

## COLLABORATION AND CONFLICT IN WRITING CENTER SESSION NOTES

Stephen Kwame Dadugblor  
The University of Texas at Austin  
[steve.dadugblor@utexas.edu](mailto:steve.dadugblor@utexas.edu)

### Abstract

This paper investigates the question of conflict in writing center sessions. Using a corpus of session notes from a large public university, I argue that there is a discrepancy in the reportage of conflict in writing center sessions: on the one hand, conflict in session notes from tutors to tutees tends to be concealed in linguistic markers of agreement; on the other hand, instances of disagreement are generally easily acknowledged to writing center administration, but not students. This incongruity and different attitudes in the reportage invite further debate about the role of conflict in tutor-tutee interactions, especially as it bears on the improvement of writing. I offer a critique of the orthodoxy of conflict avoidance in writing center theory and practice, and call for more attention both to the genre of the session note as a site of writing center practice and the question of conflict as it relates to tutor-tutee interactions.

Composition and writing center studies may differ in important respects regarding their pedagogical approaches, but they are not unlike each other; they share a unique commitment to writing and effective approaches to its teaching. Based on these shared goals, research in one can motivate studies in the other insofar as pedagogical lessons may be learned. For after all, both fields are allied, with writing center studies often considered a subset of composition studies more generally. Consider this case: In his influential ethnographic study, *Collision Course: Conflict, Negotiation, and Learning in College Composition*, Russel K. Durst explores the contradictory expectations of first-year college composition students and writing professors. Durst argues that at the heart of first-year writing instruction is a seemingly irreconcilable expectation of students and teachers: students arrive in composition classes with the “instrumentalist” mindset of advancing their careers with writing, while teachers wait to impart critical and social consciousness through writing to students. In order to bridge this conflict and gap in expectation, Durst suggests a pedagogy rooted in what he calls “reflective instrumentalism” that “takes advantage of the motivation students bring to their areas of specialization, provides students with useful knowledge, and engages students in critical scrutiny of schooling and society” (179).

In composition studies, such conflict between student and teacher expectations, between students and the learning materials they engage, and sometimes, even between instructor and student, is generally described as

inevitable and beneficial. This assumed benefit of disagreement hinges on the potential of conflict to create a learning experience that fosters critical inquiry, challenges orthodoxy, and allows for discovery of new and better ideas. In some sense, to denounce the usefulness of conflict would be to risk stifling dissent. Thus, research in composition has advanced the distinctive importance of conflict to the quality of debate and the exploration of alternative viewpoints (see Jarratt; Lynch et al.; Roberts-Miller). In exploring the case for multiple viewpoints, Peter Smagorinsky observes that meaning is constructed within a culturally mediated context, like the classroom, “a transactional zone” just like any human space of interaction, where conflict is almost inevitable in the interactive space that is teaching and learning (133).

Yet, although this recognition and/or praise of conflict in composition studies is pervasive in the literature, extensive studies of conflict in the writing center literature are limited. Where evident, studies of conflict have been concerned with how writing center administration has occasionally been characterized as setting themselves against their institutional contexts through a Socratic orientation (Ianetta). Further, in terms of institutional conflict, disagreement between writing center administrations and university management have been construed in decidedly negative terms, the contention often revolving around the marginalized status of writing centers within the larger university, and the need to legitimize writing center work in the face of skepticism of colleague instructors and university administrators (Harris, “Writing Center Administration”; Kjesrud and Wislocki).

Studies of conflict in the writing center have been discussed in the idiom of anti-racism, with attention to the ways in which tutors may constructively respond to offensive content in order to address social justice concerns (Suhr-Sytsma and Brown; Greenfield and Rowan). Still, the study of conflict has been approached in terms of “brave spaces” at writing centers, the concern here being how to succeed at “[m]aking spaces ‘safe enough’ so that people are comfortable taking risks, even if they are still not entirely comfortable” (Martini and Webster). These studies provide a theoretical basis for the attention to conflict, while

creating room for more detailed, context-driven studies that expand our understanding of conflict in writing center studies. Following from these studies on conflict, therefore, this current study attends to conflict in writer center work through another route—the writing center session and one of its primary genres of record, the session note. Mark R. Hall calls for a systematic study of texts like session notes, writing that as commonplace documents, their “ubiquity and mundanity” can make us ignore their importance to writing center work (81). There are several reasons a focus on session notes as a possible index of conflict during writing center consultations is worthwhile. First, as an important genre of the record of sessions, these notes contain interactions that help us examine the nature of interactions during sessions, including, for example, the difference in power between tutor and tutee, disagreements about the arguments a student wants to make, an offensive comment from either tutor or tutee, and misunderstandings about the writing task during a session.

