

Building an E-Community of Consulting Problem Solvers:

Utilizing Online Conversation in the Writing Center

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This article, divided into three sections, each authored by a different tutoring professional, emphasizes the importance and difficulty of building a consistent, dialogic community among the tutor-consultants of college-level writing centers. The first section, written by Dr. Jeffry Davis, the director of Wheaton College's writing center, introduces the purpose of community among tutor-consultants and presents a technological solution to the problems of lack of funding and time. The solution, an email thread called Consultant Conversations, along with its practical benefits, is outlined in depth in the second section by the writing center's student manager, Shannon Mooney. Lastly, a tutor-consultant of the writing center, Emma Sargent, explains the impact of Consultant Conversations on her personal and work experience, as well as describing the e-community that it has developed. Finally, the Appendix provides a sample of the Consultant Conversation dialogical thread.

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A Rationale for Building an E-Community—A Director’s Perspective

Some years ago, I had the opportunity to meet and converse with world-renowned writer, speaker, and educational activist Parker Palmer, who powerfully described his own journey toward greater effectiveness in higher education, offering stories and insights from over four decades of authentic teaching and mentoring of students, and sharing his ideas and experiences with clarity and insight. Palmer encouraged those engaged in academic work to cultivate the capacity for mutual connectedness, emerging out of a disposition of vulnerability and authenticity, rather than competition and pride. “Contrary to popular opinion, community requires leadership.... [which involves] creating, holding, and guarding a trustworthy space in which human resourcefulness may be evoked. A critical assumption is hidden in that definition—the assumption that people are resourceful. Standard organizational models assume that people have deficits and scarcities rather than resources” (Palmer, 1998). Enriching community experience results from purposeful leadership and the promotion of what is life giving for all members involved who participate in the community. Parker Palmer’s perceptive insights rang true for me.

Serving as the writing center director at Wheaton College for over two decades, I have consistently struggled with one particular problem concerning the oversight of my regular staff of approximately sixteen tutor-consultants: given my limited budget resources, promoting meaningful engagement among the members of my team proves to be a regular challenge, especially as such interaction relates to our collective goal of effectively serving the needs of student writers across the disciplines. Or to put it more

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directly as a question, “How can I foster a community of collaborative writing center tutor-consultants so that they can do their job better?”

One of the perennial challenges that I face involves bringing individual tutor-consultants *together* for professional development, and ensuring that their ongoing training and collective involvement creates an ethos that promotes best practices during their consulting sessions with student writers. Apart from the fall orientation workshop that occurs at the beginning of each academic year, which serves as a boot-camp covering all the rules and regulations delineated in our own *Writing Center Training Manual*, and besides the quarterly meetings when we all share our stories about our failures and our successes in our peer tutoring interactions, there remains a regular need for connectedness and direction. To use the words of Palmer, again, we “need other people for comfort, encouragement, and support, *and* for criticism, challenge, and collaboration” (Palmer, 1998). We need community.

Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, and Boquet (2007), all of whom are writing center directors at post-secondary institutions, together recognize a pressing concern, as expressed in their book *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice*: “We (as administrators) may fail to consider the ways...our tutors feel invested in the work of the writing center, the connections our tutors are making to their intellectual interests and to their lives outside the center. We may not capitalize, in other words, on the ability of everyday exchanges to tell us something about our writing centers as representing what Etienne Wenger calls ‘communities of practice’” (p. 6). In our theory-driven conceptualization of the important work of peer tutoring for writing improvement, the

authors suggest that writing center directors may fall out of touch with the embodied, sensory-oriented experiences of ordinary tutors.

Foregrounding Wenger's insights, the authors propose that "the smallest moments of our work... thought about deeply," encourage a "shared repertoire" of practices, interactions in which there is "no dichotomy between the practical and the theoretical, ideals and reality, or talking and doing" (Geller et al., 2007, p. 6). The authors clarify that when writing centers function as communities of practice, they regularly and intentionally examine the ways in which meaning is engaged and mutually negotiated among actively invested participants who are, in reality, whole human beings (Geller et al., 2007, p. 7). Directors, non-student staff members, consultant-tutors, student writers, and instructors all become participants in the writing center's "community of practice," participating in discussions that reflect the ongoing education and "negotiation of the self" (Geller et al., 2007, p. 8).

