Metacognition in the Writing Lab: A Study of Theory and Practice

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Michael Williams
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Abstract

The University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Writing Lab requires new writing consultants to complete a semester-long, three-credit training class and practicum experience before beginning employment. The goal of the class is to expose prospective consultants to reading, writing, and learning theory so they are able understand learner needs and employ effective strategies in tutoring sessions. This study follows the fall 2013 class through the semester as they read and discuss scholarship while concurrently meeting one-on-one with learners. Student language is used to demonstrate that consultants understand how theory applies to practice and how their new knowledge is utilized with learners during tutoring sessions. Collaborative learning methods used in the training class inform collaboration in practice.
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1. Introduction

The Writing Lab at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, one of the oldest writing centers in the country, was established in 1973. From the beginning, the student staff has been required to complete a training course and practicum experience prerequisite to employment. Although the training class has undergone many changes, its focus has always remained on teaching writing consultants to apply theory to practice. Although learning outcomes have measured the class’s efficacy over the years, a complete study has not been done to demonstrate, in a visible way, how learning takes place in the practicum class, and how students translate classroom learning into practice.

Since the fall of 2010, I have had a part in designing and teaching the practicum class (Education 370/570W). For the first three years, I co-taught with Dr. Maureen Giblin, Director of the Tutoring-Learning Center. Each semester I assumed more responsibility, both in curriculum design and instruction. In the fall of 2013, I took the lead, arranging the class in such a way that, I believed, student learning and the application of their knowledge to one-on-one tutoring sessions could be methodically followed and measured. This thesis will be a demonstration that undergraduate students can learn writing center theory and consciously apply it when working with learners.

The practicum class and the spirit of the lab in general are grounded in writing center theory. Any study of the class must be informed by literature on the topic. The following scholarship pieces together a picture of what a writing center should be. A review of the following scholarship will lay the framework with which to begin a transparent, qualitative analysis of the Writing Lab at UWSP.
The current concept of a writing center originated with the need to prepare at-risk populations of students for college. In response to the open enrollment policy of City University of New York in the early 1970s, Mina Shaughnessy coined the term “basic writing” (BW) and wrote *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*. As underprepared writers flooded universities across the country, innovative teaching strategies increased in importance, and professors and programs worked to adjust their practices. While the fact that many students lacked writing skills was obvious, Shaughnessy stressed the importance of understanding the nature of errors in order to address them effectively.

She writes, “BW students write the way they do, not because they are slow or non-verbal, indifferent to or incapable of academic excellence, but because they are beginners and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes” (5). Thus begins the long-lasting narrative of the underprepared student. College performance does not correlate directly with intelligence, or even desire; students who have received sufficient preparation possess the skills and motivation necessary for postsecondary success while other students do not. When given the opportunity to make mistakes and grow, underprepared students can acquire the skills they need. The question remains, how should an institution approach the task of helping students prepare for college while they are *already attending college*?

Open enrollment in the 1970s as well as recent enrollment policies have increased the number of underprepared writers in universities, pressuring institutions to innovate writing instruction or watch students fail. Shaughnessy suggests that while “correctness” is an easily measureable feature of good writing, the challenges to BW students run deeper (8-9). Grammatical errors could be considered mistakes at the surface level, and the fact that students make these mistakes could be an indicator of underlying issues (90). In order to increase
students’ likelihood of success, mistakes must be seen as indicators of larger issues—symptoms rather than diseases. Shaughnessy says of BW students, “No one saw the intelligence of their mistakes or thought to harness that intelligence in the service of learning” (11). Education has evolved since the early 1970s, but the ongoing importance of “harnessing that intelligence” remains an intricate operation. Educators must detect the hidden reasons for poor writing skills and engage them to assist students in bringing their writing up to par.

At a more global level, Shaughnessy states that it often seems “that BW students have no ideas” (226). However, the issue lies not in the fact that they have no ideas, but that they remain stuck at the sentence level. As a writer grows, she or he develops “the ability to hold larger and larger units of discourse together” (233), fleshing out ideas and adding weight and sophistication to arguments. She claims that the ability to elaborate on points, to “stay with each thought in the line of his discussion long enough to mark it as important” (230), separates the experienced writer from the basic writer. While an experienced writer expands on thoughts, adding warrants and clarity, a BW student cannot differentiate an expansion of thought from an “oblique route of reverie,” straying from the topic at hand (231). Essentially, an underprepared student has neither experienced college-level writing, nor in most cases college-level thinking. She or he may have good ideas but lack the ability to express the ideas in a thorough, logically sound way.

In the context of a writing center, a concept in its infancy when *Errors and Expectations* was published, BW students benefit tremendously from a dialogic environment. If the process of thinking affects the process of writing, conversation would serve as an aid to critical thinking, scaffolding for the invention process. An experienced peer writing tutor, someone who possesses “the ability to hold larger…units of discourse together” and to “stay with each thought in the line of his discussion” is equipped to mentor basic writers through the invention process, modeling
critical thinking through questions and conversation. Then the grammatical errors, what Shaughnessy classifies as surface-level errors, can be addressed as obstacles to clarity of ideas rather than obstacles to expression itself.

While Mina Shaughnessy gives us a foundation for understanding the development of writing skills in the context of college-level skills and thought, Brian Street addresses the larger concept of literacy in the context of society. He defines literacy as “the social practices and conceptions of reading and writing” (1). Reading and writing skills, then, are not universal, but dependent upon the attitudes, commonalities, and beliefs of groups of people.

In order to illustrate the features of this type of literacy, which he calls “ideological literacy,” he contrasts them with features from its counterpart, which he coins “autonomous literacy.” While ideological literacy narrows the focus of reading and writing skills, placing the evaluation of successful communication within the context of culturally-specific practices, autonomous literacy, Street claims, prescribes a set of more or less universally learnable skills for successful reading and writing. His division of the definitions of literacy was prompted by his discomfort with analyses of literacy by contemporary anthropologists, most notably Jack Goody. Goody, according to Street, “extends [literacy’s] scope across grand sweeps of culture and history,” creating a divide between cultures similar to the outmoded theory of literate versus non-literate societies (4-5). The written word, in this model, requires a more methodical and logical approach than non-written forms of communication, and assumptions of a society’s sophistication are often derived as a result.

Street cites Hildyard and Olsen and their claim that writing and speaking utilize separate skill sets. Writing, they propose, distances the “speaker” from the “hearer,” placing more importance on logic in communication. Therefore, societies can be classified as predominantly
logical or predominantly interpersonal—literate or oral (19-20). While this model may appear to share qualities with ideological literacy, Street points out that the concept of literate versus oral societies creates a “great divide” between cultures, portraying them, intentionally or unintentionally, as inherently different—as possibly unequal (95).

In order to further elaborate on the value of ideological literacy, Street cites Scribner and Cole’s famous study of the literary practices of the Vai people of Liberia. The literate practices of the Vai are studied within their own unique social contexts, taking an important step away from Goody’s association of literary practice with cognitive activity. However, Street claims that the study still lacks social considerations, such as the political socialization of schooling (9-10). Literacy never occurs in isolation, but always depends completely on culture, subculture, interactions, assumptions, and traditions of those who read and write.

While these studies reveal preliminary thought on ideological literacy, Street combines the studies with his own analyses to assemble a picture of what literacy practices in context look like. Rather than allowing room for dichotomies between cultural practices (logical versus primitive, literate versus oral) he views each literacy practice within each culture as springing from and dependent of specific beliefs and practices. Rather than identifying differences between literacy from culture to culture, he narrows the focus of literacy studies to individual, unique situations.

James Gee continues Street’s line of reasoning, examining a similar body of work by theorists who propel the views fostered by “New Literacy Studies.” New Literacy places all literacy into context, neutralizing dichotomies such as literate versus oral or simple versus complex. Instead, literacy in all forms can be understood only by studying it through a sociocultural lens (67). Additionally, Gee extends the definition of literacy to include a much
broader range of human experience than just reading and writing. He claims that “language in society is in the heart of the field” and that language is “attached to ‘other stuff’: to social relations, cultural models, power and politics, perspectives on experience, values and attitudes, as well as things and places in the world” (1). Literacy encompasses not only communication on a page, but also thought, action, values, and feelings. Gee’s use of the words “things” and “stuff” is appropriate considering literacy can be attached to virtually anything in the world, as long as humans perceive it.

An important piece of Gee’s vision of literacy is the “literacy myth.” According to Gee, a popular view of the myth is,

- Literacy leads to logical, analytical, critical, and rational thinking, general and abstract uses of language, skeptical and questioning attitudes, a distinction between myth and history, a recognition of the importance of time and space, complex and modern governments (with separation of church and state), political democracy and greater social equality, a lower crime rate, better citizens, economic development, wealth and productivity, political stability, urbanization, and a lower birth rate (50).

This long list of “truths” about literacy, already in the process of being debunked by studies from the likes of Scribner and Cole and Shirley Brice Heath, and further scrutinized by Brian Street, are now subjected to another level of criticism. Literacy practices represent not only the way societies read, write, and utilize logic, but also the ways governments are run, how people interact on a daily basis, how the entire world is interpreted by societies and individuals. Literacy becomes a way of being which takes place in a context within a context within a context. If, then, this panorama of human existence is no longer subject to the literacy myth, a true exploration of
sociocultural interactions can take place. “Correctness” can be judged not by an imposition of values, but by an assessment of effectiveness within a context.

However, the idea that correctness is contextual does not negate the importance of correctness. In fact, correctness in this sense becomes all-important. When considering the political, social, and ethical implications of effective communication, Gee states that “[a] text, whether written on paper, or on the soul (Plato), or on the world (Freire), is a loaded weapon.¹ The person, the educator, who hands over the gun hands over the bullets (the perspective) and must own up to the consequences” (64). The culmination of spiritual, political, and educational power converging in a potentially damaging way creates an exigence for those with the power to pass on literate practices. Reminiscent of Kenneth Burke’s idea of symbols and human perception,² Gee’s viewpoints on New Literacy and contextual correctness transcend the study of speech and text and enter an inquiry of how language, action, and cognition form reality.

In order to navigate contextually correct ways of communicating, thinking, and being, Gee introduces the concept of “Discourses” (with a capital D). Discourses are sets of characteristics we utilize and observe in order to establish and recognize identity (155). He states, “Discourses are not units or tight boxes with neat boundaries. Rather they are ways of recognizing and getting recognized as certain sorts of whos doing certain sorts of whats” (156). Discourses are performances and interpretations of the performances of others which situate each of us within specific situations and help us to establish an identity within the moment. A “situation” can be as overarching as being a citizen of a democracy or as miniscule as being a bystander of a car accident. In each situation, context provides us with a stage to perform identity.

¹ Both Plato and Freire discussed language as the driving force behind political revolution.
² For more, see Burke’s Language as Symbolic Action.
In order to communicate in the multitude of Discourses, people have developed a multitude of “social languages.” Social languages are, more or less, sub-languages consisting of unique vocabulary, inflection, and physical delivery. As nebulous as the idea of Discourse, social languages interact with and depend upon the moment as situations unfold (90). While a large idea, such as “young, educated professional” may be associated with a social language, so too may be an idea such as “old woman walking down the street.” Matching the right social language with the right Discourse is essential. Using the wrong language within a situation creates the perception that ideas, thoughts, and actions are incorrect and therefore inappropriate, ignorant, or offensive. Without using the right language in the right situation, no goals can be reached.

The writing lab is a place with ongoing situations requiring appropriate reactions and conversations. It is, in itself, a Discourse community with its own social language. Consultants working in the writing lab need to, at the very least, understand that each student has a unique social identity (156), that communicating, thinking, and the act of being vary from person to person depending on their backgrounds (155-56), that language in all of its forms affects the quality and effectiveness of interactions in the tutoring situation (64, 90), and that different ways of communicating, thinking, and being do not exist on a scale of sophisticated to ignorant, but within a multiplicity of social contexts which can be evaluated on individual bases only (64, 67). If consultants grasp these concepts, even at a basic level, the writing lab is ensured of employing students who are aware of their learners’ varying needs, sensitive of obstacles to education, and creative with approaches to passing on knowledge and habits.

When dealing with the question of how to acknowledge varying backgrounds and engage learners in a manner conducive to learning, Mike Rose refocuses the discussion of education and
D/discourse, keying in on cultural identities preventing college students from completing a degree. In examination of students who struggle or fail in school, Rose says, “if you can get close enough to their failure, you’ll find knowledge that the assignment didn’t tap, ineffective rules and strategies that have a logic of their own; you’ll find clues, as well, to the complex ties between literacy and culture, to the tremendous difficulties our children face as they attempt to find their places in the American education system” (8). Students who hail from backgrounds which share too few characteristics with university culture almost inevitably struggle to matriculate unless they are able to quickly acquire a contextually correct set of skills. In order to facilitate this type of skills transfer, a teacher, tutor, or mentor must first recognize the reasons behind these struggles.

Rose relays a story of his interactions with a college student with the pseudonym, Andrea. She tells him, “I was walking down the hall in the Engineering Building and suddenly I felt really strange. I felt I was completely alone here.” The encounter causes Rose to reflect, stating, “One of the tasks facing all freshmen is to figure out ways to counter this loneliness” (174). Students new to the university, whether well-prepared or not, find themselves in a new community, listening to new social languages—the language of the campus, languages of majors, languages of specialties within their majors.

If even well-prepared students endure an adjustment period to college, the hardships underprepared students sustain can be seen as injurious. Rose recalls his service in the Teacher Corps and the students he served: “Kids came into the schools with hand-me-down skirts and pants, they didn’t have lunch money, they were failing. The connections between neighborhood and classroom were striking” (177). These images of public schools relate directly to situations in college. Life at home, in the neighborhood, in the familiar community shape identity, and
when personal identity finds itself at odds with the type of identity required to complete an education, students fail.

Teachers, tutors, and mentors need to understand the roots of student and learner struggles. If a student’s life experience provides no references to academic success, these references must be generated. Students adrift cannot succeed unless they first set anchor, find something familiar from which to build. Similar to Lev Vygotsky’s idea of the zone of proximal development, new skills are best acquired if they lie within reach of existing skills. The closer to their own comfort levels we can meet students, the more likely it is they will grasp new concepts in an integrated, useful way. If writing lab consultants come to understand Rose’s theory, if they are able to relate to the stories of lonely, out-of-place students, they will in turn be able to develop strategies to reach out to these lost learners. They will find ways to get close enough to lend a hand, and learners will feel close enough to reach out and pull themselves up.

Some students, though, feel reluctant to accept any sort of help—even a presentation of strategies to help themselves. Patrick Finn explains reasons behind this seemingly nihilistic behavior. Students, he claims, can receive two types of education: empowering or domesticating. An empowering education is one in which students learn skills necessary to excel in life, to rise to the tops of their fields. A domesticating education is one in which students learn to follow directions, to settle into a place of productivity and stay there (ix-x).

Depending on culture, background, and economic status, students in the same school might leave with different types of education. This phenomenon does not indicate a conspiracy, nor does it place blame on unmotivated students. Rather, it is dictated by ingrained social dynamics. For instance, minorities could see “acting white” as a betrayal of their own identities.

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3 In *Thought and Language*, Vygotsky defines the zone of proximal development as “the discrepancy between a child’s actual mental age and the level he reaches in solving problems with assistance” (187).
Working-class students could feel they are playing into the hands of authority. Any student who identifies with a group which is at odds with the world of academe could feel resistant to compromising her or his identity in order to gain an education from a world that feels foreign in the first place (x).

This feeling of not belonging causes students to form what Finn calls “oppositional identity.” Students whose parents and ancestors have fought their way from oppression to working class feel a sense of unity, a pride in who they are. And who they are remains wholly dependent on their place as the underdogs (39-40). Understandably, these working-class groups feel compromised at the thought of conforming to the standards of the social classes that have held them down. To do so would be, in a sense, appeasing the enemy. In order to rise in status and class, though, minority or working-class students must learn the educated class’s discourse, adopt their strategies, and navigate the school system. Finn states, “the more a minority is like the dominant culture, the better they will do in school (40). The school system naturally caters to the dominant culture—the educated culture—and all others must adapt.

How then can educators facilitate student engagement for these at-risk populations? The answer, according to Finn, is explicit sharing of the mechanisms that maintain the status quo. He states that “nothing short of dialogue, conscientization, and explicitly teaching school discourse and powerful literacy will give all students a chance at an empowering, liberating education” (190). The responsibility for teaching students the skills and mindset they need to embrace an empowering education lies with educators. Without realization of the possibility that powerful futures await, students have no framework from which to build. Specific, explicit instruction of the secrets of the university provides the basis for moving forward in a new setting.
Sharing of secrets to success undoubtedly falls under the purview of peer writing consultants. While underprepared or reluctant students move about in uncomfortable territory, peer educators often represent a safer or more familiar contact than instructors do. While writing consultants, successful students who represent, or at least approximate, the educated social classes, occupy a space closer to faculty, staff, and administration than do Rose’s adrift students (174) or Finn’s appositionally-situated students (39), they still possess the relative appeal of undergraduates, of potential friends. Writing consultants straddle two worlds, able to step into the realm of academe or the realm of the struggling student. Jonathan Tudge discusses Vygotsky’s theory of the zone of proximal development, claiming that students learn more readily from a peer who has reached a slightly more developed plain of thought than from an expert who has moved cognitively further away. Peers who have further developed their thinking, he states, are “tantamount to experts,” at least in a relative manner, and therefore less likely to make an impact on peers who have had little exposure to the subject. On the other hand, peers who have moved only slightly away can hasten the movement of their less-experienced counterparts (160). In view of the advantages of this type of peer-to-peer interaction, student roles as mentors deserve close consideration.

The efficacy of writing tutors who possess skills and thought processes close to those of their learners can be seen in comments from Muriel Harris, the nation’s founding writing center director. She claims that “Tutors too far down the road toward ‘teacherhood’ are no longer sympathetic, supportive helpers, sensitive to the needs of fellow students whose world isn’t very far removed from that of the tutor” (380). The proximity of two students’ thought processes plays an integral role in the exchange of knowledge. Peer collaboration wanes in effectiveness as the student-student relationship moves toward a student-teacher relationship. That is not to say,
though, that writing tutors need not be more fluent in a discourse than their learners are. On the contrary, Harris describes writing tutors as “hybrid[s], somewhere between a peer and a teacher, who cannot lean too much one way or the other” (380). A tutor offers “instruction of a kind often available only in the personalized, collaborative, nonjudgmental environment of a tutorial” (381). A writing tutor, then, is a peer whose skills lie within close proximity of the learner’s, a friend and mentor a few steps further down the path toward expertise, yet close enough to reach back and grab the learner’s hand.

On this path, the most powerful tool the tutor has is conversation. Discussion of writing “makes the audience real…extend[ing] the invention process” (Spear qtd. in Harris 372). This extension of the invention process assists learners in fleshing out ideas, incorporating additional viewpoints, leading their writing toward a more rhetorical form. Depth of thinking leads to depth in writing. Reminiscent of Shaughnessy’s description of experienced writers’ ability to “stay with each thought in the line of his discussion long enough to mark it as important” (230), peer-to-peer discussion helps learners to fill in the gaps, to understand which pieces are missing and put them into place.

