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Interchapter 6B

Just the FAQs:
What Enquirers want to Know

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About the Author

Roberta was a peer tutor, a staff supervisor, and a director at Western Washington University's Writing Center between 1988-2015. In 2015, she became the Director of Writing for Western Libraries' Hacherl Research & Writing Studio. The editors welcome communication about this piece through the Studio's email: rws@wwu.edu.

Micro-Consulting Session Length

Your typical micro-consultation is around 13 minutes, but if a writing assistant wants to talk with a student for longer, can they? Is there a way for students who need more time/more help to get it?

I would flip the question: Exactly what outcomes will students gain in a longer session that serial micro-consultations wouldn't accomplish as well or better? I can't personally articulate good answers beyond tradition or a sense of wanting to feel needed. In high demand when Studio Assistants are each rotating between 3-5 visitors, micro-consulting happens naturally because our only other alternative is to turn people away. Because of the all-for-one-one-for-all ethos of learning in community, both staff and visitors prefer this equitable approach. In low demand, staff are asked to reflect on whether one long session is *really* best. Transcript evidence from longer sessions reveals much less procedural scaffolding, including few process strategies and little practice time (see Interchapter 2A, The Art of Leaving). I really can't say this strongly enough: we think people need us, and they do—but not for long. Sometimes they think they need us, but we need to show them that they don't. Given that agency is one of our main outcomes, longer sessions usually undermine that outcome.

Senior staff micro-consultations are generally very close to the 13-minute mean, but data show new staff consult for longer. Novice staff call on previous experience coaching friends in long sessions, and they have gotten used to being there to be there to witness the "Aha!" But more significantly, new staff initially lack micro-consulting strategies, so their sessions are longer until they've had enough practice assessing need without reading papers, setting incremental priorities, and choosing strategies that match visitors' strengths. Few have intentionally scaffolded before either, so there's a

learning curve to implementing I do – We do – You do. As new staff gain experience with SBL and as they begin to experiment with how quickly they can transition a learner to self-regulated learning, they gain pleasure from seeing visitors learn to trust themselves. Also, staff see advantages to both visitors and staff in having some time to step back and reflect on whether the scaffolding process is meeting the learning goals. Such mid-course adjustments simply don't happen often in traditional appointments. I don't have the data in front of me, but after practicing for about ten weeks, new staff revert to mean session length. Longer sessions still happen occasionally, even for senior staff. My last one-hour session was about three years ago, so that shows you how rare they are. The visitor was a veteran returning to school after time away, and he was recovering from a career-ending injury. He had three children, zero confidence, and a boatload of financial worry. I made the intentional decision to hold space and listen to his story because I decided that conceptual understanding and process strategies took a back seat to affective goals.

The second part of the question—what about students who need longer sessions—implies that high needs students (like the veteran) need extended help. I argue that it's far better to stagger this help over time. If students need to get from A to G in their learning, there is simply no way they will succeed if we try scaffolding that much growth in one step. High needs visitors may need more consultations, but they need *shorter* increments to ensure we scaffold success. For example, we have several frequent flyers on the spectrum. It's very common for them to spend hours in the Studio back and forth between consulting and working on their own. In total, they may receive more than an hour of consulting, but cramming that into a pre-packaged appointment length simply

makes no sense. Visitors understand immediately that hour-long sessions are counterproductive. Often visitors will wave me away saying, "Okay I've had enough now, I need to work on this." When I say I'll step away and check on them in 10 minutes, at least 85% of visitors show visible relief. It's this reaction that taught me our old methods were simply overwhelming. Of course, some visitors from more vulnerable identities or who have a long project (like a graduate thesis) benefit from an ongoing relationship with a Studio Assistant well versed in the context. For them we offer both a credit- or non-credit practicum partnership where students meet weekly with the same assistant; even so, those sessions feature SBL and integrated literacies pedagogies.

Virtual Studio

How do your online services work?

