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Joint Consultations: Strategies for Integrating Two Consultants into a Writing Center Session by Jennifer Torreano

In the writing center, it is common practice to see a consultant pulled into an ongoing session to answer a question or give an additional perspective to the student. This happens in a variety of scenarios, whether it is a quick citation inquiry, a clarification of an assignment sheet, or an opinion on the structure of a draft. Because these joint consultations, where two consultants work with a single student simultaneously, are happening so frequently, writing centers should find a way to do them well.

At Grand Valley State University, the proposal of a new and interesting project gave us a reason to consider more seriously the role joint consultations play in our work. The university is building the Mary Idema Pew Library Learning and Information Commons, which will include an area where students can work with someone from the writing center, the speech center, or the library. This “Knowledge Market” will be staffed entirely by student workers from these units. The librarians and writing consultants suspect that we will end up working with students together. In the rest of this article, I will explore the potential of sessions involving two writing consultants or a writing and library consultant.

The Value of Joint Consultations in the Writing Center
I see vast potential in joint consultations. The excitement that happens in a consultation with an enthusiastic consultant during an exchange of ideas can be very powerful. Imagine this magnified by two: a student and two consultants all building ideas, more ideas coming with every idea suggested. This will likely ignite enthusiasm in the student, which may increase her excitement and her confidence in not only this particular writing assignment, but her writing ability. Together, two consultants can model successful habits for the student--such as collaborative conversation--and reinforce them with positive connotations, so the next time she has an assignment, she can hopefully associate it with more positive feelings. She will see the consultants interacting and, if the session goes well, witness the excitement and productivity that can occur when people collaborate in conversation. This could empower her to be more collaborative on her own, to have conversations with other people about their writing and learning outside of the writing center.

Strategies for Making Joint Consultations Effective
First, in order to do joint consultations without overwhelming students, writing consultants must become skilled at recognizing which students will see the joint consultation as overwhelming and which will view it as an opportunity to see their drafts from a variety of perspectives. For example, ESL or other students who are not confident with their writing might feel intimidated by the two "experts" sitting at the table with them, despite the efforts of both consultants to empower the student. With these students, a joint consultation may be overwhelming, and one-on-one consultations would likely be more effective.

Another suggestion is to be sure that, even if a second consultant is pulled into a session to answer a simple citation question, the consultant sits down without fear of interrupting the
session. When a consultant remains standing, it throws off the atmosphere of the consultation because she appears hurried and not invested. If the consultant sits down, she is obviously giving the student her full attention.

A third strategy is for consultants to focus on explaining the “why and how” behind their criticism and praise so that students come away learning the rhetorical reasons for revision suggestions, rather than simply making changes because someone told them to. Oftentimes, students are offended by criticism because of the deeply personal nature of writing; however, if consultants can explain why things do and do not work, they can position themselves as friendly allies instead of editors. Strategies such as these are essential when working in joint consultations. If writing consultants do not think carefully about how they discuss criticism with students, the students feel barraged from both sides. Even minor criticisms can embarrass students, discomfort which is magnified by the presence of a third person in the session. Consultants must work with enthusiasm, praising the great ideas of students wherever they can find them and explaining why and how pieces of their drafts might be changed because it is essential they see us as on their side. This topic must be addressed with emphasis during training.

Testing Joint Consultations in the Writing Center
To test these strategies in the writing center, I sat down in a session with a student and another writing consultant. I had asked Dale a few days earlier if he would mind trying a joint consultation with me, but I wanted to find a student who would perceive our session as helpful rather than intimidating. When the student arrived for her appointment with Dale, I listened to her speak to him about her paper, how much she had left to do, and her frustrations with her professor. She was quite talkative, appeared to be a native speaker, and seemed eager to do as much revision as possible because she was concerned about her grade. She fit the basic criteria I had set out for testing my thinking on a real consultation, so I asked her if she would mind if I sat in on the session and explained my project. She agreed and enthusiastically told me she hoped the two of us could help her figure out what she was “doing wrong.” Carefully watching her face as she agreed to the two-on-one format assured me that she didn’t feel pressured to say yes, which I realized consultants would want to watch for before beginning a joint consultation with a student.

Though positivity as writing consultants often translates to giving suggestions to the students they work with, consultants must guard against doing too much work for the students. When two consultants sit down with a student, it would be even easier to get lost in enthusiasm, building off each other’s ideas, forgetting that the session is about helping the student become a better writer, not just leave with better writing (though that is important too). A couple simple training techniques show consultants how to avoid this. First, making consultants aware of this temptation can do wonders. Most often when consultants end up doing too much work for students, it is because they do not notice at the time and realize it only in retrospect. Bringing this possibility to light will make consultants more conscious of their own behavior during sessions. Second, a method for consultants to check their own contributions to the session is to watch the amount of eye contact they are making with the student versus the
other consultant. Most of the time, the consultants' eyes should be trained on the student, especially when giving suggestions, to ensure that the student is the one receiving the feedback and is prompted to respond.

While testing joint consultations, I found that keeping eye contact with the student helps to keep the other consultant focused on her too. I did not mention my theory about keeping eye contact with the student before sitting down in a joint consultation with Dale and the graduate student, and because of this I found that Dale, trying to be inclusive, spent about fifty percent of the time he spoke looking at the student and fifty percent looking at me. In order to focus his attention on the student, I would look at her while he was talking. Because I did not return his eye contact, he naturally looked at her as well. Once I started looking mostly at her, and Dale did as well, the student began responding to our comments immediately, whereas before she seemed to be waiting for the other one of us to respond first. I believe she felt that the session was more focused on her, so she felt more comfortable speaking up.