Second, the non-directive and/or non-evaluative tutoring approaches used in some writing centers provide context for conflict to potentially arise during sessions. As Mary Hedengren and Martin Lockerd’s study of writing center exit polls demonstrate, tutees occasionally offer negative feedback, implying that disagreement may be an underlying feature during sessions, even if infrequently. For Hedengren and Lockerd, such negative feedback from tutees are an “underused resource” (133) for improvement of writing center practice. If we take these authors’ findings seriously and consider Smagorinsky’s claim concerning composition classes as “transactional zones,” what becomes evident is that writing centers as spaces for talk about writing are just as transactional in this respect. Given that writing center studies shares pedagogical concerns with composition scholarship, it is worthwhile for writing center scholars to follow the trajectory of composition studies in investigating instances of conflict. Thus, this paper examines how conflict in writing center sessions arise, and what their index in session notes can tell us about interactions in writing center collaborative work.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. First, in order to establish the context of writing center work from which the idea of conflict emerges, I offer an overview of the idea of collaboration in writing centers as a strategy for accomplishing writing tasks. Next, using corpus linguistic and discourse analysis methods, I examine a corpus of writing center session notes—both those aspects available to tutees and sections accessible exclusively to administrators. Doing so affords an

analysis of references to conflict in respect of different audiences. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the results and significance of the analysis for theorizing conflict and conflict negotiation strategies in writing center practice.

## Understanding Conflict: Tutor and Tutee Collaborations in the Writing Center

Given that difference and conflict are integral to writing center communities, and even inevitable, focusing attention on writing center collaborative work can reveal how tutors and tutees negotiate their situatedness—power, control, and difference—during writing center sessions. The concept of collaboration in writing center work is as old as the inception of writing centers. Andrea Lunsford locates the application of the term *collaboration* to writing center work in a shift, during the 1980s, toward an understanding of the ontology of knowledge as a product of social interactions and language mediation (4). In this shift, rather than an interiorized externalization of individual writers’ thoughts, knowledge—and by extension writing tasks—is understood to be shaped by interaction and emerges as a product of collaborative work. Thus construed, the idea of knowledge implies co-creation and by that logic departs from the notion that individuals are solely, without external factors, responsible for the generation of ideas.

In this spirit of knowledge as a collaborative activity, Muriel Harris writes that what happens at the writing center is “collaborative learning about writing,” and involves “interaction between writer and reader to help the writer improve her own abilities and produce her own text—though, of course, her final product is influenced by the collaboration with others” (“Collaboration is not Collaboration” 370). Similarly, Irene L. Clark argues that writing center collaboration aims mainly at enhancing students’ overall learning about writing, and that such collaboration is focused on the writing process, as opposed to illegitimate assistance that fails to achieve this goal (520). Regarding Clark’s distinction, writing center collaboration finds forceful expression not only in non-directive tutoring, but also in scaffolding, a concept central to writing center conferences (Mackiewicz and Thompson; Nordlof). Jo Mackiewicz and Isabelle Thompson define scaffolding as “tutoring strategies used to support students’ efforts to arrive at their own solutions to problems or, in the case of writing center conferences, to decide on topics and revisions of existing drafts” (39). They indicate that in scaffolding, writing goals and tasks are mutually

defined and ideas are dialogically explored between tutor and student, hence the collaboration (46).

This understanding of scaffolding is consonant with David Wood and Heather Wood's perspectives on effective collaboration which involves, among others, (a) establishing a link between students' relevant previous knowledge and skills, and the new writing task, and (b) ensuring that students take ultimate responsibility for writing tasks (6). Drawing from Vygotsky's concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in which more experienced learners facilitate and guide less experienced learners, David Wood and Heather Wood explain that the guidance in ZPD could be understood within the framework of writing center collaboration, in interactions between tutors and students and through the tutoring functions of the writing center tutor.

But collaboration has potential pitfalls. Lunsford offers a cautionary tale against the prevalent view of collaboration as mostly beneficial, calling attention to its capacity to be authoritarian as well. Lunsford calls for writing centers to "address the issue of control explicitly" and suggests that while these tutor-centered domains of work may be based on collaboration, they risk replicating the hierarchy of teacher-centered collaborations and offer a "pretense of democracy" by "eras[ing] rather than valu[ing] difference" (7). She writes that,

collaboration often masquerades as democracy when it in fact practices the same old authoritarian control. It thus stands open to abuse, and can, in fact, lead to poor teaching and poor learning. And it can lead—as many of you know—to disastrous results in the writing center. So amidst the rush to embrace collaboration, I see *a need for careful interrogation and some caution*. (3-4, my emphasis).

