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Training Manuals and Reflective Practice

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Abstract

In this article we illustrate the reflective process of collaboratively authoring our writing center's new consultant training manual with the intention of maintaining and enhancing our center's positive culture in the face of significant change. We examine how explicitly training manuals tie the theory and practice of a particular center together and function as mirrors for center identity. Finally, we advocate the practice of self-authoring manuals as a generative exercise for professionals in the field.

Introduction

Though many excellent writing consultant training manuals exist (Bruce & Rafoth; Murphy & Sherwood; Rafoth; Ryan & Zimmerelli), each summer there are consistent requests for sharing of self-authored training materials that circulate on the WCENTER and WPA listservs (two listservs devoted to the concerns of writing center and writing program administrators). Why is there widespread interest in customized consultant training manuals when such excellent manuals are so accessible? James C. McDonald suggests that a potential reason lies in the individual institution's context: the implications of its physical space, the dynamics and expertise of its staff, and the needs of its audience. In a review essay of training manuals, McDonald suggests reasons for and difficulties with adopting commercially available manuals in a center, explaining that

they save a lot of time that directors would otherwise have to spend composing materials and searching for readings, often reinventing wobblier versions of wheels that others have developed and improved over the years [...However,] If we rely too heavily on even the best tutor-training textbooks, we reduce the variety of

approaches tutoring and tutor-training... and we make it more difficult to develop training programs sensitive to a center's local needs and conditions. (63)

In our writing center at a large research university, we have drawn from commercially available training manuals throughout the years. However, as McDonald suggests, because of the local context of our particular center, we have also felt the need to self-author a consultant training manual as our primary training text. In the process of collaboratively authoring our manual in summer 2012, we had to negotiate the rhetorical challenges of articulating the identity of our center, our graduate student staff, and our population of writers. Since training manuals explicitly tie the theory and practice of a particular center, the process of writing and revising our manual enabled us to conceptualize our "best practices" for responding to internal and external identities and responsibilities.

Self-authored, customized manuals function as "cultural artifact[s]" (Miller) for centers; they offer an especially useful site for examining the values, expectations, and implicit theoretical foundation for writing center praxis and center culture. Our analysis relies on the notion that texts such as training manuals "active[ly] [contribute] [...] to organizational processes," they "*perform something*," and have an agency independent of an author's intention (Cooren 374). Interestingly, despite the interest in and concern with developing training materials for consultants (Gillespie, Heidebrecht & Lamascus, Harris, Lunsford), there is little scholarship devoted to the process of developing these documents as a generative exercise in itself. Therefore, in this article, we illustrate the reflective process of collaboratively authoring our center's new consultant training manual with the intention of maintaining and enhancing the positive aspects of our writing center culture in the face of significant change. Most importantly, we discuss our intention to create an agentive manual, versus a static one, which remains open to revision as our administrative and consultant staff reflect on and develop our center's theory and practice.

We begin by examining how writing center scholars have addressed issues in their own centers through reflections on and changes to their training practices. Next, we describe the particular local context and culture of our writing center. We then address the following questions brought to the fore through our collaborative authorship: What is our current writing center culture? How can we enhance this culture as our context changes? How do we enact this culture, beginning with the development of a theoretically grounded consultant training manual? Of course, we recognize that a center's culture is dependent on numerous forces, many beyond our control, but in conclusion, we address how in rewriting our manual, we became more aware of the implications of our representation of ourselves as a center.

Writing centers are inherently rhetorical spaces. Their placement, space, theory, and praxis contribute to the ways they are thought of and utilized across campus. However, these ideas are usually examined independently when considering particular writing centers. Melissa Nicolas calls this dichotomy in writing center scholarship a division between "writing center as concept" versus "writing center as location" (106). Because of the examination of our training manual, we would like to add "writing center as culture" to marry these two views – since we have new people, new spaces, and new ideas, we must make a concerted, organized attempt to continue

developing a positive culture in our center that is inextricably linked to both its space and its idea.

Writing center directors frequently try to address problematic trends in consulting through a close examination of their training practices. For instance, when they noticed that consultants in their writing center were describing students as “other” in session write-ups, Jean Kiedaisch and Sue Dinitz changed their consultant preparation, encouraging consultants to identify themselves and students as individuals independent of their group affiliations. In a similar situation, Bryna Siegel Finer, Jamie White-Farnham, and Jeremiah Dyehouse changed their method of training and interacting with consultants in order to increase consultant knowledge of pedagogy, disrupt the hierarchy of their center, and improve research practices. Their primary method – including center consultants in research projects – has greatly influenced our own work in revising our training manual.

Discussion

Five years ago, when our center opened as part of our university’s Library Learning Commons Initiative, there were five writing consultants, including the Writing Center Coordinator, who self-authored the consultant manual to meet the local needs of the Writing Center. Now, as a result of additional funding opportunities awarded to the center, we will begin the fall 2012 semester with an influx of new, interdisciplinary writing consultants, expanded center space, and additional administrative leadership, including a Writing Center Coordinator and two Assistant Coordinators, all of whom are graduate students in Rhetoric and Composition. Because of the confluence of these new circumstances, we have spent the summer rethinking our center culture in the process of collaboratively authoring a new consultant training manual. Though the addition of so many new staff members poses a challenge, we see this as a generative opportunity – an opportunity to rethink our pedagogy, revisit the theory that informs our current practice, and examine how our center culture is shaped by the production of our manual.

