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ABSTRACT

A teacher may assume he or she has power in the classroom and utilize what he or she considers to be thoughtful dramatic pauses to frame and enhance certain points during the lecture. A student, seated in the back row, may regard these pauses not as the rhetorical flourishes intended but as indicative of the teacher's hesitancy or confusion and comment as such, in a subversive way, to fellow classmates. Within the classroom scenario many applications and interpretations of power exist as do many uses, and understandings, of silence. This paper explores three contrasts in three writing center consultation case studies. Specifically, the paper proposes a new methodology for analyzing consultation transcripts, a methodology that can indicate which participant is letting the other speak--and conversely, who is enforcing or who is deploying silence. It finds that this methodology can note many perspectives of the subjective and dynamic interplay of silence and power during a writing center consultation, and that it is one more training tool to improve the consultant's collaborative and power awareness. The student questionnaire and post-questionnaire and consultant questionnaire are attached. (NKA)

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# Silence in the Writing Center: Comparing Student to Consultant Word Ratios

Chris Kreiser

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Panel Title: The Rhetoric of Silence and Power: You Say It Best When You Say Nothing at All

Paper Title: Silence in the Writing Center: Comparing Student to Consultant Word Ratios

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In order to develop a sense of what power means, we often join the concept of power to another concept such as silence; for example, we usually begin to understand power as the ability to *enforce* silence or we may begin to understand power as the choice to *deploy* silence. Either way, these understandings of power as it relates to silence require still another coupling; by this I mean, it would be unproductive to understand power as the *enforcement* of silence on an empty room or to understand power as the *deployment* of silence to a non-existent audience. Our understandings of power must consider the necessity of a powerful agent and a less powerful recipient. This all being said, my burgeoning understanding of power relies on a connection to silence as well as on the relationship between agent and recipient.

But, these networks are subjective and dynamic: for example, I, as a teacher, may assume I have power in the classroom and utilize what I consider to be thoughtful dramatic pauses to frame and enhance certain points during my lecture. A student, seated in the back row, may regard these pauses not as the rhetorical flourishes I intended but as indicative of my hesitancy or confusion and comment as such, in a subversive way, to fellow classmates. Or, perhaps a savvy student may determine that I pause only before saying what I consider important and *testable* information and thus pay attention only after these signaling pauses. Just within this classroom scenario, many applications and interpretations of power exist as do many uses, and understandings, of silence.



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In the 1994 article "Literacy and the Technology of Writing," Joan Mullin describes a similar scenario that also demonstrates the subjective and dynamic natures of power and silence. In her example, set in a writing center, the consultant possess knowledge on academic writing and firmly directs the session. But, in a unique and powerful way, the student, aware of the consultant's knowledge, *allows* the consultant to direct the session by remaining quiet and, in essence, forcing the consultant to speak, to direct, and, ultimately, to author the paper. Mullin argues that this scenario (quote) "reinforces the notion of literacy as technology" (165) in that the student 'buys' the tutor-led techniques to "generate an acceptable product" (164). In this disconcerting economic model, both participants collaborate to exchange a static academic literacy. Mullin coins a great phrase to describe this exchange: "unbalanced collaboration" (165). This phrase, to me, captures a paradox, a merger of dual and dueling tensions: "collaboration" reflecting the reliance of the participants to sell and to buy; "unbalanced" indicating disparate positions. This phrase captures collaboration's twin nature: Andrea Lunsford, in her 1991 article "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center," urges us to be aware of this duality. She fears that (quote) "collaboration often masquerades as democracy when it in fact practices the same old authoritarian control" (3-4).

Lunsford uses a pejorative tone to describe what she considers collaboration's evil twin sister, authoritarian control. Carol Severino, in her 1992 article "Rhetorically Analyzing Collaboration(s)," utilizes a different tone reflecting multiple perspectives. She differentiates between "dialogic collaboration" with an emphasis on process and "hierarchical collaboration" with an emphasis on product. Her conclusions are twofold: first, of the multiple forms of collaborations, one form does not deserve praise while the others condemnation; and, second, the value we, as consultants or as students, place on competing theories of process or product will *alter* our evaluations of collaboration. In other words, a student with a paper due the hour after a consultation concludes and who therefore represents very much a product-oriented theory will evaluate collaboration differently than a

process-oriented consultant. In this example, the collaborative questions of the process-oriented consultant may appear as meandering and frivolous distractions to the product-oriented student. In another, and perhaps more threatening example, a student may feel as an outsider to the writing center which he or she views as representative of the larger Academy and Institution. When the consultant poses an open-ended question such as "What do you think?" this student may respond not in a collaborative manner but as if this open-ended question were actually the command of "Tell me what I want to hear." The collaborative building strategies of this consultant are misinterpreted by the student.

