

“I think that’s kind of your thesis, right?”

Gendered Communication in Writing Center Sessions

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ABSTRACT

Studies conducted at other institutions have found certain feminized patterns to be common in writing center (WC) practice, specifically: non-directive communication styles, socialization, nurturing, and the equalization of hierarchy. This study will seek to uncover if and/or how these pedagogical tactics are also present in the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse’s WC. This study will use ethnography through qualitative and quantitative methods, including transcribing tutoring sessions, coding client comment card feedback, and conducting interviews. Efforts to uncover these existing patterns will be necessary in order to improve and strengthen training of oncoming consultants in future semesters.

INTRODUCTION

This research at the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse (UWL) is in response to ongoing conversations in writing center (WC) theory. UWL’s WC is common in that emphasizes a non-directive and collaborative tutoring practice, as opposed to more directive and authoritative tutoring approaches. In fact, we have recently started referring to ourselves as “consultants” rather than “tutors” to linguistically commit to this egalitarian idea. The following study will consider “how a feminist pedagogy might currently be at work within writing center practices, as many scholars claim the work done in writing centers is inherently feminist” (Threatt, 2009, p. 29). In other words, the training and practice of WCs across institutions is often marked by efforts to equal hierarchy, socialize, nurture, and foster collaboration. This is an ethnography on UWL’s WC, focusing specifically on feminized consulting styles. My specific research questions are: do our consultants primarily use feminist pedagogy and tactics? If so, are our consultants actively aware of these tendencies? Are these truly best practices according to our clients? After establishing the status of the practices in the WC, the goal is to offer possible suggestions to best help to the diverse population of students who use UWL’s writing center.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following literature offers a concrete framework and terminology to conduct my own study. Kathleen Hunzer conducted a related study titled: “Gender Expectations and Relationships in the Writing Center” (1994). She studied the perceived impacts from their WC’s clients based on their impressions of gendered tutors. One student preferred female-identifying tutors, because she feels they “guide [her] through the paper and ... [are] ‘pleasant, not just criticizing’” (Hunzer, 1994, p. 7). Hunzer concludes a range of observations with an assertion that “gender stereotypes permeate and can subsequently affect the outcome of the tutorial situation” (Hunzer, 1994, p. 13). She suggests ways to remedy any imbalance in effectiveness through either having both genders working at all times, or to train all tutors to practice a more “balanced” approach. This suggests that male tutors should be more supportive and that female tutors should be more authoritative in sessions in order to minimize the gendered gap between the two (Hunzer, 1994).

Harry Denny also weighed in with his own perspectives on gender and WCs in his book, Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-to-One Mentoring (2010). Denny makes some observations about gender in WCs, specifically regarding the “*feminization*” of these centers:

By and large, writing centers **foster collaborative, supporting, and empathetic environments and pedagogy** ... More often than not, these **inclusive domains** have **disproportionate representations of women**, as tutors or clients... there’s just more of a perceived social stigma that comes with men seeking help. (Denny 100, emphasis mine)

Here, Denny addresses the issue of the stigma which WCs – just like any other tutoring center – often carry: that these spaces are only for the remedial or deficient. He then made the leap that socially, women often have an easier time asking for and accepting help than men do, possibly explaining how such an imbalance has occurred between genders in the first place. While this is (and can only be) an assumption, I wish to focus on this same idea of “feminization” within UWL’s WC.

Therese Thonus classified writing tutors' suggestions as "modal," "interrogative," and "indirect" in her study (Thonus, 1999, p. 235). She specifically looked at tutoring scenarios between native and non-native English speakers, but paid careful attention to gender differences. Thonus referenced "the 'dominance approach' [which] is based on the view that language encodes and perpetuates social status relationships," which has gendered implications (Thonus, 1999, p. 229). Her research questions involving gender were: "is there a difference between the interactions of same- and mixed-gender dyads in tutorials? Can any differences be explained solely on the basis of gender, or is institutionally conferred power more consequential?" (Thonus, 1999, p. 231). Thonus also studied "mitigation" techniques used by tutors and coded how often they are used in sessions (see Figure 1). For the purpose of this study, I have collapsed these "mitigations" into one section, titled "hedging language" (HL). For a study that focused *solely* on hedging, this model would prove to be incredibly useful. However, for my own study, I made the decision to collapse this category into one to allow for the other additions of "socialization" and "reinforcement" which analyze other tropes of feminist pedagogy not encompassed in this category. Therefore, the following examples are precisely the types of phrases that I included in my own HL section.