Indeed, writing centers today may, generally speaking, be unlike the "teacher-centered classrooms" Lunsford referred to almost three decades ago. The non-directive and non-evaluative approaches currently practiced in some writing centers make the power asymmetry more tenuous. Yet, this asymmetrical display of power cannot be totally overlooked, nor could Lunsford's call for "careful interrogation and some caution" (4), particularly within the context of research that continues to point to this very question of control. Increasingly, some scholars are taking up Lunsford's concerns on the question of control and power asymmetry in peer tutoring and writing center collaborations (e.g., Carino; Thompson et. al.). As Thompson elsewhere explains, "collaborators who perceive themselves as powerful can control the conversation, call attention to themselves, and influence others' perceptions of their writing

abilities" (424). Still, outside the United States, Twila Yates Papay's research on collaboration in South African writing centers reveals similar scenarios of unequal distribution of power. In this case, peer consultants employ questions and cite information to minimize the unequal power differentials. In short, the dynamics of uneven power and control are still not uncommon in writing center collaborations.

Indeed, attention to writing center collaboration and its potential perils as part of our scholarly lore and practice is also in keeping with recent calls by John Nordlof for scholars to examine the usefulness and success of "dogmas," "orthodoxies," and theories undergirding current writing center practice (60). Meanwhile, Trish Roberts-Miller's work on the importance of agonistic, discursive conflict in communities of discourse is relevant as much for writing center collaborative work as for composition classes. Thus, the idea of conflict inherent in collaborative work is revealed in the potential for disagreement to arise when tutors and tutees work together on writing tasks.

The notion of conflict within the collaborative work of writing center sessions emerges from yet another source. Given writing centers' diverse student populations, there is a problem with conceiving of writers as homogenous groups for whom an all-sizes-fits-all collaborative approach to writing works. As Paul Matsuda argues, the idea that the American composition class is linguistically homogenous is a myth (638). The varieties of English and varying levels of English language competence of both native and non-native speakers reflect a classroom space of divergent instructor-learner expectations and potentially misunderstood interactions. This heterogeneity of writers in composition studies should, in part, force us to consider the interactions, for example, between native-speaker tutors and non-native speaker tutees, particularly when not all writing centers might pair non-native tutors with non-native tutees for sessions. Recognizing the potential difficulty of interactions between native-speaker tutors and non-native-speaker tutees in collaborating on writing tasks, Terese Thonus writes that "they [tutors] and (their supervisors) must be willing to relinquish the orthodoxy of the collaborative frame" and permit more realistic and appropriate "contact zones" for tutorials with NNSs" (240).

Such a willingness invites us as scholars and practitioners to acknowledge that although collaboration may be an ideal, it does not always manifest in the fruitful, consensual frame within which it has frequently been cast. Rather, and equally importantly, collaboration involves disagreement and contention, both inevitable elements in writing center

work. Indeed, as Hall points out, conflict may manifest during writing center sessions, as tutor and tutee goals diverge with “different tools, rules, and motives in mind for accomplishing the same task” (60). Hall observes that “existing scholarly conversation about tutor reports is limited, focused less on the *work* (emphasis in original) that session notes do and more on persistent anxieties about audience and access” (82). In this regard, scholars are beginning to take up this concern, including Genie N. Giaimo et al., who demonstrate the necessity of both focusing attention on session notes and using corpus analytical methods to reveal the rhetorical work of these notes. I follow up on this call to investigate the work that writing center texts do, by examining session notes as an important site for possible indicators of disagreements and conflicts. The next section describes the data and methods I use in accomplishing this goal.

### Description of Data Set and Methods

The data set for this study comprises 100 entries of session notes of between 70 and 450 words, totaling 10,788 words. The notes span the period January 19 to 26, 2016, and are collected from the writing center of a large public research university in the southwestern United States. Because this study was a textual analysis of notes without direct interaction with any human subjects, this study was IRB-exempt. Added to the data set are sections of session notes from fall 2015 available only to writing center administration. These provide a useful lens with which to evaluate discrepancies in the reportage of the session to tutees and writing center administration. The session notes have been recorded by the writing center over the period and include a tutor’s name, date, assignment, and writing task accomplished. For the sake of confidentiality, all identifying information from the dataset are excluded from the analysis.

