

1-1-2011

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Recommended Citation

Hall, R. Mark (2011) "Theory In/To Practice: Using Dialogic Reflection to Develop a Writing Center Community of Practice," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 31 : Iss. 1, Article 6.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1724>

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Theory In/To Practice: Using Dialogic Reflection to Develop a Writing Center Community of Practice

by R. Mark Hall

About the Author

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Introduction

Valued for prompting writing assistants to engage in self-assessment, to expand their repertoire of strategies, and to improve their practice, reflective writing has long been a cornerstone of writing center tutor education (Bell; Mattison; Okawa et al.; Smith; Yancey). Through critical reflection, theories and decisions remain open to inspection, evaluation, and revision. Reflection is dogged, however, by two problems. First, its audience is typically limited to the self and to the writing center director. This limited audience leads to a second problem: limited learning. What's more, underlying reflection is the assumption that one has an informed critical framework already in place for thinking about tutoring practices. Kathleen Blake Yancey in "Seeing Practice Through Their Eyes: Reflection as Teacher" includes several excerpts from tutors' reflective writing, which bring to mind Romantic notions of the self. In this excerpt, the tutor asserts her own private being as a special entity transcending the normal run of tutors. She sets her own personal drama against the broader workings of the writing center community:

Now that my time in the WRC as a tutor has ended, I do not see myself as a tutor; I see myself as a “Tutor.” I know now what I should have realized all along. I am my own person with my own distinct style and personality; so therefore, I am not a robot that has come off the assembly line with all of the information I need to become a tutor. I am an individual who is different from all other Tutors in the WRC. I have a style that works best for me, and there is not a book anywhere that can tell me what this style is or should be. I am a Tutor, who knows the theory behind the writing conference and is confident enough to take this knowledge and weave my own individualism into it. (197-98)

If this tutor experiences an authentic audience for her reflective writing, it is the writing center director. Not only is her audience truncated, but also, in setting herself apart from her writing center colleagues, this consultant cuts herself off from the multiple critical lenses that circulate among them and the various insights they might add to her thinking about her tutoring experiences. Yancey says of this mode of reflection:

I have my observations, and my interactions, too, but in some ways most important, I have *multiple documents that collectively teach me—in their own words—how tutors learn to become tutors.*

I read the materials of one tutor, then of another. Soon I am learning about all of them—from their letters, their e-mails, their logs, their classroom discourse, and their inventions. (196)

Yancey herself is learning about tutors, but what, one wonders, are they learning from each other? And what are they learning about their work?

Michael Mattison’s “Someone to Watch Over Me: Reflection and Authority in the Writing Center” explores the problem of audience for tutors’ reflective writing. In Mattison’s case, tutoring practices and learning are undermined because reflective writing leads consultants to feel as though they are being spied upon by the writing center director. Surveillance, Mattison finds, directs and limits consultants’ writing about their tutoring experiences. An advocate of reflection, Mattison urges a cautious approach. “[R]eflective work,” he writes, “is like a sharp knife. You wouldn’t try working in a kitchen without one,

R. Mark Hall

but you would also take care when handling it” (47). At the close of his essay, Mattison suggests an alternative: to achieve its espoused goals, rather than an internal monologue or a one-way communication from consultant to writing center director, reflective writing ought to be recast as dialogue among tutors.

This essay takes up Mattison’s call for dialogic reflection. By way of a writing center Weblog, the “Primary Document” in this installment of “Theory In/To Practice,” consultants use reflective writing to engage in conversation about the theory and practice of tutoring. In this way, the blog plays a critical role in tutor training and in developing a writing center community of practice. By posting reflective writing to the blog and talking with peers about it, consultants maintain and transform their writing center community as they adopt and adapt its practices; likewise the community sustains and alters consultants through opportunities for participation and enculturation. As their blog posts illustrate, reflection-as-dialogue promotes deep theoretical understanding of writing center work, with discussion focused not only on procedural knowledge but also on explicating the values, assumptions, and beliefs which govern tutoring practices. In other words, common sense or explication without critical engagement is insufficient. Rather, to be useful, dialogic reflection must offer more than practical advice about how to tutor. In addition to considering local knowledge generated in its particular writing center context, dialogic reflection must also take up and engage—perhaps to question and maybe even dismiss—expert knowledge generated by writing center specialists.

Context

Central to the writing centers I have directed is the belief that, while consultants need procedural knowledge in order to work effectively, a set of how-tos is insufficient. Our tutor education, then, encourages writing assistants to adopt an inquiry stance toward writing center practice. Such a stance involves relentless questioning, asking *why*, wondering, researching, generating alternatives, testing, reviewing, and revising options. The purpose of inquiry is not merely to solve problems or to correct practice. Rather, its aim is to examine both

what we do and the rules and reasoning—the habits of mind—that determine what we do. Chris Argyris offers the terms “single-loop” and “double-loop” learning to capture this distinction. He uses the analogy of an automatic thermostat to illustrate his point. Learning-as-problem-solving, or single-loop learning, says Argyris, works like a thermostat. Whenever the temperature drops below 68 degrees, the thermostat responds by correcting the problem and turning on the heat. By contrast, a thermostat would be engaged in double-loop learning if it could ask, “Why am I set at 68 degrees?” and then explore whether or not some other temperature might more economically achieve the goal of heating the room” (4). Among our writing assistants, double-loop learning is developed, in part, through dialogic reflection.

