

GROUPIES AND SINGLETONS: STUDENT PREFERENCES IN CLASSROOM-BASED WRITING CONSULTING

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At Grand Valley State University, the writing center offers its services in two ways: both in the actual center and in the entry-level writing classrooms themselves.¹ In the writing center, students have the opportunity to meet with writing tutors in an academic environment outside of the classroom. Some students come because their professors have requested that they workshop a paper or have offered special credit to those who make use of the writing center. Most students, however, come voluntarily, either for a weekly one-hour tutorial with a specific consultant or for a brief session with a consultant during the time designated for “walk-in” appointments. Both types of tutorials offered in the writing center are open to all students, regardless of the type of class they are taking.

Within the classroom, writing consultants’ time is split between one-on-one consultations and group tutorials. Once each week, consultants work with students in the computer lab while they are engaged in the writing process. During the other class session, consultants meet with small groups of students to discuss their writing and coordinate peer response groups. As a result of the class structure, some writing students have the chance to work on their papers in both environments.

For me and other consultants, working with first-year writing students both in groups and on an individual basis during class time can often feel like two completely different tasks; the group dynamic varies greatly, thus altering the manner in which students and consultants approach the writing session. A student may react one way to response given by the consultant during a group session, then react in another way to similar response given by the same consultant during an individual meeting. While certain students seem to respond more positively to group meetings, where the advice of the consultant is tempered by discussion and opinions of a group of fellow classmates, other students prefer to work privately with a consultant and may in fact be quieter and less inclined to participate during a group tutorial.

As a writing consultant who works with students in both settings, I wanted to explore how students’ preferences for individual or group tutoring might affect their experiences with writing consultants. Since student participation is an important component of any successful writing tutorial, I wondered to what degree student perceptions of group and individual meetings might alter the usefulness of those sessions. I reasoned that the difference in the nature of group and individual settings might also affect the type of response offered, whether content, focus, organization,

or mechanics. More specifically, I wanted to discover if students felt that group sessions handled a certain kind of response more effectively than an individual tutorial. Interestingly, there is little research on this topic.

In this article, I discuss the findings of my research into these significant questions.² The responses I received demonstrate that students' experiences with writing consultants correlate directly with their perceptions of both the manner in which the tutorial is conducted and the possible success of that writing session. Thus, there was little agreement as to which setting focused more successfully on which type of response or which setting was more dependent on consultants' questions. Each student's preference, borne out of previous experience, consistently paralleled his or her belief in the make-up of writing tutorials. In short, the results from the surveys and interviews seemed to indicate that both in-class programs offered meaningful writing support.

Background

In GVSU's required, entry-level writing course, Writing 150, consultant visits are arranged according to each professor's preference. Writing consultants can take part in small group meetings during classroom time, assist students during the class's period in the computer lab, or both. The small group sessions, though chosen by the professor, are mandatory for students. Generally meeting for an hour each week, these group meetings vary according to paper topics and the individuals forming the group, but they often involve brainstorming; reading and discussing drafts for content, structure, and mechanical issues; or discussing citation guidelines or course assignments.

Because the students and consultant meet regularly and each session is discussion-based, these group tutorials allow for the development of peer relationships. Although her focus is on individual writing tutorials, Muriel Harris addresses the importance of peer and consultant interaction with writing students as a means of promoting writing-based discussion in an environment free from the higher authority of the professor, claiming that "writers both need and want discussion that engages them actively with their ideas through talk and permits them to stay in control" (31). These weekly group meetings in Writing 150, then, create a setting where students, currently sharing a similar writing experience in the classroom, can wield control over the discussion and formulate responses integral to the writing process. At the same time, they have the guidance and advice of the consultant who "inhabits a world somewhere between student and teacher" (28). Indeed, as a group tutorial is constructed around the conversation of its members, students retain a great degree of control over the meeting; the personality of the group as a whole often determines the manner in which the sessions are run and can influence the students' and the consultant's experience and comfort level. Shyer students, for instance, can open up more to discussions and become more willing to share their papers as the members of the group begin to develop a relationship and the group as a whole begins "to talk more freely and more honestly because they are not in the confines of a teacher/student relationship" (28).

Ultimately, this group dynamic plays a critical role in the writing tutorial, causing some students' experiences in writing groups to differ widely from one-on-one conferences.

