

Quoting the Academe in Writing Conference Explanations

Kelly Katherine Frantz

Teachers College, Columbia University

INTRODUCTION

Writing conferences are rich pedagogical settings to explore explanations. In contrast to teachers, writing consultants are usually peer tutors, straddling the roles of instructor and fellow student (North, 1984). This creates a unique situation where consultant-writer dyads must interactionally manage questions of expertise and authority (Carino, 2003). One way consultants manage this is through intertextuality, or the voicing of others. When consultants explain writing concepts, they often juggle many voices, from those of professors to authors to the writers' own texts. Of particular interest in the present paper is the voice of the academe. A main institutional goal of writing conferences is to help students improve their academic writing; therefore, at various points in the conferences, consultants explain the norms, language, and expectations of the target academic discourse community. While this intertextual nature of writing conferences has not yet been explored, we can expect that in order to help writers learn the target "speech genre" (Bakhtin, 1981) of the academe, consultants must inevitably connect their current explanations to prior discourse. In some ways, consultants act as information conduits, helping writers understand what is expected of them by professors or other readers of their work.

We currently know little about how consultants manage expertise and authority in their explanations and what consequences this has for the interaction. Thus, in this paper, I analyze how one consultant explains a writing concept with a particular focus on how they incorporate the voices of others. I discuss the effect this has within the interaction and how this contributes to our understanding of consultant-writer interactions in writing conferences.

DATA AND METHOD

The data come from a collection of thirty hours of video-recorded graduate writing center conferences. During writing conferences, writers are usually working on a specific assignment for one of their classes, and the consultant provides support in various ways, from suggesting paper revisions to explaining genre conventions. Participants in the present analysis are one consultant-writer dyad. The consultant is doctoral student, and the writer is a master's student. Following a conversation analytic approach, I transcribed the video-recorded interaction using modified Jeffersonian transcription conventions (Jefferson, 2004). In addition to including gaze and gesture (marked with italics), I transcribed interaction with shared computer screens (marked with an asterisk). After repeatedly viewing the videos and reading the transcripts, I created a collection of consultant explanations across multiple consultant-writer pairs. For this single case analysis, I focus on one such explanation.

ANALYSIS

In this writing conference, the writer is working on a class paper that she plans to expand into a master's thesis, and she has requested general help understanding the different sections of a research paper (e.g., Introduction, Background, Methods...). The consultant and writer are

sitting side-by side with both their laptops open to the same shared Google Doc, on which they are taking notes throughout the conversation. Before this extract begins, on the topic of the literature review section (labeled “Background/Literature Review” in the Google Doc), the consultant has told the writer to focus on what other researchers have said about her topic. Based on this, the writer takes notes silently in the Google Doc, which the consultant monitors and responds to in line 01.

- 01 C: *gazing to screen-uhuh, yeah exactly.*
 02 W: *nods, gazing to screen*
 03 C: *a:nd tsk (.)*
 04 W: *gazes to C*
 05 C: → *gazes to W-the point (.) of the literature section is to: what we call*
 06 *{air quotes-establish a gap.}*
 07 W: *°mhm,°*
 08 C: *uh have you heard that expression before? [°establish a gap,°]*
 09 W: *[shakes head]*
 10 *gazes to screen*
 11 C: *it's like u:m (0.2)*
 12 *[gazes to screen*
 13 W: *[as background literature review:?*
 14 C: **yea::h. I'll write it down,*
 C: **types "establish a gap"*
 15 *your purp- like th- the main reason that you have a literature*
 16 *review gazes to W, gestures-i:n a research paper like this, is to say:*
 17 *(.) this is what we know so far about this topic, but this is what*
 18 *we still don't know.*
 19 W: *ahh.*
 20 C: *like this is why we need to ↑do this study because*
 21 *gestures-everyone has studied X Y and Z regarding (.) this topic*
 22 *but we still don't know this. gestures-and that's where you come in.*
 23 W: *turns to screen*
 24 C: *so it's like you: are saying that I'm going to fill this gap in the research.*
 25 **(17.0)-both gazing at respective screens*
 W: **types "Say why I am going to fill this gap in this*
research -what is lacking in previous research that
hasnt been discussed/answered already"
 26 *(1.0)*
 27 C: *right. exactly.*

The focus of this analysis begins at line 05 when the consultant explains the *point* of a literature review section. The consultant evokes the academic discourse community through both verbal and nonverbal contextualization cues. First, she uses the plural first person pronoun *we*, which signals that she is speaking as part of a larger group of knowledgeable others. Through this, she shifts footing slightly (Goffman, 1981), signaling that she is not the sole author of the upcoming information. Second, she holds up air quotes as she says *establish a gap* (line 06). Air quotes, superficially, are reminiscent of quotation marks in writing. They are an iconic gesture that signal how the concurrent talk should be interpreted (Cirillo, 2019; Kendon, 2017; Lampert,

2013). Previous research on air quotes has shown them to have at least two main pragmatic functions: managing the vagueness or preciseness of talk and managing attributions of talk (Cirillo, 2019). In this case, by gesturing air quotes concurrently with *establish a gap*, the consultant marks this phrase as a precise, technical term and attributes the phrase to a discourse community (*we*) that she is a part of. Thus, by evoking prior uses of the phrase *establish a gap*, the consultant indicates that the phrase is not something she has made up or paraphrased; rather, this is a precise term used by others in this academic discourse community.

