# Rethinking Dependency: Promoting Motivation, Rapport, and Solidarity in Online Consultations during Times of Crisis

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Hello, my name is Annelise Norman, and I am a 5th-year PhD Candidate in the English department at the University of Georgia. In addition to teaching first-year writing and literature classes for the English department, I also work as a consultant in UGA's Writing Center. I sincerely appreciate you tuning into my presentation, which I have titled “Rethinking Dependency: Promoting Motivation, Rapport, and Solidarity in Online Consultations during Times of Crisis.”

Writing centers have been recognized as sites for dependency-related behaviors where some writers seek support beyond the perceived scope of the consultants’ responsibilities. As Michael Pemberton pointed out in his 1994 study of dependency in writing centers, these tendencies appear to be at odds with most writing centers’ mission to empower writers to be independent, to equip them with the tools to deal with their texts themselves without relying on others for “inordinate” writing help. Pemberton’s study and others like it have suggested that there is a fine line between fostering motivation and encouraging dependent or attachment behaviors from writers. Of late, theories of motivation have changed our estimations of the roles of emotion, identification, and solidarity. These approaches have emerged alongside contemporary theories of the collaborative and social nature of writing.

The current conditions of the pandemic combined with this new knowledge of supportive and motivating techniques necessitate a shift in our thinking about the development of working relationships and how we identify and attempt to meet the needs of our writers. In 2018, *The Writing Center Journal* published a piece on understanding the needs and expectations of working-class students who apply to writing centers for support. Harry Denny, John Nordlof, and Lori Salem found that the students participating in their study sought more direct and at times more instructional assistance from writing tutors than tutors had been trained to provide. This ultimately led to their proposal of interventions for writing centers to begin providing services that more closely align with students’ needs. Now, I’m suggesting, there’s even greater urgency to continue with this kind of work.

Therefore, I’ve chosen to investigate how our current crisis context informs the ways in which online writing center consultants develop rapport and establish solidarity with the populations they support. I argue that, in light of current circumstances, these exchanges between writers and consultants mediated by online environments prompt a revision of our preventive approach to dependency behaviors so that we might recognize the positive implications of more collaborative consulting work on writers’ motivation. We should pay attention to how motivation takes shape in online consultations given the differences in online platforms’ affordances and the circumstances that influence our consultants’ interactions with writers. Considering how the pandemic has changed so many of our working conditions, let’s look to the ways in which writing center consultants are working to establish rapport, comfort, and solidarity during sessions so that we can reassess our stance on dependency. The pandemic continues to challenge all of our traditional priorities, so we should consider revising our approaches to and perspectives on needs, nurturing, and motivation during this time of crisis and beyond.

We know from Boscolo and Hidi (2007) that motivation influences and is influenced by interest in the writing task, notions of self-efficacy with regard to completing the task, and the writer’s ability to self-regulate performance, which a writer might demonstrate through an awareness of their own ability to manage a writing task or by knowing when to ask for help and how to locate the proper assistance (Mackiewicz and Thompson, 2013, p. 44). The will or drive to write is entangled with the writer’s perceptions of their ability and the means and tools they have at their disposal for self-regulating. Obviously, the writing center is one of those resources. We know that engagement and feedback from us as writing tutors can enhance students’ motivation. In turn, we as writing tutors understand the positive outcomes of building rapport and solidarity for motivation and productivity in our sessions. We do much of this work through positive politeness strategies like noticing a person’s accomplishments, joking and being optimistic, showing concern or expressing sympathy or empathy, and reinforcing the idea of student ownership and control over their work, but as Jo Mackiewicz and Isabelle Thompson (2013) have pointed out, there can be many cross-cultural factors present that can limit the effectiveness of these strategies in our sessions.