A brief recent history of reflective writing in the writing center at California State University, Chico illustrates the move from single-loop to double-loop thinking. When I began as director, my predecessor shared the ways she employed reflective writing. At the start of her tenure, she found a writing center that was, in her words, “perilously close to useless.” Among other things, tutoring practices were confused, ungrounded in writing center theory and research. Consultants typically dove for the papers clients put before them, focusing almost exclusively on correcting sentence-level errors in grammar, punctuation, and mechanics, without first learning the clients’ contexts for writing, including the writers’ understanding of the purpose, audience, and genre requirements. To help consultants to prioritize global concerns before local and to turn their attention from fixing papers to facilitating learning, my colleague developed what came to be known in that writing center as the “Session Reflection Sheet,” which included the following prompt:

Use this sheet (front and back, if needed) to write a reflection on the session. Begin by explaining how you learned the context for writing, including the student’s understanding of the assignment and the required genre. If you worked on sentence-level errors, explain why you made this choice and what specific strategies you used to teach the writer to proofread and edit independently.

Tutors were required to write a session reflection after every consultation. This reflective writing, along with several other changes in the center, including a complete overhaul of the tutor-education course, proved effective. Writing assistants soon developed a wide array of strategies, rooted in literacy research and theory, for developing a client's understanding, rather than merely fixing papers. At its inception, the Session Reflection Sheet served another valuable function. With a writing center staffed entirely by novice consultants from the tutor-education course, which is offered every semester, new writing assistants had no experienced peers to learn from. What, newcomers wondered, semester after semester, were some effective tutoring practices common to our center? With files created for every client, the reflection sheets provided case histories, which writing assistants could consult to learn common practices. In time, the previous director successfully argued for several paid positions for experienced tutors, which she designated as "mentors." In addition to tutoring, mentors were charged with helping to train new consultants. With this development, novice writing assistants came to consult mentors more and more, and the written case histories of tutoring less and less.

Under my watch, consultants began to complain about the amount of reflective writing they were required to do. Completing a session reflection after every consultation, they insisted, was a burden. As a result, reflective writing became detached from the practice of reflective thinking and action. Tutors no longer found it a meaningful activity. Instead, the Session Reflection Sheet had become what Etienne Wenger calls a "reification," which is, in his words, "giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal that experience into 'thingness.' In doing so, we create points of focus around which the negotiation of meaning becomes organized" (*Communities of Practice: Learning* 58). Reification is neither good nor bad. It simply is. Reification, as Wenger points out, is central to every practice. "Any community of practice," he writes, "produces abstractions, tools, symbols, stories, terms, and concepts that reify something of that practice in congealed form" (*Communities of Practice: Learning* 59). For example, when you are called upon to write a meeting agenda, you don't have to wonder what the genre

features of this form of writing are. You simply search your computer for an agenda from a previous meeting and then use it as a template. This template embodies our ideas about the form and function of an agenda. In every aspect of our lives, reifications like this facilitate action. Our writing center's Session Reflection Sheet, however, had become a reification that undermined learning when consultants viewed it as a mindless routine. Stubbornly, however, I maintained a castor-oil attitude toward reflective writing: it might not taste good going down, but it's good for you. Keep writing, I insisted. One semester I tried reward, paying consultants for the additional time they spent writing. Another semester I tried coercion, conducting random checks, threatening to dock the pay of tutors who skipped a dose of reflective medicine. Meanwhile, writing assistants continued to insist that session reflections had become little more than busy work. My reaction was what Argyris terms a "defensive routine" (8). Like the thermostat in his analogy, I was engaged in single-loop thinking, trying to correct reflective writing. But the way I was going about defining and solving the problem was part of the problem itself. Reflexively, I turned attention away from my own behavior and reasoning and onto that of the writing consultants, short-circuiting an opportunity for us to learn about, and perhaps revise, the application of reflection in our writing center. Rather than deny my own responsibility by externalizing the problem and putting it on the tutors, double-loop thinking called upon me to examine the principles and propositions I used to design and implement my actions.

Double-loop thinking required me to ask not only *how* to implement reflective writing effectively, but also *why*—and, further, *whether* tutors should engage in reflective writing in the first place. I began by considering my role in initiating reflective writing via the Reflection Sheet, which I had adopted, well, unreflectively. Though a well-intentioned effort to engage writing assistants in critical reflection, in practice, the prompt is itself an illustration of single-loop thinking. Its genesis was a desire to correct what the previous director and I had viewed as bad practice. Without first learning the context for writing, consultants turned their attention too quickly and narrowly to fixing sentence-level errors. Don't do that, our

prompt admonishes. Instead, “Begin by explaining how you learned the context for writing, including the student’s understanding of the assignment and the required genre.” For the tutor who does not first learn the student’s understanding of the assignment and the required genre, there is little room for an authentic response. The writing assistant must either fabricate a reflection or ignore the directive altogether. Similarly well-intended, the prompt’s second sentence offers a way in: “If you worked on sentence-level errors, explain why you made this choice and what specific strategies you used to teach the writer to proofread and edit independently.” The consultant who employs no specific teaching strategies must, again, either invent a story or avoid the prompt altogether. Rather than encourage consultants to think critically about their practices and the decision-making processes that guide them, the Reflection Sheet enlists tutors in self-surveillance. Having failed either to learn the context for writing or to teach the client to proofread and edit, the writing assistant is admonished, however gently, to try harder next time.