Collaboration or power struggle; enforced or deployed silence? In my presentation, I explore these contrasts in three writing center consultation case studies. Specifically, I propose a new methodology for analyzing consultation transcripts, a methodology that can indicate which participant is letting the other speak. And, conversely, who is enforcing or who is deploying silence.

If approached with flexibility—that is to say with the knowledge that a single, appropriate consultation technique can not be distilled and applied wholesale to all students—we can look at numerical student-to-consultant word and time-speaking ratios coupled with student and consultant feedback. This methodology can note many perspectives of the subjective and dynamic interplay of silence and power during a writing center consultation. We can document the numerical volume of words we as consultants speak and compare it to that of the students. We can also note the moments of *silence* after we speak as we wait for students to fill this silence with *volumes* of their own.

This is not to argue that equal time speaking and equal words spoken indicate a balanced power and balanced collaboration or that all participants maintain a uniform speech tempo regardless of linguistic, geographical, or emotional factors. Rather, this methodology is to provide one more training tool to improve the consultant's collaborative and power awareness. Knowledge of word and time ratios can provide a consultant with specific numbers which *subtly* guide her or him through varying consultations with a variety of

students who may need guidance through the writing process; *others* who may need a sounding board to brainstorm and select appropriate paper topics; or even other students who may bring still different needs to a writing center consultation.

*Case Study # 1: I am confident in my writing ability and the writing center will answer all of my questions…*

In the pre-consultation questionnaire, the student in case study #1 strongly agreed with the statement "I am confident in my writing ability" and agreed with the statement "The Writing Center will answer all of my questions." During the 21 and a half minutes of this consultation, the student's conversational turns lasted only 39% of this time and the student spoke only 40% of the 3023 total words. On the post-consultation questionnaire, the student strongly agreed with the statement "My paper improved during the consultation." Prior to the consultation, as I had stated earlier, the student felt confident but also believed the writing center would provide all the answers. During the consultation, the student spoke little; the consultant spoke a lot. After the consultation, the student left thinking strongly that the paper was improved.

I argue that the student's perception of improvement were initiated by his or her preconceived belief that the Writing Center is an answer center and these perceptions were reinforced by the majority of time and of words belonging to the authoritative consultant. Further, after the session, while the student felt strongly that the paper improved, the student indicated "unsure" for the statement "My writing skills were improved during the consultation." According to the student, this unbalanced collaboration produced an improved product *but* this unbalanced collaboration did not improve the writer. Ultimately, without a collaboration in which the student *speaks*, we are left with a hierarchical, top-down method similar to Lunsford's description of authoritarian control masquerading as collaboration. Without a collaboration in which the consultant deploys silence, the writing center may solve a writing problem but when the student leaves the context of the problem

and encounters another, that student will require another top-down, unbalanced collaboration. Yet, if the student spoke equally and collaborated not on solving a problem but rather collaborated on problem solving skills, the student leaves the writing center not just with a better paper but the student leaves as a better writer.

*Case Study # 2: I am confident…do I appear confident?…*

Case study #2 involves an ESL graduate student and a consultant, both of whom are female. The student spoke 62% of the words and her turns comprised 65% of the time. What is most unique about this consultation is the 329 total conversational turns as compared to an overall average of 99. This repartee style of back and forth turn-taking averaged 12 words for the student (23 less than the student average) and 7 words for the consultant (251/2 less than the consultant average). The average time for each turn was 7.4 seconds for the student (11.2 seconds less than the student average) and 3.8 seconds for the consultant (9.2 less than average). When I surveyed the consultant after the session, the consultant strongly agreed with being comfortable during the session but felt the student did not appear comfortable or confident. The student, however, after the session, agreed with the statement "I am confident in my writing ability" and strongly agreed with the statement "I was comfortable during the session." From the student's perception, she was comfortable and confident. But, from the consultant's perception, the student did not appear confident or comfortable. Severino, in "Rhetorically Analyzing Collaboration(s)," noted a similar repartee style of short multiple turns during a different observed consultation. She partially attributes this style to the *consultant's*, not the student's, lack of confidence. Both consultations were conducted in a similar style yet all were perceived and labeled differently by the student, by the consultant, and by the observer. These varying perceptions and labels amplify the tension between collaboration and authoritarian control as well as complicate the interplay of speech and silence in writing center consultations.