The authors of *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice* argue against top-down training methods that do not include more lateral, communal interactions—the daily work of real people. As they explain in their chapter "Straighten Up and Fly Right,"

Our tutors' self-examination of their experiences as writers and tutors should embody the same reflective practices we seek to prioritize in writing center conferences. If we strive for reflective practice from our tutors in conference, we should stress in our work with our staff that "we learn to understand ourselves through explaining ourselves to others. To do this, we rely on a reflection that

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involves a *checking* against, a *confirming*, and a *balancing* of self with others.”

(Geller et al., 2007)

This emphasis on dialogic reflection as a vital aspect of writing center work affirms the philosophical conviction that tutoring and consulting involve more than correct information and reliable methods. Writing centers, especially in a liberal arts educational context rooted in spirituality (like the one we represent at Wheaton College), should operate as locations of centering practices, where tutors and writers take the risk of vulnerability to be human with each other, addressing important issues of meaning and identity formation. As Geller et al. (2007) acknowledge about such work, “That’s a tall order, but it’s also an invitation to playful, creative work, work that is organic, work that grows from our writing center staff, not work that is imposed upon them by a one-size-fits-all template” (p. 83).

This all sounds promising; however, we need to be sober about how difficult this work is. As Vandenberg (1999) observes in “Lessons of Inscription: Tutor Training and the ‘Professional Conversation,’” published in *The Writing Center Journal*, “The value of conversation as a trope for the authorization of knowledge through literate scholarly activity does not come as readily to new student tutors as it does to practiced scholars” (pp. 69-70). As much as directors would like new tutors to engage in meaningful conversations about their work and their daily struggles, such discussions do not occur easily. Complications for new tutors, especially, include the following: lack of face time to share mutual needs with co-workers; an insufficient level of comfort to allow for honest interchanges; a fear of acknowledging mistakes or inexperience. Vandenberg’s solution involves adopting what Murphy and Sherwood (2011) advocate in *St. Martin’s*

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Sourcebook for Writing Tutors: “a broad, interdisciplinary, and theoretical conversation surrounding the practice of tutoring—a conversation...[by] informed tutors...aware of the ongoing professional conversation that contributes to defining writing center practice” (p. 63).

Taking the ideas of Palmer (1998), Geller et al. (2007), and Vandenberg (1999) to heart, I came to a crisis point about five years ago when I realized that scheduling limitations prevented me from being able to call regular meetings with all staff members present. So, I set out to offer my staff a means of building an alternative—a community of practice, one grounded in current writing center scholarship. I established a relatively simple, low-tech response to our staggered schedule existence: an email thread that I called Consultant Conversations. Not a requirement but an invitation to all of my tutor-consultants, the purpose of Consultant Conversations was to encourage and enrich dialog with one another. Specifically, the listserv Consultant Conversations was created to accomplish several practical and theoretical objectives:

1) to connect tutor-consultants with each other through the immediacy of online discourse

2) to stimulate problem-solving strategies pertaining to individual peer-writing sessions

3) to draw on weekly professional resources presented in the weekly manager’s memos

4) to provide opportunities for authentic encouragement and mutual support among tutors

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5) to build an e-community through the steadfast presence of eager conversation partners

These goals seemed urgently important, especially in light of our writing center's ongoing commitment to assist our tutor-consultants as they faced the common daily challenges inherent to their job: working with peers on their particular writing struggles in authentic and open ways.

This venture—the Consultant Conversations listserv thread—resulted after one of the regular weekly mentoring meetings that I conduct with my writing center student manager, who at the time lamented that our former system—a three-ring binder called *The Blue Book*, which served as a helpful tool for recording personal tutorial struggles, a paper-based log of tutor interactions and concerns that we had used since the nineties, when I became director—was not being used as frequently as it once was. Our tutor-consultants no longer wanted to pick up a pen and journal their experiences in the log, thus having to endure a long period of space and silence before a response might appear in the binder by the next shift time, when perused once again. At that juncture, I speculated on whether we needed to get with the twenty-first century, and then I proposed a relatively simple solution. Whereas the medium of instant-messaging lacked the opportunity for a depth of expression in addressing staff issues, a basic email thread allowed for a substantive expression to a collective audience, whose members, as available, could provide a response almost as soon as a concern was posted. The solution seemed too easy, and we were not sure what the response would be. Would our tutor-consultants value the chance to express their concerns, especially right after a session that did not go as well as anticipated, or would they perceive it as a

bureaucratic imposition that really offered little beneficial results for the time and effort spent?