The consultants' time in the computer lab, on the other hand, is generally spent in impromptu one-on-one tutorials and, perhaps more often, in simply answering students' questions and talking with them about various aspects of their papers and assignments. While some students seek out help in the lab on a voluntary basis, consultants more frequently have to approach many students to offer help because students do not always initiate conversations. Nonetheless, consultants' presence in the lab allows them to aid students during the actual composing process and, due to the informal nature of the meeting, engage in open and personal interaction with the students. It is this flexibility of interaction that Harris argues "permits a close look at the individual student" (29). Harris views this from within the confines of the writing center itself, but the consultants' time in the computer lab only serves to further expand the possibility for this type of interaction: students and consultants are able to meet much more frequently and on a regular basis and in the immediacy of writing for class. Moreover, students who might not be inclined to go to the writing center are given the chance to work with a consultant on an individual basis and, as with the group meetings, develop a relationship with that consultant.

The time with the consultants in computer labs and in group meetings also supports Kenneth Bruffee's concept in "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind'" of the relationship between reflective thought as a part of writing and social conversation. Bruffee argues that this writing-oriented peer conversation, which is "emotionally involved, intellectually and substantively focused, and personally interested," ought to be employed at "as many points in the writing process as possible" (91). Thus, both group and individual conferences with the writing consultants in the classroom allow students to engage frequently in the kind of conversation to which Bruffee refers. Clearly, tutorials in the classroom and labs offer the same type of conversation Bruffee advocates is an integral part of work in the writing center; the consultants' presence in the classroom increases the frequency and alters the nature of the interaction. The labs, especially, allow the consultants to draw students into conversations about their writing while they are in the process of composing, thus blending reflective thought and conversation.

Methodology

Because the Writing 150 students who took part in this study worked with consultants in small groups during their class time and also met with consultants during their time in the computer lab, they experienced both environments. Each of the three Writing 150 classes I surveyed consisted of approximately 28 students; five consultants worked with groups of approximately five students. There were also two consultants during the lab time each week. For two of the classes I researched, the two consultants present in the lab were also group leaders in the same class. My survey focused on students' experiences working with consultants in their classrooms. The survey not only addressed each student's preference but also sought information on their most

successful writing tutorial: the setting, the focus of the response, and the effect of the setting on the session. Additionally, the survey inquired about the type of help offered most often in individual and group sessions, the environment in which the student felt more comfortable reading his or her paper and most actively participated, and in which setting the consultants asked more questions. Ultimately, seventy Writing 150 students completed the survey (See Appendix A for a copy of the questionnaire).

I also conducted follow-up interviews with five students to obtain more in-depth answers to their survey questions.³ Finally, my observations, coupled with my own experience working with students both in groups and in individual tutorials, provided a foundation for this research.

Results and Analysis

Significantly, 45% of the students in the survey specified that they found both environments—group and one-on-one consultation—to be equally helpful. Still, 58% indicated that they preferred to work in consultant-led groups and 41% stated that they would rather work with the consultant individually. Citing their most successful or influential session with a writing consultant, the students' responses correspond, almost exactly, with their preferences: for 56% that session took place in a group setting and for 44% that session took place working individually with the consultant. In fact, 75% of the students who prefer to work in groups indicated that their most successful writing session took place in a group; 71% of the students who prefer to work individually likewise indicated that their most successful writing session took place in a one-on-one tutorial. In addition, 76% of the students felt that the setting influenced the success of the experience.

Survey results also highlighted students' perceptions of the type of feedback offered in both individual tutorials and groups. Referencing their most successful experience with a writing consultant, whether in a group or individual setting, 34% of the students responded that the session focused on content, while 65% indicated that the session centered on organization and focus, and only 1% answered that it focused on grammar and mechanics. Interestingly, both the group and individual sessions maintain these same percentages: 32% of the most successful group session focused on content, while 67% focused on organization and only 5% focused on mechanics, and 31% of the most successful individual tutorials focused on content, while 68% focused on organization. That the results for the type of response offered in the most successful sessions in both group and individual settings so closely parallel the general results for the type of response offered in successful writing tutorials implies that, for this group of students, both group and individual tutorials offer substantive feedback.

