communication between writer and consultant. This flexibility allows consultant and writer to collaboratively develop more multiliterate, multimodal, and accessible consultation spaces.

In the following section, I introduce the beginnings and frameworks for this work. In the second section, I define the term "prop" and contextualize this work within writing center scholarship. In the third section, I introduce a timeline for the two phases of the study— the first designed to collect information about consultant prop use, and the second, a result of the first phase, focused on educating consultants about props and possibility. In the fourth and fifth sections, I explore the findings from the two project phases, considering the education phase's findings in conversation with approaches by Karen Barad and Sara Ahmed to elucidate emerging possibilities and inform prop education practices that create space for possibility and access in our writing centers.

Beginnings and Frameworks

Over the last three years as a consultant and Graduate Assistant Director, I've sought to understand the relationships between bodies and objects in the writing center, and the dynamics of power, possibilities, and differences these embodied "intra-actions," these mutual co-actions (Barad 33) create. This project initially emerged from my consulting practices, specifically my attention to "who is writing" during consultations, and from our "Writing Center Theory and Practice" course, a required course which all new consultants take or audit in their first term. I designed a study to learn more about how and why other consultants used objects—which I claimed as "props"—in the writing center. This study involved an initial staff meeting and two surveys about whether, how frequently, and for what purposes consultants used props — ranging from pencils to Play-Doh, Lego to laptops — in consultations, and what new props we could add to our writing center. The findings from this initial survey not only changed how we positioned and used props in the writing center, but also led to a second phase, which educated consultants about how props can create new consulting habits and possibilities.

I frame this educational phase through queer and feminist theoretical approaches, specifically Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* and Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway.* Barad and Ahmed's queer and feminist approaches decenter the subject by considering objects as agents, claiming that objects co-construct measurability, human orientation, and possible action in any space; my prop education claims that objects do this in consultations, and that attention to objects can thus reorient our consultation practices. Commonly, reflections about consultations emphasize dialogue or only consider objects' use value (for example, using style guides to answer a question). This project, in contrast, suggests that engaging objects as props can help consultants work toward diffractive learning, which Kay Are defines as "learning how bodies and objects are and can be responsive to other bodies and objects, and how they might better respond" (7). I want consultants to learn how to better respond to bodies and objects, to consider how these attentions might create access through multiliterate and multimodal approaches to learning, as Allison Hitt also emphasizes. Although emerging from different frameworks, Hitt, Anne Geller, and Nancy Welch all discuss how consultant education can teach flexible, "playful" practices in response to difference. Geller asks, "What creative practices in the public space of staff meetings might encourage the consultants to notice moments of possible play in the more hidden, private spaces of conferences?" (Geller 160). Welch frames "the differences as novel moments to appreciate and to investigate rather than eliminate" (Welch 61) and "imagine[s] what other stories might have been told" in a consultation (Welch 64). To invite consultants to engage differently in consultations, we must creatively adapt objectives and practices in consultant education; acting with these movable objects, these props, is one way of changing our objectives and practices.

Why Props? Exploring Objects in the Writing Center

My choice of the word "prop" emerges from Mary Rosner and Regan Wann's 2010 article, in which a consultant briefly suggested that any object on the consultation table "'should be considered a *prop*'" (Rosner and Wann 8). Specifically, "prop" as a concept and practice emphasizes the performativity and complexity of human-material "intra-actions." In Barad's agential realist approach, "intra-action" means that agencies, and the impression of discrete actors, only emerge from mutual co-action, or entanglement, and "don't exist as individual elements" (Barad 33). "Prop"

particularly emphasizes how our interactions with objects construct our bodies, and selves, in space; as Ahmed claims, these interactions construct how our bodies orient and act toward people and things. We should shift not only the language used to describe objects, but also shift consultant orientations toward and practices with props. My approach shares elements with multimodal approaches which seek to create accessible spaces and practices, including Hitt's, which says consultants should "develop multimodal 'toolkits'—multiple and flexible practices—that allow them to adapt to different communicative interactions" (Hitt). However, my "prop" terminology signals a difference in approach not only to the objects themselves, but to the consultant's interactions with the writer and with the objects.

