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Consultant Insight

On Returning to One's Center for the First Time

—Julia Kelley, Eric Mason, and Aidan Rivas

Introduction

When COVID-19 restrictions hit schools in spring of 2020, the Writing and Communication Center (WCC) at Nova Southeastern University (NSU) went completely remote, offering only online consultations via Zoom to its 20,000+ students. Although we had always had some online consultations and felt well-prepared to deliver our services effectively online, we worked hard, especially over the summer of 2020, to revise our training materials and policies to prepare consultants for this mode of working with clients. This mode stayed with us for some time, as it did for many centers that wanted to continue serving students and yet remain flexible and responsive to the ongoing pandemic. While we had some staff return to work out of the physical center in fall of 2021, all consultations continued to be conducted online. As of fall 2022, we are once again conducting sessions in person, and realized that much of what we had developed over the last two years would need to be reconsidered. After all, the majority of our active graduate coordinators and undergraduate consultants had only ever worked for the WCC in a remote capacity. We had to reacquaint ourselves with the flows and constraints of face-to-face (f2f) work.

The reflection below began as an episode of our center's podcast, The Writer's Edge (anchor.fm/nsuwcc), in which two of our Graduate Assistant Coordinators (GACs)—Julia Kelley and Aidan Rivas—sat down with one of our Faculty Coordinators—Dr. Eric Mason—to try to better understand what this change in modality meant for the work of graduate assistants charged with making sure that appointments ran smoothly and effectively. We thought continuing this conversation here in *SDC* would provide some further insight into what it meant to be a

consultant transitioning (back, for some, and for others, for the first time) to f2f work. We started by listening to our conversation recorded as the "The Writers' Edge Team Re-Centers" podcast episode, and then went back and expanded on the ideas that had emerged in our discussion. This essay is the result of that process.

Understanding the Affordances of Interfaces

In modern communication ecologies saturated with digital media, Collin Gifford Brooke argues that our "basic unit of analysis" should shift "from textual objects to medial interfaces" (6). We often use the term "interface" to describe the screen-based layouts of digital applications. However, we "interface" with the world and those in it in many ways, from digital devices to physical space to language itself. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the primary interface of our center changed, leading us to make use of Zoom, webcams, and screen sharing to view and discuss student work. Overall, we received positive feedback from clients during this time. However, for each student that happily used our services online, we seemed to have another who wished we could return to f2f consultations. Our consultants had varying levels of technological literacy, which meant that we needed to create and facilitate remote training modules for operating Zoom and messaging platforms such as Slack and GoToMeeting (which we used for internal communication among consultants, GACs, and WCC leadership) if we wanted to ensure that each appointment was conducted successfully and WCC operations flowed smoothly. In other words, we created interfaces for learning other interfaces.

Even after designing and delivering the new training, we discovered much about how best to use these platforms to conduct consultations by making use of their "affordances." Affordances have been defined as "characteristics of an ecological environment, or object, which allow for certain uses" (Kreniske 4). They are the functions made available through the interfaces we use—the things we often identify a specific interface as being "good for." The affordances of Zoom are partly a factor of the features and tools available in that system. For example, in Zoom our consultants and clients can use the "annotate" feature to type or use their mouse to draw onto a shared screen. Annotations made this way are visible to all, which can be quite useful for drawing attention to short sections of writing. Participants also have simultaneous access to

the affordances of the devices used to access Zoom. Consultants, for instance, could easily (and, even, privately) research answers to client questions in real-time in separate browser windows. Additionally, the online interface made it easy to share resources, or to take notes while a client talked without drawing attention away from the client. In other words, the online interface made it easier to control what was and was not visible/audible to clients during the consultation, a luxury that the f2f consultation does not afford.

For our more anxious clients, Zoom allowed a higher degree of control of these meetings as well. Clients anxious about sharing their work with a peer, who might be uncomfortable in close proximity to consultants, or who might prefer a location besides the WCC, could more easily manage such discomfort. In a typical f2f consultation at our center, clients and consultants are seated near each other in public view and within earshot of others in the center. Remote consultations allowed for increased privacy, but this higher level of confidentiality also meant that there was less direct oversight of individual sessions from WCC administration. We neither recorded each session nor dropped in unexpectedly into sessions. The online interface may have made it more difficult to communicate one's attention to the other using actions such as making eye contact, nodding, and other body language. Sometimes, clients even made these cues unavailable by choosing to disable their webcam. Muting the webcam, audio, or screen sharing, and even the decision as to when to close the meeting are affordances easily accessed via the Zoom interface, making it much simpler for consultants or clients to manage uncomfortable situations. It is certainly not common for our consultations to end with grief, but the affordances of online consultations allow for such unlikely events to be handled very differently compared to consultations in our physical center.

Developing In-Demand Skill Sets

Although there were challenges operating remotely in an ecology of digital applications, the interfaces we were exposed to did strengthen several key skill sets. This kind of skill development is unsurprising, because solving problems in an ecology of new tools and situations is the "ground for acquiring new knowledge" that leads to taking "full advantage of digital environments" (Kaplan 3). Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged our technological literacies and demanded more

flexibility from us as writing center professionals, leading us to learn the functions and intricacies of platforms such as Zoom and GoToMeeting to conduct consultations, and to find new ways to use tools like Canvas and Slack to facilitate daily operations.

We also had to learn to innovate. While affordances are often looked at as "those actions that the system enables," it is also true, as Nancy Kaplan argues, that affordances are "what people can imagine using the system to accomplish" (3). In other words, the affordances one identifies within a system are dependent on what you, the user, can creatively imagine using them for. Thus, an important aspect of our technological literacy was our willingness to not just follow instructions for how to use a platform, but our use of them as tools for creative problem-solving. For example, our podcasting team identified tools to record remotely so that hosts and guests didn't need to be in the same room to record episodes. As we continue to move further into the digital age, being knowledgeable and innovative users of digital tools is crucial.