Once I had downed a little reflective medicine of my own, I invited tutors to take up the issue of reflective writing over the course of several weekly staff meetings. To break with defensive reasoning, argues Argyris, who studies management consultants, organizations must start at the top. My own example of defensive reasoning served as a catalyst for discussion about reflective thinking in our writing center and the principles and propositions that govern its application. Two more terms from Argyris helped to facilitate our analysis. According to Argyris, we operate via a “theory of action—a set of rules that individuals use to design and implement their own behavior as well as to understand the behavior of others. Usually, these theories of actions become so taken for granted that people don’t even realize they are using them.” A paradox in human behavior, says Argyris, is that our “espoused” theory of action—the theory we *say* guides our behavior—often contradicts our actual “theory-in-use”—the theory that determines how we *actually* behave (7). Studying examples of their own reflective writing, consultants pointed out that our espoused theory of reflection contradicted our theory-in-use. The stated purpose of the session reflection was to examine tutoring

practices and decision-making processes and to share that thinking among writing assistants. In practice, however, reflections tended merely to describe the work done, without a genuine audience beyond the self. Initially, I found this assertion confusing, because reflective writing had long been public, addressed not only to the individual writer, but also to the other tutors who consulted our collection of case histories. Each reflection was filed in duplicate. One copy went into the tutor's file, another in the client's, so that writing assistants who worked with the same clients could be informed about past work, as well as goals for subsequent sessions. Tutors explained, however, that even when they consulted reflections for this purpose, they experienced the writing as a one-way transaction, with the tutor who had written the reflection merely telling them what work was done and what might be addressed in the future. What consultants wanted from reflective writing was dialogue about the theory and practice of tutoring.

Though they chafed under the burden of composing a session reflection after every tutorial, consultants continued to bring copies of their writing to weekly meetings, sharing them with the group, using their reflections to prompt lively discussions about a wide array of writing center challenges and questions. When I pointed out their fruitful use of reflection to prompt dialogue, one writing assistant replied, "That's just the point. The reflection isn't on the page. It's in our discussions." He was right. In order to reinvigorate reflective writing, we would need to address these two problems: First, how might reflective writing be made less "I-centered," more dialogic? Second, how might we identify and communicate the genre features that make reflective writing engaging and meaningful to consultants, as writers, readers, and responders? We began with the second problem. Rather than simply tell writing assistants what *I* thought the characteristics of reflective writing are—or should be—I put it to them to determine what features make a "good" reflection. They continued reading our files of reflective writing, with two questions in mind: First, what are the "habits of mind" that characterize engaging reflective writing? Second, what are the rhetorical strategies—or moves—that make reflective writing meaningful to you? Tutors identified the characteristics they thought marked good reflective

R. Mark Hall

writing and brainstormed features they did not find in our files, or found infrequently, but which they wanted to see more of. For example, beyond simply describing the work done, a good session reflection might also describe the consultant's decision-making processes. It might describe a specific strategy, offer a rationale for its implementation, and then explore possible alternatives and consequences. Their examination of the characteristics of reflective writing valued in our writing center led us to see that we need to give explicit attention to teaching and learning the genre of reflection.

Next, we turned to the proposition that, even with some agreed-upon characteristics, "The reflection isn't on the page. It's in our discussions." How could we transform reflective writing from an individual, private enterprise—or worse, a sinister means of surveillance—to a public one in order to enhance learning among tutors? This question prompted us to address another long-standing concern in our writing center. Old-timers play an important role mentoring novices, but, because of scheduling conflicts, mentors sometimes have limited contact with new tutors. As a remedy, if reflective writing could be posted in an online discussion forum, we speculated, then tutors would have an alternative venue for developing mentoring relationships. In other words, online dialogue might extend reflective writing from *individual* introspection to developing *communal* tutoring practices. To that end, using a hosted Weblogging service, we designed a simple online discussion forum where writing assistants could post and comment on their reflective writing. Because several tutors regularly read and wrote blogs themselves, this setting proved especially appealing—more authentic, to some—than composing in the context of a school assignment. Blogging helped make reflective writing meaningful again.

Primary Document

November 16, 2009

"But I always say, one's company, two's a crowd, and three's a party." Warhol.

Filed under: Weekly Reflections – msmith389 @ 12:32 am Edit This
 Tags: affective concerns, group sessions, offering options

I had a student come in this week with what I thought was a pretty run-of-the-mill concern:

She had been given a group project assignment, and each member of her group had taken a portion of the assignment to work on. With one week to go, she hadn't seen any of the other group members' chunks, so she had decided to do the whole thing herself.

So the student pretty much plopped down with just her piece, in isolation, with no assignment sheet ("My instructor gave us only verbal instructions!") and what I can only describe as one of those "aw shit" looks of anxiety on her face.

