“So what are we working on?” Pronouns as a Way of Re-Examining Composing

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The encounters of writing center tutors and clients, this essay argues, are tensional, asymmetrical, and productive negotiations of a coauthored we. As authorship and authorization are discursive processes, we offer an empirical examination of how personal pronouns mark important shifts in the dynamic creation of a shared academic manuscript in writing center consultations. Though it is tempting to analyze the work of we as simply inclusive, our analysis proposes that we is multifunctional, periodically signaling collaborative affiliation and disaffiliation, marking the negotiation of coauthorship, implying shared identity, and acting as an indicator of institutional discourse.

The fictitious notion of the perfect writing consultant (who is neither too directive nor too hands-off) or perfect composition instructor seems to loom large—a destructive figure who inhabits the discourse of theory. He or she is an ideal whose invocation encourages a narrative of guilt that does not get told at the center of writing center scholarship, but remains at the periphery, whispered in conversations about praxis. Although empirical work lays bare ways in which writers and consultants negotiate work, authorship, and responsibility, the question remains how these behaviors should be construed. How can and should praxis be adapted? Can we do better at defining our expectations for this continuum of interaction for consultants and clients to alleviate the inevitable guilt that comes with the binary presented in literature?

To answer these questions and better understand the actual complexity of writing center collaboration—collaboration that is neither purely “peer,” non-interventionist, nor authoritative, colluding expert—we approach the issue discursively, seeking to illuminate what lies between institutional discourse and interactional practice and to open up possibilities for an alternative discourse of praxis to take its place. We base our analysis on an empirical study of writing consultations over the course of a semester at a large RU/VH institution. The selections considered here are derived from ten writing consultations between graduate student consultants and graduate student clients at our university’s writing center that were recorded and transcribed by the first author. The writing consultants are all MA and doctoral-level students from the English, World Languages, and Communication departments, and the clients are graduate students from across the disciplines. We find graduate student interaction analytically compelling,
and the consultation serves as a privileged site for an exploration of their institutionally hybrid status, both with respect to each other and to the context that the consultation both invokes and (re)produces.

The encounters of writing center tutors and clients, this essay argues, are tensional, asymmetrical, and productive negotiations of a coauthored we. As authorship and authorization are discursive processes, we (also as coauthors) offer an empirical examination of how we, I, and you, mark important shifts in the consultants’ and clients’ dynamic creation of a shared academic manuscript. In analyzing coproduction and coauthorship, we do not, however, subscribe to the idea of collaboration as it presently appears in writing center and composition metadiscourse. We do not add to the robust literature where the term is evaluated as an activity which consultants (and ironically, for a term which includes two people, that is where the blame falls) in the writing center don’t do well or could do much better or indeed engage in badly. By disengaging from the present view of collaboration, which has been part of writing centers since the work of scholars such as Stephen North and Jeff Brooks, we propose two things.

The first is to wrest praxis from the constant evaluative oscillation of writing center disciplinary terminology (i.e., good-bad, collaboration-collusion, symmetry-asymmetry, consultant or peer; see review of literature which follows) which can condemn or (more rarely) praise, but offers no lingo for productive analytical discussion, or transferal of a way to do things in terms of skills and bona fide strategies. What we offer in its place is an empirical examination of what it is that writing practitioners and writing center participants actually do when enacting the practice of composing. The second is to encourage a re-articulation, or a way to relanguage our doings—to an audience within and beyond the writing center itself—in a way that better represents and values the complexities of our work. Collaboration may serve well as an interpretive shell for a complex interactional sequence, but it is a gloss, and it does little to help us understand the dynamic itself.

A good place to start our examination of writing center discourse is with the figure of the consultant. As a primary character in writing center helping narratives, the writing consultant appears to clients and the university at large under several guises. Most writing center models oscillate between conceptualizing consultants as helpers in an authority dynamic structured in top-down fashion (Shamoon and Burns 140-48); we find them cast in various roles, as coaches, teachers, and even therapists (Harris 35-40). Conversely, consultants can be portrayed as cheerleaders on the sidelines (Brooks 2). Rarely are they presented as they are in practice—chameleons that change their colors dependent on the moment-by-moment discursive requirements of the consultation.