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TABLE 6. Tutor mitigation strategies

1. Alerter	<i>It seems like you've got to make a stand, my friend.</i> (Tutor 2 with NSM)
2. Polite marker	<i>Should you, should you put a reference to the graph, do you think?</i> (Tutor 1 with NSF)
3. Aspect	<i>And I was wondering, maybe, maybe you need to qualify that a little bit.</i> (Tutor 1 with NNSM)
4. Conditional	<i>You could say, if you wanted to, 'an important part of any language'.</i> (Tutor 4 with NNSF)
5. Appealer	<i>Um and again, this is because you've been using the future tense throughout, you will want to use that tense there, right?</i> (Tutor 2 with NNSM)
6. Cajoler	<i>Well, I think you probably should mention the, the number of people.</i> (Tutor 3 with NSM)
7. Hedge	<i>And maybe, maybe the thing for you to do, at least at this point, is be consistent.</i> (Tutor 1 with NNSF)
8. Downgrader	<i>Or maybe just put that, that part of the Miller Test up front.</i> (Tutor 3 with NSF)
9. Subjectivizer	<i>I mean, we'll just, I'll just make a copy of this.</i> (Tutor 2 with NNSM)
10. Understater	<i>I think you're right that you could work a little bit on your topic sentence.</i> (Tutor 4 with NSM)
11. Upgrader	<i>And you need, you need to really hit on your arguments much more strongly than you are.</i> (Tutor 3 with NNSF)

Figure 1. Thonus' 11 "mitigation" strategies and the examples of each

METHODS

The University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (UWL) is a mid-sized, Midwestern public university. UWL's five most popular majors are: biology, psychology, exercise sports science, elementary education, and management. UWL students' average ACT score is 25, and the typical number of enrolled students is 10,000. UWL's tutoring center, the Murphy Learning Center (MLC), is located on the second floor of the campus library. The WC has its own room within the MLC, and books an average of 2,000 30-minute appointments in one academic year.

To become a WC consultant, students must fill out an application, provide writing samples, and go through an interview process. If hired, potential consultants must enroll in ENG 299, the 1 credit, pass/fail tutor training course. ENG 299 offers advice and discussions about tutoring practices, led by the WC director, with the majority of

the instruction teaching a hands-off, non-directive approach to working with student clients. In the course, we are taught to “put the pencil down” and ask plenty of questions to let students try to come to their own conclusions. This course is supplemented with assigning a new consultant to “shadow” an experienced consultant for a few weeks before conducting their own sessions.

During the time of this ethnographic study (the 2016-2017 academic year), the WC consultant population fluctuated. The fall semester consisted of 15 total consultants: 12 identifying as female, two identifying as male, and one identifying as gender-queer. Two of the female-identifying consultants graduated in December, bringing that total of female consultants down from 12 to 10 in the spring. This population ranges from sophomores to fifth-year seniors, with majors spanning from English, to history, to biology, to communications, and business. Seven of these consultants were observed in the 15 total sessions (some more than once), and five tutors were interviewed one-on-one.

Session Transcriptions

I transcribed 15 WC sessions, noting only the consultants’ language, to uncover any patterns of speech. I transcribed each session by hand and then entered these phrases into an Excel spreadsheet, line-by-line in a vertical column. In each successive vertical column, I used the following labels: tag questions (TQ), hedging language (HL; in accordance with Thonus’ mitigation example table), “we” language (W), reinforcing language (R), and questions to make sure the client understood a suggestion (C). If the selected line of speech had one/more than one of these elements present, the corresponding column(s) would be marked with a “1.” If the spoken element was absent in that line, the column was marked with a “0.” To avoid biases, I used this numerical coding strategy to quantify how often these more “feminine” patterns of speech were being used, rather than attempting to glean a general impression of the gendered language within any individual session.