Furthermore, in a time like this where there has been so much disruption to life and education, I have to wonder about those “ways and tools” that student writers are assumed to have access to for self-regulation. All three of the influences of motivation that Boscolo and Hidi outlined have all potentially been shaken by our current crisis context. We need to be prepared to fill gaps that we might have been trained to dismiss as being outside of our scope or roles as writing tutors. But we can also model resourcefulness as we attempt to build rapport with these students: verbal praise, a tried-and-true motivation staple in the classroom, is one way that we can work to do that. By identifying things that our writers are doing well or effectively and looking for ways to build upon those things, we can offer encouragement and direction simultaneously, giving writers concrete examples of effective writing elements, techniques, or ideas that are attainable. To be clear: the praise needs to be purposeful and genuine. Praise only enhances motivation when it specifies clearly the behavior or action being reinforced and when it is believable to the recipient of the praise (Hancock, 2002, p. 84).

In surveying asynchronous written feedback from consultants in UGA’s online tutoring platform, I saw praise and positivity take many forms, but one of the most genuine modes of offering praise was through cover letters that consultants attached to their markups. In composing these brief letters, consultants created a space for building rapport and establishing their conversational and collaborative goals to condition the writers’ reception of their feedback. These letters included consultants’ impressions of their reading experiences, almost always making a positive observation or comment about the work or the research topic. That individualized “personal touch” that we pride ourselves on does not get lost in the potential anonymity of online—and especially asynchronous—settings: one consultant in particular emphasized the gravity of the sharing of student work, often thanking the writer for “trusting me with your work” or “sharing your research with me.” There are also the invitations and encouragement to return to the Writing Center that are rooted in genuine investment in the writer’s work, like “I hope I get a chance to look at your work more!” and “I’m interested to know what you find!” and a very warm “It’s good to see your name pop up on my schedule again!”. After more than a page of thorough, specific, and engaged commentary, our delightful consultant Kara Krewer wrapped up the cover letter that *preceded* her actual review by apologizing for the length of the letter and offering “I got pretty invested in your writing here! Thanks so much for sending your application my way. I’d be more than happy to take a look at any other writing of yours!”

Though writers did not always disclose much about their concerns or anxieties, many of our consultants immediately took optimistic or enthusiastic approaches in their communication with writers. Beyond establishing rapport, one consultant in particular demonstrated solidarity with an overwhelmed student by demystifying a genre of writing I’m sure we all know and love, the professional school personal statement. Krewer prefaced her feedback by saying, “Before I dive in, I’d like to say: personal statements and application questions are tough. I think they’re some of the hardest things to write, because we’re essentially asked to describe our hopes and dreams in an incredibly short amount of time. So if writing these feels hard, that’s because it definitely is!” And this is where experience and expertise comes into play. We can increase writers’ confidence in us by understanding and explaining challenging genres and writing occasions that likely aren’t formally taught to our writers otherwise. This in turn will help them to feel confident in the work they continue to do in this unfamiliar genre with us and then on their own outside of the Writing Center. I realize that some of what we’re seeing might skirt the lines we’ve been told to draw around ourselves and our responsibilities. Directive or solicitous comments might appear to some to overstep or run the risk of promoting dependency from writers of inappropriate reliance upon a tutor’s skills and expertise.

But, in researching attitudes toward dependency and attachment behaviors in writing center consultations, I took issue with some of the assumptions that appeared to inform accepted definitions of and prescribed responses to these behaviors in light of our current living, working, and learning conditions. Michael Pemberton poses the question of helping students in such a way that they don’t grow to rely on that help, but I ask what happens when circumstances change as drastically as they have, and many students have so very little left to rely on. How should (or does) that inform the way we engage with them and offer support? If a dependent personality is defined as “someone who remains dependent on others for nurturance and support,” (Pemberton, 1994, p. 64) what do you do in a time of crisis, when people’s needs change and likely aren’t being met as they were before? Does knowing that they have help or access to support if they need it serve a motivating function? Or do we need to alter our perceptions of what the job is with respect to different and more challenging circumstances? Because people, especially students, are looking for something to rely on right now. Should our understanding or fear of dependency change in accordance with our current situation?

