The space between: listening within difference in writing center consultations.

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THE SPACE BETWEEN:
LISTENING WITHIN DIFFERENCE IN WRITING CENTER CONSULTATIONS

By

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DEDICATION

To my mom
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ABSTRACT

THE SPACE BETWEEN:
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July 2, 2021

Writing center consultations are built of writer and consultant relationships, interactions, and differences. Listening is a stance that facilitates navigation of these differences that are so inherent to writing centers. Yet listening has long been undervalued in Western society and in rhetoric and composition and writing center scholarship. To that end, I investigated the roles of listening in writing center consultations at the University of Louisville University Writing Center, exploring the perspectives of 14 writer and consultant participants. For this mixed methods case study, I collected observations, surveys, interviews, and asynchronous responses to follow-up questions. I also synthesized three listening theories that attend to relations and differences between self and other: dialogic listening, rhetorical listening, and listening otherwise.

Listening’s connections with openness, understanding, and power have a number of implications for the writing center. Listening involves openness to alterity and change, which requires and facilitates disruption of preconceptions. Through listening and openness, writers and consultants acknowledge the other as an individual, allowing them
to better address the unique person and situation before them. More, through the collaboration inherent to listening and through listening’s facilitation of dialogue and agency, listening allows for collaboration within the inevitable power differentials present in consultations. This refutes two common writing center preconceptions: that collaboration requires power balance and that the directive approach precludes collaboration. Finally, listening involves an attempt at understanding the other while acknowledging that a full understanding can never be reached. Listening to understand can help guide consultation approach, strengthen writer development, promote collaboration, and mitigate the risk involved in improvisation.

I present this conceptualization of listening as a framework entitled *listening within difference*. This framework involves four principles: recognizing self as other, turning toward, co-creating a space between, and co-creating meaning. This project concludes with recommendations for explicitly incorporating listening into consultant training and guidebooks.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

To work in the writing center is to work within difference. As Nancy Maloney Grimm tells us,

Writing centers are often places where people develop what scholars call postmodern skills: the ability to simultaneously maintain multiple viewpoints, to make quick shifts in discourse orientation, to work elbow to elbow with people differently positioned in the university hierarchy, to negotiate cultural and social differences, to handle the inevitable blurring of authorial boundaries, and to regularly renegotiate issues of knowledge, power, and ownership. (Good 2)

Consultations are built of relationships and interactions between writers and consultants. Writing and discussion of that writing create contact zones where perspectives, values, purposes, and expectations clash (e.g., Denny, Facing 23; Kerschbaum, Toward 118; Pratt; Shafer 296). As Stephanie L. Kerschbaum puts it, “Writing is an important ground upon which differences are marked and identified” (138). Writing centers are thus by nature places of difference—differences that must be navigated in every consultation. Such navigation is not easy, but it is facilitated by a lens that merits investigation: listening.

Listening is both a utilitarian process and an attitude. Some degree of listening is required to engage with the world, and the basic need for listening in the writing center is obvious: consultations are not going to be too useful, or enjoyable, if writers and consultants do not listen to each other. But there is much more to listening. Listening is
built of relationships and meaning making, and listening helps build relationships and meaning making.

Listening is deeply connected to humanity. Communication scholar Lisbeth Lipari holds that we exist in the relationships between self and others, relationships involving listening. For that reason, she argues, “listening brings humans into being” (Listening 2). David Beard and Graham D. Bodie, also communication scholars, state that “our understanding of listening is an essential part of our understanding of what it means to be human” (223). Listening, to a degree, makes us human, and, through listening, we can try to understand the humanity of others. And Abigail, a consultant participant in this study, took this even further. “I think listening is how to know people,” she said. “I think listening is how to love people.”

Grimm finds listening central to relationships with others in the context of the writing center. “Many writing center practitioners,” she says, “know their lives have been transformed by the understandings they developed in writing centers. These are the literacy workers . . . with the imagination, curiosity, and humility of people open to listening and incorporating alternative wisdom and perspective” (Good 52-3). Listening therefore has much to contribute to writing center consultations: it is essential to the more functional aspects of consultations but also to the humanness that consultations involve.

Listening is something that we all do, but that does not mean that we understand it or do it well. As Michael Purdy argues, listening “is not automatic, it requires our full and conscious attention. To be better listeners we need to understand, and work with the components of the listening process” (6-7). And listening is becoming more and more difficult (Ratcliffe, Rhetorical 202) given the constant assault of stimuli that we now
face. Mary Rose O’Reilley alludes to this in response to the self-posed question “Don’t all of us know how to listen?”: “On the contrary, I think we know how to shut down. Self-preservation compels it. Modern life . . . trains us not to attend but to tune out” (17).

Gesa E. Kirsch similarly argues that the significance “of being fully present, of listening deeply cannot be overstated in this day and age, and especially for a generation of students who are always wired, always multitasking” (63). Without explicit attention to listening, it is difficult to become a stronger listener, a difficulty that is heightened by the increasing noise of the 21st century.

Yet listening has been long undervalued in Western society as a whole (Lipari, Listening; Lipari, “Rhetoric’s”; Ratcliffe, Rhetorical; Stenberg), slighted in favor of reading, writing, and speaking (Ballif, “What” 51; Lipari, Listening 1; Ratcliffe, Rhetorical 20; Ronald and Roskelly 29) to the extent that Lipari refers to listening as “speech’s other” (Listening 195). Listening has become naturalized, taken for granted, written off as occurring frequently but automatically, and therefore not meriting further study (Helin 225; Lipari, Listening 1; Purdy 6; Ratcliffe, Rhetorical 18; Walker 128).

Ratcliffe enumerates three Western cultural biases against listening: biases of gender, race, and sight (Rhetorical). First, speaking is considered masculine and positive, while listening is considered feminine and negative—in other words, inferior. Second, listening interacts with race. In the United States, Ratcliffe argues, those who are not white have had to listen, to be aware of those more privileged. Those who are white, on the other hand, often have a choice.¹ Finally, Ratcliffe cites ocularcentrism—a preference for vision—as a cultural bias against listening (20-22).

¹ Ratcliffe notes that this also intersects with class, and I would add that there are many other factors intersecting to affect power differentials and privilege (Rhetorical).
Drawing on Martin Heidegger, Ratcliffe ascribes these cultural biases to the divided logos (*Rhetorical*). She explains that the West has inherited from the Greeks a logos in which speaking is split from and privileged over listening. The Western conceptualization of logos as a system of logic derives from the Greek noun *logos*, which is typically connected to speaking. Heidegger pushes against this divided logo, arguing that we must also consider the verb form of logos, *legein*, which means to say, but also to lay. This latter meaning connects to listening: “laying others’ ideas in front of us in order to let these ideas lie before us” (Ratcliffe 23-24). Under a united logos, we acknowledge and are open to the perspectives of others, laying these perspectives before us with the intent to listen. For now, though, the West’s conceptualization of logos remains divided, and the resultant biases have led to listening’s not being heard.

This study is my attempt to hear listening in the context of writing center consultations by exploring listening’s components and effects. Throughout this dissertation, I investigate how listening functions, moves, and matters, addressing both the more abstract aspects of listening and the effects to which they are tied. And, given the differences so inherent to writing center consultations, I focus on listening that attends to differences, to relationships between self and others.

Because of the lack of listening scholarship in writing center studies, I approach this project from a broad perspective in order to better understand what listening means to me and to my participants, along with how the participants experienced listening in consultations. This study integrates empirical data from writer and consultant participants at the University of Louisville University Writing Center with listening scholarship from the fields of communication and of rhetoric and composition: dialogic listening
(Cornwell and Orbe; Floyd), rhetorical listening (Ratcliffe, *Rhetorical*) and listening otherwise (Lipari, *Listening*).

This study is guided by the following research questions:

Overarching question: What are the roles of listening in writing center consultations?

1. How do writer and consultant participants conceptualize listening in writing center consultations at the University of Louisville University Writing Center?

2. How might listening affect participants’ consultation experiences?

3. Based on the above questions, how might I conceptualize listening in the writing center?

In this chapter, I clarify my terms and then elaborate on my conceptualization of the other and of difference. Next, I provide an overview of how listening is understood in the field of communication, which offers more listening scholarship than does rhetoric and composition and writing center studies. Finally, I discuss how listening has been studied in the latter two fields.

**A Note on Terms**

There are a number of overlapping terms in writing center studies, so I would like to clarify my terminology before proceeding. In this study, I use the terms that were most commonly used at my research site. However, other terms will appear when used by scholars or participants. I use the term *consultant* rather than terms like *tutor*, *assistant*, and *coach*. The exception to this is when I reference the title *peer tutor*, a common phrase whose component words are important to discussions of power. Next, I use *writer* instead of *tutee, client, or student*. Finally, I use *consultation* and *session* instead of *conference*. 
Each of these sets of terms may have slightly different connotations, but, for the sake of this dissertation, they can be understood interchangeably.

Next, the University of Louisville will also be referred to as UofL. The University Writing Center will also be referred to as the Writing Center or the UWC.

There are also some words whose relation to listening might make their use surprising. First, though I have limited use to a degree, I sometimes use the word see to mean perceiving or understanding. This is not ideal, given the oculocentric nature of Western society that Lipari and Ratcliffe point out, but, at the same time, it is a common part of vocabulary. In addition, though I will soon distinguish between listening and hearing, I sometimes use hear instead of listen. This is because, as Lipari points out, to listen does not have a transitive form in English (Listening 201).

When I discuss listening and the relation between self and other, I generally refer to pairs of interlocutors. I do this for the sake of simplicity and because the consultations that I studied involved writer-consultant pairs. However, this study certainly applies to larger groups of interlocutors as well.

When referencing listening scholarship in rhetoric and composition or writing center studies, I mostly just use the term listening. Scholars refer to similar but differentiated conceptions of listening, including active listening (Cardeñas), authentic listening (Grimm, Good), community listening (Lohr and Lindenman), compassionate listening (Arbor), deep listening (Frey), genuine listening (Middleton), open listening (Schaefer), and transformative listening (García, “Unmaking”). There are differences in denotations and connotations between these types of listening, but because these differences are not central to my argument, I focus on the similar values and simplify the
terms for the sake of clarity. I do differentiate between the three major listening frameworks on which this project rests: dialogic listening, rhetorical listening, and listening otherwise.

Finally, to keep this study focused, my use of *listening* does not include reading. However, the boundary between listening and reading is a blurry one. Both are acts requiring attention and interpretation. The difference is that listening involves auditory stimuli while reading involves the visual. Even that boundary, though, remains permeable. The International Listening Association definition of listening, for example, mentions visual cues as relevant to listening (4), which suggests that the visual is not reserved strictly for reading. Ratcliffe also applies listening to “all discursive forms” (*Rhetorical* 46). Other situations where the boundary between listening and reading is unclear include attending to sign language or to a text that is read out loud. Particularly relevant to writing centers is the potential differentiation between attending to a spoken comment in a face-to-face session and attending to a written comment in a virtual writing center session that takes place through written communication (such as instant messaging, emails, or comments on a document).

**The Other and Difference**

In discussing relationships and listening between two people, I must distinguish between the self and the not-self. The most obvious choice of term to represent the not-self is *Other*. The term, uppercase or lowercase, is common in listening literature (e.g., Koskinen and Lindström; Lipari, *Listening*; Ratcliffe, *Rhetorical*; Shotter). It is also not uncommon in rhetoric and composition scholarship (e.g., Arbor; Ballif, “What”;
Blankenship; Cain; Kerschbaum, *Toward*; Ratcliffe, *Rhetorical*; Sullivan) and was recently featured in *Keywords in Writing Studies* (Kerr).

However, the term is fraught at best. First, using the singular *other* to refer to the plural *other people* (or *other women, other writers*, etc.) suggests a single homogenous group, both ignoring individual difference within that group and emphasizing that shared defining characteristic of otherness. Second, to label someone as other suggests a comparison in which this other person is considered marked, while the self remains unmarked, central. *Other*, then, can position the other person as lesser.

Despite the above concerns, I chose to use the word *other* because of its prevalence. Though some capitalize *other*, I leave it lowercase. To me, the lowercase version feels more like an adjective than a noun and therefore more like it refers to one aspect of the person rather than to their essence. In other words, *other* connotes another person, whereas *Other* has the connotation of a theorized and exoticized entity.

And when I use *other* or *the other*, the term is purposefully abstract. Because I focus on difference between oneself and other people, *other* references not a specific homogenized group, but rather the not-self—all of humanity less the self. This distinction does not appoint categories or rank others based on aspects of their identity, but rather simply acknowledges that they are not oneself. This abstract use of *other*, then, corresponds to *others*, literally all who are not oneself. By definition, there are always differences between self and other. These differences may vary in size, number, and type,

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2 Difficulties with this type of construction can perhaps be better seen by using a different noun, such as *the disabled*. *The disabled* is a shortened version of *disabled people* (or *disabled* plus a different noun, like *disabled women*). The term *disabled people* is already problematic because disability is treated as a defining quality. In comparison, the term *people with disabilities* highlights the person, rather than a singular characteristic. This issue is only intensified when shortening *disabled people to the disabled*. Dropping the noun and adding a definite pronoun puts even more emphasis on the adjective as definitive rather than descriptive.
but they always exist. Though awareness of our own otherness may vary, we all share the fact of alterity. We are all other.

In that vein, I use Kerschbaum’s conceptualization of difference. Theorizing difference in the context of the writing classroom, Kerschbaum holds that difference derives from “a relation between two individuals that is predicated upon their separateness from one another” (Toward 67). We are all other to everyone else. Sarah Blazer and Kalen Arterburn and Caitie Liebman make this argument in the context of the writing center, with Blazer citing as a flawed premise that “diversity is seen as other and not the norm” (21).

Kerschbaum describes difference as “dynamic, relational, and emergent” (Toward 57). It is not tangible. It cannot be extracted from context, from a particular moment. Rather, difference is comparative. Kerschbaum uses herself as an example: “I am not different by virtue of my deafness any more than a hearing person is different because of his or her hearingness. I am different from other deaf people, and I am different from hearing people” (69). More, the identities and identifications involved in these comparisons are always shifting. A person will never be the same as themselves again. “They may be once-occurrent,” Kerschbaum tells us, “but they are not final” (149). And as identities change, so too does the context and thus the meanings of these identities (67).

Finally, when I refer to difference, I mean differences of all types, large or small. These might be differences in background or presentation, including accent, age, appearance, education, ethnicity, gender, nationality, neurodiversity, personality, physical
and mental ability, race, religion, sexuality, socioeconomic status, style, and many, many more.

**Listening: An Overview**

In 1995, members of the International Listening Association (ILA) proposed the following working definition of listening: “the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages” (International Listening Association 4). Designed to be “short, simple, yet as inclusive as possible” (1), this definition leaves room for disagreement because of that very attempt at comprehensiveness. Those collaborating on the definition themselves brought up several points of contention (4).

A number of scholars argue that listening should have multiple definitions. Purdy suggests that there are many approaches to listening and therefore many definitions, which differ based on intended application. For example, definitions might differ between those studying listening prediction, interpretation, or training (6). In their 2008 ILA white paper on listening research, Bodie et al., like Purdy, argue that any single definition of listening will leave something to be desired.³ Listening’s multidimensional nature requires multiple perspectives and therefore multiple definitions (3, 7). Debra L. Worthington and Bodie similarly argue that different definitions of listening are “not right or wrong, but more or less useful for some particular purpose” (11).

Purdy proposes five premises that should apply to each definition of listening, regardless of that definition’s purpose. Listening is 1) a learned behavior, which therefore can be improved, and 2) dynamic, changing depending on the context. Listening 3) is

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³ This is not to diminish the importance of working to understand listening. Bodie et al. even highlight the research question “What is listening?” as key to advancing listening’s study and practice (1).
active and 4) involves both verbal components (the content of the message) and nonverbal components (the context of the message and how the message is conveyed). Finally, listening 5) facilitates reception to other people, as well as to the listener’s surrounding environment (7-8). Bodie et al. focus on developing multiple listening theories that reflect multiple perspectives, including listening as social information processing, language learning, an ethical endeavor, social interaction, and experiential (7, 9-10).

According to Worthington and Bodie, however listening is defined, it consists of three types of processes: affective, behavioral, and cognitive. Affective processes involve people’s emotions about listening, including how motivated they are to listen and how much they enjoy listening. These processes are far-reaching, with possible “profound effects on comprehension and understanding as well as consequences for personal, professional, and relational success” (4-5). Behavioral processes involve what can be observed. These behaviors comprise listening response, both verbal (e.g., asking a clarifying question) and nonverbal (e.g., eye contact). This feedback is the only way for speakers to know that they are being listened to. Finally, cognitive processes “enable individuals to attend to, comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and make sense of spoken language” (5). In other words, these processes affect listeners’ understanding.

Each chapter of this dissertation further develops my conceptualization of listening. The starting point for that conceptualization is that listening is active: it involves attending to a message. As Richard D. Halley puts it, “listening is NOT a

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4 Despite his argument that there is no single correct definition of listening, Purdy then proposes a definition that encompasses these five premises: “Listening is the active and dynamic process of attending, perceiving, interpreting, remembering, and responding to the expressed (verbal and nonverbal) needs, concerns, and information offered by other human beings” (8).
spectrum sport” (Purdy et al. 8). This aspect of listening remains fairly constant across definitions and is often explained by comparing listening to hearing. The differentiation between the two terms is apparent even in their dictionary definitions, though perhaps less so in common usage. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines hearing as “[t]o perceive, or have the sensation of, sound” (“hear”), and listening is “[t]o give attention with the ear to some sound or utterance” (“listen”). Hearing is the sensation of sound when it reaches one’s ears, whereas listening necessitates attention to that sound. Lisbeth Lipari points out that the etymological roots of hearing denote receiving (of sound), whereas listening’s roots denote giving (of attention; *Listening* 50). Listening, then, is an act, whereas hearing is passive. This “now infamous dichotomy” (Beard and Bodie 219) is commonly reflected in communication textbooks and listening scholarship (Purdy 5). It is also implied in the ILA definition of listening, which positions the act of listening beyond merely receiving, and it is explicitly stated in Purdy’s third premise (7). Another way to think about this dichotomy is that the study of hearing involves physiological study by audiologists, whereas listening involves “individual and relational components” studied in communication, among other disciplines (Worthington and Bodie 3).

***The Study of Listening***

The lack of attention to listening in Western culture is mirrored by the dearth of listening scholarship in rhetoric and composition, and even in communication studies

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5 David Beard argues against this assumed distinction between listening and hearing, calling it “a fiction” (12). According to Beard, listening is not volitional and therefore is not active. However, listening is distinguished from hearing not as a choice of whether to hear but rather as a choice of whether to pay attention. As Lipari says, “While it is certainly true that we can literally shut out visual but not auditory stimuli, it is also true that we can hear but fail to listen” (*Listening* 196). Worthington and Bodie similarly state that “humans are constantly processing sound . . . . Not all of these sounds, however, are attended to consciously” (5). Those of us who are physically able to hear may be hearing constantly and be shaped by what we hear, but we choose what to pay attention to (i.e., to listen to). Listening, then, is active, in comparison to hearing.
(Bodie et al. 12; Floyd 129; Glenn and Ratcliffe, “Introduction”; Lipari, *Listening*; Ratcliffe, *Rhetorical*; Walker 128; Wolvin 7). After describing the factors that affect the overall Western conceptualization of listening, Ratcliffe lists three factors that explain the dearth of listening scholarship specifically within the rhetoric and composition discipline (*Rhetorical*). First, the rhetorical arts traditionally included reading, writing, speaking, and listening, but when English studies and communication studies divided, English became defined by reading and writing, and communication by speaking and listening. This rendered listening seemingly outside of the realm of rhetoric and composition. Second, even when listening had been considered a cornerstone of rhetorical tradition, it was still slighted in favor of reading, writing, and speaking. Third, poststructuralist theory is wary of speaking, which it “denigrates . . . as the trope that fosters a metaphysics of presence” (20). It is therefore, unintentionally, wary of listening, which has led to listening’s low profile in contemporary rhetoric and composition scholarship (18-23).

Because of this lack of listening scholarship, including a lack of a comprehensive overview of the listening scholarship that does exist, I provide a historical overview of listening scholarship in communication studies, in rhetoric and composition and in writing center studies. This constructs context for my study and also serves as a needed record of listening research in these disciplines.

*Listening in Communication Studies*

I begin this overview of listening scholarship with a look at communication studies for two reasons. First, much of social science listening research, including that from which I draw in this dissertation, has taken place in the field of communication.
Second, early rhetoric and composition listening scholarship overlapped with that of communication studies.

According to Beard and Bodie, the pre-World War II focus on investigating how to locate and cure speaking problems in students evolved to a focus on listening as an active process that can be learned and improved. With the rise of the communication movement and subsequent development of communications courses in the mid-20th century (Beard and Bodie 209-14), listening research shifted to an emphasis on listening comprehension and short-term recall in an education setting (Worthington and Bodie 6, 9). As the university’s interest in communication increased, some—including Ralph Nichols, a rhetoric professor often referred to as the father of listening (Beard and Bodie 213)—began to argue that listening deserved more attention and should be taught more explicitly. During this time, listening research began to concentrate on behavior by investigating listening response and the best practices for teaching listening (209).

In the 1970s, listening became recognized as active and as having an impact on the conversation. The now well-known differentiation between hearing and listening grew more common. The field began to think of listening in terms of competencies and traits, and it recognized that listening differs by context. As the communication movement died down in the 1980s, listening continued to receive attention in the classroom and in research but was approached separately from other aspects of communication (Beard and Bodie 216-19). By the 2000s, listening research began to decrease (Bodie et al. 12). At present, much of the field continues to view listening as a set of skills that can be learned and taught, skills that are “crucial for personal and professional success and well-being” (Beard and Bodie 220).
**Listening in Rhetoric and Composition**

In communication studies, listening is a recognized subfield. In comparison, rhetoric and composition’s listening scholarship is more scattered, its progression less defined. With this portion of the literature review, I tie together rhetoric and composition scholarship that I found isolated, cloistered in a variety of journals and books, relatively unconnected. One major exception to this is Ratcliffe’s theory of rhetorical listening, which I would place as one center node in this web.

As mentioned previously, early rhetoric and composition scholarship on listening was shared with communication studies, when the two fields were not yet firmly divorced. In both fields, then, the 1950s saw a rise in arguments for listening’s place in the classroom: because listening is a skill, it can and should be taught, and also must be assessed. From 1954-1956, annual workshops at the Conference on College Composition and Communication discussed listening, including how it should be defined, taught, and evaluated (“Communication”; “The Teaching and Testing of Listening”; “The Teaching and Testing of Listening Skills”). Other rhetoric and composition listening scholarship from this time followed in the same vein, concluding that listening can be taught (J. Brown), arguing for the importance of bringing the study of listening into the classroom, and discussing how to do so (Macrorie; Needham).

**1960s-1990s: Listening to Learn to Write and to Teach Writing**

In the 1960s-1990s, listening scholarship in rhetoric and composition continued to revolve around the idea that listening is important for teaching writing, and the focus on assessment decreased. In particular, scholars argued that listening is important for writing and therefore should be taught (Clark, “Listening”; Clark, “Readability”; Ronald and
Roskelly). Listening also helps students better understand texts written by others, which often means understanding others’ views (Bean; Bozik; Elbow, “Three”; Silva). For example, listening to texts is a major aspect of Peter Elbow’s well-known believing game (Writing).\(^6\) Scholarship also investigates how students in large lecture courses listen to their teachers, which often focuses on notetaking (Debs and Brillhart; deCaprariis; Koren; Otto; Pauk). Some scholars discuss the importance of teaching students how to listen (Murray; Silva; Sommers), which can facilitate the creation of safe classrooms that give students a space for exploring and for finding their voice (O’Reilley; T. Thomas).

These decades also involved much discussion of how to best teach listening to non-native English speakers. Some of this scholarship focuses on variables that might affect listening comprehension and recall (Blau; Call; Cervantes and Gainer; Chang and Read; Griffiths; Major et al.), including the effects of the listener perception and knowledge (Markham; Markham and Latham). Other scholarship explores how to best teach listening comprehension (Richards; Snow and Perkins) and listening skills and strategies (Field; Goh, “Metacognitive”; Murphy; Richards; Vandergrift). Unlike most other listening scholarship from this time, scholarship on non-native English speakers also included listening assessment (Arnold; Chastain; Field).

1990s-2000s: Listening to the Other

Around the turn of the century, listening scholarship shifted from a focus on listening in teaching to listening to the other, a topic which directly correlates with my project’s focus on listening to others within difference. Attending to the other means listening to voices that are not well-represented, as well as listening for what remains

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\(^6\) This is an example of that blurry boundary between listening and reading.
unspoken. Wayne C. Booth argues that rhetoric is best “when we learn to listen to the ‘other,’ then listen to ourselves and thus manage to respond in a way that produces genuine dialogue” (xi-xii). When we speak, we should take into account the needs of the listener (Ballif, “What”), and when we listen, we should attend to what is not said, or what has been said but we do not want to hear (V. Anderson; Ballif, “Listening”).

The 2000s also saw the introduction of Ratcliffe’s theory of rhetorical listening, which is one of the main listening frameworks that I use in this study. Ratcliffe influenced the field with her theorization of rhetorical listening even before her monograph was published, particularly via “Rhetorical Listening” (1999) and “Eavesdropping” (2000). Published a few years later in 2005, *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* immediately served as the pivotal rhetoric and composition text on listening.

In brief, rhetorical listening is not an action but an attitude: “a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture” (Ratcliffe, *Rhetorical* 1). Rhetorical listening resists the divided Western logos discussed earlier. In Ratcliffe’s words, “Within this more inclusive *logos* lies potential for personal and social justice. Perhaps through listening, people can engage more possibilities for inventing arguments that bring differences together” (25). Ratcliffe applies rhetorical listening to cross-cultural communication, focusing on race and gender. When listening rhetorically, a listener makes conscious choices about identification, which may help facilitate communication across “identifications troubled by history, uneven power dynamics, and ignorance” (47). Ratcliffe elaborates on rhetorical listening through four (nonlinear) moves and three tactics. Rhetorical listening will be discussed further in the next chapter.
Throughout the 2000s, rhetorical listening was used to support the call for an increase in listening scholarship and further engagement with listening. Rhetorical listening was also further applied to the classroom, along with a wide range of scholarly interests (Glenn and Ratcliffe, “Introduction”).

The 2010s: Listening Today

Listening research in the 2010s covered a range of topics, including development of earlier theories, particularly Ratcliffe’s rhetorical listening. Listening was also applied to pedagogy and community engaged scholarship. Other work investigates the embodied nature of listening, connects listening to queer theory, and applies listening to research itself.

Cheryl Glenn and Ratcliffe’s anthology Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts continues to show the significance of listening (and silence) to rhetoric and composition. Glenn and Ratcliffe enumerate three major arguments:

- Argument one: the arts of silence and listening are as important to rhetoric and composition studies as the traditionally emphasized arts of reading, writing, and speaking.
- Argument two: the arts of silence and listening are particularly effective for historicizing, theorizing, analyzing, and practicing the cultural stances and power of both dominant and nondominant (subaltern) groups.
- Argument three: the arts of silence and listening offer people multiple ways to negotiate and deliberate, whether with themselves or in dyadic, small-group, or large-scale situations. (“Introduction” 2-3)

Based on these arguments, the study of listening has much to add to the study of difference and to learning about and navigating the power imbalances that such differences create.

Within Glenn and Ratcliffe’s anthology, Joyce Irene Middleton and Joy Arbor apply rhetorical listening to culture at large. Middleton examines the aftermath of
Hurricane Katrina to explore the potential that listening has to help America transcend its argument culture. Arbor discusses how listening with the goal of not persuasion but understanding serves as “a model of listening across difference that highlights the humanity rather than the political positions of the other in order to effect long-term social change” (218). She further argues that “listening across difference can itself be an intervention, with important rhetorical effects” (228).

Wendy Wolters Hinshaw (“Making”) and Shari Stenberg each examine rhetorical listening within the university. Hinshaw uses Ratcliffe’s tactic of listening pedagogically to work through student and teacher resistance during class discussions about difference. And Stenberg addresses Western academia’s preferencing of mastery (or a performance of such) over openness. She suggests that we should “imagine critique as incomplete without listening” (255) and that rhetorical listening is one way to move toward such critique.

Other listening theories were also applied to pedagogy during this time. Patrick Sullivan proposes that pedagogy for secondary and early postsecondary education should revolve around listening, empathy, and reflection in order to promote complex writing and thinking, as well as collaborative, ethical, and sympathetic behavior. And Kirsch holds that listening facilitates the inclusivity of otherness in the classroom. Finally, the 2014 edition of the anthology *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language* (Celce-Murcia et al.) contains a small section applying listening specifically to pedagogy for non-native English speakers (Flowerdew and Miller; Goh, “Second”).

The 2010s also saw an uptick in scholarship connecting community engagement with listening. Community engaged scholarship has not done enough in research or
practice to listen to the community partner. A small subset of scholarship, often focusing on service learning, both argues and attempts to rectify this point (e.g., Blouin and Perry; Cronley et al.; Kimme Hea and Shah; Srinivas et al.; Stoecker and Tryon). Just as important as the lack of representation of community partner organizations in community engagement literature is the lack of representation of the thoughts and voices of community members—those with whom these organizations work (e.g., Wendler)—though there has been some research in this area (Bialka and Havlik; d’Arlach et al.; Doughty; Snow et al.; Wendler). The lack of attention to individual voices from the community means that individual backgrounds, situations, and opinions are not represented (Dempsey; Rousculp). It also detracts from comprehensive assessment of community partnerships (d’Arlach et al.). A 2018 special issue of the *Community Literacy Journal* focuses on listening, which guest editors Jenn Fishman and Lauren Rosenberg describe as “an essential component in all community work” (3). Articles in this issue examine an asset-based approach to community listening in the initial stages of a community partnership (Rowan and Cavallaro), engage with narrative to discuss listening (García, “Creating”; Jackson and DeLaune), explore the connection between community writing and community listening (Hinshaw, “Writing”; Stone), and discuss how empathic listening can shift the audience from passive listening to community listening, which involves actively trying to understand (Lohr and Lindenman).

Other recent scholarship argues that because sound is embodied, so is listening. Therefore, listening should be taught multimodally (Butler; Ceraso, “(Re)Educating”; Ceraso, *Sounding*; LaVecchia; VanKooten). Erin E. Schaefer explores the relationship between open listening and the brain and body through use of mindfulness and
neurofeedback. Given the emotional difficulty of open listening—in which each person works to be aware of themselves and the other person, understanding that they are connected to others (84-86)—Schaefer argues that to teach open listening in the composition classroom and elsewhere, the body must be taken into account. Mindfulness pedagogies can help students understand the relation between body and openness when listening, and can facilitate that openness (89-90). Renea Frey also connects listening with the body via mindfulness, and she connects this to the classroom. Frey argues that involving the body and surroundings as well as the mind—employing listening, empathy, nonviolent communication, and mindfulness—in invention benefits students rhetorically (increasing audience awareness and strengthening use of rhetorical strategies) and ethically.