I started thinking about Black, about all the emotional and personal concerns that students cart into writing center session with them. So I paused, took a deep breath, and instead of talking about the student's work, talked for just a moment about what her options were to minimize her stress and maximize efficiency.

Here are the options I gave her:

1. Continue to do the project herself. I used what I now refer to as "the Jeff question": Why do you think your professor assigned this?
2. Meet with the professor to discuss her concerns
3. Schedule a group appointment in the WRC and have a writing assistant mediate the group's discussions around the assignment.

I don't know how well I convinced her to do the last one, but it got me thinking: **What would that group session look like?** I know I've seen some of you handle group sessions, but I've never really listened in. What is the dynamic like?

Chris also mentioned something interesting to me after the session: it's against writing center policy for me to look at her group members' work without them present, even if she learns something from doing so. What do you guys think of this policy?

Comments (2)

Pages

- How to Post Reflections
- Reading About Writing Centers
- Reflect on Your Reflections

Categories

- Q & A
- Weekly Reflections

4400/5400

- ENG 4400/5400 Calendar

Tutoring Resources

- Atkins Style Guides
- IWCA
- Purdue OWL
- Tutoring Strategies
- UNCC WRC

Writing Center Journals

- Praxis: WC Journal
- Writing Center Journal Newsletter

Tags

Activity Theory Advice

The screenshot above shows a typical reflection on the blog. The toolbar running down the right margin includes links to the blog's other pages. Posts are divided into two categories: "Q & A" and "Weekly Reflections." Also included are links to course materials, resources for tutoring, and popular writing center publications.

2 Comments

1. I understand that this policy is trying to force students to come in to the WRC and get help for themselves without relying on their partners, however this perpetuates the common issues of group assignments because other group members are possibly hurting one student's grade. Now in addition to a student having to pick up the slack for a group member, their opportunity to receive some clarification and necessary guidance is also blocked because of WRC policy. Maybe instead of focusing on whether group members are present to receive help we should consider the commitment of that one student to show up and their determination to succeed in the assignment. Is better to infringe upon this student's learning opportunity in effort to force other students to live up to their academic responsibilities?

Comment by sfvilloe1 — November 16, 2009 @ 11:27 am | Edit This

2. I agree with the policy- group work has many challenges, one of which is the inequality of effort amongst group members. If one group member comes in, I would look at ONLY that person's work. If it is not divided that neatly, and it's not possible to separate their work from the rest, then I would politely let them know about our policy and suggest that they try to get the whole group together for an appointment.

I would add that this might be a time when a tutor doubles as a counselor. The one time I was in a session with a sole group member, we ended up using part of our time brainstorming ways for her to negotiate some of the cultural conflicts that were surfacing in her group. Interestingly, some of our readings were a help in this area, and I was able to help her see some of the subtle things that might have been at play.

Anyway, I do agree with the policy, and have no problem being a Nazi about it. It's way too easy for group members to send the martyr/pushover/workhorse of the group to the WRC by him/herself and then reap the benefits later. If they don't all show up, they don't get the help. Part of group work is learning to work with a group...

Comment by jesscamargo — November 15, 2009 @ 6:15 pm | Edit This

RSS feed for comments on this post.

Activity Theory Advice

to new tutors

affective concerns

APA assignment sheet

Assumption: awkward situations

Chris A. Constant

Directive Sessions

doubt

ELITE Emotional Tutee

ENGR **ESL** esl

language learners

ESL students

first-year

student focus

grammar

Grimm group papers

HOCs Language Barrier

Laurel Black literacy

event literacy

practice Mediation

Tools **NANCY**

Grimm

nonstandard

grammar elder student

postmodernist

This second screenshot includes two comments that writing assistants offered in response to the reflection above. In the right margin is a tag cloud, which highlights major topics of discussion as they develop over time. Readers may also find topics of interest by using a keyword search.

Analysis

Consultants designed the blog based upon their experiences and observations of the needs in our particular writing center. For example,

one experienced writing assistant revealed that when he had been a student in the tutor-education course, he often had questions that he was reluctant to ask the director and that he would have liked to have put to a mentor instead. To the online forum for reflective writing, then, tutors added a searchable “Question & Answer” page. Rather than look for *the* answer, during weekly staff meetings, experienced tutors would discuss questions posted to the forum by novices, then take turns offering a range of answers. The purpose would be to explore not only *what* to do in a tutoring session, but, more importantly, *why* and *whether*. For example, in answer to the question of whether to read a client’s paper aloud or to ask the client to read it herself, two mentors brought forward the unconscious theories that guide their contradictory practices. The first acknowledged that her usual practice is to ask the client to read the paper, or a portion of it, aloud. At the same time, this experienced writing assistant had come to doubt this routine. Writing to a novice led her to reconsider her doubts while justifying her strategy. She explained that she invites clients to read aloud because, among other things, they often self-correct when they read. What’s more, she continued, voicing their own writing establishes a productive discourse pattern in the tutoring session, in which the clients do most of the talking. “No, I don’t usually do that,” challenged another mentor, “because I zone out when I try to listen to someone else read. I usually read aloud, in part because I often work with English language learners, who benefit from hearing what their writing sounds like from a native speaker.” When she reads aloud, this consultant is able to take her time, to stop, and to talk about the writing, without feeling that she has interrupted the client. She went on to explain that controlling the pace of reading also allows her to see patterns of errors and to note them using minimal marking. Although contrary to the previous approach, this, too, seemed like sound reasoning. These two mentors agreed that sometimes when clients read their own work aloud, they do so in what seems like a perfunctory manner, reading the paper in their head rather than the one on paper. Together, they brainstormed advantages and disadvantages of their approaches. Among other strategies, they wondered, what if the client and consultant took turns reading aloud? Our writing center blog, then, isn’t merely an online