In the lines that follow, the consultant pursues a discussion of the phrase *establish a gap* and continues to verbally cue its intertextuality. She explicitly asks the writer whether she has heard of the *expression* (line 08), which further marks the phrase as having prior uses. The consultant alludes to the possibility that the writer has heard this phrase from someone else in a past context. When the writer indicates that she has not heard of the phrase, the consultant types it in their shared notes (line 14).

By interactionally and textually highlighting the key phrase, *establish a gap*, the consultant makes relevant further explanation (lines 15-24). Notable in this explanation is that her talk is more conversational (e.g., *this is what we know so far*, line 17). It is marked now with a general *we* (lines 17, 18, 20, 22), vague referents (*this topic*, line 17), and colloquial language (*that's where you come in*, line 22). This explanation has a distinctly non-academic tone. The consultant concludes the explanation by returning to a variation of the key phrase when she says, *so it's like you: are saying that I'm going to fill this gap in the research* (line 24).

Taken as a whole, this sequence involves the consultant explaining the definition of a key concept while managing her roles as both tutor and peer. She does so by first establishing the importance of the concept, drawing on authority from the broader academic discourse community. She then explains the concept in language more accessible to the writer. And she concludes by tying the explanation back to the academic concept.

Building intertextuality in the consultant's explanation has several consequences within this interaction. First, it bolsters the consultant's authority. By placing herself within the broader discourse community and indicating that what she says has been said before, she lends credibility to what she is teaching the writer. Second, she signals for the writer the importance of the term, indicating that of all the consultant's talk, this particular phrasing is noteworthy. That the consultant aims to highlight and topicalize the concept is also clear in her emphatic syntax in line 05 (*what we call*), repetition and typing of the term (lines 08, 14, and 24), and pursuing of the topic (e.g., line 08). Finally, the consultant signals some distance between herself and the term. Particularly with her use of air quotes, she attributes the focal phrase to not only herself, qualifying her authorship over the term. She may be repeating the term in this context, but others have said it before her. She is not the sole author.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This analysis of one consultant's explanation, although limited in scope, contributes to our understanding of the interactional work consultants do in writing conferences to manage their role as both tutor and peer. By referring to others in their explanations, consultants can manage the multiple voices at play in this pedagogical context. In addition to speaking as themselves, consultants take on the role of messenger for the academic discourse community. Thus, the extent to which they align with the messages they convey can be negotiated and marked both verbally and nonverbally in their explanations. While consultants may negotiate alignment to bolster their authority as in the case analyzed here, in other cases, consultants might

negotiate (dis)alignment as a way to mark resistance. Future studies should explore these variations in explanations.

REFERENCES

- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). Discourse in the novel. In M. Holquist (Ed.), *The dialogic imagination* (pp. 3-40). University of Texas Press.
- Carino, P. (2003). Power and authority in peer tutoring. In M. A. Pemberton & J. Kinkead (Eds.), *The center will hold: Critical perspectives on writing center scholarship* (pp. 91-110). Utah State University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46nx6f>
- Cirillo, L. (2019). The pragmatics of air quotes in English academic presentations. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 142, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2018.12.022>
- Goffman, E. (1981). *Forms of talk*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Jefferson, G. (2004). Glossary of transcript symbols with an introduction. In G. Lerner (Ed.), *Conversation analysis: Studies from the first generation* (pp. 13-34). John Benjamins.
- Kendon, A. (2017). Pragmatic functions of gestures: Some observations on the history of their study and their nature. *Gesture*, 16(2), 157-175. <https://doi.org/10.1075/gest.16.2.01ken>
- Lampert, M. (2013). Say, be like, quote (unquote), and the air-quotes: Interactive quotatives and their multimodal implications. *English Today*, 29(4), 45-56. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026607841300045X>
- North, S. M. (1984). The idea of a writing center. *College English*, 46(5), 433-446. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/377047>

Kelly Katherine Frantz is a doctoral candidate in Applied Linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University. In her research, she uses conversation analysis to study interaction in writing conferences. Correspondence should be sent to kkf2109@tc.columbia.edu.