Maintaining Professional and Ethical Boundaries during Mobile Consultations

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Hello everyone, and welcome to my individual presentation today, titled “Maintaining Professional and Ethical Boundaries during Mobile Consultations.” I define “mobile consulting” as face-to-face writing-related consultations taking place outside of the designated writing center space. In the digital age, writing centers are impacted by ever-increasing technological advancements that provide opportunities for a wider variety of writing center services, including mobile consulting. No longer must writing center consultations between peers take place in the formal location of a university writing center and under the supervision of writing center managers. Instead, consultations can conceivably take place anywhere—perhaps even outside of the university altogether. In exploring alternate boundaries of a Writing Center, the question becomes how a “writing center” can maintain professional and ethical boundaries between student writers and writing consultants, without the sense of professionalism imposed by the physical boundaries of official writing center locations. In order to answer this question, I draw upon pertinent writing center scholarship on ethics and professionalism, as well as the results of my own small-scale autoethnographic study examining student and consultant opinions about mobile consulting, as well as my own mobile consultation experiences.

I feel that I can use my own experience as evidence in this presentation because I have been a Writing Center Consultant for two years at IPFW. And prior to the spring break of last year, the Writing Center had been located in the second floor of our library. We had a designated space for the “Writing Center,” in which consultants worked with students in cubicles. There were five of them, each with a desktop computer that we were expected to incorporate into our consultation practices, one additional cubicle for a lead consultant, and a designated workspace for the director. Overall, the space may not have been exactly “comfortable,” as you can see in the video, in that it was a bit impersonal, but it had a very professional atmosphere that
facilitated efficient and on-task consultations, and resources such as citation manuals and style guides were handily available. In addition, the carrels provided a reliable place to work with students, and was symbolic of the Writing Center’s authority as a designated academic space where students could receive reliable information. When I first began working in the writing center in the fall of 2013, I was trained to expect to conduct my consultations in this designated space, and I thus built my consultation practices around this space.

Thus, prior to the spring of 2014, the IPFW Writing Center had a definite designated space in which students expected to have privacy and access to a computer. After spring break, however, our writing center moved to the first floor of the Library, and we were limited to only two or three carrels. Sometimes more writing center consultants would be working with students than there were available carrels, and thus we began experimenting with mobile consultations. Our university purchased iPads for us to use, and the writing center consultants received one session of training to use the iPads. The philosophy behind the iPads was that it would “free” us from the constraints of the designated space of the Writing Center so that we could theoretically work anywhere.

I found this change to be disruptive, because not only did I have to revise and adapt my writing center practices, but it didn’t fit with what Jackie Grutsch McKinny calls our “writing center grand narrative,” where there was an expectation on the part of students and writing center consultants for quiet, private places that were designated for use by the writing center, and that would be furnished with a computer. As part of my new mobile consultation practices, I no longer could depend on having the quiet and private designated space in the cubicle—I still worked within the boundaries of the library, but I had to look for a place to work with students in areas designated for studying. In her book Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers Grutsch
McKinney defines a writing center as a “comfortable, iconoclastic place where all students go to get one-to-one tutoring on their writing” (3), and she writes that “part of what distinguishes writing center work from composition… is the site; writing can happen anywhere, but writing center work implies a set location—a writing center” (20). She writes further that “to be read as a writing center, a space needs to have a particular array of objects. Most spaces are like this. Users have expectations about what a space will have in it and what it won’t have” (21). The point of Grutsch McKinney’s book, however, is to find aspects of the writing center which move away from this “grand narrative” in order to develop flexible writing center practices that accommodate the different needs of writing center patrons. But the fixed location and “center” aspect of what we think of as “Writing Centers” is such a fundamental part of our writing center practices. Is it even possible to maintain our professional and ethical standards without the “center?”

At this point, I feel that it would be appropriate to provide definitions for professionalism and ethics in the writing center, which often go hand-in-hand. Professionalism is a code of conduct or approved set of behaviors that demonstrate a high level of competence, commitment, or expertise. Ethics are moral principles. According to the professional standards set forth by Leigh Ryan and Lisa Zimmerelli in their book *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, “being engaged in a professional activity has ethical implications for [a writing center consultant’s] behavior…it influences how a writing tutor conducts him or herself as part of a group, how a writing tutor relates to other tutors, and how a tutor functions as a representative of the writing center. Tutoring involves both responsibility and trust…To make apprehensive writers feel more comfortable, writing centers tend to deliberately project an inviting, relaxed atmosphere. Tutors reflect this ambience through their casual friendliness. Occasionally, however, tutors may be
tempted to behave in too casual a manner, forgetting for the moment the professional nature of tutoring…” Ryan and Zimmerelli go on to devote the first chapter of their book to professionalism and ethics in the writing center, with advice on such topics as maintaining professionalism towards writers, other tutors, and teachers by moderating one’s tone of voice, maintaining a friendly persona, maintaining professional posture and moderating one’s clothing choices, and choosing the words one says carefully. Much of the available literature on writing center theory describes correct professional comportment and ethical behavior as a balancing act of multiple such considerations, but researchers also pay particular attention to the professional and ethical considerations of how much information a tutor should share with students during consultations. Researchers like Peter Carino, Steven J. Corbett, and David Bringhurst separately argue that nondirective approaches to tutoring should be balanced with a tutor’s power and authority in peer tutoring situations, so as not to exacerbate role confusion in nondirective tutoring. In my own methods, I always walk a fine line in the way I comport myself, balancing my status as a graduate student peer with my status as someone endowed with writing-related knowledge and authority. Despite the available literature on Writing Center Grand Narratives, and IPFW’s own writing center ethos of collaborative peer tutoring, I find that many students that I work with see me as “other” from them because that I am someone with answers they need. In addition, IPFW’s writing center practice of distributing summary letters at the end of each visit also grants me a level of power and authority, especially in light of the fact that some instructors assign grades or credit for these letters.