Comment Cards

Clients anonymously fill out comment cards following each session, if they choose, evaluating their tutor and the session overall (see Figure 2). These cards help consultants keep track of their perceived success in the WC. I generated a random sample of 25 comment cards from each of 4 completed semesters – fall 2014, spring 2015, fall 2015, and spring 2016 – to total 100 comment cards. I made the decision to study four different populations all within the same research so that the randomized sampling would be consistent. (Note: the consultant population stays relatively constant over these years.)

To utilize these comment cards, I tallied how many times each word was selected in the “check the words that best describe your tutor” section, and noted the percentage of sessions from the random sample that were marked at a 4 or 5 in the “do you feel that the tutoring you received was appropriate, clear, and effective?” section.

Writing Center Comment Card

Tutored by: Brittany Date: 9/8/10
 What is your Major: Biology Minor: Spanish
 Year in school: Fresh Soph Junior Sen SSen Grad
 What course is the assignment you brought in from: _____
What was your specific reason for coming to the Writing Center?
 I need to work on my organization and getting a stronger thesis
What areas do you struggle with? Audience Purpose Thesis Development
Organization Voice/Tone Intro/Conclusion Grammar/Mechanics
Do you feel the tutoring you received was appropriate, clear, and effective?
 1 2 3 4 5
 Not clear/Ineffective Adequate Clear/Effective
Do you feel that you improved your writing as a result of this tutoring session?
 1 2 3 4 5
 No Progress Some Progress Much Progress
Check the words that best describe your tutor:
 approachable poor listener interested annoyed
 good listener helpful impatient friendly
 prepared ineffective effective unprepared
 not helpful uninterested patient enthusiastic
 passionate overbearing other (specify) _____

Figure 2. UWL’s writing center comment card example

Interviews

I conducted one-on-one interviews with five consultants who volunteered to talk with me about the study (see Appendix). In these interviews, I asked consultants about their impressions of their own tutoring style, as well as stories of successes and challenges. Although the consultants had already signed the consent forms with the clear title and focus of my project printed on them, I avoided using the term “gendered” language as to not guide them toward any specific answers. I recorded the interviews on two separate devices for safety and security, as well as practicing selective transcription for the ideas that aligned most closely with the topics of this study (i.e., omitting tangential or off-topic discussion points). Those answers were then grouped into themed-patterns, shown in the next section.

RESULTS

Session Transcriptions

Hedging language (HL) was used most by consultants. I’d like to note that this category covers the most variation in language, so the potential for a given phrase to be coded HL is much higher than any other category. Regardless, HL was coded a total of 334 times over the 15 sessions observed. The we-language, socialization, and reinforcement categories were also linked to ideas of feminine nurturing/support and were coded 47, 19, and 67 times, respectively. Reinforcements are likely in any tutoring scenario. Tag questions were far less common than anticipated, totaling only 22 times over 15 sessions; in many cases, some consultants would use them often, and others not at all. Therefore, the use of TQs cannot be definitive of our practice, but are likely resulting from individual developments of speech. Clarification questions, also common in any tutoring scenario, were coded 30 times over the 15 sessions.

While these types of speech are represented in the pie chart as parts of a “whole” note that this is only the “whole” of the *coded* language from this study (see Figure 3). Transcribed lines that accrued 0’s across all categories do not fall into this chart. Consultants commonly talked *around* their suggestions (HL) and dragged out their opinions instead of stating them directly. Again, this could be a result of the gender socialization of the observed consultants – which were majority female. It can be argued, though, that these ways of speaking are naturally more common in the position of a student consultant, where approximating the authority can difficult or even ill-advised.