The 2010s also saw queer theory scholarship drawing on and problematizing listening. Gavin P. Johnson uses rhetorical foreplay to further develop Ratcliffe’s tactic of rhetorical eavesdropping to account for more material conditions, and Timothy Oleksiak suggests slow peer review as a strategy for rhetorical listening. Listening has also been tied to the ethics of sexual literacy (Kruse), and queer listening was presented as a way to critically teach masculinity studies (Landreau).

Finally, listening has been explored in the context of research and scholarship. Jacqueline Jones Royster and Kirsch discuss the importance of listening to participants and texts in rhetorical scholarship, stating that “modern researchers and scholars are fully challenged to learn how to listen more carefully to the voices (and texts) that they study, to critique our analytical assumptions and frames, to critique guiding questions reflectively and reflexively” (14), even—and, perhaps, especially—when we disagree
(146-47). In addition, Miriam Raider-Roth discusses the Listening Guide, “a feminist, voice-centered, relational and psychological methodology for narrative data analysis” (510). The Listening Guide involves listening multiple times to recordings of participants, attending each time to something different. By asking researchers to listen in multiple ways to participants, and to themselves, the Listening Guide takes into account “the significance of the researcher’s subjectivity and the researcher-participant relationship” and gives voice to those who might otherwise not be heard (510).

**Listening in Writing Center Studies**

As is the case for communication studies and rhetoric and composition, writing center scholarship on listening is not robust (Fallon 192; Feibush; Fishbain 10; Hall 151; Santa 2). In Kathryn Valentine’s words, “listening is an undercurrent in writing center work” (90): assumed, but rarely explored. Yet listening is fundamental to the writing center. R. Mark Hall describes it as “at the heart of writing center work” (151).

Listening’s centrality to writing center work is evident in its strong connection with the writing center values and practices of dialogue and collaboration. Dialogue is considered by many to be central to the writing center (e.g., Lunsford and Ede; North). In his seminal chapter “Peer Tutoring and the ‘Conversation of Mankind,’” Kenneth A. Bruffee ties thought and writing to conversation (and to each other). He argues that thought is dialogic, is “conversation internalized” (5). Writing is thought taken a step further, made external. If thought is internalized conversation, then writing is “conversation re-externalized” (7). Conversation is thus essential to writing, which means
that consultants should “engag[e] students in conversation at as many points in the writing process as possible” (7).  

Collaboration is another key writing center value (Behm; Young). Muriel Harris explains collaborative learning about writing as “interaction between writer and reader to help the writer improve her own abilities and produce her own text” (“Collaboration” 370). She names collaboration as one practice that remains constant across writing centers (“SLATE”) and finds that writing center journals, consultant guidebooks, and director reports “all attest to the widely-accepted view that tutoring in writing is a collaborative effort” (“Collaboration” 371). Bruffee also sees collaboration as essential to the writing center. If writing is a form of conversation, always taking place in a larger social context, then the writing center should provide this conversation and social context (9). Lunsford and Young each highlight collaboration’s many benefits, along with the difficulties of implementing collaboration that is genuine rather than collaboration in name only.

Dialogue and collaboration are thus central to the writing center, and they both require listening. Harris argues that truly listening to writers during individual writing conferences shows them that the conference really is a dialogue, “that they can talk while we listen, that we’ll listen closely to what they say, and that they can set the agenda for what we listen to” (Teaching 56). Listening facilitates communication, facilitates dialogue that helps writers learn (Feibush; Grimm 53; Morris 8). In addition, listening promotes collaborative learning (Fallon 192; Morris 8; Santa 2).

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7 Bruffee further writes that “[w]hat peer tutor and tutee do together is not write or edit . . . What they do together is converse” (10).
And when listening is acknowledged, it is considered important to writing center consultations (Boudreaux; Cardeñas; Fallon; Holly; McClure; Warnock and Warnock). According to Stephen M. North, writers often prefer a consultant audience that, beyond knowing how to speak about writing, “knows how to listen” (440). Laura Feibush argues that we should think of listening as an active part of conversations, “not just as a mode of reception but as a formative, even expressive, component of communicative situations.” And Julie A. Bokser sums up listening’s significance to the writing center when she refers to consultants as “professional listeners” (48).

Of course, the listening in writing center consultations, as in any other context, is not always ideal. Listening is difficult. Distractions come from without—particularly in a bustling writing center—and from within (Morris 15; Reit 9). And listening requires patience, energy (Cobb and Elledge 136). Grimm finds that “listening is often done under the pressure of time, usually with a desire to be helpful, and almost always with a notion of what is a normal academic essay,” which can interfere with listening (Good 67). These difficulties can lead to less than ideal listening, in which consultants talk more than they listen, or do not listen well (Cardeñas 62, 70, 146; Fallon; McConnell 10; Morris 7). Joshua Tyler Anderson goes as far as to argue that “being able to listen is the most difficult but essential quality tutors can have” (5). Further, though addressed less frequently, the difficulty of listening is an issue not just in terms of consultants listening to writers, but also in terms of writers listening to consultants (Fallon 118). Without this listening—on the part of the consultant and of the writer—strategies and techniques for writing center consultations will not work, or will be less effective (K. Brown 62; Fallon 109).
In what follows, I explore that undercurrent of writing center scholarship that does address listening. Two common points are the acknowledgment of listening’s importance and difficulty, and the description of listening as active or different than hearing (Boquet, *Noise* 38; K. Brown 110; Fallon; Fishbain; Morris 7; Taylor). Beyond this, the scholarship falls under five major themes: openness, power, understanding, emotion, and response. I discuss the first three categories in depth in the upcoming chapters and in brief in the following sections. I return to the latter two categories in the final chapter.

*Openness*

Some writing center scholarship that focuses or touches on listening warns of the dangers of imposing unconscious preconceptions on others, including the detrimental effects that such preconceptions can have on listening. As Grimm puts it, “we project our experiences on others; we listen with predetermined categories” (*Good* 114). These categories—shaped by institutions—form, calcify, and become “automatic” (69). For example, consultants might have preconceptions about writers’ backgrounds or academic abilities. Consultants with such preconceptions, Grimm explains, “see themselves reflected in another person, rather than perceive how the other sees them and the literacy practices of the institution” (112). David Taylor similarly argues that we have a “strong tendency to view others through our fixed ego structure, and thus to impose our own meaning on what they say” (1). More, even when working toward inclusivity, writing centers still get caught in such categories, such as focusing on a Black-white binary rather than acknowledging a range of races and cultures (García, “Unmaking”). Preconceptions shape how we understand and experience the world, and when consultants are not aware
of these preconceptions, the consultants cannot work to understand beyond them. These preconceptions, then, inhibit listening to the other person (Grimm 69, 112).

Even as preconceptions make listening difficult, listening also facilitates awareness of these preconceptions. In order to listen, we must be open to the other person, an openness that requires humility. Grimm argues that writing centers should be filled with wonder, which she describes as “a humble stance of openness to the mystery of another. It starts with the assumption that there are things about another person’s perspective that I cannot understand” (Good 112). Brian J. Fallon adds that being open to others can involve listening in different ways, which requires us “to be humble enough to see when someone is trying to communicate a problem to us in a nontraditional manner” (118). By accepting the limits of our knowledge and by knowing that there are views other than our own, we can begin to listen. We are trying to not understand but experience (Grimm 69).

Grimm connects such openness and listening to change, describing listening’s “transformative potential” (Good 53). And this transformation may require defamiliarization of the self and the “the honesty to recognize one’s difference” (114). In order to listen outside of our assumptions, we must understand that, to others, we too are other (73).

Power

Writing center scholarship also connects listening with power. Speaking about wonder, Grimm argues that humble openness to another develops from an awareness of power relations, “from a recognition that our relationships are always asymmetrical” (Good 112). At the same time, because such listening involves an openness to the other, a
sort of inhabiting of the other, it is “non-hegemonic” (69). J. Anderson argues that rhetorical listening can put power in the hands of the writers by allowing the consultant to address the writer as an individual rather than the assumed “standard” writer (66). And Bokser promotes listening as way for consultants to attend to power structures by complicating their own feelings of belonging and considering how writers might not feel the same level of comfort.

On a larger scale, Grimm holds that listening is necessary for working toward equality (Good 69), stating that “our hope for deeply democratic institutions will rest on the development of our ability to listen” (52-53). In the same vein, Katie Hupp Stahlnecker examines rhetorical listening in conjunction with different writing center relationships (including writer-consultant, coordinator-consultant, and writing center-institution) to explore how democracy can be promoted in each of these relationships. And Romeo García calls for writing centers to listen in order to better address issues of race and power (“Unmaking”).

Understanding

In writing center literature, listening has also been deeply tied to understanding. Janet Fishbain argues that before a consultant can give advice to a writer, the consultant must listen and understand (10), and Fallon considers listening to itself be a type of critical thinking (191). And according to Anne DiPardo, listening can lead to a better understanding of the writer, which can then lead to collaboration (140).

Listening to understand can help consultants make informed decisions about how to approach the consultation (Cardeñas; Fallon; Fishbain; Seckendorf). Consultants’ listening can also help writers better understand their own ideas, draw out ideas that they
did not know they had, and create new ideas (Burghardt; McClure; Morris). Part of listening for understanding involves listening to—and for—what remains unsaid (Fishbain; Taylor), which can help the consultant better understand the writer and their needs (Fallon 192; Holly 10).

And listening for understanding can involve listening not only to the writer but also to the writer’s text. According to Fishbain, consultants should “hear what the essays themselves say” (10), listening, as the text is read out loud, for missing generalizations, attention to audience, organization, style, and grammatical errors (11-12). Anthony Edgington agrees that listening to writers’ texts is important, and he finds that consultant guidebooks lack explanation of how to do so (9). He notes difficulties that consultants have when listening to writers’ papers, particularly “the difficulty of maintaining interest, dealing with grammatical mistakes, and deciding when to offer advice” (10). Further, the ways in which these consultants listen to a writer’s paper are affected by their own experience and knowledge, as well as by the sound volume of the writing center itself. Strategies for addressing these difficulties include taking notes, being patient, and having a conversation with the writer during (or after) points of potential confusion (9-11).

Finally, J. Anderson posits that understanding has its limits. Drawing on Ratcliffe’s rhetorical listening, he argues that consultants should work toward an understanding of the writer, while acknowledging that they may never actually reach full understanding.

*Emotion and Response*

Two other salient categories of listening in the writing center are emotion and response. Because they are not a central part of this dissertation, I introduce them here in
brief. In the context of emotion, listening is often described as sympathetic or empathic (or empathetic), in accordance with the type of listening involved in therapy (Cuny et al.; McBride et al.; Morris; Reit; Taylor). Such listening can facilitate consultant understanding (Cuny et al.), writer-consultant relationships (Cardeñas; Cuny et al.; Fishbain; McBride et al.; Morris), and writer confidence and growth (Fallon; Fishbain; Follett; McBride; Morris; Taylor; Young). Maureen McBride et al. also address how the listening of writers can affect consultants.

Writing center scholarship on listening also explores how listening is communicated: listener response. Response serves as feedback for the speaker and shows that the listener is active in the conversation (Farr; Feibush; Morris; Santa). It can be verbal or nonverbal (Bolander and Harrington; Boudreaux; Farr; Feibush; Morris; Santa). The form of listener response perhaps most addressed in writing center literature is backchanneling, which is when the response does not interrupt the speaker (Gilewicz and Thonus; Mackiewicz; Santa; Thonus).

**What’s to Come**

In her 2017 article, Valentine calls for a deeper examination of listening in the writing center. She investigates the current state of listening in writing center theory and practice by examining writing center consultant guidebooks (published between 2005 and 2016), which she considers to be “the richest source not for only what the field tells tutors about how to conduct writing center sessions but also for how the field defines listening as a part of writing center practice” (91). Studying these guidebooks, Valentine concludes that understandings of listening and of how listening functions in writing center consultations are limited. She finds that these guidebooks consider relatively few
definitions of listening, and these few definitions tend to derive from counseling rather than from writing studies and rhetoric and composition. Further, when discussing listening, the guidebooks often make assumptions about writers and consultants, particularly with regard to identity and authority, “tend[ing] to depict power as concentrated in the norm of the imagined tutor who decides when and what to listen to and does not appear to struggle with language, identity, or personal problems” (105-6). Because of such assumptions about writers and consultants, as well as narrow conceptualizations of listening, the guidebooks oversimplify listening. Valentine worries, “None of the guidebooks ask tutors to consider different orientations to listening or various purposes for listening” (107). Instead, they present listening as an easy way for consultants to understand writers and thus better work with them. Valentine suggests that “[t]urning to rhetorical concepts of listening is one way the field might expand not only our understanding of listening but also work toward exceptional, or at least flexible, tutoring based in praxis as opposed to reified practices such as codified steps for active listening” (108).

With this study, I take a step in this direction, rhetorically approaching listening through empirical research and application of listening scholarship. I present these research methodologies and methods in the following chapter. Chapters 3-5 each focus around a theme in writing center listening scholarship. These topics are addressed separately for the sake of discussion, but they are all interwoven, each facilitating and requiring the others. In Chapter 3, I synthesize the three listening theories that I draw on throughout the dissertation: dialogic listening (Cornwell and Orbe; Floyd), rhetorical listening (Ratcliffe, Rhetorical), and listening otherwise (Lipari, Listening). I then discuss
the openness that is so core to listening and how this openness can help disrupt
preconceptions. Chapter 4 focuses on listening’s relation to power and how listening can
facilitate collaboration within a power differential. I use this to dispute two common
writing center presuppositions in connection to collaboration. Chapter 5 focuses on the
different types of understanding that listening can facilitate in consultations. This leads to
discussion of the importance of misunderstanding as part of understanding and the
implications that misunderstanding has for improvisation in consultations. In the final
chapter, I directly address my research questions and present a listening framework that I
term *listening within difference*. I offer this framework not as a solution but as one way of
centralizing listening, as a stance with which to encounter and approach the writing
center and the world.

Throughout this dissertation, I present listening in an idealistic light. As I study
what has remained relatively unstudied, I want to learn its reaches and contours. I focus,
then, on what listening *can* do, not what it *will* do. What I present here are some of
listening’s capabilities and possibilities, not a guarantee or even an expectation that they
will always play out as such. Listening is an attempt at reaching these ideals. I hope that
this exploration can help us better understand listening in the writing center so that we
can critique the limitations and difficulties of listening and of the ways that I have
presented it. (For more on this, see the Listening Caveats and the Criticism of Rhetorical
Listening sections in the final chapter.) Like Lipari, I acknowledge that my
conceptualization of listening is utopian, while also arguing that it is something that we
should strive to achieve (“Listening” 348).
CHAPTER II: METHODOLOGIES AND METHODS

This study investigated the roles of listening in the writing center by examining the observed and felt experiences of writers and consultants from the University of Louisville (UofL) during University Writing Center (UWC) consultations.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

Overarching question: What are the roles of listening in writing center consultations?

1. How do writer and consultant participants conceptualize listening in writing center consultations at the University of Louisville University Writing Center?

2. How might listening affect participants’ consultation experiences?

3. Based on the above questions, how might I conceptualize listening in the writing center?

I chose to create an overarching question, which, in Jane Agee’s words, serves to “capture the basic goals of the study in one major question” and can facilitate the development of sub-questions (435). In developing (and redeveloping) the overarching question and sub-questions, I reflected using Pamela Takayoshi et al.’s Heuristic for Problem Setting and Research Question Creation. This heuristic consists of six questions, which ask the researcher to reflect on their personal motivation, preexisting knowledge and assumptions, positionality, ideological commitment, potential contribution to the field, and assumptions about academic research (Takayoshi et al. 114-15).

Considerations for the research questions included maintaining a level of openness. Taking Agee’s advice, I tried to construct questions that “invite a process of
exploration and discovery” (444) and to allow them to develop throughout the research process as my understanding changed (432). I also worked to keep questions focused on a specific context and answerable without closing off possibilities (443-44). Finally, I made sure not to “pack questions with multiple sub-questions” (444).

In this chapter, I first discuss the pilot study on which my most recent research is based. I then go into detail about the choices that I made throughout the research process and the reasoning behind those choices. Both the pilot study and this current study were approved by the UofL Institutional Review Board (IRB).

**Pilot Study**

The research process for this dissertation was informed by a pilot study that I conducted the semester before the current study began. I provide an overview of the pilot study to show how it influenced my decisions about narrowing the research topic, selecting methods, and modifying these methods, among other things. Detailed discussion of the current study follows this section.

My pilot study grew out of a panel for the 2017 Conference on Community Writing in which my co-panelists and I discussed the writing center values present in writing center partnerships with the community. I set out in my research intending to investigate listening in writing center consultations in two contexts: in the UofL UWC and off campus with a community partner. I planned to collect data from UofL the first semester and from the community partner the second semester. Accordingly, the pilot was based on these research questions:
1. How does listening within difference\(^8\) function in the University of Louisville University Writing Center’s individual consultations with
   a. University of Louisville writers, on campus?
   b. community partner writers, off campus?

2. How does listening within difference (or lack thereof) affect the consultants’ and writers’ experiences of the session at
   a. University of Louisville?
   b. the community partner site?

3. How do the functions and effects of listening within difference compare across the contexts of the two sites?

4. What strategies for listening within difference can be developed to facilitate communication across difference in writing center sessions and community engagement partnerships?

I began the pilot study with the University of Louisville site, planning to incorporate the community partner site soon after. As I began collecting data, however, I decided that despite my interest in community engagement—not to mention the role that it played in motivating this study—I could not incorporate it into my research at this stage. First, the pilot study called my attention to the richness of the data and how much there was to explore in the UofL Writing Center second alone. Second, there has been minimal study of listening in the writing center and of listening in community engagement, so to explore both contexts simultaneously would be to skip the step of getting grounded in at least one context. Finally, I would want a community-based study

\(^8\) Listening within difference is a listening framework that I developed throughout the research process. It is discussed further in the final chapter.
to follow a community engaged methodology, where the research is participatory, collaborative, and reciprocal throughout the study, starting as early as research design. However, due to the limitations of my dissertation—including lack of time to co-create and carry out the project, the need for a dissertation to be considered individual, and the need for the dissertation to be marketable (Burgess; Greenwood; Herr and Anderson; Khobzi and Flicker; Klocker; Southby)—I did not think that I could do this methodology justice. For these reasons, I decided to focus on only one research site and forego the community engagement aspect entirely, with the intent of returning to it in future projects.

The modified pilot was a mixed methods case study with 15 participants: ten writers, four consultants, and one participant who was writer in one consultation and a consultant in another. The consultant participants volunteered to participate, and, at the time of the consultant’s appointment, I asked the corresponding writer if they would like to participate. Each consultation was video recorded, and, after the consultation, each participant filled out an online survey through Google Forms. This survey was a slightly modified version of the Multidimensional Evaluation of Enacted Social Support (MEESS), a listening instrument designed “to measure individuals’ multifaceted evaluations of social support they provide, receive, or observe” (Goldsmith and Griscom 453). The majority of the survey consisted of ordinal questions taken from the MEESS. These questions asked participants to rate which of two polar descriptors best reflected how they felt about the person they were evaluating. For example, a participant would be asked to evaluate sensitivity by selecting from a scale of 1-7, where 1 is sensitive and 7 is insensitive. This was done for a number of descriptor pairs, such as
discouraging/encouraging and inattentive/attentive. In my survey, these questions were asked about the other person in the consultation and then were asked again about the participant themselves. My addition to the MEESS was to then ask participants to rate how they and the other person listened, on a scale of listened poorly to listened well. The survey ended with an optional text box where participants could add additional thoughts.

There were a total of 11 observations and 22 surveys. One consultant was observed five times, another consultant was observed three times, and one participant was observed twice: once as a writer and once as a consultant. I participated as a writer in the very first observed consultation as a sort of test run and to perhaps get a little insight into the writer perspective.

I also administered an anonymous survey to writers and consultants. I sought writer participants through flyers at the UWC and consultant participants through email. This survey was identical to the other survey except that it did not ask for identifying information (the participant’s name and the consultation date). Four people, all of whom were consultants, participated in this survey.

Interviews were very relevant to this study, given that I was interested in writers’ and consultants’ experience. However, I decided to forego interviews for the pilot because I wanted to use the pilot to help drive my interview questions.

As mentioned, a major consequence of the pilot was my simplifying the project to focus on listening in the writing center without the extra layer of listening in community-engaged partnerships. Other implications of this pilot for my current study are discussed in the relevant sections below.
Methodologies

This is a mixed methods case study, drawing also on phenomenology and asset-based epistemologies. The study focuses on the qualitative. Because this study revolved around understanding the phenomenon of listening from different perspectives, qualitative research’s interest in understanding how people make sense of a phenomenon (Merriam and Tisdell 6, 15) was a good fit. Further, the emergent nature of qualitative research, in which the research plan changes throughout the research process (18), fits well with listening and the openness that listening entails. As Jenny Helin argues in her article on the relevance of dialogic listening for fieldwork, “one implication of emphasizing dialogic listening is to . . . prepare oneself for an embodied being in the living moment, and openly let the ways of engaging in the field emerge from within that” (239). Also, because there had been little research on listening in the writing center, I wanted the flexibility to make changes as I learned more. I proceeded in the spirit of grounded theory, though I would not consider grounded theory to be a methodology for this study given my predetermined focus on listening. I tried to take a stance of openness, to start, in Takayoshi et al.’s words, “from a position of possibility with researchers entering research practice open to possibilities that might arise” (107).

I collected qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously (Merriam and Tisdell 46), though my analysis draws almost exclusively on qualitative data. The quantitative data came from the survey ordinal questions. Benefits of quantitative data include enriching understanding (Overton) and contextualizing the qualitative (Bishop). More, collecting both qualitative and quantitative data allows each type of data to inform the other (Merriam and Tisdell 46).
I employed a case study methodology for this research because the research involved “in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (Merriam and Tisdell 37). Since the study involved and advocated for listening to individual voices, it follows that I would listen closely to certain individuals in certain contexts, i.e., a bounded system. Further, focusing on a particular case allowed me to try to “understand [a] complex social phenomenon” (Yin 4), to try to answer “how, why?” (9). Robert K. Yin defines a case study as an empirical inquiry that “investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when . . . the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (16). In this study, I closely explored listening, in the context of particular individuals in a particular writing center. Due to my focus on individuals within this context, I could not determine what is attributable to listening as opposed to other factors. Case cannot be separated from context (214), and there are “more variables of interest than data points” (17).

This case study follows an embedded, single-case design (see fig. 1). The overall system being investigated is the set of UofL UWC consultations. Within that system are the intermediate units of writers and consultants, and within each of those intermediate units are the smallest units: individual writers and consultants. The focus of the study was on the individuals, who were contextualized by the larger units.
Particularly with regard to designing the interviews, I drew on two additional methodologies—phenomenology and asset-based epistemologies—though I do not consider this project as operating under those methodologies per se. Phenomenology explores the subjective meaning and essence of people’s experience of a phenomenon (Bevan 136; Merriam and Tisdell 26). This was appropriate because I wanted to better understand writers’ and consultants’ experiences of the phenomenon of listening. I also drew on asset-based epistemologies (ABE), which Rachael Wendler developed as a way of listening to community partners. This methodology, which she describes as “reciprocal, reflective storytelling” (56), developed from “the idea that community stories can be assets” (54). A synthesis of asset-based community development, critical raced-gendered epistemologies, indigenous methodologies, and service learning scholarship, ABE acknowledges and welcomes the perspectives and knowledge of community members. This was particularly relevant when my project was going to involve

![Fig. 1. The units of analysis for the embedded, multiple case study design.](image)
community engagement, but it is still very appropriate for the current study: as fitting with listening, I respected and wanted to learn my participants’ perspectives and experiences. In this way, though I was no longer explicitly incorporating community engaged scholarship, a community engagement mindset still informed this work.

**Research Site**

My research took place in the University of Louisville University Writing Center. Data collection occurred during the Fall 2018 semester, from September to November.

**Site Overview**

UofL was a public research university located in the city Louisville, Kentucky. UofL comprised three campuses: the Belknap Campus, near downtown Louisville; the Health Sciences Center, in downtown Louisville; and Shelby Campus, which was farther away. My research took place at the main location of the UWC, which was on the Belknap campus. There was also a satellite UWC location on the Health Sciences Campus. Both locations were open to all members of the UofL community, but the satellite location catered to graduate students, international students, and students in the sciences. In addition, the UWC offered synchronous and asynchronous online appointments via the Virtual Writing Center. I focused on the main location of the UWC in order to keep my research site consistent. This site offered in-person appointments, and it really was the heart of the UWC, with the most visits. Of the total 5,470 consultations across the 2018-2019 academic year, 4,278 took place at the main location (2,065 in the fall, 1,952 in the spring, and 261 in the summer; Bronwyn Williams, email message to author, October 29, 2019).
The University Writing Center served all members of the UofL community—undergraduates, graduate students, staff, and faculty—in all disciplines. The word “University” emphasizes this inclusion. The “University Writing Center Mission Statement” states,

Our philosophy of teaching writing begins with conceiving of writing as a process . . . At all stages of the process, we believe that writers benefit from the kind of thoughtful response we offer at the Writing Center. In our consultations we engage in a dialogue with writers to help them develop their writing, and to become more effective and confident writers . . . [W]e want to ask the questions and offer the suggestions that will help writers understand how to make their own work stronger. The Writing Center is dedicated to being a safe, inclusive environment . . . We are also committed to accommodating all writers and all learning styles.

As suggested by the above, the UWC had roots in rhetoric and composition scholarship. The UWC was based in the English Department and was tied to the rhetoric and composition doctoral program that I attended. The UWC was led by a director and an associate director. Dr. Bronwyn Williams, a tenured rhetoric and composition professor, had served as director since 2011. His scholarship included topics such as digital media, popular culture, agency, and community engagement in the writing center. The associate director, Cassandra Book, a graduate of the UofL MA program, was at the time of this research a doctoral candidate in an English PhD program. Her research interests included writing center studies, professional writing, writing program administration, and feminist rhetorics.

Four graduate students of the UofL rhetoric and composition doctoral program were selected to serve in assistant director (AD) positions annually. The ADs consulted in some capacity but also served in administrative roles. The remainder of the consulting was done by 10-15 MA students from the English department. These MA students took a writing center theory and practice course in their first semester. The UWC also employed
an administrative associate who staffed the front desk and performed other administrative duties.

UWC consultations lasted up to 50 minutes, with 10 minutes between for consultants to write their visit reports and to rest. Both appointments and walk-ins were welcome, but appointments were recommended.

**Site Description**

The philosophy of the UWC was to an extent reflected in its physicality and atmosphere. The UWC was on the first floor of Ekstrom Library, the main library on Belknap Campus, and could be seen upon entrance from the quad. Part of the Learning Commons, the UWC sat next to the Research Assistance and Instruction center. Within the last few years, the director and associate director had the opportunity to design the new space, and their decisions took writing center values into account. I provide here a description of the UWC to give a sense of those values and to contextualize the observations and interviews.

If you were to approach the UWC during the semester of my research, perhaps the first thing that you would notice is that it was encased in glass, rendering a less distinct barrier between the UWC and the rest of the library than would have been created by opaque walls. The divide between the UWC and the Research Assistance and Instruction center next door was permeable: a shared conference room with a door connecting the two centers.

Just outside the UWC front door, you would likely see a whiteboard welcoming writers or announcing upcoming events. The glass door was open any time the Writing Center was open. Entering, you would find on your left a marble-topped wood desk,
complete with an administrative associate (or sometimes a consultant) and a laptop for writers to book appointments. The wall behind the desk was red and decorated with a sculpture of a writer, and the floor was carpeted. The entryway included padded wood chairs next to a round table with flyers of Writing Center groups and events. Further in, a printer was available for writers to use at no cost if they wanted a hard copy of their text for the consultation. On the wall to the left hung artwork created and loaned by UofL students.

Then came the large open space where most consultations took place. This room contained tables with wooden tops and plastic legs with wheels to make it easy to reconfigure the tables, facilitating collaboration and accessibility. Each table had two wheeled chairs, which usually rested side by side. After checking in at the front desk, writers were encouraged to choose a table where they would wait until the time of their appointment, at which point the consultant would come out to meet them. A few plants were scattered throughout the room. The lights were fluorescent but hung from the ceiling in a way that some might find more welcoming than the standard academic lights embedded in the ceiling.

On the left, a tall metal bookcase held pads, pencils, and reference books. Instead of a wall, the left side of the room was made up of three side rooms, each separated from the main room by a glass wall and door. There were a few chairs and a desk with an iMac computer in each room. The room closest to the UWC entrance was the conference room shared with the Research Assistance and Instruction center. The other two rooms had red accent walls with student artwork and were available for consultations when a writer wanted a quieter setting.
On the right side of the main room, a counter ran along a wall of glass, overlooking the library computer area. PCs lined the counter. Toward the back of the Writing Center were the associate director’s office on the left and the director’s on the right. Each had a window looking out on the main room. On the wall next to the associate director’s window hung a holder with handouts for consultants and writers.

Between the two offices at the back of the UWC was a door leading to the breakroom for the MA consultants. Half of the room was occupied by a large conference table, and the rest contained a coffee pot and a refrigerator, a couch, a few computers, and lockers for the consultants’ belongings. A door led out to a back passage of the library. Consultants had the code to that door and were encouraged to use the Writing Center space outside of work hours to study.

On the left side of the consultant room was a door, almost always open, leading to the AD office. This office, long and thin, held another refrigerator and a microwave next to bookcases with extra issues of rhetoric and composition journals and other miscellany. One wall was lined with a long desk with space for the four ADs, though it was rare for all four to occupy the room at the same time.

All consultations that I recorded took place in the center side room on the left side of the main room. The vast majority of my interviews took place in the shared conference room next to the room for the observations. This conference room was not used for consultations, so I was able to interview the participants in the Writing Center without taking space away from consultations. Due to a scheduling conflict, one of the interviews took place in the AD office.
Research Participants and Recruitment

This study involved a total of 84 participants: seven consultant participants, seven writer participants, and 70 anonymous writer survey participants. (For an overview of individual consultant and writer participants, see Appendix A.) The process of recruitment, including discussion of consent, is outlined here. The ethics of this process are discussed further in the ethics section of this chapter.

Consultants

Of the seven consultant participants, five were MA consultants and two were PhD student or candidate assistant directors. One of these participants—Christopher—had also taken part in the pilot study both as a consultant and as a writer.

The MA consultants were first-semester students in the English department at UofL, working 20 hours a week at the Writing Center in exchange for tuition and a stipend. The MA program had three unofficial tracks: literature, creative writing, and rhetoric and composition. A typical MA course load was 9 credits. I did not know any of these MA consultants personally before my study.

