Purdue Writing Lab/Purdue OWL Presentations

Purdue Writing Lab/Purdue OWL

2-2024

Expanding Landscapes: Intersections between Writing Center Work and Other Academic Fields

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Expanding Landscapes:
Intersections between Writing Center Work and Other Academic Fields

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ECWCA Conference 2024

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Generalist vs Specialist Tutors

Walker (1998): Genre theory as a middle ground

Gordon (2014): Genre to guide pedagogical strategies

Dinitz & Harrington (2014): Role & value of disciplinary expertise

Okuda (2017): Benefits and drawbacks of generalist tutoring

Swihart Jewell & Cheatle, Eds (2021): Multiple chapters on hiring and
training graduate consultants across disciplines

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(Vicki)

As you just heard, each of our panelists comes from a different academic field. Our presentation arose out of conversations we've had about the connections between those fields and the work they do at the Purdue OWL.

Writing centers often work with **writers** from disciplines across campus, but a **consulting staff** may or may not mirror that disciplinary variety, with many consultants coming from an English composition background. This has led, over the years, to much discussion in the field about generalist versus specialist tutors. In 1998, Kristin Walker proposed genre theory as a way to help fashion a middle ground between generalist and specialist tutoring. Layne Gordon picked this theme back up in 2014, the same year that Sue Dinitz and Susanmarie Harrington published research clarifying the role (and value) of disciplinary expertise in consultations. In 2017, Tomoyo Okuda clarified the varying usefulness of different generalist strategies, noting, in addition, a need for improved training of generalist consultants. More recently, in 2021, several chapters of Megan Swihart Jewell and Joseph Cheatle's book *Redefining Roles* explore issues related to hiring graduate consultants from across campus, including discussions of how to train them, but also raising once again the generalist versus specialist dichotomy.

We are not going to directly deal with this dichotomy today. The generalist-specialist conversation centers around what is best **for the writers**. Instead, we want to focus on a topic that has often been left out of the generalist-specialist conversation entirely: the specific intersections between the various academic homes of consultants and their writing center training and work, and, in particular, what these intersections might tell us about consultant education and the potential for cross-disciplinary collaborations.

Overview

- Context
- Client Agency
- Relationships/Interactions
- Session Protocols
- Implications

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I'll start with a brief look at our context so that you understand where the presenters are coming from, but then I'll turn it over to them to talk about client agency, relationships and interactions between clients and consultants, and session protocols. We'll end with a look at some implications of this work and have a time for questions.

Context

I began working at the Purdue OWL in the fall of 2012. At that time, graduate teaching assistants made up at least a third of our consultant staff. In any given year, we had around 17 GTAs. This portion of our staff was almost entirely composed of students from the English department, with an occasional student from another humanities department. Over the last decade, decreases in English department admittance rates have resulted in far fewer GTAs available to work at the OWL. Currently, we have 3 GTAs from English who are writing dissertations related to writing center work and 1 GTA from English with a focus on literature. While we have hired professional writing specialists who have filled some of the gap that has been left due to waning English admittances, we did not want to lose out on what GTAs bring to the OWL as a whole. So we put out a call campus-wide for GTAs who were looking for funding and who **also** had some sort of experiences with writing and mentoring students. Prospective applicants provided a copy of their CV, a cover letter that explained what they hoped to gain professionally from working for us as well as what they brought to the position, and a list of in-house references (for instance a Purdue professor with whom they had taken a class). I then interviewed potential hires from that pool. For the current year, we hired 3 GTAs from outside of English: one from counseling psychology; one from speech, language, hearing sciences; and one from math education.

A Cascade of Change

- Increased need for flexibility
- Adjustments to consultant education

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Changes in who we hired and how we did so had a cascading effect in how we operate and in how we educate graduate staff. First, hiring outside the English department resulted in a need for increased flexibility in how we operate. We could no longer assume that the GTAs would be available the entire week prior to the semester for orientation, nor that they would be able to set and keep a single consulting schedule for an entire semester. Their home departments tended to have requirements that did not necessarily play nicely with historical OWL practices. For instance, students in fields that required them to complete clinical hours in addition to classes might have two different schedules for a single semester due to shifting from one clinical assignment to another halfway through the semester. The need to work around class **plus** clinical hours also resulted in the need to allow longer runs of tutoring hours than formerly, up to 6 hours in a row rather than only three.