When we, as consultants, engage materials as "objects," they are separate from us, something to be moved, but not themselves moving; when we engage them as "tools," they are something we are using to act upon something else (the writer, or the writer's work). However, when we engage them as "props," they are an agent we are acting and moving with, one that is integral to, and constitutive of, our action and the writer's action. While the props that might immediately come to mind are a pencil and the writer's printed draft, my definition of props invites us to not only more critically consider those props, like pencils and drafts, that become transparent in consultations, but also those materials we engage less frequently, exploring how laptops, sticky notes, Lego, prompts, yarn, gestures, Play-Doh, or tables participate in constructing what is possible within a consultation. Even a consultant taking a drink or going to fill up a water bottle can change possibility. Engaging *all* objects as "props" means perceiving them in unexpected, embodied, and intentional ways, considering these props, and the spaces they inhabit, as integral elements constructing, and being constructed by, the consultation. These props and spaces, rather than serving as separate tools or resources or sites we "use" to achieve a particular goal, actually diversify our objectives and approaches because they determine what is and is not possible for us to do in a consultation space.[1]

Discussions about objects in the writing center have focused on encouraging productive play (Stephenson; Hochstetler; Verbais), building from scholarly work about play by scholars including Daniel Lochman and Scott Miller. However, conversations about objects, spaces, and the material realities of consulting work have rarely entered tutor guidebooks; of those I reviewed, only Christine Murphy and Steve Sherwood's *St. Martin's Sourcebook* and Leigh Ryan and Lisa Zimmerelli's

The Bedford Guide mention object use, and only when working with writers with disabilities (Murphy and Sherwood 13-14) or different learning styles (Ryan and Zimmerelli 54-56, 64). Similarly, most scholarly conversations about tutor/consultant training and education primarily discuss verbal interactions; a CompPile search for "consultant training," "consultant education," "tutor training," and "tutor education" from the last twenty years reveal many conversations (often in *WLN,* and in a 2019 *WLN* Edited collection, *How We Teach Writing Tutors*) which mostly examine verbal interactions between director and consultant, or consultant and writer, and often only marginally discuss objects or bodies (with a few exceptions). I claim the interactions between bodies and objects in the writing center as essential, introducing a consultant education approach which invites consultants to reorient themselves to the objects surrounding them as props, as things they, and the writer, act *with* to create differently embodied habits and practices. This approach encourages consultants to act with props and writers, co-constructing diversely embodied practices that expand the scope of what is possible to do and to know in consultations.

While a few scholars have discussed encouraging consultants to try different objects or use resources, these earlier approaches have often created restrictive divisions, either through the limited ways they categorize resources or objects, or through their answer-driven approach to object use and application. Both Bonnie Devet and Crystal Conzo teach tutors to learn about and responsibly use resources, but both define "resources" as exclusively print/written resources, including grammar handbooks, style guides, and writing center handouts. Neither scholar explores the resources' embodied differences (between online resources and print resources, for example) or considers any other objects as possible resources, and both emphasize resources are for getting "answers," unlike Mary Bartosenski, who, exploring colored pens as process to help a writer "paint" a paper (168), offers a single-object precursor to my own approach. Approaches to play in tutor training have also focused on specific objects; Denise Stephenson and Sarah Hochstetler both describe a project that invited consultants to model essay structures using construction-type toys, a process that taught them how they might engage modeling with writers, but also invited them to reconsider their own writing. Chad Verbais describes placing toys on writing center tables to encourage play, hoping consultants would use them to create new knowledge, stimulate creativity, "reinforce or introduce a lesson," and, "most importantly . . . introduce the tactile learner to various

writing concepts" (Verbais 138). My approach expands the toy possibilities these approaches raise to claim that consultant education and practice benefits from conversations that consider *all* objects in the writing center as sites of equal possibility.