Because we shared a department and a writing center background with a similar philosophy, these consultants’ ideas might have been more likely to jive with my own than would those of consultants from a different institution or educational background. The writing center philosophy was perpetuated in daily practice and also through a 3-credit writing center theory and practice course that the MA consultants took during their first semester as consultants (which was the semester of my data collection). The course was designed and taught by the UWC director, with the additional facilitation of two of the ADs. And the pedagogy and values discussed in this course did impact the
consultants. As Liz, an MA consultant participant, said, “Bronwyn has a really strong philosophy. It’s one of the best things about this writing center. He’s like, ‘This is what we do, this is how we do it, and this is what you’re going to do.’”

The remaining two consultant participants were UWC assistant directors. To become an AD, rhetoric and composition doctoral students and candidates participated in an application and interview process. Christopher was the assistant director for graduate student writing. He worked at both the UWC on the Belknap Campus and the Health and Sciences Center satellite location. His focus was on graduate student, international, and science writers, though he worked with any writer who made an appointment with him. He worked at the Writing Center 20 hours a week and taught no courses during this time. Christopher was in the cohort after mine, and I had known him for over two years at the time of data collection. I also knew the other AD participant, Beth, but not as well: she was two cohorts after mine. Beth was Writing Center assistant director, which involved working 10 hours a week in the UWC and teaching one course through the English department. She tutored limited hours and mentored the MA consultants. Beth also served as community service liaison with the University Writing Center’s community partner.

My recruitment process for MA consultants differed somewhat from my process for recruiting ADs. To recruit MA consultants, I visited one of the first few writing center theory and practice course sessions of the semester. I made a pitch, giving an overview of myself (including my connection to the UWC) and of my study topic and its significance. I also distributed a handout explaining what participation would involve, with a time estimate (see Appendix C). To decrease potential feelings of coercion, I made it clear that
participation was optional and could be ended at any time, and that participation would not affect the consultant’s standing in the Writing Center or as a student in this course. I passed around a sign-up sheet for those interested in learning more about participating. The first step of my recruitment of AD participants was a more condensed project overview in person or via email. I also made it clear that the ADs should in no way feel obligated to participate based on our personal connections.

I then sent a follow-up email to MA and AD consultants, asking who wanted to participate and/or learn more. I encouraged them to talk with me further if they had any questions or concerns. In the end, seven consultants—five MA consultants and two ADs—decided to participate. There were two additional consultants who were interested in participating but could not pursue it further, one due to personal reasons and the other because she worked only at the Virtual Writing Center, which was not included in this study.

Once a consultant decided that they were interested in participating, I emailed them the IRB-approved consent form in advance of the observation. We also went over the consent form in person before or on the day of the observation. This process included giving the consultants the chance to choose whether they wanted to use their real name or a pseudonym, whether they consented to being audio recorded, and whether they consented to being video recorded. Participants were given another opportunity to raise concerns or ask questions.

After sharing the consent form, I worked with each consultant participant to create a schedule based on their and my availability. To choose the day and time of the observation, we looked for days when the consultant had Writing Center shifts (and,
ideally, some appointments already scheduled) and when I was available to block off
time for a few appointments in a row. I only observed each consultant once, but I set
aside multiple appointments to allow for writers who might not want to participate. When
choosing dates, we also considered whether we would both be available for an interview
within a few days of their observation (and sooner when possible). This would help keep
their memories and thoughts about the consultation fresh.

On the day of the observation, I went over the consent form with the consultant if we had not done so already. The consultant then filled out a communication form (see Appendix D), which asked them whether they wanted to be contacted with clarification questions, information on analysis and findings, and/or calls for future participation (though I ended up not pursuing the latter). This allowed participants to take part in the study to the extent that they wanted to without being contacted more than necessary. The form also asked participants to select their pronouns so that I could refer to them respectfully and accurately.⁹

Regarding demographics, the only form of identification that I asked about was
gender, and even that was somewhat indirect, a result of asking about their pronouns. I
did not otherwise inquire about identifications because I was interested to see which
aspects of identity participants chose as significant in response to one of my follow-up
email questions:

If I talk about you directly in my dissertation write-up, it’s likely that I would
include a description of some kind. To help make sure that you agree and are
comfortable with that description, it would be nice to have some description that
comes from you. How would you describe yourself—any aspects of yourself that
you find relevant—for readers of my dissertation?

⁹ In order to keep the form concise, I limited the number of pronouns included on the communication form to those I believed most frequently used. Participants were also given the option of writing in pronouns.
You can read these descriptions in their entirety in Appendix A.

Based on the communication form, four consultant participants identified with the pronouns she/her/hers and three with he/him/his. Based partly on self-descriptions and partly on researcher perception, all seven consultants seemed to be white or Caucasian. One consultant identified as “able-bodied.” Other aspects of identity mentioned included age, height, educational background, and writing center background.

**Writers**

There were seven writer participants, one of whom—Kathryn—had also taken part in the pilot study as a consultant. Two writers discontinued their participation partway through the study: one after the observation and one after the interview. These participants stopped responding to my attempts at communication and did not cite a reason for ending their participation. I assume that they no longer had the time that participation involved.

To recruit writers, I went to a consultant participant’s consultation during the time we had scheduled for potential observations. I then made a pitch, giving an overview of myself and my connection to the UWC and of the study topic and its significance. I also shared the same handout that I showed to potential consultant participants, explaining what participation would involve, with a time estimate (see Appendix C), and I highlighted the importance of the Writing Center’s learning from writers’ perspectives. I emphasized that they were under no obligation to participate, that participation had no

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10 Four consultants self-identified in their descriptions as white or Caucasian. Three consultants did not include race in their descriptions. Based on my interpretation, they were white or Caucasian. To contextualize this, during the semester of my data collection, all but one of the consultants in the UWC self-identified or appeared, based on my interpretation, as white or Caucasian. The seventh consultant presented, to my perspective, as African American or Black. LaShondra, a writer, touched on this when she asked me about the racial and gender breakdown of the consultants, stating, “This is the first year I’ve ever seen an African American woman work in the Lab altogether.”
effect on their use of the UWC, and that they could end their participation at any time. When writers declined to participate, the main reason was the amount of time that participation would take (e.g., one student chose not to participate because they were a PhD student on the job market).

When a writer agreed to participate, we underwent the same consent procedure as for the consultants, except that the writers, for obvious reasons, had not received the consent form in advance. The writer participants filled out the same communication form as did the consultant participants, and they were also asked in a follow-up email to describe themselves.

Based on the communication form, four writers identified with the pronouns she/her/hers and three with he/him/his (the same gender ratio as with the consultants). Based partly on self-descriptions and partly on researcher perception, four writers seemed white or Caucasian, two seemed African American or Black, and one seemed East Asian.\textsuperscript{11} One writer identified as having a disability. Other aspects of identity that were sometimes mentioned included age, height, and educational background. As determined from the interviews, observations, and self-descriptions, three of the writers were pursuing graduate degrees, three were pursuing bachelor’s degrees, and one was auditing undergraduate courses (and had already earned a bachelor’s degree).

\textit{Anonymous Writer Survey Participants}

The anonymous writer survey participants were recruited on my behalf by the director of the UWC. The recruitment email asked potential participants to take part in a

\textsuperscript{11} Three writers self-identified in their descriptions as white and one as African American. Three writers did not include race in their descriptions. Based on my interpretation, one was African American or Black, one was East Asian, and one was white or Caucasian.
quick and anonymous online survey to support research on listening in the writing center. The email explained that writing centers can benefit from learning about writers’ experiences, and potential participants were told to contact me via email with any questions.

This recruitment email was sent twice, once in the middle of the semester and once at the end. The first email was sent to all writers who had participated in at least one Writing Center consultation since the beginning of the semester. The second email was sent to all writers who had participated in at least one Writing Center consultation since the first recruitment was sent. Of the 70 anonymous survey participants, 59% responded to mid-semester survey, and 41% responded to the survey at the end of the semester.

The survey itself included an IRB-approved consent form, which did not require a signature, before any questions were asked.

Methods

The four methods used for this project are observations, surveys, interviews, and asynchronous follow-up questions.\(^{12}\) The observations consisted of the video recording of participants’ consultations (save one observation, which was audio recorded instead).

After the observation, each participant completed an online survey. Within a few days of the observation and survey, I interviewed the participant. A few days after that, I sent the participant follow-up questions via email (see fig. 2). The observations allowed me an

![Fig. 2. The methods process for each participant.](image)

\(^{12}\) I also included on the consent form the possibility of collecting relevant documents from participants. I collected only one document: Vanessa, a writer, had to write a reflection of her UWC visit for her class, and she shared with me a copy of that reflection.
outsider’s perspective of the consultation. The surveys and interviews helped me learn about what I could not observe: the participants’ experiences (Merriam and Tisdell 108; Patton 340).

In this section, I provide an overview of each method, including when and how that method was used, along with information about the number of participants. I then go into more detail about the design of that method.

**Observations**

The observation was the first form of data collection that each participant experienced. The consultations of the seven writer-consultant participant pairs were recorded. All observations took place in the middle side room of the UWC. Upon facing the back of the room, the table, chairs, and computer were on the right side of the room. The video recorder, on a tripod, was placed at an angle in the back right corner so that it would capture the faces of the writer and consultant, which meant that the contents of computer screens were not visible. I began the recording process for each consultation, and the consultant ended it.

Six of these observations were video recorded. The seventh was audio recorded at the request of the writer participant. I had decided to record the consultations, rather than sitting in on them, not in an attempt to bypass the Hawthorne Effect, which cannot be done, but rather because I thought that the participants might find this a little less uncomfortable and disruptive.

UWC consultations lasted up to 50 minutes, and the length of the observed consultations ranged from 23 minutes to 49 minutes. The average observation lasted 35 minutes.
Surveys

After their consultation, writer and consultant participants each filled out an electronic survey (see Appendix F). The consultants typically took the survey in the back room of the UWC. Most writers took the survey on the computer in the room of the consultation (where I had pulled up the survey before the consultation began). Sometimes, though, the consultants or writers were in a rush, and, in those cases, I emailed them the survey link so that they could complete the survey later. This sometimes led to the survey being completed after the interview. All 14 writer and consultant participants filled out a survey.

The anonymous writer participants filled out their survey when they received the email invitation in the middle of the semester or the end of the semester. The anonymous survey was the same as the survey for writer and consultant participants except that the anonymous survey did not collect identifying information (name, date of consultation, and name of consultant). A total of 70 writers completed the anonymous survey. The mid-semester survey had a response rate of 7.1%. The end-of-semester survey had a response rate of 5.1%.

The survey used in this study was a much-revised version of the survey from my pilot study. In brief, the updated survey collected information about the participant and their consultation, including a summary of the consultation and a rating of the success level of the consultation. It then asked participants to rate different aspects of the other person’s behavior and their own behavior, and to reflect on how these behaviors might have affected the success of the consultation. Next, the survey asked the participants how strongly they thought that the other person listened to them and how strongly they
thought that they listened to the other person. Participants then reflected on how listening might have affected the success of the consultation. The survey ended with an optional text box for additional thoughts.

Development of this survey entailed a number of revisions. Throughout the redesign, I tried to consider the survey experience from the participant perspective, as per Don Dillman et al. I also reflected on exactly what I wanted to measure, and I considered question and response order, type of response, wording and syntax, length, organization, and neutrality (Dillman et al.; Krosnick and Presser).

One change I made was to shift the survey platform from Google Forms to Survey Monkey. Drawing on Claire Lauer et al.'s discussion of survey user interface, I found the Survey Monkey interface to be more appealing and professional. Survey Monkey allowed me to put my ordinal questions into a matrix, with the question at the top and a list of the different variables with the same rating options. With Google Forms, on the other hand, I had to repeat the question for each variable.

Next, I decided to modify the survey questions, which had originally been based on the Multidimensional Evaluation of Enacted Social Support (MEESS; Goldsmith and Griscom). These modifications meant that the survey was no longer calibrated for quantitative reliability and validity. However, when I reviewed the data from the pilot study, I had found the quantitative less informative for my research questions than the qualitative. Given the qualitative nature of this project, I was concerned less with using an instrument designed for statistical analysis and more with gathering data in an additional format, giving writer and consultant participants an opportunity to reflect on
the consultation while it was still fresh and hearing from writers beyond the seven whom I observed and interviewed.

One modification was the addition of new questions. I provided a space for participants to explain the reasons for their ratings after each set of ordinal questions. I also added a section for demographic and consultation information, including a question about the success of the consultation. I deliberately did not define success because what makes a consultation successful differs based on context. The space for participants to clarify their rating of the consultation success provided insight into what success meant for each participant.

In addition to adding new questions, I also modified the MEESS questions (Goldsmith and Griscom). As described in the overview of my pilot study, the MEESS asked participants to rate which of two polar descriptors best described how they felt about the person they were evaluating. The instrument asked about 12 descriptor pairs as a way of examining three categories: sensitive/emotional awareness, supportive/relational awareness, and helpful (problem-solving utility). These pairs began to feel redundant, and I sometimes found them confusing because they did not always represent the same relationships between polar words. For example, with the pair compassionless/compassionate, the first adjective is a lack of the second. With the pair discouraging/encouraging, however, the first adjective is the opposite of the second.

In the revised survey, I asked about five descriptors. First, to avoid the issue of differing relationships among descriptor pairs, I decided to use single descriptors and to ask participants to rate their level of agreement with that descriptor. To go from 12 concepts to five, I reduced the eight word pairs that measured sensitive/emotional
awareness and supportive/relational awareness to one descriptor from each of the two category titles: sensitive and supportive. I deleted the descriptors from the helpful category because the concept of helpfulness was reflected in other questions (such as those about the success of the consultation). I then added three concepts that seemed important to listening based on my research thus far: attentive, collaborative, and authentic.

I also shifted these descriptors from adjectives to adverbs so that they referred to a person’s behavior rather than the person themselves. For example, instead of asking a participant to rate themselves where 1 is sensitive and 7 is insensitive, I asked them to rate how strongly they agreed with the statement “During this consultation, I behaved sensitively.” Making this change might make it easier for participants to respond truthfully because they might be less inclined to describe a person—themselves or the other person—negatively than to describe a behavior negatively.

Finally, I changed the scaling for all of my ordinal questions from a seven-point scale to a five-point scale. There is no single recommended rating scale (Krosnick and Presser 268), and I had used a seven-point scale in the pilot survey solely based on the MEESS instrument. For the new survey, I shifted to five-point scale because I personally found it easier to understand in this particular context. With a seven-point, I had trouble differentiating between, for example, what it meant to somewhat agree that the other person behaved collaboratively versus what it meant to agree that the other person behaved collaboratively.
Interviews

The third method used in this study was synchronous, in-person interviews. I considered these interviews to be social practices rather than research instruments, acknowledging that data is co-constructed between interviewer and interviewee (Kinloch and San Pedro 32; Talmy).

The in-person interviews took place within a few days of the participant’s observation. All but one of these interviews were conducted in the shared conference room, and the other interview was conducted in the AD office. Interviews were audio recorded.

There were 12 interviews. Due to scheduling constraints, I had to ask one participant questions asynchronously via email, choosing core questions from my interview guide. The final participant was not interviewed because he was no longer participating in the study. One hour was set aside for each in-person interview. The length of these interviews ranged from 30 to 69 minutes, and the average interview lasted 52 minutes.

The in-person interviews were semi-structured, as is common in qualitative research (Merriam and Tisdell 124). This helped me make sure that I addressed essential topics while also allowing our conversation to move in unexpected but meaningful directions. To this end, my interview guide included more questions than I actually asked so that I could select the questions most appropriate for the particular situation.

My interview design drew on and merged Wendler’s asset-based epistemologies interviews and Bevan’s phenomenological interviews. The asset-based epistemologies interviews move through five stages: Opening, What, So What, Now What, and Closing.
The Opening stage is meant “to establish rapport, negotiate the research process, [and] determine context” (Wendler 59). In the What stage, the participant shares stories about the relevant experience, and in the So What stage, the researcher and participant analyze those stories. The Now What stage relates to future implications. In the final stage, Closing, participant and researcher “[r]e-negotiate the interview process, discuss next steps, [and] pursue reciprocity” (59).

Bevan’s phenomenological interviews move through three stages: contextualization, apprehending the phenomenon, and clarifying the phenomenon. Contextualization involves exploration of the participant’s lifeworld to learn about what gives the experience of interest meaning, typically using descriptive questions. In apprehending the phenomenon, the researcher zooms in on the relevant experience, learning more through descriptive and structural questions (Bevan 139-41). Finally, clarifying the phenomenon utilizes imaginative variation, where “the researcher is conscious of an element of experience, which is then put through the process of imaginatively varying its structural components to uncover invariant parts and thus clarifying its structure” (141).

My interview guide was based on these two interview structures (but I did not stick firmly to this organization within an interview if the conversation moved from it in a useful way). First, my interview guide addressed the participant’s background, in the vein of Wendler’s Opening and Bevan’s contextualization. Next, the guide shifted to discussion of the observed consultation, as in Wendler’s What and Bevan’s apprehending the phenomenon stages. Following this, my interview guide addressed that consultation with a focus on listening and elicited the participant’s opinions about listening in the
writing center. This was a continuation of Wendler’s What stage, moving into her Now What and Closing stages, and it also fit with Bevan’s clarifying the phenomenon stage. All interviews concluded with my asking the participant if they had anything to add.

Interview design also considered question design (keeping questions open-ended, neutral, singular, and clear), number, type, sequencing, statements, probes, and feedback (Merriam and Tisdell; Patton; Rubin and Rubin; Westby et al.). (See Appendix E for the interview guide.)

I modified one segment of the interview guide after the eighth interview. The guide included a set of four questions asking about the participant’s listening and the listening of the other person. For the first eight interviews, these questions were:

Tell me about a time during the consultation when the other person
- Listened to you.
- Did not listen to you.

Tell me about a time during the consultation when you
- Listened to the other person.
- Did not listen to the other person.

By the eighth interview, I found that it was often difficult for participants to think of a specific moment when they or the other person was listening because listening occurred throughout the consultation, even if the level of listening varied. To help participants locate a specific moment, I added the modifier particularly well. Asking participants to bring up a time when they or the other person did not listen also led to difficulties. It was too specific—maybe they did not feel that such a moment occurred—and/or too negative. To ameliorate this, I added the modifier well. The modified questions read:

Tell me about a time during the consultation when the other person
- Listened to you particularly well.
- Did not listen to you well.

Tell me about a time during the consultation when you
- Listened to the other person particularly well.
• Did not listen to the other person **well**.

The four remaining interviews used this version of these questions.

As Christopher, a consultant participant, pointed out, these interviews quickly became a meta experience for me because I was enacting what I was studying: I was listening to the participants talk about listening. This at times got me stuck in my head. For example, when discussing listening response during our interview, Christopher shared that it irritated him when people displayed their listening through constant mmhming: “mmhm mmhm mmhm mmhm mmhm.” “Once a second,” he said, “once every other second, it sounds like you’re listening. Multiple times a second, you’re waiting for your turn to talk.” Of course, I immediately became self-conscious of any mmhming that I had been doing, which suddenly felt excessive. Luckily, Christopher realized my concern, saying, “Every single time, when you listen to this [interview recording], because you’re going to be paranoid about this, you’ll notice that you only mmhm when I paused, so, it’s fine, and it doesn’t bother me at all.” In my other interviews, I continued to be conscious (“paranoid”) of my mmhming and of the many other things that I was learning about listening.

Indeed, the importance of listening is discussed in some scholarship on research. Bonnie S. Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater hold that research into people requires collaborative listening. Valeria Kinloch and Timothy San Pedro argue that listening helps researchers building trust and meaning with participants. Similarly, Jenny Helin explains that listening during conversations with participants should be an active, embodied process. Regarding listening in interviews specifically, the first chapter of Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin’s book on qualitative interviewing is titled “Listening, Hearing, Sharing.” Rubin and Rubin write of the importance that listening plays in trying to
understand the interviewees. And Michael Quinn Patton also discusses the importance of attentive listening in interviews, particularly in the context of balancing listening with notetaking (381, 383).

*Email Follow-Up Questions*

Follow-up questions were emailed as an attached Word document to participants within a few days of their in-person interview. Of the six to eight questions, two were asked to all participants: how did they want to be described in the dissertation and did they have any further comments.

The remaining questions were individualized. To create these individualized questions, I went through the observation, survey, and face-to-face interview for each participant, noting my thoughts and possible themes. Based on this data and rudimentary analysis, I generated sometimes as many as 20 potential follow-up questions for that participant. I then narrowed these down to four to six questions for each participant. I chose the questions that I thought would lead to data that was particularly relevant or interesting, as well as questions that would best draw out participants’ thoughts and opinions. I worried a bit over choosing the “correct” or “best” questions, but I decided that, as in synchronous interviews, sometimes I have to with my gut.

Overall, the individualized questions that I selected asked the participant either to explain or consider something further, sometimes specifying a particular direction or mentioning a topic that that had not come up during the survey or in-person interview.

Take the first four follow-up questions that I asked Beth, a consultant, as examples:

Speaking of Kathryn in the interview, you say, “she’s very open, and I think when she can be open and then you can run with that openness and ask genuine questions.”

1) What does “open” mean to you in this context?
2) How does the writer’s openness facilitate your asking genuine questions?
3) How might listening connect to openness?
4) How might listening connect to asking genuine questions?

The first question asks Beth to further explain the concept of openness in the context of the writing center. The second question is more specific, asking her to explain the causal relationship between openness and asking genuine questions. The third and fourth questions introduce a topic that Beth had not spoken about in regard to openness and genuine questions: listening.

Christopher kindly encouraged me to ask him a second round of follow-up questions. I took advantage of this and asked him to elaborate on a particular part of his response.

The participant response time for these follow-up questions ranged from one hour to 21 days. The average response time was 9.6 days.

**Analysis**

My analysis took place simultaneously with data collection. I used the qualitative data management and analysis program ATLAS.ti to track my data and the analysis process.

Beyond the notes that I took during the interviews, my initial analysis began after each interview, when I went through that participant’s observation, survey, and interview to construct the participant’s individualized follow-up questions. Throughout this process, I noticed potential themes that appeared in multiple data or that otherwise seemed significant. I tracked these in a memo in ATLAS.ti, listing each theme and the data in which I found it, and I added to that list as I developed follow-up questions for additional participants. The names of these themes were not pretty—they represented my
grasping at half-formed ideas. I did not draw directly on these potential themes for later analysis per se, but they helped me get an initial sense of the data.

The potential themes that I located in five or more observations, surveys, and interviews were:

- note-taking as a form of listening / as showing listening
- asking questions in order to listen better / listening by asking questions
- listening without preconceptions/assumptions/plans / willing to be changed / putting aside expertise; listening and emotion
- listening and openness
- listening to know/understand people and see them as individuals
- listening as performative
- listening to/for what is not said
- listening as embodied
- the importance of listening at the beginning of a session

Many other potential themes came up only once. They included listening as reciprocal, listening selectively, listening and religion, and listening and writing center environment.

Other analysis included analytic memos (Blakeslee and Fleischer 184; Saldaña). As with my list of potential themes, I wrote these memos in ATLAS.ti. As per Johnny Saldaña, these memos included reflection on:

- how you personally relate to the participants and/or the phenomenon . . .
- the participants’ routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships
- emergent patterns, categories, themes, concepts, and assertions . . .
- any problems with the study . . .
- future directions for the study (53)
Analysis continued throughout the transcription and coding process, discussed below, and also throughout the writing process.

**Transcription**

Interview transcription was simultaneous with data collection and was done based on the audio recording. I transcribed all interviews myself in order to more fully immerse myself in the data. Before transcribing, I listened to each interview at least twice and took notes. To transcribe, I used the program Transcribe, by Wreally.\(^{13}\) I chose this program for its keyboard shortcuts, which I found easier to use than a transcription foot pedal, and for its auto loop feature. The latter allowed me to decide how many seconds the video or audio recording would run before looping back. This helped me better process what I heard and gave me a little more time to type it out. The program also allowed me to set how long it would pause before looping back and how many seconds back the program would then go.

Through trial and error, I found the settings that typically worked best for me, though I made adjustments in the moment depending on how easy I found the interview to understand and how quickly the participants (and I) spoke. For the first run-through of most interviews, I transcribed at a speed of .7x. I set the autoloop to play for 12-15 seconds, pause for 2 seconds, and rewind for 1 or 2 seconds. For additional run-throughs, I transcribed at a speed of 1.1x, with no autoloop. During these additional run-throughs, I corrected mistakes, added words that I had missed, and inserted time stamps.

When I completed a transcript, I copy and pasted it from Transcribe into Microsoft Word, making design modifications, which I will soon discuss. Keeping in

\(^{13}\) See https://transcribe.wreally.com.
mind Christopher Joseph Jenks’s statement that “[r]esearchers have an incredible amount of power at their disposal, as they determine how the words spoken by [participants] . . . are presented to a larger audience” (18), I invited each participant to review a copy of their transcription and let me know whether they felt that I was representing them correctly and whether there were any modifications that they would like me to make.

There is no set method of transcription in writing center studies, so, before transcribing, I quickly became stuck in the mire of transcript considerations and conventions. I referred to a number of sources (Drummond and Hopper; Gardner; Gilewicz and Thonus; Hammersley; Hayashi and Hayashi; Jenks; Ochs; Santa; Thonus) and found that these considerations fell into three categories: what to transcribe, how to transcribe it, and how to design the transcript. Before delving into those categories, I had to acknowledge that transcription is necessarily a subjective process. Martyn Hammersley explains that “what we transcribe, and to some extent how we transcribe it, reflects substantive assumptions . . . and methodological ones” (558). Indeed, according to Elinor Ochs, the transcript should be intentionally designed to “reflect the particular interests—the hypotheses to be examined—of the researcher” (44). Ochs also points out that, contrary to frequent assumption, transcribing based on a recording does not rid the researcher of transcription choices, but rather only delays such choices (44). In sum, decisions about transcription must be intentional, as well as transparent (Gilewicz and Thonus).

A guiding factor when making transcription decisions was that, in Takayoshi’s words, the ultimate goal of transcription “is making the raw data manageable and

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14 And the use of technology also requires choice (e.g., the researcher must decide where to point the camera).
analyzable” (9). The first choice I faced was what to transcribe and in how much detail. There were many factors to consider. Some were verbal, such as pause length, intonation, overlap, and self-interruption. Others were non-verbal, such as gestures, gaze, and body orientation (Hammersely; Ochs). When deciding what to include, I followed Cindy M. Bird’s suggestion and “returned to my original intention for interviewing” (234), which was to learn about participants’ experiences and perspectives about listening in writing center consultations. I also kept in mind Ochs’s statement that a “more useful transcript is a more selective one” (44). In other words, including too much information can make a transcript difficult to read and to analyze. Therefore, I decided to take a more macro perspective, transcribing what was said, rather than the particulars of how it was said.

In the terms of Magdalena Gilewicz and Terese Thonus, I chose horizontal transcription over close vertical transcription. Horizontal transcription contains less detail, and this “precludes much meaningful linguistic and interactional analysis” (Gilewicz and Thonus 27). They liken horizontal transcription to a playscript, in which participants speak one at a time and which can “appear orchestrated and flat” (27). Gilewicz and Thonus promote close vertical transcription, which “contain[s] a more complete illustration of tutorial interaction” (28). Close vertical transcription can certainly give insight into meaning, but it was not necessary for my research, at least at this stage, and would likely make it more difficult for me to analyze overarching experiences and perspectives. I did note a particular factor when I thought that it contributed significantly to comprehension. The factors that I noted most frequently were laughter and noticeably long pauses. I also included filler words, like like and um.15

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15 I did plan to use close vertical transcription when transcribing the observations with attention to listening response. Part of my analysis of response would have been to investigate what response looked and
Next, I had to decide how to represent the various factors I wanted to transcribe. Because I was not including much detail in my transcriptions, I was able to keep this representation simple. I used one asterisk——*—— for each syllable that I could not understand (Gilewicz and Thonus 30; Jenks 114). I used double parentheses——(( ))—— to represent other observations (Gilewicz and Thonus 30; Jenks 114). For example, representation of a statement with laughter might look like: “I’m still trying to figure out right now, but, you know. ((laughs)).” I also used italics to convey emphasis, and I represented the pronunciation of certain words (e.g., gonna instead of going to).

Though I represented these features in the transcripts, I did not always represent them when quoting transcripts in this dissertation. I sometimes altered the quotes slightly, cutting back factors that did not significantly contribute to how something might be interpreted (e.g., I would write going to instead of gonna). I did this in part for clarity. Also, because these alterations did not affect my analysis, I felt that it was respectful to represent participants in a more polished manner.

The third consideration I faced was transcription design. The goal, Jenks explains, is to “enhance the readability of a transcript by presenting the text in an orderly and visually pleasing way” (29). Design elements include margin size, speaker layout, line numbers, line breaks, indentations, line spacing, font, and speaker labels (Hammersley; Jenks). After pasting my transcript into Microsoft Word, I increased the right and left margins to 1.2 inches (Jenks 30) to allow room for coding. I used a monotype font, sounded like, and this would benefit from a closer examination of verbal and nonverbal factors. Because I did not yet know which aspects of response I wanted to focus on, I saved that detailed transcription until I was working on that topic. However, due to dissertation timeline and length, I was unable to include response in this dissertation, so I have not yet made those decisions about close vertical transcription.
Inconsolata,\textsuperscript{16} to increase readability and to facilitate line alignment, in case I later needed to represent factors like overlap (40). I also made a deliberate decision about speaker labels. Hammersley worries that if the speakers are labeled by role (in this case, Writer, Consultant, and Interviewer), rather than by name or code, then this “implies that all of a person’s utterances were ‘in role,’ and that these roles are the most important consideration” (557), detracting from the individual within that role. Still, I chose to label the speakers by role because role is relevant to my analysis, and this made it easier for me to determine that role at a glance. Throughout analysis, I made sure to consider participants as individuals, as is particularly appropriate for listening.

Finally, I imported each transcript into ATLAS.ti and synced it with its respective recording using the transcription timestamps. When the recording and transcript were synced, ATLAS.ti could automatically scroll through the transcription as the recording played. I could also click on a particular moment in the transcription and be taken to that moment in the recording.

\textit{Coding}

I coded the interviews, surveys, and follow-up questions for all participants. I began the coding process with open coding, first with a beta study and then for the remaining participants. Next, I did a second cycle of coding using pattern and axial coding: categorizing, merging, deleting, renaming, and prioritizing (Merriam and Tisdell; Saldaña). Finally, I recoded the interviews, surveys, and follow-up questions for all participants. The process as described sounds linear, but I, like Saldaña, consider coding recursive and simultaneous with data collection.

\textsuperscript{16} I just could not stand looking at transcripts in Courier New or Lucida Sans Typewriter, the two monotype fonts included in Microsoft Word.
Given the scholarship I had been reading and the trends that I found in my initial exploration of my data, I had some expectations going into the coding process. I couldn’t not. In particular, I expected the emotion, understanding, and performance to be significantly represented. I did my best to acknowledge these expectations while also maintaining openness to (and overtly searching for) data that did not fit these expectations.