Second, the change in hiring practices also resulted in a change to educational practices. English GTAs took a 1-credit OWL practicum class their first semester, in addition to an entire week of orientation. This practice was in line with how the English department educated their graduate instructors. For GTAs outside of English, we had to reimagine the orientation week and practicum. For the current year, which has been our largest cohort of non-English GTAs, a two-day orientation replaced the full week, and a 5-week on-the-job training followed by once-a-week self-study and conversation with an experienced tutor replaced the 1-credit-hour class.

The focus of the education was primarily on understanding the logistics and pragmatics of writer consultations, developing the camaraderie and collaboration among consultants that writing centers tend to be known for, and instilling in the new consultants confidence in their ability to handle one-on-one sessions with writers. Once they began tutoring, they were introduced to more of the theory of writing center work, still as it related to the practice of it.

At various times during that first semester, all three of the new consultants expressed how they saw overlaps between the work they did in their own academic fields and the work they were being introduced to in the writing lab. These cross-disciplinary overlaps intrigued us– what were the similarities, what were the differences? How might the overlaps lend themselves to fruitful places for future cross-disciplinary collaboration? And, perhaps most immediately useful for me from an administrative standpoint, how might the overlaps point to a necessity for adjusting how we educate graduate consultants? What experiences do they bring from their own fields that would make them excellent consultants and what might they gain from their experiences with us that would contribute to their work in their own fields?

When we sat down to talk about this presentation, we realized that the areas of overlap coalesced around three primary areas: client agency, relationships or interactions between clients and consultants, and session protocols. Now I'll hand things over to the consultants themselves to share what they discovered.

Client Agency

(Lisa)

I'm a third year PhD student in math ed where some focuses are to research how students learn math, how to teach math, and various teaching and learning theories to support that. Here we're going to talk about parallels between client agency in the writing lab & student agency in math education.

Client Agency at OWL and in Math

OWL

- Transferring skills
- Scaffolding
- Finding their writer voice
- Confidence
- Working with writers at any stage

Math (Teaching)

- Transferring skills
- Scaffolding
- Finding their math identity
- Confidence
- Working with students at any stage

OWL

    A goal is for clients to take what they learned in sessions and apply them outside of OWL like in class or when they're writing independently
    Similarly, within a session, we encourage clients to practice skills throughout the session (scaffolding)
    We want clients to find their writer voice and be confident in writing abilities (Confidence)
    Lastly, we work with clients at any writer stage

Similarly in my math teaching experiences,
    My goal is for students to be able to take logical skills from class and use them in different contexts
    Use mathematical skills from class on their own
    Find their math identify & be confident in mathematical abilities
    And students come in with various math experience, so we work with them wherever they're at

Examples in Practice

Math Teaching	OWL tutoring
"I'm not a math person" narrative commonly heard in students	"I'm not a writer" narrative
Math is hard	Writing is hard
As an instructor, I hope students gain skills that they can apply outside of the classroom (e.g., logical reasoning and simplifying complex concepts)	As a tutor, I hope clients take skills from their sessions and apply them in their future writing experiences in addition to contexts outside of OWL
Encouraging students to explain their mathematical thinking and strategizing	Encouraging clients to explain parts of their writing and what they're trying to convey to the reader
Writing a proof or showing a math solution needs to be understandable and clear to whoever is reading it	As an OWL tutor and outside reader, my feedback for my clients includes writing clearly for their audience

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Here are specific examples from my math teaching experiences paralleled with some of my OWL tutoring sessions.
The first example is "I'm not a math person" which is commonly heard. Similarly, I've had OWL clients who start session with "I'm not writer, but I'd like help on_."

A common phrase I hear when "math" is mentioned is "math is hard"
I personally think writing is hard, but at OWL, clients explain writing challenges that they have like matching genre conventions or making sure that what they wrote matches a prompt

When I taught math and math ed courses, my goal was that students could take skills from their classes and apply them outside of the classroom
Similarly at OWL, a goal is for clients to take skills from sessions and apply them in contexts outside of OWL

When I teach math, I encourage students to explain their mathematical thinking and strategizing
Similarly in OWL, I encourage clients to explain their writing and how they're trying to convey their writing to their audience

Lastly, a math misconception is that it's a whole sheet of computation. But students are still expected to explain their strategizing clearly to whoever is reading it, like a grader, teacher, or peer.
Similarly in OWL, I encourage my client to consider their audience, especially since I'm likely an audience member outside of their field and convey their writing clearly.