**Potential Obstacles with Joint Consultations**
Writing consultants begin their careers by testing out different strategies for working with students, then sticking with the ones they find to work best. Oftentimes, they choose different strategies than their fellow consultants. For example, I like to step out of consultations for five minutes to allow students to free write when they get stuck or when the student is testing a new idea. Most of the consultants I work with don’t use this strategy. So how can we negotiate joint consultations between consultants who want to run sessions differently?

Our best option is to have the consultant lay out the different possibilities for the student at the beginning of the session, then again if the consultation takes a different turn. For example, if a student comes in with a draft and wants two perspectives on it because she is concerned with her organization, one consultant can explain that someone could read the paper out loud or they could make a reverse outline. Then the other consultant could jump in with her own ideas, such as cutting the paper at the end of each paragraph and rearranging it in a way that makes more sense. This way, the student can choose what she thinks will be most productive, giving her more agency in the session. In addition, this difference in styles can be productive rather than detrimental because it will push consultants to examine their strategies and teach them new ways of working with students. Better yet, they will observe other consultants using strategies they might have previously rejected and learn how to use them better.

In addition, writing centers must reconsider the furniture they use. Rectangular tables will not work because they either create a problem with chairs bumping into each other if the second consultant sits on the short side of the table next to the student, or one person ends up on the other side of the table, creating an authoritative atmosphere. Round tables would work best because then everyone is seated in an equal position, maintaining the peer relationship in King Arthur fashion. At these round tables, the consultants should be seated on either side of the student, so she feels as though the consultation is centered on her and she is not staring at a panel of experts to the left or right of her. This will also allow both consultants to see her paper if she has a question that requires looking at the draft.
Another issue that will affect how common joint consultations can be in individual writing centers is funding. In order to have two people working with one student at a time, centers will have to pay two consultants for the time that they usually pay one. One option is to start out by having consultants do joint consultations only during slow times, when the second consultant is already scheduled and would not be working with a student anyway, so no money is lost. This can continue until writing center directors get solid numbers on the popularity of joint consultations and survey data about their benefits, so writing centers can in turn request more funding to staff more consultants at one time.

A related issue is the difficulty of scheduling joint consultations, especially in the beginning. Most joint consultations will likely be spontaneous, so if writing centers have drop-in hours, they will probably have to staff extra people on drop-ins if joint consultations become popular, so their waiting lists don’t get backed up. The amount of extra people on staff will vary with each center, based on the number of students seen every day and how common the directors and staff decide joint consultations should be. Eventually I foresee students who enjoyed their joint consultation experiences requesting to work with two consultants at a time, which will present its own hurdle for scheduling and survey systems. If this happens, extra consultants may be needed for appointment slots as well. This must all be tested on a trial-and-error basis until students become familiar with the idea of joint consultations and writing center directors can figure out how often joint consultations happen and when. Only then will writing centers be able to individually decide how best to schedule their writing consultants to accommodate joint consultations.

Joint Consultations Between Writing and Library Consultants

Though writing and research are recursive processes, the way student support services are organized do not reflect this and it can be misleading for students. Because students can either work with a librarian or a writing consultant, focusing on either their research or their writing, not both at the same time, the message being sent to students is that writing and research are separate processes that do not overlap. Library and writing center services cannot be fully integrated without major administration conflicts, training problems, and financial difficulty, but we can help students with writing and research at the same time, showing them that the processes are intertwined, which will make them better writers. This is possible through joint consultations between a student, a writing consultant, and a peer library consultant.

The presence of peer library consultants in joint consultations will help to eliminate the roadblocks that arise in a session when the writing consultant realizes the student needs to do more research before new ideas can be generated. When the need for more research arises, the library consultant can help the student with it immediately, while the writing consultant helps the student work out how to use the research in a productive way.

Joint consultations will also allow students who come in looking for research help to also work with a writing consultant to arrange the sources into a workable outline or to integrate the
research into their drafts as they find it. Students can see that writing doesn’t start where research ends, and that neither process works well without the other. If writing centers can change the way students think about research and writing, they can change the way they navigate these processes. This will make them not only better writers, as Stephen North described, but also will help them to produce better writing.

If librarians train student consultants to help other students with research, their consultants could also attend parts of writing center training to ensure that writing and library consultants share the same goals: maintaining a peer relationship with students, balancing minimalist and directive tutoring, and encouraging and inspiring the students they work with. Lee VanOrsdel, Dean of University Libraries at Grand Valley State, explained the differences she sees between the work of MLS librarians and writing consultants as a difference in methodology. She explained that librarians tend to be direct in giving students what they need, while writing consultants model work for students and extract students’ existing knowledge from them. Librarians are also unfamiliar with creating peer relationships with students, as their qualifications automatically give them authority. In order for joint consultations to work, it is important that the peer relationship with the student is maintained, so library consultants should attend parts of writing center training to learn about peer relationships and non-directive tutoring to supplement the training the librarians will give them. Additionally, writing consultants could attend parts of library training to learn the core principles of research, which will improve their writing consultations and help them to be on the same page as the library consultants. If library and writing consultants are cross-trained, the student will be sitting down with two other students who share the same goals, one well-equipped to help with research, the other with writing.

At Grand Valley State University, we hope that when the research and writing consultants work together, we will become more familiar with each other’s methodology, learning new strategies and allowing us to support students better. Joint consultations will offer us a way to continue learning from one another for the benefit of the students we work with.

**Conclusion**

Joint consultations provide a platform to change the way students view the research and writing process, as well as simply giving them a variety of perspectives to learn from. They give us the opportunity to help students become better writers while also producing better writing. Additionally, joint consultations will improve the way we function as writing consultants, whether we are working only with each other or with research consultants from the library. Whether it is students learning from consultants, consultants learning from students, or consultants learning from each other, this supportive learning environment is what the writing center is all about.

**Works Cited**