To start, I did a beta study in which I performed open coding. I selected four participants (two writer-consultant pairs) to focus on, and I coded all data for each of those participants. I decided on process coding, using gerunds, as a good entry point into the data because it allowed me to investigate both “[s]imple observable activity . . . and more general conceptual action” (Saldaña 111). I did this coding in ATLAS.ti, tracking progressions in the code. I did two rounds of coding for each interview.

Throughout this process, and then again after I coded data for all four participants, I revised my codes by merging, separating, deleting, and renaming them. One consideration was how many times a code was used. When a code was only used once or twice, I thought about whether that was appropriate because it was an outlier or whether that code would better fit under a different (and possibly new) category. For example, the category Brainstorming included the codes “brainstorming,” “brainstorming as collaboration,” and “brainstorming as freeing.” Because these individual codes were used relatively infrequently, I decided to combine them all into the single code “brainstorming” (which I proceeded to have difficulty categorizing). Other considerations included renaming a concept (for example, based on scholarship and my data, I found that “performance” was more accurate than “behavior”), keeping terms consistent (such
as whether I referred to writers in the singular or plural), and merging opposing codes (e.g., “having control” and “not having control”). The hope was that I would have a sense of categories and codes that I might use as a framework to help me code the entire study in a more informed way.

After beta coding, I used the revised codes when continuing open coding for the rest of the participants. At that this point, I began to wonder whether I should code each instance of a topic or the entire appearance of that topic. For example, if the topic of having control of a consultation was raised several times during a minute of an interview, should I code each mention separately, or should I code that entire minute once. I opted to code the overall appearance of a topic. My codes were not operationalized and therefore could not be analyzed quantitatively. There was no way to compare the significance of a topic’s frequency with the length of time for which that topic was present, or with the emphasis placed on that topic. Given this, I found no reason to preference coding each instance of a topic over coding the entire appearance of that topic, or vice versa. I decided to code the overall mention of the topic because it felt more accurate to me and helped me better see the larger picture. From this point forward, then, I coded the overall appearance of a topic, but for the data already coded, I had coded each instance.

My initial analysis supported the themes of emotion, understanding, and performance as important. Other themes that emerged were conversation, openness, ownership, note-taking, preconceptions, and questions. Empathy, which I had thought would be an important subcategory of emotion, did not appear nearly as frequently as I had expected.
I then did a second cycle of coding for all data using pattern and axial coding (Merriam and Tisdell; Saldaña). At this point, I had 196 codes and 10 categories.

After this, I decided to recode for three reasons. First, I ended the earlier rounds of coding with a lot of codes and messy categories (the meanings of which were not always obvious to me), along with a few codes that remained uncategorized. Some codes also overlapped because I was creating new codes as I went. Anne Blakeslee and Cathy Fleischer write, “If your coding seems overcomplex or difficult, then it may be a sign that your themes and categories don’t truly represent what’s in the data” (179). Therefore, I wanted to start again, with a fresh look at the data. I had no illusions about starting from a blank slate—I knew that I would enter this round coding with ideas from my analysis thus far—but I felt that it would be easier to make new observations and reinterpret past observations when working from an unmarked page rather than a page tangled with old thoughts. Second, because I had sometimes coded each instance of a topic and sometimes coded the overall instance, I wanted to start over to make this consistent. Finally, I had begun a full-time job toward the end of the second cycle of coding and, while accustoming myself to the new position, I had gone a few months without further analysis. I felt distanced from the data, and recoding helped me to refamiliarize myself with it.

I made two major changes for this round of coding. First, rather than using ATLAS.ti, I coded by hand on printed, uncoded copies of all transcripts, surveys, and follow-up questions. This encouraged me to be thorough and helped me experience the data in a different way. Second, I ordered my coding by category rather than data. In other words, I coded all interviews, surveys, and follow-up responses for one code
category and then repeated this process for each other category. This helped me pay attention to themes across participants. When two categories were closely related, I coded them both at the time. Those pairings were Listening-Moments, Understanding-Questions, and Openness-Power.

The first two categories that I coded were Listening and Moments. These two code categories were paired because they served as an overview of participants’ perceptions of and experiences with listening. The category Listening covered those aspects of listening not obviously connected to the other code categories. The most frequently used codes under that category addressed difficulties of listening and the engagement that listening involved. The Moments category marked participants’ responses when I asked them to share with me four specific moments during their consultation, with each exemplifying a time when they or the other person listened particularly well or not well. This enabled me to easily locate these descriptions, which I could then use to find those moments in the observations. I proceeded to follow this coding process for Understanding and Questions, and then Openness and Power.

At the end of this round of coding, the final coded categories were Listening, Moments, Openness, Power, Questions, and Understanding.17 This dissertation uses the code categories Listening, Openness, Power, Questions, and Understanding, leaving out the category Moments. I was also confident that Emotion and Response would each be a category, but, due to logistical constraints (dissertation timeline and length), I did not code for them.

17 I also created a category (Oddballs) for interesting but infrequent topics, which I did not use in this current research. Some of those topics included religion, writing center environment, and listening in connection to memory. I coded for this category throughout the coding process because different things seemed odd depending on which categories I was currently focusing on.
For ease of use, I renamed each code to mark the category under which it fell by making a shortened version of the category part of the code itself. For example, I modified “alterity” to “OPN – alterity.” This made it easy for me to know at a glance that this code fell under the Openness category.

I then transferred all of these codes to ATLAS.ti. This process served as another pass through the data and codes and thus another chance to revise. For this study, I had five categories and 43 codes. All categories and codes are listed in Appendix B, along with more detail on code development for each category.

**Trustworthiness**

Two traditional ways of determining whether research is trustworthy are validity (internal and external) and reliability. In this section, I discuss these three measures but reframe them as internal credibility, user generalizability, and consistency.

*Internal Credibility (Validity)*

For qualitative research, internal validity can more usefully be understood as credibility. In quantitative research, internal validity is a measure of “how research findings match reality” (Merriam and Tisdell 242). Given that qualitative researchers hold that there is no single, unmediated reality, however, this concept of internal validity does not apply. Instead, validity can be reconceptualized as credibility, for which the question is “are the findings credible, given the data presented?” (242).

I took four measures to make my research credible. First, my study involved crystallization. Like triangulation, crystallization increases credibility by using multiple points of measurement, but crystallization emphasizes that there are more than three angles from which one can approach a study (Glesne 45; Merriam and Tisdell 245-46).
Yin explains that triangulation is necessary to case studies due to the large number of variables that case studies involve (17). By drawing on multiple methods (participant observation, interviews, surveys, and asynchronous follow-up questions) and multiple sources of data (14 participants), my study made use of crystallization (Merriam and Tisdell 245).

Second, I used respondent validation, sharing my findings with the participants so that I might receive feedback on my perspective from theirs (Merriam and Tisdell 246). I provided all participants with the option of reviewing interview transcripts and my analysis when relevant to them. Beyond increasing the study’s credibility, respondent validation is also particularly relevant given my focus on listening.

A third way that I increased my study’s credibility was through peer examination—feedback from others in the field (Merriam and Tisdell 249-50). The four members of my dissertation committee provided me with feedback throughout the research process. It is worth noting, though, that the committee members generally provided feedback based on my writeup rather than on their analysis of my raw data.

Fourth, I made use of reflexivity throughout the study, considering how my background and perspectives might affect the study from conceptualization to analysis to writing. This included reflecting on research questions, methods, and analysis (Agee; Takayoshi et al.). In doing so, I took into account Wanda Pillow’s discussion of reflexivity. Pillow delineates four common types of reflexivity, each of which she finds problematic, and she instead proposes a reflexivity of discomfort. These four types are reflexivity as recognition of self, reflexivity as recognition of other, reflexivity as truth, and reflexivity as transcendence. Pillow explains reflexivity as recognition of self as the
ability to “recognize an otherness of self and the self of others” (181). But, she argues, it is not so easy to know our own subjectivity and to fully express that subjectivity to our audience. Regarding reflexivity as recognition of the other, Pillow wonders how much we can understand the participants and convey that understanding, and, moreover, given the balance of power in a research study, how we can make sure that the participants are able to represent themselves. Reflexivity as truth, according to Pillow, “supports the idea that the researcher can ‘get it right’” (185), that there is a singular truth at which they can arrive. Reflexivity as transcendence is the “idea that the researcher, through reflexivity, can transcend her own subjectivity and own cultural context in a way that releases her/him from the weight of (mis)representations” (186). As will be discussed in the following chapter, we cannot leave our preconceptions behind. Instead, we can try to be aware of them and to limit their ability to limit us. Pillow instead advocates reflexivities of discomfort. This is “a reflexivity that seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous” (188). Instead of making the assumptions inherent to the four common types of reflexivity, researchers must understand “their selves or their subjects as uncomfortable and uncontainable” (188).

While acknowledging the constraints of reflexivity, I still consider it important to share my positionality with my audience, keeping in mind that my full experience cannot be shared. My perspective was that of a middle-class white woman in her early 30s. Born and raised in Brooklyn, I grew up surrounded by diversity and prided myself on what I considered my openness to different backgrounds and perspectives. I had excellent access to education and a strong academic background. I was placed in advanced programs in elementary school and junior high school, attended a competitive and well-known high
school, went to an Ivy League college as an undergraduate, earned two master’s degrees, and was currently pursuing a doctorate. My connection to education continued in a professional capacity: I had worked as a teacher and as a writing center consultant at different institutions with students varying in race, class, age, education level, and so on. Though I was not working in the UofL University Writing Center during data collection, I had worked there as an assistant director for the two years prior.

My connection with my consultant participants likely had a larger impact on my data collection and analysis than did my relationship with my writer participants. The consultant participants with whom I worked were either fellow doctoral students in the same rhetoric and composition program as I was or MA students who were also in the English department. Of the writer participants, one was in my program and was a friend. Otherwise, my connections with writers were not so pronounced.

The connection between me, the consultants, and the UofL English department, as well as a few personal connections that extended outside of this study, must have had both positive and negative effects on my research. First, due to our connection, consultant participants might have been more open and honest with me. On the other hand, the director of the UWC was my dissertation chair. This could have made the consultants less open because they did not want to encourage negative opinions in their supervisor. To counter this, I assured consultants that he would not be looking directly at the data itself, and they of course had the option of using pseudonyms. In addition, much of my analysis occurred after the consultants had completed their year in the Writing Center.

Second, I shared a similar writing center pedagogical background with these consultants. This is not to say that we had taken the same classes or had the same writing
center experience, but we generally approached our writing center work from a common philosophy: that expressed in the “University Writing Center Mission Statement” included earlier. Because of this common background, I might have better understood the consultants. On the other hand, I might have thought that I understood the consultants, when in actuality I was making assumptions based on my own preconceptions. I did my best to keep this in mind throughout the study.

**User Generalizability (External Validity)**

External validity traditionally measures whether the study is generalizable to similar scenarios (Merriam and Tisdell 253). For qualitative research, however, the goal is “to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many” (254). The goal, then, is not for the study to be generalizable, but rather for potential users of the research to determine whether the research is applicable to them. External validity can therefore be thought about more specifically as user generalizability. I took user generalizability into account by painting a detailed and clear picture of the research process and findings in order to make the details of my study apparent to readers, helping them to decide whether this study applies to them (256-57).

**Consistency (Reliability)**

Also problematic in qualitative research is the concept of reliability. Qualitative research investigates human behavior, and human behavior is not reliable (Merriam and Tisdell 250). Reliability can be reconceptualized as consistency, asking “not whether findings will be found again but whether the results are consistent with the data collected” (251). Like credibility, consistency can be supported through use of crystallization, peer examination, and reflexivity (252). A fourth way to strengthen
consistency is by leaving an audit trail (252-53). I kept track of how data, analysis, and findings emerged throughout the study, in part through writing research memos and using ATLAS.ti to organize my data, analysis, and reflections.

By taking these measures to strengthen internal credibility, user generalizability, and consistency, I also took steps to meet Richard H. Haswell’s, Dana Lynn Driscoll and Sherry Wynn Perdue’s, Georganne Nordstrom’s, and many others’ call for RAD—replicable, aggregable, and data-driven—research.

**Ethics**

This study was approved by the UofL IRB. The study posed no foreseeable risks beyond potential discomfort in answering personal questions. All electronic data was kept on a password-protected computer, and all printed data was kept in a locked cabinet. Survey data was also stored in SurveyMonkey services.

One of my biggest ethical concerns was participants’ potential feelings of coercion during the recruitment and consent process. I did not want consultants to feel pressured to participate due to my Writing Center background or because the Writing Center director was my dissertation chair. When I visited the writing center pedagogy and practice course to recruit MA consultants, I was therefore explicit that participation and lack thereof would not affect their standing in the UWC or in the course. During this visit, the writing center director did note the importance that research plays in our writing center, but he was careful to make clear that consultants were not obligated to participate in any such research. I also decreased pressure on potential participants by passing around a sign-up sheet for anyone who wanted to learn more about participating. This put less attention on who did and did not sign up than if I had, for example, asked those who
wanted to participate to raise their hands. In addition, by stating that signing up was not an obligation to participate, I emphasized that participation itself was not an obligation and that they could learn more about the study before deciding. I also gave potential participants time to think by telling the class that I would send out a follow-up email to everyone in the next few days. I made similar points when recruiting AD participants. When I sent the follow-up email to MA and AD consultants, I offered them the option of further discussing the study and their participation. I also explicitly asked them to let me know if they were no longer interested in participating, with the intention of making it easier for anyone who changed their minds to tell me so.

I was even more uncomfortable with recruiting writers. The writers generally had less of a tie to the UWC than did the consultants and therefore perhaps less interest in contributing to writing center research. I also did not want to ask writers to divest themselves of their time. When speaking to potential writer participants before their consultation, I emphasized that participation had no effect on their use of the UWC, that they were under no obligation to participate, and that they could end their participation at any time. I also tried to make it easier for them to decline if they chose to do so by telling them that I completely understood if they were not interested in participating at this time.

Once a writer or consultant agreed to participate, they gave informed and voluntary consent via an IRB-approved consent form before their observation. This form introduced the study and went over the purpose and procedures. Other information included researcher contact information, risks, benefits, confidentiality, and rights. All participants preferred to read the consent form on their own and then ask me if they had questions, but I still gave them an overview of each section. I emphasized that
participation was voluntary and that they could at any time withdraw from the study, refuse to answer any questions, or decline to participate in a certain part of the study.

While reviewing the consent form, I also emphasized the procedures and benefits sections, in part because I had kept these sections fairly general to give me leeway to make changes as the study emerged. All aspects of participation that my study involved were included in the consent form, but there were some aspects of participation included in the consent form that I decided to forego (such as a second in-person interview). To be very clear about participation would involve, I went over a handout that listed each aspect of participation—the observation, survey, interview, and follow-up email—with a time estimate. This handout also included three optional aspects of participation—an additional survey, an additional interview, and study feedback—with a time estimate (see Appendix C).

In the benefits section of the consent form, I had included the possibility of reciprocity, but my thoughts on reciprocity in this context changed as my study changed. Even as this study adhered to the deontological ethics of the IRB, I wanted it to also be driven by community covenantal ethics: “reciprocal relationships in which participants have a mutual responsibility toward one another and toward contributing to the successful outcome of the research process” (Stevens et al. 432). Reciprocity was driven by community engaged scholarship and these covenantal ethics, and it was also intended for an earlier version of this study that entailed greater use of participant time and energy (e.g., additional interviews and observations). Under the dissertation constraints, I did not feel that I would do justice to reciprocity, though I did bring snacks (individually packaged candy and trail mix) to the interviews.
When reviewing the consent form, I made sure to discuss with participants the three choices that they had to make: choices about anonymity, audio recording, and video recording. Participants were given the option of remaining anonymous—using a pseudonym of their choosing—or being credited by name for their contributions. Three of 14 participants chose to use a pseudonym. Next, I asked participants if they would allow audio recording and then, in a separate question, if they would add video recording. This made it very clear that being video recorded was a choice, not a necessity. All participants except one consented to being both audio and video recorded. The other participant, a writer, chose to only be audio recorded during the observation. Participants were asked to sign and date after each choice that they made, instead of checking a checkbox. This was intended to encourage them to stop and think about each decision instead of feeling obligated to proceed quickly.

Participants were then asked to sign one more time to indicate that they fully understood and agreed to the consent form. Before they signed this, I encouraged them to share any questions, comments, or concerns that they might have. I also reminded them that signing this form did not obligate them to participate in the study. After they signed, they began their consultation. I left the room, signed the consent form myself, and emailed each participant a copy.

The recruitment and consent process for the anonymous survey participants was less concerning. The brief recruitment email sent to all those who had had an appointment in the UWC made clear that participation or lack thereof did not affect their standing in the UWC. Also, the facts that the survey was anonymous and that recruitment occurred relatively impersonally via email hopefully made it easier for potential
participants to decide not to participate. The IRB-approved consent form for this anonymous survey made up the first page of the survey and did not require a signature.

During the recruitment and consent process and throughout the dissertation, I attended to issues of ethics by listening, by taking a stance of openness. Like Pillow’s reflexivities of discomfort, listening requires an awareness of preconceptions and the willingness to try to understand while also acknowledging the limits of such understanding. Throughout the study, I tried to welcome discomfort and to be open, to listen to the participants, to the data, to my writing and analyzing, to scholarship, and to change.
CHAPTER III: OPENNESS

If I had to describe listening in one word, that word would be openness. In my data and in listening scholarship, the concept of openness arose again and again. To listen is to take a stance of openness, and listening both requires and facilitates such openness. An exploration of openness is essential to understanding listening, and this exploration serves as a building block for the following chapters on power and understanding.

Though it is not always framed in this terminology, writing centers value openness. They welcome those who are not considered traditional students, who face discrimination, whose voices are underrepresented, or, if nothing else, those who, in one form or another, need help. Consultations revolve around the writers, and consultants work to meet the writers where they are. And writing center scholars and practitioners often envision the writing center as a disruptive force in the university.

But even when well-intentioned, writing center professionals and writers are human and, as such, fall prey to preconceptions. This detracts from openness, which, in turn, detracts from consultations. If we perceive the other person through our assumptions, it is difficult to address their actual wants and needs.

Preconceptions are assumptions of similarity, where likeness in one aspect implies likeness in other aspects, without acknowledgment of difference. In other words, preconceptions involve knowledge and beliefs about a generalized group, blending
individuals until they become indistinguishable. Preconceptions can therefore be disrupted through attention to difference.

Listening, with its stance of openness, can help. Listening requires and facilitates increased awareness of preconceptions and of the other person. To listen is to welcome alterity and the possibility of change, and to push the limits of preconceptions.

After an overview of preconceptions in the writing center, I make two interventions in this chapter. First, I weave together multiple listening theories, each addressing listening and difference, in order to pull out the elements most relevant for listening in the writing center. These theories—dialogic listening (Cornwall and Orbe; Floyd), Krista Ratcliffe’s rhetorical listening, and Lisbeth Lipari’s listening otherwise—focus on the relationship between the self and the other person. Openness is at the core of this listening. In the second part of this chapter, I apply openness to my data. In the context of the writing center, I discuss openness to alterity and to change. Finally, I describe how such openness and listening might be facilitated. A detailed list of the codes used in this chapter and an overview of code development can be found in Appendix B, under Listening and Openness.

Preconceptions

Preconceptions are a necessary part of making our way through this world, but they are also dangerous. Here, I explain the necessity and detriments of preconceptions, which I then discuss in the context of the writing center. Later in the chapter, I present listening as an intervention for these concerns.

We all have preconceptions. Our world is nothing if not crowded, filled with stimuli, people, ideas “competing for awareness” (Lipari, Listening 44). As
communication scholar Lipari explains, part of the way that we function in this world is through schemas: “mental template[s] or network[s] of associations that we build throughout our lives from the threads and shards of past experiences, and that . . . shape our interpretations of the present” (94)—a concept that, for my purposes, I treat as akin to preconceptions, generalities, and assumptions. These schemas are ways of organizing information, serving as a “shorthand” that allows us to focus, rather than attempt to take in everything (94).

But schemas also present a danger: they direct us to what we expect, perpetuating our assumptions instead of challenging them. In the words of Lipari, “We become habituated to the familiar” (Listening 99). Moreover, by their very nature, schemas function below the level of our attention, functioning in the background. Without deliberate work on our part, our preconceptions lie hidden from us (94-95), where they can influence our understanding and choices without our realizing. As Kerschbaum explains, “Broad identity categories are an integral part of the way we make sense of our lives. Even as these broad labels provide a necessary means for interpreting and understanding experience, they run the risk of stereotyping or misidentifying people” (Toward 64). We need schemas to live our lives, but we must be mindful that they help us make decisions rather than making those decisions for us.\(^\text{18}\)

Schemas behave like clichéd phrases or concepts. Clichés develop because they serve a function and therefore are used frequently, but they can eventually become

\(^{18}\) Schemas can also inhibit development and change. In his book about time, Carlo Rovelli uses the examples of Copernicus and Einstein to show how “the things that seemed self-evident to us were really no more than prejudices” (11). When Copernicus developed a model centering the universe around the sun rather than around the Earth, he was met with extreme resistance. And Einstein argued that time passes at different speeds at different places, which seemed impossible to grasp. Because many were unwilling to challenge their assumptions about the centrality of the Earth or the commonsense experience of time, they were not open to changing their understanding of the world (and the universe).
shortcuts for thinking and writing. Because clichés are so prevalent, we might use one automatically, even if it is reductive or doesn’t fit the context—and, sometimes, even if we don’t believe it.\(^\text{19}\) As George Orwell explains about clichés, “They will construct your sentences for you—even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent—and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself.” Clichés can be useful, but, like schemas, they are dangerous when used automatically.

A major challenge in the writing center is working with difference by drawing on schemas while also addressing the uniqueness of the immediate. In writing center scholarship and practice, this means interrogating the generalities we have constructed about homogenized groups—the group of all writers, the group of all consultants, the group of all consultations, and so on—so that we can deliberately use these generalities to the extent that they apply to the current writer, consultant, and consultation. We should draw on our preconceptions of such groups while also recognizing that, in actuality, no writer, consultant, or consultation fits those generalities. We must also address the individuality of the particular person and context.

Carol-Ann Farkas explains the lure of generalities in consultations: “Nothing is more comfortable than an unexamined assumption; like an overstuffed sofa, it’s easy to sink into one but very hard to get out of” (1).\(^\text{20}\) But to hold a preconception without

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\(^{19}\) My college roommate often said, “Everything happens for a reason.” More than a decade later, that thought often unearths itself in my head in response to difficult situations, even though I disagree with the sentiment. It would not be difficult for that to slip out during a conversation.

\(^{20}\) This metaphor is particularly apt because writing centers are often designed to make the writer comfortable, but, as Jacqueline Grutsch McKinney and Grace Pregent et al. argue, not all homes are the same. The cozy couch might fit white middle- or upper-class American homes, but this does not take into account the homes that do not fit this assumed standard. Bronwyn T. Williams holds that “spaces are never just physical constructions, but always reflect and reproduce systems of power” (Literacy 129), which connects to Grutsch McKinney’s argument that the design of the writing center tends to reflect those in
challenging it is to view the world in only one way. To acknowledge only one reality—one’s own—is to hold preconceptions about what is “correct” and about how others experience the world. Nancy Maloney Grimm’s book *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times* focuses on the importance of a postmodern perspective, along with an attention to power, for writing center work. In contrast to the modernist belief in a single understanding, a single reality, a postmodern approach recognizes that there is no one truth. The need to acknowledge multiple viewpoints is particularly relevant for writing center sessions. Consultants need to be aware of many perspectives, including their own, the writers’, the professor’s, and other readers’.

Preconceptions of students, literacy, and learning shape writing centers in practice. Grimm demonstrates how such assumptions affected three versions of the same writing center (“New”). The first version of this center held a prescriptive understanding of language, and the assumption that the students who used the writing center lacked the knowledge and skills needed in the university. This drove a center that would not even meet with writers until they had gone through autonomous “skill-and-drill remediation lessons” (12). The second version was student-centered, driven by the desire to help. The staff stuck to the nondirective method and prioritized higher order concerns, even when that approach might not have been a good fit for the particular writer with whom they were working. The writing center’s third version—staffed by a more diverse group of consultants who had often used the writing center themselves—supported linguistic and charge of the writing center. Williams, however, takes this in a different direction, arguing that designing writing centers “in ways intended to be antithetical to other university spaces” (131) can “make[] an important statement to students that [writing centers] approach learning in a different way” (132)—even, I will add, if that space is not a direct reflection of each writer who frequents it. In this way, assumptions and attempts to disrupt them can be seen at all levels of the writing center.
other types of diversity, understanding communication as specific to context. Consultants attended to the writers’ wants and needs regardless of order of concern and worked to make explicit the conventions of academic discourse and their role in power relations (12-15).

As Grimm’s example shows, preconceptions shape writing center training and philosophy (which shape each other), which, in turn, affect how individual consultants behave. These consultants—such as those in the second writing center version who consistently stuck to the nondirective approach—were driven by their training. Consultants were also constrained by the overarching writing center philosophy. For example, the first center’s prescriptive approach to writing meant that writers were greeted by remediation lessons rather than people. And the feeling that consultants must strictly adhere to their training and their writing center’s philosophy does more than limit them to certain behavior: it can also make them feel “paralyzed” by the need to be the “Ideal Tutor” (Gillam et al. 195).

Consultants may also make assumptions on a session-by-session basis. They might interpret an assignment or faculty expectations based on classes that they themselves have taken or taught (Farkas). In our interviews, Beth and Kathryn warned of how preconceptions—or, as Kathryn described it, an “agenda”—might push the session in a less appropriate direction. Kathryn, a writer who also had experience as a consultant, explained that coming to the consultation with a calcified conceptualization of good writing could lead the consultant to shape the text to fit that ideal rather than to attend to the writer and what they need or want. Moreover, new consultants, early in their training and practice, might believe that they are “not doing a consultation unless [they’re] going
through and fixing everything.” And Beth, a consultant, similarly warned that strict adherence to training means less attention to the individual writers. She explained that when she was a less experienced consultant, she sometimes “molded the session into what [she] thought it should be,” which may not have been what the writers wanted or needed. Preconceptions about consultations can also derive from consultants’ own experiences as students. Beth discussed how English majors\textsuperscript{21} are “trained to prepare to rebut” rather than to listen, which can drive a certain approach. Writing center (and classroom) pedagogical training, along with consultants’ experiences as students, can create learned instincts that then operate under the radar.

Consultants may also have preconceptions about writers. They might judge a writer based on the writer’s race or attitude or clothing, among infinite other variables. For example, after analyzing surveys from writing center consultants across the United States, Nancy Effinger Wilson finds that consultants often judged writers based on their use of African American vernacular English. Robert Mundy and Rachel Sugarman describe a consultant who, meeting with a Pakistani-American woman, based his tutoring approach on his knowledge of Pakistani culture and on his perceptions of the writer from a class that they had both taken a year ago. The directive approach that he adopted was not the best choice: the writer left the session early and did not use their writing center again. Liz, a consultant, shared that she sometimes made assumptions, particularly about potential consultation challenges, based on the information that writers had entered in the appointment form when scheduling an appointment. Liz listed a few examples of that information: the writer’s academic standing, whether they had used the Writing Center

\textsuperscript{21} All consultants in the UofL University Writing Center were members of English graduate programs.
before, and what they wanted help with. Beth also referenced these appointment forms, telling me that she tried not to stick too closely to this information. For her consultation with Kathryn, Beth noted, Kathryn had filled out the form a month earlier, so it may have no longer been applicable.

And preconceptions are not limited to consultants. Writers, too, may have preconceptions about consultants, and, as discussed earlier, they may also have assumptions about consultations. A common example is that writers expect to play a more passive role in the consultation and to have their paper corrected by the consultant. My consultant participants also brought up writer preconceptions about writing centers and consultations, mentioning the same issue: that writers often expect to be less involved in the session. As Liz explained, writers do not realize that their “labor” is part of the session, as is collaborating with the consultant. Katie, a consultant, added that writers might have had a high school experience that was “sit there and listen,” and they, particularly those recently in high school, might think that this type of passive behavior is similarly expected in writing center sessions.

Writer preconceptions can also extend to assumptions about writing and assignments. With a focus on working-class writers, Harry Denny et al. note that writers may have a firm conceptualization of what “college” writing should look like regardless of professor and course. Similarly, Kathryn described “the fallacy of the ‘perfect paper,’” in which the writer enters the consultation with preconceptions of what the paper needs to look like. In trying to meet this ideal, the writer may direct the session to focus on concerns that are (or that the consultant considers) less pressing.
And Katie brought up the significance of writer respect for the writing center. Comparing writers’ preconceptions of the University of Louisville Writing Center with those of the writing center at her previous institution, she argued that students “take the writing center here more seriously” because it has an engaged staff, more consultants, pedagogical training, and graduate consultants. This difference in respect can shift writer behavior and expectations.

My consultant participants also discussed how writers’ preconceptions about writing itself could affect consultations. One such preconception is what writers need help with. Kathryn and Josh, also a consultant, pointed out that writers often describe their needs in amorphous terms that serve as catchalls, like grammar and flow. When narrowed down, these terms might mean something else altogether or might not represent what the consultants consider most important. And Josh described how the preconceptions about writing that he had as undergraduate (e.g., a good writer works alone, rather than collaborating with a consultant) still lingered in the back of his mind, even though he no longer subscribed to them. This could certainly affect how writers interact with consultants during their session.

In addition, many of us have deeply engrained preconceptions of academia. Shari Stenberg argues that academia tends toward critique and exclusion. Rather than listening to others with openness and placing our work in relation to theirs—“cultivating”—we “hunt” them (252). We “capture and destroy” their ideas to demonstrate our own mastery (252). And in his book about the importance of listening, motivation, and habits of mind in primary and secondary education and the first year of undergraduate studies, Patrick Sullivan pushes back against education’s insistence that students exhibit mastery or a
pretense of mastery (55-58). These preconceptions of academia can have a deleterious effect on consultants’ listening. As Beth explained, “I think that tutors are trained to talk, and they’re not really trained to listen.” And these preconceptions can be dangerous on the writer side as well. For example, a traditional Western view of academia could impede collaboration by suggesting that consultants, as experts, should oversee the session and the writing. Or it could lead to defensiveness, with writers considering consultants’ pushback (against writers’ ideas or writing) as a challenge of the writers’ knowledge and ability.

Further, because consultants are often so deeply engrained in academic practices and are chosen for their very ability to succeed, it can be difficult for them to be aware of these practices. This can lead to a perpetuation of mainstream academic values and practices, ignoring differences (Gillam et al. 162; Grimm, Good; Grimm, “New”; Trimbur 22-23). (This will be further discussed in the following chapter.)

Consultations can also be shaped by preconceptions of those outside of the writing center. For example, some faculty still view writing centers as places to which “bad” writers should be relegated so that they might be “fixed.” And faculty have their own preconceptions about writing, which influence assignments and student experience (Devet; Farkas; Ryan). There may also be preconceptions on the part of the institution’s administration, notably that writing centers exist “to deal with heterogeneity . . . by controlling it (or cleaning it up) rather than by interpreting or negotiating it” (Grimm, Good 82).