Likewise, in the interviews, there was no agreement on which environment better concentrated on which type of feedback, but rather, as with the surveys, all students seemed to find that their preferred setting best offered the type of help they most needed. One student, Jane, for example, who prefers to work individually, expressed that one-on-one tutorials frequently focused on organization, the issue with which she felt she most often needed help.⁴ Conversely, Jennifer,

another student who is partial to working alone with the consultant, asserted that individual sessions better concentrate on the area of content, but that this was by her choice.

The same pattern held true for the students who prefer to work in groups. These students indicated that the group setting allowed them to get feedback and ideas, not just from the consultant, but from their peers as well, which they found particularly helpful. One student argued that the group setting is better because it “seems to generate more ideas [and] it’s easier for a group of kids to talk together with the consultant keeping them on topic and giving them questions so they have more to talk about.” This belief was echoed by many other students, who similarly commented that they felt the “group setting is more successful because everyone views the writing from a different perspective,” and they liked the “multiple ideas from diverse students.”

The multiplicity of perspectives and ideas present in the group was acknowledged in the survey by the students who preferred to work individually, but they all agreed that working with the consultant individually helped them to avoid the distractions and the feelings of being overwhelmed with the responses they found in many of their group meetings. These students repeatedly stated that they felt the individual sessions allowed them to stay focused on the details of their essay; in fact, the words “focus,” “specific details,” and “personal” were echoed in the statements of the students who preferred to work individually. One student remarked that “with the individual session I got feedback on just my paper and was able to ask more specific questions on my paper.”

The interviews also echoed the comments written on the surveys about the nature of the environment created by group and individual meetings. The students interviewed consistently maintained that the group meetings often felt more informal while the individual tutorials were more formal and focused more closely on the paper itself. The students who prefer working individually liked the closer focus, frequently mentioning that this close attention prevented them from feeling distracted. Jennifer, for example, felt that in an individual tutorial she “got more work done because [she] actually did the work instead of talking with [her] friends . . . [she] got more attention.” Jennifer, as well as Jane, also claimed to prefer the individualized attention on the specific style of writing and personal challenges.

Likewise, the students who prefer group sessions stated that they enjoyed the more informal environment because they found it more comfortable. Anne, for example, expressed that these meetings are “not always by the book, [they are] more informal.” Anne and the other interviewed students emphasized that in groups the attention and focus is more broadly based; they felt that the group meetings tended to be more discussion oriented, with several peers all participating and sharing the attention, rather than focused on any single person. The students who prefer groups noted that they appreciated receiving many different points of view and benefited from the sense of shared experience that permeated the group sessions. One student, Lindsay, stated that the relationships built in the small groups helped her to share her paper; she claimed that it helped if those around her

knew her personally and already had an understanding of what she was trying to say so that they could offer advice for how to explain her ideas to others.

Another important finding is that 58% of the students most actively participate in the setting of their preference. It is reasonable to conclude that the willingness of the student to participate affects not only the success of the writing tutorial but also the content on which that session focuses. It is probable that a session with a consultant, in either setting, will more likely focus on the type of help the students themselves feel they need the most if those students actively participate in the meeting. Harris cites the importance of this active participation on the part of the student and the focused attention on the part of the consultant in her assertion that during writing tutorials, “the conversation is free to roam in whatever direction the student and tutor see as useful” (29).

Interestingly, while 41% of the students who took the survey claimed to prefer to work with the writing consultant on an individual basis, most do not frequently seek out the consultant in the writing labs; 45% of all students admitted that they almost never asked for help and 50% only do so sporadically. Nonetheless, according to these students’ written comments, the participation of the writing consultant in the class and lab is most beneficial to them.

Additionally, most of the students surveyed indicated that they felt that the consultant asked more questions in the setting of their preference. 82% of the students who preferred to work individually with the consultant felt that consultants also asked more questions in an individual setting. Similarly, 67% of the students who prefer to work in groups feel that consultants asked more questions in a group setting.