In order to accomplish this level of mentoring, writing tutors must undergo training (Harris 369). An effective tutor is a skilled reader and responder, process-oriented, and able to assess the learner through questioning (371). Beyond that, he or she is able to offer “emotional support” (372), a crucial skill in a one-on-one session with a beginning writer. With these skills, a tutor performs an intricate dance, scaffolding the learner’s knowledge with the right pieces at the right times, never taking on the role of a teacher, yet never too closely mirroring the peer. The job of a writing tutor is a demanding one, requiring a judicial application of skills, altogether wrapped up in identity.
If a writing tutor’s identity is a precarious one, so too is the identity of the writing center itself. Above all, a writing center needs to be student-centered; and while focusing on students, the emphasis needs to remain on process. Stephen North explains that a writer’s main concern is the paper at hand, while the tutor’s concern is the writer him- or herself (49-50). By shifting attention from the paper to the student, tutors identify more closely with learners as people and gain insight to their strengths and challenges. In this way the tutor maintains the all-important proximity to the learner. The consultation “will not derive from a generalized model of composing, or be based on where the student ought to be…but will begin from where the student is, and move where the student moves” (51). The spirit of the place itself becomes one of safety and growth, not of skill drills. Talking is a crucial part of writing, and the proliferation of writing centers is “an institutional response to this need” (51). A writing center is not a place for proofreading and grammar-checking, but a place for writers to grow and incorporate new habits into their individual processes.

A writing center is not an extension of the classroom, although cooperation between writing classes and writing center can certainly take place. North states that writing center employees are “acutely aware of crucial differences between talking about writing in the context of a class, and talking about it in the context of a center” (53). Peer-to-peer interaction provides an entirely different pathway to integrating workable writing habits into students’ college lives. Writing tutors do not give assignments, nor do they evaluate students’ final products. The professor is not directly involved in the writing consultation; however, the professor is “part of the rhetorical context in which the writer is trying to operate” (52). The relationship between the classroom and the writing center is tenuous, but acknowledgment of the instruction behind the writing is key.
In this place that does not directly instruct student writers, yet integrates the multiple powers of friend and teacher, the dialogical environment becomes paramount. North characterizes conversation as “the essence of the writing center method” (55). Peer tutors ask questions, explain concepts, brainstorm ideas. In order to maximize what is in a learner’s head already, conversations serve a meaningful purpose (Harris; North; Shaughnessy; Vygotsky). When a student truly does not know which steps to take, conversation serves as cardinal north (Finn; Rose). Tutor training must include the art of speaking to learners. Peers ask relevant questions and explain issues that are most obviously pressing to students. Learners have a chance to be heard beyond the busy office hours of their professors. Conversation expands critical thinking, adding weight to writing. In short, as North simply puts it, “talk is everything” (56).

The UWSP Writing Lab embodies all of the aforementioned values. It is a place where mistakes signify a point of growth rather than failure (Shaughnessy; Rose), a place where the outer limitations of a writer’s abilities can be expanded through conversation and modeling (Shaughnessy; Rose; Harris; North; Vygotsky). Interaction between peers creates an environment where knowledge can be shared optimally and without significantly uneven power dynamics (Street; Gee). But within the peer-to-peer relationship, the tutor brings a more developed viewpoint to the table which represents a logical next step for learners (Harris; Vygotsky). A sense of community should permeate interactions as tutor and learner search for common ground on which to exchange knowledge (Street; Finn; Gee; North). While this sharing of skills and habits drives tutorials, interactions must also take into consideration the assignments behind writing (North 52). Above all, tutors should approach learners holistically, guiding them toward habits conducive to overall success and acclimating them to college discourse (Shaughnessy; Street; Gee; Rose; Finn; Harris; North). Taking into account the scholarship
surrounding writing centers, the consultants at UWSP attempt to treat learners as whole people within an educational setting. Rather than teaching down to learners, consultants introduce them to a community of discourse, encouraging them to reach out in any and all appropriate directions to make contact with missing pieces and find new comprehension. Through conversation, peer educators marshal complex knowledge of reading, writing, and learning theory to connect with learners at a human level.

In order to learn to integrate these broad, interconnected theories into conversations with learners, writing consultants in the Writing Lab take a three-credit, three-hundred-level practicum class. Education 370/570W prepares writing consultants for practice by introducing them to writing center theory, inclusivity and ethics, and collaborative pedagogy. By applying theory to practice, consultants position themselves as a link between students and faculty. While professors have mastered the discourses of their fields, first- and second-year students have likely had little or no exposure to discipline-specific reading, writing, and thinking. Peer-to-peer collaboration in the Writing Lab offers learners an additional pathway into course material. Undergraduate consultants are able to usher learners as they take their first steps toward learning and expression at the college level.

I use the literature reviewed here to model what a writing center should be. In order to accomplish the ideal model, writing tutors must understand and practice the aforementioned concepts. A methodical and detailed explanation of the tutor training practicum, an illustration of the students’ step-by-step process of imbibing and expressing theory, and an analysis of tutors’ applications of what they have learned will provide qualitative evidence that undergraduate writing consultants in the UWSP Writing Lab understand and apply theory put forth by scholars.

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4 For Education 370/570 learning objectives, see Appendix A
in the field, and, therefore, provide learners with an environment conducive to successful writing.

At the onset of the Fall 2013 Semester, I asked the question, can undergraduate writing tutors learn writing center theory in a methodical and transparent way? Moreover, can they then apply that theory to practice in a metacognitive manner? In an attempt to answer this question, I have laid out the step-by-step journey of new writing consultants as they complete their first-semester practicum. The study will use student language to measure the effectiveness of the training class and the impact of tutors on learners as they put theory into practice.

2. Methods

This study focuses on the processes practicum students go through while learning and applying writing center theory. This study does not provide a comprehensive picture of the practicum class and concurrent tutoring experience, but examines only the theoretical readings and responses to the readings which demonstrate consultant understanding or application of theory in practice. Developing conceptions of theory and practice will be evidenced through consultant language. Consultant comprehension and application of theory will be explored in three sections:

Initial Responses

- In the fall semester of 2013, practicum consultants wrote responses to readings before class discussion. These responses helped them to form initial opinions. For each reading, the Initial Responses section will include a brief review of the reading or readings assigned, the writing prompt as presented to consultants, the purpose of the prompt, and selected excerpts from the responses. This section represents consultants’ thoughts and opinions before class discussion.
Final Responses

- At the end of the semester, practicum consultants were asked five questions on D2L. The D2L questions provided consultants with an opportunity to express their understanding after having gone through in-class discussions and experiencing real-time sessions in the Writing Lab. The Final Responses section illustrates consultant understanding of theory and evidence that theory is being applied in practice.

Reprise

- Practicum consultants wrote two in-class essays as a final exam. These questions allowed space for consultants to present their own conceptualizations of how theory and practice work together and how peer-to-peer interaction affects language and learning. They were asked to explain their own growth throughout the semester.

These three stages in consultant comprehension of theory and practice provide a methodical, transparent depiction of their learning processes. Also apparent is their development into writing center professionals as they become metacognizant of these processes and begin to consciously employ their knowledge, habits, and skills while working with learners.

All data are specific to the fall 2013 semester. In order to simplify explanation, students in the practicum class will be referred to as “consultants” or “tutors” while students visiting the writing lab for help will be referred to as “learners.”

3. Initial Responses

3.1 Reading: Brooks, Corbett, & Fitzgerald

Practicum Consultants discuss three pieces, written for three different audiences, focusing on three distinct approaches to writing consultations: “Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Students Do All the Work,” by Jeff Brooks; “Tutoring Style, Tutoring Ethics: The Continuing Relevance
of the Directive/Nondirective Instructional Debate,” by Steven Corbett; “Collaborative Learning and Whole language Theory,” by Sallyanne Fitzgerald; and the “The Tutoring Process,” chapter three of The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring, second edition, by Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner. Through these four readings, practicum consultants’ first exposure to tutoring sessions is one that combines writing center theory with practical application of skills. The variety of viewpoints within these readings sets the class’s tone, signaling that the semester-long inquiry into the role of a writing consultant will be a complex one.

Jeff Brooks, with his coining of the term “minimalist tutoring,” reflects long-held assumptions of the writing center. Specifically, a writing center is a place for students to explore their already-existing knowledge while in conversation with a neutral, nondirective writing consultant. If the peer tutor offers direct answers to questions or solutions to problems, she or he has committed the crime of academic dishonesty, doing the work for the student rather than encouraging the student to take control of the writing. On one hand, students in the practicum usually feel relief upon reading Brooks, realizing they are not expected to be experts or teachers of writing. They like the idea that the “paper belongs to the student” (85). On the other hand, practicum consultants sense that there is something crucial missing in the article. The fact that a confused learner may be sitting next to a successful student—a student with answers—with no hope of those answers being made accessible, often sets practicum consultants on edge.

Particularly, Brooks’s explanation of “defensive tutoring” strikes a negative chord as he portrays the writing consultation as a conflict, describing the session as a “fight” in which learners “will fatigue you into submission if they can,” and ultimately suggesting the consultant should “yawn” and “look at the clock,” and employ a collection of other passive-aggressive tactics when the learner does not exhibit satisfactory motivation (87). Withholding important
information from a struggling learner, especially while pretending not to care, does not sit right, which is why practicum consultants also read other texts in tandem with this useful yet problematic article.

Steven Corbett challenges the minimalist approach, citing Brooks among others as the progenitors of a reactive, political policy which has limited writing centers for decades. He states, “When diving deeply into a discussion of directive/nondirective tutoring, we soon begin to realize that—as in any educational situation—we are dealing not just with instructional, but also with political issues” (Corbett). Specifically, professors and administrations have doubted the ability of peer consultants to respect the sanctity of intellectual property as well as the ability of peers to accurately and responsibly impart knowledge to impressionable students. Corbett claims writing centers, by adopting minimalist approaches as policy, have shot themselves in the foot, stating, “concern with avoiding plagiarism, coupled with the second-class and frequently precarious status of writing centers within the university hierarchy, generated a set of defensive strategies aimed at warding off the suspicions of those in traditional humanities departments.” By being reactive to the general sentiments of university departments rather than proactive in showcasing the types of collaborative processes at work, Corbett quotes Clark and Healy in their claim that “the writing center has been party to its own marginality and silencing” (qtd. in Corbett). Practicum consultants, while more comfortable with the idea of minimalist approaches, tend to agree with Corbett’s assertions that the writing center will be most effective when identified as a place of learning and not merely a “hands-off” study space for learners to sort out what they already know.

The most difficult aspect to this reading, and an aspect that practicum consultants become familiar with in the context of their future participation in the program, is that writing
consultations operate within a directive/nondirective spectrum in which decisions must be made on a student-to-student basis. While peer consultants are not instructors, they do possess what Brian Street calls “insider knowledge” (qtd. in Corbett). Peer consultants are experienced, successful students. They have excelled in college, maintaining high grade point averages and exhibiting the habits necessary for success. Many learners seeking assistance in the writing lab have not learned successful habits, nor have they comprehended the conventions for writing in their majors. The more academically underprepared the learner, the more unlikely she or he is to marshal the academic prowess to catch up to more prepared students, short of being granted insider knowledge. Corbett submits that embracing the Vygotskian concepts of modeling and imitation allows a consultant to “focus on what students know and need to know.” In some cases, a learner needs to be explicitly shown the correct and expected way of doing something in order to be able to replicate it in the future. The decision to be directive or nondirective with a learner is not black and white, and consultants learn to make the decision, learner by learner, situation by situation.

Sallyanne Fitzgerald applies Collaborative Learning Theory to peer writing consultations, stressing that “knowledge…is socially constructed” (11). The knowledge that learners gain from peer consultants, whether imparted directively or nondirectively, constitutes only a portion of the student’s overall understanding of a larger discourse. Within this larger discourse, “collaboration ‘frees’ each writer to seek his or her own ideas with support from the community” (12). If knowledge is a social construct, then discussion and sharing in a peer-to-peer writing consultation provides learners with a framework within which to construct personal views as well as a broad understanding of their particular academic discourses. Collaboration, rather than giving away free answers, actually acclimates learners to a larger learning community, enabling
them to assimilate information and build upon existing knowledge. Students in the practicum class begin to construct their own socially-situated knowledge after reading Fitzgerald, turning class discussion toward their own collaborative learning experiences.

3.1.1. Assignment

These four readings take differing positions concerning the role of a peer writing consultant. They are also written for different audiences: *Longman* for peer and graduate writing center staff, Brooks for TA’s, Corbett for writing center professionals, and Fitzgerald for educators.

1. Write a paragraph about the differing approaches to writing lab tutoring/consultation presented in the readings. Some things to consider are appropriate tone, the role of the tutor, the tutor-learner relationship, and the amount of contribution needed from the learner.

2. Write another paragraph considering the readings as a whole. As a new tutor/consultant, what strategies or advice do you find most helpful? Do the readings change your understanding of the process in the booth?

3.1.2. Purpose

Introduce students to the complex and personal nature of writing sessions. Emphasize the necessity to adapt individual sessions by communicating with learners and making informed decisions.

3.1.3. Responses

By design, these readings introduce practicum consultants to a holistic and subjective approach to peer tutoring. While consultants are not instructors and do not possess expert knowledge, they are advanced students in possession of insider knowledge necessary for college success. From Week One of the semester, they are encouraged to develop decision-making skills
during one-on-one sessions, flexing the academic muscles that initially earned them a position in
the training class. Rather than learning rules and structures for one-on-one sessions to be later
disrupted and revised in accommodation of learners’ individual needs, practicum consultants first
grapple with the complex nature of their upcoming position in the writing lab and begin to
slowly build structure around an already-existing milieu. Training begins with what is rather than
what should be, immediately acknowledging the value of sound judgment while working with
individual learners.

In acknowledgement of the necessity to make decisions unique to each individual,
consultants respond accordingly. They grapple with the fact that they will need to navigate
imperfect circumstances for maximum effect. Sentiments are as follows. “I see both sides of the
argument in both Corbett’s and Brooks’s cases, but I found myself leaning more towards
Corbett. In a perfect world where everyone is a great writer, Brooks’s advice should dominate.”
Right off the bat, this consultant foresees the challenges of underprepared writers. “When I
understand the priorities of each learner, I can better grasp how to help the student grow as a
writer instead of solely patching up the paper at hand.” This quote illustrates a desire to develop
a holistic approach to tutoring. “The reasoning behind collaborative tutoring appeals to me…
When they just give me an answer or explain how they did it, it’s really hard for me to follow.”
This student relates her own experience as a learner and why an individual approach benefits her.
Most responses reference the intricate nature of working with students’ writing with statements
such as “Overall, I believe the combination of these readings gave me many different points of
view and helpful insight into the complex dimensions involved in the tutoring process.”

3.2 Reading: Bruffee
In summation of these four articles, the next class period is dedicated to the discussion of Kenneth Bruffee’s “Peer Tutoring and the ‘Conversation of Mankind.’” Bruffee explores the intricate connections between conversation and thought, stating that “thought is public or social conversation internalized” (208). Interactions between people not only influence thoughts and ideas, but are actually the genesis of internal thoughts and ideas. Therefore, “thought is a social artifact” with its “source in some or other interpretive community” (209). The people and culture surrounding us determine the lines of reasoning we naturally fall into. We align ourselves to the structure of our dialogic surroundings. Bruffee claims that “any effort to understand conversation requires us to understand the nature of community life that generates and maintains conversation” (209). Continuing Fitzgerald’s line of reasoning that “knowledge…is socially constructed” (11), Bruffee connects Collaborative Learning Theory to home culture. Not only is learning social, but learning is unique to individuals, depending on the type of baggage they carry from their homes and communities. Writing, then, directly reflects a learner’s cultural influences. “If thought is internalized conversation,” Bruffee claims, “then writing is internalized conversation re-externalized” (210). Thought, conversation, and writing are inextricable.

3.2.1. Assignment
In this reading, Kenneth Bruffee raises issues surrounding language, thought, conversation, collaboration, and learning. He argues that peer tutoring is knowledge creation: “the product of human beings in a state of continual negotiation or conversation.”

In a couple of paragraphs, talk about whether you agree or disagree with this statement, and the reasons for your analysis.

3.2.2. Purpose
Foster awareness of the interconnectedness of writing, reading, speaking, and thinking.

Contextualize learning and expression as social acts. Encourage sensitivity to the backgrounds of individual learners.

3.2.3. Responses

This reading represents the first instance of real disagreement between students in the practicum class. Some students embrace Bruffee’s idea of knowledge creation while others resist the concept, favoring a Capital-T-Truth. Fascinatingly, each student’s background seems to dictate her or his stance on the subject, both in sentiment and form of expression. A psychology major agrees with Bruffee, writing, “internal cognition originates in practice.” A communicative disorders major writes, “one’s thoughts are limited by factors such as ‘inexperience, personal anxiety, economic interest, and paradigmatic inflexibility.’” A biology major disagrees, insisting “knowledge is an accumulation of facts” and “there are certain facts we don’t create.” Perhaps the clearest illustration of the rift between students’ differences in perceiving truth comes from a student who tries to straddle the line, writing, “knowledge is not so much created by conversation as it is revealed.” She goes on to say, “I agree with Bruffee’s ideas, theories, and principles surrounding the creation of knowledge through conversation. However, I would amend the word ‘creation,’ replacing it with ‘revelation.’” Semantics aside, consultants all agree that thought, conversation, and writing are connected, and that they inform each other. An English major writes, “Ultimately, any process that involves interaction is more likely to generate better results than the product of simply one individual.”

Although practicum consultants’ opinions vary on whether thought indeed originates in conversation, consensus within the class exists in the idea that home and community remain inextricably linked with education. Moreover, they agree that learners’ writing assignments
provide clues to college preparedness and provide opportunities for discussion of university culture and the development of successful habits. Whether consultants fully grasp Bruffee’s theories is less important than the thought process students engage in while thinking, speaking, and writing through it. One student sums up his experience with Bruffee, writing, “his writing leaves me very perplexed. Just trying to wrap my head around his thoughts took me quite a while.” He ends the response paper by saying, “despite the fact that I was thoroughly confused for a majority of the reading, I still thoroughly enjoyed trying to decipher its meaning.”

3.3. Reading: Bedford, Chapters Two and Four

On week three, Practicum Consultants begin sessions with their weekly Independent Writing (English ’57) learners. This is also the week spent entirely on discussing the writing process. While consultants sometimes feel they are being dropped into a one-on-one tutoring session prematurely, the ‘57 students are being assessed, pass or fail, on the amount of writing they do, and not the quality. Studying and discussing the writing process while concurrently working with learners helps practicum consultants to quickly integrate what they learn into their individual practices.

*Bedford* Chapter Two lays out a number of scenarios in order to exemplify what learners in different stages of the writing process may ask for. The language of these learners ranges from “I don’t really understand what to do,” to, “Please edit my punctuation” (Ryan and Zimmerelli 6-7). The chapter goes on to describe what may take place during each stage, delineating the stages as “prewriting”, “writing”, and “revising and editing.” Revising and editing is broken down into “global revision” and “sentence-level revision” (8-10). The purpose of this chapter is not to offer strategies for mentoring learners, but simply to show what the stages of the writing process look
like and what a writer should be aware of within each stage. The pronoun, “we,” prevails in this chapter, generalizing the instruction.