Other scholars have explored how objects can create opportunities for multiple intelligences, including Karen Klein and Linda Hecker, who engage walking and manipulatives to help their college students organize their writing (Hecker; Klein and Hecker); and Libby Miles, et. al., who describe consulting strategies to recognize and suit particular intelligences. While these explorations encourage embodied awareness in consultations, many recommendations considering "multiple learning approaches" or "learning styles" position themselves as "alternative" or "different" ways of approaching writing center work—sometimes to encourage generally different approaches, but, more frequently, as strategies for working specifically with "different" writers, or suited specifically to writers with a particular learning style or intelligence "type."[2] Rather than positioning these object-integrated approaches as strategies one could offer any writer in any consultation, scholars frequently present these approaches as strategies to "change" or "adapt" consultation practices for particular writers' needs, or for a particular student population. Rarely, like Ryan and Zimmerelli, do they acknowledge that these practices "can be useful in tutoring all writers" (54). These approaches position object engagement as a "fix-it" approach that diverts from a "norm." In contrast, I position prop engagement as a sustainable, evolving practice that encourages attention to the effects of difference through consultation practice and "provides multiple and flexible options for all students" (Hitt).

Project Design and Timeline

The prop project I discuss emerges from data collected and applied between February and December 2018 from a writing center at a Western private research university with about 12,000 graduate and undergraduate students. I collected this data as part of a study exempted from IRB review and conducted in accordance with institutional IRB human research guidelines. The writing center is led by the director and assistant director with support from eight undergraduate admins and Summer Graduate Assistant Directors. During the data collection period, 19 graduate and 11 undergraduate (2017-2018) and 21 graduate and 10 undergraduate (2018-2019) consultants worked in the writing center, representing disciplines across the university. This project emerged from, and was

implemented in, the two-credit "Writing Center Theory and Practice" course led by our directors and the existing peer education structure, including regular consultant-led staff meetings and observations by peers and directors.

As Figure 1 (See Appendix) indicates, our consultant prop education process emerged in two main phases: the initially proposed informational phase, and the second educational phase, which emerged as a direct result of consultant feedback from the first. Phase One: Awareness included one staff meeting and two anonymous consultant surveys, which all consultants were invited to complete. Phase Two: Education included an orientation training activity, two in-class conversations, one anonymous consultant survey, and one set of four deidentified consulting logs; only new consultants were invited to participate in this phase. Figure 1 (See Appendix) provides the project timeline and participants. I led the consultant orientation training activity and in-class conversation; advanced consultants led the first and second sets of staff meetings. In the following section, I introduce findings from each phase of this process.

Project Findings Phase One: Awareness

In this section, I introduce Phase One and chronologically explore the findings from the initial winter survey, which prompted changes in our writing center space, and the follow-up spring survey, which assessed changes in consultant awareness. Phase One asked how consultants used available props during consultations, and what additional props might create new learning possibilities. In the February staff meeting materials, I gave meeting leaders a brief paragraph introducing props and a link to the ten-minute initial winter survey. In this survey, consultants indicated how frequently they used each prop during consultations and briefly described how they did so. They also suggested props they would like to add to the center. Thirty consultants and admins responded to this survey. In the spring, we added small moveable carts to make props more visible; props in these "prop carts" included highlighters, pens, pencils, markers, colored pencils, crayons, sticky notes, mini-notepads, mini-whiteboards, style and grammar guides, Lego, Play-Doh, yarn, and small toys. Consultants and writers had continued access to their personal props, including the writer's draft and assignment sheet, water bottles, coffee cups, laptops, and phones. After these carts were introduced, consultants responded to a spring survey, which assessed how consultants might have used props differently since the carts were introduced.

Winter Survey Findings

From the descriptions that consultants shared, we learned that using props as a framework to discuss object engagement offered important, detailed insights about consulting practices. Below, I note a few exigent findings:

Consultants reported using highlighters

- to help writers achieve synthesis in a genre ("if someone is doing a lit review or is paraphrasing information and they have physical copies of articles"), or
- to help a writer visually identify paper elements ("highlight repeated errors in a paper, or every time they use passive voice, etc.," and "if the writer and I are doing identification/structural work, I often ask if it will help them to use a highlighter").

Consultants described using sticky notes

- to continue the conversation beyond the consultation ("if I want to give the writer a small piece of info (such as to write down a website)," "to give the writer something to leave with, even if it's just a web address"),
- to chronicle discrete or condensed information ("in a similar vein as notepads, but for smaller topics of conversation (a single idea vs a brainstorm)"), or
- to help with invention and organization (having writers "write new sentences and then put it on their paper where the sentence should go").