Relationships/Interactions

(Vanessa)
Relationships and interactions are the face-to-face or virtual interfaces between writers and consultants. I'll also touch on how this concept (i.e., relationships/interactions) applies to my graduate level studies in counseling psychology.

Relationships/Interactions at the OWL

- Writer autonomy
- Relational approaches
- Skill building
- Essential tutor qualities

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Since working at the Purdue Owl, I've identified some foundational principles that speak to the importance of healthy and positive relationships and interactions between writers and consultants.

The first one being…

- Writer autonomy. This emphasizes the importance of allowing writers to direct their own work. At the Owl, we use strategies to help both establish and maintain writer control throughout the session. This can look like checking-in before the session begins to do some agenda setting, being curious about a writer's work and their writing process. All of which ensure that writers feel in control of their work and the session.
- We also use relational approaches by reducing the number of evaluative/directive comments and instead we opt for a collaborative approach that invites the writer's voice and their participation. So, again the use of questions, open-ended comments or feedback and adopting a neutral stance.
- Skill building incorporates practices that focus on developing writing skills rather than merely correcting errors or mistakes in their writing. For example, this can look like helping writers understand the difference between active and passive voice and sentence-verb agreement. Helps to build their skills to help them become more confident and independent writers.
- Finally, all these areas would be impossible without some essential tutor qualities - Empathy, patience, active listening, being genuine/authentic, and positive, sometimes using that positivity to be a cheerleader for writers.

Relationships/Interactions within Psychology

Relationship building and fostering healthy interactions is the heart of what we do!

- Common Factors Theory (Rosenzweig, 1936; Frank & Frank 1993)
- Person-centered
- Insight building
- Essential therapist qualities

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I've been pleasantly surprised by the overlap between the training I received to be a writing consultant and the graduate level training I'm receiving in counseling psychology. When it comes to relationships and interactions, it's really the heart of what we do. Within a counseling context, we try to foster healthy interactions by modeling and building strong therapeutic or working relationships with our clients is very important and essential to the field.

Just like being a writing consultant, we use similar foundational principles to establish connections with our clients. For instance, within psychology, there is a theory that suggests that many of the different approaches to counseling share common factors that account for much of the effectiveness of a psychological treatment. One of the common factors is the therapeutic alliance or relationship, which accounts for much of the effectiveness of counseling. So similar to writing consultants, we also take a relational approach.

One way that we apply a relational approach, much like a writing consultant is by being person-centered. In that perspective, the client leads and the therapist follows. This is similar to the work we do at the Owl because the writer leads and guides the session, while the consultant follows their lead.

Like skill building or scaffolding in a writing context, within psychology we also work to build our clients' insight into their presenting concern. We do this by fostering self-recognition and growth to support treatment goals.

Finally, all of these areas would be impossible without some essential therapist qualities - Empathy, patience, genuine, and active listening and unconditional positive regard (Showing complete support and acceptance of a person)

Differences in Relationships/Interactions

- Length of Time
  - A single *writing* session may be enough
  - Several *therapy* sessions are needed
- Negotiating Session Goals
  - *Writing centers* cannot accommodate all requests
  - *Therapy* has greater flexibility to accommodate clients

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When it comes to relationships and interactions, there is a lot of overlap between the work psychologists do and what writing consultants do. However, there are also some fundamental differences.

For example, the length of time. It's quite common for one writing session to be enough for a writer to perhaps feel more confident with their writing or to accomplish their goals or get more support on their assignment. However, that is rarely if ever the case in counseling psychology. Several sessions are typically needed to help clients accomplish their treatment goals. The reason for that is the first session is where we get to know the client better and we ask a lot of background questions. We refer to this as an intake.

A second area of difference is how we negotiate session goals. There are instances where a writer's goals may be different from the goals of the writing lab. A really common example of this is requests for editing or when a writer wants the tutor to do the work for them. Due to the nature and goals of writing centers, those requests cannot always be accommodated, especially if alternative ways of supporting the writer have been offered but the writer is still insistent upon not doing their own work. Given the boundaries and limits of writing centers, not all writer requests can be accommodated.

Where as, in counseling psychology for the most part, there is greater flexibility in accommodating client's goals. For example, if a client is insistent upon taking the session in a particular manner or if they do not like a therapist's suggestions, that's okay, we can continue to work with them, we may explore their hesitancy, but we can continue to work with them. Only in extreme cases will a therapist not accommodate a client's goals or request, but those are more extreme and for the most part there is great flexibility.