*Case Study #3: Well, um, I know what I want to say, you know, I just don't know, um, how to write it, you know…*

In the final case study, the student contributes 68% of the words and his or her turns comprise 77% of the total time. These figures seem to indicate initially that the student, in the volumes of words and time, dominates this consultation. However, although the student averages about twice as many words (32 words per turn to 16 words per turn for the consultant), the student takes 3 times as long to say these words (23 seconds per turn compared to 7 seconds per turn for the consultant). The student said twice as many words but required 3 times longer to say them. The majority of the student's words in the consultation's transcript are "you know" and "well" and the phrase most often repeated by the consultant is "What do you think?" These word and time ratios combined with the transcript suggest that what little the consultant says is said quickly and decisively so that the power to speak constantly shifts back to the student who is afforded long moments of silence to work through thoughts, word choices, and writing decisions.

On the pre-consultation survey, the student wrote that a teacher recommended she visit the writing center. (As an aside, these "recommendations", as we all know, have a dual subjective nature themselves: to paraphrase Lunsford, recommendations for visits to the writing center often masquerade as suggestions when in fact they are perceived as implied commands from teacher to student.) On the pre-consultation survey, this student, who was indecisive throughout the consultation, noted that the paper was far from finished. After the consultation, the student strongly agreed that the paper improved. I argue that these improvements began to grow during the moments of silence afforded the student by the consultant who continually spoke decisively, shortly and then shut-up. It is in these moments of silence that the dynamic and subjective qualities of power can shift to the opportunity of empowerment.

What conclusions can be drawn from all of this data? In combination with rhetorical, linguistic, and other methods of transcript analysis, I would propose an analysis of

numerical word and time ratios which all can contribute to the training and self-awareness of consultants and ultimately to the fostering of *balanced* collaboration in its most productive sense within the writing center.



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# Student Questionnaire

Prior to the consultation, please answer the following questions by circling the appropriate number.

1-Strongly agree 2-Agree 3-Unsure 4-Disagree 5-Strongly Disagree

I understand my paper's topic

1 2 3 4 5 Average response: 1.3

I am confident in my writing abilities

1 2 3 4 5 Average response: 1.6

My paper is a finished product

1 2 3 4 5 Average response: 3

My paper requires major revisions

1 2 3 4 5 Average response: 3.3

The Writing Center will answer all of my writing questions

1 2 3 4 5 Average response: 2

A teacher recommended me to the Writing Center

1 2 3 4 5 Average response: 2.3



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# Student Post-Questionnaire

After the consultation, please answer the following questions by circling the appropriate number.

1-Strongly agree 2-Agree 3-Unsure 4-Disagree 5-Strongly Disagree

I understand my paper's topic

1 2 3 4 5 Average response: 1.3

I am confident in my writing abilities

1 2 3 4 5 Average response: 1.6

I was comfortable during the consultation

1 2 3 4 5 Average response: 1.6

My writing skills were improved during the consultation

1 2 3 4 5 Average response: 2

My paper improved during the consultation

1 2 3 4 5 Average response: 1.3

The consultation was a collaborative effort

1 2 3 4 5 Average response: 1.6

The consultation was a success

1 2 3 4 5 Average response: 1.6

The Writing Center will answer all of my writing questions

1 2 3 4 5 Average response: 2



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# Consultant Questionnaire

After the consultation, please answer the following questions by circling the appropriate number.

1-Strongly agree 2-Agree 3-Unsure 4-Disagree 5-Strongly Disagree

I understood the student's paper's topic

1 2 3 4 5 Average response: 1.3

The student appeared confident in her or his writing abilities

1 2 3 4 5 Average response: 2.3

My role as consultant is to direct the session

1 2 3 4 5 Average response: 4.6

I was comfortable during the consultation

1 2 3 4 5 Average response: 1.3

The student appeared comfortable during the consultation

1 2 3 4 5 Average response: 2.3

The student's writing skills were improved during the consultation

1 2 3 4 5 Average response: 2.6

The student's paper improved during the consultation

1 2 3 4 5 Average response: 2

The consultation was a collaborative effort

1 2 3 4 5 Average response: 1.6

The consultation was a success

1 2 3 4 5 Average response: 1.6



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