When asked how they use their own mug or water bottle in consultations, six consultants described very intentional behaviors, including choosing to take a drink

- "to make a pause in the conversation,"
- to collect their own thoughts or to allow the writers to collect theirs, or
- to create time to brainstorm.

Consultant reports about writer prop engagement also helped us better understand how props moved between writers and consultants. Consultants reported:

- their own props use by chronicling a writer's actions, writing "I ask if it will help them to use a highlighter," or that they ask writers "to write new sentences and then put it on their paper where the sentence should go."
- some writers engage props, but not always those in the writing center; for example, while one consultant indicated that "I've seen writers grab the highlighter to use for their own paper," another stated that "Sometimes writers bring

their own highlighters but I haven't seen many grab whats [sic] provided in the holder."

- some writers do not engage a prop unless a consultant suggests it: "not unless prompted to use by consultant," "only if I reference them first," "citation help led by me."

While a few consultants indicated that writers took initiative with particular props (most generally the pencil and the mini-notepad), these consultant observations not only showed us the importance of placing props "at hand," but also showed us that consultants perceived writers didn't use props frequently. While language to talk intentionally about props offered consultants new ways to witness choices, these findings suggested that we needed to teach consultants how to talk about props with writers. The consultants who reported making verbal and gestural prop invitations to writers showed us a few possibilities. One consultant reported giving the writer one of the props the consultant picked up—a highlighter, a notepad, a pencil. Other consultants verbally welcomed the writer to use any prop. These invitations called attention to the props, which often act as less visible or more transparent elements of consultation practice, and thereby offered consultants and writers opportunities to shape different possibilities, objectives, and goals.

Based on these findings, and the prop suggestions from the winter survey, we implemented the first of a series of changes to our writing center, including educational changes which I discuss in Phase Two. We made two practical changes to our writing center from these findings:

- In March, our director added nine mini-whiteboards and markers to the consulting tables with the existing pencils, mini-notepads, and grammar guides. A consultant suggested getting mini-whiteboards in the survey, and we felt that mini-whiteboards, a more private and accessible resource, would address anxieties about using the writing center's large, publicly visible whiteboard.
- In April and May 2018, to create more space on the tables, our director moved all props to new carts placed between tables; this made props previously stored in drawers or boxes (including colored pencils, markers, crayons, small toys, Lego, yarn, Play-Doh) more accessible.

Spring Survey Findings

In the second survey, consultants indicated how, and how frequently, they used each prop during consultations; consultants who had also worked during Winter 2018 answered questions comparing prop visibility and prop use since the carts were introduced, assessing how consultant practices may have shifted. The results suggested that, while consultants were thinking more about props, they were still not sure how to use them. Fourteen consultants responded; 12 of the 14 consultant respondents worked in both winter and spring. For these 12 consultants:

- 9 of 12 strongly agreed or agreed that props were more visible during spring quarter
- 7 of 12 strongly agreed or agreed that they felt more aware of how they used props during spring quarter
- 9 of 12 strongly agreed or agreed that they thought more consciously about using props after the winter DIY meeting
- 9 of 12 strongly agreed or agreed that they felt considering prop use had positively impacted their consulting practice.

While consultants reported thinking much more about props, their self-reported props use didn't dramatically change, suggesting that knowing the props existed did not give consultants the tools or confidence to use them. Figure 2 (See Appendix), which compares consultants' reported use of four props in the winter and spring surveys, illustrates this ambivalence. In addition, fewer consultants reported using art supplies, toys, and games; however, three consultants mentioned *wanting* to, or feeling invited to, use these resources, although the consultant hadn't done so yet. Three consultants said they were uncertain or confused about how they might use the props, suggesting we needed to explicitly introduce and discuss them.

These findings from the spring survey, the end of the initial Phase One study, showed that consultants were thinking about props and sought models for engaging props in consultations. From these findings, I developed a second, more explicitly educative phase. Working with our director, assistant director, and other teaching assistants, I integrated prop education into the fall "Writing Center Theory and Practice" course and collected data through another survey and consulting logs, which I discuss below.