However, all the students interviewed agreed that consultants asked more questions during an individual tutorial. Significantly, a few students remarked that consultants asked a great many questions in all situations but that they felt that these questions were more noticeable during an individual meeting. A number of the students who would rather work in groups stressed that the questions asked during individual tutorials were often not as helpful for them because they were so busy trying to find the “right” answer that they could not pay close attention to the discussion of their paper. Here, Lindsay admitted that when alone with the consultant she found that “if they ask [her] questions, [she’s] just going to try and come up with something that will make [her] sound smart or something, and [she’s] not even trying to think at all.” Adam, likewise, when asked how he felt about consultants’ questions in an individual tutorial, responded, “sometimes, it’s like, I’m not ready to go that far right now.” Students like Lindsay and Adam preferred the questions be aimed at prompting group discussion rather than be directed to any individual. The students who favor individual tutorials, on the other hand, stated that the questions helped them to think about the specifics of their own paper. Indeed, Jane claimed that the consultants “really ask you for your ideas . . . [They] help [me] get ideas by the question that they ask.”

Implications

Based upon the results of the survey and the follow-up interviews, it appears that neither the group sessions nor the individual sessions offer any type of response or focus better than the other, but that students consistently find the kind of help they feel they need most—whether content, organization, or focus—in the setting they prefer. Since the students who participated in this study indicated that they often do not initiate writing tutorials themselves but rather rely on consultants approaching them first, the incorporation of writing center services within the classroom itself is a necessary step to expand on the number of students who benefit from working with writing consultants. These findings provide clear evidence that classroom-based writing tutoring can contribute to the development of students' writing and revising abilities. As a result, writing center directors, writing program administrators, and writing faculty should consider using both kinds of in-class tutoring in writing classes and other classes in which writing takes place.

My research has other noteworthy implications. While the classes I researched used the same consultants in weekly groups in the classroom, other arrangements might be equally helpful and allow for a greater variety of environments in which students and writing consultants could work together. In some classes, for example, consultants and group members could rotate weekly so that students get the chance to work with different peers. In other classes, consultants could be available for one-on-one consultations outside of the group at certain times. Similarly, during lab time, students' meetings with writing consultants could be incredibly casual and brief or more formalized; consultants may even have the opportunity to form a small, impromptu group within the writing lab according to the immediate situation. Experimenting with different formats could provide students the opportunity to experience several different kinds of writing tutorials to find which type of session works best for them and to explore different ways of approaching the writing process with consultants and their peers.

Another option, of course, would be to incorporate group tutorials into writing centers. My research shows that for some students, group sessions are more helpful than individual conferencing. While adding group tutorials to writing center practices would only benefit those students inclined to actively seek help with their writing, it would, nonetheless, provide students not enrolled in a writing class with the opportunity to discuss their work with their peers in an academic environment. Moreover, at the times when there are more students requesting help in the center than the present consultants can handle, the use of group sessions might be a way to allow as many students as possible to receive help with their writing.

While consultants cannot necessarily change students' preferences for group or individual tutorials, consultants can listen to students' needs and partialities and fit the tutorial to address those factors. When working in a group setting, writing consultants can make a point of mentioning the availability of the writing center so that students who prefer to work alone with a writing consultant may seek out individual help on their own. Likewise, in one-on-one tutorials, consultants should keep in mind one of the main advantages of peer groups that the writing students

in this study consistently mentioned: the presence of diverse ideas and responses. In this situation, consultants can suggest that students either discuss their papers with friends and peers or seek out the help of another writing consultant in order to gain a number of different perspectives. Additionally, the student and consultant could work together to imagine ways in which other readers (their grandparents, their high school teacher, their favorite pop star) might view the writing so that, even when working individually, that student is able to benefit from multiple perspectives which are present in the group setting.

Furthermore, while Harris asserts that the interaction between consultants and students creates an environment free from “penalties for asking what [students] perceive as ‘dumb’ questions (the penalty being that the teacher will find out how little they know or how inept they are in formulating their questions)” (28), for some students, this anxiety over questions and answers is not completely dispelled during a conference with a consultant. Consultants should be aware of the comfort level of the students with whom they are working. Especially in an individual setting, it may be helpful for consultants to pay attention to students’ reactions to questions and alter their approach accordingly. If a particular student seems to be struggling to come up with answers, it might be useful to say that the purpose of the question is to think about their paper topic or writing process. Again, if the questions do not seem to be helping a student, perhaps the concept brought up by the question could be rephrased into a statement or example.

