**Queering Consultant Professional Development: Literacy Improvisation**

**in the Writing Center**

Writing centers (WC) are odd spaces, situated at many intersections and overflowing with dueling binaries. As Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, and Boquet (2007) explain, “We live in an either-or world, a world that doesn’t offer much opportunity to be uncertain, or tickled, or puzzled” (p. 16). WCs must navigate and create certainty out of conflicting roles, such as social-interpersonal, peer-teacher, directive-non-directive, writer-consultant, active-passive. WC administrators and directors use various approaches to prepare consultants for the many contexts and personalities they experience on a daily basis. In WC scholarship, we have begun to discuss the application of queer theory in considering limitations of and challenges to preconceived roles (Denny, 2005; Rihn & Sloan, 2013). Approaching consultant identity and development in the theoretical frame of queer literacies can provide fresh and engaging ways to explore consultant professional and identity development.

WCs and queer theory both intimately involve dynamic identities, intellects, and embodied practices. WC scholarship and queer theory both acknowledge that the process of making sense of ourselves often relies on binaries like learner-teacher, reader-writer, writer-tutor. While queer theory calls for the deconstruction of these modes of meaning-making (Luhmann, 1998), WCs have yet to produce adequate theory or practice to help consultants navigate identity production or politics (Denny, 2005).

As a way of reading the world, queer theory seeks to open up privileged discourses while also focusing on the mutually-constituting nature of privilege and normativity (Alexander & Wallace, 2009; Denny, 2005 49). Butler (1991) discusses self as a constituted effect of discourse, compulsory and repeated performances, and a representation of a prior truth. Queer theory sees identity and intelligences are embodied practices that are also constrained by the roles in which they fit (Rice, 2008; Saloman, 2008; Alexander, 2008). Because of their history of being marginalized within the academy along with attention to identity politics and material consequences, WCs offer a space to examine queer literacies (Alexander, 2008) as an engaging approach to WC professional development (PD).

WC research has addressed consultant PD and roles in many different ways. Trimbur (1987) discusses the conflicting nature of the term and identity of *peer tutor* as a possible source of confusion and cognitive dissonance for consultants. When consultants are left to navigate a fluid sense self, the potential for *role ambiguity* and *role conflict* is likely (Healy, 1991). Staying too long in this “no man’s land” can lead to a crisis of loyalty and identity for some, resulting in behaviors like withdrawal, rejection, or evasion of responsibilities (Trimbur, 1987; Healy, 1991).

Is there a way we could take advantage of, subvert, or queer what others have described as a pitfall or negative? Could exploring identities offer consultants new and beneficial perspectives on what have been called instruments of normalization and regulatory regimes (Butler, 1990; Foucault 1990)? What could we learn from encouraging consultants to see their identities as mobile performances (Munoz, 2007), and how could dramatic improvisation help us explore these ideas?

As Alexander and Rhodes (2014) discuss, one person is a site for the convergence of many different, at times conflicting, identities. Like any other identity, consultant roles fluctuate as they must be engaged with and respond to shifting contexts within each consultation (Ahmed, 2006). In this sense, consultants participate in improvisation everyday: writing is riffing; consulting is riffing. On the symbolic stage of the WC, actors work together within the flexible structure of consultations, without a script or previously determined scenario, to build knowledge and make meaning together.

To explore collaboration and consultant identity, we first discuss an emerging theme of *yes… but* evident in a recent consultant survey. As we explore queer literacies in a WC setting, we offer an approach to consultant PD grounded in Tina Fey’s (2011) four rules of improv. We conclude by discussing how these improvisation activities challenge the limitations of expected roles, disrupt the critical *yes… but* culture of higher education, and encourage consideration of how we can value, recognize, and further develop a yes… *and* culture within WCs.