As Geller et al. (2007) recognize in *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice*, there are varying degrees of technology being implemented within writing centers today. The authors suggest a few reasons to explain why:

While many of us have integrated technology into our writing centers' daily operations, others of us fear technology. We think it may take us away from what we are committed to: one-on-one, fact-to-face tutoring. We think we don't know enough about it to use it well. We resist it. But rather than resisting technology, blindly accepting it or having it forced upon us, we might begin to use it for our own interests and as a part of the learning cultures we're developing in our writing centers. (Geller et al., 2007, p. 124)

Regarding this fear of technology, I must confess that at times I have been more of a Luddite, as an administrator. My concern has been the loss of human, embodied, and dynamic interaction. However, more recently I have tempered my criticisms of our hyper-technological world, affirming that legitimate forms of online communication actually prompt meaningful and personally invested interconnection. In fact, as Margaret M. Roidi (2015) acknowledges in "Tutor Training Procedures in Higher Education: Creating a Community of Lifelong Learners," "exposure to appropriate learning opportunities as well as leadership patterns can be complemented by technology" (p. 5). Technology has been an effective method of communication and training for many years; an email thread, I finally realized, hardly seemed like cutting-edge technology.

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Immediately after launching our Consultant Conversations listserv thread, my staff members took to it “like a duck to water”—or to contemporize the simile, “like a Millennial in front of a computer.” The conversation thread began, and then lengthened within 24 hours, and ever since has been spinning on, offering thoughtful and practical assistance on the best ways to tutor writers. (For a sample of the thread, see the Appendix.)

Beneficial Aspects of an E-Community—A Manager’s Perspective

As the student manager of tutor-consultants at Wheaton College’s writing center, I have had the opportunity to converse thoughtfully with my director about management philosophy and my own experience in this role. My own philosophy is simple: I believe that a good manager is one who can balance the goals of the collective with the personal growth of the individuals. As Sally A. Lipsky and Malika Kapadia’s (2013) study on the effect of work experiences for academic peer tutor-consultants shows, an effective method of accomplishing both tasks in the context of college-level writing centers is to dialogue with tutor-consultants about how to promote positive change in the organization. According to Lipsky and Kapadia (2013), “informal discussions [with supervisors of peer tutor programs] might increase peer educators’ awareness of the varied aspects and benefits of their jobs, enhance their job satisfaction and performance, and even increase their overall satisfaction with their undergraduate experience” (p. 9). Entering into such open and goal-focused conversation develops community, helping the center reach set goals together while also empowering each individual to contribute his/her expertise and gifts. And as Roidi (2015) affirms, “A community of tutors can

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benefit tutees, institution of higher learning, academic support program, and the community at large,” making these meaningful conversations the heart of positive change in an organization such as a writing center (p. 12).

However, meaningful conversations about tutoring, especially those focused on the difficulties of the work, often do not occur easily within the structure of a writing center. Because most of the work at a writing center takes place within one-on-one sessions with tutor-consultants and clients, staff members do not often have the opportunity to have conversations, let alone dialogue about individual and collective goals as a community. While many managers in other types of work environments have the opportunity to work alongside their co-workers on an almost daily basis, I see the tutor-consultants on my staff only when I am able to visit them during their shifts. Even as the student manager of a small center with only sixteen tutor-consultants (including myself), I have few opportunities to approach my staff for thoughtful and honest conversation about their work and our collective goals. I have often feared that this made them feel isolated from me as a manager. Though I have considered many ways in which I might solve this “distance problem” among staff, I have found that the most helpful solution during my time as manager has been our listserv thread called Consultant Conversations.