Session Protocols

(Ashley)

Before I begin, I would like to take a moment to briefly introduce the field of speech-language pathology. One widely known part of this profession is helping children with the pronunciation of speech sounds like /r/. While that is something speech-language pathologists certainly do, they also work in schools, hospitals, and outpatient clinics with people of all ages to evaluate, diagnose, and treat a wide variety of concerns. Some populations that benefit from speech-language pathology services include adults experiencing difficulty with understanding and producing language or speaking clearly after a stroke or brain injury, individuals with impaired swallowing due to neurological causes or cancer treatment, and children who are having difficulty with reading and writing or meeting language development milestones.

I began my work at the Writing Lab the same semester I began my graduate program in speech-language pathology. Going into the semester, I found a parallel between my two roles. As a student clinician, I would be supporting clients with their communication across the lifespan, while as a tutor, I would be supporting writers across the lifespan of a document. While at first this seemed like a more abstract connection, I quickly found that my roles as a tutor and clinician had much in common. One area where I especially see these similarities is in the protocols followed in both writing tutorials and therapy sessions. Sessions in the Writing Lab and therapy sessions in the speech, language, and hearing clinic follow similar formats, where there is a period of preparation, a 45-60 minute one-on-one session with a client, and a period of documentation afterward.

Before a Session: Client History

OWL
Appointment information:

- Name, major, language
- Course number, professor
- Stage of the writing process and specific concerns
- Attached document
- Previous client report forms

A few minutes to prepare

SLP
Chart review & lesson plan:

- Assessments and imaging
- Physician referral
- Previous provider notes
- Established goals and progress

A few days to a week to prepare

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Prior to a Writing Lab session, I can get a sense of the client's goals from the information they provided upon scheduling the appointment. At the very least, I know their name, major, and the language they speak away from campus. I may also have the course number and professor corresponding to the document they are working on, as well as the stage in the writing process they are at and a brief summary of their concerns. Sometimes they have already uploaded a document that I can start reviewing, and if time allows, I can look at past client report forms to get a sense of the history of that document or the writer. Similarly, prior to a therapy session, I would review the available information for the client. There may be an extensive history including assessment results and imaging findings, established goals and the progress being made toward them, and previous and ongoing interventions. Other times, there is simply a referral with limited description of the client's symptoms.

The primary difference between my preparation for OWL and therapy clients is the amount of time and detail involved. While I can have a successful tutoring session with only a few minutes to review the client's history in between back-to-back appointments, a therapy session can involve hours of reviewing charts and creating a lesson plan several days ahead of time that describes what goals will be targeted and how. Despite these differences, no matter the amount of information I have beforehand, in both writing lab work and therapy, I need to be able to adapt to whatever the client needs when we actually sit down together and start discussing their concerns.

After a Session: Documenting the Encounter

At the end of both an OWL session and a therapy session, documentation is key, although it serves different purposes in each field. Both disciplines have documentation that tells a story of progress that was made, the initial concerns that led to the encounter, and potential steps to take in the future.

At the OWL, the client report form is a way of keeping a record of sessions and communicating takeaways directly to the client using a first-person perspective. My process involves commending the writer on what they are doing well, describing what we worked on together, providing any resources and recommendations I think would be applicable to them, and encouraging them to return for appointments in the future if needed.

On the other hand, a clinical note, called a SOAP note, is written in the third-person and documents progress toward goals while justifying services to insurance companies. In a SOAP note you might see something along the lines of "Client is a 42 year old female presenting to the clinic for complaints of hoarse vocal quality." This note derives its name from the subjective information from the client's self-report, objective data collected during the session, an analysis and assessment of that data, and a plan for the future. It is intended to be brief and concise, often including abbreviations and excluding articles.

Both client report forms and SOAP notes help me to reflect on a session, including the strategies I employed and the progress the client made toward the goals established at the beginning of the session.

In the Session: Setting the Agenda

"I'd like to work on making my graduate school personal statement more concise."

"Client will demonstrate accurate production of /r/ 80% of the time."

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A Writing Lab session and a therapy session start in similar ways. An agenda is set to give the client an idea of what to expect and to effectively manage time from the beginning.

In a tutorial, the client presents their concerns and priorities and the agenda is constructed around those. In a therapy session, the client presents their concerns and priorities and the clinician takes them into account along with formal assessments and clinical judgment to establish specific short-term and long-term goals. A writer may come to a session saying, "I'd like to work on making my graduate school personal statement more concise" or "I need help writing an introduction and thesis statement" and the session develops from that foundation. A therapy session, on the other hand, is oriented toward more formal goals that the clinician crafts, such as "Client will demonstrate accurate production of /r/ 80% of the time." It is important to note that the client's preferences and priorities are still considered as the direction of therapy takes shape. Part of providing evidence-based practice is taking into account not only what the clinician sees as the best path forward due to their clinical experience and the available evidence, but also the client's perspective.