***Yes… But* in the WC**

In a recent survey on their perceptions of authority and writer/consultant roles during writing consultations, our consultant’s qualitative responses revealed an emerging *yes… but* pattern when they were considering these power dynamics. The consultants reported feeling more like an peer than a teacher, but perceived the writer to be more like a student than an peer. As a result of such a perspective, ideas reflective of equal power/authority were often followed by ideas conflicting with them. For example, one consultant explains, “I like collaborating with the students in their writing, but they often defer to my guidance,” and ,“I frequently try to engage and make sure they feel comfortable and realize I’m a student. But mostly it errs on the side of me being the teacher.” Another consultant simply states, “I like to have discussions with students but sometimes it just does not go that way.” Overall, this “yes… but” pattern occurs 14 times within 4 consultants responses to 6 qualitative questions each.

Writing consultations are spaces, places, and objects where both consultant and writer “shore up, build anew, and deconstruct identities, ways of knowing, and the contexts to which they are attached” (Denny, 2005, pg. 45-46). Because a consultation is never as simple as a writer working with another writer, it is important to consider different consultant roles and what they may look like. For example, a writer in Carter-Rod’s (1995) study sought and appreciated a peer relationship with her consultants while a consultant in Bell’s (1989) study expressed a struggle similar to our writing consultants. As he tried to be “an equal, a peer, not an authority figure” (p. 114), he then acknowledged this was not necessarily the case. He was “in charge”. Briggs (1991) found consultants may be more likely to take on a teacher role in short-term WC relationships, and the possibility of becoming more of a peer, counselor, or friend was reserved for more long-term consultant-writer relationships.

Consultant roles can fall on a continuum of teacher/peer, but the tutors may have to work hard to cultivate the role of peer. As one of the consultants in Roswell’s (1992) study commented, “It’s hard to be tutor, because you’re just like everybody else. Except no one expects you to be” (p. 85). Consultants demonstrate their power by speech acts like asking questions (Jordan, 2003), focusing on grammar (Bean, 1998), and giving praise and advice (McClure, 1990). Engaging with writers and focusing on larger concepts takes more time and energy than taking charge of a session and focusing, line-by-line, on grammar (Bean, 1999). While a non-direct approach to consulting can be more empowering for the consultant, directedness is, of course, needed and desired by the writer at times (Vallejo, 2004). Related to the role of teacher/peer is the role of writer that some consultants and writers cast the consultant in (Roswell, 1992). This can be seen as the role of “master and apprentice, implying only time and practice separate the two” (pp. 151-152).

Our consultant’s *yes… but* repetition seems to echo, “*Yes*, I am a peer, *but* the writer is stuck in the role of student,” or “*Yes*, I want to be mutual, *but* there are many obstacles.” Likewise, the culture of higher education tends to promote this *yes… but* dynamic, where we may acknowledge what others articulate with a *yes,* but then we contradict or challenge that point view with a *but*. Critical pedagogy - and its drive to dig deeper, to go beneath surface meanings and to engage a continuous process of learning and unlearning - is at the root of much of this discourse (Shor, 1980). While a *yes… but* approach can offer an effective and meaningful experience, it could also lose its value if the *but* becomes an automatic response rather than one thoughtfully constructed. A (re)considering of this *yes… but* theme is one way to develop queer.

**Developing Queer Literacies in WCs**

While feminist, critical, and multicultural theory and practices have done much to promote and engage understandings of the relationship between culture and composition, sexuality and sexual orientation are equally important factors. Because of the strong linkage of identity and sexuality in the modern world, it is necessary to analyze sexuality in order to fully understand our culture (Sedwick, 1990; Alexander, 2008). According to Alexander (2008), developing sexual literacies allows us to recognize the significant relationship of sexuality to self- and the greater community. This process critically engages the narratives that surround sex and sexuality and examines these stories to discover dominant values and ways to work against constraining norms. At the intersection of self-knowledge and social power, we can find who we imagine ourselves to be as people.