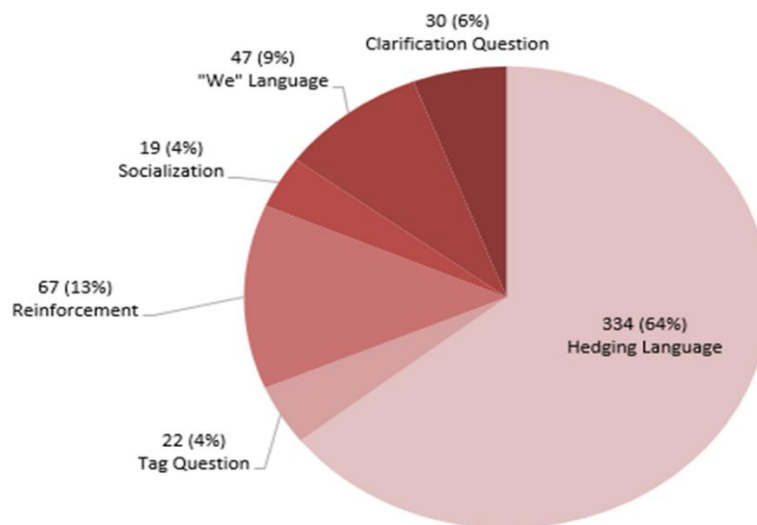


Figure 3. Breakdown of coded language recorded from the 15 observed sessions

Comment Cards

Comment card feedback offered concrete numerical feedback, although the results and decidedly “feminized” findings from this section could be the most subjective (see Figure 4). 13% of the random sample were from male consultants, and 87% were from female consultants. Personality-trait terms, like “helpful” (90%),

“friendly” (88%), and “good listener” (87%), were the most common in this random sample. Interestingly, those three traits were ranked *above* more task-focused descriptions, like “prepared” or “effective.” However, of this same random sample, 97% of clients ranked their session as a four or five out of five for overall effectiveness. From this it can be surmised that clients from our WC equate more personable and approachable consultants with effective consulting.

“Helpful,” “friendly,” “approachable,” and “good listener” were consistently the top-ranked traits over the four semesters. Coincidentally, these traits often belong to more passive and accommodating (and likely *feminine-socialized*) individuals. Having these four traits so highly ranked, as well as having this sample ranked as effective overall, shows not only that feminine traits are *common* among our consultants, but that they are also *commonly viewed as effective* by our clients.

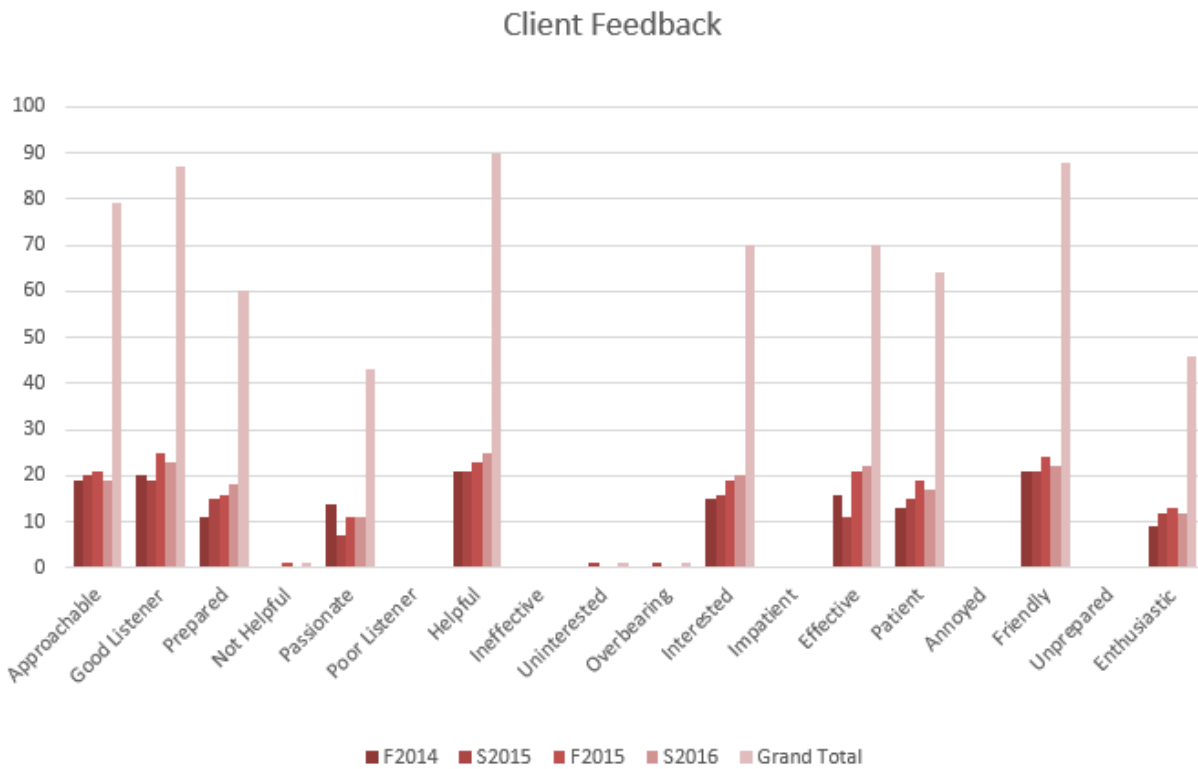


Figure 4. Comment card results from random samples taken over four completed semesters