We typically offer several virtual options, including chat, asynchronous response to drafts submitted online, virtual consulting, and online learning modules.

- **Chat**

Many of our visitors come through chat, which runs through Libanswers, a library-oriented product by Springshare. Staffed during most library hours, a chat window automatically pops up when visitors consult the Library or Studio website. Information desk staffers answer chats and transfer them appropriately across the Libraries, including to the Studio. All studio staff remain logged in to chat during shifts. When chats are quick questions, we answer and end the chat. When chats come from visitors in process, we leave the chat open so they can check back with us as needed while they work. When chat questions are highly complex, the system allows us to convert them into tickets so we can queue and refer them. Finally, when the chat

medium isn't adequate to the visitor's learning needs, we invite them to join us on Zoom instead. The Libanswers system also serves as a platform Ask Us, a searchable FAQ. Adding chat would improve any writing center, but though chat platforms are common to libraries, they are uncommon among other support services. I speculate that chat is not common in writing centers because of traditions around appointments, long sessions, and a preference for face-to-face learning.

- **Asynchronous Response**

Visitors can submit writing online through our website for response within 48 hours. Although visitors can choose from written or screencast response, transcript evidence indicates that, in direct contradiction to our in-person pedagogies, written responses seldom feature scaffolding. In other words, written responses mainly target knowing *about* (see Chapter 2 for more on knowing *about*, *how*, and to *become*). On the other hand, screencasts prompt growth in all three types of knowledge; Studio Assistants follow the I do-You do sequence for demonstrating strategies, for adding visual cues to strategy scaffolds, and for prompting meta reflection. Screencasting, then, is an equity practice because it approximates outcomes parity with in-person learning. Unfortunately, new staff strongly prefer written response, partly because it's what they are used to and partly because they are self-conscious about recording their own voice. To counter the encultured preference for written response, we review evidence in our staff development. Visitors also show a knee jerk preference for written response (again, encultured), but in a small assessment of visitors who received both, they preferred screencasts two to one over written, saying it is easier to follow and it feels more relational.

- **Synchronous Consulting**

Although partially available prior to the pandemic, we have expanded synchronous consulting. In a [Zoom room](#) shared with the Tutoring Center, visitors drop in for consulting. The session host then assigns visitors and staff to a breakout room for video consulting. Although Zoom can approximate the physical Studio in terms of a learning community with serial micro-consulting, our current practice is very much a regression to the previous one-at-a-time, leave-when-it's-over service point mentality. As Pippa Hemsley points out in [Interchapter 4D](#) on virtual studios, using alternate existing platforms such as Discord's *Study Together!* would more closely align the virtual and physical Studio. Failing to plan both physical and virtual program elements together from the beginning likely accounts for our current virtual growing pains (see [Chapter 4](#)).

- **Online Learning Objects**

The Studio's website offers an increasing number of three-minute, on demand [self-paced learning objects](#). These resources also have an equity intention, as not all students can attend in person, perhaps because they attend a distance program or work during our hours. Or some may be reluctant for whatever reason to ask for help. In addition to these video or slide-based resources, the Libraries offers a more substantial [interactive series of tutorials on integrated literacies](#) with instruction on refining an inquiry question, finding, evaluating, reading, and using sources, and drafting, revising, editing, proofreading, and documenting. These tutorials are being enhanced as we speak. And finally, the Studio is completing asynchronous virtual versions of our

integrated literacies classroom workshops, which some faculty link in the classroom management system for a flipped classroom experience.

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Staff Education

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Do you have a credit-bearing course that student peer assistants must take before working in your writing studio? What training do you require for professional tutors and librarians who work in the writing studio?