Just as a therapy session is not entirely dictated by the clinician, a tutorial's direction is not solely determined by the client. While the client's vision for their document is the driving force behind a tutorial, the tutor can offer input when defining goals. For example, if a writer has asked me to help them with their APA citations but I have questions about significant aspects of the organization of their paper, I might let them know what I have noticed and ask if they would like to discuss it along with their primary concerns. The control is still in the writer's hands, and it is important not to overstep, but I can encourage them to consider other opportunities to improve their document and grow their skills.

In the Session: Assessment

OWL

The "first read-through"

How is the writer responding?

SLP

Informal and formal assessment

Data collection

Meeting the client where they are at today

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Once the agenda is set, a period of informal "assessment" begins. In a Writing Lab session, I typically do a first read-through with the client where one of us reads the entire document or sections of the document aloud before discussing it. During this time, I am paying attention not only to the organization, flow, structure, and grammar, but also to the way the client is reading their own work or how they are responding to me reading their work. Those observations along with their stated objectives for the session guide our focus.

Similarly, when I first meet with a therapy client, the first few minutes are important to get a sense of where they are at on that particular day and how that might affect our work together. This might look like having a simple conversation about their day during which I can pay attention to the clarity of their speech sounds, quality of their voice, and symmetry and movement of their face. In other situations, particularly with a new client, a more formal assessment might be warranted. This could involve methods like administering a standardized test, giving the client a questionnaire to fill out, or observing them perform exercises.

The assessment is important in both situations because, even if there is an agenda or goal in place, how the client is presenting in the moment may alter the path taken toward meeting those goals.

Throughout a therapy session, it is important to continue taking "data" such as the number of accurate productions of a speech sound, the number of opportunities given to produce the sound, and the level of support provided for each of those productions. This is used to determine whether a skill has been mastered and whether a certain intervention is working. This quantitative definition of success is not present in a tutorial, where success is more so determined by how the writer feels about their document at the end of the session.

In the Session: Intervention

OWL

SLP

Modeling

Cueing

Self-Assessment

Interactive approach

Directive approach
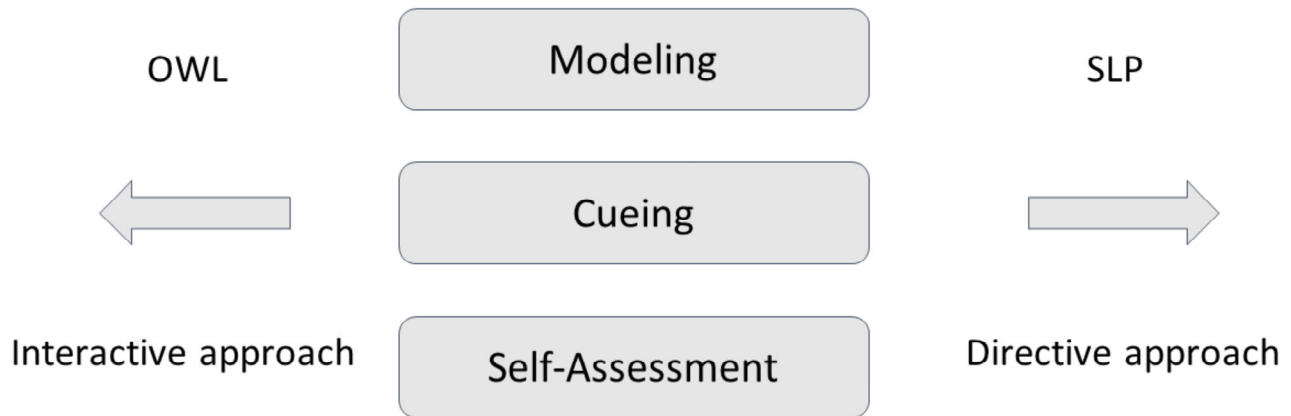
After that initial read-through or assessment begins the intervention. Despite this being the most technical aspect of the process, this is actually where I see the greatest similarity between these fields. Whether I am tutoring a writer or treating a therapy client, I am continually drawing on creativity, empathy, and patience. Many of the concepts that inform my clinical practice also show up in tutorials.

