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**You Want Me to Do What?**

**Directive vs. Non-Directive Consulting in Writing Centers**

**PROBLEM**

“The mission of the IPFW Writing Center is to help writers learn to use language more effectively, produce clear writing appropriate to their purposes and audiences, and develop positive attitudes about writing and about themselves as writers.” In other words, the Writing Center is an important co-curricular site for learning to write well via a non-directive approach, where assistance is provided to undergraduate and graduate students.

In understanding the purpose of the Writing Center, one must understand the differences between directive and non-directive consulting. Directive consulting is focused on developing a better paper and solely concerned with the success of the product. Non-directive consulting, on the other hand, is focused on developing better writers and increasing their knowledge. This approach is centered on achieving success through the process. While some direction from the tutor is required within both models, being directive (as opposed to non-directive) implies the consultant’s control over the process and product. This is at best disrespectful and at worst plagiarism.

The benefits of utilizing the Writing Center are well established; however, a disconnect frequently exists between the expectations of student writers and the services offered within the Writing Center. Student writers sometimes expect consultants to edit their papers or to direct their composition efforts, whereas consultants are trained to encourage the student to maintain complete control of their writing. This is the essential difference between a directive and a non-directive approach. We will attempt to bridge this gap in understanding through an analysis of existing models, being directive (as opposed to non-directive) implies the consultant’s control over the process and product. This is at best disrespectful and at worst plagiarism.

The mission of the IPFW Writing Center is to help writers learn to use language more effectively, produce clear writing appropriate to their purposes and audiences, and develop positive attitudes about writing and about themselves as writers.” In other words, the Writing Center is an important co-curricular site for learning to write well via a non-directive approach, where assistance is provided to undergraduate and graduate students.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

**SOURCES OF CONFUSION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satre and Trabz (1988)</td>
<td>• explain the educational methods utilized in writing centers by peer tutors (non-directive) as contradictory to those used in the classroom by instructors (directive)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• highlight judgment vs. non-judgment (respectively)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• posit that writers maintain greater control and authority in a non-directive environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trimbur (2008)</td>
<td>• acknowledges that the phrase “peer tutor” is a paradox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• tutors are given authority over peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• students expect a more directive approach from an authority figure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boyd and Halbeck (2011)</td>
<td>• argue for a balance between directive and non-directive approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• outline that some situations may require more directive techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• put the onus on tutors to understand when this switch is appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clark (1995)</td>
<td>• asserts that a timeline of development exists for writers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• directive interactions may be necessary for less advanced students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• non-directive interactions gradually build upon and reinforce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• concepts that have already been internalized by students</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• contends that flexibility is a benefit of a non-directive environment</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• tutors model productive writing behaviors</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**NEITHER SOLELY DIRECTIVE NOR NON-DIRECTIVE**

- Non-directive interactions gradually build upon and reinforce concepts that have already been internalized by students.
- Tutors model productive writing behaviors.

**CONSULTANT EDUCATION IS IMPERATIVE**

Shannon and Brito (2008)

- Reinforce the concept that directive and non-directive approaches often go hand in hand.
- Clarify when to switch between the two approaches.
- Undergraduate writing curricula provide opportunities for growth of an overarching skill set.
- Effective graduate-level writing requires the adoption of a specific discourse, often best managed in a more directive way.

**POSSIBLE OPPORTUNITIES FOR CLARIFICATION**

Adkins (2011)

- Advocates for the use of workshops.
- For staff and faculty (as the most effective links to the student body).
- For students (often at the behest of specific instructors).
- Suggests that exposure to the writing center space, staff, and procedures allows for stakeholders to understand what actually takes place in a consultation.

**SOLUTIONS**

**COMMUNICATION**

The primary solution seems to consist of greater communication about the writing center:

- Who are we here to assist.
- What are we able to do with our writers.
- When can we provide assistance within the composition process.
- Where do we see ourselves within the larger educational ecosystem.
- Why do writers choose to utilize our services.
- How do we do what we do.

One of the most effective ways we have to share this information is through a mission statement. The IPFW Writing Center, as you have seen, has crafted a mission statement that clearly explains our answers to these questions and more. However, misconceptions about the Writing Center are difficult to counter via one-way communication.

**EDUCATION**

The secondary solution involves a direct conversation between the writing center and its stakeholders. One example of such an interaction is the orientation. Frequently used to educate students about what to expect from a non-directive consultation, they may prove integral to facilitating instructor comfort with our work as well. These workshops, held for the benefit of faculty and staff, make tangible what was previously only theoretical. Our mission is clear if those involved understand its function; non-directive consultations, where the student maintains control over their paper, provide students with the opportunity to learn techniques that they can apply to future papers.

**CONCLUSION**

Despite the barriers that can arise from using a non-directive style, the staff of the IPFW Writing Center advocates for and utilizes a direct but non-directive approach to consulting. As outlined in the mission statement, we seek to help the student become a better writer overall rather than simply providing assistance on an assignment-by-assignment basis. We believe that a non-directive approach best achieves this goal by helping the writer think about his or her own writing process, knowledge that can then be applied to successive compositional efforts.

**“I just want you to quickly look over my paper for grammar issues. How long can that take?”**

**“Can you just tell me what to write?”**

**“I’m not sure you understand what it is that we do…”**

**“What exactly do you mean when you say ‘grammar issues’?”**

**“I’m not sure you understand what exactly do you mean…”**

**“I’m not sure you understand what it is that we do….”**

Audrey Whetstone • Nalani Keeslar • Sara Jackson | The IPFW Writing Center