venue for exchanging ideas about tutoring. One purpose is to engage writing center theory through reflective writing. Another purpose, as these two old-timers demonstrate, is to model for novices some habits of mind that characterize reflective thinking, while explicating specific tutoring strategies.

In addition to the Question & Answer page, consultants post weekly reflections and respond to reflections posted by their peers. To understand their dialogue and its consequences, I apply the notion of “communities of practice” as a theoretical framework for understanding the writing that consultants do to reflect on their tutoring experiences. Anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger coined the term “communities of practice” while studying models of apprenticeship among West African tailors, Yucatec Midwives, US navel quartermasters, supermarket butchers, and recovering alcoholics involved in AA. By observing these diverse groups, Lave and Wenger came to understand learning as *participation in collaboration with others on meaningful activities toward some common goal*. According to this view, learning is not something to be acquired, as in a body of knowledge, which one either has or doesn’t have. Rather, *learning is participation*. And *participation is learning* (49-52). Communities of practice, Lave and Wenger suggest, have three characteristics. First, a community of practice includes a “domain of interest,” a sphere of concern and capability. Second, a community of practice includes members who engage in common activities, interact, and learn from each other over time. Third, a community of practice includes, as Wenger puts it, “a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, [and] ways of addressing recurring problems” (*Communities of Practice: A Brief Introduction*). While we all belong to multiple communities—yoga class, a snowboarding club, the online movie service Netflix, not all of these are communities of practice. While movie buffs *do* belong to a community of sorts in Netflix, we do not interact and learn from each other while working toward some common goal over time. In addition to these characteristics, communities of practice have a history of shared goals, meanings, and practices. They constantly reproduce themselves as newcomers join the community, take up its practices, and, eventually, replace old-timers. In this way, communities of practice are dynamic systems.

What's more, members maintain and transform the community as they adopt and adapt its practices; likewise, the community sustains and alters individuals through opportunities for participation and enculturation.

In *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice*, Anne Ellen Geller et al. offer the idea of communities of practice as a tool for analyzing writing center work. This essay extends and complicates a communities-of-practice understanding of writing centers by looking more closely at the learning that takes place among consultants. While much research is devoted to the learning between tutors and clients, comparatively little attention has been given to the ways in which writing assistants learn from one another. A communities-of-practice theory of learning focuses our attention on this important aspect of writing center work. In the context of our writing center, where experienced consultants, or mentors, play a central role in educating novices, a communities-of-practice framework is useful for understanding teaching and learning among old-timers and newcomers. In "Lab Technicians and High School Student Interns—Who Is Scaffolding Whom?: On Forms of Emergent Expertise," Pei-Ling Hsu and Wolff-Michael Roth find that scaffolding newcomers into a community of practice is not a one-way process where the expert or more capable peer supports the development of the novice. Rather, because learning is social and dialogical, knowledgeability is a two-way street. Hsu and Roth propose the notion of "emergent expertise" to describe that learning process, where expertise is not the product of individuals, but an outcome of the interactions among them. Rather than focus on individual knowing or tutor development, then, a communities-of-practice perspective turns our attention to the joint activities—the *practice*—of the writing center, the transactional process of becoming enculturated into that community, and the resources, such as the blog, which mediate that process. Together in dialogue, writing assistants take up, learn, and transform their community's shared goals, meanings, and practices. In doing so, consultants are themselves changed by their writing center community of practice.

Blogging, one tool for developing a community of practice, is well established in writing centers.¹ Melinda Baer, in "Using Weblogs in

Your Writing Center,” lists a number of benefits. “The most useful aspect of blogs in writing centers,” she writes, “is their ability to compile links and discussions (posts) in one place that is accessible by consultants anywhere they can get online” (2). In addition to the pragmatic, blogs can be used as a tool for developing thinking. Below is one example of a reflection posted on our blog and some of the discussion that resulted from it. This excerpt is written by a novice tutor, Esme, who was prompted by another student’s presentation in class to write about a consultation she experienced as a power struggle:

I had a [first-year composition] student who came in wanting me to “fix” his paper. He had brought his laptop with him, but no printouts of his paper, assignment sheet, or sources. He just wanted me to look at his paper on his laptop and fix it. Heck, we couldn’t even both see it properly at the same time because of the sideways resolution. I insisted we print everything out and I graciously allowed him to get on a writing center computer. I made a point that this was a special consideration and that next time he would have to use the computer lab. I also made sure he printed his paper last, so we could go over the assignment sheet before he tried to put the paper under my nose. He kept telling me that he just needed help going over his paper. That he had 3 pages and only needed 2 more. I kept redirecting him to the assignment sheet and asking him questions about his sources and prewriting. Finally, I set down my pen, leaned back in my chair, and just looked at him. After a brief pause, I straight up told him that my job was to help him learn and that I couldn’t and wouldn’t just fix his paper. After that he seemed to accept that we actually were going to work hard, and everything went very smoothly after that. He left anxious to keep going—he said he was headed to the library—and with an outline in hand. I think he was a little depressed about the amount of work he still had left to do, but he accepted that it was necessary, and he had a plan he could work with.