Queerness offers a particular, under-explored, and under-utilized critical power to composition studies (Alexander & Wallace, 2009). Queer literacies encourage us to be reflexively aware of the way we constitute the object we are to teach and learn in order to reinforce the constitutive nature of knowledge production. Because these literacies are not gender or sexuality neutral, they do not reify particular notions of identity and subjectivity. Rather, they create spaces we can examine how gender and sexuality impact our literacy practices and help us understand the relationships among language, forms of representation, human experience, and narratives participate in the creation of identity. In a broader sense, queer literacies include a commitment to freedom in inquiry, expression, social equity, and more democratic educational practices. Practices in and out of the classroom can be sites for analysis of social and collective issues and struggles (Spurlin, 2002).

Queer literacies offer opportunities to understand the complexity of identity, how identities manifest through assorted discourses and texts, how categories or roles have come to dominate the way we understand ourselves and others, and how texts we read and write can become sites of resistance. Bryson and DeCastell (1990) describe queer literacies as a form of praxis used deliberately to interfere with the production of normalcy in education. These literacies aim to help students understand that they have choices and alternatives in how to be and how they express their identities by using or rejecting competing discourses. Queer literacies encourage us to not only subvert processes of normalization, but also to interrupt common modes used to making ourselves and making sense by producing new identifications outside of binary models of roles and identities.

Progressive literacy practices of WCs put us in danger of using normative language to talk about education, disciplines, literature, and experience. From a feminist theory perspective, human experience is organized by patriarchy (Fuss, 1989; Grument, 1988), and gay and lesbian theorists have shown patriarchy is directly linked to heterosexism and heteronormativity (Sedgwick, 1990). In a WC setting, by queering a consultation “the limits of the ordinary can be tested by students and tutors” (Denny, 2005, p. 55). This can involve engagement in the critically reflective practice of problem-posing and embracing the recursive nature of consulting and composing. A queer consultation, then, would push back against the dominant, critical, institutional discourse by promoting a more public conversation that encourages writers to take personal risks. To do this, consultants can collaborate with writers to create new discourse independent from the external influences of a dominant, institutional, and *yes… but* culture in their sessions.

Queerness provides a way to engage in discussions about how intimate and personal aspects of our lives relate to and depend on the larger institutional, cultural, and political narratives, which directly affect how we think about and construct our selves. As Miller (1994) discusses, those in composition studies receive little training in how to respond to “parodic, critical, oppositional, dismissive, resistant, transgressive, and regressive” texts (p. 349), the kind of texts that can be opportunities to empower a writer to make the personal public. In order to prepare consultants to disrupt dominate discourses, literacy improvisation activities in consultant PD encourage identities that adapt and push beyond the limits of the ordinary within the fluctuations of a session.

**Literacy-Improvisation in the WC**

The overarching rule of improvisation calls for “accepting all offers,” which can empower writers and consultants to trust one another’s intelligence and imagination while collaboratively construct meaning (Fishman et al., 2005).  Viewing consultations as improvisational performances bridges social situations and agency, allowing consultants to respond effectively to shifting contexts in these social interactions (Goffman, 1959).

In these contexts, improvisation pivots on a notion of collaboration and co-creation of a dynamic text. As such, we have come to think of the work we do with improv as *literacy improvisation*. Utilizing Tina Fey’s rules of improvisation, Assistant Director of the UWC at ECU Erin Herrmann and I constructed a working definition of *literacy improvisation*. Fey offers four rules for the type of improvisation that may be familiar to people who have ever watch an improv troop of actors at a club or on television: 1. Agree, 2. Don’t just say yes. Say yes and, 3. Make statements, and 4. There are no mistakes… Only opportunities (see Appendix 1). These rules offer us verbs (Britzman, 1995) or actions -- respecting, contributing, creating, and adapting -- that expand rather than limit consultants in their professional and identity development. The *literacy* part indicates embodiment, practices, and understanding of the fluid roles and identities of consultants as writers, consultants, or teachers and encourages us to think critically about and outside of dominant discourses (Banks, 2003).