When preconceptions influence us without our knowledge, we are subject to their (our) whims. This can negatively impact the course of writing center sessions, with the
consultant meeting not the writer’s wants and needs, but rather the wants and needs that the consultant assumes. In reference to these dangers of schemas, Lilith Vasudevan asks how we can make sure that schemas (she refers specifically to engrained pedagogical theories) “function neither as shield nor sword” (1168-69). One way to disrupt them is through listening.

**Listening and Disruption**

Listening both facilitates and requires disruption. Lipari draws from Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus—how the sedimentation of our experience affects how we perceive and interpret the world—to describe our listening habitus: how the way that we “habitually inhabit[] and perform ways of listening” is affected by our individual socialization (*Listening* 52). Our habitus shapes what we listen to and how. It affects “who speaks and who doesn’t, what is and is not said, how what is said is said, as well as, of course, to whom it is said and what is and is not heard, and how what is heard is heard” (53). Lipari argues that this habitus must be interrupted in order for us to listen instead of merely hear, to attend to ideas and people and ways of communicating that go beyond our typical experiences and assumptions (56).

In this section, I explore several conceptualizations of how listening to others requires, facilitates, and is disruption (and I will later apply this theory to writing centers). By considering three listening theories with the relationship between self and other at their core—dialogic listening, rhetorical listening, and listening otherwise—I arrive at one central tenet that facilitates disruption of preconceptions: openness.
Dialogic Listening

Nancy C. Cornwell and Mark P. Orbe find that though literature on dialogic relationships consistently mentions the centrality of listening, it does not study listening in any greater depth. Cornwell and Orbe and James J. Floyd apply Richard L. Johannesen’s work on dialogic communication specifically to listening. The dialogic communicator is “one who attempts to minimize the tendency toward selfishness and the manipulation of others” (Floyd 128), in contrast to the monologic communicator, who embraces such tendencies. In Johannesen’s words, dialogic communication involves “turning toward, outgoing to and reaching for the other” (qtd. in Floyd 128). Floyd describes dialogic communication, and thus dialogic listening, as “separate people seeking to come together without denying their separateness” (Floyd qtd. in Floyd 134). Dialogue and dialogic listening should be understood, then, “not as a communication strategy or technique, but as an orientation” (Cornwell and Orbe 82), an “attitude’ toward or spirit of communication” (Floyd 128).

Applying Johannesen’s characteristics of dialogic communication to listening, Floyd enumerates six characteristics:

1. **authenticity**: listening and responding honestly  
2. **inclusion**: working to understand the speaker to the extent that is possible  
3. **confirming the other**: finding value in the speaker because the speaker is a person  
4. **presentness**: staying in the current moment and actively paying attention to the speaker  
5. **spirit of mutual equality**: listening without bias and only then evaluating what the speaker has communicated  
6. **supportive climate**: results from the other five characteristics (130-32)

Even as I integrate the above into my conceptualization of listening, I push back slightly against the fifth characteristic. I agree with the sentiment, but I argue that it is not possible to listen without bias. As discussed, and as will be further covered in the
upcoming section about listening otherwise, we can never fully leave our preconceptions and foreknowledge behind.

Cornwell and Orbe argue that in order to think about communication as dialogic, we need to rethink our understanding of listening. In this reconceptualization, they present dialogic listening as “an interdisciplinary, interconnected concept that emerges from the theoretical threads of communication, dialogue, and listening theory” (86), in which self-reflection is essential. They discuss four aspects of dialogic listening:

1. *ethic of care*: The objective cannot be separated from the subjective, and an attempt to do so “creates an unsupportive psychological climate where certain voices are privileged over others” (87).

2. *listening to/for culture*: There must be an awareness of “similarities and differences between and within diverse cultural groups” (88).

3. *awareness of power dynamic and privilege*: Even as we strive for an equal power balance, we must acknowledge that such a balance is not the current state of affairs (89).

4. *listening as a “both/and process”*: Listening does not follow “polarized conceptualizations of complex subject matter” (90).

In comparison to monologic listening, dialogic listening requires an openness to others, a turning toward. Floyd and Cornwell and Orbe promote a disruption of internalized preconceptions through genuine attempts at understanding and valuing the other (Floyd’s authenticity, inclusion, and confirming the other and Cornwell and Orbe’s listening to/for culture and awareness of power dynamic). Further, they express the importance of this occurring in a supportive environment (Floyd’s supportive climate and
Cornwell and Orbe’s ethic of care). Floyd also states that the listener should stay focused on the speaker rather than letting their thoughts wander. It is this intentional openness and attention to the other person that helps disrupts preconceptions about that person.

**Rhetorical Listening**

Ratcliffe’s rhetorical listening serves as a way of working within the difference between self and other to create meaning. Ratcliffe defines rhetorical listening as a “stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture,” a stance that might be taken in “cross-cultural exchanges” (*Rhetorical* 1). More, rhetorical listening is a “way of making meaning with/in language” (23). Ratcliffe positions rhetorical listening as a response to Jacqueline Jones Royster’s question “How do we translate listening into language and action . . . ?” (qtd. in Ratcliffe 17). Rhetorical listening, then, is not passive, but rather a purposeful, active way of communicating with other people despite, and because of, difference.\(^\text{22}\)

Ratcliffe divides rhetorical listening into four moves. First is “Promoting an understanding of self and other” (*Rhetorical* 26). Ratcliffe reconceives of understanding as “standing under discourses that surround us and others” (29; emphasis added). It involves receptivity, not mastery, listening “not *for* intent but *with* intent” (28). The listener must attend to all of these discourses, listening for absences within them and then deliberately incorporating what is learned into oneself. Further, listeners must become aware of their own internalized preconceptions, which involves “identifying the various discourses embodied within each of us and then listening to hear and imagine how these

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\(^{22}\) Ratcliffe focuses particularly on race and gender, but I apply rhetorical listening to all differences.
discourses might affect not only ourselves but others” (28). We cannot try to understand the other without trying to understand ourselves, and vice versa.

The second move of rhetorical listening is “Proceeding within an accountability logic” (Ratcliffe, Rhetorical 26). Such a logic “invites us to consider how all of us are, at present, culturally implicated in effects of the past (via our resulting privileges and/or their lack) and, thus, accountable for what we do about situations now” (32). We must acknowledge the effects of the past on the present and on ourselves and others, and we must incorporate this awareness of privilege and nonprivilege into our actions.

Ratcliffe’s third move is “Locating identifications across commonalities and differences” (Rhetorical 26). In contrast to the typical search for similarities between ourselves and another, Ratcliffe argues, we should search for similarities and differences. Through rhetorical listening, we consciously identify via disjunction as well as similarity.

The fourth and final move of rhetorical listening is “Analyzing claims as well as the cultural logics within which these claims function” (Ratcliffe, Rhetorical 26). When considering someone else’s assertion, we must take into account the cultural context and the logic from which that person is operating, in addition to the content of their claim. Even though we may still disagree with that person, keeping cultural logic in mind can help us “better appreciate that the other person is not simply wrong but rather functioning from within a different logic” (33).²³

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²³ Timothy Oleksiak argues that “while the moves Ratcliffe offers are important for listening, those making use of such moves must also locate themselves and others within the material conditions that grant unearned privileges to some rather than others” (319). I do find that Ratcliffe touches on this in her fourth move of rhetorical listening, but Oleksiak’s point about the significance of attention to privilege and to the material, and about how queer theory complicates and facilitates this fourth move, is well-taken.
Ratcliffe specifically uses the term *openness* in her description of rhetorical listening, and she discusses the need for receptivity to others. Like dialogic listening, rhetorical listening promotes disruption of our assumptions by highlighting the need to try to understand others, including where they are coming from (rhetorical listening moves one and four). Ratcliffe also addresses the need for self-awareness (moves one and two).

**Listening Otherwise**

Like dialogic listening and rhetorical listening, Lipari’s concept of listening otherwise is defined by the relationship between self and others, and it is presented as a stance, not a technique. She describes listening otherwise as “a process of listening that is committed to receiving otherness” (“Listening Otherwise” 45), “listening for and to the otherness of others” (*Listening* 176).

Listening otherwise means accepting the alterity of the other person, what Lipari describes as “the radical otherness, difference, incomprehensibility of the other, and the simple impossibility of it being otherwise” (*Listening* 180). You and I might have undergone similar experiences or look similar, we might come from similar backgrounds or have similar values. We might click immediately, fall into a familiar pattern. But even if I know everything about you, even if there is nothing more that you can tell or show me about yourself that I do not already know, I will never fully know you because, quite simply, I am not you. And I cannot fully listen to you until I accept this.

To claim full understanding is to claim mastery, but we can never master another. We must relinquish attempts at control, despite the temptation “to speak, to know, to impose” (Lipari, *Listening* 177). If we give in to this temptation, we are in danger of
thinking that we see and hear the other person, when really we see and hear only ourselves. Further, to claim full understanding is, in Lipari’s words, “to make the stranger a familiar,” which “is to do violence to the otherness of the other, to exclude some part of the stranger” (198). Because we can never fully know someone, to behave as though we do is to deny the pieces of that person that we do not know.

To accept alterity and resist the temptation to control requires an openness to the other and to being changed. Lipari explains that in this state of listening and openness, the listener acknowledges their preconceptions and beliefs and then does not deny them, but rather works to move beyond them (Lipari, “Listening, Thinking” 354). The listener should reflect on their preconceptions, should “pay attention and tolerate [their] own contradictory intentions and conviction” (Listening 187). This allows the listener to travel past conceptual thinking and language to a place where the habituated is no longer familiar (354). It “is a process of contraction, of stepping back, that creates a distance so that the other may come forward” (197-98). As Lipari describes it, “I come to the conversation empty—not empty of my experience or history—but empty of the belief that my experience or history defines the limits of possible meaning and experience” (“Listening, Thinking” 355). Listening directly calls for disruption of our preconceptions by arguing that we can never fully understand, and that to cling to our assumptions of understanding is to stop us from moving beyond them, from learning something new.

Lipari compares listening to the improvisation of jazz (Listening). Jazz players begin with a common conception of musical principles and then move beyond it based on their and others’ contributions (132). When jazz musicians “speak,” they do so not by relying on preconceived notions of what they will say but rather by playing off of the
speech of others. This requires awareness and active engagement. Lipari explains that musicians can only riff in this way through listening, through emptying themselves of assumptions and intentions. They bring their preconceptions and their knowledge—they can’t not—but they do not let this serve as “the limits of possible meaning and experience” (“Listening, Thinking” 355). They treat the margins of their preconceptions as a border rather than a barrier. Improvisation is “finding the pulse of the familiar structure and pushing beyond it” (Listening 132). It is grounded in the known but then leaves the ground.

As dialogic listening, rhetorical listening, and listening otherwise show, we cannot listen without being open, and being open allows us to listen. To be open is to know and accept that there are parts of others that we do not and cannot understand. It is to be aware that there is more out there than our assumptions. We may not be able to understand everything, but being open to others lets us learn more than the world that we have already constructed.

*Transformation, Hospitality, and the Space Between*

Listening, then, requires not mastery, but rather a refusal of such (Lipari, *Listening*). We listen to the other and allow what we learn to change our understanding, to affect how we respond. This does not necessitate change (of opinion, of understanding, of behavior), but it does require an openness to the possibility. In the words of Nel Noddings, “We are not attempting to transform the world, but we are allowing ourselves to be transformed” (qtd. in Lipari 184). We soften our boundaries, push at our preconceptions.
This involves creating a space where we let in the other. Lipari draws on Martin Heidegger’s argument that hearing succeeds “when we belong to the matter addressed . . .
To belong to speech—this is nothing else than in each case letting whatever a letting-lie-before us lays gathered before us in its entirety” (Heidegger qtd. in “Listening, Thinking” 349). To listen, we must allow the speech to live inside of us, where we have created a space. Lipari thus conceives of listening “as a kind of dwelling place from where we offer our hospitality to others and the world” (Listening 102). From this dwelling place, the listener does not have to understand the other person but rather to stand with them (“Listening, Thinking” 350).

The hospitality of Lipari’s dwelling place can be further understood in connection to Richard H. Haswell and Janis Haswell’s application of hospitality to the English classroom. Haswell and Haswell describe hospitality as “one model of that relation of the self with the Other” (46). And Dale Jacobs directly connects hospitality with listening (including rhetorical listening) and the openness that it promotes, going so far as to state, “Without listening, hospitality and the mutual reverence implied in that concept are not possible” (576). Both he and Haswell and Haswell refer not to today’s hospitality industry, but rather to nomadic hospitality. In nomadic hospitality, exemplified by the Bedouin, hosts respectfully open their tents to wandering strangers, providing shelter, food, drink, and information about the area. Guests offer information about other places in exchange. In the future, hosts may travel in the lands of the guests and be welcomed into the guests’ tents, leading to a change of roles, hosts now guests and guests now hosts.

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Though Lipari and Haswell and Haswell envisage the internal dwelling place differently, both connect hospitality to openness. Lipari conceives of hospitality as creating a space and welcoming the other in, whereas Haswell and Haswell, drawing on Emmanuel Levinas, position hospitality as the act of emerging from an internal dwelling in order to welcome the other. For Haswell and Haswell, dwelling is the starting condition rather than the goal. Despite these opposing metaphors, both theories position hospitality as an openness to the other and to the possibility of change. According to Haswell and Haswell, hospitality “allow[s] change in consciousness, experience, language, learning, and ethics through an openness to what lies outside the self (‘exteriority’)” (32). An emergence to welcome the other—i.e., an act of hospitality—allows us to move forward toward the new.

In applying hospitality to the English classroom, Haswell and Haswell differentiate between three types of hospitality: intellectual, transformative, and Ubuntu. Intellectual hospitality “assumes that true inquiry involves welcoming novel understanding” (53). To truly explore the possible, one must be open to the other person’s perspectives and thoughts. In transformative hospitality, the host becomes guest, and the guest becomes host. For example, in the hospitable classroom, students-guests change in response to the teacher-host, but the teacher must also change in response to the students, requiring a shifting of roles to teacher-guest and students-hosts (54). Ubuntu hospitality stems from the African concept of Ubuntu, which Desmond Tutu explains as “my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours” (qtd. in Haswell and Haswell 55). Self and other are bound together, and acts of hospitality are necessary when those ties come undone.
In all three types of hospitality, welcoming the guest—a stranger—involves opening oneself to the otherness of the other, to acknowledging differences and “relish[ing] the shock” of them (Haswell and Haswell 66). The risk of relinquishing mastery is required for the hospitable classroom, or, in this case, the hospitable consultation. In Haswell and Haswell’s words, for such a classroom or consultation to be “just, [it] must be out of control” (58). Similarly required is the risk of transformation. If there is no such risk or change on the part of the host, then the host is not open to difference and “has merely assimilated, or relegated, the guest into his or her own world” (56). Just as Lipari describes viewing the other through the lens of the self as an act of violence (*Listening* 198), Haswell and Haswell describe it as a “devouring” (57). And in hospitality, even as the host and guest are bound, they are not the same. There is “a unity without uniformity” (55). As with listening, then, hospitality requires a surrendering to the difference of the other and to change.

According to Ratcliffe, this surrendering allows for the construction of a space between self and other, which she refers to as the metonymic gap (*Rhetorical* 72). Because rhetorical listening is meant to facilitate communication across differences, part of Ratcliffe’s theorization involves a reconceptualization of identification in terms of metonymy, which takes into account both similarities and differences. The *Oxford*

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24 Ratcliffe locates the identification in rhetorical listening as interplay between traditional identification, represented by Kenneth Burke, and postmodern identification, represented by Diana Fuss (*Rhetorical*). On the one hand is Burke’s theory of consubstantiality, which holds that identification occurs when people transcend differences, the metaphorical substance of one person merging with that of another (Ratcliffe 55). On the other hand is Fuss’s theory of identification and disidentification, in which identification involves similarities and differences, with an emphasis on the former. Fuss also brings up disidentification: “an identification that has already been made and denied in the unconscious” (Fuss qtd. in Ratcliffe 62). Consubstantiality foregrounds similarities, with differences often ignored, while in Fuss’s theory, similarities are often considered impossible (32). Rhetorical listening, on the other hand, takes both similarities and differences into consideration.
*English Dictionary* defines metonymy as “the action of substituting for a word or phrase denoting an object . . . a word or phrase denoting a property or something associated with it, e.g. as when referring to the monarchy as ‘the crown’” (“metonymy”). There is a connection between the monarchy and a crown but there are obvious differences. As Ratcliffe points out, metonymy thus “assumes that two objects do not share a common substance but are rather merely associated” (98). Listening metonymically, then, acknowledges some similarity while pushing back against assumptions of similarity. It “invites listeners to assume that one member of a group . . . does not speak for all other members” (99). Ratcliffe describes this as metonymic non-identification.

The association of the juxtaposed concepts is viewed across the gap of their difference. This metonymic gap is a space between self and other where we can take a breath and realize that we do not and cannot know everything about the other, and where we listen to learn more. This place between, in T. Minh-ha Trinh’s words, “belongs to no one, not even to the creator” (qtd. in Ratcliffe 93).25 Like Lipari’s internal dwelling and Haswell and Haswell’s acts of hospitality, Ratcliffe’s metonymic gap is a space created by acknowledging, accepting, and honoring our differences as well as similarities, by ceding control and stepping back so that the other person might step in (even as they do the same). Such spaces resonate with Mary Louise Pratt’s contact zones: “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly

25 Gavin P. Johnson finds it problematic that “Ratcliffe’s orientation towards identification, disidentification, and non-identification seems fixed and determined. The trouble here is that an individualized understanding of agency—illustrated by the liberal notion of choice—does not consider the fluid nature of identification as one reckons with their positionality” (126). I agree that all aspects of identification must be—are—mutable, though my interpretation is that her representation of non-identification is one point in the constant process of repositioning and reidentifying.
asymmetrical relations of power” (34). It is in these spaces that we can listen and allow ourselves to be transformed.

Lipari describes the process of creating these spaces as renunciation (Listening 184), Haswell and Haswell as dispossession (43). John Stewart et al. explain this renunciation in terms of a cosmopolitan attitude. A cosmopolitan attitude is inclusive and open to change: “A person with a cosmopolitan attitude may be committed to an idea or position, but he or she does not assume that it is absolutely ‘right’” (Stewart et al. 236). In contrast, someone with an ethnocentric attitude locates their identity in their ideas. They are resistant to change because they feel that changing their ideas changes their very self. But, as Lipari argues, when we are open to alterity and change, we are not renouncing ourselves but rather the idea that we know everything, that our view is the norm, that we, rather than others, are society’s unmarked (“Listening, Thinking” 355).

Listening, then, is an opening to possibilities, which directly addresses the challenge of drawing on both the general and the unique. It involves working to become aware of the usefulness and dangers of our assumptions to lessen their hold. By renouncing mastery and making room for the other, we acknowledge that our schemas and foreknowledge are only one way of perceiving the world. Kerschbaum’s explanation of attending to difference could just as easily be applied to listening: it involves “acknowledging the way categories help us negotiate situations while holding those category identifications open for new interpretation and understanding” (Toward 92).26 Similarly, through listening, preconceptions are acknowledged and then disrupted by possibilities.

26 Kerschbaum herself connects listening to attending to difference, drawing on Ratcliffe’s concept of non-identification (Toward 58) and later suggesting use of “flexible listening” (63).
Listening and Openness in the Writing Center

According to dialogic listening, rhetorical listening, and listening otherwise, listening is inextricable from openness, and vice versa. To Ratcliffe, rhetorical listening is a “stance of openness” (*Rhetorical 1*), which involves receptivity, as well as exploration into how we historically and culturally fit in the current context and into how we fit with the other person. Likewise, Lipari describes listening otherwise as “listening that is committed to receiving otherness” (“Listening Otherwise” 45), requiring acceptance and a relinquishing of control. Dialogic listening’s ties to openness are less explicit but can be summed up by listening as a turning toward the other person.

In this listening theory, being open is not defined per se. Perhaps the most representative connotation is being receptive, but other connotations that give glimpses into its meaning include being exposed, vulnerable, uncertain, and generous (“open”). In my conceptualization, openness is an awareness of self and other, an attempt at understanding the other person along with the acceptance that alterity is unknowable. To be open is to relinquish such illusions of mastery and to give up control, making room for the other person and collaborating with them. To be open is to allow for the possibility of changing and to resist trying to change the other person. Openness is to see the other person as an individual, within larger societal contexts. Further, it is to be aware that each individual is constantly in flux and therefore unpredictable.

Because openness promotes the disruption of preconceptions, one way to address preconceptions in the writing center is exploring consultations through the lens of listening, with an ear toward openness. Like these listening scholars, my participants tended to associate openness with listening. Abigail, Beth, Josh, and LaShondra explicitly
brought up openness as an inherent part of listening. LaShondra, a writer, described being open in listening as being “ready to receive what you have to bring,” fully taking it in and “allowing that to sit.” Josh explained it as being willing to try to understand the other person, a willingness to “gauge who they are, what they’re doing, what they’re about,” to “see them as a unique person.” And, like Floyd and Lipari, Abigail described listening as “turning toward” the other person.

There is a limited amount of writing center scholarship that addresses openness and preconceptions in the context of listening. Grimm and Julie A. Bokser in particular address openness in the writing center, but they do not go into detail about how openness and listening might translate into practice. Grimm argues that listening is necessary for moving past preconceptions (Good). Drawing on Gemma Corradi Fiumara, who also influenced Ratcliffe and Lipari, Grimm explains listening as attending to the thoughts of others with an open mind. It is performed with the intent of experiencing, not of understanding, where understanding means fitting ideas into our perspective of the world (69). Further, Grimm promotes the need in the writing center to acknowledge that we, too, are other. “Rather than helping the Other become more like us,” Grimm explains, “the work of the writing center might instead include developing the ability to see ourselves as the Other, to recognize the limits of our worldviews and our cultural assumptions and to regard our discursive practices from the perspectives of those outside the mainstream discourse” (14). Like Lipari, Ratcliffe, and others, Grimm argues for the refusal of mastery.

Given that we are, by definition, unable to inhabit the other person, to fully understand their perspective, Grimm proposes that writing centers take a stance of
wonder (*Good*). This “humble stance of openness to the mystery of another” drives “a desire to hear the Other’s stories” (112). To wonder is to acknowledge that we and the other person are unknowable to each other and that each of us is constantly changing.

Julie A. Bokser positions listening as a way to help consultants complicate the idea of belonging, with the ultimate goal that “tutors learn how to listen for issues of belonging from tutees themselves” (46-47). Bokser draws on the large strokes of rhetorical listening—openness and lack of mastery—to show that listening helps consultants question belonging, which involves being open to questioning their own positionality and that of others.

By drawing on this limited writing center scholarship, on listening theory, and on my data, I found that openness fell into two (interrelated) categories: openness to alterity and openness to change.

**Openness to Alterity**

One aspect of openness in listening is trying to understand the other person while acknowledging that they are other from us and we other from them. As Grimm argues, “we are ontologically unable to think or feel from another’s perspective” (*Good* 112). Like Haswell and Haswell’s intellectual hospitality, openness to alterity is a welcoming of the other person, rather than an attempt to change them. It is acceptance of the fact that differences exist and of these differences themselves.

Both Grimm and Kathryn Valentine promote the necessity of such openness to alterity in writing centers. Grimm argues that writing centers should “value difference and creativity more than they value sameness and standardization” (“New” 21). Part of valuing differences is locating ourselves and our perspectives in relation to the other
person and being receptive to the other rather than trying to change them to fit ourselves. We should be open to other perspectives, to what Grimm calls “Alternate Ways of Naming the World” (Good 23).

Yet, as Valentine points out, consultant guidebook discussions of listening do not satisfactorily account for openness to difference. Mentions of difference focus on the comparison of consultants and writers, with an assumed homogeneity for those in each role. According to Valentine, the consultant is often presented as a white, a native speaker of English who “does not appear to struggle with language, identity, or personal problems” (106). The writer, on the other hand, is often presented as a non-native English speaker or a basic writer who is neuronormative and wants to have a speaking role in the consultation (105-7).27

Like Grimm, Valentine argues for receptivity to the other person rather than mastery over them (and she goes on to recommend the framework of rhetorical listening as a way of bringing openness to difference into writing center conceptualizations of listening.) Josh summed up this perspective: “I want to work from where the writer is as a person.” This involves listening for the individual rather than relying on an assumption. This openness requires an attempt to understand (discussed in detail in Chapter 5),

And we should make this attempt to understand regardless of disagreements and differences. Josh explained,

I must respect the writer as a human being . . . I must then accept wherever they are coming from, regardless of the experience they have as writers or where they come from in an ethnic or socioeconomic sense. Even if the writer is blatantly racist or homophobic, I still must be able to respect their humanity and

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27 Romeo García similarly expresses concern over assumed homogeneity, in this case, “the insufficiency of a white/black race paradigm—the black subject as the default ‘colonial’ subject and the white tutor as a functional colonizer” (“Unmaking” 38).
intelligence . . . I don’t have to always agree or understand them, but I do have to make an effort.

Josh connected this to his own experiences. Even outside of writing centers, his favorite relationships were those in which the other person respected his perspective. “[E]ven if they don’t agree with me,” he said, “they’ve at least heard me and they’ve processed with me.” And, as Katie pointed out, such differences are unearthed not only in conversation with the writer but also through their writing. After all, the writing content often presents the writer’s perspective.

In writing center studies, Serkan Gorkemli expresses similar sentiment as Josh and Katie, though without mention of listening. Reflecting on a consultation in which he strongly disagreed with the content of the writer’s argument, he decides that part of his responsibility as a consultant is “to appreciate the complexity of the issue” (9). Gorkemli was working to be open to the alterity of this writer.

This sentiment also appears in rhetoric and composition scholarship. Ratcliffe states, “We learn to listen by listening to those who do not agree with us” (Rhetorical 36), and Wendy Wolters Hinshaw, in her discussion of how rhetorical listening can help the students and teacher work through resistance during class discussions about difference, makes a similar argument: it is important to be open to those with views you may disagree with (“Making”). Virginia Anderson also contends that it is our ethical obligation to listen to others in such instances. This “remind[s] us,” she says, “that we are not alone, are not first, and can never be the sole arbiters of meaning” (466). And, as Anderson, Hinshaw, and Floyd clarify, listening and openness to other perspectives do

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28 The writer was arguing that driver’s manuals should not be published in Spanish because immigrants should be learning English and should not be welcomed into the country anyway.
not equate with agreeing. Listening and openness are “not necessarily uncritical” (Hinshaw 273) and do “not mean ‘agreement or obedience’” (Floyd 134). Instead, listening increases the potential for further communication.

Part of listening for alterity is listening for what is not said. In our discussion of listening, Beth brought up the importance of “trying to absorb the words but also maybe the intentions or the meanings behind someone’s words.” And Kathryn directly stated the importance of attending to “what . . . the student is saying to me and what are they not saying.” For example, a graduate student might tell a consultant that they want help organizing a chapter of their dissertation, but, by listening, the consultant might realize the writer’s anxiety about their dissertation. The consultant’s response (or lack thereof) to this anxiety could have an effect on the writer, writing, and consultation.

In this vein, some writing center scholarship on listening argues that the listener must attend to what is missing or below the surface (Fallon; Fishbain; Holly; Taylor). Janet Fishbain describes this as “listen[ing] ‘between the words’” (10). And David Taylor, drawing on psychologist Theodor Reik, refers to this as the third ear, which he explains as “seeing beyond the surface of what someone is saying to the ideas and perceptions underneath” (1). This can help the consultant better understand the writer and their needs.

In rhetoric and composition scholarship, Michelle Ballif addresses the importance of listening to rhetorical elisions, to what a speaker must leave unspoken in order to allow the rest of what they say to be heard (“Listening”). We must search for such elisions, but we cannot presume to understand them because such presumptions would silence them again. In other words, we should try “to listen for them, rather than to hear them” (734).
And Mary Ann Cain goes so far as to argue that “[t]here is no ‘direct’ way to listen to self and other” (493). Instead, we must listen to language itself, which can then help us work toward finding meaning in what we can never fully understand. (This idea of finding meaning in uncertainty is further discussed in Chapter 5.)

To be open to alterity, Grimm argues, requires a reexamination of ourselves (Good 88). Like Ratcliffe’s attention to cultural logic, Cornwell and Orbe’s listening to and for culture, and Lipari’s argument for self-reflection, Grimm and others (e.g., Denny, “Queering”) call on writing center professionals to become aware of the culture that drives their choices and thoughts. Grimm argues, “Relentless reflection on how we know what we know and why we assume what we assume creates conditions for social transformation because it weakens the confidence derived from naturalizing the ways of the dominant group” (109). Such self-awareness can help consultants (and other writing center professionals, as well as writers) to see outside of their preconceptions, allowing them to see the other as a person rather than a profile.

In order to become aware of the invisible structures and values driving our thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions, we need to see ourselves as other, to, in Grimm’s words, “recognize the limits of our worldviews and our cultural assumptions and to regard our discursive practices from the perspectives of those outside the mainstream discourse” (Good 14). And, really, that we are other is a truism—after all, we are not the other person, so, by definition, we are their other—though perhaps a difficult one to accept.

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29 In their book on ethnography and field research, Bonnie Stone Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater make a similar point: “Any study of an ‘other’ is also a study of a ‘self’” (xvii).
Christopher provides one example of seeing self as other. Describing himself as an “apparently white, cis, heterosexual man,” he self-identified as a member of a dominant group. He noted that these characteristics are particularly relevant in the context of privilege: in his words, “I’m allowed to get away with so much, often without noticing.” And, he explained, as a member of this group, he might have the tendency to dominate conversation without being stopped. Reflecting on power and privilege, Christopher took steps to address behavior that might result from this privilege. For example, he would monitor how much he spoke throughout a consultation. Further, his reflection helped create that “weakened confidence” that Grimm describes (Good 109), through which he could better perceive the writer.

Katie further argued that “it’s not necessarily the consultant’s place to attempt to change the writer’s opinions.” Beyond a receptivity to the other person’s thoughts, openness requires that renunciation of control. As Abigail put it in her recommendations for writing center consultants on how to listen, “some of the simplest advice is to stop telling and to start learning how to ask.” Rather than pushing their own perspectives, consultants should listen to the perspectives of the writers. Katie pointed out that this includes perspectives not just on the more salient topics, like controversial issues (e.g., abortion), but also on writing. She told me, “I have seen consultants in the past openly criticize a writer for starting a paper late, or things of the like—I disagree with this because even if it’s a writing style I myself may not agree with, I would never tell the writer that, because it might be what works for the writer.”