Interviews

I conducted five one-on-one interviews, transcribing and organizing the responses by question and theme. Some of the major themes discovered through these discussions were: 1) the amount of authority assumed depends on consultant’s experience and confidence, 2) consultants often assume more authority with ESL and shy students, 3) some consultants are aware of their hedging language and feel an urge to “correct” it, and 4) consultants are mixed on feeling communicative tensions in this role. I organized the following quotations by categories of experience, confidence, avoiding authority, embracing authority, and non-directive practice. The number preceding each quotation is indicative of the random number assigned to the associated consultant to maintain confidentiality.

Experience

[11] Um – I think I definitely use like certain phrases, and I think that’s because, um, I’ve only tutored for one semester, especially because I feel like – you know – I haven’t done the job long enough to like, do it with my own words, I think.

[8] Definitely feel that tension a lot, and especially as I’ve tutored more. Which, you think it might have been like the opposite, like where I’d get used to it, but I don’t think you do.

[12] ...when I was just starting out, it definitely felt like a façade almost, or like a persona, you know, where I wasn't quite myself. But now... it feels more natural just because I'm more used to it I guess.

[9] Otherwise I try not to overtalk [sic] as much as possible, but earlier on, I definitely talked a lot more than I probably should've.

Confidence

[8] I think it honestly is like, for me it's like a confidence thing. And you don't want to give the wrong answer, and it's like, also recognizing that, there's this line between like "you can change it if you want because it's your paper" and also, "you should probably change it." And so I think that line is like really difficult and really thin.

[8] I don't know if I do that... is it like a lack of confidence? Like do I really know the answer and I just like can't just say what I know? Or is it because, like, it can go multiple ways and they should have the flexibility to like fix what they want... I don't know!

Avoiding Authority

[11] ...just being like overly-friendly, and like um, trying to make sure that I don't sound too much like – um – not an expert but, like, I'm talking down to someone.

[12] ...but I feel like when you step back and tell them, like "this is your session and I'm not gonna do it for you" they do show more like initiative.

[8] Giving them that space to like think of what questions to ask... 'cause you'll find that they like start to talk back like when you give them that space, but you have to give them that space to begin with.

[11] I also try to say, like, it as a suggestion, rather than as something that has to be said, because um, it isn't my paper... and then I'm like "this is like if you have time" or "if you care more about your grade" or whatever.

[3] ...the put the pencil down idea... I think that really - like - lends itself to being collaborative like, you're not gonna take over the session, you're just gonna be there and help and – like – be more of a guide, rather than the "answer."

Embracing Authority

[9] If they're absolutely on the wrong track, I'll generally be more authoritarian... If it's like really glaring then I'll be more assertive.

[12] Sometimes I feel like I talk more with like our ELL students, just because a lot of that is – there is some language barrier between it, and more frequently they like it when tutors read their papers out loud...

[9] ...definitely with ESL students that like I will admit, that's still something that can be really frustrating, um, when you're trying to explain something complex.... But also I think with students who are coming in with not as developed writing skills... Having to teach them the foundations of how to write like a persuasive essay or how you write like a lab report.... If they don't have the foundation then I'll tell them...

Opinions on Non-Directive Practices

[12] I don't really like [hedging] because it makes us almost seem like we have to be apologetic for knowing things... I think sessions would be so much faster if you just said straight-up "I know this, and this is why you're here, so I'm just gonna tell you what it is..."

[8] I started to notice that I shouldn't like say those things.... 'Cause I know I shouldn't be so like "maybe" "kind of" "I think..."

[11] I think I do say, like especially the "but that's just what I think..."