Although the writing process is presented in linear fashion for the purpose of illustration, Chapter Two cites prominent writing center figures, such as Janet Emig, Sondra Perl, Linda Flower, Peter Elbow, and Donald Murray (7), stressing that writing does not take place linearly. Further situational examples are provided, including the salvaging of only two viable sentences from a long piece of writing and the creation of a “no holds barred” letter, written to clear the mind for more serious work (9-10). Again, strategies for working with learners are not forthcoming, but descriptions of what writers do are offered.

*Bedford* Chapter four offers approaches to working with learners who are experiencing hang-ups while negotiating the process. Ryan and Zimmerelli, while presenting the process, once again, in a linear fashion, stress that each writer experiences the process differently, and that consultants must learn to be flexible as they develop their own tutoring styles (41). The authors display examples of prewriting exercises, such as listing, clustering, and freewriting (41-45). Within the examples, are embedded suggestions for further questioning and idea development. Consultants are encouraged to help learners to establish and keep in mind audience, purpose, and assignment guidelines (45). Suggestions for discussing revision is segmented, once again, into global and sentence-level. The section on global revision stresses development and organization, illustrating how to ask questions about thesis strength and support, supporting details, relationships between ideas, format, and needs of the audience (48-50). Suggestions for aiding in sentence-level revision become oblique, referring to the tenuous and sometimes controversial practice of modelling, the layman’s practice of reading aloud for punctuation, and the use of handbooks and grammar guides (51-54).
3.3.1. Assignment

Please talk about your experiences working within a school-based writing process. What worked and what didn’t?

3.3.2 Purpose

Encourage consultants to develop a meta-awareness of their own writing processes. Provide a starting point for the in-class discussion on working through the writing process with learners.

3.3.3. Responses

The Practicum Consultants, experiencing their first sessions while simultaneously taking the training course, reflect on their experiences within the context of the Bedford. Drawing on recent personal experiences as well as sections in the book that feel ethically suspect, the conversation becomes lively. Some students benefit from following a more rigid process, as is apparent in in the following statement: “Organization is my biggest obstacle when writing a paper…If I am lazy in my planning, I end up paying the price later.” Others have invented their own processes: “I realized my sophomore year that I was usually trying to write in a linear fashion. I believe this is probably one of the biggest problems most student writers face.” Another writes, “I am a get-it-on-the-page-quick writer.” And yet another says that discussing a formal writing process “brings back unpleasant memories and feelings of irritation.” By airing complaints and frustrations as well as sharing techniques, and success strategies, the class assembles a sophisticated picture of what the writing process may or may not be, and they realize that each learner will bring a different set of experiences to the tutoring session.

3.4. Reading: McIntosh, Apfelbaum

An important aspect of consultant training is a close consideration of diversity and inclusivity. The subjects of diversity and inclusivity can be difficult ones for UWSP students,
especially for those who hail from Central Wisconsin. Some students have received little exposure to diverse populations, and although their intentions are sound, their understanding remains undeveloped. The unit is designed to give shape and purpose to a dialog which began on day one of class with student introductions. Students are expected to participate in discussion and to carry concepts of inclusivity through the rest of the semester and into their sessions in the lab. These include understanding of the needs of international students, American minorities, the LGBTQ community, those with learning differences, nontraditional students, veterans, and those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.

Consultants read “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” by Peggy McIntosh. While this article offers little in the way of theory, it does provide examples of conditions enjoyed by whites—conditions on which American minorities cannot rely. For example, for example, those with white privilege will not have their skin color associated with financial responsibility, nor will race affect their quality of legal representation. This list of day-to-day situations primes conversation and provides consultants with a starting point for a larger discussion. McIntosh continues by explaining the systemic nature of unearned privilege and the consequent myth of meritocracy. Discussing systems of privilege provides the context for an ongoing exploration of inclusivity.

“Racial Color Blindness: Emergence, Practice, and Implications” by Apfelbaum, Norton, and Sommers, illustrates the complex nature of race relations as well as well-intentioned pitfalls. While the idea of color blindness originates in the Civil Rights movement, legal rights associated with the concept have been gradually turned to the advantage of already privileged whites (207). Current interpretations of color blindness necessitate identical treatment between cultures and races. However, in reference to McIntosh and others, identical treatment could be considered
socially just and responsible only in a mythological meritocracy. The authors consider multiculturalism as an alternative, but explain that populations who see themselves as non-diverse, particularly white Europeans, resist multiculturalism, claiming it discriminates against the dominant culture (207-208). Finally, Apfelbaum et al. propose “a hybrid form of multiculturalism” which acknowledges diversity within each individual, “allowing everyone to contribute to diversity” (208). This individual approach to diversity creates space for everybody to discuss and celebrate the uniqueness of others without dwelling on broad differences. More research is needed to confirm the effectiveness of this approach, but consultants benefit, at the very least, from the permission this mindset gives them to engage in frank conversation. This inclusive approach to diversity, experienced on the first day of class with the “getting to know you” exercise, persists throughout the semester.

3.4.1. Assignment

Please bring some reflections on these readings and the implications for your work as writing consultants. Write at least a paragraph or two that can stimulate further discussion.

3.4.2. Purpose

Identify large-scale, social factors in racial discrimination. Consider how diversity and inclusivity positively affect education on a community level as well as a personal level.

3.4.3. Responses

The subjects of unearned privilege and inclusivity present many UWSP students with new mental hurdles. Many students born in Central Wisconsin have had relatively little exposure to diversity. Additionally, nearly half of the students at UWSP are first-generation, students who have not been prepared for the type of reasoning demanded in college. Scholarship on diversity and inclusivity requires these students to come to terms with previously unconsidered social
forces before fully comprehending the consequences of unmindful actions. The following responses represent immediate reactions to new concepts in the readings.

A number of consultants admit to being novices with these issues. One writes, “This reading deeply impacted my understanding of what is meant by the phrase ‘white privilege’ because I was never able to identify it before.” Others express that they have had an inkling that privilege existed but never seen it unmasked: “I’m glad that we’re discussing this in Practicum; even though I’m trying to get out of the attitude I was raised in, it’s still difficult. Sometimes you don’t even realize what you’re doing.” Even though some students begin the practicum experience with little knowledge of diversity and inclusivity, they, for the most part, open themselves to the readings and await upcoming class discussion.

Of course, some resistance occurs. One consultant writes, “I did not like reading the white privilege article at all…I felt like this paper is better suited for the 1950’s and 60’s than it is for today. Reading that article just made me feel mad, and seemed like she was making up a lot of hypothetical situations.” This student personal experiences and past education have provided him with no frame of reference with which to base his conclusions on power dynamics in present-day society. Subsequent in-class discussions become important as peers discuss differing understandings of the scholarship.

Many of the responses examine interactions between culturally different people as matters of identity and power. One student writes, “According to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, you need to feel respected and included by others before you can focus on being genuinely confident in yourself.” This student understands that an inclusive environment allows minority students to explore and learn safely, enjoying the type of environment that their peers in majority groups take for granted. Another student addresses the issue of color-blindness, writing, “By
erasing a person’s identity, we then assign him/her to an ethnic and racial category even as we try not to give him/her one. The problem is that we typically assign people to our culture, or white culture.” These responses acknowledge the lopsided power dynamics inherent in the interactions of majority and minority groups. This acknowledgment enables students to make a step into mindful collaboration.

In the initial responses, most students wrote about the importance of finding commonalities with their learners. Commonalities have the power to “demonstrate the fact that the tutor is a peer” and “create a setting where people from all backgrounds can be successful and comfortable.” While students generally agree that concentrating on sameness is beneficial, they still recognize the importance of examining difference. The difficulty lies in knowing exactly how and when showcasing difference promotes learning and when it marginalizes individuals. One student writes, “I think there needs to be a balance between making a distinction and understanding cultures, and making people from different cultures feel like they are not part of something, that they do not belong.” Pointing out difference can be hurtful to learners, even when tutors have the best intentions. However, the majority of responses described talking about difference as positive, as illustrated in the following: “By acknowledging race, or at least the social construct of race, I think the gap between different cultures can be bridged and allow for more room for discussion and learning about them.” The consensus remains that openness encourages a healthier environment than fear of conversation.

Still, a concern lingers among consultants that the wrong words or actions could upset a delicate balance, as expressed in this quote: “People are coming to us as tutors because they trust that we can help. If we do or say something to break that trust, we could have really damaging effects on how they view the writing lab, the library, or even UWSP.” Consultants realize that
they are peers to their learners, that similarities overshadow differences, but they also realize that they hold power, and power necessitates mindfulness.

3.5. Reading: Matsuda, Matsuda & Cox, Edlund, Gillespie & Lerner

Shifting gears once again, the class addresses the challenges and rewards of working with English language learners (ELL). ELL students, including international students and immigrant students, face challenges not only with language fluency, but also with cultural understanding. While these students often put grammar and vocabulary at the forefront of their concerns, historical and cultural references, taken for granted by native speakers, also impede comprehension. Conversations with ELL students must move beyond sentence-level mistakes.

Paul Kei Matsuda, a now-prominent figure in composition studies, attended UWSP and took Education 370 in 1994. Current Education 370/570 students read the essays he wrote while in their shoes. In “What Is It Like to Learn English as a Foreign Student?”, Matsuda describes his experiences with language acquisition and grammar woes. “Correctness is not my goal—“ he states, “effectiveness is.” In “It Just Doesn’t Sound Right,” he explains that ELL students have not yet developed an intuitive feel for the English language. They cannot distinguish correctness by ear. These early Matsuda pieces, written while he was an undergraduate at UWSP, help consultants to appreciate, in a relatable way, the process ELL learners go through while developing English fluency.

Matsuda’s professional work echoes sentiments from his time as a student. “Reading an ESL Writer’s Text” lays out strategies for working with ELL students writing (Matsuda and Cox). Unexpected or “incorrect” sentence structure stand out as obvious and fixable problems in ELL student writing; however, the authors state, “It is important to realize that differences are not necessarily signs of deficiency” (40). While ELL students may not have mastered American
conventions in their writing, they have mastered the conventions in their home languages, and perhaps several other languages as well. From a standpoint of effective communication, sentences that “don’t sound right” are often just fine. The question, then, is how “American” does a writer’s prose need to be?

The question of language acquisition as a long process is explored further with John Edlund’s piece, “Teaching ESL Writers: Issues of Grammar, Style, and Evaluation.” Edlund cites Stephen Krashen’s language acquisition theory, encouraging tutors to engage ELL learners holistically. Like Matsuda and Cox, Edlund asserts that students should learn to effectively communicate first and integrate correct grammar once communication has been accomplished. However, he focuses more closely on the details of learning a language, such as the necessity to memorize articles and idiomatic phrases. Tense agreement and vocabulary, he claims, also interfere with meaning-making. A measured yet metacognitive approach, then, helps learners to blend their native patterns with those of English, constructing an “interlanguage” as a stage of the learning process.

Gillespie and Lerner round out the perspectives on ELL instruction with practical advice. They caution against the allure of common assumptions, such as “NNS writers think differently from native English speakers” (118) and “NNS writers come to the writing center to get their grammar checked” (119). Working with learners who are learning English, they state, is more or less the same as working with native speakers. The key to success are to be mindful of the directive/nondirective spectrum and to identify and work with patterns of error to maximize effectiveness (125). ELL students share more similarities than differences with native speakers.

3.5.1. Assignment
Once again, consider several readings that may both harmonize and conflict: Paul Matsuda’s earlier pieces which he wrote as a student in Practicum, his later piece with Michelle Cox, the Edlund piece, and the chapter in Longman. What resonates with you? What is new or surprising? Most importantly, how do you see yourself applying this knowledge in your practice? Please express your ideas in about one double-spaced page.

3.5.2. Purpose

Introduce consultants to the complex and individual nature of ELL sessions. Provide strategies for working with ELL learners.

3.5.3. Responses

Practicum consultants’ written responses represent evolving viewpoints on what strategies should be. On one level, they understand that an ELL session will be a challenge for both learner and consultant. There is more to meeting with an ELL student than simply pointing out corrections to be made. One consultant writes, “In Matsuda’s earlier pieces, I can feel the anxiety and emotion behind the fears of ELL students.” This particular student goes on to say that while the anxiety associated with speaking, listening, and operating in a foreign country is obvious, the Matsuda readings caused her to consider foreign students’ feelings more explicitly. Another consultant states, “I don’t think anyone should have to give up their identity to conform to cultural norms, but on the other hand, most ELL students come here to learn English and its conventions.” As with all other responses, consultants engage the complexity of working holistically with a fellow student, understanding that while they have not mastered the craft of tutoring, they do have a place in the conversation.

Consultants also display their own anxieties associated with ELL sessions, as well as their struggles with understanding the scholarship behind the pieces they have read. One
consultant writes, “I’d see many ELL students on campus speaking in their first language and wonder why they didn’t just use English, but after reading [Matsuda and Cox], I realized they probably aren’t confident in their abilities.” This quote represents a limited world view in progress. While this consultant has not grasped the complexity of the cultural situations foreign students encounter, she has engaged with the readings and begun to express her thoughts and discoveries. In-class discussions following her written response further expanded her view.

Several consultants expressed sympathy for the plight of ELL students, pointing out “the unfairness of being asked to do something you cannot do” and the counterproductive nature of criticizing learners too much with the following: “If the learner could just write and not be afraid to be criticized for incorrect grammar, I think he or she would have a better opportunity to learn.” While empathy toward all learners is important, the goal of the readings and discussions remains a balanced approach toward the tutoring of writing, listening to learners while encouraging them to take responsibility for their own learning. Responses demonstrate consultants’ willingness to grapple with these concepts in preparation to for upcoming class discussions.

A number of consultants devise well-balanced strategies for ELL sessions even before the class discussion. Thoughts are as follows: “It is important to know your learner to help them grow as a reader and writer. As you understand their feelings toward learning the language, you can help them learn grammar through practical application that they can understand through growing their ideas, organization, tone, meaning, and vocabulary.” This balance between a learner-first practice and conscious, explicit instruction serves experienced consultants well, and this practicum student has set herself on the path. Another comment, “The goal is to listen and first take into mind what the learner is saying before getting down to the nitty-gritty,” also speaks
to an increasing understanding of the give-and-take process involved in working with any learner, and particularly ELL learners.

Matsuda and Cox propose three approaches to reading ELL student writing: the assimilationist approach, the accommodationist approach, and the separatist approach. The assimilationist views differences in ELL writing as erroneous. The separatist ignores any and all differences as long as communication occurs. The accommodationist lies somewhere in between (42). Consultants discuss the merits of each approach. A culturally-sensitive consultants writes, “Why should anyone have to change their way of thinking to sound American?” This sentiment is countered by another consultant’s opinion, already mentioned above: “most ELL students come here to learn English and its conventions.” Because of the high volume of ELL students the writing lab serves, several practicum consultants will usually have already met with one of these students. In such cases, they are able to enrich the conversation with personal experience.

Inevitably, the question of grammar instruction pervades the discussion. Matsuda and Cox recommend working at the global level first, reading for understanding, and moving on to grammar after ensuring effectiveness of communication (44-45). Of course, effectiveness of communication and grammar are intricately intertwined. Consultants often feel anxious at the thought of explaining grammar to ELL learners, especially when dealing with idioms and more abstract grammatical concepts, such as prepositions and articles. John Edlund offers tips for explaining some of these seemingly oblique grammar issues while keeping sight of the large picture. From the perspective of language acquisition, Edlund subscribes to Stephen Krashen’s theory that students learn to communicate first and slowly assimilate grammar as they improve (3). Within the context of a student’s writing, opportunities for more explicit instruction exist. Pointing out patterns of error and addressing them in a directive way can be a “consciousness
raising” experience for a learner (3). The gradual process of language acquisition can be expedited through well-placed, explicit instruction. Addressing the tension between global versus grammatical issues, some consultants draw from their own past, such as this struggling math student: “When I was struggling to do basic equations last year, if I had gotten the formula correct but my addition was off at the end—I was still overjoyed, but my teachers weren’t.” Another consultant uses the readings to anticipate the balance he will need to strike: “These readings really illustrated to me how tutoring ELL students is more about helping them become more effective in communicating their thoughts and ideas rather than focusing on grammar and the way their writing sounds.”

The importance of grammar, though, is not lost on consultants. A conscientious student states, “While I believe that content and organization are most important, grammar shouldn’t be overlooked because poor grammar impedes understanding…What if they had the vocabulary and the ideas but just weren’t really sure how to put it together?” This quote shows a sophistication that often takes consultants a number of semesters of practice to reach. Once this level of though is reached, consultants begin to build demonstrable skills, as in this example:

During my last two ELL sessions the same student kept asking me to explain several grammar rules and terms to him, but I unfortunately wasn’t familiar with the terms, making me feel embarrassed. Instead, I read over the sentence examples in the book in order to understand the concept being explained. I was then able to give him example sentences in order to help him understand how to structure them correctly. By the end of the session he had grasped the idea fairly well, and we were both pleased with how the session turned out. Matsuda’s explanation of the effectiveness of putting grammar rules
into *practice* rather than simply *explaining* them really reassured me in my current ELL approach.

This quote represents the ideal mindset toward peer-to-peer ELL tutoring. The consultant concedes a limited knowledge base and approaches the learner as a fellow student. They discuss the problem together and cooperate in order to reach a conclusion. The consultant does not attempt to overstep boundaries and teach a grammar rule that she herself is fuzzy on, but rather uses resources (in this case, a handbook) to figure out the rule. Leaving behind the temptation to adopt a directive stance to cover her own self-consciousness, the consultant works though the problem with the learner, modeling how a successful student takes control of his or her own education and sharing habits that will carry over to other university classes.

3.6. Independent Discussions

A series of independent discussions challenges consultants to think deeply and independently. During this unit, practicum consultants incorporate several modes of communication into explorations reading, writing, and learning theory. For five weeks, each consultant posts a weekly question on D2L, answers a fellow classmate’s question, and later participates in an in-class discussion on the material. For each weekly discussion, two or three discussion leaders are designated to conduct the class. For the first thirty minutes of these discussions, consultants proceed without instructor support or interference. The student-led seminar discussions take place each Thursday, leaving Tuesdays open for group discussions on supplemental material. The Tuesday readings compliment the D2L pieces, enhancing consultants’ understanding or preparing them to lead discussions on similar topics. The readings that set up independent discussions will be referred to as “Supplemental Readings” while the readings to be discussed independently by students will be referred to as “D2L Readings.”
3.6.1. Supplemental Reading: Warren

Throughout the country, the topic of reading in the writing center is one that generally receives little attention. The readings in the practicum class serve to prepare consultants for sessions in which students need advice on reading at the college level. Underprepared learners often have not connected reading, as invention, to the writing process. They often struggle in classes, whether or not writing is a component, because of unsophisticated or basic reading skills. Discussions of the reading pieces are designed to help consultants bring meta-awareness to their own reading practices as well as provide strategies for discussing reading with learners.