To analyze references to disagreement in the notes, I draw on both Ute Römer and Stefanie Wulff’s corpus linguistic methodology for the analysis of written academic texts, and Ellen Barton’s inductive discourse analysis of rich features of texts. On the one hand, Römer and Wulff’s methodology allows for context-specific analysis of large corpora of linguistic units. Using the concordance mapping feature of the methodology provides context for the linguistic units that appear in a large body of texts. The concordance allows for a sorting of word classes, which can then be further selected and analysed based on their frequency and the intended research purpose. On the other hand, Barton offers an inductive discourse analytical approach that focuses attention on the rich features of texts, those

“linguistic features that point to the relation between a text and its context” (23). Rich feature analysis relies on examples and patterns as the basis for argumentation and places contextual value of patterns at the center of the analysis. The approach involves the selection of a study data, the verification of patterns, coding of data, and interpretation of the data based on significance of the patterns within the context of the sample.

The larger goal of my study, as already outlined, is to investigate conflict in the session notes in the context of the collaborative frame within which it occurs. Hall argues that session notes could provide a crucial index for “valued practices for tutoring” at the writing center (77). For this study, Römer and Wulff’s corpus linguistic methodology in combination with Barton’s approach is appropriate for the study in order to “assess and describe a linguistic phenomenon in a maximally objective and hence largely theory-neutral fashion” (Römer and Wulff 100). Römer and Wulff offer a four-step approach to corpus analysis with the software package *AntConc*, namely

- (a) the creation of a word list and keyword list,
- (b) compiling and analyzing a concordance,
- (c) tracing repeated instances of a word or phrase in a text, and
- (d) examining contextual phenomena such as collocates and clusters (103).

Importantly, the first step (of creating word lists) is crucial because word lists, according to the authors, “highlight which words are most frequent in a corpus and may be worth investigating” (Römer and Wulff 104).

For the purposes of this paper, I omitted keyword lists from the analysis since the objective here is not to compare the frequency of words in the corpus under analysis with a reference corpus. I developed a corpus of all 100 entries of session notes and coded for the most frequently occurring words using the *AntConc* concordancer. The results from the first twenty most frequently occurring words in the corpus in *AntConc* are shown in Table 1 (See Appendix).

After creating a word list, the next step in Römer and Wulff’s approach involves the compilation and analysis of a concordance. I examined words that frequently appeared in the corpus and which could potentially provide insight into collaboration and instances of conflict.

Considering the interactive nature of writing center collaborative tasks, tutors frequently employ words that suggest action both on their part and their tutees’. Based on this assumption, I focused on the words ranked 3, 4, 6, and 17 in *AntConc*, namely “you” “your” and “we,” these being content words meaningful to the analysis,

compared to grammatical articles and pronouns like “the,” “to,” and “in,” which do not suggest interaction at all, although these equally register high frequencies in the corpus.

I also paid attention to the verb “discussed,” as within the context of the sessions, its use indicates the interaction between tutor and tutee. I traced the instances of the use of the content words within context, reading closely for cases where collaboration and conflict are expressed. This third step in the corpus analytic framework works in tandem with the fourth and final step, the contextual reading for collocates and clusters. For my analytical purposes, I assumed words that cluster with the word list under examination could provide indications of the phenomena of conflict being investigated.

### Results, Analysis, and Discussion

Overwhelmingly, my analysis of the corpus reveals collocates that suggest consensus-building in achieving writing tasks. For instance, in coding for tutors’ discussion of their interactions with tutees, all but two sentences in the entire corpus (based on the word list investigated) referred to the interactions in consensus-building terms. The tutors described their interactions in primarily three rhetorical moves. First, they defined the writing task sought by the tutee, including writing concerns tutees brought to the center. Second, they indicated strategies used to achieve the task. Third, and finally, they recapped the decision collectively agreed upon for the improvement of the writing task. These findings resonate with Hall’s observations of the variety of rhetorical work that session notes do: they summarize the content of the session, address tutee concerns, and recommend next steps beyond the session (87-89). Indeed, in his analysis of a corpus of session notes, Hall found that the most frequently occurring rhetorical move tutors make is to “build rapport,” a move that not only reflects the ways in which session notes are “a direct person-to-person communication between peer tutors and writers” (94), but also points to the values and identities that a tutor creates for herself as a “peer collaborator/co-learner” (97). In this regard, beyond the practical function they serve, session notes provide tutors with opportunities to reflect on their practice and persuade others (like other instructors and writing center administrators who read these notes) that they (tutors) are capable practitioners conforming to writing center norms. This identity construction dimension of the notes and the collaborative and rapport-building ethos are reflected also in my corpus.