To add a new (dark) twist to this plot, a recent empirical study of writing center praxis argues that the relationship between consultants and client-writers is based on collusion, defined as a consultant-enacted, client-disempowering array of practices of “the same old authoritarian control”
Composition Studies (Lunsford qtd. in Rollins, Smith, and Westbrook 122), masquerading as collaboration. The critique might be renewed but its discursive backdrop is familiar. Indeed, the idea(l) of collaboration as “textual nonintervention” (Clark and Healy 36) has guided composition praxis in the writing center since North’s 1984 treatise “The Idea of a Writing Center.” In a relationship defined by helping, North drew a countertuitive boundary between consultants’ actions and writers’ expectations, facilitation, and intervention. In a political relationship defined by helping, inscribed in helping discourse (see Edelman) where one party defines the terms in which what becomes known as help will be understood and delivered to the other (Bartesaghi 16), North drew an uncertain binary between peerdom and directiveness, writer’s work and consultant’s help. For, if as North saw it, consultants “are not here to serve, supplement, back up, complement, reinforce, or otherwise be defined by any external curriculum” (79), consultants’ help is done by “talk[ing] to writers.” However, despite North’s subsequent willingness to reconsider his line in the sand (see North, “Revisiting”), not to mention others’ arguments as to the complexities and practical impossibility of textual nonintervention in writing center interaction (see Ede and Lunsford), the existence of a “legitimate and illegitimate collaboration” discourse is, as Wittgenstein famously wrote, a picture that holds us captive (Clark and Healy 39). It is in our language, and our language repeats it to us, helps us reconstruct it, subscribe to it and, subsequently, even prescribe it.

Though we primarily refer to them as consultants and clients, thus choosing a metaphor from counseling of a various nature, writing center interlocutors in our data are both graduate students. They both orient to particular material realities within the academy, and do so discursively. That is, graduate student-clients bring their writing to the center to ensure that they can speak the language of their respective academic discourse communities (see Berkenkotter and Ravotas), a linguistic accomplishment that most graduate writing consultants are also desperately trying to finesse. Both student-consultants and clients still struggle with many of the same issues that undergraduates do—meeting the requirements of assignments, structuring arguments, polishing manuscripts—but often these struggles are magnified, in writing theses and dissertations, developing IRB protocols, and trying to construct professional ethos. Because we propose to opt out of the binary that paints authority and collaboration as oppositional, we instead focus on the asymmetrical complexities that collaboration entails by examining how graduate student consultants and clients use pronouns when talking about composing.

Collaboration in Writing Center Practice: A Reconstruction

Within writing center studies, scholars have explored what collaboration entails by examining consultant-client discourse in terms of the dynamic of asymmetry implicit within helping relationships where “those who self-define as giving help set the parameters of the relationship defined
as helping; within that relationship, helpers and helped have different access, rights, and duties in the negotiation of its terms” (Bartesaghi 16). In “Scaffolding in the Writing Center: A Microanalysis of an Experienced Tutor’s Verbal and Nonverbal Tutoring Strategies,” Isabelle Thompson defines scaffolding as strategies which “[support] students while they figure out answers for themselves” (423). She examines a “successful” tutorial in terms of the asymmetrical practices that take place in this interaction: direct instruction, cognitive scaffolding, and motivational scaffolding, signaled in both talk and gesture. Urging the writing center community to not mark directiveness as inherently problematic, Thompson cites its appropriate use as one of the most important facets of a successful tutorial. She writes that a student must be “motivationally ready … [for] tutors [to] be productively directive. If tutors are too directive too early, before students are motivated to be active participants, the conference is not likely to be successful” (447).

Similarly, in her article “Dominance in Academic Writing Tutorials: Gender, Language Proficiency, and the Offering of Suggestions,” Terese Thonus examines tutors’ directives, accepting them as a natural and necessary part of writing center action, and she seeks to tie the strategies by which tutors enact dominance to gender and language ability. In her study of 16 consultations, she charts the frequency and type of suggestion as it correlates to gender and speakers’ language status. While Thonus acknowledges that writing consultants’ position within the institution provides them with shaky authority, she concludes that more than any other variable, institutional affiliation grants dominance most visibly (244).