Our tutors also developed multimodal design skills. We saw enhanced design literacy not only in the additional work WCC staff did with digital applications and social media to stay in contact with remote workers and to maintain consultant well-being, but in our education and training materials and procedures that had to be updated to account for the virtual ecology in which we were operating. We had to think strategically about how consultants would navigate through the Canvas interface (where all of our training modules live), and develop more video resources to engage consultants more effectively online. We developed workshops as well related to professional development and diversity education, streamed through Zoom using presentations designed in Canva or Google Slides. Many faculty members took this time as an opportunity to redesign their courses in a more structured way that highlighted online multimodal resources and tools, giving students more freedom to develop projects not constrained by the classroom space. The willingness to experiment and explore a variety of perspectives and possibilities are further examples of skills consultants need as future leaders.

Even within these virtual settings, we also relearned the importance of body language. The proximity that in-person environments offer provides a clearer reading of social cues and understandings, such as those built on good posture, eye contact, and attentive listening. Body

language is not as easily detected in an online platform like Zoom, and thus requires consultants to be that much more cognizant of the signals they were sending. What online consulting has taught us—if not apparent before—is just how powerful our nonverbal cues are in our communication practices. Now that we have returned to in-person consultations, we can apply this knowledge to this new stage of our center.

Managing Time in the Writing Center

Being a productive writer often means learning to schedule time for the various stages of composing, and returning to our center re-focused our attention on how much administrative work in a writing center also focuses on managing the flow and demands of time. Clients come in and out of the space, sometimes early or late for their appointments, and consultants only have a limited amount of time with which to work with them on any given day, with those consultations themselves being strategically scheduled (hopefully) to give students enough time to plan or revise to meet upcoming deadlines. Hosting these consultations online via Zoom had affected the distribution of this work across time in a few ways. For some students, working online made it easier to schedule appointments or to show up on time, negating the need to commute to campus (the time for which, in South Florida, can be highly variable) and thus provided extra time to attend to personal or professional needs. For others, online consultations made it easier to have online resources such as citation references and library resource guides ready-at-hand, so no time was wasted searching for them.

Both clients and consultants may have benefited from more flexible scheduling during the pandemic, because individuals weren't limited as much by the days and times when they would already be physically on campus to schedule appointments. Commuting from home or across campus is a larger factor with in-person appointments, making the start time of appointments more fluid than the phrase "at the top of the hour" would suggest. Students sometimes arrive anywhere from 20 minutes early to 10 minutes late to in-person appointments, while online appointments would commonly begin with both parties logging in right at the start time. And "walk-in" consultations, where students had no appointment but were assigned to a free consultant soon after arriving at the center, were rare during the pandemic. Still, it seems that

consultations run more smoothly in-person. Some consultants have observed that their sessions tended to be shorter online compared to in-person consultations, perhaps because the social interactions associated with f2f work sometimes get reduced to a minimum, providing more time to work. Or perhaps it is just easier to end a session by clicking a button than by walking away from someone in person.

One of the biggest changes we noticed upon the return to in-person operation is that real-time interventions by center leadership became much easier to initiate than during the pandemic. Since it was difficult to be in multiple online spaces at once, it was not common when we were working remotely for coordinators to drop into online consultations unannounced in consultants' personal Zoom rooms, since doing so might make them unavailable in other online spaces. When online, we usually waited for consultants to reach out to us with questions or issues. Upon our return to in-person operation, however, coordinators reported that it was easier to get a general sense of what was going on in multiple sessions at once, and to provide "just-in-time" support to consultants. While we had previously supplied this type of mid-consultation support through Slack or GTM during the pandemic if consultants reached out to us, in-person operation allows coordinators to recognize these opportunities even when consultants do not. These observations serve as a reminder that kairos, or timeliness, is a key aspect of writing and writing consultation and that the management of the work flow in a center is a time-based aspect of center administration with which coordinators will need to become reacquainted now that our interface has shifted.

Conclusion

As consultants, GACs, and faculty committed to developing the skills and practices necessary to deliver high-quality consultations, we welcome this opportunity to reflect on what we learned during the pandemic, and what we need to re-learn as we return to having a physical presence at the NSU Writing and Communication Center. It is important to note that while some of us are returning to a physical presence in our center, many more are learning what it means to deliver in-person consultation services for the first time. Part of this learning process is recognizing the affordances available through these various modalities and how our relationships to the tools and technologies and spaces we

work in affect our ability to identify best practices and work productively with others.

The widespread shift to online consultations posed significant challenges to consultants and writing center daily operations, prompting the need for new training and increased familiarity with online interfaces. But it also provided opportunities for learning new skill sets connected to these digital tools and spaces, and renewed attention to labor conditions and management styles. By working in this remote consultation ecology over the last two years, we gained an increased awareness and appreciation of the situations of others, of the value of non-verbal cues in communication, of the opportunities to explore multimodal expressions of creativity as student and professor, and of the technological and social literacies that we develop through online platforms. These insights are necessary for cultivating meaningful relationships and connections in current and future digital communication ecologies, and will ensure that we are able to approach future challenges with the flexible and timely responses necessary to maintain client satisfaction and consultant well-being.

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Contributor Bios

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Aidan Rivas is a second-year master's student in the Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media program at NSU. He is also a Graduate Assistant Coordinator at the Writing and Communication Center. His background is in communications with a focus in digital media production, and work experience primarily in graphic design and corporate communications. His academic work tends to examine heuristics for pedagogy and learning in multimodal contexts.

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