Receptivity without attempting to change the other does not prohibit consultants from expressing their own opinions, as long as consultants are also open to the opinions
of the writers. This is the difference between imposing and sharing. Katie told me about a recent consultation in which the writer wanted to focus the consultation on her thesis statement. Katie, however, found the thesis statement to be strong, which meant that the consultation would be more usefully spent on a different focus. Katie expressed this to the writer: “I even upfront told her that I know that you’re concerned about this, but I think your thesis is really good, and I wouldn’t be saying that if I didn’t think this was the truth.” Katie elaborated on why she found the thesis strong and then suggested that they go through the rest of the paper before returning to the thesis. Katie expressed her opinion, and it was important that she did so—the session (in Katie’s opinion, at least) might have otherwise been spent on something less useful to the writer. But even as she shared her own perspective, Katie also addressed the writer’s concerns. As she explained, “I think if a writer has a major concern like that—I think she told me three or four times, this is my main concern—and if I just said, ‘Oh, don’t worry, your thesis is fine,’ then the writer might feel like they’re not really being listened to.” Listening and openness are not a matter of submitting to the writer but rather of collaborating with them, sharing ideas while also being open to theirs.

According to dialogic listening, rhetorical listening, and listening otherwise, as well as hospitality theory, openness requires making space for the other person rather than trying to change them. Josh addressed this explicitly in our interview by referencing zimzum when explaining his conceptualization of listening. According to Josh, “Zimzum is a Hebrew word, referring to the space the Jewish God (Yahweh) created by contracting, or making Himself smaller, so that the world could exist.” Such a “cognitive or mental or emotional space,” as Josh called it, is created between people as the result of
a relationship. The strength of the relationship may vary, but the space derives from “the need to make room for the other’s needs or wants.” Josh even suggested that this concept be applied to writing center pedagogy “to talk about ways consultants can minimize their voices to create spaces for the writer’s voice to be heard.” In his reflection on consultations involving large differences of opinions, Gorkemli similarly brings up this idea of making room: part of the way that he worked to be open to the writer was by “carv[ing] ‘a conversational space’” (10). This hearkens back to listening theory’s space between, constructed by contracting the self to make a space where the self and other can cocreate meaning.

Other participants also referred to this idea of giving the writer room. Christopher explained that the consultation should be a “negotiation,” a “back and forth”—a conversation—and that this involves both consultant and writer having space on the discussion floor. And Abigail hinted at this creation of space when she described listening as “a practice of almost forgetting yourself.” She explained this in terms of attention: “[W]e pay attention to ourselves all day, but listening to another person is giving them that attention. And so, necessarily, your attention has to turn away from yourself.” So though I—along with Lipari, Ratcliffe, and others—would argue that listening calls for increased self-awareness rather than a version of forgetting, I agree with Abigail’s core point that the listener must make room in their attention for the other person.

Openness to alterity is essential for a listening that accounts for identity differences, large and small. While significant in all contexts, such differences in identity play a particularly important role in writing centers, where writers, along with consultants
and other writing center professionals, are constantly faced with choices of assimilation, opposition, and subversion (Denny, *Facing*; Denny, “Queering”).

To reiterate, for this study, I did not explicitly ask participants about how they identified, beyond asking them which pronouns they wanted me to use. I did also ask them to describe themselves, which gave them the opportunity to include any aspects of identification that they found significant and relevant. A few participants of their own accord discussed race, gender, age, and educational background. Disability, age, and educational background were also key to two of the observed consultations. Besides this, race, gender, disability, age, educational background, and other aspects of identification were not obviously central to the observed consultations or explicitly brought up by participants (beyond their self-descriptions for this study). It is also possible, even likely, that participants may have avoided discussion of differences in race, gender, and other aspects of identification for fear of saying something offensive.

There were two instances in which race and gender were explicitly raised. As mentioned earlier, Christopher showed awareness of how he presented in contrast to how the writer presented (particularly with regard to race and gender), and this affected how he made room for the writer. LaShondra, who identified as an African American woman, asked at the end of our interview about the race and gender makeup of the consultants. Of the 15 MA consultants and PhD assistant directors that year, as based on my interpretation, only two were people of color: one person was African American or Black and the other was Latina. 30 Neither were participants in this study. Of the 15 consultants, six identified as male and nine as female (based on the personal pronouns that they used

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30 I had not asked the non-participating consultants about their race, so identifying those two consultants as people of color is based on my interpretation, which I fully acknowledge is not ideal.
in their writing center biographies). LaShondra then explained how she took race and gender into account when choosing a consultant so that she would receive feedback from a variety of perspectives. (This is discussed further in Chapter 5.)

In John and Liz’s consultation, both were aware of John’s age—70—and the gap between the consultation and when he had last taken a class—50 years—because John explicitly shared this information at the beginning of the consultation, before we even started recording. Liz took these differences—between John and her and between John and other writers—into account during the session. She also took similarities into account: Liz identified as a nontraditional student and had experience tutoring and researching nontraditional students. (This is also further discussed in Chapter 5.)

Beth was aware of disability. This directly connected to her consultation with Kathryn, who had come to the writing center to work on a book review about books on disability. In response to my email follow-up question asking participants to describe themselves, Kathryn self-identified as someone who had a disability, while Beth self-identified as someone who did not. In their consultation, Beth made room for Kathryn’s experience by acknowledging that Kathryn brought something to the table that Beth could never bring, rather than assuming that Kathryn fit a certain stereotype of a person with a disability or that she could understand Kathryn on the basis of her own experience. It otherwise would have been difficult to address Kathryn’s specific needs, especially given that Kathryn needed help deciding how much of her personal experience to include in the review.

I regret that I cannot address these and other specific forms of identity difference in greater depth. The relations between listening, openness, and specific forms of
identification certainly merit further research, with a more intentional and explicit attention to individual differences. My current focus, however, is on an initial, broad investigation of listening and difference in the context of the writing center, rather than on a delving into individual applications. Various examples of difference will be brought up throughout this dissertation and are also implicit in acknowledgement of different (unspecified) backgrounds.

**Openness to Change**

Openness to alterity—awareness of our own perspectives and receptivity to those of the other person—facilitates openness to change. Such change is important in the writing center. Grimm writes, “Effective tutors learn to shift perspective, to question their assumptions, to seek alternative viewpoints” (“New” 21). She calls for consistent, ongoing change in the writing center, in terms of both pedagogy and people: “A fair writing center practice must be constantly under revision, and the people who work in writing centers must be open to transformation” (Good 111). García similarly advocates for “a center in the process of becoming” (“Unmaking” 49).

My participants also brought up the importance of change, and thus the importance of being open to it. Beth, for example, described the necessity of allowing for a shift in expectations, explaining this as “the idea that a student could tell you the context of a situation and that you would then disregard your previous notion of what was expected based on what the student told you.” And Abigail identified one aspect of listening as “revising your understanding of something or of a person, or . . . taking it in with the intention of forming a response.” Beth and Abigail, like García (“Unmaking”)
and Grimm (Good), advocate for an openness to change, revision, transformation, becoming.

Liz discussed how her perception of John, a writer, changed during the session from her initial quick read: “[H]e came off as very wary at the beginning of the session given his careful examination of the consent form, and by the end, I was shifted to an idea that this is more of a chill guy. He’s just, you know, he was just a little bit nervous about that one thing, it just made him seem a little bit uptight. [He’s o]verall just kind of a relaxed, inquisitive gentleman.”

Through the topic of literacy narratives, Beth exemplified openness to change regarding writing. Even if consultants did not know the genre before working at the Writing Center, it quickly became familiar within that first semester. At UofL, as at many other institutions, literacy narratives are one of the universal assignments for English 101 and are therefore among the most frequent assignments that consultants help with at the beginning of the semester. Further, many of the PhD consultants, including Beth, have themselves taught English 101 and assigned literacy narratives. Consultants thus tend to have a strong conceptualization of what a literacy narrative should look like. But, Beth asked, what if a writer came into the Writing Center and described a literacy narrative that did not meet that conceptualization?

Beth argued that in this situation, consultants must be “willing to at least pursue the idea” that this is the version of the literacy narrative that they should use in this consultation. By working with the writer instead of immediately dismissing the writer’s conceptualization of the literacy narrative, the consultant can better understand where the writer is coming from (for example, maybe a similar genre is structured differently in that...
writer’s culture, or maybe this was how the teacher presented the genre in class). And the writer can better understand a more standard academic view of the genre, enabling them to make an informed decision on which version to follow (or which features of each to use). By being open to expanding their understanding of the genre, the consultant works with the writer to decide what is appropriate for that specific context and helps the writer develop tools to make such decisions in the future.

Openness to change also applies to the consultation itself. Beth argued that consultants need to be open to the possibility of changes in the consultation in order to best help the writer. She explained,

[I]f tutors are trained too rigidly to focus and redirect on the center’s priorities, and the students’ concerns are not addressed or validated as just as important—like your grammar might be just as important as your thesis statement to you, and maybe to your teacher—. . . So, taking one’s training but being, I would say, 70% influenced by what the student is telling you and 30% influenced by your training as a tutor.

Josh similarly discussed openness to changing the consultation path in the middle of the consultation:

Some might say, “Well, is that difficult because then you’re coming in with certain expectations in the appointment, like, okay, so we’re going to look at this for grammar.” But that’s not necessarily true. It’s just like anything else. It’s like any conversation. You begin with one idea of what you want the conversation to look like—maybe you start the conversation because you have one specific question that you want a professor or someone to answer—but then, as you’re talking, you realize, oh, but I also wanted to ask about this, or I have this question, or I’m really curious about this.

Just as a conversation organically shifts based on the contributions of the interlocuters, so should a writing center consultation shift depending on the collaboration of writer and consultant. Beth and Josh’s examples show that consultants might walk into the consultation with one idea of how it should go based on writing center pedagogy, but they must be open to changing this preconception based on context.
Openness to change is also important on the writer’s end. Writers might have preconceptions about the writing center, about that particular consultant, or about consultants in general that could affect their consultation. Liz discussed how writer preconceptions about the UofL Writing Center might limit how those writers listen and learn:

If you come to the Writing Center with an idea of how things are going to play out, and you discard things in the session that do not correspond to that idea, you are not listening. Whereas if you come to the Writing Center—You know, everybody’s going to come with a conception of what we are. You can’t escape that. But if you come knowing that that conception might be a little bit interrupted . . . you could fully perform listening. You can take in different things in your session.

And David described such preconceptions from the perspective of a writer. Before coming to the Writing Center for the first time, he worried that the consultants would not have the background knowledge to help him with his political science thesis. However, he was open to the possibility that consultants would still be able to contribute, and he ended up satisfied with his consultant, Josh: the observed consultation was David and Josh’s third time meeting together.

In addition, openness to change corresponds with openness to feedback. Feedback is, ideally, a major reason for coming to a writing center. As David expressed, “As a visitor of Writing Center, my purpose was to get [the consultants’] perspectives, thoughts, and advises.” But taking in such feedback (regardless of whether that feedback is accepted) is not easy (Bleakney et al.; Elbow, “High”; Higgins et al.; Lizzio and Wilson). When asked what advice he had for other writers, David said, “You have to be open to that kind of feedback, whatever feedback that they’re going to give you.” In

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31 This feedback is not limited to writers’ drafts—it includes feedback on thoughts, writing processes, project timelines, and so on.
response to that same question, Madison advised other writers to “be really open to what
the instructors are saying because they are actually really helpful and know what they’re
talking about.” For consultant feedback to be useful, the writer needs to be open to the
consultant’s perspectives and suggestions.

When asked in the survey how their own behavior affected their consultation’s
success level, LaShondra and Madison responded succinctly and similarly. LaShondra
wrote, “I was open to receiving ideas today,” and Madison wrote, “I was open to new
thoughts and ideas.” The meaning of success was left open to interpretation, but both
LaShondra and Madison tied openness to feedback with a positive consultation.

LaShondra also discussed how openness facilitated her taking in more critical
feedback, which she often found beneficial. Consultants’ “push[ing] even more on some
of the questions, on challenging the ideas . . .,” she said, “those are the very things that
push my paper over the edge.” However, she needed to be open for this type of
feedback to be useful. With this openness, the consultant can, in LaShondra’s words,
“us[e] the spirit of connection to be able to not push me away but to push me further in
the way that I want to go.” It is only when she “feel[s] open and ready to receive the
information” that she and the consultant can “push deeper.”

Further, many of the consultants—Beth, Christopher, Josh, Katie, Liz, and
Quaid—cited an awareness of how open to their feedback the writers were (or how open
they perceived the writers to be) and how this affected the consultation. Liz, for example,
described John as “very responsive to feedback and ideas.” Katie found Madison “very
receptive to everything I said” and contrasted this with her experience with defensive

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32 Kathryn similarly appreciated being challenged: “I have found I respond best when I am able to get
feedback on things I want feedback on, but to also be pushed to think about the text in a different way.”
writers. And consultants valued this openness. Katie expressed that she was “pleased” with Madison’s openess, and Beth appreciated that Kathryn, who she described as “accommodating,” was open to her suggestions. Further, consultants cited the openness of writers as having positive effects on the consultation. Speaking again about Kathryn, Beth said, “I think when she can be open and then you can kind of run with that openness and ask genuine questions and kind of validate the experience and the project that she’s working on as a very worthwhile project, she really responds well to that, and then we have a good session together.” Quaid similarly connected the positive consultation to Chris’s receptivity.

Of course, writers need to listen in order to receive feedback, but consultants’ listening can also facilitate writers’ openness to feedback. First, listening helps consultants give more useful feedback, which writers are more likely to pay attention to. By listening, consultants can better understand the writer’s needs, wants, and ideas. (See Chapter 5 for more on how listening facilitates understanding). For example, Kathryn expressed that she was open to Beth’s feedback, even though that feedback was “kind of like an authoritative thing,” because Beth had listened to Kathryn’s goals and given this feedback with those goals in mind.

In addition, writers’ perceptions that their consultants listened to them also facilitated their openness to the consultants’ feedback. Vanessa, for example, was impressed with how closely Christopher listened to her essay when she was reading it out loud. She told me, “[W]hen we went back, and we were looking at the things I can do to revise, he knew specifically where to go and everything, like he remembered my piece, honestly, more than I did.” Vanessa explained that because of how Christopher listened,
she was more likely to listen to him, trust him, and take his advice. And Katie made the point that when the consultant listens and is open to the writer’s perspective, even when strongly disagreeing, the writer becomes more open to the consultant’s feedback.\textsuperscript{33}

Approaching this from a different angle, LaShondra described a section of her consultation with Abigail when she did not feel open. At one point, Abigail looked at her watch multiple times, which LaShondra interpreted as a lack of interest and a lack of listening. This made LaShondra “close off.” As she expressed in our interview, “I was not as open as I could have been because of that.” When LaShondra felt that Abigail was not listening, she did not want to listen to what Abigail had to say. A little later in the consultation, Abigail explained that she checked her watch so that they could try to fit as many of LaShondra’s ideas and goals into the session as possible. LaShondra then once again felt listened to and began to open up.

We have thus seen how listening both facilitates and requires openness. In particular, openness to alterity and openness to change emerged as categories from both scholarship and practice. By acknowledging and welcoming the difference of the other person and by being willing to change based on these differences, we can better perceive the other person as an individual positioned in a particular context, which, in turn, helps us cut through our preconceptions. This is good in and of itself, and it also helps writing center consultations better meet writers’ wants and needs.

\textbf{Try It at Home: Ratcliffe’s Ways of Facilitating Listening}

To be more intentional in strengthening and practicing our listening, we need to address listening explicitly in consultant training. The openness that is required for

\textsuperscript{33} Sheri Rysdam and Lisa Johnson-Shull similarly argue that listening’s attitude of trying to understand rather than to judge can increase writer receptivity.
listening is fairly abstract. Being open requires making room for the other and
coinhabiting the space made by such a contraction, but—particularly given the Western
predilection for mastery—how is that to be done? And if listening is an attitude, how
exactly do we teach and nurture it? Explaining listening theory is one thing, but it is
difficult to express concrete steps for how to listen better. Such steps, though, would help
with both putting listening into practice and better understanding the theory. To that end,
I draw on Ratcliffe to share two potential ways of facilitating listening. These are not the
“correct” ways to listen, but they are steps that could prove useful in certain contexts.

When explaining her rhetoric of listening, Ratcliffe presents four ways in which
listening can emerge (*Rhetorical*). The first two will be discussed here as ways of
facilitating openness, and the third will be discussed in the following chapter in the
context of power. The first two ways of facilitating listening that Ratcliffe presents are:

- “A *rhetoric of listening focuses openly on terms (both positive and negative) in order
to engage them*” (94)
- “A *rhetoric of listening proceeds via a cultural logic that recognizes simultaneous
commonalities and differences*” (95)

I will discuss each of these in turn.

First, Ratcliffe argues that we should attend to and consider negative terms, in
addition to positive ones (*Rhetorical*). Otherwise, we end up “accepting [the negative
terms] without critique or, worse, . . . rejecting them without critique,” and this prevents
the furthering of conversation (86). Ratcliffe gives the example of a debate on feminist
research methods between Audre Lorde and Mary Daly. In brief, Daly argued that all
women experience sexism similarly. Lorde was concerned that Daly was treating women
as a homogenous group and that Black women were only portrayed negatively. Lorde contacted Daly with her concerns, but this resulted in private discussion and then separate publication of their individual viewpoints, rather than a public conversation. Examples of negative interpretations of Lorde’s words include:

- [Lorde] believes white women are unable to hear black women or maintain dialogue with them.
- She believes white women too often retreat into destructive guilt and defensiveness.
- She believes white women can speak to white women at less emotional cost. (Ratcliffe 86)

Looking past these negative interpretations, which leads to automatically accepting or rejecting them, halts the conversation, rather than fueling discussion of the important issues raised. For example, the above terms might spark consideration of the experiences of African American women: “For African American women, there is a sense of danger in speaking back to the dominant white culture; there is common expectation about how white women will respond to challenges; and there are two ‘successful ways of coping’—being silent and erasing painful knowledge from consciousness” (86). The same holds true for negative interpretations of Daly’s words. These interpretations—such as “Daly regrets any pain she may have caused herself or her readers” and “She regrets unintended oversights” (86)—could stop discussion before it begins. Or these terms could be reflected on more closely, leading to a conversation about, for example, white women’s assumptions that lack of intention means lack of responsibility (87).

I did not observe much regarding negative terms in this study, likely in part due to self-selection—the writers and consultants who agreed to participate in this study were perhaps less likely to feel negative during the session—so I use Anne DiPardo’s “Lessons from Fannie” to show how attention to negative terms can apply to the writing center.
DiPardo analyzes a semester-long relationship between Morgan, a consultant, and Fannie, a writer. Fannie was a Navajo undergraduate student whose first language was Navajo, and she aspired to become a teacher so that she could provide her reservation with the educational support that had been so lacking for her. Fannie struggled with writing and explained to DiPardo that “her early literacy education had been neither respectful of her heritage nor sensitive to the kinds of challenges she would face in the educational mainstream” (130). Morgan worked with Fannie for a semester and, initially excited, grew frustrated by what she perceived as Fannie’s lack of engagement. Morgan gave the example of Fannie saying, “[W]ell, I don’t know what I’m supposed to write. . . . Well I don’t like this, I don’t like my writing” (133). Ratcliffe would propose that Morgan listen beyond the negative so that she could usefully engage such dialogue, rather than feeling frustrated by it or just putting it aside (Rhetorical). Morgan could have appreciated the difficulty it likely took Fannie to share this and then use that insight to better understand how Fannie approached writing. This would involve the consultant growing aware of when and how they react to negative terms so that they could then really think about these terms and in this way forward the consultation.

Ratcliffe’s second way of facilitating listening is to complicate the binary of right versus wrong in favor of attending to both ideas (Rhetorical). These different perspectives “may be laid side by side not to silence one another but to inform and challenge one another” (96). Here, Ratcliffe continues with the example of Daly and Lorde, arguing that they did not follow such a logic in their dispute. Instead, Daly focused on similarities between women, while Lorde focused on differences. They treated the understanding of women as a binary choice—either same or different.
The cultural logic that Ratcliffe forwards can be demonstrated by writing center consultations where consultant and writer have different preferred session focuses. This is exemplified by Katie’s consultation, discussed earlier, where the writer wanted to focus on her thesis statement, whereas Katie thought that the writer would be better served if they focused the consultation on something else. Rather than pushing her own agenda or giving in and doing what the writer asked, Katie discussed her suggested approach with the writer. And rather than deciding that one focus was right and one wrong, Katie and the writer thought about both plans for the consultation. This promoted increased understanding, rather than the silencing of one viewpoint. For example, considering both plans might have led Katie and the writer to discuss why the writer perceived the thesis statement as needing work and why Katie found it strong. This could better help the writer understand thesis statements and better help Katie understand the writer’s understanding of thesis statements.

Kathryn and Beth’s consultation serves as another example of how acknowledging differing perspectives, along with those that are similar, strengthens the interaction. As mentioned earlier, this consultation revolved around a topic with which the writer had more academic and lived experience: disability. Kathryn was writing a book review on three books about people with disabilities. She and Beth were in different cohorts of the UofL rhetoric and composition PhD program and so knew each other to a certain degree. As expressed in our interview, Beth was clearly aware of the differences between her and Kathryn with regard to disability: “[Kathryn] definitely has personal,
lived, embodied experience in the topic that she’s dealing with, and I don’t.”

Meanwhile, Kathryn had selected Beth as a consultant in part because of a similarity: Beth had some knowledge, or at least interest, in the field of disability studies. To Kathryn, this meant that “[Beth will] probably get where I’m coming from.” This consultation was built of similarity and difference from the start.

And throughout the consultation, both similarity and difference allowed Beth help Kathryn revise her writing to better address a more general rhetoric and composition audience that was unfamiliar with disability studies. Beth differed from Kathryn in that she was less familiar with the medical jargon used by Kathryn and the authors to discuss disability. Beth was similar to Kathryn in that she was also familiar with the rhetoric and composition audience. This difference and similarity enabled Beth to differentiate between the terminology typical to a rhetoric and composition audience and the terminology less familiar to that audience. Both Beth and Kathryn were aware of such similarities and differences, which they treated as resources that “inform and challenge one another” (Ratcliffe, Rhetorical 96).

Willingness

Attention to negative terms and an acknowledgment that multiple perspectives can be “right” are two concrete steps that we can take toward openness and listening. As helpful as these steps might be, they—along with openness and listening overall—require something even more basic and much more fundamental: willingness. Without

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34 Kathryn did not bring up this difference between her and Beth in our interview, but I believe that this is a difference she likely took for granted because of her foreknowledge of Beth and the infrequency with which she had encountered writing center consultants with experience with disability.
willingness, we cannot listen. More, willingness is listening’s emotional core.

Willingness is at the heart of—is the heart of—listening.

I had not really thought about willingness until Josh brought it up in our interview. In his explanation of listening, Josh returned again and again to this concept, from which he found openness difficult to extract. To listen, he explained, we must be willing to see the other person as an individual, to try to understand them, to “be present” and to pay attention. We must be willing to venture into the unfamiliar and uncomfortable. We cannot be open without being willing to be open.

Josh also pointed out that willingness is a choice to be open not only to others but also for others. Listeners need to be willing to be open to what the other is bringing and also to be willing to be open to sharing what they themselves bring. Josh explained this as “be[ing] open to letting them know you as well, . . . to offer[ing] something sometimes, too.” This echoes Haswell and Haswell’s conception of hospitality, where we must emerge from ourselves in order to welcome the other person. Such openness is important on the writer side as well. For example, when Beth spoke with me about how open Kathryn was during their consultation and how that helped facilitate a good consultation, she referenced Kathryn’s willingness to share “her personal relation to her topic.”

This willingness to share oneself means being open to sharing to the extent that it strengthens the relationship or the consultation. It is not forcing ourselves to share a random story or to pretend that we had a similar experience. It should be the opposite: a form of honesty. It means being open to the same risks that writers take when sharing their writing or their struggles or their successes. For example, Christopher described a past consultation when a writer brought in an essay about an extremely personal,
emotional moment: the time when his mentor was killed. Christopher chose to give the
writer control of the conversation, to let the writer choose what to share and when to
move on. Christopher explained, “Had I attempted to redirect or cut him off or really add
my own perspective or experiences, it would have been a breach of care and respect.”
Christopher might have been willing to share something of his self, to take the risk that
sharing involves, but he decided that this was not appropriate given the context.

Abigail’s discussion of intent adds a layer to this concept of willingness. To her,
listening is “hearing and knowing a person, and comprehending and having the intention
of either taking it in and revising your understanding of something or of a person, or it’s
taking it in with the intention of forming a response.” Intent is not about success or
failure, about reaching an end result, but rather about being willing to try.

Ratcliffe also briefly brings up willingness as essential to listening (Rhetorical).
She presents understanding and standing under as a way toward not solution but
possibility, toward the potential of increasing the limits of our understanding. Drawing on
Alice Rayner, Ratcliffe argues that “the agency for moving and re-moving such limits
involves a ‘capacity’ and ‘willingness’ . . . We all possess that capacity; what must be
supplied is the willingness” (29-30). And in the referenced article, Rayner mentions both
willingness and intentionality when discussing a theater audience’s listening obligations.
Both scholars and my participants, then, note how we cannot be open or listen without
willingness.

Listening can be thought of as active, intentional, directed openness, with
willingness at its core. We must be willing to disrupt our preconceptions. Turning toward
others (Floyd) is a choice that we must be willing to make. Trying to understand, holding
ourselves accountable, identifying with similarities and differences, and considering context (Ratcliffe) require willingness, as do accepting alterity and our own limitations, resisting and renouncing mastery (Lipari). We must be willing to increase self-awareness, to contract ourselves to make room for others.

Willingness is a stance, as listening and openness are stances. Drawing on Sara Ahmed, Jennifer Rowsell describes stance as a “way of turning to the world . . . that is deliberate, rhetorical, and expressive” (628). A stance is not an end result, but a state of being, a way of approaching the world. Lipari tells us, “[W]hen you are listening, really listening as opposed to hearing or interpreting, you are that listening, such that listening constitutes the very being of your being” (Listening 102). It is an “ontological experience” (“Listening” 359). It is in the progressive tense.

And Rowsell explains that stances are not taken but made. They result from constant decisions. We are always building the ways that we “turn to the world” (Rowsell 636). Stances may feel automatic, out of our hands, but, really, they are a choice. We must choose openness, choose listening. To do that, we must first choose to be willing to try.

And this is not easy: the openness of listening is a challenge in multiple senses of the word. It is “a difficult or demanding task, esp[ecially] one seen as a test of one’s abilities or character” (“challenge, n.”). Being open draws on our inner strength. Listening also asks us “[t]o call in question” (“challenge, v.”) what we know and believe. Finally, to be open is to actively work toward the difficult, “[t]o summon . . . to a contest or any trial of daring or skill” (“challenge, v.”). Being open is the willingness to challenge ourselves.
Openness and lack of certainty entail risk (Boquet, *Noise* 77-81), and so does change. In discussion of student transformation, Bronwyn T. Williams explains that this transformation “takes time and deep, significant, often painful, change. It also means turning away from the previous identity” (*Literacy* 162). More, openness can conflict with the instincts of those of us in Western academia, in which mastery and control—antitheses of openness—are highly valued (Stenberg; Sullivan).\textsuperscript{35} As Beth stated, “we . . . read and write in order to respond and not in order to be changed, and that’s the best part of listening, when you’re listening in order to have your mind changed by what was said . . .” To take on the challenge of openness is to face risk and, for some, to resist instinct.

But, as Grimm argues, “we need to develop a willingness to study that which makes us uncomfortable” (*Good* 115). We need to work toward the humility and vulnerability that such risks entail (Grimm 79; Lipari, *Listening* 221; Ratcliffe, *Rhetorical* 73). Writing centers therefore must work to support and nurture willingness, to teach and promote a stance of listening on the part of the consultants. They must create and help consultants create environments that promote listening on the part of the writers. By listening, consultants and writers work toward an openness to alterity and to change, just as openness to alterity and to change facilitate listening. Support of listening, openness, willingness helps disrupt preconceptions so that writers and consultants can better see, hear, and acknowledge each other as individuals and therefore better work together.

\textsuperscript{35} And even outside of academia, Western culture values winning. In Wayne C. Booth’s view, people in the United States are “[t]rained not to listen but to shout” (90), and their “goal in life is to triumph” (96). Lipari similarly points out that in Western society, “even when listening is addressed . . . , it is done primarily with the aim of conquest and control” (*Listening* 2).
CHAPTER IV: POWER

Power is a major concern for writing centers. Many centers pride themselves on being safe spaces where the distances between tiers in the traditional academic hierarchy are decreased, where writers and consultants work together. Consultations revolve around the writers, whom consultants work to meet where they are. Writing center scholars and practitioners often envision the writing center as a disruptive force in the university, or at least develop writing centers with some degree of that goal in mind (Carino).

Writing center scholarship has addressed power extensively. Much of this literature investigates how the roles of consultant and writer affect power balance within consultations, frequently with regard to the nondirective tutoring approach (Bruffee; Carino; Clark, “A Critique”; Gillam et al.; Harris, “Collaboration”; Lunsford; Shamoon and Burns; Trimbur). These discussions are often tied to collaboration, a major writing center value (Behm; Bruffee; Eodice; Harris, “Collaboration”; Harris, “SLATE”; Lunsford and Ede; Young). Collaboration is often defined in terms of equal authority and sometimes in terms of shared power (Cardeñas; Carino; Lunsford; Moore; Rollins et al.; Trimbur), but I will soon redefine it as working together toward a common goal.

Other writing center scholarship, often more recent, investigates connections between identity and power in the writing center, through lenses like class (Denny and Towle; Denny et al.; Scott et al.), disability (Babcock and Daniels), dialect (Greenfield and Rowan; Scott et al.), non-native and multilingual English speakers (Bruce and Rafoth; Eckstein; Rafoth; Ronesi), place (Scott et al.), postcolonialism (Bawarshi and
Pelkowski; García, “Unmaking”), queer theory (Denny, *Facing*; Denny, “Queering”), and race (García; Greenfield and Rowan; Lockett).

Despite this attention to power, there is still the danger that writing center professionals—who tend to be comfortable within academia, earning good grades and skillfully navigating the institution—can unknowingly view the academic status quo, including its systems of power and privilege, as natural. But many writers coming to the writing center are those least familiar with academia and its systems. Consultants, with their internalized perception of the academic status quo, might end up helping these writers learn how to meet that status quo rather than to grow their awareness of power, which would strengthen their ability to make informed choices.

This danger is only made more likely given writing centers’ idealization of power balance. Even as writing centers attend to power, their passion for power balance and their belief that such balance is possible and is facilitated by tried and true methods (particularly the nondirective approach) can entice them into overlooking the inevitability of power imbalance. Peter Carino argues that writing centers must acknowledge that no matter how strongly they wish to present as nonhierarchical, they still exist within a hierarchical institution, and that hierarchy will always penetrate consultations. In order to truly think about power in consultations and to “help[] students achieve their own authority as writers in a power laden environment such as the university” (113), Carino writes, writing centers must recognize the inevitability of hierarchy. Otherwise, the very idea of writing centers as welcoming, nurturing, comfortable, and collaborative could perpetuate the status quo that writing centers seek to complicate (e.g., Geller et al.; Grimm, *Good*).
Attention to power balance in consultations requires further attention to individual difference, while also considering the larger societal context of these differences. It requires awareness that writers and consultants identify differently and that these identifications and their intersections (and presentations) affect power differently.