As useful as Thompson’s and Thonus’s findings are, they intensify the metadiscursive disconnect between what we theorize and practice and how we theorize what we practice. Consider how writing centers employ the discourse of “collaboration” to situate themselves within their universities. A case in point is the authors’ university writing center website, which characterizes writing center interaction in the following way:

Writing Center consultations are fifty minutes long and begin at the top of each hour. Consultants do not offer proofreading or editing services; instead, sessions are conducted collaboratively, and consultants make suggestions to help writers develop their own work. (“Writing Center”)

Such a preface leaves consultants and clients unsure of what the consultation will actually entail. What is the magical interaction that is not proofreading, not editing, but instead—appropriate collaboration?

Given this disconnect, it is up to consultants and clients to interpret and negotiate the meaning of “collaboration” in the moment-by-moment exchanges of the consultation as it occurs. In contrast to instructors, consultants’ identities as collaborators are languaged in symmetrical terms; they are non-experts, non-evaluators, helpers that simply allow students to free themselves from writer’s block. As graduate students helping other
students—who are often going through the same milestones of university education—consultants occupy a hybrid “status that is equal yet somehow unequal” (Williams 38). Since writing center consultations usually begin with a discussion of the writer’s project, the writer reading her work out loud, and then a move to Socratic discussion regarding what the writer would like to change, praxis can easily be construed as “textual nonintervention.” But the idea(lization) of the consultant as a ventriloquist of sorts, who merely provides students access to their “voices,” tricks consultants into being taken in by a (metadiscursive) Wittgensteinian picture that is incoherent with practice. And it tricks us, as writing center users and theorists, into imagining consultants as not actually doing anything other than enabling a process that pre-existed the consultation: a monologic vision which allows scripting of the very process and its characters. Discursive work adds actual voices to this monologue, suggesting that opting out of the picture is an empirical project, from the inside out.

Brooke Rollins, Trixie Smith, and Evelyn Westbrook explore the discourse of writing center praxis in terms of interactional ethos. In their study of graduate consultations, they examine how consultants use tools that, they argue, covertly deny authority: claiming ignorance, using embedded directives, and relying on the inclusive pronouns we and us. They write that:

inclusive pronouns ... suggest that the client is actively involved in issuing directives. This use of inclusive pronouns is the most simplistic, yet perhaps most representative method of disguising the assistant’s authority. ... For example, when an assistant uses the phrase “We decided...” rather than “I decided...,” she insists that the decision is a joint one. (128)

Thus, for Rollins, Smith, and Westbrook, tutor contributions are directive, but covertly so: they are based on collusion. What is troubling about their analysis is that, by focusing on so-called tutor’s authority, they do not take into account the dynamic, back-and-forth features of interaction, or how clients also use pronouns in the consultation.

We are interested in showing how in spoken discourse, or talk-in-interaction, pronouns reveal a speaker’s positioning toward the topic at hand. This allows us to examine both the immediate context of the relationship of consultant and client and the broader frame of institutional discourse of composing within which this relationship takes place. In contrast, Communication scholars Kathleen Haspel and Karen Tracy have examined pronoun usage as a productive site for understanding speakers’ strategies of affiliation and disaffiliation to what they are speaking about. In their examination of a disagreement at a school board meeting in “Marking and Shifting Lines in the Sand,” the authors consider how varied the work of we and they can be. Alternately used as inclusive, disaffiliative, and accusative, Haspel and Tracy see how we, especially, is used by speakers to successfully claim a particular identity and strengthen their claims. Like Haspel and Tracy, our study values the insight pronoun use provides into discursive collaboration, and we use
them to detail the nature of the asymmetrical relationship enacted within writing center consultations (as suggested by Thompson).