Project Findings, Phase Two: Education

In this section, I discuss Phase Two's three main goals: first, to encourage consultants to invite themselves and writers to use props (in the September 2018 orientation activity and November 2018 class

conversation); to help consultants use props to transform their own consulting habits (in the October 2018 class conversation); and to explicitly educate consultants about the props available in our writing center (in all three educational events). For each goal, I first discuss what we did during the educational event, and then present findings from the fall survey, the consulting logs, or both. Finally, I explore the implications of each goal by placing findings in conversation with Barad and Ahmed's work. I explore how consultant attention to props' intra-active potential creates new insights into how the objects we work with shape, and can transform, consultants' and writers' possible/available actions and approaches.

In this second phase, I introduced new consultants to the props and gave them opportunities to practice using props to create possibilities. During the September consultant orientation, consultants rotated acting as writer, consultant, and observer in a small-group role-playing activity. In October, I led a class conversation discussing props and consulting habits. One week after this conversation, the new consultants responded to a survey. This fall survey, distributed only to new consultants, showed how consultants engaged with props during their first month after being introduced to, practicing, and discussing props strategies. Our second classroom conversation, in November, offered consultants the opportunity to play with props to revise a poem. To collect more qualitative data about prop engagement across sessions, in December I invited consultants to chronicle, in anonymous consulting logs, how they used props in four different consultations across a three-week period. Four consultants completed these logs and sent them to our office manager, who deidentified the logs before sending them to me. These logs recorded how consultants used props, whether consultants used multiple props in a consultation, and how prop engagement varied when working with different writers.

Explorations and Invitations: Extending the Consulting Apparatus

Phase One showed how consultants and writers used props in consultations. However, I hoped props could facilitate new consultation strategies for consultants and writers, and I introduced this in the September 2018 role-playing orientation activity. Those playing the role of consultants received slips of paper with consulting strategies; these included invitations to "experiment with color," "try visual mapping," "use the small whiteboard," "cut up the paper or use notecards," "consider various places to sit at the table," and "incorporate an electronic device into the consultation."

In this activity, consultants learned that choosing one prop over another created different possibilities within the space, but also excluded other possibilities until they engaged a new prop. Consultants considered how using only a few props—for example, the ubiquitously used pencil and mini-notepad—might create exclusions, and what additional possibilities might emerge if, for example, a consultant and writer incorporated color coding, or tried visual mapping or toys to illustrate an idea. Introducing these possibilities, not as 'examples,' but as invitations, can create different opportunities during intra-actions with writers, as Stephenson modeled in a tutor training activity using toy structures to model essays. As Stephenson emphasizes, invitations, rather than specific models, are key, because then "students are more free to branch off and do wildly different things," to change and multiply consultation possibilities (7). By modeling general invitations to work with props, I hoped to show consultants how to invite their writers to experiment differently with their writing, and with the props surrounding them.

These invitations to writers seemed slow to emerge in consultation practice; in our mid-quarter fall survey results, consultants still reported that writers only rarely used props beyond the standard pencil and notepad. In our November class session, we gave consultants another opportunity to truly play with props, asking them to model an Exquisite Corpse poem using whatever props they wanted from the cart. This opportunity for play seemed to make a difference in how new consultants approached props and talked about them with writers, as shown in the December consulting logs. One consultant, paraphrased at the beginning of this essay, invited a writer to highlight their paper and suggested they use sticky notes; in their log, the consultant wrote that the writer

> enjoyed the fact that they were responsible for marking their own paper. I could feel that they enjoyed the feeling of ownership. I was also surprised by the excitement that using sticky notes caused, as the writer was very excited to build the paper that way.

While this log chronicles how the consultant perceives the writer's emotions, rather than the writer's actual feelings, the "surprise" the consultant experiences at the writer's enthusiasm suggests an opportunity, a change in objective and orientation, an opening for both writer and consultant. By extending the invitation to use these sticky notes, the consultant offered an opportunity for this writer to engage with the more accessible, visible props and to transform their revision process, creating newly intra-active space and new delimitations of agency.