Writing Center director Tom MacLennan calls this balancing act “the narrow ridge” in collaborative learning. But how can this “narrow ridge” be negotiated? In his essay “The Use of Force: Medical Ethics and Center Practice,” Jay Jacoby uses a doctor-patient metaphor to
describe the relationship between a consultant and writer. Jacoby says that this mutual participation/contractual model obliges student writers and peer consultants to take active roles in the decision-making process. Writers must honestly elaborate their intentions to the best of their ability and must also be prepared to explore actively any alternatives and be responsible not only for making decisions, but also for explaining them. Peer consultants must be sure that writers are informed of and understand the choices open to them, and that the writer has made those choices freely. This doctor-patient metaphor for the tutor-tutee relationship satisfies the ethical and professional goal of assisting writers to find satisfactory resolutions to their writing-related concerns while lessening the potential for plagiarism.

Now that a theoretical foundation to professional and ethical considerations during writing consultations has been established, how does a writing consultant, especially one interested in mobile consultations, manage to balance this “narrow ridge” of professional and ethical comportment with establishing a personable accord between student writer and peer tutor? To answer this question, I will offer examples from my own experience, and from the results of a small-scale case study on mobile consulting. As part of my own writing center persona, I try to use humor to counterbalance the impersonal and forbidding qualities associated with academia. For example, I explain rhetorical analysis with amusing explanations and funny, yet memorable, examples. Pamela Farrell-Childers agrees with this methodology in her essay “A Unique Learning Environment,” writing that: “A sense of camaraderie and sharing together is an important part of the writing center atmosphere. Laughter is not foreign to writing enters; in fact, some of the best learning occurs once anxieties are lessened in a comfortable atmosphere conducive to learning” (112). Through humor, I attempt to bridge the gap between my statuses as an authority figure and as a fellow student, and I counterbalance this method with subliminal
emblems of my authority: I try to dress nicely for work, wearing nice jeans paired with a business casual blouse. I never wear sweats to work. I also make sure that I wear a nametag, which is symbolic of authority in the library—that I am part of the “academic institution,” and have authority to distribute writing-related information. Gutrusch McKinny calls this image of a writing center consultant as “iconoclastic,” in that it “requires us to be irregular and non-academic, firmly astraddle the boundaries dividing academic culture from the rest of America.” It is important, however, to recognize that the writing center is indeed an academic institution, and by virtue of its status as an “institution,” it must uphold articulated academic and professional standards. I argue that in order to counterbalance the informal atmosphere of mobile consulting, it is important that writing consultants ensure that they fulfill these professional and academic standards by being conscious of the way they comport themselves with students.

From March 16 to April 1, I conducted a mini auto-ethnographic case study, in which I surveyed some of my fellow consultants and student patrons of the writing center. I also participated in mobile consultations with students, based on the student’s willingness to work outside of the official writing center location. Thirteen students were surveyed as to how they felt about mobile consulting, and in general, I received ambivalent responses. Ten out of thirteen students expressed that they did not have a preference on where they worked, so long as they were able to have a successful face-to-face writing consultation. Two students expressed that they preferred working in cubicles, and one expressed a preference for mobile consulting over the designated writing center space. From my results, I found that students generally do not allow the physical space of where a writing consultation takes place to interfere with the consultation itself—they place more weight on conducting the consultation effectively. But does the physical location of the writing center truly matter when it comes to maintaining ethical and
professional boundaries between consultant and student? In the end, it is important to maintain a barrier of professionalism between student and consultant, because the consultant is liable for information distributed to students, especially when grades are involved. However, I have found this barrier to be semi-permeable—negotiable, if you will,

The move away from a permanent writing center location and toward mobile consulting is jarring, especially to consultants like me who are used to the metanarrative of the writing center as a comfortable and permanent space. Many university writing centers express concerns about space availability and budgeting, and mobile consulting may be a feasible answer to these concerns. I found that mobile consultation is just as likely to be successful as a consultation conducted in the writing center, because that success is very much dependent upon the interaction between writer and consultant. However, there are some things that can help contribute to the likelihood of a successful consultation. Students and consultants need minimal distractions and outside interference while conducting a face-to-face sessions, to be sure, but if as long as a consultant continues to comport himself or herself in a professional fashion, as defined by respectful interaction, flexibility with consulting practices to fit the needs of individual students, and accommodating the university’s need for documentation, then the results from my study seem to indicate that mobile consultations can be sufficiently professional and ethical. However, it will be important to make sure that the peer tutors who work in university writing centers are sufficiently trained. I will end my presentation today with a call for more research in alternative methods of writing center consultation, and particularly those that re-define the physical space of university writing centers. Thank you.