

Writing Center Work as a Social and Collaborative Act of Reflection

When I began my work in the writing center at the University of Denver, my largest concern was, and to some extent still is, navigating the inherent difficulty in helping a student to produce a better paper without simply editing the paper for the student. In a reflection I wrote for one of my first consultations, I described the discomfort in what I perceived as taking on an authoritative role and critiquing or correcting a paper. I enjoyed working with fellow students, but I had anxiety concerning my own presence in the consultation. I was fearful of ‘taking over’ and inserting my own voice into someone else’s work, but I really wanted to help the student feel confident about their paper and in their ability as a writer. So, I began each consultation asking the student what their goals for the session were, but that was the only set moment. Therefore, each consultation was an exercise in improvisation as I sought to make each and every consultation unique; it was exhausting and so I quickly decided I needed more tools in my metaphorical toolbox. In my conversations with professors, other peer tutors, and in my research I fortuitously stumbled upon and resonated with the concept of reflection as a part of the writing process. In this presentation, I will explore reflection and how it has the potential to transform writing center consultations into a social and collaborative act of reflection.

Reflection is widely recognized in the field of composition studies as a tool for the transfer of knowledge and metacognition. However, defining reflection can be quite difficult as it can mean revision, it can be a form of self-assessment, it can be an analysis of learning, it can be done individually or it can be done collaboratively, it can mean all of this or it can be something else entirely. For the purpose of this presentation, Kathleen Blake Yancey’s explanation of reflection will serve as the parameters in which I discuss reflection. Yancey writes, “Reflection, then, is the dialectical process by which we develop and achieve, first, specific goals for

learning; second, strategies for reaching those goals; and third, means of determining whether or not we have met those goals or other goals.” (78). Despite the accepted understanding of reflection as an inherent element of the writing process, many students find reflection difficult because they do not perceive it as “an integral part of their processes and practices” (Taczak 79). Reflection aids in resilience for writers as it encourages a continuing process of self-assessment. By considering the intentionality and function of rhetorical choices, a writer is better equipped to transfer knowledge to different rhetorical situations. Furthermore, in the writing center it is commonly understood that we are creating better writers, not better papers. [Accordingly, shouldn't writing center consultations aid students in not only understanding the invaluable nature of reflection, but also how to best incorporate reflection into their writing process?](#)

The social act of conversing with a peer on the subject of a student's writing in order to produce better writers, is not a new concept to writing center pedagogy. What is different is the context in which these conversations are understood. A collaborative conversation in which both parties are actively and equally engaged by explaining and questioning is a social act. These collaborative conversations are in opposition to the concept of illegitimate collaboration which occurs between a peer tutor and a student when the peer tutor gives the answers rather than asking questions. Illegitimate collaboration places the peer tutor in an authoritative role since it is assumed that the peer tutor knows the answers and is giving the answers to the student. So, a student who brings a piece of their writing to the writing center is not necessarily expecting to work with a professor or another authority; they are looking to work with a peer with whom they can converse.

Kate Kostelnik writes about the value of these conversations, saying: “A conversation where a writer puts forth and explains her thinking is nearly the same thing as the composing

process. Conversation is not *just* a means to an end; it's a means *to* writing itself" (132).

Conversations in this context are therefore a social and collaborative part of the writing process between a peer tutor and the student in the writing center. These conversations have a prominent place in writing center pedagogy, and perhaps by using these conversations as invitations for reflection the student can leave the writing center not only with a better paper, but with a better sense of who she is as a writer.

I believe that the conversations in the writing center already have an implicit element of reflection. A student who arrives at the writing center has already begun the process of reflecting by identifying a piece of writing that she needs help with. Furthermore, by asking a student to set goals for the consultation, the peer tutor is beginning the conversation with a question that requires the student to think critically and reflectively about the paper as well as her own writerly identity. Kathleen Blake Yancey writes: "If we want students to be reflective, we will have to invite them to be so, may need to reflect with them. Reflection, like language itself, is social as well as individual" (53). This concept of reflection being social is intriguing to me as it pertains to the social and collaborative conversations in the writing center. As I have discussed how reflection is an implicit element of a consultation, the next step in this conversation is how to make reflection not only an explicit part of these consultations, but how to invite the student to reflect with us.

In searching for methods to incorporate reflection explicitly into writing center conversations, I return to Kostelnik's article where she writes: "Reflection is tied to questioning - another central tenet of writing center pedagogy that helps writers think critically about their texts as well as supporting them with inquiries that keep them writing" (138). By teaching peer tutors how to question students about their writing in order to instigate reflection, peer tutors gain

another tool for their toolbox that benefits the writer and aids in preventing illegitimate collaboration.