**Discourse Analysis**

In his recent contribution to *Composition Studies*, Paul Walker proposes discourse analysis as a method for reconstituting Composition’s theoretical metavocabulary—terminology, enactment, and practical consequentiality. In also adopting a discursive approach, we continue Walker’s reflexive move. As a method, DA involves recording, faithfully transcribing, and analyzing talk. An important metatheoretical assumption of this process of recording and transcription is that, though DA focuses on problematic communication settings, answers are not known ahead of time, but derived inductively from the data. Authority, or what is known in critical theory as power, is seen in DA as a dynamic of talk in interaction: it has to be claimed, and authorized, by participants in the talk, within a particular context. By focusing on clients’ and consultants’ use of pronouns, and their switches between the singular *I* to the inclusive *we*, our analysis emphasizes speakers’ available resources (see Fairclough; Haspel and Tracy) for claiming singular and shared ownership of a text. Invoked by these claims are relationships of identity and responsibility which themselves speak of the discursive context of the consultation as helping interaction in an institutional setting. Our transcription notation is at an intermediate level of detail (see Gilewicz and Thonus); we capture pauses, simultaneous or overlapping speech, vocalizations, emphases, false starts, and non-verbal features of the interaction (see Appendix for transcription notation).

**Analysis: Pronoun Use in Writing Center Interaction**

In the sections that follow, we present four extracts from writing consultations to show how graduate students—as both consultants and clients in the writing center—avail themselves of pronouns to coproduce new meanings, a new textual composition, and reflexively share the work of composing. We offer this examination as an opening to set aside what is presently argued about collaboration and offer a way to reconsider it as a multifaceted interactional praxis along a continuum of asymmetric helping strategies.

**We as Influence**

As a practice which materializes and reformulates its institutional context, the writing center consultation is a dynamic of what Bazerman and Paradis define as influence, “a means of inducing or enrolling outsiders into an insider’s view and commitments” (7). Pronouns influence by negotiating speaker’s positions of insider and outsider as institutional members, or experts, raising questions of who may influence whom and whose commitments about the writing process are more important in an exchange. We illustrate this use of pronouns in an extract from a consultation, below, in
which a graduate student client working on her dissertation in Education (G) meets with a graduate student writing consultant (T). Although G has decided to use the writing center throughout her dissertation process and she has scheduled appointments throughout the semester, this is one of her first consultations, as is made clear by her unawareness of writing center praxis:

*Extract 1*

55  G: You don’t have to read it like (.) you can read it quietly. I mean,
56   I’ve got other stuff that I can do.
57  T: Well maybe what we can do is actually (.) to make sure that your
58   meaning and intentions are clear. So maybe I’ll read the first ten
59   lines out
60 G: [O.K.
61 T: And we can make sure we’re on the same um (.) paycheck.

In line 57, the consultant uses *we* as a corrective response to the student’s *I* and *you* presentation. Since the student has agreed to work on her project in the writing center but has not worked with a consultant before, she sets the terms of the helping relationship as one in which she and the consultant will take turns developing her work independently. His *we* reconstructs the student’s terms within the appropriate institutional discourse of the consultation, reframing both the immediate praxis (i.e. how things will go) and inducting her into the discourse of writing center ideology.

In line 61, the consultant uses humor to mitigate his directive, encouraging the student to be on the same “paycheck” as opposed reading the work “quietly” to himself (Line 55); this deliberate use of *we* signals a “complex transformation, involving shifts of meaning and new perspectives,” that asks the student to conceive of the helping relationship in a different way (Linell 148). Rather than simply signaling tutorial “collusion,” the use of the inclusive pronoun functions as a creative way to induct the student into an institutional way of seeing and reconstructing the meaning of praxis from a client-led to a consultant-led dynamic. Instead of sitting idly by while the consultant does the work of the consultation, *we* invites the student to partake in writing center praxis, that of reading the paper out loud. The fact that the extract is sealed with an “OK” in a cooperative overlap (lines 59 and 60) suggests that the student accepts the consultant’s invitation.

