

RESEARCH NOTE

Power dynamics in writing consultations and potential lessons for teaching: An English Studies perspective

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I initially wanted to be a writing consultant at Stellenbosch University's Writing Lab when I applied to work as a tutor at the same university's English Department. Having always been quite shy and introverted, I thought that the opportunity to consult one-on-one would help me to become more comfortable interacting with other people, as well as enable me to think on my feet, something I would have to do while teaching and when presenting papers, an inevitable aspect of the academic career I have chosen to pursue. Having worked as a consultant for five years, I have found that the experience has certainly helped to ease me into the role of teacher but has also broadened my perspectives on how to engage with my students and how I view their work.

Much of what I have learnt can be understood in terms of the power dynamics at work between the consultant and the student within the consultation space. The close proximity in which consultations are conducted can be daunting. At times, I found myself very nervous about the prospect that other consultants could overhear the advice I was giving because several consultants can work in one room simultaneously. At the same time, I have found that the general understanding between consultants is that the Writing Lab is a supportive and non-judgmental space where the proximity sometimes enables us to learn from one another by being able to gauge how other consultants aid their students. I think that the consulting environment sets a great example for English Studies tutorials, which are group lessons aimed at lively student interactions about the texts being studied. This is especially so because English Studies is a discipline that relies on interpretation instead of hard facts, and there are different degrees of depth with which one can interpret a text, and ultimately one's ability to develop and refine one's ideas about characters, storylines and so forth, depends on hearing others' views. Thus, to be able to set the tone for the class, to help make it feel like a safe, supportive space where students can experiment with their ideas and feel secure enough to ask questions, is a valuable skill that writing consultants often hone.

There are several ways in which the consultation space and other aspects pertaining to place can converge in a manner that can make the consultation experience very daunting. Someone who visits the Writing Lab can be new to the venue and the consulting procedure, but might also be new to the university, the region, and even the country. There are thus several dimensions of a

student's subjectivity that can cause them to feel like outsiders which can hinder their willingness or ability to open up during the consultation. The feeling of being new and unfamiliar to a space can certainly, to my mind, be tied to one's sense of one's capacity to excel. The understanding that I have developed through consultations, one that I try to remember when teaching and convey to my students as well, is that one's ability to navigate the writing (or reading or learning) process is linked to one's familiarity with the spaces one works in, and one's understanding of the expectations relevant to these spaces. By this I mean that I am not inherently a better writer than the student I consult with, or a better literary critic than the student I teach, but I have generally been a student for longer, so I have had more exposure to the writing and reading processes, more exposure to markers' critique, more feedback on my work (and feedback from more people). In short, I have had more time to "learn the ropes" and become familiar with the educational spaces I inhabit, and the types of thinking, writing, and rhetoric that these spaces utilise and require. I find it important to remember that some students are more comfortable than others, not just in terms of their personalities but also regarding their differing degrees of exposure to institutional spaces (some are first-generation university students, some are second- or third-language English speakers, some are foreigners, etc.).

In the context of a writing consultation, the student's anxieties about his or her unfamiliarity with the space can be facilitated by the consultant's unfamiliarity with the subject. As a consultant, I can offer advice about how best to frame arguments and understand assignment instructions, but the student is treated as the expert on the subject matter, and we meet one another halfway, each bringing different (but complementary) expertise to the table. In some ways, because of this, consulting with a student in one's own field can, surprisingly, be more challenging because one needs to refrain from directing the student in terms of content. I have experienced it myself that a consultant who shares your discipline might relax the norms of the consultation procedure, taking on more of a supervisory role instead of merely facilitating the student. The mutual unfamiliarity at play between a consultant and students from different disciplinary backgrounds can therefore allow for very productive consultations.