In both OWL work and therapy, modeling of concepts is a very important tool. In a tutorial I might model a grammar concept or a convention of a genre, such as a passive versus active voice or the use of bullet points on a resume rather than paragraphs. In a similar vein, I might model the proper production of a sound or a swallowing maneuver for a client in therapy.

Another important consideration during both types of sessions is the appropriate amount of cueing to use. When providing therapy, using sound or meaning cues is helpful for eliciting speech, but those should be used only when the client is not able to do something independently. In a tutorial, I am careful to not overstep and to let the client try things before I ask a question or offer a suggestion, but I am always there for support.

Lastly, I find myself asking both OWL and therapy clients to assess their own progress before I offer direct feedback. After reading through the writer's work together, I almost always ask them to tell me their thoughts before I give my own so as not to influence their opinion. In a therapy session, I often ask clients to rate a sound they just produced to get a sense of their awareness of their own errors and ability to self-correct.

While these tools represent an area of significant overlap, the way those tools are used is a fundamental difference in the two fields. I am far more directive in my role as a student clinician, whereas I aim for a more interactive approach while tutoring. Since I was learning how to be a tutor at the same time I was learning how to be a clinician, this difference in approaches was something I had to consciously reconcile. My first clinical supervisor actually told me I needed to be more assertive, and I realized I was taking on therapy a bit too much like a tutorial!

Vanessa and Lisa have described the importance of building strong relationships with clients and promoting client autonomy in both writing center work and their respective disciplines. Those are common threads in my discipline as well. Attending speech therapy or a writing tutorial can be vulnerable for clients, and no matter the intervention being utilized, empowering the client with education and encouragement is at the center of a session.

In the Session: Next Steps

"Until the next document!"

"It is recommended that the client be discharged from services."

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Both Writing Lab sessions and therapy sessions end with the establishment of next steps. For an OWL client, this may be a summary of improvements to consider for the document and an invitation to schedule another appointment. In therapy, this might look like the assigning of "homework" and arranging the next session. Next steps might also include being discharged from services or referred to another provider.

If all goes according to plan, there should come a time when my speech therapy clients should never have to see me again because they have met their goals, and they can communicate effectively with their loved ones or enjoy their favorite foods safely. Initially I brought that same mindset to my tutoring approach. Since tutors strive to improve writers and not just writing, if I have clients returning to the Writing Lab assignment after assignment, am I doing my job? Am I providing them with the right tools to use on their own? As I have continued working as a tutor, engaging with more clients, and learning from my fellow tutors, I have come to realize that visiting the Writing Lab is part of the writing process for some clients rather than being indicative of some problem that needs to be fixed. I think that the clinical mindset I bring to tutoring helps me to meet client needs, but it also means that I must be vigilant against pathologizing writing.

Implications

- Adjust consultant education
- Seek contributions from other disciplines

(Vicki)

The work that we've done here is a **very initial** exploration of overlaps that might exist between writing center work and other academic disciplines, but I think it has some implications for the writing center field. What comes most immediately to mind is the need to become more overt in our consultant education about the overlaps that might exist between consultants' disciplinary homes and the work they do at the OWL. When we hired primarily English majors, we often talked during training about the similarities and differences between teaching and tutoring or between creative writing workshopping and tutoring. When we hired Lisa, Vanessa, and Ashley, I didn't know enough about their fields of study to even think to overtly draw those connections. Happily, they did this themselves without much prompting from me. Helping new hires draw connections between their past experiences in their own field of study and how sessions at the OWL work can contribute some immediate confidence as they first begin tutoring; at the same time, it will be important to identify places where the two fields operate with different assumptions so as to circumvent potential problems. Unless both new consultants and the administrators who hire them are thinking about connections, overlaps, and intersections, both the useful similarities and the problematic differences may go unrecognized in time to provide early support or to prevent problems.

Another implication is that such intersections might serve as a way to adjust how writing centers operate. The three fields represented here are all person-centric, and Ashley and Vanessa's fields, in particular, conduct one-on-one sessions much like a writing center does. What might we as a field learn about interacting with individuals and negotiating their

agendas by entering into conversations with other person-centric disciplines to learn where the differences lie and to what effect? Writing consulting is about writing and writers, yes, but it is also person-to-person interaction, and the success or failure of any given appointment with a writer depends at least partially on the success or failure of the relational interactions. Collaboration across disciplines to examine the relational aspects of writing support would seem to provide fruitful avenues of inquiry.

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Questions?

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