**We as Coauthorship**

Once they are presented to consultants at the writing center, client manuscripts become part of a cycle of talking and writing (see Labov and Fanshel) where the lines between suggestions for improvement and composing become blurred. This very tension, which involves the amount of responsibility toward the shared text, is signaled in consultants’ strategies of af-
filiation and disaffiliation toward the manuscript they are working on with a client. Accordingly, *we* is used to signal the consultant’s accountability toward the text as a shared, coauthored institutional product. Conversely, the consultant also shifts pronouns to distance himself from its coproduction and render the student accountable for it. As Haspel and Tracy argue, “In using a reference term, speakers state or imply their membership in one category (we) and, at the same time, their nonmembership in a contrast category (they)” (148). In the context of the charged school board meeting that they observe, Haspel and Tracy examine how a speaker begins his discussion by using *we* to “initially [position] himself as someone speaking on behalf of his wife and himself,” and then soon turns to *they* when addressing the troublesome material at the center of the meeting (148-152). The following extract follows a similar pattern.

In this exchange, the pair is engaged in considering the client’s response to an article. Since the client, a Higher Education MA student, is a frequent user of the Writing Center, she quickly recognizes the troublesome aspect of her request to work on a paper hours before it is due. From the outset, there is a tension between what the client (S) wants to work on and the consultant’s (T) agenda for the paper.

*Extract 2*

16 T: And when is this paper due?
17 S: (4.0) ((laughter))
18 T: Today?
19 S: Today.
20 T: Today? Oh my goodness. We’ll see what we can do. Okay um.
21 What I’d like you to do (.)
22 You mind reading this out loud?

Notice how the consultant reacts to this common occurrence in the writing center: the challenge of an imminent deadline. He immediately introduces *we* in Line 20, signaling that the challenge of the due date might be something that they can confront together. In line 17, the student responds to the consultant’s question about the deadline with a long pause and laughter, which signals her hesitation to introduce the troublesome material (see Jefferson). The trouble is reinforced by the consultant’s correct guess that the paper is due “today” (line 18) and the student’s emphatic repetition (line 19). In lines 20-21, the consultant orients to this trouble with an interesting pronominal switch, outlining the tension between what is doable and accountable as shared product and what is, instead, positioned individual academic accomplishment. In this short extract, pronouns already accomplish quite a bit of work, first signaling solidarity, then suggesting how the student is responsible for the work at hand.

The tutor reinforces the shared plan for the session in line 20 with “okay” and the subsequent vocalization “um.” In this case, the discourse marker
“okay” acts as a repair, that is, it allows the consultant to “take back” his prior version, in which he would be directly accountable for a paper “due today.” Not finishing his utterance, he then switches to I, to do something he is solely accountable for. Here the singular pronoun marks the consultant’s invocation of the ideological tenet of textual responsibility, where the student’s role is to be solely responsible for the academic text and the consultant’s role is not to intervene. Note, however, that this ideology can only be enacted by means of a clear directive on the consultant’s part (line 21), though the additional backtrack in the following turn, “You mind?” hedges and mitigates the force of his instruction. This short extract encapsulates thirty seconds when the consultant oscillates between degrees of responsibility, demonstrating the complexities of working at the boundary of, and embodying, the liminal “equal yet somehow unequal” role.

We as Shared Identity

Whereas we may mark shifts in the helping asymmetry, it can also display clients’ and consultants’ co-orientation to the academic text as an emergent institutional product and their co-incumbent position as graduate students within the academy. Their orientation to a joint identity is exemplified in the following exchange between a graduate student consultant (T) and client (S), an MA student in Criminology, where the two are focused on the matter of correct APA citation. We present the beginning of the consultation (lines 1-3) and then move to a later segment of the exchange (lines 36-45) to continue our analysis.