This is where listening comes in. Listening requires and facilitates an attention to power. Indeed, part of the openness described in the previous chapter is awareness of the positioning of self and other in culture, time, privilege, and webs of power. Krista Ratcliffe argues that attention to power is essential to listening, as exemplified by one of her four moves of rhetorical listening: “Proceeding within an accountability logic” (Rhetorical 31). She writes that we are all “culturally implicated in effects of the past (via our resulting privileges and/or their lack) and, thus, accountable for what we do about situations now, even if we are not responsible for their origins” (32). To listen, we must be aware of our privileges (and lack thereof) and keep them in mind when we act. We must “recognize [our] interdependency as well as [our] movements among different insider and outsider cultural positions” (73). This involves constantly questioning ourselves, the world, what we might automatically consider “natural.” Similarly, one of Nancy C. Cornwell and Mark P. Orbe’s four elements of dialogic listening is power consciousness, “listening with an ear to the position(s) of privilege” (90). And David Beard argues that listening “has immense power to locate the subject within the structures of power and a web of social relations” (10). (An example is located in this chapter’s Try It at Home section.) Listening thus facilitates an awareness of how people and power are functioning in the current context.
Nancy Maloney Grimm’s suggestion on how to attend to power balance and individual differences in the writing center directly connects to listening (Good). Drawing on political science professor and psychotherapist Jane Flax, Grimm promotes the need for transitional spaces “where we deal with the loss of omnipotence, with the pressures of the outer world, and with the conflicts of the inner world” (75). Flax details four desirable characteristics of the transitional space: reconciliation, reciprocity, recognition, and judgment. Reconciliation involves “a new multiple unity” in which differences are still acknowledged (Flax qtd. in Grimm 75). Under reciprocity, we function within “a continuous though imprecisely defined sharing of authority and mutuality of decision” (Flax qtd. in Grimm 76). Recognition entails “acknowledging the legitimacy of others” (Flax qtd. in Grimm 77), accepting similarities and differences. Finally, judgment involves moving between multiple points of view, multiple realities, in the process of forming opinions and understanding. These transitional spaces are “part of the lifelong process of reconciling self and other” (75).

Listening entails those four characteristics. It provides a lens that takes identity into account—that, indeed, relies on identity and the ensuing differences—which provides a method for interrogating power. As discussed in the previous chapter, to listen is to relinquish (perceived) mastery and to make room for the other person, cocreating a space between (Lipari, Listening; Lipari, “Listening, Thinking”; Ratcliffe, Rhetorical). Like Flax’s reconciliation, listening calls for togetherness with an acceptance of differences: a “unity without uniformity” (Haswell and Haswell 55). As with reciprocity, to listen is to renounce control, to make room for the other, to create together. Listening also involves recognition, requiring an openness to alterity and change, with attention to
both similarities and differences. And, like judgment, listening requires acknowledging that there are more perspectives than our own and that we should try for understanding while also knowing that we can never fully understand.

To listen is not to deny power dynamics but to negotiate them. To listen is to increase awareness of self and take a stance of active openness to the other person. This cannot be done by ignoring power differences. Quite the opposite, listening and openness necessitate attention to the individual and the context, including power. Openness does not necessarily change the power dynamic, but it can change how we understand, navigate, and use that power.

Listening’s connection with power in the context of the writing center has been addressed by Grimm, Julie A. Bokser, and Romeo García. Grimm’s presentation of listening corresponds with Lisbeth Lipari’s and Ratcliffe’s views that a space is created when we take a step back to give room to the other person and our differences. This involves renouncing the idea that we can know everything and that we are the norm (Good). Bokser discusses how common understandings of literacy and academia can make writers feel like they do not belong, and how listening can help consultants question their own feelings of belonging and in this way attend to power relations. More recently, García recommends using listening to address race and power in the writing center, to decolonialize the writing center and, in his words, “nuance what it means to talk about race and difference(s)” (“Unmaking” 52). This and other writing center listening scholarship (J. Anderson; Anglesey and McBride; Costello) draw almost exclusively on rhetorical listening, and when rhetorical listening is referenced, it is

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36 Exceptions include Grimm, who develops the concept of authentic listening in part based on philosophy and psychoanalysis scholar Gemma Corradi Fiumara’s The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of
often done so somewhat abstractly rather than with attention to its specifics. And Kathryn Valentine finds in her analysis of consultant guidebooks’ presentations of listening that these books often connect power, authority, and identity with listening, but these connections are oversimplified.

To further the conversation carried on by Bokser, García (“Unmaking”), Grimm (Good), and others, and to address Valentine’s concerns, I take a wider and deeper dive into how listening connects to power. This dive illuminates two faulty presuppositions about collaboration that writing center conversations on power have not addressed. As will be further discussed, collaboration is often defined in terms of power and therefore is an important aspect of these conversations of power. But even as these conversations complicate views on power balance, they falsely presuppose that collaboration requires power balance and that collaboration requires the nondirective approach. Listening theory shows that these presuppositions are incorrect.

This chapter is organized around those two presuppositions, and exploration of each demonstrates how listening connects to power in the writing center. First, I go into greater detail about power differentials and connect this to the assumption that collaboration requires an equal balance of power. I explain collaboration in the process. I then show how listening theory debunks that assumption, and how listening facilitates collaboration within uneven power dynamics. Next, I explore power with regard to the directive and nondirective tutoring approaches, addressing the assumption that nondirective tutoring facilitates collaboration, while directive tutoring precludes it. This leads to a discussion of how listening allows for collaboration in directive tutoring.

Listening (which was a source for both Lipari and Ratcliffe). Also, some scholars addressing listening’s connection with emotion (Cuny et al.; McBride; Reit; Taylor) draw on psychologists’ theories of listening.
Finally, I exemplify one way of listening with an ear toward power. A detailed list of the codes used in this chapter and an overview of code development can be found in Appendix B, under Listening and Power.

**Presupposition: Collaboration Requires Power Balance**

I have found that power is not always clearly defined in writing center literature and that power and authority are sometimes conflated. For the sake of this dissertation, power means the ability to influence someone or something else, even if met with resistance (Alsobaie; “power”; Werder). Carmen Werder, drawing on political linguist David Bell, explains that power derives from “the ownership of some external property or resource” (10). Authority is the right to power (Alsobaie; “authority”), which derives from role (Spigelman 38; Werder) and expertise (Buzzelli and Johnston 875; Carino 106). In Mohammed Fahad Alsobaie’s words, authority is the “legitimizing of the power, essentially the why one part should follow the other” (155). Though clearly related, power and authority are not correlated—they vary independently of each other. Each of us can have gradations of both power and authority, neither power nor authority, power without authority, or authority without power.

Power balance and authority balance have been concerns in the writing center for decades. Many have argued that power and authority are inherently imbalanced between consultants and writers. After all, consultants are chosen, at least in part, for their success in academia: their skill as learners, their good grades, and their ability to be the students that the institution wants them to be. Yet these very strengths, along with consultants’ position in the writing center, can divide them from writers who are supposedly their
peers (e.g., Bitzel; Carino; Gillam et al.; Harris, “Collaboration”; Trimbur 23). There are thus imbalances from the start.

This is exemplified by the ostensible paradox in the title peer tutor. On the one hand, peer denotes another of equal standing, but, on the other, tutor suggests power and knowledge differentials. Some argue that consultants feel a pull in both directions (Gillam et al.; Trimbur), and others conceptualize the consultant as a hybrid on a spectrum between the two roles (Harris, “Collaboration”; Palmeri) or a hybrid that “simultaneously inhabit both the peer and tutor realms” (Moore). Further, as Irene L. Clark and Dave Healy point out, though the peer tutor title is frequently used, the peer aspect is less applicable in some contexts than others. For example, consultants may be in a higher professional role (such as graduate students and even professors) than the professors, and they may be older (Clark and Healy 39). This applies to the UofL University Writing Center, where all consultants are graduate students, earning their master’s degree or their doctorate.

Of major concern to writing center scholars and practitioners is that such imbalances make collaboration difficult or impossible, and they rightfully and importantly work to even out these dynamics. But working toward a more equal balance of power or of authority is a slow and perhaps never-ending journey that requires change in the writing center, the institution, and society. Moreover, given the intersections of individual difference, a total balance of power or authority between a consultant and writer is not possible. It is therefore essential to consider collaboration in the presence of power imbalance.

37 Though the UofL University Writing Center uses consultant rather than peer tutor, the discussions of power that stem from the latter title are still relevant.
In contrast to the writing center presupposition that power imbalance precludes collaboration, listening shows that collaboration in the face of imbalance is possible and—since complete power balance is unachievable—is in fact the only way to collaborate. Listening also demonstrates how to navigate such imbalances.

**Collaboration and Power Balance**

In writing center scholarship, collaboration is often conceptualized in terms of authority and power. With the advent of the social constructionist movement, there was a shift to conceptualizing knowledge as socially constructed, rather than exterior or interior, and viewing writing as collaboration, always taking place in a larger social context (Bruffee; Grimm; Lunsford; Shamoon and Burns 137). Andrea A. Lunsford famously likens this type of writing center to a parlor, where consultants’ job is to work with writers to create knowledge rather than unearth it, and where control lies with the group rather than the individual writer or consultant (7-9).

Therefore, collaboration is often explicitly defined in terms of authority. It is assumed that collaboration requires a nonhierarchical environment, i.e., a consultation in which authority is shared, often equally (Cardeñas; Carino; Lunsford; Rollins et al.; Trimbur). Under this definition, there cannot be collaboration without balance of authority. For example, Lisa S. Ede and Lunsford directly contrast dialogic collaboration—which they consider real collaboration—with what they term *hierarchical collaboration*, suggesting that collaboration is (more) nonhierarchical.\(^{38}\) And Clark and

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\(^{38}\) Ede and Lunsford’s hierarchical collaboration is more than just a hierarchical structure—it is hierarchy in the extreme. Under this form of “collaboration,” those in power make the decisions, wielding their power over the other members of the group. It is clear that such use of power would by definition inhibit collaboration. Ede and Lunsford are equating a hierarchical structure with misuse of that structure. The former does not have to inhibit collaboration, while the latter does.
Healy argue that “[t]rue collaboration occurs between colleagues who are both members of the same discourse community,” in comparison to attempted collaboration in the writing center (39). The latter collaboration, according to Clark and Healy, is destined to fail because the writer often “is not a full-fledged member of the academic discourse community” (39). In other words, there cannot be successful collaboration between writer and consultant because they have different levels of authority.

Among scholars and my participants, there is a great desire to work toward an equal balance of authority in writing center consultations. But is it really possible to have equal balance of authority in any one consultation? Returning to Clark and Healy, can there ever be a balance even between colleagues? With faculty members, for example, there is always some level of hierarchy, implicit or explicit (based, for example, on faculty ranking level, tenure, time spent at institution, and fit in the department). Even if two faculty members have the same exact job title and description—the same role—they will not have the same level of authority in an interaction. In Grimm’s words, “our relationships are always asymmetrical” (Good 112). The reality is that there will always be some level of imbalance.39

The typical assumed dynamic places the authority with the consultants. Authority certainly can derive from consultants’ role and success in academia. As Grimm argues, “the students who walk into a room institutionally labeled ‘Writing Center’ automatically construct the tutors sitting inside the room as having institutional authority” (Good 113). And authority can also emerge from consultants’ insider knowledge of various facets of academia, such as rhetorical features of academic discourse (Blau et al. 26; Shamoon and

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39 Though the power balance within an individual consultation will never be equal, consultations often have a more balanced power dynamic than classrooms, as Christopher, a consultant participant, pointed out.
Burns 146). One of my writer participants, LaShondra, told me that when she first started coming to the Writing Center, “I felt like I put a lot of weight on [the fact that] because they were the consultant that they would know.” And Christopher, a consultant, demonstrated the type of authority that derives from insider knowledge in his consultation with Vanessa. Vanessa was an undergraduate English major, and she mentioned two English professors in connection with her writing. As an English doctoral student, Christopher knew both professors, and he referred to them by their first names before realizing this and reverting back to using their titles and last names.

However, authority differentials are more complex than positioning the consultant with authority versus the writer without authority. There are many different types of roles and expertise, and the higher level of authority does not necessarily reside with the consultant. For example, an undergraduate consultant might work with a PhD candidate who is writing their dissertation. The writer’s specialized, advanced knowledge of their topic would increase their authority. Within my study, Beth, a consultant, spoke to this when describing her consultation with Kathryn. Beth and Kathryn were in the same PhD program, with Kathryn two years ahead. There were of course many factors at play in their consultation, but Beth was well aware of the authority that came from Kathryn’s academic experience. “I think her being more advanced than me in the program,” Beth said, “is a great way of taking away this feeling of any kind of . . . power differential. So, on one hand, I’m giving her advice about the paper, but on the other hand, I think she knows she’s teaching me too.”

Even as Beth had authority inherent to her position as

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40 Beth referred here to power as opposed to authority, but, as stated earlier, I find that these are often conflated (and I certainly conflated the two before writing about them more closely). Also, though Beth felt that there was power (authority) balance in the consultation, I would interpret this as a decrease in, but not elimination of, a differential.
consultant, Kathryn had authority that derived from her academic experience. This scenario exemplifies how there will always be an authority differential between two people due to endless differences between them.

Though collaboration is most frequently defined based on authority, it is also conceptualized in terms of power. Leanne Michelle Moore, for example, describes collaboration as occurring “between two people who share power.” But, just as with authority, the power dynamic is not so simple. In Michel Foucault’s words, “Power is everywhere. . . . [I]t is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another” (93). On the level of the individual, intersectionality makes equal power impossible. In any particular consultation, there will always be differences between that consultant and that writer, and the intersectionalities of race, gender, and other differences alter power balance.

This means that we cannot definitively state that one person in a consultation has more authority or power than the other. It is impossible to quantify and compare given the many sources of authority and power. How would we determine whether Beth, with her role as consultant, or Kathryn, with her academic experience, had more power or authority, particularly given the many other factors in play? Clark and Healy claim equality between colleagues, but the differences between those colleagues makes calculating their levels of power or authority impossible.

Further, authority and power are fluid. They change as roles, knowledge, and identity change, and as larger social contexts change. Each person is always in flux, shifting in knowledge, identity, and experience. As Stephanie L. Kerschbaum explains, “individuals are never coincident even with themselves” (Toward 69). And even those
aspects of identity that do not change (e.g., skin color) do vary in meaning based on context (65). With these changes come changes in authority and power. And roles may also switch between the two people in the consultation. As Richard H. Haswell and Janis Haswell discuss in the context of hospitality, the person who is the host may later become the guest.41 Given the omnipresence, variety, and fluidity of individual differences and contexts, it is not possible to have equal authority or power in a particular consultation or to determine which person has “more.”

This is not to argue that those who push for equal authority or “empowerment between equals” (Moore)42 are wasting their time, but rather that there is more that needs to be addressed. These scholars speak to imbalances between generalized groups (all writers and all consultants), balances that ideally can be changed in the long term by addressing major social power structures. As Elizabeth H. Boquet writes, “Life in the writing center thrives on such asymmetry, and on the hope that we can eventually achieve some sort of symmetry, if not harmony” (“Intellectual” 29). But, here, I address a different concern: the dynamic between individuals (this writer, this consultant). As Kerschbaum explains, working with difference calls for “the development of pedagogical resources that attend simultaneously to the broad categories that shape our perception of the world and to the highly individual encounters we experience on a daily basis” (Toward 6). I work to address the latter.

41 And Haswell and Haswell argue that this switching of roles must occur for the situation to be considered hospitable. If the host remains host, they risk nothing, and they are not open to the alterity of the other or to change.

42 Moore also talks about consultant and writer “creat[ing] both the knowledge and the power together,” which is more nuanced than the aim of equal power. Still, this does not take the inevitable power differential into account.
If there are authority and power differentials in each consultation, then these differentials must be acknowledged. Consultants should not enter consultations assuming the possibility of equality, and the goal for an individual session should not be power balance. This assumption and this goal elide individual differences and can promote preconceptions, prohibit self-transformation, and encourage inauthenticity (Grimm, Good). Confidence in the possibility of a symmetrical relationship can lead to consultant overconfidence in their understanding of the writer. As Grimm writes about this situation, “Confident that they can reverse perspectives, [consultants] see themselves reflected in another person, rather than perceive how the other sees them and the literacy practices of the institution” (112). In these cases, the consultant sees themselves in the writer instead of seeing the writer themselves. In doing so, consultants perceive what they want to perceive, or what they automatically perceive—which is what they already know, or think that they know. They see an extension of themselves rather than something new. This inhibits the possibility of change: how can we change if our perspectives remain the same? Instead, writers, consultants, and other writing center professionals need to be aware of the consistent presence, inextricable components, and shifting nature of authority and power differentials and to take this into account during consultations.

Listening helps with exactly that. Listening facilitates the awareness of self and other that is crucial for noticing and navigating authority and power differentials. Further, listening theory and my data show that these differentials do not preclude collaboration. After all, if they did, collaboration would never be possible. Finally, listening can be used to negotiate imbalance to facilitate collaboration.

43 In this argument, Grimm assumes that, overall, consultants are “members of the dominant group” (Good 111).
As I go on to discuss power and authority in relation to listening, I will often use power as an umbrella term to cover both power and the right to power. Though power and authority derive from different sources, both revolve around the concept of power, both are fluid and not operationalizable, a balance of each is impossible but also often assumed necessary for collaboration, and both are affected and in part explained by listening.

**Power Imbalance and Listening**

Listening is itself collaboration. Self and other cocreate the space between and the meaning within it. This occurs regardless of—and is, in fact, inseparable from—individual differences, including differences in power. After explaining this in greater detail, I will show that dialogue and agency are two ways of exemplifying and facilitating collaboration within power imbalance.

Given my argument that collaboration does not require power balance, I must explain collaboration in different terms. Defining collaboration in terms of power in this context would be begging the question; the connection between the two cannot be explored if one is defined in terms of the other. The argument presupposes the premise: that without power balance, there can be no collaboration. This circular reasoning masks the fact that collaboration can actually be separated from power balance.

Alternative, or supplementary, conceptualizations of collaboration are defined in terms of responsibility and of goals rather than of power. These conceptualizations revolve around concepts like co-investment, cocreation and co-negotiation, give and take, and working toward a common goal, and they are expressed with terms like communal, common, and collectively (Behm 6; Bruffee 12; Gillam et al. 162; Hall 19; MacLennon
My participants, too, explained collaboration with regard to sharing responsibility, generally without overt mention of power or authority. To many of my participants, collaboration is a togetherness. Consultant Liz, for example, described it as a “partnership” and as “shared labor.” Christopher explained collaboration as a negotiation in which writer and consultant are “piecing things together together.” For Quaid, collaboration meant that he and the writer “fed off of each other.” David, a writer, described collaboration as both writer and consultant putting in work in order to reach the same goal. In this dissertation, I conceptualize collaboration as working together toward a common goal.

Listening theory supports this redefining of collaboration by showing that to listen is to collaborate (Purdy et al. 13), regardless of power dynamic. Along these lines, a few writing center scholars argue that listening promotes collaborative learning (Fallon 192; Morris 8; Santa 2), and listening theory establishes this connection, along with the connection between listening and collaboration overall. Christopher described listening as such, referring to it as a “two-way street.” As discussed in the previous chapter, listening involves the cocreation of a space with the other person, a space in which meaning is similarly cocreated. The very creation of these places is an act of collaboration.

These are places, built by self and other, that are unmistakably unfamiliar but also constructed of differences, spaces that “belong[] to no one” (Trinh qtd. in Ratcliffe, Rhetorical 93). As Floyd writes about dialogic communication, it involves “separate

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44 For David, this goal was “to improve the written material.”
45 This also encompasses the idea of sharing responsibility because that is necessary for writer and consultant to together work toward a goal.
people seeking to come together without denying their separateness” (qtd. in Floyd 134). 46

Similarly, within these spaces, meaning is constructed not from self or other but from self and other. Drawing on Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, Lipari argues that this is meaning that can only come from cocreation, that neither person would otherwise create on their own (Listening 131). Listening helps to birth new thoughts, serving “as a form of midwifery” (199), and to build something “greater than the sum of the interlocutors” (161). Ratcliffe also conceptualizes listening as generative, describing it as facilitating “interpretive invention, . . . a way of making meaning via language via others” (Rhetorical 31). In these spaces, meaning making is a collaborative process.

Dialogic listening, too, highlights listening’s collaborative and co-constructive nature. John Stewart et al. envision dialogic listening using the metaphor of the potter’s wheel. Each interlocutor has their hand on the clay, each shaping it together. No one person is in control of the meaning that emerges (Stewart et al. 235-37). And for Valeria Kinloch and Timothy San Pedro, dialogic communication “co-creates an area of trust between speakers” (30). It is in this “space between” (29) that joint inquiry occurs, that meaning is formed. Like Lipari, Kinloch and San Pedro argue that in this space, “we were able to construct that which we might not have had the confidence to build alone” (40). Supportive dialogic communication allows for the co-construction of what would otherwise not be built.

46 In listing aspects of dialogic listening, Floyd includes a “spirit of mutual equality,” but his explanation shows that this does not mean that all are equal, but rather that all have equal rights to “communicate freely and openly” (“Listening” 131).
This meaning that could not be constructed separately is therefore created because, not in spite, of differences, which include the power differentials that differences entail. As Grimm says about Flax’s characteristic of reciprocity, it “does not require equality of power, only resistance to domination” (Good 76). And, like Mary Louise Pratt’s contact zones, these spaces between are made “often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt 34), but they can still be spaces of collaboration (37). Collaboration does not require symmetry in roles, background, identification, or power, and, indeed, is fueled by such differences.

In the writing center, these differences are resources that both writers and consultants bring. For example, Christopher explained that he contributed the ability to help writers translate their ideas to the page, and writers contributed the ideas. Liz described how she “had a lot to offer” for “genre analysis and concept development,” and John, the writer she worked with, “brought a lot to the table, too.” There is great benefit in bringing different perspectives, knowledge, and skills to the consultation. As Liz said about her and John’s mutual contributions, “[I]t was definitely shared labor. It was collaboration. And that’s the best.”

Another example of the benefits of differences in background and power can be demonstrated by returning to the moment in Vanessa and Christopher’s consultation when Christopher referenced his familiarity with two of Vanessa’s English professors. I presented this as an example of a source of consultants’ power, and from my perspective as observer, this was a clear demonstration of power (even though, in my interpretation, it was not intended as such). But, notably, Vanessa brought up this moment in our interview as a positive point in the consultation. In addition to building rapport, she
explained, it helped her learn more about the expectations and preferences of one of these professors. Vanessa said, “[He] referred to my professor as Jane, even though I called her Dr. Morrison. I mean, she’s really cool. And he was just like, ‘I’m sure Jane would be fine with this,’ and I was like, ‘Okay,’ so.” This also helped her feel less stressed about that assignment.

Even as I agree that listening explains and allows for collaboration regardless of power dynamic, I must note that my participants presented listening differently. We agreed about the connection between listening and power, but because they were concerned with the journey toward power balance within an individual consultation, both writers and consultants argued that the consultant’s listening to the writer takes steps toward balancing the power dynamic. John referred to listening in the writing center as “democratic,” which he explained as, “Equal participants. As opposed to, let’s say, parent-child or teacher-student.” Christopher argued that listening “sidesteps some hierarchical power stuff that might interfere with a collegial position.” Through listening, he said, “you’re no longer bestowing knowledge from behind the secret gates but helping a colleague with their work.” Similarly, Katie held concerns that the writer would “think that I think I’m higher up than them or better than them,” and—drawing this conclusion in part from her own experiences as a student—she found that listening helps consultant and writer become closer to peers.  

47 Of course, Christopher could have been wrong about that professor’s expectations and preferences. If Vanessa took his advice and did poorly on the assignment, it could be argued that she made this choice because of Christopher’s presumed inside knowledge (power), and that therefore the power differential had a negative effect. This, however, would not be an issue of collaboration because even if Christopher had made a mistake, he and Vanessa were still working together.  

48 Dr. Jane Morrison is a pseudonym.  

49 These connections between listening and power balance seem to assume that consultants have more power within consultations than writers.
This adherence to the goal of power balance only goes to show the importance of this research. Because there will always be a power differential on the level of the individual, we must learn how to navigate it. Without explicit discussion, consultants will likely default to attempts at building symmetrical relationships. Research and discussion of listening, though, shows that a power differential on the level of the individual does not have to obstruct collaboration and can even facilitate it. Two specific ways that listening facilitates writer and consultant collaboration are by fostering dialogue and by fostering agency.

Dialogue

Listening is essential for dialogue (Booth xi-xii; Feibush; Grimm, Good 53; Lipari, Listening; Middleton; Morris 8; Sullivan), which, in turn, contributes to collaboration. Here, I draw on my participants and on listening scholarship to show how listening, dialogue, and power relate.

Dialogue is a major writing center value. Lunsford and Ede find that dialogic interaction is the trait most inherent to writing centers (16), and Stephen North, too, argues that the “essence of the writing center method, then, is this talking” (443). In his seminal chapter “Peer Tutoring and the ‘Conversation of Mankind,’” Kenneth A. Bruffee similarly posits conversation as central to the writing center (and to writing and thought). And Harris argues that listening to writers during individual writing consultations shows them that consultations really are dialogic, “that [writers] can talk while we listen, that we’ll listen closely to what they say, and that they can set the agenda for what we listen to” (Teaching 56).
Many of my participants suggested that listening is inextricable from conversation, arguing that listening is important for conversation, that conversation facilitates listening, and that conversation demonstrates listening. First, consultants Christopher and Katie held that listening encourages conversation. And Abigail, another consultant, firmly stated that “without listening, there is no conversation.” When I asked her to explain this further, she paused, unsure of how to expand on what felt to her like a truism—that “[listening] seems so inherent in what conversation is.” After a moment, she continued,

I mean, if someone’s talking to you, one, they expect you to be listening, and it’s disappointing or jarring if they feel like you’re not listening. And they feel like if you’re not listening, there’s no point in their talking, because in their talking, they’re wanting to communicate something to you . . . I don’t know if that’s conversation if you’re not paying attention to what the other person has said.

Abigail tied this to the word conversation itself. “I think the etymology of conversation is like turning towards,” she said, “and, I mean, we turn towards people to talk to them, but we also turn towards people when we listen to them.” As described in dialogic listening, listening involves a (metaphoric) turning toward the other person (Floyd). It is difficult to have a conversation when facing different directions.

In addition, some participants posited the converse: that conversation facilitates listening. Conversation, they argue, facilitates engagement and thus attention, which makes it easier to listen. David stated that his consultation was engaging, and he attributed this to his and Josh’s “back and forth” conversation, in which they were both active participants. Liz brought up a causal relationship between listening and conversation, specifying that her and Craig’s discussion was ongoing “due to listening to one another.” And Quaid similarly explained that “there’s a difference in attention when it’s just you talking to [the writer] versus there being a back-and-forth conversation.”
Because of this, Quaid said, listening was more difficult when there was not conversation. Abigail analyzed a common scenario in which there is likely not to be conversation: when the writer is reading their paper out loud. She told me that she found it more difficult to listen to the writer when they were reading out loud than when she and the writer were conversing. Reflecting on this, Abigail said, “I wonder if [this difficulty is] because [the writer is] not turned towards me. They’re not talking to me . . . so it’s not a conversation.”

Finally, some participants found that conversation demonstrated listening. David described his conversation with Josh as “back-and-forth, meaning that not just one of us do all the talking,” and stated that because of this conversation, he knew that Josh was listening to him. Similarly, Katie said that, in comparison to when someone suddenly moves the conversation in a different direction, “if someone’s participating in the dialogue, then I feel very confident they’re listening.”

Listening theory also ties together listening and conversation. Ratcliffe developed rhetorical listening to “negotiate troubled identifications in order to facilitate cross-cultural communication” (Rhetorical 17). And dialogic listening clearly ties listening to conversation—it’s in the name. After all, dialogic listening derived from Richard L. Johannesen’s conceptualization of dialogic conversation (Cornwell and Orbe; Floyd). Cornwell and Orbe even argue for “the central role that listening plays in inviting dialogue” (86).

With her holistic concept of interlistening, Lipari also views listening as an essential, inextricable aspect of communication (Listening). Like Bruffee and others, Lipari ties together speaking and thinking, holding that language not only conveys
thought but also shapes it. Unlike Bruffee, Lipari considers listening to be part of this gestalt. She argues that listening, speech, and thought are “an integrated plural, rather than a triplet of three seemingly independent processes” (157). These three processes occur simultaneously, each affecting the others (158). Lipari’s explanation of communication mirrors the heart of listening: “communication is a process of opening to the other, which holds the promise of making worlds” (203). And, to her, a lack of listening is the primary way of rupturing communication.

Some participants also connected listening and conversation with power, viewing the first two as ways of mitigating the effects of the latter. Again, they focused on the attempt to reach power balance, which I will soon complicate. The participants described conversation as a way of moving from the more hierarchical consultant-writer (or even teacher-student) dynamic to a dynamic closer to that of colleagues. Christopher worried about what he felt was a lack of conversation in his consultation with Vanessa, and he later described the resulting dynamic as “a little bit too teacher-student.” He believed that consultations should be a back and forth, a negotiation, a conversation, and he thought this consultation did not quite meet these standards, saying, “I had the floor, and she was essentially listening to me like . . . in a classroom.” Christopher tried to facilitate conversation but worried that he had not tried hard enough. From his perspective, the consultation became Vanessa nodding along as he presented ideas, rather than both of them exchanging ideas. This made the dynamic, in his words, “one-sided.”

50 Lipari does not address writing (Listening).
51 The atomistic view that listening, thinking, and speaking are separate processes resulted in part from the preferencing of communication via language. “If we move out of that paradigm of language-centered study,” Lipari argues, “and move toward a more communication-centered study, other possibilities and understandings arise” (Listening 158).
52 Lipari makes a point to explain that this interconnectedness is how things are; it occurs regardless of our intention or awareness (Listening).
Quaid exemplified the strong relationship between listening, conversation, and power by differentiating between consultations with a more “consultant-writer dynamic”—which he described as “mechanical”—and those with a more conversational tone. In fact, when I asked him to expand on what conversation meant to him, Quaid did so by contrasting conversation with the consultant-writer dynamic, thus associating conversation with a more equal balance of power. He was quite enthusiastic when describing these more conversational consultations, and he displayed this enthusiasm when discussing his consultation with Chris. In Quaid’s words, “[I]nstead of just sitting back and being like, ‘You tell me what I need,’” Chris’s approach was more, “I’m going to talk to you as a person, we’re going to be on the same level and we’re going to work through this.” Chris contributed to the conversation, instead of behaving passively and letting Quaid take control. Quaid described this as a “dynamic of him listening to what I had to say and me listening to what he had to say.” This led to a consultation the Quaid described as less like work than like “a conversation about work.” He argued that through listening and through conversation, he and Chris were able to make the power dynamic a little more balanced.54

Despite my participants’ focus on listening and conversation as ways of facilitating power balance, such balance is not possible. Instead, listening and conversation facilitate collaboration. This may feel like a more equal power balance because both writer and consultant are contributing to the consultation and working toward a common goal.