As Madson (2005) explains, “When the answer to all questions is yes, you enter a new world, a world of action, possibility, and adventure… Yes glues us together… Yes expands your world” (p. 27). The act of saying *yes* marks a shift from a private and more passive discourse to an active and public discourse. This act can open paths for such an adventure beyond the limits “normal” to something new. Literacy improvisation activities provide opportunities for consultants to construct and embody various approaches to composition, consultations, and collaboration while considering the (dis)connections among language, power, and actions. In order to disrupt the academy’s binary tensions, these exercises challenge the limitations of expected roles and disrupt the hyper-critical *yes… but* culture of higher education. This disruption is an attempt to queer this discourse, and practicing a *yes… and* discourse in the WC in turn helps build a broader a *yes… and* culture.

By viewing these identities as performances, or “postures” (Harris 31), consultants and writers gain the ability to adopt and shift to alternate identities appropriate for purpose and context, responding writer’s individual unique and dynamic strengths and needs.

Literacy-related activities like literacy improvisation are living in the on-going present, forming relations and connections across signs, objects, and bodies in unexpected ways (Leander and Boldt, 2012).  They are saturated with emotions and affect and help us keep the distinction between description and prescription sharp and in order to begin to imagine what else may be going on.  A body in motion is an immediate, unfolding relation to its own nonpresent potential for variance. There is a relationship between the body and its indeterminacy – its openness to becoming that in each moment is a different becoming. Each movement is not the same old thing; it is contributing something new to the world (Massumi, 2002).  Rather than being stagnant or stuck in one place, consultants are moving and embodying the fluid nature of their roles and the action of consulting.

Of course, *yes… but-*ting has its benefits in addition to the drawbacks already mentioned.  Literacy improvisation activities, if incorporated into consultant PD, provide the space, time, and structure to explore and embody the collaborative nature of WC work along with the dynamic identities regularly enacted by consultants.  They ask consultants to take risks, think critically, and perform for others, engaging in the form of different, non-written literacy.

**Queering in Action**

One literacy improvisation activity consultants have found to be both fun and meaningful is *Flocking* (see Appendix 2). While it could be done at any point in a weekly meeting, we tend to begin and end meetings with these kinds of exercises as they are effective ways to introduce concepts or topics/synthesize important ideas.   
 In Flocking, the ensemble scatters throughout the room as music begins the performance. To start, consultant A begins a movement, and everyone else emulates that movement. Consultant A then sends the energy and leader role to consultant B by making eye contact with her, and consultant B changes the movement very slightly. The ensemble then follows that movement, and the process continues throughout the group.

During this literacy improvisation activity, the group must work collaboratively and seamlessly to create a dynamic and changing composition. The composition shows how the body and energy can move throughout a group as the ensemble changes the composition without word or gesture or prescribed cues as in a dance. The embodied literacy shows how groups can work as a team to build on one another’s movements, and it shows how collectively we respond as a culture as power circulates through individuals (Butler, 1990).

Activities like flocking demonstrate, through small acts of subversion, how power dynamics can be understood and pushed back against in a WC PD setting. In this activity, each person’s participation (or resistance) matters. If just one person decides to stay off the path everyone else is taking, the group as a whole could be affected. Not everyone knows who has the power, as leadership is not passed with a grand gesture but with a small, subtle glance. This activity explores the ambiguous transfer of power, the operation of small gestures, the significance of a sign being produced and reproduced signifying the embodiment of an idea or authority (Halberstam, 2011; Butler, 1990). Though these and other activities, such as “Yes… and…” (see Appendix 3), we can build new and different cultures and practices.

**Coming to a (Queer) Conclusion**

We are starting to play with these ideas and engage in some of these conversations in our WC.  Queer theory has provided us with a way to subvert possible troubles that come with writing consultant work. Specifically, literacy improvisation in consults PD facilitates the exploration of consultant identities in a way that offers a critical perspective on who were are and what we do in the WC.

While Denny (2005) offers the idea of consultants engaging in a sort of coming out in PD as a way to foster conversation of shared knowledge and the give and take of a consultation, we worry that this kind of self-disclosure may have a flattening effect, minimizing diversity rather than celebrating it (Alexander & Rhodes, 2014, p. 431). We hope that literacy improvisation can offer opportunities to meander in “unknowable difference” with each other, speak into and at the *curious silences* in consultations to disrupt dominant discourses (Rihn & Sloan, 2013), and marinate in any subjective or political construct that emerges so that we may do the same with writers in our centers.