James Warren’s “Rhetorical Reading as a Gateway to Disciplinary Literacy” establishes reading as integral to university studies. More specifically, the article distinguishes different reading strategies between disciplines. Just as writing, studying, and speaking within different disciplines vary, so does reading. While reading specialists in grade schools and high schools prepare students for general reading, Warren claims that “disciplinary literacy depends on specialized knowledge of subject matter teachers—specialized knowledge that ELA teachers and literacy coaches do not possess” (1). College expectations exceed the demand of simply reading and understanding; students are to interact with text rhetorically in order to “acquire new knowledge in a specific subject area” (2). Reading is not merely a means to an end, but rather an act students perform as an integral part of the learning process in a specific major with its own nuances and unique requirements (2). By acknowledging the author’s identity, the piece’s purpose and audience, and the larger historical and situational contexts during the time of the text’s creation, students learn to read texts as communication written by people, intended to be read by a target audience, and influenced by the circumstancing surrounding it during its conception. Written texts are not autonomous truths, but pieces of communication to be
discussed and analyzed (3). Experts automatically read with a disciplinary eye, a skill which develops only with practice as proficiency in a subject area increases, but students can be taught techniques to expedite the process (5). Interacting with texts, questioning the reasoning behind them, thinking of texts as social constructions, and writing responses all increase students’ awareness of how they read and what is important to glean (6).

3.6.2. Assignment

Thinking back on the classes you’ve had at the university level so far, can you think of one discipline-specific reading you’ve done? Can you think of techniques you used, either consciously or unconsciously, while reading? What class was the reading for, and what is at least one mindset or technique you used to comprehend the material? If you can’t think of a specific reading, think more generally about a class in which the reading challenged you.

3.6.3. Purpose

Encourage students to take inventory of their own college-level reading techniques. Become aware of the contextual challenges of reading within majors.

3.6.4. Responses

Consultants respond to the Warren reading by describing rhetorical reading strategies they had already been using, consciously or unconsciously, within the context of discipline-specific classes. Most consultants had already been utilizing multiple techniques to engage texts deeply. Examples include writing in the margins, marking passages with sticky notes, researching the author and time period, rewriting ideas in their own words, and considering the intended audience.

On a deeper level, some consultants considered their own place in the conversation, working to incorporate ideas in texts to their larger learning experience as well as the larger body
of scholarship. A former student of an Asian Politics course in Political Science wrote of shifting her focus in order to elevate her learning: “I had to keep in mind that I was reading it to understand the overall political process…so I just had to keep reminding myself of what I was trying to take away from the article…” This student understands the multiple interpretations text can offer, and she works to focus on aspects appropriate to the discipline for which she is reading. A student who had taken a course in Developmental Psychology describes her process for completing a discipline-appropriate reading:

I criticized the study as I read, and I thought of questions as I went along. Fortunately, by the time I finished the report most of the questions had been specifically addressed. This proved to me that I had been thinking along the same lines as the researchers, just as the intended audience would have done…Knowing what to expect helped me plan for how to receive and make sense of the information.

This reading technique demonstrates a firm grasp on the complexities of higher learning. This student understands that a text is directed toward an audience of peers who share a knowledge base. She understands that it is the reader’s responsibility to “receive and make sense of the information.” She is also able to compensate for her lack of expertise in the subject area by testing her understanding against that of the intended audience by using context clues.

Consultants acknowledge obstacles, both practical and psychological, to performing effective readings, such as, “The hardest part of reading for Psychology 110 was getting used to all the discipline based vocabulary.” “It is hard not to read some textbooks as law, especially when the class requires it.” “It is not easy to disagree with an expert in the field because of my respect for authority. I find this [rhetorical reading] method difficult but increasingly more important and useful as I become educated.” Not only do students view college-level reading as
an intellectual challenge, but they also struggle psychologically to move beyond text as a source of truth handed down from an unquestionable authority figure. However, consultants display metacognition when explaining their struggles.

3.7. D2L Reading One: Tierney & Pearson

In preparation for the first student-led class discussion, consultants read “Toward a Composing Model of Reading by Robert Tierney and David Pearson. These authors equate the reading process and the writing process. Both writer and reader plan ahead of time, creating goals and expectations (569-571). Just as a writer, a reader composes multiple drafts of the material, revising her or his understanding as more pieces fall into place (571-572). Both writer and reader adopt a stance or alignment while interacting with the text, and each has the option of adjusting alignments in order to change the outcome of the text (572-576). A reader may engage text on multiple levels, applying different sets of beliefs, judgments, and techniques for evaluation while also “monitoring” oneself, acting as a more objective observer of the material (577-578). When viewed as a conversation between writer and reader, text becomes a dynamic exploration of meaning rather than a static, dead message. Challenging assumptions of what text is leads readers toward a metacognitive reading process.

3.7.1. Responses

Prior to the in-class discussion, practicum consultants responded to each other’s questions on D2L. They touched on several aspects of the reading, alignment being the most accessible and most widely-discussed. A number of students discuss the power of aligning oneself both as a writer and as a reader with statements such as, “Simply the language [the author] uses can have an impact on how a message is taken,” and, “…it is dangerous to take only one perspective on a topic,” and more specifically, “Without viewing others’ perspectives and trying to form some
sort of monitored alignment, we could have a shutdown of the U.S. government.” Not only do consultants express an understanding of how reading and writing from specific perspectives changes how information is transmitted, but they also connect this transmission of information to the educational system and to the world in general.

Responses illustrate an understanding that comprehension of text can be enhanced and revised through analysis, conversation, and interaction with the page. Several consultants stress that the reading process does not end when the eyes leave the page with quotes such as “Reflection would more than likely bring back the main ideas” and “To gain new skills, it is important to put in that extra work and further reflect on the significance of the text.” Some consultants synthesize the processes of writing and reading further. One writes,

It makes me wonder how much of the paper writing process is spent in the role of a reader versus a writer. I know that I personally go off on “writing tangents” for a few paragraphs or so when I am struck with a great idea, and then I go back and read what I have written as if I were an audience member reading my writing. I try and make sure that other people will understand the point I am trying to get across, too; that the meaning I have just “made” makes sense to somebody else besides myself.

This student has considered the complicated affair of transmitting information. She has devised a self test to determine whether she will connect with the audience. Her quote connects reader and writer as two meaning-makers attempting to meet in the middle in order to exchange knowledge.

The following student compares the Tierney and Pearson reading to an earlier reading by Kenneth Bruffee, pointing out that the interaction between writer and reader constitutes knowledge creation. She writes,
According to Tierney and Pearson, the article/paper you write is a conversation between you and the reader (and this goes back to earlier readings we’ve had, such as Bruffee), and it’s hard to have a conversation that is only one sided. Even in a lecture where the professor is talking at you, you occasionally speak up or ask questions. When a friend is telling you a long-winded story, you respond with the appropriate smile, frown, or chuckle here and there. In a regular conversation, you are both the listener and the speaker—so if reading/writing is a conversation, you have to be both the reader and the writer in order for whatever knowledge you’re trying to make to come to fruition.

This quote displays an advanced mode of thinking concerning the nature of communication. Using multiple media, viewpoints, and physical and mental processes, people manipulate information in order to reach consensus—or at least to consciously take a stance. The analogy of reading and writing to listening and speaking is an effective one, drawn by a student who firmly grasps the concepts Tierney and Pearson have put forth.

3.8. D2L Reading Two: Harris

Segueing from the reading process to the writing process, consultants read Muriel Harris’s “Composing Behaviors of One- and Multi-Draft Writers.” Harris contrasts the habits of writers who produce multiple drafts with habits of those who consider papers finished after a single draft. Quality, she claims, does not necessarily improve with each draft (175). She differentiates “retranscription” from the production of “pre-text” (175). While multi-draft writers organize their research and thoughts while writing and rewriting, single-draft writers go through a similar process before committing anything to paper, organizing, planning, and drafting inside their heads (175-177). While the phenomenon of multi- versus single-draft writing tendencies have not been studied in depth (178), the dichotomy between the two provides solid anchor points...
from which consultants can delve into their own preferences in writing and, eventually, approaches to working with learners—those attempting to write more efficiently as well as those who would do well to draft more thoroughly. Perhaps most importantly, Harris claims that the tendency toward single- or multi-drafting could coincide with different approaches to material. Single-drafters may prefer to begin with a focused idea while multi-drafters view writing as exploratory (180-182). Writing styles vary depending on when and how writers engage the invention process, and either approach (or, most commonly, a middle-ground approach) should be tailored to the individual writer. Awareness of students’ radically different writing styles aids in assisting learners.

3.8.1. Responses

D2L responses proved consultants to be skeptical of Harris’s willingness to label writers, especially writers who are still in school. They viewed college writing as an activity with many facets, too fluid to be defined. “No one should have to pick one version or the other,” one consultant states. Another writes, “I believe that my writing style has changed over time and varies depending on the class for which I am writing.” However, while consultants do not buy in to the idea of writers being classified as one or the other—or even a discernable combination of the two—they do see the value of studying the concept in order to understand the writing process better. As a more scientifically-minded student writes, “This is not necessarily true, but it’s a good place to start.” Generally, the class believed that one could only become a successful single-drafter after working extensively with multiple drafts, as is expressed in the following quote: “I think a writer has to start learning the process of revision by using multiple drafts, and later hone the skills and develop a preference for effective writing of his or her own.” Another writes, “I would suggest they begin to discover their personal preference by using the multi-draft
method...By physically manipulating their ideas they would be able to watch their personal style take shape.” The act of performing multiple steps while writing has value, whether a writer decides, ultimately, to follow the process or to adapt it to his or her own needs. The pressures of college also seem to be a factor for drafting styles. While students begin college as multi-drafters—“In high school, our English curriculum trained us to be multi-draft writers”—students soon abandon this approach for the sleeker single-draft method, as these quotes attest: “Recently I’ve had to adjust my hardcore multiple draft style to fit the needs of essay exam and short answer style class assignments,” and “I would think that being a one-drafter would be a very useful skill in college...The pre-planning skills and quick decision making are two things that every college writer should possess.” The healthy skepticism consultants brought to this reading allowed them to disentangle artificial (yet useful) classifications from individualized concepts applicable to a wide range of learners. While the class had spent significant time studying the writing process throughout the semester, the Harris reading opened new doors to the material, increasing consultants’ reflectiveness.

3.9. Supplemental Reading: Williams & McEnerney, *Bedford* Chapter Seven

As a companion piece to the Harris article, consultants read “Writing in College,” an online article, by Joseph Williams and Lawrence McEnerney from the University of Chicago Writing Program. These authors explain that while standards for writing in college are higher than standards in high school, writing “better” is not necessarily the ticket to a successful college career. They state, “Often, what your instructors are asking of you is not just something better, but something different. University-level writing requires a student to make an argument, and the argument must be backed up with a claim. A “point worth making” varies from discipline to discipline, but what remains consistent is the necessity to demonstrate a point as one that is
substantive. Williams and McEnerney also stress the importance of the writing process as invention, describing the act of writing as “a way of thinking through a problem, of discovering what you want to say.”

Consultants also read Bedford chapter Seven. This chapter gives brief descriptions of different genres of writing—literary reviews, lab reports, etc.—and provides checklists of features for each.

3.9.1. Assignment

The Williams and McEnerney reading points out that in college, making a point is not good enough. Students need to make a point worth making. The types of points worth making vary from discipline to discipline. Bedford Chapter 7 gives tips for writing across the curriculum. During your practice in the booth, you will encounter students from a variety of majors. In order to best serve our student body, we need to be aware of interdisciplinary variations and be able to identify basic conventions. With these two readings in mind, reflect on your major. What are some important writing conventions in your field? Can you think of any secrets to making the writing sound “right”? Write an explanation of what is critical to writing in your major.

3.9.2. Responses

Consultants are able to synthesize the moves they make in order to produce writing suitable for college. While some insights have to do with recognizing conventions specific to particular majors, others are more universal. A Broad-field Social Science major stresses the importance of a “clear thesis, strong organization, and strong evidence.” While these elements apply to social science writing, they remain relevant across a number of disciplines. He goes on to say that a paper should make “an interesting claim…written in a comprehensible and narrow way,” and that “[w]ithin that claim, there must be proof to back that argument up.” The argument
needs to be specific, and the writer’s views need to be backed up with professional scholarship. A sophisticated understanding of the connections between these elements is apparent from his statement, “The way in which the articles relate should structure and provide exploration of the claim.” He recognizes ways in which structure and content inform each other. He also understands the importance of warranting arguments.

The English majors in the class focus on theme and context. One student explains that when writing about an author’s work, she is “expected to determine how these works relate to a larger concept in society.” In order to do this, she must “focus on major themes” and “make an argument about a literary work that goes beyond the text.” Typically, the English majors display solid understanding of rhetorical context, including audience. One student writes, “English students have their own voice. By voice I mean they have their own choice to create whatever writing sounds “right” as long as it is grammatically correct, at the least understandable, and is arguable.” Another writes, “humanities writing requires readers to convey their overall point or argument while at the same time making the paper sound good.” English majors see writing as at once a transmission of information and a piece of art.

Science writers express writing in their field as a skill rather than an art form with statements such as, “writing in the sciences is direct and specific,” and “objective sentences are a big part of writing science papers.” Each science major listed the sections of a lab report in some form: cover letter, abstract, introduction/background, methods, results, and interpretation.

Interestingly, science writers spend as much time explaining what science writing is not as explaining what it is, stating, “you cannot really ‘create suspense’ or anything like that,” and “never use ‘flowery language.’” It seems as though a natural tendency exists to be creative with writing, and that instinct must be overcome to write pragmatically. A Biology major writes,
The thing that puts off most students to scientific writing is scientific writing itself. It’s dry; it’s not humorous; if you stray from the standard outline you’re shunned; if your claim isn’t complex enough it’s not good; if you step on the wrong person’s ideas in your paper, you’re done. Scientific writing is tricky and it’s sticky and people hate it.

I happen to like it.

This student defines scientific writing by exploding its conventions in a rant about what it is not. She then states that she enjoys scientific writing—a type of writing she does not reveal in her response. As with many science writers, she has acquired a field-specific literacy skill which represents only one aspect of her writing repertoire.

Some students in the practicum, especially those who are early in their school careers, explain that they have not yet been acclimated to the specifics of their own discipline-specific writing, but they do have a sense of how to work with learners in a general way. One student writes, “To be truthful, I am only part-way into my second year of college here and have not yet done much writing in my major…However, I know that clear, concise writing that is factual and well-supported is the epitome of good science writing.” This student has an intellectual grasp on what writing in her field should look like, but she has not yet developed that understanding intuitively.

Responses such as these reiterate the fact that consultants are peers to their learners, that they themselves are beginning writers. To reference Bruffee, though, this does not make them “the blind leading the blind” (212). Rather, consultants marshal their well-developed skills and the resources available to them in order to model learning. One source they turn to is the expertise of the professor. One student writes, “I have found that there are differences between how I write for specific professors…I have different ‘voices’ I can write in.” This student
constructs a tone for her writing based upon guidance from her professors. Another student writes, “The professors are used to reading papers in the disciplines they excel in, so they will recognize a good argument written in the right format, and will guide a student in the right direction if he or she is missing the goal.” Consultants are not teachers themselves, but they have mastered the art of learning in multiple contexts, and they use this student perspective to guide learners along the path, modeling strategies as they go.

While some students in the practicum have barely begun their journey toward discipline-specific writing competence, others have already arrived. A Communicative Disorders student writes,

   To be successful in the Communicative Disorders major a student’s writing must be clear, concise, and complete. Writing in this field occurs between professionals, and even as undergraduates students are expected to be the professional writer composing for professional audiences. Often undergraduate ComD majors observe children and are asked to write a summary of how the children behaved or interacted with adults and peers. Before writing, the student needs to identify general observations of importance, as well as examples that support those observations. The observations ideally include appropriate, discipline specific terminology. If the audience is another member of the field, which is usually the case, the writer does not need to spend time defining these terms because the audience should be familiar with them. Part of the student’s purpose in writing the paper is to demonstrate their understanding of how to correctly apply them. Using terminology correctly in writing is one of the keys to making writing in ComD “sound right.”
This response demonstrates not only a firm grasp on the audience, purpose, and author’s intent for the Communicative Disorders field, but it also establishes a link between expectations in the field and expectations in the major. The act of writing in the ComD major, she claims, is preparation for writing professionally. She recognizes that college writing requires the student writer to maintain a fiction, to pretend to be a professional while simultaneously demonstrating what she or he has learned.

Students who have reached this meta-cognizant level of writing prove invaluable in the practicum class. Classmates who have not yet experienced discipline-specific writing learn from those who have. Students who have reached meta-cognition benefit by expressing their understanding through sharing with others. While students with understanding exercise their critical thinking skills through discussion, students who are still on their way to understanding reach further outside their spheres of knowledge as they follow their classmates. In this way, the practicum class becomes a model for writing consultants’ experiences with learners.

3.10. D2L Reading Three: Rose

While some students need additional instruction to acclimate to new expectations in college, others have had no preparation at all. Mike Rose brings the plight of these often overlooked students to light in his book, Lives on the Boundary. Practicum consultants read “The Politics of Remediation,” a chapter from Rose’s book in which he draws a line between education and culture. A prepared student, he explains, has most likely enjoyed some type of support structure—probably a middle-class family and neighborhood, a high school with a curriculum geared toward future student success, and authority figures who encouraged post-secondary education. If these students struggled at any point, “they could depend on the fairness of a system that rewarded effort and involvement” (172). While college is not meant to be easy,

5 For a list of writing conventions compiled by the practicum class, see Appendix B
prepared students who struggled would usually “do okay if they put in the time, if they read the textbook carefully and did all their homework” (173). However, hard work by itself does not always rectify academic shortcomings. Students entering college who have never experienced a cultural support structure at home cannot depend on the existing system for support in the university. The school is a foreign place. As Rose states, “a much deeper sense of isolation comes if the loneliness you feel is rooted in the books and lectures that surround you, in the very language of the place” (174). In order to set and accomplish goals in school, some students must first reassess their identities (176). When a student’s cultural belief system clashes with the assumptions of the school system, that student becomes an outsider, emotionally challenged each step of the way (182). Therefore, the issue of communicating effectively to those from lower social classes, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds becomes more than a sound pedagogical decision—it becomes a matter of social justice (192-193).

3.10.1. Responses

In the responses, practicum students generally reported having a support system enabling them to meet the challenges of the university. Typical sentiments include, “Because I had the opportunity to take A.P. courses, I felt fairly well prepared for my introductory college courses” and “I was able to have the support of both my family and faculty to help me achieve my goals.”

Because of the preparedness of the members of this class, sociocultural obstacles to education proved to be a difficult subject. Some attempted to simplify issues of economics, race, and culture by treating problems with high schools as not a symptom, but the root of the disease: “I believe that a better use of time in high school would be to teach students how to analyze and create knowledge for themselves.” This student fails to acknowledge the overarching economic and social forces within which lower-class schools reside. The fact that schools unsatisfactorily
prepare students is rooted in larger systemic failures than the school system itself. Another suggests improving the school system through “consideration of the costs and benefits of uniformity and standardization.” While this student also admits that this type of strategy has failed in the past, and that upon investigation other strategies could arise, he still does not fully grasp the power of economics and social beliefs on education. Yet another student oversimplifies the issue by individualizing the problem: “There are going to be ‘good’ teachers and ‘bad’ teachers wherever you go. But I think how they teach and how much attention they give each student is the determining factor.” While “good” teaching is one of the solutions to the problem, the underlying trouble remains unaddressed.

A courageous few attempted to identify with marginalized groups by relating their own battles: “I am learning right now that the learning curve continues throughout college…my point is that no matter how prepared or well adjusted you think you are, you can still get that one class or assignment that just comes out of nowhere.” While any student can run into troubles at any given time, genuinely unprepared students will experience similar troubles in all classes simultaneously, compounded by a sense of isolation in an unfriendly place (Rose 174). This student goes on to say, “I feel like I’m always adapting.” In the context of the Rose reading, the ability to adapt marks a well-prepared student.

