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Interchapter 2C

The *No-Stakes* Agenda: A Unique Approach to Equity

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Image adapted from Gerd Altman, Pixabay

About the Author

Rachel graduated from Western with degrees in sociology and women, gender, and sexuality studies. In her three years at the Studio, she mixed her passions for equity/inclusion into writing tutoring techniques. She will pursue an advanced degree in social research while working with higher-education students and staff. The editors welcome communication about this piece through the Studio's email: rws@wwu.edu.

I could sense the worry and tension the minute they walked in. They looked frazzled—like they had been stressed all week and were falling behind. But they also looked purposeful, so I could tell that they had an agenda. When I greeted them (let's call them Chris), I was hit with a flood of information about their huge assignment, their lack of progress, and their need to work quickly and effectively. Chris disclosed that they had obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), which often made them obsess too long over a task and pick out every little flaw. But they had a proposition: Chris would set a time limit for each task, and I would be their personal reminder to let them know when they needed to move on. Well, this request was different from the usual! I could tell that my typical consultation tactics would not work here. Instead, I knew it was best to go with Chris' suggestion and let them work on their own. And that's how the *no-stakes agenda* was born.

A no-stakes agenda (NSA) is a mindset that studio assistants have while going into a consultation. Instead of putting forward specific goals, the assistant evaluates the student's needs and works towards the student's success. Letting go of my own agenda requires me to reflect on and set aside any assumptions I might be leading with when entering in a consultation. To accomplish an NSA, I remain adaptable and allow visitors to have control. While it may seem counterintuitive, the flexible NSA approach helped Chris feel successful in their writing because they received the support that they authentically needed. Contrast this with a more traditional consulting agenda: to improve thesis, find sources, perfect grammar, or other things we think are pressing fixes.

Maintaining rigid scripts in consultations does not provide flexible support and can discourage students who do not feel like these structures fit their learning processes (Chandler & Sutton, 2018). Rigid scripts can occur when writing assistants get into a routine with students in consultations. It is very common for all consultations to start off the same: asking for background information on the assignment, taking an initial run-through of the draft, asking the student for their concerns, and then find a solution for that problem. Many consultants are most comfortable starting all sessions with these scripts, partly because visitors tend to have similar questions about their writing and partly because tutors can get stuck in the problem-solution rigidity of consultations. But Chris was not at a place to accept help with revising or editing quite yet, so if I had insisted on looking at their syllabus or assignment, I would have just delayed their progress and may have alienated them. Relinquishing a more traditional script, I did not ask them about their assignment at all. Instead, I took an NSA approach, adopting their agenda as my own.

In cultivating an NSA approach, consultants honor visitors' agency because they respect their agendas and their abilities to use their skills effectively for their own learning. The NSA allows students to decide what they want to work on without holding them to my own or others' traditional standards of research and writing. Interactions with students become less scripted and less transactional; they are in control of the consultation and have agency over their learning. When I allow students agency over their learning, they create their own expectations about their writing rather than needing to meet my ideals. Over time, the NSA allows students take ownership of their own writing, develop their instincts, and manage their learning process.

The flexibility of NSAs creates opportunity for greater educational justice. With Chris for instance, I was able to create an equitable learning environment even though their needs differed from others; the structural flexibility allowed for their needs to be met and reminded me that my agenda should always be in the best interest of the student. A space is only equitable if it can easily accommodate requests without making anyone feel like their needs deviate from the norm. In reflecting back on my interaction with Chris, I know they felt more empowered — they know they belong. Prompting this confidence in every student is important because I know there are barriers to academic success for many identities. Ensuring equity is something universities are prioritizing, but enacting equity requires structural change. Studio-based learning practices can be one structural solution to equity-related challenges. By providing flexible accommodations to students through NSA practices, libraries, writing centers, and studios can flip the power structure and work toward equity. Although not the sole solution to educational justice, NSAs promote both agency and inclusivity by challenging my own scripts and by allowing students like Chris the power to propose "counterscripts" (Chandler & Sutton, 2018, p. 13). By giving each student thoughtful attention and adapting specifically to their needs, I am creating an equitable learning environment.

When my shift was over, Chris was still on track. I left knowing that I had played an important role in supporting their learning. Holding space for students to make progress is a powerful thing, and a no-stakes agenda creates that space. Chris needed a way to flesh out their ideas on their own and learn the skills of being able to manage their writing process without my interference. If I had changed the course of the

consultation, they would have continued in their patterns of obsessive thinking rather

than having agency to continue drafting ways that work best for their needs. By

encouraging a practice that strives for flexibility, we inherently create a learning

environment that is more equitable, because it puts student needs first and above all

else.

References

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