Heeding Denny’s (2005) cautioning of identity politics and against any epistemology as offering a totalizing way of knowing, we hope that this approach encourages consultants to (re)consider concepts like public, risk, and normal. We are interested in the possible paths that could be unveiled in the future if literacy improvisation is applied to other important ideas in queer theory like memory (Halberstam, 2011), homophobia, inclusiveness, and the homo/hetero binary (Alexander & Wallace, 2009; Rihn & Sloan, 2013).

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Appendix 1  
Literacy Improvisation handout

Both writing and consulting involve imagination, improvisation, and enactments (Rice, 2008), embodied practices that are also central to much current queer theory (Butler, 2004; Saloman, 2008; Alexander, 2008). The overarching rule of improvisation calls for “accepting all offers,” which can empowers writers, and consultants, to trust one another’s intelligence and imagination and to collaboratively construct meaning (Fishman et al., 2005).

Literacy improvisation is an approach framed by queer theory and structured around dramatic improv. Literacy improvisation activities provide opportunities for consultants to construct and embody various approaches to composition, consultations, and collaboration while considering the (dis)connections among language, power, and actions.

As writing consultants, we already participate in improvisation everyday: writing is riffing; consulting is riffing. On the symbolic stage of the WC, actors work together within the flexible structure of consultations without a script or previously determined scenario to build knowledge and make meaning together.

Our 4 Rules

1.) Agree,

2.) Don’t just say yes. Say *yes and*,

3.) Make statements, and

4.) There are no mistakes … Only opportunities.

(Tina Fey, 2011)

We extract from these rules four possible consultant actions: respect, contribute, create, and adapt.

A Few More Ideas

* There are no scripts. Just be here. Start anywhere. Act now.
* Be average. You don’t have to be witty and amazing all the time!
* Pay attention. Watch. Listen.
* Make your partner look good, and take care of each other.
* Enjoy the ride. ☺

Appendix 2  
Literacy improvisation Activity  
  
These improvisation activities were developed by Dr. Lil Brannon and Lacy Manship at UNC-Charlotte.

**Flocking**

In this improvisation activity, the ensemble must work collaboratively and seamlessly to create a dynamic and changing composition. The composition shows how the body and energy can move throughout a group as the ensemble changes the composition without word or gesture or prescribed cues as in a dance. The embodied literacy shows how groups can work as a team to build on one another’s movements and it shows how collectively we shift as a culture as power circulates through various individuals.

**The activity:**

The ensemble scatters throughout the room as music begins the performance.

Member A of the ensemble begins a movement and all members of the ensemble continue to do that movement.

Member A then through eye contact sends the energy to Member B who changes the movement very slightly. The ensemble then follows that movement.

The process continues throughout the ensemble.

Appendix 3  
Literacy Improvisation Activity

**Yes… and . . .**We live in a “yes… but” culture, where we acknowledge what others tell us with a “yes” and then contradict their point of view with a “but.” In order to share energy and power in improvisation, the culture shifts to a “yes… and” culture, where one acknowledges the place from which another is coming and then builds on that starting place by “and-ing” the person with how alternatives build from that place (for example, “I see what you are saying, and I want to add this” or “I see you are saying X and I see Y as a point of difference or as something else to be considered.” In improvisation, the ensemble builds trust and moves energy through the ensemble through the following “yes… and” activity.

**The activity:**

The ensemble gathers in a circle.

Member A of the ensemble sends energy to another by looking directly at that member (Member B) while simultaneously pointing to him/her. Member B acknowledges with a “yes” that he/she is being pointed to and this “yes” signals that the other member may have her/his placed in the circle. Member A begins to walk towards Member B to assume his/her place in the circle.

Member B then point to another member in the circle (Member C). Member B must wait in her/his place until Member C acknowledges with a “yes”. Member B then walks towards Member C to take his/her place in the circle while Member C points to another member and receives a “Yes”.

The process continues throughout the ensemble.