We used to have a credit-bearing course, but we don't anymore. Professional development is required for everyone, but now it is all for pay. We identified ethical issues with requiring staff to pay tuition for a course that is required for the job. It all came to a head when an exposé in our school newspaper claimed that Studio Assistants had to pay to work in the Studio. Our tuition is bundled, so we didn't realize anyone paid additional tuition, but we learned that one of our staff members paid a significant upcharge. This news story was the beginning of a string of student labor issues for Western. While we were not in violation of federal labor laws, we just felt exploitive about paying professionals but not the students who already earn less. I wrote a strong case requesting additional funding, which was readily approved. The amount of required staff development is most intense for those in their first two quarters of practice. After their first year, staff generally spend 3-5 paid hours per quarter in staff development.

Given the complexity of our program, we long ago gave up the idea that all staff (including professionals) can be experts in everything. We developed a heuristic with four levels of expertise (see Chapter 4, p. 44). New staff shadow until they demonstrate Level 2 expertise, which is generally acquired in the first three weeks after significant up-front onboarding: 21 paid hours (4 hours a week in class, 3 hours a week shadowing). After everyone can handle Level 2, we use a badging system to indicate additional

expertise. Staff in all roles choose a badge to work on each quarter. At the beginning of each term, staff meet with a more experienced practitioner in a goal-setting conference. Staff bring a session transcript and a self-assessment that identifies several strengths and one gap in their practice; most choose to work on a badge that fills the gap. Although some badges have multiple levels (bronze, silver, and gold), in general, it takes 3 hours to earn a badge.

Let me provide a badge example. We support Zotero as a research management tool. In 3 hours, I can earn a Zotero badge by working through the online learning modules. Then I add my name to a list of Zotero badge holders. When I'm on shift with a colleague who doesn't have a Zotero badge, they may call me to co-consult if a visitor asks a question beyond their expertise. We just started the badging system in 2019, and so far, we like it; however, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has stalled our work on adding new badges. A sampling of our staff education online learning objects and sample videos are linked in the Appendix.

Physical Space

What is the approximate square footage of your Studio? Is the area devoted to "just writing" or is there tutoring for other subject areas too?

I wish I knew square footage. If campus weren't closed for the pandemic, I'd pace it out. Our previous space was 1400 square feet (student population 15,000). Though I'm not spatially intelligent, I'm to guess and say we have 3-4 times that now.

We focus on integrated literacies (research, reading, writing, listening, speaking), but we support all learning where possible. Because they habituate to our learning community no matter what they are learning, the same visitor may be researching and writing for a while before they start doing equations or vice versa. As Kellyn Wolden

points out in [Interchapter 4B](#), all learning is authorized in the Studio, as is eating lunch. Many visitors are engaged in reading, which cuts across all disciplines. Few visit us intentionally for reading help, but when we engage students, they often tell us how much they struggle with reading in terms of volume, comprehension, and retention. I remember having a 3-minute strategy consultation with someone struggling with reading an accounting case. She later told me those three minutes changed her life (well, her reading life). Teachers regularly employ 3-minute teaching moments; why don't writing centers?

The Tutoring Center is also part of Western Libraries now, but though we wish they were more proximate, they are across a skybridge in another library building. However, many STEM students study in our space. In the future, we hope to equip their tutors to potentially support 100- and 200-level STEM writing (primarily lab reports). They have a lot of street cred in the sciences, and we never have had much, despite all kinds of outreach.

Program Planning and Implementation

How much time did you spend at the planning stage before you rolled out your writing studio program? How did you prepare staff for the transition?

In terms of space planning, it took about 18 months to plan Phase 1 of the space because it was a fairly significant remodel related to a large donation. Planning involved architects (initially) and later facilities, maintenance, the campus interior designer. Internally, the planning involved a large team of stakeholders to promote buy-in across donors, the university, the libraries, and the staff. We planned Phase 2 of the space during our first year of operation after Phase 1. We mostly addressed problems that we

either anticipated or that emerged as a pain point. It was very useful to incrementally

stage spatial changes, so we didn't get locked into anything that didn't work in practice.