These changes may seem small, or artificial, but when we asked consultants to reach for a new prop and practice, we asked them to change the consultation "apparatus," and therefore move the objectives of, and what is possible in, the consultation space. Apparatuses, as Barad writes, are "boundary-making practices that are formative of matter and meaning, productive of, and part of, the phenomena produced" (Barad 146), and that "any measurement of position using [a particular] apparatus cannot be attributed to some abstract, independently existing object but *rather [as] a property of the phenomenon—the inseparability of the object and the measuring agencies*" (Barad 139, my emphasis). To extend this to writing center spaces, what we attempt to measure in the writing consultation—whether that's the writer's increasing confidence, the consultant's ability to share agency with the writer, or how the paper transforms during the consultation—is inseparable from the consultation itself, the props, spaces, and people. The spatial intra-actions between materials and humans create and constitute both the *exclusions* that the apparatus enacts (the "agential cuts" that create the boundaries, or illusions of separate "entities" (Barad 148)) and the *possibilities* present in every shifting intra-action. As Barad writes, "intra-actions iteratively reconfigure what is possible and what is impossible" and "new possibilities open up as others that might have been possible are now excluded" (177), shifting with every choice and intra-action. By moving with props to change the choices we make, we change our goals and approaches to the consultation. Changing the props and actions involved changed the goals and structures of the consultation itself, creating new and different possibilities for "measuring" what happens when we work with writers.

"Movable Objects": Changing Consultation Habits

In October, I talked with consultants, emphasizing props as opportunities to "break habits" or to create possibilities for new orientations and approaches. I invited consultants to consider how, by repeating similar consultation practices, they might begin to orient their perceptions and bodies in particular ways, making it more difficult to change their actions or take different perspectives. As a response to these "consulting habits," I invited consultants to consider the props they frequently used, and to actively experiment with placing different props in their space, close for both writers and consultants, asking consultants to look at their own behavior and explore points of possibility to create new writer and consultant orientations. This conversation helped consultants view and describe props and carts in new ways; when asked in the survey how they thought

the prop carts might be asking them to use props differently or inviting them to try new props, new consultant respondents positioned the prop carts as sources of possibility and inspiration, describing the prop carts as:

- "a 'treasure chest,' of sorts, where we dig around to find unexpected creative inspiration" to "use props as a way to visualize and have fun while working on an assignment"
- "a movable object […] not static and therefore it is easily accessible for both the writer and the consultant"
- "always there and available in the open is encouraging, and reminds me as a consultant that there is no one way to explain a strategy or think about the writing process. It also reminds me that people have different learning styles, and invites me to think of ways to incorporate props into addressing these styles."

The consultants' language in these reflections show that they associate props with access and possibility; the props, which are "movable object[s]," remind consultants that their habits and practices are equally moveable and changeable, "that there is no one way to explain a strategy or think about a writing process." These possibilities open many opportunities to disrupt consulting habits.

Ahmed tells us that "what bodies 'tend to do' are effects of histories rather than being originary. We could say that history 'happens' in the very repetition of gestures, which is what gives bodies their tendencies" (Ahmed 56) and that "the work of repetition is not neutral work; *it orients the body in some ways rather than others*" (Ahmed 57). Props can help us identify and recognize these orientations. Identifying repeated prop use can help us recognize our existing habits, orientations, and patterns. For example, Hochstetler writes that comparing other tutors' essay models, made with different toys, to Hochstetler's own always-Lego essay model helped Hochstetler reflect on and recognize recurring writing patterns and "habits" (Hochstetler 10). They can also help us make new decisions about our writing; Klein and Hecker's students discovered that tactile modeling helped them construct connections, that "'thinking about the size, color, and shape of the pieces helped me make decisions about where the pieces belong in the overall structure'" (Klein and Hecker 97). These comparative and tactile applications offer two ways consultants might apply "props as a way to visualize and have fun" in a consultation; having the props as a physical reminder that there is "no one way"

to consult encourages consultants to frequently consider how they can disrupt and transform their practices.

"The 'Now' of this Nearness": Locating Props

When we introduced the carts in the spring, they appeared sporadically, and, although many consultants discussed the carts informally, I did not facilitate any formal discussions or conversations. Results from the spring survey indicated that, even with the carts, consultants still weren't sure where to find all props, and we knew that, to engage props, consultants must first know where to find them. During Fall 2018, we explicitly introduced the carts and props during our fall orientation activity and classroom conversation. After these activities, I invited new consultants to complete the fall survey; 12 new consultants replied. As in the spring survey, I invited consultants to indicate whether they knew where to find a list of props. I hoped to learn which, and how many, props all consultants knew where to find in the writing center. Consultants responded as follows:

- In the spring survey (May 2018) all 14 respondents indicated they knew where to find 6 of 11 (54.5%) of listed props. (Note that, of the 14 consultant respondents, 13 had worked for nearly a full academic year).
- In the fall survey (October 2018) all 12 respondents said, "yes, I know where to find this object" for 15 of 24 (62.5%) of listed props. (Note that these 12 consultant respondents had worked for less than a month).