Consultant Conversations is easy to use and has become integral to staff connectedness. The email interactions work as follows: once a week, the manager will send a mass email containing a memo, grammar lesson, and theory lesson, along with some discussion questions. First, the memo simply alerts students to what is happening at our writing center, particularly for that week, such as a professor requiring her

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students to visit the writing center for a crucial assignment. Second, the grammar lesson will include a short article or blog entry about a particular topic in grammar or the importance of composition concepts as they relate to a student's writing. Third, the theory lesson includes a study, editorial, chapter, or video about tutoring, writing center theory, or writing in general, along with two discussion questions. Often I will try to tie content from the memo section into the theory section under a common theme, such as how to specially assist the needs of ESL clients. Consultants electronically respond by replying to the email thread with their answers to the discussion questions so that all tutor-consultants may read their answers, and many of tutor-consultants' answers are follow-ups to other tutor-consultants' responses.

As the student manager, I strongly encourage participation in Consultant Conversations for three reasons. The first is that it reinforces the position of tutor-consultants as collaborative peers, not superior experts. Many clients come to the center seeing tutor-consultants as writing gurus who impart wisdom onto the client, but this is far from the truth. Tutor-consultants are learning, too, alongside clients, learning about the artfulness that must accompany being a writing tutor. The Consultant Conversations listserv reinforces this humble identity in the staff members. The second reason is that it allows tutor-consultants to engage with other staff members in a way that builds up the community. While the center benefits from tutor-consultants' increased knowledge and critical thinking, the tutor-consultants also benefit personally and professionally, as writers and tutors. Staff members receive the suggestions and encouragements of their peers, which both reinforce good practices and hone their writing and tutoring skills. The third reason for suggested participation is that it helps

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realize our vision of the writing center as a place of positive collaboration. In Andrea Lunsford's (1991) important essay "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center," she shows the ineffectiveness of writing centers with strict hierarchical structures, and she argues that collaboration invests power in the group through dialogue. The ones in conversation and community are the ones that maintain control in a structure. In a genuinely collaborative writing center, each member of the community holds the most power and motivation to effect positive change. Lunsford's claim captures how our writing center structures our appointments and client-consultant relationships, and Consultant Conversations emulates that dialogic-centered structure within our staff.

Besides acting as weekly discussion and training facilitated by the manager, Consultant Conversations also exists for tutor-consultants to share questions and insecurities. One particularly admirable submission was from a tutor-consultant who just ended what she termed a "weird session" where, after explaining the situation, she posed this question, "How do you help a client who seems unable to conceptually understand her own argument, and also unable to recognize her own inability?" Despite this tutor-consultant's humorous take on the session, several tutor-consultants responded with advice they had received from outside sources, including professors and past tutoring experiences. Many suggested practical activities they might use in that session, such as writing down the student's argument point by point until connections were made. Through this exchange, respondents were able to pass down knowledge they had gleaned previously, while the submitter was able to admit uncertainty and be affirmed for a similar situation that may arise in the future. Submissions like these

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demonstrate that technology allows tutor-consultants to talk about their sessions, ask their fellow staff members questions, and encourage each other in community.

In addition to building community and developing the tutors' skills, Consultant Conversations assists me, as manager, to delegate responsibility and conserve time. Though I must initiate it, the email thread allows other tutor-consultants to accept some of the responsibility of instructing new hires in the nuances of tutoring. For example, when a newly-hired tutor-consultant posed a question about time management in his appointments, several more experienced tutor-consultants promptly answered with helpful suggestions. Because of their extensive consulting experience, they were able to support and instruct the new hire. Were it not for Consultant Conversations, the tutor-consultant may not have had the chance to ask me for help, or my other managerial responsibilities may have been neglected due to extensive training of new hires. In moments such as these, Consultant Conversations becomes of great use to me as a manager.

Finally, tutor-consultants have reacted quite positively to the effect of Consultant Conversations on our community. One of the strongest indicators of this reaction is the common phrase in tutor-consultants' responses: "I never knew that...." Through Consultant Conversations, consultants are constantly learning new things and broadening their perspectives, whether by the lesson or other tutor-consultants in the conversation. Because I often challenge tutor-consultants to speak from their own experiences and prior knowledge, the tutor-consultants come to know each other more intimately through their conversations about shared interests and goals, making themselves and each other more equipped to serve clients.