The program planning (pedagogy) group was much smaller (Head of Research,

Director and Assistant of Writing Center, and Learning Commons Director). Our vision

for the pedagogy is what most excited the donors, so change was a given. Program

planning (outcomes, pedagogy) happened simultaneously with space planning, although

we implemented new pedagogies before making spatial change. Here's a timeline of

pedagogical change (we are on the quarter system).

> Summer 2014: Researched signature pedagogies
>
> Fall 2014: Floated micro-consulting plans for staff feedback
>
> Winter 2015: Piloted an evening studio
>
> Spring 2015: Moved Research Consultation and the Writing Center into an unimproved corner of our current space
>
> Summer 2015: Construction, Phase 1
>
> Fall 2015: Merged program structures, fully implemented both signature pedagogies, grand opening as the Hacherl Research & Writing Studio

One key to moving so quickly is that we agreed to conceptual changes without

being distracted by logistics. Never let a *how* get in the way of a good *what* and *why*! We

often tell writers to trust the process, so we took our own advice and just trusted the

logistics to work themselves out. Mostly, we predicted more impediments than we

encountered. Of course, not everyone is completely comfortable jumping in with both

feet without a clear landing. Early on we surveyed staff about how risk tolerant they

were. I predicted professionals would be less tolerant, but in fact many undergraduates

were highly risk averse. Since we knew from studying the change bell curve there is

always push back, we worked incrementally. For instance, we piloted micro-consulting

and integrated literacies in the evenings from 6-9 p.m. We advertised studio hours in a

comfy library study area staffed with writing assistants and librarians. The informal

evening study culture provided the perfect low-stakes atmosphere for trying innovative

strategies. We staffed evenings primarily with the Trail Blazers our survey identified; we

gave them carte blanche to fail up and relied on their expertise to help leaders

understand what worked/what didn't. After piloting the evening studio, Research

Consultation and the Writing Center moved together into a corner of where we are now.

That quarter helped reveal the practice challenges of merged literacies and for creating a

community of practice where professionals worked as peers with undergraduates.

When we opened as the Studio in fall 2015, we fully implemented both signature

pedagogies, including integrated literacies (previously, librarians mostly answered

research questions, and writing assistants mostly answered writing questions). To invest

in this pedagogy, we developed nine cross-training literacy labs where small groups of

mixed pros/students could learn strategies to support research, reading, and writing.

Envisioning and implementing all program elements (outcomes and pedagogies, not

space) took us about twelve months. We joke now that we dated, lived together, and got

married all within a year.

I think it helped everyone that we explicitly acknowledged the change bell curve

(early adopters, adopters, later adopters) and affirmed the value of each (later adopters

often kept us early adopters from doing dumb stuff). Trail Blazers who piloted the

evening studio helped us develop a community of practice ethos that stays playful,

welcoming failure as opportunity, celebrating trying something new regardless of

outcome, and sponsoring lots of reflection. Although we prepared staff with studio-

based learning theory and cross-training in multiple literacies, leaders didn't pretend to

have all the answers; we relied on the community to discover them as we went along.

Mainly, we all just committed to doing what we thought was the right thing for

increasing learning. The fact that visitors affirmed the change so enthusiastically

spurred us all in taking more risks. A couple of years in, even the strongest skeptics

among staff, faculty, or visitors had no desire to go back. One thing I learned: if you wait

to feel ready, inertia always prevails. You have to be moving to create change.

Appendix

Staff Education Resources

Note that all resources carry a Creative Commons attribution share-alike license; feel free to modify and reuse with credit.

[Micro-consulting Demo Videos](#) – Micro-consulting videos made for onboarding purposes. These videos demonstrate a complete SBL interaction, including greeting, assessment, scaffolding, leaving, and checking back in.

[Studio-based Learning](#) – A core staff development unit on SBL pedagogy

[Going Meta](#) – A core staff development unit on prompting metacognitive reflection

[Invitational Learning](#) – An elective staff development unit on invitational learning theory