Esme’s frustration here is palpable, but she is proud of both her resolve and her directness. Her refusal to bend to the will of an insistent client prompted two of her classmates to respond with praise, in part because, like many tutors, they find that resistance, such as Esme’s, requires hard-won confidence. Mia responded, “I am so glad that my case presentation was on a topic you could relate to

and write about in your post! The next time I have a ‘power struggle,’ I will follow your example in stepping away from the situation and laying it out straight to the client. It feels good to know other writing assistants are going through the same stuff!” Chris followed with, “Wow! Great examples. In your second session I really liked how much you took the initiative and set the boundaries and put the ball back in his court.”

A core principle of a communities-of-practice understanding of learning is that learning is participation, and participation is learning. But participation in what, exactly? Consultants learn to tutor by observing the practices of their peers and by tutoring. But learning by watching and doing tells only part of the story. In their study of apprenticeship as a model of learning, Lave and Wenger find that rather than novices’ learning via explicit instruction from masters, “there is very little observable teaching; the more basic phenomenon is learning” (92). Learning, they argue, depends less upon hierarchical master-apprentice relationships than on relations among apprentices: “It seems typical of apprenticeship that apprentices learn mostly in relation with other apprentices” (93). In the writing center, we see old-timers learning from novices as well as novices learning from old-timers. For instance, in the act of answering a new tutor’s query about reading a client’s paper aloud, the two responders, both writing assistants for several semesters, are prompted to rethink their practices. But what is the role of expert knowledge in consultants’ learning? Lave and Wenger distinguish between a *learning curriculum* and a *teaching curriculum*. “A learning curriculum,” they explain, “is a field of learning resources in everyday practice *viewed from the perspective of the learners*” (97, emphasis in the original). “Learning” in a community of practice is not something to be acquired. It is *in* the many and varied relationships among community members. By contrast to the open expanse of the learning curriculum, a “teaching curriculum,” Lave and Wenger argue, “supplies—and thereby limits—structuring resources for learning” (97).

We should be skeptical, however, of such either/or dichotomous thinking. As designer of the teaching curriculum and a dialogic partner in the community of practice, the writing center director plays an important role on the blog. One function is to socialize consultants

into professional conversations about writing center work, to provide critical lenses from which to interpret the work they are undertaking. The blog, then, is not a “pure” student-centered social network. Rather, writing assistants import into their conversations the content, values, assumptions, and beliefs about tutoring that make up the teaching curriculum. In addition to sharing local knowledge generated by their own tutoring experiences, consultants practice the academic moves and ways of talking about tutorials that they learn in the tutoring class as well as other courses they are taking. In this way, the writing center blog becomes a place where tutors rehearse and participate in the community of practice they are entering, engaging, and, indeed, creating. As the following responses to Esme’s post illustrate, consultants develop a shared repertoire of resources by engaging the expert knowledge that constitutes the writing center’s teaching curriculum. In dialogue, writing assistants explicate expert knowledge. They reflect, incorporate, resist, and revise the teaching curriculum of the tutor-education course. In doing so, they maintain and transform their writing center community of practice as they adopt and adapt its expert knowledge. Likewise, the community sustains and alters individual consultants through their participation.

While praise for Esme may be warranted, a third respondent in this discussion thread complicates our understanding of the power struggle Esme describes by examining the situation through the lens of activity theory, which we use in our writing center as a heuristic for analyzing consultations, and which plays a central role in tutor training. Here is Natalie’s response to Esme’s post:

Don’t worry about these situations; they arise all of the time. Think about activity theory . . . there must be a distribution of labor in your sessions. If you are doing all of the work, then the student is not learning anything on his or her own. Collaboration is key to working through papers. Furthermore, you cannot feel responsible for not being able to finish the student’s paper. If they have a lot of work left to do on it, then they cannot expect to finish in a 45 minute session. I would suggest at the end of the session to persuade them to make another appointment. If their paper is due that day, then tell them to come in earlier next time so they can schedule a few appointments before the due date.

R. Mark Hall

Compare this to the reflection from Yancey's student quoted earlier. There is a fundamental difference between the highly individualized "I-centered" approach to reflection as personal and private, aimed at the self and the surveilling writing center director. By contrast, Natalie's post shows her joining the professional conversation about writing center theory and practice via her local writing center community. She is beginning to think through the analytical framework of activity theory provided by the writing center teaching curriculum. As she demonstrates, knowledge in this writing center community of practice is not generated by consultants in dialogue solely with one another. Rather, Natalie's post draws our attention to the role of the writing center director, who designs and teaches the tutor-education course. I sometimes join in conversations on the blog, but even when I don't participate directly in the conversation, I'm always already present in the exchanges. My knowledge, my course design, my choices of what to read and write about, my values and assumptions about tutor education inform dialogic reflection. Natalie's application of theory reflects a core value I emphasize. In addition to rehearsing—and thus developing—her understanding of the role of the distribution of labor in the activity system of a tutorial, Natalie offers up two alternatives, not in opposition to Esme's resolve, but as extensions to it. Natalie is interested in procedural knowledge—what *to do* in a challenging situation like this one. Equally important, she is concerned with the values, assumptions, and beliefs that guide Esme's actions. Why should Esme resist doing the client's work for him?