Even though consultants did not initially comprehend the reading as I would have hoped, they did construct useful strategies for working with unprepared students. One student writes, “I think we should always assume that every student is giving their best work on a paper.” By framing every encounter positively, consultants will find more opportunities for engagement. Another writes, “I do think relating the information to their everyday lives can help. If they see the actual effect on their lives they’re more likely to think that it’s important and remember the
information.” While explaining the importance of a liberal education to any student can be difficult, this consultant is thinking in the right vein. Perhaps the most well-rounded strategy follows:

If we don’t have enough time to really dig deep and assess [preparedness], just being a helping hand and an open mind to a student with a paper can really be effective. In some situations, a tutor can be very helpful by not pushing and prodding—by just gently working on something like a paper or study skills, we can show that there is a friendly face or a listening ear. I think that this can make a world of difference to a student who might make the same errors over and over again because it could make them feel comfortable enough to share some personal information on their own. It could also be helpful by making the student feel comfortable in the writing lab, and that learner might come back more often, hopefully leading to fewer errors.

This consultant utilizes a number of concepts from throughout the semester. Staying open to the needs of individual learners lies at the center of the practicum experience, as does confidentiality. This approach invites the learner to divulge any pertinent information without pressure. As consultants are not teachers, observation of error patterns is one of the main tools at their disposal. Not only does addressing a pattern provide a starting point for academic work, but it also opens conversation on a more individual level. Finally, regular meetings benefit unprepared or underprepared students, equipping them with skills to move forward.

Cultural sensitivity, being the central tenet of the writing lab, can be practiced not only through acknowledgment of a student’s home life and background, but also through efforts to understand academic and professional discourse. Consultants expand their conceptions of culture to include more than ethnicity, nationality, religion, and community, delving into knowledge-
based, habit-based, and experience-based definitions. A student who has grown up in a Hmong community may also become part of the university community, and in turn, part of the scientific community, further specializing in Natural Resources, and, finally, Soil. Speaking to learners in a meaningful and effective way becomes more than an issue of vocabulary, moving into the realm of discourse. While Mike Rose provides a framework for understanding individuals and their personal battles, James Gee extends the conversation to include communities of practice in the university, the workplace, and society at large.

3.11. D2L Reading Four: Gee

In “Reading as Situated Language: A Sociocognitive Perspective,” James Gee discusses the correlation between language, action and identity, the use of “social languages” to express these aspects of self beyond mere interpretation, and the function of “Discourse” (with a capital D) within these communities (714). Upon the shoulders of Kenneth Burke and Stephen Toulmin, Gee associates language with perception, action, and identity.

According to Gee, the most important functions of language are action and perspective (714-715). What people say and what people do (the action component) are inextricable. Gee claims, “meaning in language is tied to people’s experiences of situated action in the material and social world” (715). What people do, see, and feel in the world affects how they express themselves as well as how they interpret expressions of others. Therefore, language exists only within context, “always situated” and “customized to our actual contexts” (16). Similarly, language is tied to perspective. If humans are creatures of experience, language affords a way to interpret and relay those experiences. Gee asserts, “words and grammar are not primarily about giving and getting information but are, rather, about giving and getting different perspectives on experience” (717). When we think of events, feelings, and concepts, we do not think in words.
Our thoughts are abstract and experience-based. Language functions as a tool to express our feelings and personal experiences to others. “Reading the word” is “reading the world,” and vice-versa (718).

In order to relay highly personal experiences to one another, people develop “social languages”—styles of speaking which share similar grammatical patterns, vocabulary, and syntax (718). Coming together with language helps people to come together with shared experience. Social languages can be associated with any and all aspects of life. In Gee’s words, examples include “the language of medicine, literature, street gangs, sociology, law, rap, or informal dinner-time talk among friends” (719). People with similar thoughts and experiences—partaking in similar actions—develop similar ways of communicating.

Styles of communication, though, do not round out the picture of human language. Since language is always contextual, effective communication through social languages can be actualized only within the proper context, or within a “community of practice” (721). When social language is used within a community of practice, it becomes a specialized form of communication that Gee calls a Discourse (721-722). Capital D Discourse, between members of a community who share experiences, beliefs, and thought processes, becomes natural. The style of communication encompasses not only words, but actions, thoughts, fashion, assumptions, and values (722). In short, a Discourse becomes not just a way of speaking, but a combination of speaking, thinking, acting, and being. While people can adjust to different situations, speaking and acting in ways appropriate to a variety of life situations, their “primary Discourse,” or core identity, will ultimately prevail (723-724).

3.11.1. Responses
Consultants acknowledge the fact that socializing to a Discourse takes exposure and time. However, in the effort to demonstrate competence and the ability to apply Gee’s theory practically, several describe Discourse communities and social languages in an overly simplified manner. The following is an attempt at demonstrating competence which undercuts itself:

I’ve noticed all over campus that people interact in their own personal way. The topic or subject of the conversation can also change how we communicate. I think it is important to take note of a learner’s discourse and then judge whether you should adjust to the way they speak accordingly. When you are with someone who is having trouble writing a science based piece, it is important for the terms to be defined, compared to an English writing sample where the story may be a creative piece with no need for professionalism. If the situation calls for a streamlined speaking path due to the discourse then yes, I think speaking their language would help you connect with them better. It would also allow for a better understanding all around since both the learner and the tutor would be on the same page.

The stilted language in this quote is indicative of the student’s attempts to reach for a level of understanding just beyond her grasp. She has observed Discourse communities in action “all over campus.” She astutely points out that the “subject of the conversation can also change how we communicate,” an important and often overlooked aspect of the theory. She then counteracts her previous thought by suggesting a consultant “should adjust the way they speak.” Considering the complexities of Discourse communities, including her assertion that knowledge of a topic affects communication, this type of adjustment would prove difficult at best. As she attempts to exemplify contrasting learning situations—science writing versus creative writing—her
sentences become gnarled. Her desire to explain a concept that is new to her hinders her writing ability.

This particular quote marks an observable point of growth. The consultant applies bits of theory to her own observations and experiences, struggling to assemble them into something useful. Her main obstacle to coherently explaining the theory to her peers seems to be her desire demonstrate expertise in Discourses outside her own. As an initial reaction to a difficult reading, this response proves the consultant to be immersed in a serious thought process, working through a tangle of material and moving closer to a new type of thought and expression.

A more realistic, although possibly less inspired, approach toward working with disciplinary writing simplifies the concept of Discourse enough to make it manageable in a tutoring session. “When a learner is writing for an English course, we could demonstrate a sentence that asserts an opinion without using personal pronouns. It seems that people learn and later utilize writing techniques by imitating a standard model.” This consultant scales down Gee’s theory to a practical level. Explaining writing theory to a learner would be counterproductive. An effective technique would need to involve a more measurable exercise, such as rewriting sentences without personal pronouns. Also important to mention is that this consultant is an English major, and she uses an example which falls within her own scope of expertise. The reading is meant to bring awareness of the existence of a multitude of Discourses, not to pressure tutors to become experts in all of them.

Of all the responses, the most insightful was written by an International Studies major—a student in a major that is multidisciplinary by nature.

I think we should speak to a learner the same way we would talk to a classmate. Doing so acknowledges the fact that we are peers but perhaps not here as best friends. While we
can still be friends, I still think it is important to maintain a certain level of professionalism while in the booth. Changing our dialect purposely to make us sound like “wannabe” professors, though, goes beyond our role.

While the first quote expresses a desire to be an expert in everything, and the second quote concedes a limited range of expertise, this quote presents the broader possibilities of Discourse-specific interactions between students. Students in the university are, in fact, a Discourse community of their own. By utilizing the finding common ground as students, utilizing a student social language, consultants discover pathways toward collaborative learning. Rather than depending on field-specific expertise to usher learners through the process of becoming professionals, consultants can meet learners at a mutual point—as students—and pass on successful habits. Consultants, then, do not “teach” learners, but rather share the secrets to being a successful student. Once a student learns successful habits, she or he will more readily move through the system and become socialized to their Discourse communities.

3.12. D2L Reading Five: Colomb

In summation of the Theory into Practice unit, consultants read “Disciplinary ‘Secrets’ and the Apprentice Writer: The Lessons for Critical Thinking” by Gregory Colomb. Reading, writing, and thinking are not “generic skills,” but skills that that occur always within disciplines (1). While the first year in college can be a challenging one, a time when students must adapt to college standards and expectations, even well-acculturated students stumble when confronted with disciplines outside their own. Further, such struggles translate to the professional world as well, as Colomb illustrates with an example of a tenured professor, explaining that “all of the skills she had developed as an anthropologist seemed to desert her as she entered the door of law school” (3). This problem with functioning in fields outside one’s own, then, stems not so much
from a lack of ability, or even education, but from a lack of contextual familiarity. Colomb claims “students write and think better when they know what they are writing or thinking about. And in the academic setting, knowledge is the property of, and so is defined by, the disciplines” (5). Therefore, professors face a steep hill when attempting to “teach writing once and for all” in introductory composition classes (3). It is, in fact, “an impossible goal,” unfairly holding faculty to an unattainable standard (3-4).

The goal of teaching writing “once and for all” puts undue stress on both students and faculty because of the variant nature of writing in the disciplines. Format, structure, argumentation, sentence structure, and even grammar change with the majors, adjusting to different types of subject matter and ways of thinking (10). The subtleties of disciplinary writing, as Gee explained with Discourse communities, cannot be simply taught. As one becomes an expert in a field, specialized ways of thinking, speaking, and writing gradually become natural actions. By the time one becomes an expert in a field, these skills have become “deeply entrenched,” sometimes to the point of being subliminal (9). The practitioner may no longer be aware of the discipline-specific moves she or he is making, but may be simply doing things the way they are done.

Writing skills are not generic, nor does one style override other styles as universal. Rather than viewing all writing as a branch or variation of a standard type of writing, taught “once and for all” in the Freshman year, Colomb proposes a new viewpoint, stating, “Instead of our metaphors of growth and construction, I prefer the equally familiar one of an ‘outsider’ trying to ‘get into’ a community” (6). The burden of teaching writing, then, would not fall completely on a single department but on all departments as they shepherded students through the secrets of the trade. Extending the metaphor, Colomb claims that were students’ learning paths linear, they
would arrive at each stop with the “baggage,” or skills they needed for the next leg of the journey. However, if the non-linear model were to be adopted, students would not be expected to have already accumulated all of the baggage. They would arrive with what baggage they had collected and pick up new skills as needed.

Colomb’s piece does not take into account programs such as Writing Across Disciplines or UWSP’s Writing Emphasis and Communication in the Major, but even so, the perception remains the same: the burden of college writing instruction has been placed on the shoulders of English Departments, and the lion share of blame for unsatisfactory student writing is routinely placed there as well. University politics aside, the need for discipline-specific knowledge of writing, as well as the importance of continued writing practice, become clear to practicum consultants.

3.12.1. Responses

Consultants’ responses were pragmatic as they sought common ground between tutor and learner. Most attempted to find “ins” to discuss features of writing, since both tutor and learner will likely both be operating from a limited knowledge base. The majority of the responses focused on using professors and assignment sheets to model correct writing. When explaining why she has been successful writing papers in college, one consultant responds, “I understand what my professors will be looking for,” showcasing the importance of meeting professors’ expectations as well as looking toward a safe place, direct instruction, rather than a more nebulous place of professional consensus, or Discourse.

Another response takes the concept of disciplinary writing further: “I will suggest they model then types of papers and writing found within their discipline.” This student looks to the body of work in a field for direction. She recognizes the importance of reading in order to write
effectively, and she also acknowledges the fact that she will not be able to instruct every student on conventions within their majors. Rather, she anticipates passing on skills to learners, enabling them to work though problems on their own.

The following quote from a Communicative Disorders major demonstrates both a grasp on theory and a sound strategy for working with peers:

I recognize parts of ComD writing that can be applied to math and science writing, and then I don’t worry about learning those parts…Another part of writing in ComD is supporting points with examples and explaining examples using points. This is another “basic skill” that, when recognized, can be applied to other disciplines. So, although each discipline is different, certain skills can be applied to many of them. This application is most effective when a student can recognize the similarities and differences between disciplines and apply previously learned skills to a new discourse in the appropriate fashion and proportion.

Colomb’s metaphor of carrying bits and pieces of baggage into new communities (6) can be seen in this response. This consultants recognizes that becoming fluent in different types of writing is not a linear process, but rather one in which students build from and add to prior experiences, accumulating skills and integrating them into new ways of thinking.

Although a sophisticated understanding of Colomb’s theories is ideal, consultants need not possess such an intimate sense of disciplinary modes of thinking and writing in order to help learners. This consultant puts forth a sound strategy to work within her means, ensuring a positive impact on her learners without overstepping bounds:

As tutors, I think we can help students with basics—sentences, organization, grammar, being clear and specific—as well as helping them make sure they have stuck to the
assignment requirements. Honestly, I don’t usually have a chance to get beyond these types of things during a session anyway. If learners have specific questions, we can answer them the best we can. If we really don’t know how to help them, or if we suspect we may be running into some discipline-specific problems, we can either see if there are other tutors available in that discipline or suggest that the student go to the professor.

While practicum consultants receive substantial training, they are, in fact, still undergraduates. The most important function of the Colomb reading is to generate awareness that disciplinary differences exist, and that acclimation into a discipline takes place over time and in a non-linear manner. Assisting learners with the structure and clarity while imparting even a dash of disciplinary awareness will amount to a successful session.

6. Final Responses

Consultants are asked to answer five questions near the end of the semester. While responses to this point have represented only their reactions to readings, the final response questions represent their opinions after reading, writing about, and discussing the material. These questions offer consultants an opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of specific questions. The responses prove to be much more sophisticated and well-thought-out than initial reactions from the readings.

.1. Question One

How did participating in the D2L discussions affect your understanding of the readings? Please give an example.

.1.1. Responses

Students found the D2L discussion forum to be helpful in understanding the readings. Not only did they share their thoughts, but the public nature of the forum motivated some of
them to read and discuss more thoroughly than they would have otherwise. One student writes, “I was challenged to look critically [at my own posts] and go back to find the parts in the readings that justified my answers.” Another writes, “The D2L discussions affected my understanding of the readings because they forced me to attack the readings full-force instead of just glossing them over.” Scrutiny from peers, for this group, is a strong motivational force.

Many of the consultants valued the perspective they gained through reading their classmates’ responses: “Seeing evidence of this discipline-specific difference in reading comprehension really prompted me to try and look at my readings with a variety of different perspectives because I now know that there are indeed a multiplicity of stances to take on a single reading.” The student uses the term “discipline-specific” rather loosely in this case, but the fact remains that she is finding vocabulary to explain the importance of reading critically. She also recognizes that every reader brings something different to the reading and discussion brings about changes of perspective. Another student writes,

I would read something one way because of my own background, but then see someone else posting from a different viewpoint that I would have never originally looked at. This made me critically question the articles more as the semester continued. As I spent more time on each reading, I was able to…understand my own reading, the author’s intentions, and my classmates’ interpretations.

Reading rhetorically becomes more and more natural to students as they interact with each other and take note of how other readers construct meaning from text.

This cooperation in creating meaning showcases the collaborative spirit which develops over the course of the semester. The act of reading and comprehending moves from being a
solitary act to being an experience shared by all fourteen students in class, as is evidenced with this quote:

After reading the readings myself, I could feel that I had only gleaned parts of the whole. I focused in on different parts than my classmates, and it wasn’t until I read their posts that the full meaning of the article began to really take shape. I tried to imagine what they had been thinking while they were reading and compared that to what had been going on in my mind. Each of my classmates showed me a new way to look at the readings...our discussions felt like each person brought 1/14 to the table, and we combined them to make 14/14, one whole, of an understanding.

This concept of knowledge creation, so difficult for college students to grasp, has become clear to this practicum student through collaboration with her peers. She is reading and thinking more critically. Moreover, she understands the process she has gone through in order to acquire these skills. The main objective of Education 370/570 is to walk practicum consultants through the process of learning theory in a transparent way so they can in turn pass their habits of thought on to their learners. This quote exhibits evidence that the goal has been met.

.2. Question Two

Would the peer-led, in-class discussions have been different if the instructors had participated?

4.2.1. Responses

Students in the practicum appreciated the opportunity to lead discussions without instructor involvement. They also comprehended the purpose of the activity as heuristic exercise, as well as the advantages and challenges involved. Peer-led discussions lasted approximately thirty minutes. Dr. Giblin and I would then join the conversation for a fifteen-minute follow-up.
Student comments suggest that the follow-up became an important part of the discussion for them, and that they recognized it as scaffolding to support their own discoveries.

Knowing that they would be fully responsible for conducting class on their own, consultants became aware of their motivations, as well as how incentives for making sense of the material subtly changed when faced with a new situation. As one student remarks, “The fact that [the instructors] did not participate showed me that they had confidence in our ability to discern and discuss the important points.” When the primary responsibility for creating knowledge falls on the student, the perspective change is significant. Another student writes, “We wanted to do the best for ourselves and our classmates. The environment of the discussion helped us care and talk about things that we felt were globally important to our community.” This quote shows a desire to do well, but more excitingly, it acknowledges the importance of cooperation within a community, in this case the classroom, in problem solving and the furthering of knowledge. This meat-awareness of the nature of learning once again demonstrates a step toward the main objective of the class: to train peer consultants to deliberately apply theory in one-on-one tutorials.

Understanding the nature of their own learning proved valuable. In addition, students came to understand the nature of collaborative learning. One student writes, “We were forced to find the meaning ourselves. People learn by doing, and when we were alone in the discussion, we couldn’t rely on our instructors to tell us the answers or push us in one direction or another.” Careful consideration and cooperation serves as the compass rather than direct instruction.

Students showed evidence of a shift in thinking from valuing direct instruction to valuing a heuristic method of discovery. They were able to discuss personal ideas inductively with their classmates, gathering perspectives to form a large picture and then distilling thoughts to reach
conclusions together. The freedom to follow lines of thought, untethered by authority, gave students a sense of ownership over their learning processes, as revealed in this quote: “While I’m sure the discussions would have been more on topic if the instructors were involved, I think by having tutors run the show, we felt more engaged with the material and more likely to continue the conversations outside of class and with different communities (such as friends and family).”

Students begin to feel comfortable with trial and error in learning. This student acknowledges the fact that peer-led discussions did not always yield the results the instructors had in mind, but he also grasps the importance of applying a process to learning and continuing the conversations in new circles and with new perspectives. This idea is integral to the writing lab. Peer consultants are not instructors, nor do they directly teach learners. The collaborative learning taking place in the writing lab represents an additional pathway to knowledge, apart from yet complimentary to the classroom.

Consultants’ utilization of this pathway to knowledge mimics their one-on-one sessions in the writing lab. Rather than depending on a professor for answers, consultant and learner must rely on materials from the class and memory of in-class experiences while navigating assignments themselves. A consultant states, “I think if the instructors had participated, we might have conformed to whatever they said and not tried to expand our own thoughts on the subject.” An experienced student knows that expressing independent thought is necessary for success in college. Consultants serve learners well by passing on the ability to not only consider what has been learned in class, but to take the knowledge further. This skill can be learned over time, but it can also, in part, be taught, as evidenced in the following: “I had to think critically and decide for myself what understanding to take away. This was the first time I had an experience like this.” Many students, while responsible for synthesizing concepts in sophisticated ways, have
never been taught to view knowledge as more than something to be inputted and outputted, something to learn and be tested on. Peer consultants have the luxury of being able to model specific habits on an equal level with their learners. In real time, consultants show learners how to take the next step in reasoning. In order to share this insider information with learners, though, consultants must be aware of how and why they do it themselves.