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As discussion takes place among the staff, it not only builds up our community, but it aids our clients as well. By sharing knowledge and experience, we are collaborating in building a better writing center. more equipped to help the students who come to us for assistance. The writing center e-community gives each client the benefit of not just a single tutor-consultant but of the collective staff, as each individual staff member acquires broader knowledge from the experience of the whole staff in the listserv thread. Our e-community keeps the center and the tutor-consultants flourishing.

Finally, technology fosters community in a writing center setting. As a manager, it has helped me with staff management in ways no other single tool has. It certainly has the practical advantage of creating virtual face time, but it also allows tutor-consultants to participate in thoughtful exchange with one another about writing and consulting, which they may not have experience with outside the use of technology. It not only aids tutor-consultants' personal and professional flourishing, it also aids in the flourishing of the writing center as a living, progressive entity, equipped to help clients in many ways. This technological space we have created allows tutor-consultants to admit uncertainty and be vulnerable with their other staff members, but also encourage each other with new ideas and practices. This kind of conversation is vital to effective tutoring.

Conversing in the E-Community—A Tutor-Consultant's Perspective

While the theoretical context and practical benefits for a dialogic e-community, in the form of Consultant Conversations, have been considered already, I will describe the ways in which the Consultant Conversations listserv thread has supported and enhanced my capacities as a tutor, as well as the community as a whole. By creating a

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friendly and supportive tutor-consultant e-community, our online conversation has allowed me both to engage in meaningful dialogue about my work and to apply that dialogue to practical situations.

When I first used Consultant Conversations, I was intimidated by it—as a staff member who was hired at the start of the second-semester, I felt like a newcomer, and I assumed that everyone else possessed some sort of secret writing center expertise. However, once I actually read my co-workers’ contributions above my carefully crafted response in the thread, I realized that my anxiety about contributing to the online conversation thread was unwarranted. It began with one of my co-workers reflecting on the difficulty of working on a paper with a client while maintaining the client’s unique voice and ideas and concluding: “Stick to your writing standards, but do not forget the particular needs of the individual in light of the background/context in which they (and you) have been shaped.” Below this message, another co-worker responded with a related, practical question for the group: “What do you do when you know that an argument a student is making is insufficient, but when you push them on it, they seem to want to stick to it?” Immediately after this response, the initial respondent emailed the thread: “Whoops,” he wrote in apology, “Long night/Limited attention span.” He finished this second email with a smiley-face emoji which made me realize that this was a conversation I could join without fear of shame or ridicule. My co-workers were ready both to laugh at their own mistakes and to engage with theories in a natural, unforced manner; this vulnerable, informal tone of Consultant Conversations allows a culture of learning and camaraderie to develop among the staff.

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This culture would not necessarily exist otherwise, given the staggered scheduling system that does not allow me to see most of my co-workers on a regular basis. Without Consultant Conversations, it would be easy to feel alone in my work at the writing center. However, as we trade emails back and forth over the semester, my co-workers and I create a distinct workplace culture, focused on common goals and interests. Last year, we had a “sub-thread” of haikus running within our email thread – my co-workers ended their contributions with hastily sketched and usually humorous poems. While some addressed the freshmen for whom the center visit was a course requirement and others referenced comma-splices, all of the haikus were the sort of jokes that occur in a community where people know each other and are striving towards a common goal.

Because of its virtual nature, our e-community depends upon our language. We speak to each other as co-workers and fellow students; thus, while we try to be thoughtful and articulate, we also avoid overly-formal language. In my experience, the tone of Consultant Conversations develops over the semester, beginning as a string of carefully crafted, formal analyses of the assigned reading that we receive each week from the student manager. Early last semester, one of my co-workers responded to the reading by writing, “Scaffolding can help self-regulated learning because it develops trust between the student and tutor so that the student feels more confident sharing ideas or making changes unassisted in the future.” I agreed with her, but her language was so abstract and hypothetical that it hindered my comfort in responding. As the semester continues, however, and we practice communicating by means of Consultant Conversations, our language begins to change. At this point, co-workers have begun to

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respond to specific things others have said earlier in the thread and to relate the discussion to practical applications. The thread becomes an actual conversation rather than an academic assignment. Thus, not only does our weekly participation in Consultant Conversations create a much-needed workplace community, but, as the director and manager have both noted, that very community is what allows for meaningful conversation to occur.

