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Training for Triggers: Helping Writing Center Consultants Navigate Emotional Sessions

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Abstract: Labor performed by writing center consultants in sessions is inherently emotional. While writing center professionals can never alleviate fully the emotional demands placed on consultants during sessions, we can work to educate our staff about empathetic engagement with clients, and we can create structures and practices conducive to a supportive work environment that promotes self-care among our staff. In addition, we can partner with other on-campus resources, such as the counseling center, to ensure that our consultants know where to get extra support for themselves and where to direct students in need.

In our large, peer-staffed writing center, we frequently use an asynchronous discussion board to educate our consultants and to allow them to touch base about their sessions with us—their directors—and with one another. While the content of these posts, especially the ones in our “Open Forum” section, frequently reflects the intellectual labor performed by writing center consultants—i.e., easily anticipated questions about how best to work with clients on brainstorming, outlining, refining arguments, solidifying citations, explaining grammar, and so on—sometimes a post will underscore the intensity of emotional labor expected from consultants in writing center sessions. A particularly poignant example of affective demands placed on tutors comes from veteran consultant C. She writes,

A student came in with a fourteen-page, single-spaced memoir [about a time] when he was younger and his tutor for school molested him during one of their sessions. He seemed to feel a bit awkward while discussing it, but he didn't seem so uncomfortable with the topic. I asked if he felt okay reading it out loud, which he did. As he was reading it, I asked him a bunch of questions about his writing, specifically. However, I felt really uncomfortable discussing the actual issue [...] when he finally reached the moment where the tutor put his hand on the client's thigh, he stopped reading. Now, it was obvious just how uncomfortable he was. And I was uncomfortable. There was just a really long, awkward moment. I asked if he wanted me to read the part out loud, or if he wanted to skip over it. He actually braced through it and read on. However, he was stuttering and visibly upset. I had absolutely NO idea how to react. I asked if he was comfortable enough to write about this topic and share it with the class. He said he was, so I didn't push it. I don't really remember what happened next (I think the session ended soon after), so I can't say how I handled it, exactly. I mostly just stuck to what he wrote; what else could I do!?

While C's session illustrates an especially emotionally demanding situation, most writing center sessions, in fact, contain emotional components. Clients come in harried, stressed about assignments or by the general demands of being in college. They come in hangdog, deflated by a professor's critical commentary or admonition to “Go to the writing center!” They come in happy, pleased to report that we've helped them in the past and eager to work with us again. They come in annoyed, wanting appointments that are all booked up. As Y puts it,

I have had my fair share of emotional clients, ranging from the little snuffle all the way up to a partial emotional breakdown. It may sound like I'm trying to add a responsibility to our job description, but to be honest it is needed. If we want to be the type of center that can handle and deal with emotional clients, we will need to be a little invested in their worries and stress so that we can better deal with the paper they have by addressing the stress. It's all in the business of humans, they say.

Despite the frequency with which writing center consultants confront clients like the ones Y describes above, those

who are frustrated, angry, or otherwise emotional, there is a surprising dearth of scholarship on the subject. While a number of sources assert that writing center work is not—nor should be—therapy (Speirs, Hudson, Bisson), many others concede that writing consultants are often cast in the role of unofficial counselors (Mills, Weintraub, Barnett, Murphy). In our writing center, not only do we tend to align ourselves with the latter camp—believing that the work we do has important emotional aspects—but we also actively work to train our staff to be as responsive to clients' emotional needs as they are to their academic ones. Because our large, comfortable, light- and plant-filled writing center is centrally located on a campus with no true student union, and because we try to provide a pleasant place for students to come and write even when they don't have formal appointments scheduled, we have a reputation on campus as a “go-to” warm and welcoming space for students to hang out in. Moreover, in our hiring process we tend to self-select for really helpful peer consultants to join our staff by prioritizing consultants' people skills over high GPAs and other academic achievements. These two factors—our nice space, our nice consultants—combine to place us on the “frontlines”: critical points of contact for the student community. As directors, we are aware that, while we can never entirely alleviate or compensate the real emotional labor involved in the job of talking with students one-on-one about the often-vexing subject of their writing, there are some things we can do to support and care for our staff as they go about their work. Primarily, we can acknowledge and validate the emotional ardor of writing center work, and we can adjust conditions in the work lives of our staff to promote self-care and an overall climate of support.

Giving consultants the space and time to process emotional issues they encounter in sessions is one way we try to support our staff in the work that they do. We encourage them to block themselves off for an hour after a difficult session if they can and to write about their experience on our staff discussion board. We also encourage them to support one another in doing so by agreeing to swap appointments if need be and, most importantly, by creating an ethos of support, so that self-care becomes one of our community priorities. Affording the consultants the time and space they need to process difficult sessions gives them a chance to vent, to offer consolation to one another, and to exchange strategies for dealing with similar situations in the future. The following excerpt from a recent discussion board post provides an example of a situation wherein a consultant seems to benefit from turning to this forum to vent about a session. She writes,

Today, [a trainee] and I had a session with a student who was working on an English paper. The session itself was okay; we went over the writing, clarifying sentences, working on execution, grammar, adding details, etc. However, upon finishing going over the paper, the student began to talk about how it was hard for them to understand the poems. This then transferred into how they were very stressed all the time with all of the work they had to do. This then went into a conversation about religion, people having faith, and then to mental stress. To be quite honest, I'm not quite sure how the transition occurred or what the connection was, but I believe it was related in their mind. [The trainee] and I let them talk for a little while because they seemed like they just wanted someone to talk to. However, throughout their speaking it became apparent that they were looking for an outlet.

Because scenarios like the one A describes are fairly commonplace, and because being someone's outlet is hard, we talk specifically in training and in ongoing consultant education about empathetic engagement with clients' emotional states, as well as techniques for redirecting the focus of the session back to the paper. More difficult are the sessions that resonate personally with consultants. As another consultant asks on the discussion board, “What if we find ourselves working with a client who is suffering something similar to us (whether this is stress, identity struggle, etc.)? Do we hide this? Do we talk about it with the client? Should we ignore our own thoughts and emotions during the session in order to attend to theirs?”

This query prompted an all-staff meeting where we talked about our responsibilities and boundaries while navigating emotional sessions. Holding staff meetings to share experiences and strategies is another way that writing center professionals can take care of our staff. While taking care—creating an environment in which consultants feel valued, heard, validated, and supported—is a worthy end unto itself, consultants who feel cared for are better equipped to care for the population of students who come through our doors. For us, that means arranging consultants' schedules so that they're not overloaded with appointments and can pause to reflect on sessions and debrief with their directors and with one another; it means cultivating a community of support by encouraging them to turn to each other for help in tricky sessions and in helping to cover shifts when people are ill or when they need time off to study or to attend to personal matters. It also, importantly, means partnering with resources on campus that provide support for our consultants when they need it and that help us learn how to work most effectively with emotional students in the center. In particular, we try to make sure that our staff has a good working relationship with the counseling center, that they feel comfortable availing themselves of their services at times when they are stressed or triggered by sessions, and that they feel confident suggesting the counseling center as an option for distressed clients. Ultimately, while we as writing center professionals cannot alleviate entirely the emotional load writing center work places on our staff, we can initiate practices that help our staff, themselves caretakers, take care of themselves.

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