Extract 3

1  T:  Okay, so what are we working on?
2  S:  Um, so we’re looking at a paper for this course and she basically suggested that everybody come, basically, you know for APA style
3  [[…]]
36  T:  Alright, let’s find those headings. They’re all so weird.
37  S:  Yeah, I was just looking at the (website).
38  T:  Yeah, that’s frustrating because it can be like really confusing. Because you don’t know [which to trust
39  S:  [Exactly
40  T:  Definitely. [That’s no fun
41  S:  [((laughter))
42  T:  I think that’s the right page, we’ve got seven different options there.
43  (10.0) ((read paper)) Okay
44  yeah (5.0) ((read paper))

The consultant begins the interaction with an invitation to work on the task of correct citation together, beginning the dialogue with “What are we working on?” (line 1). The student accounts for her place in the writing
center in an interesting way; by explaining that her professor encouraged “everyone” to come and that she just needs help on citation (lines 1-3), she modifies the consultant’s we by making her professor responsible for her need to “work on” something. Additionally, she makes “everyone” part of the collective who needs writing center help and herself as needing assistance on APA style (line 3). The consultant’s uptake of the client’s response introduces a new grouping of we to the consultation: a “let’s” (line 36), that includes the consultant and the client. This we marks a shared task between the two, which the consultant expands in the second part of her turn in line 36 regarding APA rules: “They are all so weird.” With this small self-disclosure that reveals the consultant as also a graduate student miffed by APA citation, the tutor brings about a shift in the consultation. This is a discursive shift materialized in praxis, as we now see the pair engaged in reading the text together (an action not instructed by the consultant) and looking up information toward a common goal.

The consultant’s additional contribution in line 38 illustrates how shared identity can be cultivated by graduate students working together in a collaborative asymmetry. The tutor’s introduction of confusion and issues of “trust” (lines 38-39), with respect to information about correct citation, are direct claims of her identity as a novice or learner within the academic setting that she and her interlocutor occupy. The sincerity of this identity construction notwithstanding, we see by the client’s overlapping speech in lines 40-41, and the laughter at the tutor’s humor (line 42), that it functions as a bridge for the client to meet the consultant in a shared space.

We as Marker of Institutional Discourse

In this final example, the tutor (T) begins the consultation with the usual question, “what [are we] working on today?” (line 1). The student (J), an ELL doctoral student in Education, reads this question as a prompt for her writing center literacy narrative, describing her work with other writing consultants and the focus of her project in the writing center (lines 8-13). Although she answers the initial request for information with I (line 2-3), the client switches to we in her own narrative (line 12), signaling the coconstruction of discourse in the center and her knowledge of the writing center consultation as a specific genre of helping relationships, complete with expected writing center “talk” and requests. As Jessica Williams suggests, writing center interaction functions as a type of institutional discourse (37). Although it is distinct from “workplace talk,” writing center discourse stands at the “intersection” of two types of institutional discourse, expert-client, as in commercial settings, and expert-novice, as in educational settings (39).

Extract 4

1 T: Ok, ((clears throat)) so what exactly is it we’re working on today?
J: I’ve been—I’ve been meeting for a couple of weeks with the other tutors.

I’ve been meeting many people really [((laughter))]

T: [((laughter))]

J: I’ve been working on this proposal and I almost submit

submit it next week (.) aaand I’m just trying to see what I can do.

T: ((laughter))

J: Definitely, I have limited time. I cannot really (2.0) uh (2.0) have

everything fixed. But for myself (.) I’ve told the other tutors.

I go to improve my writing skills, umm, I know that right now

I’m doing my dissertation, so uh, I’m just going to come

regularly here, so we will work on many other things (.) not only

(2.0)

dissertation.

Initially, the student explains her goals for visiting the writing center, commenting that although she is now focusing on specific materials for her dissertation (line 11), she wants to improve her writing skills generally with regular visits to the center (lines 9-10). Through her narrative, the student displays knowledge of writing center philosophy and the idea of writing as a process. Her comments can be read as the student’s acceptance of what she has come to know of the center; she has embraced the pervasive writing center maxim, “become a better writer, don’t just produce a better paper.” During the whole of the student’s successful literacy narrative, the consultant agrees and laughs (lines 4 and 7) to affirm the student’s acknowledgment of the particular relationship invited in the center.

In the four exchanges presented above, *we* is explored within a dynamic of talk-in-interaction, where both consultant and client strategies are taken into account. Our analysis shows that *we* and *I* have different functions in negotiating consultant and client goals within a collaborative asymmetry, a phrase that enables a both/and productivity for analyst and participants alike as they coconstruct the shifts and reformulations of an institutional helping relationship.

