

2021

Interchapter 5A

Holding Space in Consultations: Choosing your own Adventure

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About the Author

A 2020 graduate, Ally is continuing down her path to become a clinical psychologist. When not skillfully procrastinating literature reviews, she enjoys anything artsy, swimming, and exploring ways to best hold space for those around her. The editors welcome communication about this piece through the Studio's email: rws@wwu.edu.

RECOMMENDED CITATION, APA 7TH ED

Duvall, A. (2021). Holding space in consultations: Choosing your own adventure. In R. D. Kjesrud, P. Hemsley, S. Jensen, & E. Winningham (Eds.), *Learning enhanced: Studio practices for engaged inclusivity* (pp. 5A.1 – 5A.8). Western Libraries CEDAR. https://cedar.wwu.edu/learning_enhanced/9

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We all have heard (or said) the famous “I am a crappy writer” speech. Even as I am writing this, I feel like I’m not up to the task. Whether we hear this doubt from a visitor or feel it within ourselves, we all recognize how negative self-talk impacts us. I can’t begin to count the students who have come into the Studio and immediately discounted their ideas and abilities. These students automatically label themselves as bad writers even though they can’t nail down what a “good writer” has that they don’t. We compare ourselves to some unattainable standard even though good writing exists within everyone.

Taking time to unpack why someone feels like a bad writer can make a huge difference in how they treat themselves, their writing, and their abilities. When we focus exclusively on the writing someone shares with us, we often forget to attend to the humanity we all share. Yes, we are writers, researchers, and readers. But we are also human, and when we are consulting, we are being human together with our visitors. Writing is inherently vulnerable, so when someone feels like they are crappy, they are predisposed to avoid sharing their thoughts with others. This crappy writer cycle costs so much and results in only more frustration and self-doubt. Who needs more self-doubt? Not me!

Those of us who work in studios or writing centers must hold space for this vicious cycle and show our visitors they aren’t alone in combating their negative self-talk. Holding space means being present with someone without judgment and accepting their lived experiences as truth. By holding space for those around us, we can increase our awareness levels, practice empathy and compassion, and simply be there for

someone other than ourselves. I personally visualize holding space as “embracing with two hands instead of pointing with one finger” (Kim, 2018). Holding space also confronts how we view productivity and efficiency by removing our agenda from a consultation. We might think the visitor could take their paper in a different direction but focusing on that change would be centering our voice. By not pushing our agenda, we prioritize the voice of the other person and challenge our common urge to fix things. Applying this concept felt counter to my instincts at first, but now it’s second nature. As you continue reading more about how to hold space, I challenge you to move past any discomfort and appreciate holding space for the way it connects us with others; these connections create opportunities for growth, deeper understanding, and unconditional compassion—both for writers and consultants.

Embracing Individuality

I first encountered holding space in a facilitator training for a non-profit, [Our Treehouse](#), that holds grief groups for families, teens, and young adults. This concept stuck out to me because I was so used to trying to help or fix people when they were dealing with a problem. Holding space challenges our human instinct to be “Bob the Builder” and helps us situate a person as the expert in their own experience. After this training at Our Treehouse, I came back to the Studio and immediately saw how we practice holding space. We all know that there is no single writing process, just as there is no single way to grieve someone who has died. Holding space doesn’t rank the different ways people write (or ways people grieve) and acknowledges the uniqueness of each person’s lived experience.

At Our Treehouse, we hold space by trusting that each person has the power and ability within themselves to heal and continue their lifelong grief journey. In the Studio, we do this by trusting that each person has the power and ability within themselves to write and continue their journey of lifelong learning. In micro-consultations, we demonstrate that we believe in the visitor's ability to succeed; by scaffolding tailored strategies to serve as a foundation for success, they develop confidence in their process and product. By leaving them to work the strategy and checking back in when they (mostly) succeed, we are physically giving them space to practice independent learning. Holding space supports visitors by meeting them where they are and putting them in the driver's seat of the consultation.