Further, in describing the writing task and the decisions they arrived at with tutees, tutors typically expressed their interactions and collaborations in terms such as the following: “You intended to...” “I suggested...,” “I encouraged you to...,” “I think you should...,” “We decided...,” “We agreed...” “We discussed...,” and “We worked on...” Such rhetorical moves not only emphasize the non-directive, non-evaluative aspect of writing center tutoring in this corpus, but also draw attention to dominant perceptions of writing center collaborations as collaborative learning about writing, with the primary responsibility for the final draft of writing being the tutee’s rather than the tutor’s. Evident from the language used here is a sense of collaboration manifested in decidedly rapport-building terms. More specifically, the uses of a “we” language, as Hall has similarly found, emphasizes the collaborative nature of tutor-tutee relationships during sessions and “implies agreement, and thus a smooth, cooperative relationship between the two” (99).

Two cases within the corpus, however, lend themselves to considerations of disagreement. Due to their particularly contextual nature, I quote them in full below for the analysis:

1. While *we didn't quite come to a decision* on the tone of your statement, we did come up with a strategy that will allow you to move forward with its composition.
2. We talked about how you could rework the first paragraph as is, *but you felt that made your statement more generic*. So then, we considered ditching the first paragraph to refocus your essay and more clearly articulate how being an artist relates to dentistry. You decided that the story about being an artist allowed you to be more original and, therefore, give the admissions committee a better sense of who you are.

Both cases point to instances where collaboration could result in disagreement as well. Tutees do not always come to a decision with their tutors, regardless of whether they think these tutors have superior knowledge of writing. Aside these two traces of disagreement, one other source of information suggests that conflict may be much more common during sessions than writing center scholarship or session notes might suggest. In the dataset for this analysis, aspects of session notes available exclusively to writing center administration point to traces of disagreement and conflict that may not always be acknowledged in writing center session notes.

Few instances of conflict are directly evident in the session notes analyzed. I argue that this is likely the result of a writing center practice in which tutors are

encouraged to downplay conflict, in keeping with the conflict avoidance of much writing center discourse. Research has demonstrated that tutors construct identities for themselves in session notes as customer service workers, by “echoing the sort of customer-service language we might expect to hear in a hospitality or retail setting” (Hall 99). Not unlike the slogan “the customer is always right” that encourages an ethos of conflict avoidance and customer satisfaction, the near absence of and lack of explicit indicators of conflict in the corpus of notes available to students could be understood in terms of writing center values and practices. If, as Hall argues, “session notes both reflect and construct the underpinning values and institutional ethos of a writing center” (102), then it stands to reason that the notes in this corpus perform the ideals of collaboration, rapport building, and conflict avoidance that would be characteristic of much writing center work.

In contrast to the rapport-building ethos enacted in much of the corpus, a section of the session notes available only to writing center administration (but not students nor their instructors) provides a much different insight into tutors’ representations of their interactions with tutees. This section of the notes entails concerns relating to sessions that tutors want administrators to address. My analysis reveals moments of frustration experienced by tutors and which expose instances of disagreement and conflict during sessions. Three examples below from the dataset from fall 2015 are representative of these conflictual encounters. To provide a fuller analysis, I follow Hall’s approach of analyzing the session notes in full (79), editing for confidentiality where necessary.

#### *Excerpt 1*

The student came in with a paper for her [X] course in which she was supposed to choose a side and argue whether or not plants have intelligence. The student wanted to simply look over her draft in general (no particular concerns). This student was **extremely difficult to work with** from the start of the consultation to the very end. Any comment/suggestion/explanation of writing process or elements from me was met with **a very defensive attitude** and the consultation grew **very tense** very quickly. I felt as if **she was insulted by any comment or question I had** about her paper and immediately disregarded everything I said. The student explained that she learned how to properly write papers in her high school junior and senior AP courses. The consultation ended with what I considered **an offensive remark** from the student, “I think I’m just thinking about this more

intellectually...you know, more scientifically.” I took offense for the obvious reasons, but also because I am in fact a senior science major, and this paper did not even resemble a science paper! (\*inner frustration\*) Shortly after discussing this consultation with a few coworkers, I learned that the instructor is offering extra credit for coming to the writing center. The student did indicate that she wanted a note to her instructor; however, the instructor’s name and contact information was not on the intake form. I suppose the extra credit somewhat explains the student’s outward disinterest, but the **defensive and condescending attitude** were definitely the higher order concern in my opinion. I would like to further discuss this consultation with a member of the admin team in person.