Following Natalie's post, another writing assistant weighs in, enriching the dialogue by extending Natalie's understanding of activity theory. Michael writes the following:

I think Natalie's on to something here, in terms of a way to think about this particular power struggle via activity theory. While she mentions the "division of labor" inherent in the activity, as [the theorist] David Russell reminds us, "activity systems" are "goal-directed" interactions. [Your] power struggle seems to result because you and the client have different/competing goals in mind.

Like Natalie, Michael makes an academic move, generated, in part,

by my participation in our writing center community of practice. In responding to Esme's post, Michael is learning the routines, the ways of talking about writing center work, the intellectual moves I value and promote in tutor education. Naming and quoting from Russell, Michael further identifies with the expert knowledge he has encountered in the tutor-education course. Using activity theory as a heuristic, Michael draws attention to a central question for both clients and tutors: What is the objective—or purpose—for writing? Michael brings to mind a companion refrain in our center: What is the goal—or objective—of the consultation itself? In echoing this refrain, Michael reminds his peers of the necessity, for a successful session, of asking—and answering—these two questions. He goes on to discuss Esme's tutorial in terms of a second framework for analysis—reflective practice—which, like activity theory, is another “espoused” theory in our center:

Your move, explicitly addressing what you would—and would not—do, helped to break the tension. What's impressive is that you had the presence of mind to stop what you were doing, mid-session, and move differently. That's that “reflection-in-action” we've been talking about in class. (For me, it's usually “reflection inaction.” When things aren't going well in a session, I just keep doing what I've been doing, even if it's a complete failure.)

Another way to address this sort of power struggle with the client would be to talk about goals explicitly, in terms of what the student wants to accomplish in the session, and in terms of the writing center's goal to help him learn something he can take with him. (This makes me think back to the “Getting Started” chapter in the ESL collection about the need to negotiate the work that gets done as part of making a plan at the beginning of a session.)

Unless we share the same goals, how can the activity system of the session be productive?

This writing consultant engages in double-loop thinking by applying expert knowledge. Referring to reflection-in-action, Michael acknowledges that his “theory-in-use” does not always meet up with the “espoused theory” of our writing center community of practice.

R. Mark Hall

But the goal is not necessarily to bring the two into alignment. Rather, as Michael demonstrates, the purpose of double-loop thinking is to recognize the reasoning we use when we design and implement our actions. Like Natalie before him, Michael uses the blog to articulate his understanding of the principles and propositions that govern practices in our center. He models for Esme the kind of reflective thinking consultants said they value, explaining the “why” of his practice, justifying his strategies by drawing connections to and among multiple texts from the tutor-education course.

To end this thread, another tutor, an old-timer in our center, chimes in. Like Mia and Chris, Carter has high praise for Esme’s blunt force. But Carter does not stop there. In her post, she makes a rhetorical move common in double-loop thinking, which writing assistants call “minding the gap.” Looking for what’s missing in the interpretations that precede hers, Carter writes:

What is interesting about your post, Esme, is your raw truth about the session: And it has provoked such reaction from [writing assistants] that leads them to consider theory. As I’ve never had the confidence, or rather guts, to stand up directly to a student and stare them down until they crack under pressure and decide to cooperate, I have to applaud your bravery, but at the same time, I question the motivation of the student. Why did [he] come to the writing center? Was he sent here by a professor and did not come under the best of circumstances? What prompted his uncooperative behavior? Was it merely stress, or was there something else going on here?

While Esme locates the source of the session’s conflict in the client, Carter suggests another possibility. Her interpretation is prompted by an earlier conversation begun in class, by Yll, a novice tutor who raised the question in a presentation of what assumptions tutors make about clients, and how those beliefs affect the work—for good or ill—in a tutoring session. Carter continues her post this way:

I’m wondering if it has to do with the client’s perceptions of the writing assistant (similar to what Yll was discussing in his case presentation). To what extent was his role determined by perceptions of tutors as students, sorority sisters, pocket-protector geeks, English majors, etc.? Maybe if we try to be clearer about the agenda of work at the beginning of a session, then divisions of labor . . . are not so confrontational to work through in the midst of a session.

With her references back to the importance of goal-setting in the activity system of a writing center consultation, Carter, while earlier praising Esme's confrontational style, concludes by suggesting an altogether different approach. If tutors negotiate the work of a consultation at the outset, perhaps power struggles such as the one Esme describes can be avoided. In this way, Carter recognizes in Esme's response a defensive routine, similar to my earlier defensive reasoning about reflective writing. Unlike the personal, introspective reflections, which bring to mind Romantic notions of the self, this dialogic approach, via the writing center blog, turns reflective writing outward, promoting reciprocal teaching and learning among tutors as they apply the expert knowledge gleaned from the writing center teaching curriculum.