The conversation, in turn, is what has trained me to be an effective writing center tutor-consultant. When I was first hired, I knew almost nothing about writing centers, so the writing theory readings that my manager assigned each week provided me with valuable instruction. As Vandenberg (1999) notes, all theory exists in an academic conversation, and he argues that student tutors should be encouraged to engage with these theories and enter into the conversation. Although I have been exposed to a wide breadth of writing center theory and practice, the readings themselves are the least impactful aspects of my experience with Consultant Conversations. Alone, these theories would merely increase my knowledge base; most of my growth as a tutor-consultant has come when other tutor-consultants and I engage these theories in Consultant Conversations.

Any conversation involves more than passive consumption of information; it requires both a conscious involvement with that information and a respectful exchange of opinions. In order to continue to flourish, then, Consultant Conversations requires at least the majority of tutor-consultants to participate in a given week. As both a writing major and a tutor-consultant at a writing center, I have learned the value of writing about something in order to deepen my understanding of it. The questions that the student

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manager poses each week encourage such integration of comprehension and application of the theories. For example, once she asked the team to read an article about requiring students to visit the writing center and its effectiveness. Our student manager asked us to discuss our own experiences with clients who were required to come to our center. Because many of these freshmen come hoping for improved grades, our manager also asked us to consider our level of responsibility for the grades of our clients. The conversation that followed revealed that many of us had first come to the center because our writing teachers required the visit. In light of this response, our discussion on grades was slightly more nuanced. Most of us agreed that the paper's grade should not be either the tutor-consultant's responsibility or the client's primary aim, but I entered the conversation idealistically convinced that grades should not even enter our minds in a consulting session. However, as more of my co-workers emphasized the links between good writing, good grades, and our role as tutor-consultants, I began to modify my internal stance.

As shown by this exchange, when I respond to the readings each week, I am forced to think deeply about the work I do on a daily basis and perhaps change my behavior and beliefs based on my co-workers' insights. Over the past three semesters, Consultant Conversations has encouraged me to keep growing as a tutor-consultant because I cannot separate theory from practice. Neither can I separate my own experience from that of others within the email thread. My co-workers' contributions have formed my experience of the conversation at least as much as my own thinking. As previously noted, our conversation allows us to build one another up as tutor-consultants and, consequently, to build up the center. We all have different opinions and

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experiences to draw upon and my co-workers' perspectives have impacted my own significantly.

The beauty of conversation is that it depends upon a community of members with diverse viewpoints. "Diversity is all around us," as Kim R. Nolt correctly reminds us, "and adapting teaching [tutoring] methods in consideration of that is an important part of the educational process" (p. 16). Similarly, as our director explained, an emphasis on dialogue in the writing center shifts the center's focus from correct information or methods to a meaningful exchange of ideas between vulnerable humans. Consultant Conversations needs each of us to contribute. Once, in a particularly helpful exercise, our student manager divided the tutor-consultants into pairs and asked us to conduct consulting sessions with one another. Afterwards, we shared what we had learned about our own consulting "style" by watching another tutor-consultant. Fellow tutor-consultants gained confidence, acquired new ideas for their own developing consulting practices, and provided overall growth. Used in this way, Consultant Conversations itself actually resembles a consulting session: as peers, we give each other feedback on various ideas and their communication, and we learn together as a result. As I write a response, my co-workers are responding to the same question and often, they will come up with ideas that would never have occurred to me. On occasion, a tutor-consultant will add a specific question at the end of their entry, asking how others would handle a specific situation that occurred during their sessions. At this point, co-workers can voice their ideas, sympathize with the tutor-consultant, and suggest alternative methods. Consultant Conversations enriches each of our consulting practices by providing us with at least fifteen different ways to approach various scenarios. In several situations, our

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ongoing discussion about practical matters allows our work at the writing center to become more nuanced and intentional.