Responses to question one illustrated a sophisticated understanding of how information is discovered, processed, and constructed. Responses to question two have taken the concept of knowledge construction a step further, showcasing consultants’ understanding that different kinds of collaboration influence how individuals and groups of people comprehend material. Not only does collaborative learning place responsibility more squarely on the student or learner, but it becomes clear that decisions must be made when dealing with forces that influence understanding.

3. Question Three

Do you feel that working with students’ personal writing in ’57 sessions prepared you to work with students’ academic writing? If so, please discuss the similarities between these sessions as well as the differences.

4.3.1. Responses

Consultants confirm that their work with learners from the English ’57 series provided a framework for work with learners with academic writing. On one level, the mere act of interacting with learners provides opportunities to practice, and in turn, a sense of comfort. On another level, consultants gain experience working with the writing process. Once consultants get a feel for what it is like to work through a piece of writing with a learner, they are able to apply what they have learned to other types of writing. They also become accustomed to
balancing the needs of the learner with the demands of the writing task at hand, a skill that prepares them to work with learners whose limited experience may inhibit them from meeting requirements of an assignment.

Having a chance to go through the motions with a writer who is working on personal writing for a pass or fail grade provided consultants with practice and a measure of immediate success. They appreciated the opportunity to ease into the job before dealing with high-stakes situations. A student writes, “I think working with ‘57s really helped me ‘feel out’ my tutoring style…I was able to focus more on how to best help my learner rather than worrying about helping them with an assignment and following a professor’s expectations.” Assignment sheets, professor expectations, and writing conventions add another dimension to writing sessions. Consultants were able to add those to their repertoire after becoming comfortable with the rhythms of the job.

Another difference between ’57 sessions and academic writing sessions is the level at which learners engage the writing project. Often, learners express more enthusiasm for personal writing as opposed to writing assignments, and the strategies within the writing session change. A consultant reports that in ’57 sessions, “the writing meant a lot to the student” and the learners “had more ambition and excitement toward their projects and were more willing to make changes.” Making changes is a major aspect of the writing process. Working with enthusiastic leaners who are willing to put effort into making changes is good preparation for talking through revisions in learners’ assignments. Likewise, learners sometimes felt excited about their ideas in ’57 sessions while their main concern in academic sessions was grammar and mechanics: “I felt that in my academic sessions, we focused more on the rules of writing, where my ’57 sessions dealt more with broad issues.” and “my ’57 learners wanted to work on their pieces to make
them better rather than just to improve their grade.” These are points of interest in that learners tend to resist treating writing as a process when writing papers for class, but embrace the process with their own writing. Finding ways to transfer that enthusiasm to academic writing tasks is an area ripe for research.

Although academic and ’57 sessions differ, many notable similarities exist. One consultant writes that he was able to “learn the language to teach and discuss the writing process.” If all writing involves a process, then working with personal writing will provide the basis for discussing academic pieces as well. Another consultant points out the similarities between choices in disciplinary convention and choices in structure for personal writing: “The major difference is content…academic writing focuses on differences between disciplines while ‘57s are more personal, so we can focus on structures.” The underlying point is that structure and content inform each other. If styles of thought and presentation of thought combine to create discourses, then personal writing could also combine thought and presentation to create an intended individual result.

Some consultants indicated that skills from tutoring ’57 learners transferred more or less directly to tutoring other learners: “With both kinds of sessions the primary focus is on developing the student’s ideas through discussion as well as the organization and evidence/analysis.” The power of deepening thought and finding organization through discussion can be seen as a universal skill. The following illustrates strong similarities not only in the consultant’s approach, but in learner needs and expectations: “My work with both was similar because I was able to reference some of the same sources and scan for the same global issues…I was able to ask similar questions to hint at what could be improved or elaborated on…Essentially every learner wanted to work on grammar concerns.” This consultant’s approach
may prove to be too simplistic, but the premise of working with ideas and putting them onto paper effectively and correctly is sound.

In many ways, the ’57 sessions represent an ideal, something to aspire toward when conducting academic sessions. The main difference is time. For ‘57s, consultants meet with their learners twelve times throughout the semester, whereas students coming in for academic writing might attend once or twice. Even students attending to work on papers for classes might see multiple consultants, preventing any one of them from becoming familiar with their writing. Of her ’57 learners, a consultant writes, “I had all semester to help them get it right…It was nice to work with the ’57 learners through their entire writing process, from brainstorming to proofreading. It helped me to get a sense of various ways to help learners at each stage.” Getting to know a learner well helps consultants to gain the skills they need to work with learners they do not know well. When working in a more hurried or limited capacity, progress can still be made. Another consultant writes, “In ‘57s they have plenty of time to experiment with new approaches and different techniques. I know I really enjoyed being able to spend one session focusing on certain aspects of my learner’s writing (i.e. point of view, details, grammar) rather than trying to cram all those elements into one short session.” Learner expectations for a single session when working on a paper should be realistic. However, during the course of twelve ’57 sessions, Consultant and learner have room to breathe. They can take the time necessary to acquire new skills.

By beginning their careers in the writing lab with learners working on personal writing and then moving into academic writing, consultants experience the writing process as it pertains to students throughout campus. They see the incarnations the writing process can take, and they become accustomed to guiding learners—cooperative and otherwise—through the process. They
witness the connections between ideas and structure, between the intellectual realm of writing and the physical realm. Quite soon, they are able to discern differences in style as well as transferable skills and habits. By allowing personal writing to exist side by side with academic writing, consultants begin to create their own, unique mental maps of connections, large and small, between different types of writing and discourse.

4.4. Question Four

When working with learners from your major, how much of the time were you able to focus on discipline-specific language and concepts? Did you find yourself changing your language and/or approach when working with students who have had little practice within their majors? If so, how?

4.4.1. Responses

Working with learners in the same major proved easier and more enjoyable to practicum consultants. They report moving through sessions quicker and with more fluidity. In these sessions, discipline-specific thought and language was exchanged almost effortlessly. When explaining experiences with learners outside their majors, consultants report resorting to a more hands-off approach. They fall back to pointing out more universal issues and asking learners to explain what they know.

Consultants characterize sessions with learners who share a major as “more enjoyable.” These are the sessions where they “felt more confident” and were able to “jump right into specifics.” One consultant admits that “it was nice being able to use [his] background knowledge.” When writing about working with these learners, consultants included details first, saving explanations of working with students outside their majors for last. It felt as though their
accounts of working with like-minded learners was matter of fact to them, that the interactions
were so natural as to be nearly inconsequential.

Their descriptions of working with learners in their own majors were less thoughtful, a
mere preamble to their more lengthy responses to the second part of the question: the part which
inquires about their work with learners who were working outside their disciplines. The question
is posed from a learner point of view, i.e. learners who are working outside their own majors, but
consultants expanded their responses to also include working with learners outside their (the
consultants’) majors. The fact that consultants answered the second half of this question in a
lengthy fashion, as well as the fact that a number of them included an additional aspect to their
answers, indicates that working with learners outside their majors presents a serious challenge.

When working with learners who were unfamiliar with their own disciplines, the main
strategy consultants had at their disposal was carefully worded explanation. One consultants
writes, “I try to be as careful with my wording as possible. I don’t want to confuse them by using
terms they haven’t learned yet or say something they will automatically take as fact.” This quote
represents a developed understanding of learning. Presentation must be presented in an
understandable fashion, and “understandable” means something different to each learner. This
quote also demonstrates an understanding that talking above a learner’s head creates a power
dynamic. When information comes from authority, many students tend to “automatically take it
as fact.” The objective of a peer-to-peer writing consultation is for two students to collaborate at
a more or less equal level, not for the consultant to adopt the role of professor. Another student
wrote that when working with a learner unfamiliar with his or her own discourse, they “worked
on the ‘who, what, where, when, and why’ of the paper.” By encouraging the learner to think
more rhetorically, she or she will become familiar with aspect of writing specific to the major.
Consultants also reported on what they did when they themselves entered unfamiliar territory. These sessions covered less ground, but through collaboration they still ended successfully. While language flows naturally within a familiar major, consultants choose words more carefully when operating outside of it: “I spend more time wanting to take things slowly and thinking more before I say something.” This consultant relays a sentiment common across all responses: that she feels the need to safeguard herself against misinforming her learner. These sessions raise awareness of just how fluent in their own majors consultants have become. A History major states, “With history papers, I just tutor, whereas with other disciplines, I actually sit down and think about how I’m tutoring.” Reminiscent of Colomb, this consultant has become so steeped in her major that writing and thinking in her accustomed manner has become almost second nature. Working outside of her comfort zone seemingly deskills her.

However, this heightened awareness of differences between disciplines enhances consultants’ skills, even as it causes uncertainty and self-consciousness. Consultants are not expected to be experts in other majors, just to be aware that other conventions exist which can significantly alter how material is approached and expressed. In a collaborative learning environment, the learner hold responsibility for taking charge of her or his own learning, and the consultant can facilitate that learning by asking the right questions and encouraging growth in areas of critical thinking: “I assume my learner is more of an expert than I am, and I ask questions to try to guide him/her along. I don’t really focus on their discipline so much as how they feel about their paper.” Although knowledge of the existence and importance of disciplines lies at the center of Education 370/570, positive impact will always result from thoughtful conversations of writing. Most students, especially those who are in their first two years, have not moved into classes where their writing necessarily needs to be discipline-specific—and
students in some programs never will. Writing consultants can still be of help with writing skills that hold true across most disciplines: “Even though I was able to bring some of my disciplinary knowledge into the session, most of what we worked on was whether the papers were clear—not necessarily discipline-specific.” Clear language is a cornerstone of good writing. Although the definition of clarity can vary to a degree, being able to make a point with coherent ideas and correct sentence structure provides, at the very least, a solid starting point for effective writing.

A couple consultants used a lack of disciplinary knowledge to their advantage, identifying with learners as a fellow beginner: “To be honest, I haven’t had many learners from my major, and even if I did, I’m not at the level where I’m able to truly ‘walk the walk.’ However, I have noticed that I sometimes have to change the way I talk with Freshmen, as far as the discourse of college in general.” This consultant identifies with students as a fellow member of the college community, a community that has a discourse of its own. She finds commonalities as a way in and moves ahead from there. Another consultant writes, “Because I was new to the discipline just like they were, we were on the same page. I showed them how I would approach a new discipline so they could use it as a model.” This is exactly why learners benefit from visiting the writing lab: Writing consultants are experienced problem-solvers who have navigated the university system successfully. A talented and experienced student places her- or himself in the center of a puzzled and reasons a way through it. By modeling successful habits of thought to learners, consultants are fulfilling their purpose as peer educators.

The disciplinary nature of college can be daunting for students, well-prepared or otherwise, but there is a set of transferable skills which will enable them to adapt to challenges. Writing lab consultants are chosen based on their possession of these skills as well as their inclination to mentor learners. Every individual entering the university faces the challenge of
acceptance to a major and socialization into a discipline, and mentoring can expedite the process. Whether a learner has the opportunity to meet with a peer from the same major or a student in the process of acquiring expertise in another field, peer-to-peer modeling serves to straighten the learning curve and increase learners’ chances for success.

4.5. Question Five

Did you find the Alien Territory project helpful to your understanding of Discourse communities? If so, how?

This question follows up on an assignment that practicum students were to complete during the weeks leading up to the Colomb reading. For this assignment, students were required to attend a class in which they would never willingly enroll. They then bring their “field notes” to class and discuss experiences between themselves; they are not required to write formal responses. However, they are asked about the assignment in D2L questions five.6

4.5.1. Responses

Most consultants expressed that they had an understanding of Discourse communities before participating in the Alien Territory, and that the assignment reinforced their existing ideas. A couple students responded to the question in a shallower way than would have been ideal, stating, “this project got the point across that we need to change out language or the methods we use to help learners to best fit them,” or “[k]nowing what the learner experiences in the classroom will help me to tailor the sessions around what they are used to.” The purpose of the assignment was to drive home the idea that Discourses cannot be simply observed and mastered, but time and effort need to go into a process of socialization. However, even if consultants understand Discourse at a superficial level, they will possess enough awareness to work effectively with learners.

6 For an explanation of the assignment, see Appendix C
The majority of consultants comprehended the purpose behind the assignment more deeply, but they still differed in how they comprehended the relationship between Disciplines and personalities. A Communications major writes, “Going to a genetics class confirmed my choice in major...people truly are different in their ways of writing, reading, and even the ways they learn.” This student understands that being steeped in a field affects more than how one takes notes or structures an essay. Discourses influence how thinking and learning take place. Interestingly, she says that visiting a science class “confirmed” her choice in majors. Her statement suggests that she feels a predisposition toward a language-based style of learning which caused her to pursue the humanities. Her answer does not suggest that her learning style developed as a result of studying humanities. Conversely, another consultant, a Psychology major, accompanied his roommate to her computer programming class. He writes, “After [attending the class], it made more sense why she interacts the way she does with other people...” Clearly, this student attributes his roommate’s social habits to the habits she has picked up in her course of study. Both of the aforementioned students link Discourse with personality, but with opposite cause and effect.

A particularly insightful response connects discipline-specific knowledge and habits with student perspective and ability without the burden of a cause and effect appraisal:

I have always known that I am better suited to the humanities and language based disciplines, but this project made me realize just how far down the path of my own discipline I have already traveled. The students in the class I observed were approximately as deep into their discipline as I am into mine, and the differences between our disciplines were glaring. It truly was like viewing the world through a different pair of glasses. Hearing the experiences of my classmates further deepened my understanding.
As we were sharing our experiences I began picturing how a statistician, a musician, a chemist, and an author might view the same situation. They would be experiencing the same thing, yet each of their minds would go in a completely different direction. This quote illustrates the influence occupation has on thinking, and vice versa. It also attributes thinking habits and world view to training and repetition—habits of mind. A person may feel a disposition toward a particular field, but personality does not completely determine thought processes. The same student goes on to say,

Thinking about how each discourse brings with it a different perspective, and how each individual has a different perspective within those discourses, gave me another realization of just how differently each person sees the world. The most amazing part though, is that we all manage to live together in the same society. That is the greatest testament to human adaptability, and that is what will allow me to help people from every discipline.

The student’s understanding of the impact discipline-specific thought and action has upon knowledge creation validates the Alien Territory project as a beneficial exercise in summation of the Gee and Colomb readings. She recognizes Discourse communities as discrete circles of practice, not easily imitated or fully comprehended without time and effort. She also recognizes the value of allowing a multitudinous viewpoint to exist. Most importantly, she understands that while she will never be a member of every community of practice, she can use her knowledge of Discourse to find ways in with learners—to communicate where common ground exists and yield where her comprehension fails. By collaborating with learners outside her own discipline, she can lead learners toward an understanding of what they know, as well as what they need to learn.
A Biology major comprehends what she does and does not understand by drawing a comparison between the alien experience and her familiar experiences in biology classes. She writes,

The Alien Territory project felt like a lab to me. In biology, usually our classes have a lecture and then a lab where we apply things that we have learned in lecture. Being a science person, I learn best from hands-on activities. In this class, we discussed Discourse communities and how different student backgrounds affect their preparation for college, and in the Alien Territory project we applied it. I got to feel what it was like to feel a little lost and unprepared in a class and see how different a fine arts class is compared to the science classes I was used to. That helped me understand the concept better. It was one thing to just think about differing perspectives in different courses, but it was another getting to experience it firsthand.

Each student has a different way in when it comes to understanding Discourse and its significance. The major in which the student is working seems to affect her or his reasoning process while thinking through the concept. It seems as if a discipline-specific perspective innately contains critical thinking components that lead students toward their own unique yet valid embodiments of what interdisciplinary communication is.

5. Reprise

The final exam comes in the form of a written reprise. Students write in-class essays in response to two questions. After spending the semester studying and discussing reading, writing, and learning theory while concurrently working with learners, the reprise provides an opportunity to for practicum consultants to demonstrate growth and explain how their newfound knowledge can be applied to peer writing consultations. The reprise is an opportunity to answer
essay questions broadly, demonstrating a fullness of understanding apparent, until this point, only in class discussions. This section represents a culmination of the practicum class as consultants explain what they have learned and how it applies to their practice in the Writing Lab as well as to their experiences in the university. Pseudonyms will be used to present the culminating thoughts of each practicum consultant. Key quotes have been selected from each student and each question.

1. Consider the following list of readings: Colomb, Gee, Harris, Rose, Bruffee, Tireney & Pearson. Which one of these readings most influenced you, and why? Please be thorough in your response. In your explanation, you may include a short quote or two from this reading that particularly spoke to you in order to make your point(s).

2. Please write about how your thinking about language and learning changed over the past semester, and describe the experiences that you found most valuable both in class and during your practice in the Writing Lab. How did you apply what you learned in the booth?

5.1. Jane (History major, responded to Colomb)

5.1.1. Question One

Jane expresses that she had never put thought into disciplinary differences in writing before taking the class, but after reading the Colomb piece, she realized she had understood it on an intuitive level. The writing examples in the reading, she says, raised her awareness of what she already knew as well as what she did not know:

At first, Colomb’s article freaked me out. I could not wrap my head around the examples from the physics writer…However, as I thought about it more, I recognized that it is not my job to know all the disciplines. Colomb’s article seemed to be advocating for a
recognition of the differences between disciplines most of all. The article showed me that the most important thing was critical thinking for all subjects…I focus on making sure my learner interacts with the reading…I won’t analyze every paper through the lens of a historian.

Jane has incorporated Colomb’s theories on disciplinary written into her personal thought process. She is prepared to apply her disciplinary knowledge while acknowledging her limitations. She has put a plan of action into place for instances when disciplinary knowledge is lacking, connecting with learners at a more universal level—within the discourse of critically-thinking college students.

5.1.2. Question Two

Jane relays a story of a roommate’s friend who plans to go into the teaching field. The friend has expressed anger at “lazy” students. Citing the Rose reading and her personal experiences in the writing lab, Jane insists that poor performance in school can be attributed to a number of challenges students face. She writes, “For the students who work in the writing lab who want to be teachers, they will be able to go forth and spread that knowledge into the world.”

She also demonstrates application of what she has learned about ELL learners: “For example, one student had difficulties with determiners/articles, and I was able to step back and recognize that the Chinese language didn’t have those, so it completely changed how I worked with her…I’m much more careful about my explanations now, and I always make sure my learner understands what I’m saying before I move on.”

Jane’s responses reveal an understanding of disciplinary writing as well as an awareness of where her expertise ends. She has strategies in place for a range of situations, all of which match her strengths with learner needs. Most notably, she has learned to view each learner as an
individual with personal challenges as well as strengths. Through studying the readings and interacting with learners, she utilized theory to develop an array of best practices.

5.2. Ben (Biology major, responded to Rose)

5.2.1. Question One

Ben identifies with a student in the Rose reading, relating her struggles with some of his own. He writes, “The reading made me look back on the struggles I had during my freshman year.” He thought he had been well-prepared for college, but his hard work did not pay off the way he hoped. He also looks back to his high school experience, stating, “My high school was significantly divided on the basis of money and status…forty out of 136 students dropped out. Needless to say, none of the drop outs were the ‘rich kids.’” Ben has gained sensitivity for the unique challenges faced by underperforming students. He was able to identify with a student from the reading, and he has carried the feeling through to his work in the writing lab.