Pemberton has suggested that, at the very least, “we want [students] to feel a reduced need for the presumed ‘authoritative validation’ that we offer them” (1994, p. 67). What this means for us as writing center tutors, according to Pemberton, is that we should work hard in our sessions to “deflect the ‘authority’ label these students wish to pin on [us] and attach it securely to the students themselves and the audience which is being addressed in their texts” (1994, p. 68). Under normal conditions and when students are empowered, able, and equipped to take on their writing tasks, I don’t necessarily disagree with Pemberton—we want students to take ownership of their writing and feel confident in their skills and ideas. But when perceptions of authority have undergone the traumas that the pandemic has brought with it, I think we need to extend compassion and be more creative and resourceful when it comes to recognizing student agency. In many ways, then, this discussion invokes the larger ongoing conversation about the roles of writing tutors. As Terese Thonus (2001) has pointed out, in practice, many tutors -- who have been instructed by tutorial manuals insisting that they behave as “supportive peers rather than authoritative teachers” -- end up “constructing themselves as teachers” and fulfilling more “teacherly” roles in consultations (p. 61). Thus, we’re left with what Thonus describes as a “continuum of roles stretching from teacher to peer, negotiated anew in each tutorial” (p. 61). And I think that’s important to keep in mind here: each session is unique, and each writer is coming in with a unique set of circumstances and needs.

We as tutors aren’t at odds with instructors; we’re not challenging that authority or expertise. But when a student comes to us presenting with a gap in knowledge or understanding that we *are* equipped to fill, and they express a desire or need for that kind of support, we shouldn’t shut them down. They have their own perceptions of their needs and deficiencies that might not match what we diagnose in the writing that they bring to a consultation. We might be tasked with addressing needs that aren’t on paper. So, in light of this crisis context, perhaps the prescriptions made over the past 30 years about our roles as tutors and assigning responsibility when it comes to student work require some revision. We need to change our thinking about dependency and authority because, over the past roughly 2 years, authority has failed us in so many ways and on spectacular scales. The uncertainty students feel about their work, their skills, their knowledge and education isn’t just baseless insecurity or a symptom of attachment behavior—their worlds, just like ours, have been turned upside down. Many are looking for *someone* to just be certain of *something* in these never-ending unprecedented times.

This brings us to prescribed modes of writing tutor conduct. Pemberton suggests that “a flexible yet firm response to dependent students -- one that offers support but denies responsibility for the student’s papers -- may very well be the best and most productive strategy that tutors and administrators can employ.” This is a reasonable, if a little defensive, approach to tutoring, but I argue that you can be supportive by *leaning into* that authority when students are seeking it without becoming responsible for the student’s *paper* -- we can (and should) still invest in the student’s *writing*.

Heather N. Hill cites the finding that transfer often must be cued and guided in order to be successful in suggesting that we shift our focus in writing centers to the facilitation of transfer, or students’ understanding of the “transportability of writing-related knowledge.” With transfer, we are attempting, as Hill describes, “to help students use previously-learned knowledge,” while simultaneously drawing on our own experiences as writers and tutors in these sessions. This can be as simple as showing students the connections between their previous experiences and their current writing task. By caring enough to ask those questions, you not only help to familiarize the writing task for them, but you start to develop a rapport that reflects your investment in the individual. Promoting and enacting the transfer of skills by using our experience, authority, whatever you choose to call it can either show students that they are equipped to take on the writing task or create an opportunity for us to give students the skills they need to feel confident and capable as writers that they will then transfer to other writing contexts. What Jo Mackiewicz and Isabelle Thompson asserted almost 10 years ago still holds true for motivating writers in our consultations: “it is important that tutors focus their full and caring attention on students, work to develop rapport and solidarity, and demonstrate their respect for them” (2013, p. 67), and what better way to do that right now than to meet students where they are and honor their uniquely difficult positions of trying to write or learn to write in a sustained state of crisis?

I’m not saying to throw out the rulebook and inappropriately take on the role of these writers’ teachers, but if we have a writer that is seeking assurance or exhibiting preoccupation or anxiety, it’s the humane thing to do to use our positions and expertise to help alleviate that and attend to their needs, even if they are more dependent or emotional than just the writing we’ve been told to focus on. I’m saying if you’re capable, you should do what you can to help, but obviously within reason. You should still maintain boundaries, like working only within the allotted appointment time, or not offering extra help or declining contact outside of writing center environments, for example. But the fact is, we’re not just engaging with writers; we’re serving people who write.

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