What is evident from this note is the very conflictual nature of the session. The tutor’s perspective of the session is that of a person frustrated by the encounter with the tutee. Several sources of this conflict can be adduced: the tutee’s hostile disposition to the session; the tutor’s belief that their prior knowledge of the subject matter was at odds with the tutee’s knowledge; and, the instructor’s requirement for students to visit the writing center for extra credit. The tutor characterizes the conflict itself as “definitely the higher order concern,” suggesting that the experience possibly created a climate wherein the conflictual encounter, rather than the writing task, became the focus of the session. The encounter between the tutor and tutee here echoes Hall’s argument that even as tutor and tutee work toward the same goal, they may sometimes seem to be “working at cross purposes” (60). On the one hand, the tutor believes his knowledge as a science major better positions him to discuss the subject matter with ease and help the tutee accomplish their writing goals. The tutee, on the other hand, reported thinking about the subject “more intellectually” and “more scientifically.” Meanwhile, while the instructor’s requirement for students to visit the writing center for extra credit is an external factor to the session (a requirement to which this particular student is demonstrably resistant), it contributes to the experience of the conflict. Thus, the gap in agreement between tutor and tutee, the differences in expectations, and the varying motives both tutor and tutee bring to the writing task contribute to the experience of conflict during the session. In short, while they both shared a common goal of working collaboratively on the draft, both the tutor and the tutee’s purposes diverged and became the source of disagreement and conflict.

## Excerpt 2

This was an *odd consultation*. The student indicated he'd been here before, but he was very confused by my question "What concerns do you have about your paper? What are your goals for our time here together?" He kept on saying "*just read through it and tell me what's wrong*" without being able to offer any suggestions for what could be "wrong". I reminded him of our *non-directive approach* and he finally said he wanted to work on "flow." We read through his paper paragraph-by-paragraph and at each suggestion, he said "well I have been writing papers like this and my TA gives me an A." I reminded him that he always has veto power, to which he replied, "well the TA likes us to come and have notes sent so that's why I came." So overall, it was just odd because he *seemed frustrated with my questions*, which I took to be *lack of understanding of how we work here and then dismissal of all suggestions* because he gets good grades on his assignments anyway. He wasn't completely disengaged with the consultation, but he *wasn't the most active participant* either. I'm not sure how best to handle situations like this so any tips are welcome.

In this second example, the source of conflict could be located within the non-directive, non-evaluative approach to tutoring practiced in this writing center. The tutee's expectation of direct instruction from the tutor was at odds with the center's ideals of writer autonomy, where tutees, while collaborating with tutors on projects, still hold greater say in the direction of the goals and outcomes of the writing task. This second example also demonstrates not just minimal collaboration during the session, if at all, but also shows that the tutee's deference of power to the tutor deviates from the practice of collaboration that requires tutees to take active control of their writing tasks. Further, that the tutor was unsure how to handle such conflict arising from the gap in expectation between institutional policy and tutee expectation points to the presence of conflict during sessions, even if such conflict is not reported in session notes available to tutees. Moreover, in this example, the teaching assistant's mandatory requirement that students visit the writing center does introduce a further dynamic of disappointment not just for this tutee, but for the tutor and administrators as well. Given institutional policies that limit the tutor's ability to meet these demands from instructors, coupled with the tutee's resistance to such "forced" services that he may otherwise not voluntarily take advantage of because of his good grades, the session was conflictual, as both tutor and tutee attempt to meet the instructor's goals.

## Excerpt 3

A student seemed to have *left the consultation feeling distressed and upset*. She was working on a chemical engineering research paper in which the prompt asked her to evaluate a situation. She did not state her arguments in a clear, direct manner; instead, she used mostly descriptive voice. When I was asking her questions to get a better picture of her thought process and to help her form an argumentative voice, at first she responded as if I was questioning her, but after I explained why I asked her those questions, she seemed to understand and came up with strong topic sentences on her own. After a few paragraphs, I asked her to follow the pattern we have previously done and continued asking some more questions, when all of a sudden *she took it personally as if I was criticizing her*. She said, "*I've only started learning English five years ago*. I know what I want to talk about; I just don't know how to say it properly in English. I think in my own language. Is English also your second language? I'm sure you know this too." Previously, she also raised her eyebrows and expressed concerns when I described our ND/NE policy "I'm not here like your professor/TA, so I'm not grading your paper, telling you what is right/wrong..." and when I said that I'm an undergraduate student just like her. I was under the impression that *she came in with a perception that there is right and wrong in English writing*, and when I didn't give her a direct answer, she thought I was withholding information from her or purposefully trying not to help her.

Earlier, I noted that the myth of linguistic homogeneity as discussed by Paul Matsuda ought to shape our understanding of tutor-tutee interactions and the varying levels of English language competence that could be a source of conflict during sessions. The varieties of English tutors and tutees bring to the writing center may be a resource, but depending on how these varieties are approached, they could also be the source of conflict as has been demonstrated in the third excerpt above. While the tutor clearly sought to relinquish any perceived power during the session by emphasizing the non-directive, non-evaluative approach used in this writing center, the tutee's expectation of direct instruction shaped the experience of the session, resulting in the conflict. Indeed, it is impossible to tell from the note the nature of the tutor's questions that might have led to the tutee's perception of being criticized, but the tutee's acknowledgment of the limit of their own English proficiency ("I just don't know how to say it properly in English") and their assumption,

“that there is right and wrong in English writing,” reveals the potential source of misunderstanding and ultimately the distress that was the outcome of this session.