5.2.2. Question Two

Learning about the effects of language on others strikes Ben as the most important part of his practicum experience. He writes, “Over the past semester, I think I have learned to be more consciously aware of the language I use and the style I use to learn.” Self-reflection leads him to a place where he is able to empathize with others as well: “The complexity that I discovered in language is just incredible. The ways in which we associate feelings, memories, and experiences into words. The way society creates positive or negative undertones to words, which we in turn use and either negatively or positively affect a person without knowing it.” This response signifies growth. When asked to explain the most important part of his experience, Ben chooses to write about a shift in his world view which affects relationships of all kinds. While becoming a writing consultant, he has rethought his interactions with the world.
5.3. Mary (International Studies major, responded to Harris)

5.3.1. Question One

Mary takes from the practicum a new perception of the writing process. She writes, “Muriel Harris’s article influenced me in how I face a writing task... The article also taught me to observe others’ writing styles and has given me guidance on what advice to give if a learner is struggling through the writing process.” Mary leaves practicum with the skills she needs to collaborate with learners. Once again, close observation of her own writing process has led to a heightened awareness of others’ writing processes. She expresses that she is armed with strategies to help struggling writers.

5.3.2. Question Two

This essay question prompts Mary to discuss her personal journey and how she relates it to her work in the writing lab. She writes, “Our discussions on class difference, cultural pedigree, and family value systems helped me to face areas in my own history that needed addressing. Then when I was in a session with a learner who had a few emotional moments, I was more prepared to help her work through them.” Looking inward helps her to see her learners’ difficulties more clearly. In order to connect on this level, Mary understands the complex role of discussion in the learning process: “I found language and learning to contain more facets than I had previously understood... In class, I discovered the power of language in the context of discussion.” Discussion has aided her in discovering her own unexamined challenges, and she uses this new awareness to better connect with her learners.

5.4. Sally (Wildlife Management major, responded to Harris)

5.4.1. Question One
Consciousness of writing as a process which is unique to each individual has helped Sally to improve her own writing and to interact productively with learners. She writes, “A lot of the time, we forget how we write and how others write and think differently than us. Harris made me aware of who I am as a writer and why I did things the way I did.” Self-examination, for all of the practicum consultants, proves to be the starting point for recognition of the plights of their learners. She goes on to say, “I was able to put this new understanding into action with learners…Almost everything from the reading I was able to apply.” Sally is able to internalize writing theory and apply it in her one-on-one writing sessions. And she does so in a metacognitive fashion, which a main goal of the practicum experience.

5.4.2. Question Two

Sally reports learning about language both in class and during her time consulting learners. She writes, “Now I know language is not just communicating. It is what we are communicating, why, how, to whom, and when. There are a million people participating in a million different ways…Language is social. In the beginning I fought the phrase ‘social construct,’ but it is. Language is cultural.” Sally has adopted a new, rhetorical view on communication, and she demonstrates an ability to apply learning theory in real time, as is illustrated with the following quote: “Most of what I understand about language and learning comes from working with learners. Each hour was different, and each [learner] taught me something.” She leaves the class with a more developed perception of language and its power. She also acknowledges the importance of a dialogic environment in learning.

5.5. Carrie (Communication major, responded to Harris, Bruffee, and Colomb)

5.5.1. Question One
Carrie’s response resists the prompt, touching on three readings rather than one. Of Harris, she writes, “…it really got my gears turning and made me think about the writing process as a whole.” A common thread for consultants is their heightened awareness of writing as a process, which satisfies one of the learning objectives for Education 370/570 as well as demonstrates a metacognitive application of theory in practice. She points out an overriding theme present in the Bruffee and Colomb pieces, stating, “We learn from those who teach us…The idea that everyone is different because of their past interests me.” An examination of how environment shapes learning, as with other practicum consultants, propels Carrie to a more careful consideration of how she communicates with learners.

5.5.2. Question Two

The uniqueness of each person in the class drives Carrie to engage the uniqueness of her learners in order to help them find their own approach to writing. She writes, “My favorite thing about this class is that everyone is so different. We are all so unique in our values, abilities, techniques, etc. This class made it clear that I have to adapt even more to help others.” She understands the importance of meeting learners where they are, encouraging them to use their strengths. She cites the Brooks reading, stating, “If I approach students’ writing as something to fix, they will keep coming in over and over with the same problem in different papers. But if we work on methods and global changes, the learner could improve on their own.” These thoughts combine to express the importance of working holistically with learners, empowering them to improve their own writing and thinking.

5.6. Adam (Psychology major, responded to Colomb)

5.6.1. Question One
Adam reads the Colomb article in exactly the way it is intended in the course: as a summation. He writes, “Colomb’s arguments and points made most of this course finally click. Without Colomb, I don’t think I would have fully understood how James Gee relates to our tutoring experience. Colomb allowed for a practical understanding of the Discourses and communities of practice that Gee discusses.” Adam’s comprehension of the contextual dependency of language hinges upon examples put forth by Colomb—examples that Adam sees as intertwined with Gee’s social languages and situational meaning of words. He cites this quote from Colomb, “[w]riting and thinking are always about something” (4), as integral to understanding Gee’s claim that writing differs between disciplines. This synthesis of theory shows Adam’s sophistication on the topic of learning and writing in context and serves him well in the tutoring situation.

5.6.2. Question Two

As others have expressed, Adam believes his experiences discussing theory in class prepared him to apply it in his tutoring sessions. He writes, “To be able to discuss and communicate ideas in such a safe environment was incredible to me. Being able to explore scholarly articles interpersonally and intrapersonally without worrying about failing allowed me to explore each of the pieces deeper and at my own pace.” The collaborative, dialogic atmosphere of the writing lab necessitates cultivation of the same environment in class, laying a foundation for tutoring sessions. He relays an experience tutoring an unresponsive learner. In-class discussion had modelled for Adam a student-centered approach to tutoring, which he employed in this session. He asked his learner why he had chosen the particular topic and what was actually important to him. Adam writes, “He got emotional as he told me. He said no one
had cared to ask him about his topic or why he wrote what he did.” Basing his tutoring style off of in-class experiences, Adam is able to pass his safe and productive feeling on to his learner.

5.7. Anna (English major, responded to Gee)

5.7.1. Question One

The importance of working with learners as unique individuals yet again surfaces as paramount. Anna explains how the Gee reading relates to in-class discussions as well as work with learners. She writes,

I remember the first day of the semester when we all introduced ourselves and gave information about our heritage or any cultural traditions that we practiced with our families…This information ended up proving useful because it helped us understand that although we are all part of this practicum course, we had very different perspectives that we could take with us to the tutoring session.

She goes on to relate how this in-class experience augments her understanding of Gee as well as her tutoring style, writing, “Gee’s explanations of the different ways an individual’s culture and experiences affect his or her perspectives on new concepts and discourses helped me determine how to assist learners.”

5.7.2. Question Two

Anna reports a heightened awareness of the processes students go through while writing and learning. More specifically, she learned that drafting processes differed from person to person, and that few students followed a tidy and efficient formula. She feel reassured in her own messy writing habits, writing, “The Harris article, our D2L postings, and our discussions in class helped me realize that I was not alone.” This self-reflection strengthens her ability to work with learners. She writes, “I might alter my language depending on my learner’s background
knowledge,” and “stepping outside my comfort zone helps me to better understand learners.”

Ultimately, writing consultants are learners themselves, asking questions and finding ways to communicate in order to pass on these skills to fellow students.

5.8. Karen (English major, responded to Harris)

5.8.1. Question One

Recognition of individualized processes to reach the same goal resonated with Karen. She writes, “When I came to college, I did not find a standard format for writing between all my classes.” Upon entering college, she immediately noticed the discipline-specific nature of writing. She states, “When I fought to find a correct style for myself, I felt my writing skill depreciate as I focused on the specific structure of my writing instead of the content of my writing.” Much as Rose claims (171), Karen’s difficulty with writing in a new style inhibits her ability to effectively communicate. When she moves on to work with learners in similar situations, her self-examination allows her to collaborate effectively, as she writes, “Students are adapting to every professor, class, and exam in order to meet their writing goals in the classroom. Harris made me realize that my job is not only to help writers understand their writing styles, but also to help them understand how they can adapt their writing processes to improve their writing, specific to their disciplines.” When dealing with a variety of personalities and a variety of expectations for writing, consultants must marshal as much theoretical knowledge and personal experience as possible in order to usher learners through the drafting process.

5.8.2. Question Two

Karen reports and understanding that quality communication depends upon not only making a good argument, but also structuring the argument effectively. She writes, “…this class made me really understand that writers are creating knowledge as a process, instead of
regurgitating facts and opinions. The idea of building and changing texts to reach a ‘good point’ is something I never considered on a critical level before this class.” This association between structure and content, which represents a quite advanced conception of writing, becomes even more apparent with her statement, “…when helping learners grow and understand their writing styles, I feel I can truly make a difference as their ideas and grammar grow.” Karen realizes that grammar, format, and genre cannot be separated from content when discussing effective writing. She concludes with, “This class helped me understand that writing is not a stagnant construction. Language and learning are integrated in every session, paper, class, discipline, job, community, country, and world.”

5.9. Dawn (Communicative Disorders major, responded to Rose)

5.9.1. Question One

The Rose chapter provides scenarios which Dawn takes to heart as she writes, “The chapter showed how to apply abstract advice to real life situations. The real life situations addressed by Rose relate directly to the work consultants do in the writing lab.” While most of the readings explore abstract concepts which the class teases out through discussion, Rose tells stories of real students enduring real difficulties. Dawn explains that she now understands that each student must be engaged at a comfortable level, writing, “Every student deals with some type of adversity, whether it is home life, a language barrier, mental health issues, a learning disability, low self-esteem, or any number of other problems. Rose reminded me that the first step in conducting a successful tutoring session is to find out where the learner is at academically, but also emotionally.” Our goal in the writing lab is not solely one of increasing learners’ academic success, but also one of passing on positive habits and resources to excel in all areas. Acknowledging the obstacles to each student’s success aids in furthering this goal.
5.9.2. Question Two

Dawn states that the multiple modes of communication used throughout the practicum semester informed each other, deepening her understanding of the theory: “…‘the readings, the discussions, the Alien Territory assignment, example papers, and tutoring manual readings have changed my thinking about writing and language. All of these activities taught me something different that I was able to bring to learners.’” In addition to multiple modes of communication, Dawn claims that the combination to thought and action enhanced her practicum experience: “Though I learned much of what I do in tutoring sessions in class, I have also learned a lot about being a good writing consultant by being a writing consultant. In the session, I call up in my mind things we have talked about I class, but also things that have worked in other sessions with other learners.” Dawn has integrated theory into practice by incorporating readings, discussion, and personal experience into her own style.

5.10. Regina (International Studies/Spanish major, responded to Gee)

5.10.1. Question One

Regina responds to Gee, writing, “I have always been very intrigued by the combination of language, culture, and social interactions, which is why I am an International Studies and Spanish major and an Anthropology minor.” Her interest is language and culture guides her through class as she develops her own unique yet valid and operational views on peer-to-peer interaction. She extracts points she sees as meaningful: “In my margin next to [the Gee reading], I wrote down ‘perception=comprehension.’” She allows these views to evolve as the semester’s discussions proceed: “As we mentioned so often in class, everybody comes to college with their own baggage. We don’t know everybody’s individual story because we haven’t perceived life in the same way they have, so we should always use discretion when interacting with other
individuals. I think this idea applies to not only the writing lab but to life in general.” Regina’s response illustrates how her initial interests influence her reading of the piece, how in-class discussion refines her understanding, and how the combination of reading, discussion, and experience lead her to a fuller comprehension of the theory as well as its application.

5.10.2. Question Two

Regina sums up her newfound relationship with language, learning, and tutoring in the following excerpt:

The idea of writing and reading as a conversation really changed my perspective of reading, writing, and language as a whole. We talked about how language is not really a linear process, which was a breakthrough for me even though it seems kind of obvious looking back now. Whenever I write, I generally use up a whole page outlining, connecting, and thinking through my ideas before I put them down on paper. It seems that so many students coming to college are under the impression that their writing is static and that it is meaningless. I try to have them think critically about their writing; I ask them to put themselves in someone else’s shoes or to generate their own ideas about why a topic is important to learn about. I explain how I find it easier to write when I can relate to the writing in some small way. This helps keep the topic interesting to me and makes the writing more personal and exciting. Similarly, thinking of writing as a conversation between me, my pen, and my readings/sources has really put writing and reading into different terms for me. I now see reading and writing as an active process, something that is constantly changing and never really finished. I try to explain this to my peer learners in the writing lab whenever they find themselves overwhelmed with the need to change things in their papers.
The inclusion of this long excerpt serves as emphasis that Regina not only engages with her learners’ writing and learning processes, but that she is also working through a process of her own. The fact that the essay from which this quote is extracted was written in class and under a time restraint may account for Regina’s conflation of her personal process and the conversations she has with her learners, but the fact that self-examination of her personal habits exists side by side in her psyche with her tutoring experiences is telling. The mission of the writing lab is to provide peer-to-peer assistance while still pushing writers to grow. Regina’s engagement with her own learning process paces her at a level with which learners can identify, yet her level of metacognition allows her to challenge learners with new thoughts and strategies for success. She offers the comfort of a peer and the assurance of an authority.

5.11. Chelsea (International Studies major, responded to Gee)

5.11.1. Question One

Chelsea uses an examination of her thought processes with the Gee reading as a starting point for her interactions with learners. She writes that she “connected reading and writing to the larger picture.” She goes on to say,

Reading and writing are not just general terms, but things that vary between discourses and from person to person. This makes me think of reading and writing not just how they apply to me, but also how reading and writing are different for other people…This has not only helped me with how I think about reading and writing in my own discipline, but it has also helped me help people from other disciplines.

Chelsea does not claim to be an expert in disciplines outside her own, but she does claim that an awareness of the disciplinary nature of reading and writing enhances her ability to communicate with learners, effectively demonstrating application of theory in practice.
5.11.2. Question Two

Chelsea creates a clear distinction between reading and discussing theory and applying it in real-time situations. She discusses the Alien Territory assignment, writing,

Our readings discussed language and different learning styles, but did not have much impact when it came to visualizing and experiencing these things. When I did the Alien Territory assignment, I was able to see how disciplines have specific vocabulary one needs to use and understand. I was also able to visualize a different learning environment and style.

She proves to be quite hands-on with her learning.

Chelsea also demonstrates an ability to adapt to learners using strategies she developed in class by acknowledging that students “all come to college with different skill sets and expectations,” and continuing with an explanation of “trying to say it in several ways, coming up with examples for them to visualize it.” She does not possess discipline-specific knowledge to speak competently to all learners, but she does understand that learning occurs along many pathways, that a learner’s major or discipline affects which pathways she or he takes, and that the relationship between conversation, comprehension, and writing is an expansive one. The more inclusive the conversation becomes, the more possibility for genuine comprehension and successful communication.

5.12. Tammy (Biology major, responded to Rose)

5.12.1. Question One

As with other practicum consultants, Tammy connects with Rose because of personal experiences of her own. She states, “I have been in almost the exact positions as Lucia and Denise, confronting…ideas [they] could not agree with, though it was gender discrimination
rather than race.” Rose’s recounting of actual events provides students with concrete examples to latch onto, even if the stories need to be adapted.

Tammy also relates Rose’s examples of how difficult adjustment to college can be, for students who struggled in high school as well as for students who excelled, to her own experiences with learners. She writes,

I worked with a frustrated student who told me she had taken AP English in high school—she could not understand why she was having such trouble with the research essay she had brought in. More recently, I worked with another learner who had serious sentence-level errors in his papers; one of these papers was in fact about how people had told him he would never go to college, and how he had to struggle to get here.

She has taken into account the vast array of backgrounds students bring to the college environment and the various challenges these backgrounds can manifest. Her personal identification with the reading enriched her understanding the struggles her learners encounter, enabling her to more effectively collaborate with them.

5.12.2. Question Two

Tammy integrates the concepts from the readings she finds most pertinent into her practice with learners. She writes, “Reading the Rose and Warren articles made me realize, or perhaps understand better, how people have different experiences, and how this can affect their learning. Additionally, the Colomb reading was something of a revelation to me; I never entirely realized that writing could be so different between disciplines.” When describing her current views on language and learning, Tammy cites sources which explore assorted aspects of the language arts in order to express an integrated sense of awareness.
This integration of multiple aspects of communication and learning allows Tammy to approach learners from a perspective of skill sets rather than differentiating between remedial and advanced. She shares her experience with a particular learner, writing, “Using some of the ideas I learned in this class, I approached the situation by talking more about ideas and concepts rather than about the basics she already knew. Her problem was not knowing how to write, but rather knowing how to write for this kind of college assignment.” The challenge as she sees it is not “teaching” students to write—college students are literate people. The challenge is to determine which skills learners have and which ones they lack. A peer consultant then has the ability pass on the missing skills, allowing the learner to further assemble his or her own puzzle.

5.13. Liz (Communication major, responded to Bruffee)

5.13.1. Question One

A transparent conception of knowledge creation helps consultants with self-confidence and effectiveness. Liz writes, “I find myself consciously referencing Bruffee’s work as I tutor.” In a self-aware manner, she stresses the importance of providing a “social context” for learners with a “peer who had experience with their class.” She clearly connects Bruffee’s theory with her own practice, writing, “Bruffee writes about meeting learners where they are…He shares his ultimate ideal of peer tutors conversing with learners rather than editing or proofreading” and “explaining the demands of the subject and assignment if the learner does not know.” Above all, Liz considers the tutoring situation a social one, and she links reading with experience consciously.

5.13.2. Question Two

The importance of combining different methods of discovery to construct a full picture of language and learning becomes apparent in Liz’s response. She claims, “As much as I enjoyed
the theories and discussions, nothing helped me more than actually working with learners…A lot of the readings did not give direct advice, but the discussions with my fellow practicum students about said readings would always yield bits of wisdom.” Collaborative learning, a central tenet of the writing lab, steers her toward a deeper understanding of class material. Likewise, Liz adopts this type of posture in her tutoring sessions, crediting her success as a writing consultant to “ideas about meeting your learners where they are and being collaborative.” The dynamic ways in which reading, discussion, and practice intermingle with thought prompt Liz to write, “When all of the articles got jumbled around in my head and combined with actual learners who needed help, good ideas popped out.” Multiple modes of thinking and learning provided her with the means to build an integrated mental model of what learning looks like.