In exploring methods of reflective questioning, I once again draw on Kathleen Yancey and her conception of reflective writing. Yancey outlines the three processes of reflective writing as: “1) Goal-setting, revisiting, refining; 2) Text-revising in the light of retrospection; 3) The articulating of what learning has taken place” (6). In understanding the purpose of each process, which in the interest of time I will not be going into, it is possible to use open-ended questions to instigate collaborative and reflective conversations about the student’s writing. Therefore, I have used these processes to frame a consultation that explicitly brings Yancey’s description of the reflective process into the social and collaborative conversations in the writing center.

The first step is an approach already commonly used by peer tutors in the writing center: asking the student what their goals for the consultation are. This question asks the student to reflect on the current state of his text and to critically assess what he thinks needs to be addressed in the consultation. It also asks the student to evaluate himself as a writer by identifying areas that need improvement. In using this strategy myself, I find it is easy to allow this first step to take an insignificant role in the consultation even when I believe it may be the most important. For example, when asked what a student’s goals for the session are, a student may respond “grammar” or “proof-reading.” In the past, I have tried to dissuade a student from this approach by reverting to the writing center policy that we do not proof read papers. However, I have found that asking more specific questions which require active engagement from the student allows the student to reflect on and assess his own writing. For example, one of the most common goals that I encounter is simply stated as “grammar.” I will immediately ask the student to specify areas of concern within that goal with questions such as: Are you concerned with commas or sentence

structure? Can you identify a specific example in the paper? What makes you concerned about this example? Can you explain your understanding of this concept outside of this example?

The second step in this approach would be to take the rhetorical strategies discussed in the previous conversation and to apply them elsewhere in the student's writing. In following with the previous example of the student concerned with grammar, a discussion on the use commas may feel productive, but the next step is to ask the student to apply the new knowledge independently to other areas in their writing. I have found that leaving the student to revise a few paragraphs on their own during a consultation is an effective tactic as it encourages the student to immediately apply his new knowledge as a form of reflective revision. As a peer tutor, this tactic also encourages me to take a step back in order to ensure the student's ownership of the paper. An essential goal for this step is the student's sense of agency in their writing. In avoiding illegitimate collaboration, it is critical that the student understands the revisions and does not feel disenfranchised from his own work.

The third and final step in this process is to continue the conversation in a recursive manner. Discussing the changes made and their effect on the paper allows the student to, as Yancey so perfectly puts it, "explain to others, as we explain to ourselves" (24). By asking the student to explain the changes made to their paper and *how* the student understands these changes, the peer tutor is now the recipient of the lesson in the conversation. Questions such as: "What works well in this paper and what does not work well?" "What are your strengths as a writer?" and "What is the next step for this project and for you as a writer?" instigate reflection for the student as well as the peer tutor. The student is assessing himself as a writer by identifying personal strengths and weaknesses as well as planning for future development, while the peer tutor is given immediate feedback on the consultation.

This three step approach has helped me to develop as a peer tutor and as a reflective writer. While it is not always necessary to strictly adhere to this structure, having it ready in my toolbox is reassuring and I no longer experience the anxiety of improvisation in every consultation. I am also more confident that the students I work with are benefitting from the consultations and are able to incorporate reflective elements into their writing process. For example, I recently worked with a student who brought in a paper for her literature review assignment. This was her first experience with the genre and was uncertain about the state of her paper. Her goals for the session were stated as: adherence to the genre and the value of the information presented in the review. Upon reading her paper and the rubric given by the professor, we realized that her paper did not fit the description of a literature review. We came to this realization by questioning her methods of quote integration, in which she used citations to give credit. By recognizing this rhetorical strategy, she realized that she was analyzing the information rather than allowing the publications to speak for themselves. From this brief conversation, we identified the gap in her understanding of the assignment which we were able to fill. The next step in this consultation was to allow the student to practice different methods of synthesizing the information without analyzing it. At the end of the consultation, we discussed what her understanding of a literature review was and how that differed from her understanding prior to her revisions. This conversation gave both of us confidence that she was now able to leave the writing center and not only revise her paper to fit the genre, but that she is now capable of writing a literature review in the future.

Reflection is an invaluable tool for any writer, and I believe that by understanding its importance and having the tools necessary to incorporate it explicitly into consultations, a peer tutor is better equipped to conduct collaborative conversations with students. In the future, I hope

to continue exploring different methods of bringing reflection into these social and collaborative conversations since I believe that by giving reflection a more prominent voice in these conversations we can have a better understanding of what it means to create better writers, not better papers.