These three cases are only a microcosm of a larger phenomenon in which tutors report difficult sessions to administrators, pointing out the conflict that is clearly elided in the session notes students see. In a sense, given the multiple, even conflicting audiences and purposes for session notes (Hall 77), it is reasonable that the section of the notes addressed to writing center administration would admit such occurrences of conflictual encounters. While conflict does seem to be generally avoided in the session notes in the aspects available to students, analysis of session notes in previous research has revealed that “tutor reports occasionally included negative evaluations of writers themselves” (Hall 94). Such a finding suggests that inherent in the collaborative ethos and the rapport-building rhetorical work enacted in session notes may be instances of conflict and disagreement that tutors may gloss over because of the values we enact and the ideals we tend to uphold.

## Conclusion

This analysis has used a small data set to gain insights into disagreement and conflict during writing center sessions. Evidence from sections of notes available to writing center administration suggests that though conflict does occur during sessions, they are generally not acknowledged in the notes tutees see at the end of tutoring. I argue that this is perhaps partly a result of the customer-service ethos writing centers generally cultivate and the rhetorical work that the notes as a genre tend to perform for tutee audiences. Further, my analysis reveals that tutors candidly discuss instances of conflict in situations where only administrators read sections of notes. But as Hall suggests, “any session report is limited, an incomplete account of a consultation” (83). Thus, we may consider comparative analyses of notes available to tutees on the one hand, and those accessible to instructors, but not tutees, or professors and tutees, on the other hand, to examine strategies tutors employ in discussing disagreement to different audiences. Such comparative analyses would enable us to more effectively make sense of scenarios of conflict and explore effective strategies for negotiating them in writing centers.

In investigating traces of conflict in the session notes, I have followed scholarly arguments cautioning against the dominant perception in writing center

scholarship that collaboration between tutors and tutees primarily rests on consensus. My analysis offers insights into the conflictual nature of collaborations during tutorial sessions. As contact zones, writing center collaborations do not only and always rest on rapport-building; they could be just as agonistic. How tutors negotiate such conflictual moments with tutees is important to the success of collaborations. Because students not only can but also do reject advice and attempt to negotiate control during writing center collaborative work (Park), rethinking conceptions of collaboration within its predominantly rapport-building frame could be an important step towards devising strategies that could enable tutors and tutees better negotiate conflictual encounters.

Additionally, more attention to the genre of the session note as a site for negotiation of meaning between tutor and tutee could uncover the very practice of writing center collaborations, at least from the point of view of tutors. Future studies could benefit also from more scholarly attention to a triangulated and larger data set that advances our understanding of manifestations of conflict. Here, studies of session notes in combination with other genres such as (transcripts of) video-taped interactions of sessions, reports available to administrators, and exit polls and surveys provided by tutees, may reveal how both tutors and tutees characterize conflict and disagreement in varying sites and texts of writing center work.

I opened this essay with Durst’s argument concerning the contradictory expectations of first-year college composition students and writing professors, as well as the need for writing instructors to adopt a reflective praxis in dealing with such conflicting expectations. As writing center scholars, we may adopt and be guided by that ethos of reflection in our own work as we explore the locations of conflict and the strategies we develop for resolving disagreements in writing center practice. That ethos of reflection could lead us on the path of rethinking the field’s dominant ideas about collaboration toward improved writing center pedagogy, theory, and practice.

## Works Cited

- Barton, Ellen. “Linguistic Discourse Analysis: How the Language in Texts Works.” *What Writing Does and How it Does It*, edited by Charles Bazerman and Paul Prior. Routledge, 2003, pp. 63-88.
- Carino, Peter. “Power and Authority in Peer Tutoring.” *The Center will Hold: Critical Perspectives on Writing Center Scholarship*, edited by Michael Pemberton and Joyce Kincaid. Utah State UP, 2003, pp. 96-113.