While the data regarding the number of questions consultants ask in group and individual sessions is inconclusive, it would appear, based upon the survey at least, that consultants do not usually ask more questions individually than they do in group meetings. Perhaps it is not a matter of quantity but of prominence. Anne, in her interview, for instance, claimed that consultants ask many questions all the time, but “when they have more students to worry about, [the questions] are more like broad, a discussion.” Overall, student interviews stressed the more informal and discussion-based nature of group meetings and also indicated that discussion topics and questions are generally aimed at the group as a whole rather than focused on an individual’s essay. With this in mind, questions in the group setting may tend to be more rhetorical, thus causing the questions to seem fewer and less prominent because they do not necessarily require the individual student to formulate an answer. Perhaps in both settings a better way for consultants to handle questions would be to first assure students that they do not need to find a “correct” answer, or indeed any answer at all, and that all questions are merely attempts to promote thoughtful discussion.

Conclusion: Preferences and Perceptions

That student preferences and perceptions are not easily categorized or understood appears quite obvious and simplistic. Nonetheless, the students’ responses in this study suggest that they have been influenced by their previous experiences with writing consultants, and that, respectively, this history has shaped their perception of the content and helpfulness of group and individual

tutorials. For example, 80% of the students who prefer to work in groups and whose most successful session focused on content also believe that groups generally offer more help with content. Likewise, 96% of the students who prefer to work in groups and whose most successful session focused on organization also believe that groups offer more help with organization and focus. The results among students who prefer to work with the consultant individually follows suit: 78% of those whose most successful session focused on content likewise indicate that they believe that individual sessions generally offer more help on content, and 74% of those whose most successful session focused on organization feel that individual sessions generally offer more organization and focus.

It might even be deduced that these preconceptions about time with consultants influence students' willingness to participate in tutorials, which further reinforces their original opinions. This cycle of reinforcement, between experience, preference, and participation, only emphasizes for writing center administrators and scholars the importance of offering a range of approaches to writing tutorials. Constant exposure to different kinds of consultation methods might compel students to reevaluate their perceptions. Ultimately, when there are diverse options available to students for engaging with writing consultants, there is a greater chance that students will discover new ways of looking at their writing and their writing process(es).

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Notes

¹ In-class peer tutoring is an emerging practice in composition studies. For three interesting discussions of this practice, see Soliday; Soven ("Curriculum-Based Peer Tutoring Programs"; "Curriculum-Based Peer Tutors and WAC").

² I received permission to conduct this research from the Human Research Review Committee at GVSU. All participants gave informed consent.

³ By coincidence rather than design, four of the five interviewees were female. This may have influenced the results of the interview in respect to the fact that, as volunteers, these particular students may have been more likely than their peers to feel comfortable working with a consultant and more willing to discuss their writing experience.

⁴ All names have been changed in order to protect the identity of the students I interviewed.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

1. Do you prefer to work with the consultant:
 - a) in the group session
 - b) individually
2. Based on the papers you have written and discussed thus far, which has been most helpful:
 - a) working in the group
 - b) working individually with the consultant
 - c) both equally
3. Think back to your most successful writing session with a consultant or suggestion from a consultant that has most influenced your writing. Did this occur in:
 - a) group session
 - b) one-on-one with the consultant
4. Thinking back to your most successful or influential writing session with a consultant, what did the feedback/discussion focus on?
 - a) content
 - b) focus/organization
 - c) grammar and language
5. Thinking back to your most successful or influential writing session, do you think the success of the session was influenced by the setting (group or individual)? Explain.
6. How often do you seek out one-on-one help in the lab?
 - a) every class
 - b) sporadically
 - c) almost never
7. Do you feel more comfortable discussing your paper:
 - a) in the group
 - b) individually
8. In your group, which do you receive more help on:
 - a) content
 - b) organization/focus
 - c) language/grammar
9. In the lab, which do you receive more help on:
 - a) content
 - b) organization/focus
 - c) language/grammar
10. Where do you find it easier to actively participate:
 - a) the group
 - b) with the consultant individually
 - c) no difference
11. Do you ever feel overwhelmed with response:
 - a) in the group
 - b) with the consultant alone
 - c) both
 - d) neither
12. Are you asked more questions by the consultant:
 - a) in the group
 - b) individually