**Conclusion: What Comes Next**

Once the putative dichotomy of collaboration and authority is set aside, we are invited to opt out of its discourse and the relational terms that it prescribes for the praxis of composing. We may instead consider the ways in which a collaborative asymmetry involves a productive and creative tension between ideology and praxis, which participants both acknowledge and resist at will as they orient to each other, the text they both wish to improve upon, and the institutional context of the consultation. Though it is compelling to analyze the work of *we* as inclusive, and therefore a means for the consultant to encode so-called collaboration while, in fact, colluding, our analysis proposes that *we* is itself multifunctional: signaling collab-
orative affiliation and disaffiliation by sharing and distancing oneself from a text; marking the negotiation of coauthorship; implying shared identity by acknowledging a common status within the institution through the act of composing; and acting as an indicator of institutional discourse by acknowledging shared assumptions and constraints of the particular community. All these discursive acts embody collaboration, for collaboration itself consists of strategies of asymmetry by which writing consultants, as helpers in a dynamic, conduct interaction with their clients.

Our analyses, our critiques, and the metadiscourse of collaboration we have reconstructed in order to set aside here, do not remain in an epistemological bubble that floats separated from the ontology of our praxis. That which we define as “illegitimate” or “collusion,” cannot but re-enter the conversations of our praxis as training, self-assessments, gossip and value judgments, affecting both clients and consultants. In the case of consultants, whose work the writing center depends on, we wonder what kind of resources this languaging of what is as opposed to what should be offers for them to build their own characterizations as professionals within the academy. Tutors either feel they are too non-directive and, as a result, frustrating in their suggestions to clients, or too directive, and thus misbehaving (see Pantelides; Blau and Hall) in their roles as helpers. The frequent manifestation of tutor fear (Lidh 9) and anxiety (see Chandler), suggests that the discursive toolbox of “writing center orthodoxy” (Clark and Healy 36) could offer consultants more effective tools. If asymmetry is part and parcel of writing center collaboration (see Latterell; Thompson; Thonus; Rollins, Smith and Westbrook), as conversation scholars show that it is indeed a feature of any exchange (see Drew), then it should be an accepted part of the way writing centers present themselves outside of their own discourse community, to clients and to the university at large.

It may be that recognizing and detailing the kind of interaction that takes place in the writing center is not politically expedient. As opposed to the dubious words “coproduced” and “asymmetrical,” and the fuzzy categories of what actual writing center interaction entails, the assertion that students develop “their own work” in the Writing Center is a non-threatening, symmetrical peer interaction that is much simpler and easier to defend to administrators focused on the dangers of plagiarism and academic dishonesty, especially those already suspicious of writing center work. Writing center administrators purposely simplify this relationship and define it in terms of what it isn’t—a relationship with an expert, an editor, an instructor—in order to occupy a safe political space. Surely this argument has been made before, that writing centers must resist unfair university policies (see Kail and Trimbur; Clark and Healy; Grimm), but they’ve made this argument for different reasons, for institutional value change.

We hold, however, that a representation of writing center interaction as complex collaborative asymmetry is more in keeping with writing center ideology than playing passive defense, and eliminating the disconnect
between practice and theory will help consultants feel more at ease with the requirements of their occupation. More broadly, Compositionists of all stripes can benefit from acknowledging the fuzziness of our roles and the lack of clear demarcation between who the university wants us to be, who we say we are, and what actually happens in classrooms. To acknowledge the discourses we enact in our relationships means to move away from the narrative of guilt that frequently plagues both our practice and our scholarship.

Appendix A: Transcription Notation

(.) An audible pause, like drawing a breath
(.2) A timed pause, in fraction of a second
[ ] Marks the beginning of overlapping or simultaneous speech
− Speech that is abruptly cut off
(word) Inaudible speech, with the transcriptionist’s best guess between parentheses
(laugh)) Transcriptionist’s rendition of non-phonetic material

Underline Underline a word or part of a word marks emphasis

Notes

1. We thank one of our anonymous reviewers for pointing this out to us.
2. These are worries that numerous tutors have expressed to the first author in post-session discussions.

Works Cited


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