The conversation that surrounds writing and writing centers is lively and inviting, but it can be easy to miss. Consultant Conversations at the writing center has encouraged me to enter into the wider academic conversation by making that exchange of ideas immediate and practical. My weekly assignments force me to engage with theory, and to remember that the most insignificant of consulting sessions is in fact part of a bigger picture. By remaining in conversation with my co-workers, I am able to help create a community that both challenges my thinking and encourages my practice. At our writing center, we try to communicate to clients that writing does not need to be a solitary activity – it thrives in the midst of communication and feedback. Similarly, Consultant Conversations reminds us that peer consulting does not need to be something we do alone. Our work develops and thrives best in a community.

Appendix: A Sample from the Consultant Conversation Listserv Thread

On Wed, Jan 22, 2014 at 4:39 PM, Mara wrote:

The materials for this week were quite helpful—I really appreciated the review over many of the areas we cover frequently! I also had some new thoughts from the theory piece on drafting. The authors were very open towards different drafting approaches—they affirmed both the "don't-let-your-pencil-stop" and the "each-sentence-must-be-PERFECT" approach. But they also gave the caveat that, whichever approach you use, you should be consistent: *Whichever style is yours, establish a ritual for writing and follow it. Ritualistically straighten up your desk, sit down, sharpen your pencils or boot*

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up your computer, get the light just right, knowing that you will sit there for an absolute minimum time. I found this bit fascinating. On the one hand, I think that I do get more accomplished when I follow my "standard" drafting approach, even down to the straightening-desk routine. But I've also sometimes found that different kinds of drafting approaches help me to engage different kinds of writing or topics. So, I'm curious what the rest of you think . . . have you found that a "writing ritual" is your best practice, or is variety helpful?

On Wed, Jan 22, 2014 at 9:35 PM, Juan wrote:

I would say, Mara, that my approach to the writing process does shift depending on the topic or nature of my assignment. Not counting brief reflections (which I tend to write in one sitting), some of the strategies that vary include the amount of research I do prior to starting a draft, whether or not I make a written outline, and whether or not I use free writing as a tool for developing my ideas. For major philosophy essays, I find that both free writing and outlining are useful, since I am often working on complex ideas that need to fit together in very particular ways. However, I am less likely to use free writing if the ideas in the essay are easier for me to understand.

On Thu, Jan 23, 2014 at 2:27 PM, Richard wrote:

My "writing ritual" begins the night of the new moon. I light the seven candles, pour the consecrated wine on the floor, and call upon Queen Mab to give me the writing skills I need to defeat the evil demon of poorly organized essays. In all seriousness, I tend actually to do most of the invention and a large part of the outlining in my head before I ever sit down at a computer. In general, I will spend 2/3 of my time doing research and

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thinking out my essay and only 1/3 actually writing it out, so that by the time I am writing my first draft, I have a pretty good idea of what I want to say. I also consistently count on writing around three drafts of every paper.

On Thu, Jan 24, 2014 at 1:41 PM, Shawna wrote:

In response to Mara's question: I was super relieved to hear that the "make every sentence perfect" method is valid--thanks for that. My writing ritual actually involve a lot of talking (I'm often an external processor) about what I'm writing on before I ever start the process. Once I get comfortable communicating my thesis and the ideas are clear in my head, I begin research and then do a detailed outline. From there I draft with perfectionism, and then usually do a technical read-through to fix grammar and word repetition. But I'm in Dr. Davis' class right now, so all that might change soon =) And granted, this is when I'm not being lazy about a paper, which is almost never. It's only my ideal modus operandi.

On Thu, Jan 24, 2014 at 3:15 PM, Moe wrote:

I don't think the double hyphen is actually a thing. I've always thought it was an incomplete dash. Also, my typical writing ritual: First, I read the relevant material cross-legged on my sofa with pencil in hand. A cup of tea helps (or several). Second, I go back over notes to clarify thoughts and make another cup of tea. Third, I rewrite some ideas, take a break, and then, if I gave myself enough time, I may wait till the next day to continue. Fourth, I write a draft. Fifth, I look over my draft—cut and paste, reorganize, hack and slash—and then drink some more tea. Sixth, I rewrite my paper. And last, I agonize over surface issues until the deadline. Finally, cleaning my room or work-space general tends to focus my mind. In the past when I've been particularly frazzled, I've

resorted to pulling out a sports jacket and tie, which makes me feel invincible.

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