However, before revising our theory and consequent training manuals, we had to take stock of our existing writing center culture. Our current staff of 26 is composed of MA and PhD level graduate students from three different tracks in English: Creative Writing, Literature, and Rhetoric and Composition. Our new staff will also include graduate students in the fields of Communication, World Languages, and Education. Consultants participate in a three-day orientation during the summer, and then new consultants are asked to observe consultations for a week before they begin working independently in the center. Though there is no training course required for consultants, mandatory professional development is conducted on a monthly basis throughout the semester. Our best consultants are engaged, curious, reflective, and professional; in revising our center manual, we have tried to create a rhetorical situation that invites consultants to embrace these qualities.

One of the purposeful choices we made in our manual concerns terminology and the rhetorical positioning of our graduate-student staff as “consultants” versus “tutors,” and “writers” versus “students” or “tutees.” We make this distinction in an effort to reinforce the professionalism and general approach to writers that we ask of consultants and to acknowledge the diversity of students, faculty, and staff who visit our center. We ask consultants to approach writers respectfully, as “reader-listeners” of sorts, who reinforce writers’ confidence in their projects.

For instance, in the most recent revision to our consultant training manual, we articulate the following:

Although we look at all kinds of writing from many different writers, we are not “experts,” dispensing content knowledge and grammar lectures. Instead, writing consultants are careful, experienced readers. By approaching each writing project as a reader and acting as an advocate for each writer, consultants help writers by eliciting their implicit knowledge about particular writing projects and learning together in the process of finding answers to unknowns. (Pantelides, Ewing, Langbehn 16)

Material such as this is meant to provide the graduate student consultants with a jumping-off point for developing professional ethos, not to impose upon them a set of static rules.

In revising the manual, we tried to develop the consultant’s role to include more responsibilities and encourage consultants to gain a greater sense of ownership in the center. We aimed to create a space conducive to consultant research and open to the varied needs of the writers who cross our threshold. Like Finer, White-Farnham, and Dyehouse, one of the ways we have tried to develop this aspect of our center culture is by enhancing research opportunities in the writing center, thereby generating a relationship for consultants with the center that is immediately and explicitly mutually beneficial. Currently, consultants are encouraged and expected to contribute to the center in myriad ways. They routinely add to the center’s resource library, blog, and participate in outreach activities. Going forward, returning writing consultants will lead portions of orientation, presenting their own research on areas of writing center theory to incoming staff members. These presentations will later help to further build and revise our training materials.

Our goal in the writing center broadly is to allow for the professionalization of graduate students, a frequently difficult endeavor since “Graduate students exist in a kind of professional limbo, negotiating a nexus of discourses and demands that complicates their training as rhetoricians and consultants” (LeCluyse and Mendelsohn 103). Because of this unique circumstance of graduate students training graduate students, we have mimicked elements of Christopher LeCluyse and Sue Mendelsohn’s redesign of their own training as “an argument,” one that asks consultants to participate in training according to their own interests, based on *topoi* they devised (103).

We have adapted a version of LeCluyse and Mendelsohn’s training as “argument” in our center by presenting our manual to the consultants as a living document, one that is intended to be interpretive, not instructional. We maintain electronic versions that are capable of evolving as new tools and ideas become integrated into the center. Consultants are encouraged to provide feedback on both the theory we provide as well as the daily protocol utilized in the center – as the manual invites:

we’ve incorporated the voices of writing center scholars that inform our center’s theoretical foundation. We encourage you to engage with these voices and bring both your own voice and research to the guidelines outlined here. We expect that you will contribute your ideas, your suggestions, and your questions to the coordinators and to this document throughout the semester. (Pantelides, Ewing, Langbehn 7)

The physical manual, therefore, becomes a catalyst of discussion itself, asking consultants to engage with the center both practically and theoretically.

To further encourage this reflexivity, one of the primary revisions we made to the manual was to add further professional development opportunities for consultants. In addition to meetings throughout the semester, consultants are invited to research, develop, and facilitate workshops, and observe and critique colleagues, including the writing center coordinators. By drawing consultant's attention to the connection between theory and praxis in the writing center, and inviting them to apply their research interests in professional development opportunities, we hope to develop further awareness and engagement in the staff.

Finally, since space is at a premium across the university and especially in the library where our center is housed, using the physical space of our center was something we visited purposefully in our manual. We encouraged the consultants to use spaces productively and to take advantage of the different locations within the library available for our use. Our manual's narrative addresses the space as writers experience it, and we examine the opportunities for collaboration that the round tables, open spaces, moveable chairs, and multiple locations allow.

Conclusion

The process of self-authoring a consultant training manual, though it can indeed be unwieldy and “[wobbly]” (McDonald 63), is an important, reflective exercise that incites consultants and administrators to engage the theoretical foundations of their center and purposefully choose terminology, research opportunities, professional development, and space utility that reflect the local needs of a center. We recognize that despite careful revision of our manual, the semester will be what it will be. There are so many variables that impact how our center will develop that all we can do is control for what is possible, remain flexible, and support our staff and writers consistently. Would our discussion of our tutoring philosophy be better written if we used a commercially available training manual? Possibly. Would it be easier to read for our staff? Perhaps. However, we believe that engaging consultants with us in the messy writing process will be a useful undertaking during the semester. If they learn even a fragment about themselves as writing professionals and rhetoricians as we did about ourselves and our center during our collaborative composition process – it will be worth it.

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