In the fall survey, all respondents reported knowing where to find a higher percentage of more props. These results suggest that explicitly introducing props and carts through the orientation activity and in-class discussion invited more consultant awareness of props and their locations.

However, our survey results also taught us that proximal access matters. While we had moved all props to the carts in spring, in the fall, responding to summer consultants' comments, we placed some props back on the table and left some in the cart. In the fall survey, we explored the relationship between location and prop use, asking consultants to indicate how often they used the pencils and notepads on the table versus the pencils and notepads in the cart:

- 10 of 12 respondents indicated that they had used the pencils on the table; only 2 of 12 indicated they had used the pencils in the cart
- 8 of 12 respondents indicated that they had used the mini-notepads on the table; only 3 of

12 indicated that they had used the mini-notepads in the cart.

These results implied that prop proximity relates to engagement; in response, we moved a few more key props (specifically colored pencils, markers, and highlighters) onto tables. By placing a few props at hand, we hoped consultants would construct new orientations that might extend their reach to other props available in the carts.

We found that placing props "near" empowered consultants and writers to explore new possibilities with these movable objects "in the 'now' of this nearness" (Ahmed 39). For example, in one December consulting log, a consultant wrote:

> The writer came in with a large paper that needed to be re-organized and more, and they were a little worried about it. But they saw the play-doh [sic] in the roll carts and immediately asked if they could grab some and play with it. Of course, I said yes, and they grabbed some and used it almost as a stress ball, just working it around while we talked about their work.

This description shows that, with the Play-Doh visible, and at hand, the writer felt they could ask to work with it. Later, this writer and consultant ended up color-coding the paper, using sticky notes to categorize and organize ideas from the color-coordinated pages, and using the whiteboard to brainstorm paper titles. The possibilities that emerged from the Play-Doh's nearness carried forward, shaping the direction of their consultation. While writers and consultants both choose props with intention, what results from those choices "remains open," creating new possibilities for prop, writer, and consultant to affect and engage one another in the consultation space.

Repetitions and orientations can only be changed by props which are known and at hand; while placing props close by, or choosing to incorporate a prop, may seem like an artificial practice, we must remember that the possibility emerges in each moment's intra-action. As Ahmed argues, our previous orientations make possible what we reach for (Ahmed 39), but the possibility between subject and object is "what happens *once we are near*. If being near to this or that object is not a matter of chance, what happens in the 'now' of this nearness remains open, in the sense that we don't always know things affect each other, or how we will be affected by things (Deleuze 1992: 637)" (Ahmed 39). We can help determine what "gets near" to consultants and writers in consultation spaces, whether inside or outside our writing center.

Conclusion

When we consider and practice orienting ourselves differently with the props at hand, "in reach," within our consultation space, we can adjust and change our orientations and practices, swerving, bending and turning so that we are not enacting the same gestures, the same "cuts," to determine which voices or objects or perspectives matter within the writing center. Whether in proximate or online writing center spaces, we encounter new opportunities to consider and reorient our own habits, and to help writers do so. By inviting a writer to work with sticky notes, or with an online Trello board, we might create opportunities for them to reconceptualize their organization; by inviting a writer to try color-coding their sentences with colored pens, or by changing the font color in a Google doc, we might offer them a new way to understand the structure of language. However, by consistently offering the same approaches, only using the same pen and paper, or the same computer mouse to scroll through a draft, we might exclude a writer from engaging their unique writing and thinking processes, or from exploring new ones.