A skill that has been helpful in working with students from disciplines that I am unfamiliar with, which has also proven valuable in my teaching, is being able to use directive questions to help students solve problems of interpretation that they might have instead of simply providing them with any applicable answer. Often, tutors attempt to get students to think beyond the textual examples provided in a lecture or in secondary reading material, so that they do not fall back on popular interpretations but instead try to develop their own readings of texts. Apart from helping one avoid imposing one's own views on students, directive questions are beneficial in demonstrating the logic of argumentation, that is, to get students to understand that it is not enough for them to simply make statements, but that these statements need to be backed up in a logical and coherent manner. This means that students can be more active participants in the learning process. I certainly hope that in some cases this has helped students to develop skills that transcend the requirements of specific English Studies assignments, and which may be of use to them with other writing tasks in the future, no matter the subject.

This also means that the students have licence to make final decisions regarding the work. My role as a consultant and tutor is largely facilitatory. They should decide what to do with the consultant's advice, and this requires treating the space in a particular way. One of the earliest things I remember being taught about consultations was how to make students feel included in the space by not hogging their paper, by letting them make corrections instead of them passing

that job on to me, by identifying tasks that they can work on before our next consultation, and so on. This has helped me as a tutor to learn the difficult but valuable lesson that I can be an effective, caring, and accommodating teacher without taking on a martyr-like persona by which I try to save (lazy, disinterested) students from themselves. Consultations have therefore helped me to delineate my responsibilities as a teacher more clearly.

The consultation process does, however, aim to balance the student's authority over their work with the consultant's authority to direct the interaction. I think that the onus falls on the consultant to stay on course, to avoid being overwhelmed by a student who might be demanding, and, importantly, to navigate incidents where students might propose ideas in their writing that can be offensive. I have encountered such incidents during consultations, although not frequently, but because of the nature of English Studies – a field in which students are required to read texts that tend to deal with sensitive social issues around race, gender, power and so on, and then formulate their interpretations about these issues – one needs to be prepared for the likelihood that insensitive or ill-phrased comments can arise. Even if I am offended by something being said, I think it would be unproductive to show that, and that it would be best to direct the conversation in such a way that I show the student why such comments can be construed as impolite. In other words, I think it better to explain how, as a reader, I interpret the claim in a certain way (which can be followed up with other questions like “Is this what you mean?” or “How do you want the reader to understand this statement?”), instead of a more affrontive response such as “Why would you say something like that?”. It has helped me to see that in teaching scenarios, where one needs to be in control of multiple students, it might be safer to resort to questions of argumentation, as one would in a writing consultation, taking the route of allowing a student to unpack their reasoning (and perhaps then noticing flaws in it as they go along) as opposed to responding with outrage or shock.

At the same time, they have broadened my perspectives on ways that I can be of more use to students, such as how I give feedback to them. Ordinarily, English Studies feedback is given in written form, and my own tends to be very thorough. This can, however, be very intimidating. Students do not always understand feedback because it takes time to familiarise oneself with the academic rhetoric used by markers, to adjust to different teachers' marking styles, and the volume of feedback can be overwhelming (if many aspects of the writing are covered, students may struggle to decide where to start making adjustments or to understand what their main shortcomings were). As a result, I have tried to incorporate one-on-one consultations with my students more regularly. This offers a quicker and easier means to summarise for a student one's impression of their work, and prioritise steps for improvement. One can also avoid misinterpretations of meaning, intention, and tone that sometimes creep into written feedback. Consultations as a means of providing feedback has formed part of my teaching philosophy that students have different strengths and preferences, and – where possible – one could try to accommodate these differences in one's teaching.

The most significant contribution that my consulting experience has had on my teaching is probably that it has helped me to think more empathetically towards students. Since my own experiences with tutors and supervisors have always been supportive and accommodating, it was difficult to imagine how differently other students' experiences could be until I worked at the Writing Lab. This has helped me to be more cognisant of the types of challenges students may face. It has helped me to understand that one's writing can deceive one's efforts; that students very often know their work better than their writing makes clear. It has helped me to

appreciate the creation of supportive spaces that are so necessary in academic institutions, so that I have come to think of writing labs as academic way stations, places where one can stop to ask for directions or simply gain assurance that one is on the right track. Mostly, consulting has helped me to see that, as a teacher with some degree of authority over students, I am always doing more than just marking a paper – that behind the paper is someone trying to navigate university life, likely with many anxieties and aspirations.