5.14. Barb (Biology major, responded to Rose)

5.14.1. Question One

Barb learns from the Rose reading that mistakes can be positive—that a point of error can mark a point of growth (171). She writes, “…people who make mistakes may be doing so because they are trying to reach beyond their current writing level, not because they do not understand written English.” She cites an example from the reading in which a student named Suzette struggles with sentence fragments, stating,

By asking the right questions, [Rose] finds out that she was just trying to avoid saying, “she…she…she…” repeatedly because she understood that college-level essays did not repeat themselves like that (Rose 171). This example gave me a new perspective, and it also helped me see how important it is to ask the right questions and listen intently. It showed me that just because I am going through a paper full of errors doesn’t mean the learner doesn’t want to or cannot write at the college level.
Barb offers these thoughts on how the reading altered her understanding of the nature of mistakes. She then continues with an explanation of how it now affects her performance in tutoring sessions. She recognizes that “different backgrounds affect how students do in college,” and she explains how she applied this understanding to a specific learner who came into college with a misguided set of assumptions. Her learner had attended high school in an area that did not have adequate bussing to carry students home. She writes, “A problem that looked like bad sentence structure to me was actually just an example that was not thoroughly explained because she assumed that all school districts ran this way.” Recognizing mistakes as multifaceted and contextual has granted Barb a better understanding of her learners and the world around her.

5.14.2. Question Two

Situations outside her comfort zone broadened Barb’s perspectives on language and learning. She writes that “working with ELL students helped [her] see how challenging English can be.” Discussing English from the viewpoint of an outsider pushed her to marshal skills as she “had to explain things in multiple ways” which ultimately “broadened [her] thinking.” Because of the experiences with ELL learners, Barb reports, “now when I work with any student and I am trying to explain a concept or example, I am usually thinking of multiple ways to say it in my head.” Finding precision in her language while working with ELL students has improved her interactions with native speakers as well. Importantly, she is able to attribute this improvement consciously.

Barb also credits the Alien Territory assignment, another activity outside her comfort zone, with broadening her perspectives on learning. She writes, “I had forgotten what it was like to be completely lost in a class and feel like an outsider.” As an accomplished student, she found it helpful to be forced into a situation where she had no hope of immediately grasping class
material or comfortably interacting with fellow classmates. She realizes “how hard it can be to adapt to something you do not like or know nothing about.” The exercise has increased her empathy and provided her with a personal context with which to find a starting point with struggling or disillusioned learners.

6. Discussion

When viewed broadly, consultant comments reveal a progression from grappling and uncertainty to awareness of how theory can be applied when working with learners. By the end of the semester and practicum experience, each consultant reached her or his own conclusions regarding class material and peer interaction. While they enjoyed collaboration and support in the class, they needed to apply what they learned individually when working one-on-one with learners. While some consultants, in my opinion, had more well-rounded conceptions of what peer-to-peer tutoring should be than others did, all fourteen students emerged from the practicum experience as capable Writing Lab employees. The measure of success for this program is based on process, both individual and collective, toward becoming competent and compassionate professionals.

Through responses to readings, answers to the final questions, and written reprises, consultants documented their learning processes as they moved through the course and tutoring experience. The extent to which they internalized material has been qualitatively measured through their own language. Findings have been documented throughout this thesis, although they have not been pulled together in support of an overriding vision for the Writing Lab. In order to present the conclusions of this study, the original research question must be revisited: Can undergraduate writing tutors learn writing center theory in a methodical and transparent way? Moreover, can they then apply that theory to practice in a metacognitive manner? Although
this two-part question is subjective, patterns of consultant language take shape around the
inquiry. Evidence throughout this study suggests that consultants have learned the theory,
understood why it was important, and employed it while tutoring. They accomplished this
through self-reflection, broadening their world views, becoming aware of the discipline-specific
nature of writing, and negotiating relationships with learners.

While self-reflection occurred throughout the semester, consultants looked inward
particularly during the first weeks. The first theory assignment they completed (documented in
3.1) was on three conflicting pieces: Brooks, Corbett, and Fitzgerald. Encountering these
readings at the onset of the semester introduced consultants to the complexity and “grayness” of
the lab and granted permission to question everything. On the heels of the three pieces came
Bruffe (3.2), who proposes that knowledge is subjective and the Bedford chapters (3.3), which
examine the non-linear, personal nature of the writing process. The fact that consultants viewed
these readings through a critical lens is apparent with comments such as, “I see both sides of the
argument,” and “The reasoning behind collaborative tutoring appeals to me.” Consultants
considered the readings closely, almost noncommittally, and stayed open to new ideas. Perhaps
the most poignant expression of this patient, questioning alignment was put forth by an honest
student who said of Bruffee, “Despite the fact that I was thoroughly confused for a majority of
the reading, I still thoroughly enjoyed trying to decipher its meaning.” Reminiscent of both
Vygotsky (187-188) and Gee (155), this student aimed to build upon his existing knowledge,
welcoming and incorporating new language in order to do so. This attitude was widespread in the
class; in the midst of self-doubt, consultants turned to each other. This type of stance, during the
opening weeks of the semester, positioned new consultants for success.
The ability to read and think critically, suspend judgment until thoroughly exploring available information, and welcome the challenge of unfamiliar discourse defines a successful college student. While the arrangement of readings undoubtedly facilitated this attitude, more important was the fact that students fed off each other’s discussion in class. Cooperation between classmates while reaching for new possibilities aided each student in setting a high personal bar while remaining open to a larger depth and breadth of reflection. They began to understand that the social aspect of learning informed the way they processed and comprehended material (Bruffee 209).

Self-reflection continued as the class moved into the study of diversity and inclusivity. Already in the mindset of questioning, consultants felt comfortable expressing confusion, doubt, and concern. Abounding were comments such as, “This reading deeply impacted my understanding of what is meant by the phrase ‘white privilege’ because I was never able to identify it before.” This quote from the Apfelbaum response (3.4.3) clearly depicts a student who understands her gap in understanding and is actively pursuing answers. She acknowledges her lack of understanding and turns it into an opportunity for growth. Behind the desire for growth lay a concern for fellow students, as evidenced with this quote: “People are coming to us as tutors because they trust that we can help. If we do or say something to break that trust, we could have really damaging effects on how they view the writing lab, the library, or even UWSP.” Consultants looked inward not only to accumulate more knowledge, but to own responsibility for collaborating with learners.

Closely-related to the desire to communicate and collaborate with diverse students was the desire to more thoroughly understand disparate world views. While prospective consultants were recommended by faculty who characterize them as inquisitive and compassionate,
consultants often felt they lacked worldly knowledge and hungered for more. They quickly assimilated ideas from the diversity readings as indicated in this comment on McIntosh (3.4.3): “The problem is that we typically assign people to our culture, or white culture.” Written by a white student, this quote shows an expanding mindset—a recognition that the dominant culture is not a default culture. Students also hungered to more thoroughly understand cultures and needs from learners visiting or immigrating to the U.S., as laid out in the ELL readings by Matsuda et al. (3.5). Comments such as, “I don’t think anyone should have to give up their identity to conform to cultural norms” (3.5.3) drive home the genuine interest consultants had in identifying with diverse students.

Expanding world perspective included looking closer to home. The work of Rose (3.10) spurred consultants to examine the challenges of underprepared students. While nobody in class identified as having ever been an underprepared student, they recognized the fact that the student body at UWSP is made up of 50% first generation students, a population that does not necessarily determine under-preparedness but does have a correlation. Sentiments included the need to help students to “see the actual effect [of academics] on their lives” and “feel comfortable in the writing lab” (3.10.1). Inviting learners to enjoy a sense of community prevailed as the most powerful tool for facilitating success. Consultants expressed a belief that whatever world views they subscribed to, they shared corners of their beliefs and aspirations with others.

Discussions of the discipline-specific nature of writing opened conversation to a wide variety of issues, from grammar and structure to social identity. Words consultants used to characterize strong college writing included “interesting,” “narrow,” “specific,” and “well-researched” (3.9.2). They drew parallels between content and structure: “The way in which the
[scholarly] articles relate should structure and provide exploration of the claim.” The idea of writing being “narrow” while at the same time “providing exploration of a claim” evokes Shaughnessy’s assertion that well-prepared writers work with “larger units of discourse” (233) and “stay with each thought” (230). Becoming proficient in a discipline, then, involves the ability to expand ideas and follow them through to logical conclusions. Consultants recognized the importance of discussing the fleshing out of ideas with learners as a way of mentoring.

A common strategy consultants suggested for working with learners who have not yet adjusted to their disciplines is modeling. When discussing strategies for working with students in English courses, a consultant writes, “When a learner is writing for an English course, we could demonstrate a sentence that asserts an opinion without using personal pronouns. It seems that people learn and later utilize writing techniques by imitating a standard model” (3.11.1). Consultants from majors other than English offered strategies specific to their own fields. The takeaway from statements such as these is multifaceted: consultants were able to identify discipline-specific features of writing; they knew how to change generally-written sentences to precisely-written sentences fitting the area of study; they understood that students could be taught disciplinary secrets explicitly; they also understood that modeling structure in this way was not an act of “fixing” a paper, but an invitation to what Gee would call a community of practice (12). Modeling a sentence seems at first like a simple concept, but the path practicum consultants took to arrive at the proper way of modeling a sentence brought them through not simply writing mechanics, but recognition of college-level discourse (Williams and McEnerney; Gee; Shaughnessy), the application of critical, disciplinary thinking to writing (Shaughnessy 230; Colomb 3), and the idea that what is seen as “good” writing depends upon context (Street; Gee). Consultants came to understand that peer-to-peer writing tutoring transcends the text on
Quality work with writers encompasses not only the writing itself, but the person behind the writing and the context within which the writer is operating.

Negotiating a relationship with the writer can transform a peer tutorial from a “skill drill” to an opportunity for intellectual growth. The habit of acknowledging writers as complex people is, undoubtedly, the most important result of the practicum experience. Before addressing a single word on a page, consultants must make an effort to understand something about the person behind the writing—his or her motivations, strengths, and obstacles. Both parties need to also grasp the situation at hand, such as the nature of the assignment, guidelines set forth by the instructor, deadlines, etc. A relationship which takes into account a variety of factors must be negotiated in order to move forward, and the fall 2013 practicum accepted the task enthusiastically.

Assessing the situation at hand not only improves results, but it builds trust between consultant and learner. A hasty look at a paper without gathering background information can hinder learners from voicing opinions and lessen the effects of sessions. As one consultant states, “Students are adapting to every professor, class, and exam in order to meet their writing goals in the classroom” (5.8.1). Taking time to understand the factors contributing to a learner’s overall situation strengthens the personal connection and, therefore, enhances the learner’s end results. Consultants raised this idea of understanding learners’ situations to a higher level, as illustrated in the following comment: “Every student deals with some type of adversity, whether it is home life, a language barrier, mental health issues, a learning disability, low self-esteem, or any number of other problems. Rose reminded me that the first step in conducting a successful tutoring session is to find out where the learner is at academically, but also emotionally” (5.9.1).
Consultants delved into difficult scenarios, embracing the opportunity to engage learners by available means.

In order to engage learners earnestly and productively, consultants focused on commonalities. As one consultant writes, “The real life situations addressed by Rose relate directly to the work consultants do in the writing lab” (5.9.1). Again, Rose influenced consultants’ abilities to identify with learners. In line with Gee’s description of primary and secondary Discourses (173-174), consultants related to learners as peers in the university, even if their personal backgrounds were different. The following example positions the consultant as a member of the learner’s community: “I think we should speak to a learner the same way we talk to a classmate. Doing so acknowledges the fact that we are peers but perhaps not here as best friends” (3.11.1). Student-to-student identification became this consultant’s “in” with learners—a shared secondary Discourse. The class in general found value in cultivating meaningful connections with learners.

In order to ensure continued success with tutor-learner relationships, practicum students remained aware of their limitations. Recognizing and working within limitations reinforces the dialogic nature of peer-to-peer learning and clearly defines the role of the Writing Lab for both students and faculty in the university. Learners identify readily with consultants who navigate the learning process side by side with them (Tudge 160; Harris 380), and faculty recognize that their assignments and guidelines will be present in the tutorial session (North 52). Consultants find relief in knowing they are not expected to be experts. One consultant explains that she realizes “it is not [her] job to know all the disciplines” but to have “recognition of the differences between disciplines” (5.1.1). As a fellow student, her job is to offer incremental bits of information and strategy to learners. In line with Vygotsky, Harris, Gee, and Colomb, the most
successful tutoring session is one in which the consultant helps the learner to reach just a little further and incorporate a piece at a time. Another consultant cautions against neglecting the peer-to-peer relationship, writing, “Changing our dialect purposely to make us sound like ‘wannabe’ professors goes beyond our role” (3.11.1). This comment is significant in that it show the students in the practicum understood the type of service they offered learners. Peer consultants are not teachers, but mentors. The lab does not exist to compete with the classroom, nor does it exist to merely echo professorial voices. The purpose of the lab, and the students working within, is to offer support, guidance, and alternate paths toward intellectual growth.

An abundance of evidence exists to support the fact that students in the fall 2013 practicum learned and applied theory in a cognizant manner. Their self-aware, evolving language throughout the semester is testament to their development as professionals. Beyond growing into a job, they became a cohort, a community of peers with a common language and interrelated sets of goals. This study has focused on specific instances of student experience that signified growth or new cognition, but many of the transformations they went through cannot be measured. The shift from being self-sufficient students, pursuing degrees as individuals to becoming part of a learning and teaching cohort whom students depended upon changed the tenor of their interactions. Self-reflection and shared experience brought them closer as classmates and colleagues. A sense of security and camaraderie from the classroom filtered through the rest of the Writing Lab, affecting fellow students, learners and consultants alike. The forces behind the synergy I observed over the course of the practicum remain, at least partially, shrouded. While finding ways to measure success is useful, it can also be useful to refrain from explaining the inexplicable.
Notes

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i In *The Psychology of Literacy*, Scribner and Cole report on their study of over 1,000 people in West Africa and their literate practices. The study serves to challenge the popular notion that Western literacy practices are superior and more developed than other types. Societal and cultural factors are seen as the force behind the shaping of literacy, contextualizing what it means to be literate.

ii In *Ways With Words: Language, Life, and Work In Communities and Classrooms*, Shirley Brice Heath studies two working-class communities, Trackton and Roadville. She studies ethnicity and economics in order to determine how communities affect literacy. She found that different types of communities had different needs and styles when it came to literacy and education.

iii The practicum consultants explore the challenges of the LGBTQ community. Safe Zone training is offered for both students and faculty and staff at UWSP, and the training is built into the curriculum of the Education 370/570. The training focuses on language and awareness, allowing students to ask questions and discuss in a safe and positive environment. Members of the Gender-Sexuality Alliance, the campus’s student organization for LGBTQ issues, facilitate the Safe Zone, adding additional voices to student experience. At the end of the training, students receive a laminated card signifying that they are allies. This palpable affirmation of inclusivity crystalizes the holistic, socially-aware approach to collaborative learning in consultants’ minds as they move ahead with the program.

iv The discussion of learning differences presents an opportunity to add additional voices. In the fall of 2013, Amanda Meidl Grundman, senior staff member in the TLC, visited as a guest speaker to present on students with learning differences. While students with LD are often overlooked in the conversation of diversity, Amanda’s presentation focused on students with Asperger’s Syndrome, students with traumatic brain injuries, and students with ADHD. She offered scenarios for one-on-one work with these special populations and the opportunity for further discussion between peers. Consultants are not expected to become experts in working with students with LD. Rather, they are to become aware of the signs that a student may be facing challenges and alert the senior staff. Ultimately, consultants should develop an awareness that a learning difference does not mark deficiency, but necessitates a different and sometimes creative approach.

v Practicum consultants are also given the opportunity to discuss ELL sessions with experienced consultants during an in-class panel discussion. Hearing about the struggles and growth of fellow writing lab employees serves to soothe nerves. Students in Education 370/570 benefit from the voices of others in their community of practice.
Appendix A

Education 370/570W Learning Objectives

- Participants will acquire a deep understanding of the various ways that students make meaning through language (reading, writing, speaking) as well as the social and cultural influences that impact their learning.
- Participants will be able to synthesize related theoretical perspectives and translate theory to practice.
- Participants will understand the importance of collaborative learning.
- Participants will become culturally competent and apply principles of Inclusive Excellence.
- Participants will be able to meet all of the recordkeeping requirements necessary to work in the UWSP Writing Lab and to serve as teaching assistants for Independent Writing (English 157, 257, and 357).
Appendix B

Writing in Your Major: Disciplinary Tips from the Fall 2013 Practicum Class

Philosophy

- Don’t be afraid to use “I”
- Be aware of conventions of the sub-disciplines from which you are borrowing
- Give the reader a clear structure to offset complex content
- Be flexible

Biology

- Keep language to a minimum. Writing should be quantitative
- Use sections instead of transitions
- Use passive, past-tense
- Account for all materials and methods. Include all data
- Avoid repetition
- Use your lab notebook
- Include charts, diagrams, and graphs

Natural Resources

- This discipline has conventions similar to those of biology, only the writing is more often based on fieldwork rather than lab work
- Include the following sections: abstract, background, methods, data, discussion, conclusion, and references

English (Literary Analysis)

- Thesis statement is not a summary of the paper, but a stand-alone argument
- Assume the audience has read the text
- Use quotes to illustrate themes, characters, author, context, and content
- Use present tense, active voice
- Final paragraph should bring material to a new level—“take away” point
- Discover what the literature means on a large, societal scale
- Conclusions are qualitative—based on an individual writer’s ability to decipher text through lenses and form new perspectives
- Research serves to construct positions and new interpretations
Social Sciences

- Social science includes a broad range of writing. In general, the essay must demonstrate the student’s knowledge in an efficient manner.
- Claims need to be backed up with data or expert opinion, depending on the type of writing being done
- Primary sources are highly valued, but often unavailable

History (genre within social sciences)

- Be aware of biases in research. Do not incorporate bias into your own work
- Argue in a new way
- Cite factual evidence from credible sources while maintaining a narrative quality
- Use a serious tone, but remember to tell a story
- Specificity is important: dates, names, events, and places

Interior Architecture

- Be descriptive yet concise
- Make the writing as visual as possible
- Writing must appeal to a broad audience
- Clients should easily understand the writing and feel good about it

Web Design and Media Development (WDMD)

- Writing usually accompanies a project and should be as straightforward as possible
- Answer questions in a clear, detailed manner
- Writing is usually not based upon research, but the details of the project. However, you should include an explanation of where your ideas came from

International Studies

- This major encompasses a number of discourses. Writing conventions and thinking styles must be adapted accordingly
- A large theme spanning these disciplines is the need to recognize, address, and correct ethnocentric thoughts and feelings
- Appropriate terms must be learned and used

Communicative Disorders

- Our Com D department emphasizes professional writing
- The Writing Lab has been cited as an important resource for Com D students
- New initiatives in improving writing are currently evolving in the department, and the Writing Lab will have a role to play
Appendix C

Exploring Alien Territory

This assignment will send you into uncharted waters between Gee and Colomb.

The purpose of the assignment is to allow you to be an outside observer in a course within a major that is foreign to you. Because this assignment will take at least a portion of your class time, class will not meet on Tuesday, November 8th.

1) Choose the time that the activity fits best in your schedule.

2) Choose your alien experience: either refer to the time table, or ask a friend to attend class with him/her.

3) Do not choose a GDR if possible.

4) Secure the instructor’s permission to attend the course (permission explanation at the bottom of this sheet).

5) If you would prefer, ask Mo to e-mail the request to the instructor in your chosen course.

6) Bring in the tools of an anthropologist: curiosity, powers of observation, and lots of paper for notes, sketches, quotes.

7) Remember that you are NOT evaluating the professor, but rather observing the language, interaction (faculty student/student student), atmosphere, assumed background knowledge – notice everything.

8) Bring your field notes to class on Thursday 10 November for a lively discussion.
Works Cited