[12] I say "I don't know" a lot. Even if, like, I'm 100% sure what's going on, I'll be like "I think this, but I don't know." Now that I kind of like started to realize that, I'm trying to like take that out of my vocabulary... because it's almost just like a snap reaction where you say something and then I think, "well... I don't wanna be abrasive, so I'm gonna say I'm not sure" even if I'm like 110% sure that this is what it should be.

DISCUSSION

This small-scale study suggests that UWL's WC is a feminized space: session transcriptions show a great deal of dodging authority, clients deem our consultants as "approachable" and "friendly" (more than noting them as "effective" or "prepared"), and some consultants feel tension communicating suggestions in this position, since they are taught to be non-directive. However, more in-depth and long-term studies would be necessary to solidify and/or add complexity to this claim.

Although clients have found success with our current feminized practice, I would argue that consultants could be more confident expressing their ideas and suggestions in less constricted ways. “I say ‘I don’t know’ a lot. Even if, like, I’m 100% sure what’s going on, I’ll be like ‘I think this, but I don’t know’” (Interview, Consultant #12). Statements like this are where I believe our practice can become problematic: trained consultants should not constantly doubt and hedge around their own knowledge. While this non-directive and egalitarian approach to WCs appears as non-threatening and effective for clients, we must also recognize and address the conflict that it can present to consultants.

In ENG 299 (the 1 credit, pass/fail tutor training course), there is an emphasis on “putting the pencil down” and taking the non-directive approach to tutoring. In some ways, my research suggests that this philosophy produces less confident and tentative consultants. While the control of the session should always be in the hands of the client, ENG 299 could also discuss ways to make suggestions with ease, rather than uncertainty. If there is more open discussion in ENG 299 on *how* and *when* to make concrete suggestions to students (and that it is acceptable to do so), some of this tension could be released. Open discussions about confidently offering suggestions when appropriate could help consultants walk the line between directive and non-directive approaches more comfortably, while still maintaining the benefits of both. To be clear, I am not implying that hedging is inherently *wrong*, but I would like to point out what its prevalence could be signifying: that this hedging is the *result* of an underlying uncertainty with assuming authority.

To conclude, I would urge future UWL consultants to continue this discussion in theory and research in our writing center, so that we can continue to improve and build on our tutoring methods in the years to come. This study was completed over just one academic year, with a small number of participants. Therefore, it cannot be seen as *representative* of UWL’s WC, but it can instead be an opportunity to open the dialogue about gender and its impact on our practices.

LIMITATIONS

Session Transcription

Given time constraints and schedule conflicts, I was not able to observe and interview the entire WC staff, and my results are intended to reflect that portion as only *suggestive* to the whole, not definitive. Ideally, this project would have observed each tutor numerous times for a more holistic sense of the common dialogue. Additionally, I did not code for the gender of the tutee in these sessions, however, research has suggested that same- and mixed-gender dyads may interact differently with one another, which would be an interesting future extension of this study.

Comment Cards

While the anonymity of the client is supposed to be protected through leaving their name off of the card, the patterns in my research have me concerned at the validity of these reflections. By this, I mean that it was incredibly rare to find a consultant with low rankings. While this is wonderful to see, I wonder if clients fear the paper trail of leaving the card in an open box on their way out the door, keeping them from offering any constructive criticism. In future studies, I would recommend having clients use an online submission format for comment cards, which would allow for more honesty and still protect their anonymity.

Interviews

Again, due to time constraints and efforts to gather volunteers, I was only able to interview five consultants. It would have been ideal to speak with each consultant, although this small sample was still fairly representative of the population.

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APPENDIX

Consultant Interview Questions

1. How often would you say you spend time talking versus listening in a session?
 - a. If it varies, under which circumstances?
2. Do you notice a shift in your language when you assume the role of a writing consultant? In other words, do you feel that you use a tutoring "script" when you are working with clients?
3. How do you communicate negative feedback to clients?
 - a. Does this ever make you feel a tension or conflict?
4. Taking what we learned about collaborative tutoring in ENG 299 (the WC training course):
 - a. Could you tell me about a time when using WC best practices greatly helped you to facilitate a successful session?
 - b. Conversely, could you tell me about a time when using those practices hindered you from best helping a client?