As Baer cautions about writing center blogs,

You can lead consultants to a blog, but you can't make them post. . . . [W]e can provide all the innovative new tools we can think of to facilitate communication and self-motivated learning in our staff, but we will always face users who just won't buy into the new tools we offer. (3-4)

In my experience, consultants are more likely to become and remain interested in blogging when it is not just another requirement added to their already busy schedules but when the blog is thoroughly integrated into tutor education, when the writing they do on the blog is frequently and carefully considered in class and in staff meetings, and when blogging is tied to other thinking and writing consultants do. In Esme's case, the learning that resulted, in part, from exchanges on the blog, was demonstrated later in an essay she wrote at the end of the semester:

Examining my session reflections and responses has made me aware of several things. First, through analyzing my tutoring practices, I realize that not only do I religiously stick to the same routine, but I now better understand *why* sticking to the same routine is not necessarily a good thing. Second, . . . with Grimm and Penti's "Rethinking Agency" [another text from the tutor-education course] in mind, I realize that I have located problems *in students* rather than *in my practices*, particularly for clients who "do not seem to respond readily to conventional teaching or tutoring," or to my preferred routine (195).

Esme's analysis here shows a significant leap in thinking. While Carter wondered if the client's assumptions about Esme had dictated his uncooperative behavior, Esme "minds the gap" further, turning a critical eye upon herself. Unlike her initial defensive reasoning, rather than externalizing the problem onto the client, Esme now wonders how the session might have gone differently had she located the tension in herself, in her own—perhaps mistaken—assumptions about the client. With praise from her peers, Esme has maintained confidence in her ability to challenge a difficult client, with good results. The discussion of her power struggle is not oversimplified by binary thinking. Esme's practice is not labeled "wrong," then contrasted with a "right" way to tutor. Rather, tutors have mined the situation for a variety—and thus a complexity—of interpretations. In dialogue with her peers, Esme is led to a productive conclusion about her role as a tutor, exemplifying double-loop thinking: she may not be able to change the behavior of a resistant client, but, with a heightened awareness of her own values, assumptions, and beliefs, she may be able to change *her* reaction to that behavior. If her earlier post is a fair indication, I would argue that Esme could not have analyzed her tutoring practices with this depth of sophistication without the discussion resulting from her initial post.

Importantly, as their blog posts illustrate, when focused explicitly on reflective thinking, writing center work is not reduced to a set of how-tos. Rather, the discussion explicates the principles and propositions supplied by expert knowledge, which govern tutoring practices. Affording relationships among experienced and novice writing assistants, dialogic reflection supports the development of a writing center community of practice. Discussion threads like the one above draw our attention to the discursive, transactional processes of learning among tutors. While we have structured tutor education with the notion that old-timers mentor newcomers, the distinctions regarding their relative levels of expertise are not predetermined. As Hsu and Roth observe in their study of science lab technicians and high school students, "who is in the know, who teaches whom, or who has power over someone else is the result of the processes at hand" (2). In the posts above, for example, experienced consultants, Michael and Carter, prompt Esme, a novice, to consider the necessity

of negotiating the agenda of a tutoring session with a client. At the same time, Esme initiates an opportunity for Michael and Carter to develop their own understandings of writing center theory and practice. As a result of his classroom presentation, another novice, Yll, prompts Carter, an old-timer, to investigate an issue Carter had not previously considered, the assumptions tutors and clients make about one another, and the effects those assumptions have on the tutorial. Their discussion demonstrates that knowledgeability is not constituted in the individual, in one's head, something mentor consultants impart to novices, or vice versa. Rather, the online discussion forum exemplifies what Hsu and Roth call "emergent expertise—knowledgeability that is not a property of individuals but the educational emergence produced during the dual transaction process between participants and mediated by different resources" (8). In other words, in a writing center community of practice, expertise is not possessed by individuals; rather, it is emergent within their transactions, mediated, not only by resources, such as expert knowledge supplied in the tutor-education course, but also by tools such as the blog. As their posts demonstrate, a communities-of-practice theory of learning brings to the fore the tacit and dynamic aspects of knowledge creation and sharing through dialogue among tutors. Participation in our writing center community is a primary learning event. At the same time, explicit teaching in the tutor-education course is an essential locus of learning. In dialogue—not only among themselves, but also through the expert knowledge of its teaching curriculum—consultants develop the shared repertoire essential to a writing center community of practice.

R. Mark Hall

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the writing assistants at California State University, Chico and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte for sharing their work and ideas so generously and for forwarding my thinking about the form and function of reflection in a writing center. I would also like to thank Thia Wolf, Kim Jaxon, Lil Brannon, Tony Scott, Ashlyn Williams, and the anonymous *Writing Center Journal* reviewers for their comments and advice on earlier versions of this manuscript.

NOTE

1. In addition to PeerCentered, a blog for writing consultants and others interested in writing centers to exchange ideas with colleagues from around the world, Jackie Grutsch McKinney has compiled a list of writing center blogs, some public, others internal (Gardner). McKinney's *Writing Lab Newsletter* column "Geek in the Center: Blogging" elaborates on the uses of blogs in writing centers.

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