Corey's Crappy Writing Adventure: Three Paths for Holding Space

The transcript activity (Corey's Crappy Writing Adventure) below demonstrates three paths for holding space: Holding Space for the Assignment, Holding Space for the Process, and Holding Space for Affect. Each path demonstrates holding space in a different way depending on what the visitor is focused on, whether that's making the product, examining their process, or taking a step back to explore their mindset. Each path leads to a unique outcome, and Corey benefits from any of them.



Click this link to Join Corey's Adventure

Holding Space for the Assignment

While some may see holding space for “I am a crappy writer” as most beneficial in the long run, not every visitor is ready for that conversation while actively worrying about their assignment. Remember this isn’t about our priorities; holding space means withholding judgment and creating room for what the visitor needs in the moment. Visitors may be preoccupied with finishing because the deadline is approaching, or they are “so over” the assignment. For these visitors, the Assignment Path honors their felt need and helps them produce a much-needed product. In the Assignment adventure, the consultant holds space by positioning Corey as the expert, by asking open-ended questions to prompt strengths, and by tailoring a best-fit, get-it-done strategy. Note how this path not only benefits Corey, it also provides the consultant new to holding space an opportunity to try new practices without completely departing from the familiar.

Holding Space for the Process

While this path helps with the present assignment, the Process Path also acknowledges the bigger picture and influences how future assignments go for Corey. The Process Path creates a place to explore the way visitors write and how that impacts their writing, present and future. The consultant holds process space by intentionally asking Corey about what they’ve done so far, strategies they usually use, places they often get stuck—even about the amount of time they work without breaks. The consultant can validate Corey's frustration but also take time to notice strengths and goals. The Process Path invests in Corey’s future by recognizing that productivity is more than just finishing this single product.

Holding Space for the Affect

The Affect Path unpacks Corey’s “crappy writer” mindset and provides a strategy to challenge that mindset. The consultant creates space for Corey to sit with their feelings of having crappy ideas and may gently probe the origin of those feelings. The Affect Path allows space for letting Corey know they aren’t alone in feeling like a crappy writer and may even prompt Corey to consider the possibility that possibly, just possibly, not all their ideas are lousy. To provide a break from feelings of failure, I often recommend taking a physical break because they’re often over-focused on their work. By suggesting a break, this path holds space for Corey’s mental health without judging what they need.

Benefits of Holding Space

Challenging Productivity

Time, efficiency, and productivity motivate all three paths, yet we can be productive without being efficient and efficient without being productive; in short, time determines neither efficiency nor productivity. We may skip over attending to visitors as people because we want to focus on their assignments and not waste their time. This attitude limits what we can accomplish in a consultation and works against life-long learning. As we can see in the Affect Path, taking time to explore Corey’s crappy writer mindset will likely increase both productivity and efficiency. Whether holding space for an assignment, process, affect, or something else, consultants can challenge productivity’s time-based definition and re-focus our efforts to what is most beneficial in that moment. By keeping the principles of holding space in your consulting toolkit, we

can be ready to meet visitors where they are in their writing adventures.

Being Human Together

I love how holding space connects us. Not every space prioritizes being human together; in a world where every person has a unique story, we can all stand to learn more from each other. Holding space lays the foundations for lasting relationships, with the people we work with, the visitors we consult, or with people just passing through. Holding space adds layers of acceptance, unconditional love, and interest that we could all have more of in our lives. If we all hold space for each other, imagine the impact. The person who was afraid to apply for a job because they thought their written application wouldn't be good enough applies anyway. The kid who avoids research papers at all costs tries a new way to organize their claims and realizes their ideas are better than they thought. And who knows, the next Maya Angelou could decide to send off their book proposal because someone acknowledged and held space for their crappy writer thoughts and helped them find confidence in their abilities. We have all heard and sometimes said "I am a crappy writer"; what if we didn't run from these words? How can you hold space for someone's voice, mindset, and journey?

References

Kim, J. (2019). What does it mean/look like to hold space for someone? *Medium*.

<https://medium.com/@angrytherapist/what-does-it-mean-look-like-to-hold-space-for-someone-5feb78134caf>