- Clark, Irene L. "Portfolio Evaluation, Collaboration, and Writing Centers." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 44, no. 4, 1993, pp. 515-524.
- Durst, Russel K. *Collision Course: Conflict, Negotiation, and Learning in College Composition*. National Council of Teachers of English, 1999.
- Gaiimo, Genie N., et al. "It's All in the Notes: What Session Notes Can Tell Us About the Work of Writing Centers." *Journal of Writing Analytics*, vol. 2, 2018, pp. 225-256.
- Greenfield, Laura, and Karen Rowan, editors. *Writing Centers and the New Racism: A Call for Sustainable Dialogue and Change*. UP of Colorado, 2011.
- Hall, R. Mark. *Around the Texts of Writing Center Work: An Inquiry-Based Approach to Tutor Education*. University Press of Colorado, 2017.
- Hallman Martini, Rebecca, and Travis Webster. "Writing centers as brave/r spaces: A special issue introduction." *The Peer Review* 1.2 (2017).
- Harris, Muriel. "Collaboration is Not Collaboration is Not Collaboration: Writing Center Tutorials vs. Peer-Response Groups." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 43, no. 3, 1992, pp. 369-383.
- . "Writing Center Administration: Making Local, Institutional Knowledge in our Writing Centers." *Writing Center Research: Extending the Conversation*, edited by Paula Gillespie et al. Erlbaum, 2002, pp. 75-89.
- Hedengren, Mary, and Martin Lockerd. "Tell me What You Really Think: Lessons from Negative Student Feedback." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2017, pp. 131-145.
- Ianetta, Melissa. "If Aristotle ran the writing center: Classical rhetoric and writing center administration." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2004, pp. 37-59.
- Jarratt, Susan C. "Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict." *Contending with words: Composition and Rhetoric in a Postmodern Age*, edited by Patricia Harkin and John Schilb. MLA, 1991, pp.105-123.
- Kjesrud, Roberta D., and Mary A. Wislocki. "Learning and Leading Through Conflicted Collaborations." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2011, pp. 89-116.
- Lunsford, Andrea. "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol.12, no. 1, 1991, pp. 3-10.
- Lynch, Dennis A., Diana George, and Marilyn M. Cooper. "Moments of Argument: Agonistic Inquiry and Confrontational Cooperation." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 48, no.1, 1997, pp. 61-85.
- Mackiewicz, Jo, and Isabelle Thompson. "Motivational Scaffolding, Politeness, and Writing Center Tutoring." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 33, no.1, 2013, pp. 38-73.
- Matsuda, Paul Kei. "The Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity in US College Composition." *College English*, vol. 68, no. 6, 2006, pp. 637-651.
- Nordlof, John. "Vygotsky, Scaffolding, and the Role of Theory in Writing Center Work." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2014, pp. 45-64.
- Papay, Twila Yates. "Collaborating with a Difference: How a South African Writing Center brings Comfort to the Contact Zone." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2002, pp. 5-22.
- Park, Innhwa. "Stepwise Advice Negotiation in Writing Center Peer Tutoring." *Language and Education*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2014, pp. 362-382.
- Roberts-Miller, Trish. "Discursive Conflict in Communities and Classrooms." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 54, no. 4, 2003, pp. 536-557.
- Römer, Ute, and Stefanie Wulff. "Applying Corpus Methods to Written Academic Texts: Explorations of MICUSP." *Journal of Writing Research*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2010, pp. 99-127.
- Smagorinsky, Peter. "If Meaning is Constructed, What is It Made From? Toward a Cultural Theory of Reading." *Review of Educational Research*, vol. 71, no.1, 2001, pp. 133-169.
- Suhr-Sytsma, Mandy, and Shan-Estelle Brown. "Theory in/to practice: Addressing the everyday language of oppression in the writing center." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 31, no. 2 2011, pp. 13-49.
- Thompson, Isabelle. "Scaffolding in the Writing Center: A Microanalysis of an Experienced Tutor's Verbal and Nonverbal Tutoring Strategies." *Written Communication*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2009, pp. 417-453.
- Thompson, Isabelle, et al. "Examining our Lore: A Survey of Students' and Tutors' Satisfaction with Writing Center Conferences." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 29, no.1, 2009, pp. 78-105.
- Thonus, Terese. "What are the Differences?: Tutor Interactions with First-and Second-Language Writers." *Journal of Second Language Writing*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2004, pp. 227-242.
- Wood, David, and Heather Wood. "Vygotsky, Tutoring and Learning." *Oxford Review of Education*, vol. 22, no.1, 1996, pp. 5-16.

---

**Appendix**

Table 1: Word List Showing Frequency of Words in Session Notes Corpus

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Word</b>
1	487	to
2	479	the
3	458	you
4	458	your
5	385	and
6	264	we
7	223	of
8	194	in
9	189	for
10	182	a
11	135	on
12	126	with
13	109	that
14	103	today
15	100	paper
16	93	about
17	84	discussed
18	84	writing
19	82	came
20	74	also