Every writing center's available props and consultant training practices differ; rather than offering prescriptive recommendations for prop education, I instead suggest that directors and consultants begin conversations about their own prop practices. Questions like these might begin to inform your writing center's unique approach to prop education:

- Collect Props: What physical and digital props do we have in our writing center, our at-home workspaces, and our online spaces that are, or could be, used as props? Let's gather them together (physically, or in a list).
- Identify Practices: Which of these props do we use in our consultation practices? How do we, and writers, use them, and why? How are props related to our consulting habits? When do our practices use the prop to act upon a writer's draft (as a "tool") and when do they engage a prop *with* the writer (as a "prop")?
- Discuss Possibilities: Thinking of a specific consulting moment, what possibilities and choices might different props have opened for us and for writers? How can we practice acting with new props, and how can we invite writers to do so?
- Extend Access: How can we make props and consultation spaces more accessible for consultants and writers, including through

increased visibility, closer physical proximity,
lingual, aural, and tactile diversity, etc.?
Our prop education didn't, and shouldn't, ask
consultants to consider props in isolation, as things that
are used, but instead helped consultants intentionally
consider the ways bodyminds interact *with* one another
with props in the writing center, and, now, in virtual
spaces. These conversations were ongoing, occurring in
observations, small-group staff meetings, and casual
conversations in shared spaces, and were always
grounded in the consultant's specific intra-action with a
prop and writer.

Maintaining awareness of the physical movement
and adaptation, the embodied situatedness, that
consultations require can help us ask if our theoretical
and pedagogical approaches acknowledge the material
experiences of different bodies and the power dynamics
that emerge in consultant and writer engagement with
props, and, thus, in our writing centers and
communities. These physical movements and
manifestations are equally important in online spaces; as
Laura Feibush emphasizes through gestural listening,
directors and consultants must further "reflect on
elements of interface and embodiment" (Feibush).
Digital and physical props can still create possibility in
online consultations, possibilities writing centers
continue to explore. As Barad reminds us, objects,
"'environments' and 'bodies' are intra-actively co-
constituted. Bodies ('human', 'environmental', or
otherwise) are integral 'parts' of, or dynamic
reconfigurings of, what is" (Barad 170). Consultant
education that invites consultants to explore how they
can interact differently with props and with writers teach
them how to change and transform the consultation
itself. We must continue to engage these education
practices in conversation with queer and feminist
theoretical approaches like Ahmed's and Barad's and
must continue to ask how bodies are moving and intra-
acting to recognize how our practices limit or encourage
new orientations, turnings, and possibilities.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. Kay Are explores this phenomenon through an object learning approach, exploring the diffractive power of objects, and specifically object-based learning (OBL), in creative writing pedagogy. Are positions objects as tools to decenter the subject and help students work toward material changes in systems of power, rather than simply reproducing those systems through the emphasis on the subject brought by the reflection-focused model.
2. Carol Lethaby and Patricia Harries discuss this debate about learning styles and preferences, emphasizing that preferred learning styles is a neuromyth, even as educators continue to teach to them; while different sensory information is processed differently in the brain, people do not process information through only one sense, and scientific evidence does not support the idea that students learn better through their preferred learning style (Lethaby and Harries 17-18).

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Appendix

Figure 1. Project Timeline and Participants

Date	Event	Participants
Phase One: Awareness		
February 2018	Staff meeting with brief props introduction; winter survey distributed during meeting	30 consultants participated; 30 consultants responded to survey
March-May 2018	Mini-whiteboards and carts introduced to space; props placed in carts	Author and writing center director implemented
May 2018	Spring survey distributed over email	14 consultants responded to survey
Phase Two: Education		
September 2018	Orientation activity	24 new consultants participated
October 2018	In-class prop conversation, including introduction to carts and consulting habits; fall survey distributed in staff meeting	24 new consultants participated; 12 consultants responded to survey
November 2018	In-class conversation about play, where consultants use props to interpret a poem	24 new consultants participated
December 2018	Consultants complete consulting logs, documenting four consultations over a three-week period	4 consultants completed logs

Figure 2. Selected Comparison of Reported Props Use, Winter and Spring Survey

Prop	Respondents Reporting Use of Props on Tables in Winter Survey	Respondents Reporting Use of Props in Carts in Spring Survey
Pencils	29 of 30 (96%)	14 of 14 (100%)
Sticky Notes	13 of 30 (43%)	10 of 14 (71%)
Highlighters	11 of 30 (36.6%)	6 of 14 (42.8%)
Style Guides	21 of 30 (70%)	7 of 14 (50%).