53 In his discussion of consultation dynamics, Quaid used “consultant-writer” interchangeably with “professional-writer.”
54 Quaid also particularly enjoyed this consultation with Chris, describing it as “one of those appointments where, while nothing out of the ordinary happens, you do feel like you actually had an impact.”
Agency

Collaboration cannot occur without contributions from both parties and the ability of both to make decisions. Though it might seem that an uneven power balance would restrict agency, and thus collaboration, that does not have to be the case. Listening can facilitate agency, which allows for collaboration within a power differential.

Before going further, I must define how I will be using the term *agency*. Understandings of agency have become fraught in rhetoric and composition and other fields with the rise of posthumanism and poststructuralism. Under these orientations, the individual is not autonomous, separate unto themselves, or unchanging. Rather, the self is a matter of interaction with changing, complex systems of knowledge, discourse, and power. Therefore, agency is not something located within the individual, something that can be possessed, as previously theorized, but rather a reaction to context. Under posthumanism and poststructuralism, then, it begins to appear that agency cannot exist: an individual cannot simply make a choice and have the expected result occur (Accardi; Cooper, “Rhetorical” 420; Williams 9-10).

Ratcliffe discusses personal agency, but not in great detail and not without running into the issues mentioned above (*Rhetorical*). Her conceptualization of personal agency does take context into account by holding that personal agency “competes with discursive agency and cultural agency” (75) and that it is in the gaps and conflicts between cultural discourses that agency can be asserted (52-53). However, as noted by queer scholars Gavin P. Johnson and Timothy Oleksiak, Ratcliffe also treats the individual as autonomous by referring to agency as something that one possesses, which

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55 According to Ratcliffe, the metonymic gap, formed by nonidentification, is one such space where agency can be invoked (*Rhetorical* 74-75).
problematically implies that agency is located in the individual. Johnson and Oleksiak also criticize Ratcliffe’s lack of attention to agency’s interactions with material conditions and the unearned privilege that these conditions may entail. In Johnson’s words, Ratcliffe does not account for how agency is “generated through the entanglement of matter, meaning, and bodies in spacetime” (125).

In this study, I draw from theory that approaches agency as the ability, or the perception of the ability, to make a choice within a larger context, as opposed to the guarantee that expected outcomes will result from that choice. Kerschbaum explains that agency is not a matter of achieved intention: even if effects are “not always purposeful or intended,” they still result, at least in part, from choice (“On Rhetorical” 64). Marilyn M. Cooper similarly argues that agency is based not in attaining specific results but “in individuals’ lived knowledge that their actions are their own” (“Rhetorical” 421). What makes an agent is their perception that a choice was their own.

In the words of Bronwyn Williams, agency is “the perception, drawn from experiences and dispositions, that the individual can, in a given social context, act, make a decision, and make meaning” (9). As Williams’s definition suggests, that the individual can make choices does not mean that they can make these choices autonomously. Cooper explains, “Agency is a matter of action; it involves doing things intentionally and voluntarily, but it is not a matter of causing whatever happened. [Agents] . . . are responsible for those actions, but they are not the sole cause of what happens”

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56 I find that Ratcliffe references privilege in the move of rhetorical listening “Proceeding within an accountability logic” (Rhetorical 31), in the rhetorical stances of recognition, critique and accountability (96-98), and in her tactic of listening pedagogically (157-9). However, I do understand Johnson’s and Oleksiak’s points that she does not spend enough time on privilege and that she should tie privilege more explicitly to material conditions.
57 And Ratcliffe does point out that agency is not determined by consequences (Rhetorical 75).
(“Rhetorical” 439). The above explanations of agency therefore do not contravene the posthumanist and poststructuralist concerns about agency being abstracted from context.

For this dissertation, agency is an individual’s perception that they can make their own choices within a certain context. These choices may be shaped and constrained by this context, but agents can choose within that constraint.

In writing center scholarship, Brooke Rollins et al. argue, as do I, that agency is one way to promote collaboration in the presence of power imbalance. Finding it essential to attend to the differentials in power and knowledge that many writing center relationships entail, Rollins et al. push for a model of collaboration that would facilitate writer agency. This model “would empower graduate student assistants by allowing them, when appropriate, to draw upon their expertise and authority while also empowering writers by allowing them to direct the session and to disagree more openly with the assistants who work with them” (135). I diverge here with some of Rollins et al.’s assumptions. They place the expertise with the consultants, or at least treat that as the more likely scenario, and they also place the authority with the consultant (which is likely due in part to their findings that even as consultants tried to be the opposite, they often became authoritarian). More, Rollins et al. use agency as a way of mitigating power differentials in the attempt “to equalize asymmetrical power relations between clients and assistants” (121), rather than as a way of navigating inevitable asymmetrical power relations.

Isabelle Thompson et al. also apply agency to power as a means of allowing for collaboration. They address my concern with Rollins et al.’s argument by proposing the concept of asymmetrical collaboration, which positions agency as a means toward
collaboration within a power differential rather than as a means toward equalizing this power differential. This is in direct response to Ede and Lunsford’s dialogic collaboration, which assumes a working together of equals. Thompson et al.’s asymmetrical collaboration acknowledges the power imbalance between consultant and writer but argues that this does not prohibit collaboration. The consultant has more power due to their “greater expertise in the subject matter or skill,” but, despite this power differential, collaboration can occur because the writer can “initiate the collaboration and set the agenda” (81). Though the collaborators are not “equal,” the consultation is still collaborative because both consultant and writer have a say in the process (97). Like Rollins et al., Thompson et al. assume that the consultant has greater power and expertise than the writer.

Here, I talk about how listening can help facilitate writer agency, which itself facilitates collaboration. Like Rollins et al. and Thompson et al., I focus on writer agency, rather than the agency of the consultant, but this is not due to an assumption on my part that writers have less agency or power than consultants. Rather, I focus on writing agency because that is what emerged from my data. It is important to note that this discussion of agency can certainly apply to the reverse: the consultant agency that arises from writers’ listening to consultants.

Listening is the contraction of self and forfeiture of control, which allows for agency. I now go into more detail on how listening can help consultants facilitate writer

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58 Interestingly, even as they argue that collaboration can occur across a power differential, Thompson et al. equate collaboration with lack of hierarchy. My interpretation is that they are using hierarchy like Ede and Lunsford did, with the assumption that a hierarchy entails abuse of that hierarchy. More, Thompson et al. find that writers were more satisfied with consultations with asymmetrical collaboration than consultations with Ede and Lunsford’s dialogic collaboration (97). I would argue, though, that the former is preferable because the latter is not possible and so is an illusion at best.
agency over the consultation itself and over their writing, and on how this connects to power.

Writer Agency Over Writing

First, listening can help facilitate writers’ agency over their writing, meaning that it can help writers feel that they can make their own decisions about their text. My participants were very aware cognizant of such feelings, though they expressed this in terms of ownership rather than agency. Katie, for example, recommended to consultants that “you need to listen to [writers] even if you might not necessarily agree with them and kind of focus more on making the session what the writer wants it to be and keeping the paper the writer’s and not changing it to yours.” Putting herself in the position of a writer, she also stated, “I wouldn’t want the consultant to just take ownership of my paper and just read everything and tell me everything that’s wrong.”

Based on Katie’s and other participants’ word choice and argument, I initially labeled this section and the corresponding code *ownership*. When trying to define ownership in this context, though, I realized that the concept of agency was more appropriate. With both writer and consultant contributing to the writing, attributing ownership becomes complex, and perhaps less meaningful. More significant, and accurate, than the writer owning their writing is the idea of the writer “owning” their decisions—in other words, agency. Ownership is also an oversimplification that does not consider factors like collaboration, assignment requirements, or academic norms (e.g., Cooper, “Really”; Ede and Lunsford; Latterrell). I will use the term *ownership* when the participants do so in order to best reflect their thoughts, but I consider their discussion of ownership to be one of agency.
Vanessa and Christopher’s and LaShondra and Abigail’s consultations particularly exemplify the importance of writer agency over writing and how the consultant’s listening to the writer can facilitate this agency. Vanessa came to the consultation for feedback on her two-page response to Chester Himes’s novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. Throughout their discussion of her response, Vanessa felt that Christopher gave her agency over her writing by treating her thoughts and opinions as “just as important as his.” This allowed her to engage with Christopher’s feedback but also to make the ultimate decisions about whether and how to use it. Vanessa explained that even as Christopher offered suggestions, he made sure that she was, in her words, “active . . . in the revision of the paper,” and she felt secure that “it was still my paper and my decisions, and that he wasn’t going to try and take over.” This was due in part to the value that Christopher placed on Vanessa’s voice: he did not, she explained, “just try to impose a certain sort of style.” She found this “really cool” and “empowering.” Vanessa knew that she had agency—the final say—this situation. “Trusting his advice,” she told me, “means that I know that it’s good advice, but that doesn’t mean that his advice will always be the best advice for what I want to do with my paper.” She knew that she had the ability to choose what advice to follow.

This agency derived in part from Christopher’s listening, which involves his attending to the other and renouncing mastery and control. According to Vanessa, and corroborated by my observation, Christopher consistently asked for and valued her opinions and choices, making a number of communicative choices implying that Vanessa was the expert. From the beginning of the session, Christopher made clear that he had not
read *If He Hollers*, meaning he was not an authority on it: Vanessa knew more about it than he did.

A more expansive example occurred toward the end of their consultation when Christopher brought up the essay’s focus. He explicitly deferred his understanding of Vanessa’s essay to her own understanding or intent. Vanessa’s thesis, as she summarized it at the beginning of the consultation, was that “[the narrator] is guided by his dreams.” She was drawing a connection between the character’s disturbed daydreams and his reliability as a narrator. Christopher pointed out to Vanessa that near the end of her essay, she raised the concept of fear, which he took to be, in his words, “the core of her argument that she didn’t know was the core of her argument.” After calling her attention to that spot in the essay, Christopher continued,

> I’ve never read this novel or this story. The reason why I pulled [the idea of fear] out was that it felt like maybe the most important part of this. It felt like you were claiming that these daydreams are out of fear, which is a pretty big claim. And if you wanted to make that claim, that’s the core claim for throughout the whole thing. And I think you could probably hang everything off of that if you wanted to.

Here, Christopher gave feedback—really, an indirect suggestion—but did so in a way that left room for Vanessa. By saying “It felt like” when explaining his understanding of her writing, he implied that his interpretation of her writing was just that, as opposed to fact. He claimed a lack of expertise of the book and similarly recognized her authority over her writing.

And as he explained his thoughts further, he continued to demonstrate that the significance of this concept of fear revolved around her, not him. He said,

> So, what I heard you say as you were reading was, as you were describing those daydreams, it was about revenge . . . , and it seemed like those were purely out of just uncontrollable anger. And the reason why I glommed onto that fears idea was that seems like the opposite. I can see the connection between fear and anger or
fear and violence, but, early on, you weren’t making that connection. And then, fairly late here, you did. And that’s why it felt important.

Through this explanation, Christopher showed that fear was not his own idea that he was urging her to incorporate, but rather a concept that he pulled from her own thoughts.

More, when Christopher gave specific advice, he offered it as a choice. He went on to suggest that if Vanessa intended fear to be significant, then she should integrate that topic into the beginning of the essay. On the other hand, if fear was not part of her main point, then she should emphasize it less at the end. Vanessa prompted Christopher for specifics on how to proceed if she did decide that fear should be part of her thesis: “So, if I made that claim, I guess I would put it in the introduction, and then, like, the sentence here, maybe?” she asked, showing him something on her computer screen and then turning to see his response. “On how it builds up into his daydreams taking over him and these daydreams connected to fear?” Christopher nodded, but quickly added, smiling, “As long as that’s what you want to say. Don’t take my word for it.” Christopher shared his thoughts and advice, but he did so while still privileging Vanessa’s knowledge and choices. He made direct suggestions, but they hinged on whether Vanessa decided that the concept of fear was significant. She was treated as the authority here: the choices lay with her.

Christopher was able to facilitate writer agency because he listened. He actively gave feedback, but he was aware of the power imbalance and tried to simultaneously abdicate some control. He worked with Vanessa to create a space between, and he contributed to meaning making in this space while also attending to what Vanessa contributed. Discussing his method for this and other consultations, he explained, “I listen intently to writers’ intent, to try to understand what they were trying to get across
so that I can help them actually put it on the page.” Christopher contributed his interpretation but then gave Vanessa room for her thoughts and her response to his thoughts. And this did not go unnoticed. Vanessa told me, “I feel like this is the first time that I’ve had someone from the Writing Center who asked for my opinion instead of just giving advice.”

LaShondra and Abigail’s consultation provides another example of how a consultant’s listening can facilitate writer agency over their writing. LaShondra had visited the Writing Center many times over the course of her MFA in theater program. She described to me how sometimes consultants had taken control of her writing, trying to direct it, in her words, “to their view of what my paper should be.” These consultants pushed her paper in new directions, and, at first, LaShondra went along with it. Speaking of a paper that she had revised to move in such a new direction, she told me, “[I]t was a great paper. I got great feedback on it, but it just didn’t feel like me.”

To elucidate her point, LaShondra constructed a fast food example, successfully making our stomachs growl during our noon interview. LaShondra continued,

If you come on in with an idea about McDonald’s Big Mac, and I’m the consultant, and I say, “Yeah, oh, but have you thought about Burger King’s Whopper?” You know the way that that works: and then you shift to the Whopper . . . I much rather we talk about the layers of the Big Mac, and we stay in the same idea, in the same realm as a jumping-off point, instead of totally shifting . . .

Even if the Whopper was a good idea, she told me, it was not her idea. It did not reflect her. As she said, “I still want my voice to look like my voice when I’m done with my paper.” She did not want to change her voice but to strengthen it. She further explained,

59 In addition to not reflecting the writer’s thoughts, a paper directed by the consultant can be more difficult to write. As LaShondra explained, “It was a great idea . . . but I felt like I did more work to try to find ideas around this idea that we had shifted to . . . [I]t feels like though I wrote the paper, I don’t feel like I thoroughly understand what I’m talking about because it shifted so much.”
“I come from a different background, I come from a different view, and I want to express that view the best way possible.” LaShondra came to the Writing Center to make sure that her writing fit academic standards, not the ideas of consultants.

In such consultations, the consultants were not listening to her, and this detracted from her agency. LaShondra described these consultants as “listening to respond” (which I would call hearing), as listening “to get [their] thought out,” rather than “listening to understand.” The consultants did not make room for her, were not open to her ideas, did not cede control, and she felt obligated to follow their lead because they were the consultants, and she was the one coming for help.60 This detracted from her sense of control over the paper, and thus from her agency over her writing.

LaShondra contrasted these past consultations with her recent session with Abigail. LaShondra appreciated that Abigail “listened to all of my ideas before giving her own suggestions.” This enabled LaShondra and Abigail to, as LaShondra put it, “push[] in the same direction”—which, I’ll note, echoes my explanation of collaboration as working toward a common goal. Abigail was open to LaShondra’s ideas, and her suggestions were actual suggestions rather than masked imperatives. Abigail’s listening facilitated LaShondra’s sense of control over her writing, and, because of this, LaShondra “welcomed” Abigail’s feedback.61

60 To be fair, I’m speculating about these consultations, given that I did not observe them or have access to the consultants’ perspectives. There are certainly explanations beyond lack of listening, such as that LaShondra did not clearly express her needs or that the consultant was listening but did not understand.
61 As Williams says, “Students acknowledge that they value criticism that respects their ideas” (Literacy 76).
Writer Agency Over Consultation

Listening can also facilitate writer agency over the consultation itself. Participants Abigail, Beth, David, and Liz pointed out that listening facilitates collaboration because we must listen to make sure that we are moving in the same direction, pursuing the same goal in the consultation. Just as LaShondra emphasized the importance of her and Abigail moving in the same direction regarding the content of her writing, she also expressed the need for writers and consultants to guide the consultation itself in the same direction.

“[C]ollaboration’s a partnership,” Liz told me. “So, I think that you have to be able to be in communion with one another in what you’re doing.” This, she said, requires listening because listening involves “really taking in information, considering it and applying it to practice,” which are all essential to collaboration. As Abigail put it, “Without listening, the consultant and writer might come up with ideas on their own rather than together.”

Josh and Kathryn discussed situations where writers arrive at the Writing Center thinking that they need help with one thing, when—at least in the interpretation of the consultants—they would benefit much more from help with something else. This often takes the form of writers requesting help with lower order concerns (LOCs) or with somewhat nebulous concepts. Frequent requests, as those of us who work in writing centers know, are help with “grammar” or “flow.” Through conversation with the consultants, these writers might better understand that a concentration on higher order concerns (HOCs) might be more useful or that there is room to think further about what they really want help with: e.g., what does flow mean? 62

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62 These examples are certainly not always the case. HOCs should not automatically be prioritized over LOCs. And it is just as likely that these conversations will help consultants learn what the writers want help with and why as it is that these conversations will contribute to the writers’ understanding.
As described in the previous chapter, Katie had a consultation where the writer wanted to spend the session working on her thesis, while Katie found the thesis strong and thought the consultation would be better spent focusing on other things. Based on the writer’s concerns and Katie’s analysis, they briefly discussed the thesis statement and then spent the majority of the consultation on other topics, returning to the thesis at the end. The consultation did not go in the direction that the writer had planned when it first began, but Katie immediately acknowledged the writer’s concerns about her thesis and incorporated them into the proposed plan for the session. Katie explained her reasoning for this plan and asked the writer to choose whether to follow, modify, or completely change that plan. In this way, Katie provided input, but the choice was the writer’s.

LaShondra’s guiding of her and Abigail’s session provides an especially strong example of writer agency over the consultation, due not only to LaShondra’s control of the session but also to how much she discussed this control during our interview. LaShondra had found that she gets the most out of consultations when she arrives with a plan. When she first started coming to the Writing Center, she explained, “I didn’t know how to craft the consultation as to what I needed to get out of it.” This sometimes led to consultations moving in unhelpful directions, such as when one consultant went into a lengthy tangent about the Oxford comma. “[O]nce you introduce this idea, and this is how I apply it further,” LaShondra said, “I appreciate that portion. However, if you talk about it too much then I’ve lost control of what I came in for. If we only have 50 minutes, and we talk about the Oxford comma and how to use it for eight, instead of the condensed version of how I apply it further, then I’ve lost control of how I can craft my time.” Now, LaShondra comes to consultations knowing what she wants: “Usually, I start all of my
meetings by saying, ‘This is the assignment. This is what I want to get and how I want to achieve that.’ This can deter the consultant from “rambling on about general ideas of writing . . . [so] that it’s specifically about what I brought in today and what I’m trying to get out of this today.” In her consultation with Abigail, LaShondra directly stated how she wanted the consultation to proceed. This was apparent to me as an observer and to Abigail, who told me, “[LaShondra] wanted to go through the bibliographies and then have time for brainstorming, and she made that very clear.”

Having control over the session helped LaShondra make sure that the session was useful for her. However, when a consultant did not listen, as in the Oxford comma consultation, and instead moved the consultation in a direction of their choosing, this detracted from LaShondra’s perception of her ability to make decisions. Listening requires giving up the illusion of mastery, but when the consultant went on about the Oxford comma, they did the opposite. LaShondra interpreted the tangent as a show of intelligence—mastery—that did not address her needs. “So, while I appreciate how smart [consultants] are,” she said, “it still didn’t really help me much in the paper that’s due tomorrow or the next day.” In the instance of the Oxford comma, the consultant, intentionally or not, made the session more about themselves than about the writer. Because the consultant was not listening, LaShondra “lost control” of her ability to guide the session.

Liz explained how a consultant’s lack of listening can derive from consultant ego or self-centeredness. She explained that the first step of listening for a consultant is “to put aside your expertise.” She went on,

I haven’t seen this as much [at the UofL Writing Center], but I have seen it in my undergrad, where tutors think that they are the be-all end-all of writing and,
because of that, they want to dominate the session. So, it doesn’t really matter what the writer has to say . . . But that doesn’t help the writer with their process. It just maybe helps the writer with their paper, if that, so it’s not really effective in terms of writing center pedagogy. So that’s like numero uno, is like getting your philosophy in check, right, that this isn’t about you.

In such instances, the consultant does not consider (or, perhaps, worry about) the power and authority inherent to their role,63 and they do not make room for the writer.

As shown, consultants can facilitate (or detract from) writer agency through listening, but, as LaShondra demonstrates, the writer can certainly already have agency or strengthen their agency themselves. At this point in her MFA program and in her many visits to the Writing Center, LaShondra seemed to have firm control over her writing and her consultations, and she seemed to know that the decisions were hers to make. Abigail explicitly commented on this, stating, “I want [writers] to see changes they could make, and I want them to make those decisions and take control over their paper. [LaShondra] was definitely doing that, and I think other students can be reluctant to do that. Like they expect I’m supposed to do it.” Abigail also appreciatively mentioned again and again how LaShondra guided the session: “[S]he seemed to take control of the session. She knew what she wanted to work on, and she knew what her concerns were. . . . And I was grateful for that, because sometimes I think writers might too quickly just give the consultant the control, like, ‘Oh, whatever you think needs to be fixed,’ or ‘Whatever you think I need to do.’ But she seemed to take control easily.” To argue that listening facilitates agency thus is not to deny writer agency that already exists or that can be strengthened by other means. Rather, listening contributes to, or reinforces, that agency, and lack of listening can do the opposite.

63 Though, again, there are many other factors from which power and authority can derive.
So though power imbalance can certainly detract from collaboration, listening shows that it does not have to. By facilitating writer agency over their writing and over the consultation, listening facilitates collaboration within power differentials. And listening also facilitates dialogue, which has similar effects.

By explaining and exemplifying how collaboration can occur within a power differential, listening theory argues against writing center scholarship’s incorrect presupposition that collaboration requires power balance. Listening involves making room for the other, cocreating a shared space, and cocreating within that space. The listener does not abdicate power, nor can they, but they do abdicate control, which is the exertion of that power. This allows for cocreation, which is built from similarities but also from differences and the power differential that those differences entail. The space between is shared, even if the power is not. Coinhabiting this space can facilitate working together within differences, including differences in power.

**Presupposition: Collaboration Requires the Nondirective Approach**

The second writing center presupposition that listening disproves is that collaboration requires the nondirective approach and is precluded by the directive approach. To argue against this, I explain how the directive and nondirective approaches are commonly connected with collaboration. Using listening theory and my data, I then argue against this presupposition and show how listening can facilitate collaboration regardless of tutoring approach.

First, a few caveats. I distinguish between the directive and nondirective approaches in this section to increase clarity, but they are not so easily separated. Consultations rarely follow a singular approach and, indeed, often involve constant
switching between approaches. Further, there is not a clear binary between the two approaches; the “switches” between them can be better described as fluid shifts. Finally, the directive approach and the nondirective approach are not singular, determined procedures: each encompasses many strategies and options.

Keeping this in mind, I represent the typical understanding of the nondirective approach as involving minimal, or at least little, consultant intervention. This approach is in line with writing centers’ description of their pedagogy as student-centered, collaborative, and nonhierarchical (Grimm, Good 85; Rollins et al. 119; Shamoon and Burns 137). A consultant following the directive approach, on the other hand, serves more as an informant, perhaps pointing out a mistake and telling the writer how to fix it, explaining a concept, or directly responding to a writer’s question.  

A common understanding of the directive approach is that consultants lead rather than facilitate and that they therefore have more power in the consultation than do writers.

My data, unsurprisingly, included numerous examples of the nondirective approach. The nondirective approach has been complicated since Jeff Brooks’s 1991 article “Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work,” but I use his characterization of the approach here because of its clear delineations and because it was a seminal text early in the approach’s development. According to Brooks, one element of minimalist tutoring is that writer and consultant sit side by side. The UofL University Writing Center was arranged to encourage, or at least facilitate, this setup. As described in Chapter 2, the Writing Center’s configuration of rectangular tables encouraged

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64 Other elements of directive tutoring that may be less obvious include presenting the writer with choices and discussing how meaning shifts with each choice. Under the directive approach, the consultant might also model brainstorming (Hawthorne 5).
consultant and writer to sit side by side, though tables and chairs were wheeled and 
therefore easy to rearrange. In all observed consultations, the writer and consultant sat 
next to each other (with the possible exception of John and Liz’s session, where I could 
not observe the setup because John asked to be recorded using audio only.)

Brooks also recommends that the writer read their paper out loud, the consultant 
not write on the paper, and the consultant ask questions. This was certainly the rule in the 
seven consultations that I observed. Six of these seven consultations involved the writer’s 
text, and that text was read out loud in all six of these consultations. Five times out of 
these six, the text was read by the writer. There were no instances that I observed in 
which a consultant wrote on the writer’s paper or typed on their laptop, though there were 
times when a consultant leaned over the writer to get their paper, moved the paper closer 
to themselves, or reached over to flip a page or scroll on the computer. The consultations 
also involved numerous questions. (Questions are explored further in the next chapter.)

The nondirective approach is not problematic in and of itself. It becomes an issue, 
as scholars began pointing out in the 1990s, when it is treated as “tutoring orthodoxy” 
(Shamoon and Burns 137) and followed regardless of contextual factors. Nondirective 
tutoring can function as a gatekeeper, denying writers access to “insider knowledge” 
(Grimm, Good 31) due to the assumption that this knowledge is already shared by all. 
Under the nondirective approach, consultants avoid making direct claims and 
suggestions, preferring to ask questions to draw out the writers’ ideas and knowledge.

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65 John did not bring in a draft. Instead, his consultation focused on discussion of the assignment and academic conventions.
66 Josh, the consultant, read the text out loud in his and David’s consultation. They had worked together previously and had already established that Josh would be the one to read (though before proceeding in this consultation, Josh did confirm that David wanted to continue in that manner).
This works for some writers in some contexts but is detrimental to others, often those who are least familiar with academia and do not have the relevant knowledge from which to draw (Grimm; Latterrell). This can include writers with disabilities (Neff), working-class writers (Denny et al.; Scott et al.), and writers who are non-native English speakers (Blau et al.; Eckstein; Harris and Silva; Powers; Salem; Williams and Severino). Directive tutoring, on the other hand, can illuminate rhetorical processes and academic conventions and in that way distribute insider knowledge.

As of the writing of this dissertation, there is little or no scholarship arguing that consultations should be completely nondirective. The argument that the directive approach should also be used in sessions—begun by scholars like Clark (“A Critique”) and Shamoon and Burns—continues, in various forms, to this day (e.g., Denny et al.; Eckstein). A typical writing center perspective is that consultants should be flexible in choice of approach, depending on the context (Burns and Jesson; Carino; Corbett, “Negotiating”; Corbett, “Tutoring Style”; Shamoon and Burns). Contextual factors include the ratio of writer to consultant knowledge (Carino), where the writer is in the writing process (Clark 195), and whether the writer is a non-native English speaker (Blau et al.; Eckstein; Harris and Silva; Powers; Salem; Williams and Severino).

67 Beyond gatekeeping, strict adherence to the nondirective approach can lead to negative writer experiences. Denny et al. describe how their participants—working-class writers—“believed the professors and tutors knew what the [essay] structure was but simply wouldn’t or couldn’t explain it to them, perhaps because the expected structure was supposed to have been learned in high school. To our interviewees, this withholding felt unfair, like a game that was rigged against them” (77). And Carino argues that it is disingenuous for consultants to behave “coyly” (105) by pretending a lack of knowledge.

68 For example, directive tutoring allows for imitation, which is an important learning tool (Clark and Healy 39). Shamoon and Burns compare directive tutoring—when done well—to a master class, in which an expert pianist, for example, meets with emerging pianists. Some students observe and others perform. Based on those performances, the expert gives individualized advice on how to improve, and the expert may themselves play something and ask a student to repeat it. In such a class, there is certainly a hierarchy of power and skill, but there is also respect: a respect that the musician is still developing and so needs help but also that they are in fact a musician. The same style could be used in writing center consultations.
And yet consultants often feel that they would be breaking a central tenet of practice if they follow a more directive approach (Blau et al.; Cogie; Gillam et al.; Nicklay), even those consultants who understand that approach’s benefits and who were explicitly encouraged to use both approaches. These consultants feel pushback, guilt—even if only from themselves.69

Some of my consultant participants held this concern. Liz, like all of the MA consultant participants, was taking the writing center pedagogy class that semester with the director of the University Writing Center. She and the other MA consultants learned about the complex, fluid, and dialogic nature of choices that occur in consultations, as opposed to the oversimplicity of a directive-nondirective binary in which the nondirective is preferred. And Liz noted benefits that the directive approach had for her consultation with John: given his status as a student returning to school after many years and given the discomfort that he expressed with certain aspects of his course, she wanted to provide him with notes so that he would “leav[e] with something tangible.” But Liz still worried about being too directive with John, about giving him “commands.” Christopher—who, as a PhD student, had not taken this particular pedagogy class with the Writing Center director—also worried about playing too prominent a role in the session. He told me, “It feels like I could have done a better job stepping aside once we started revising.”

Quaid, another MA consultant, proved an exception, describing an appropriate writing center dynamic as “[s]imilar to teacher/student—one has the wider breadth of knowledge and is willing to impart that knowledge on a student.” My observations of Quaid’s consultation with Chris found that Quaid did follow a more directive approach.

69 I have often felt the same way.
For example, after Chris read his essay on alienation in *The Truman Show* and briefly reflected on it, Quaid went on to tell Chris how he should revise his essay:

That’s going to be where you need to start. That’s going to be your whole introduction paragraph. . . . You’re just going to talk about exactly what you said, really. . . . I would go ahead and do your definition of what alienation is . . . And then you’re going to go into— That’s where you can kind of go into some of your summary of the movie. Because you’re going to want to answer what’s going on in the movie and how he’s alienated from the world, which you also want to incorporate in your thesis. You can either do that in the first or second paragraphs, around there, since it’s such a short essay. . . . So, you just incorporate your thesis and then go from there. So that would be your first paragraph.

In this instance, Quaid described what Chris should do rather, rather than facilitating Chris’s reaching his own conclusions. Based on my conversations with my participants, I would place Quaid’s view in the minority at the UofL Writing Center, and I wonder if this view might be related to his background as a high school teacher. Factors such as age, gender, and personality may also play a role. Regardless of the reasons for his preference of the directive approach in comparison to the preferences of many of his fellow consultants, this goes to show that some consultants do not feel qualms about following a more directive approach.

The typical preferencing of the nondirective approach is likely due, at least in part, to the presupposition that I am about to argue against: that the nondirective approach facilitates power balance and that this approach, and not the directive approach, allows for collaboration. The argument goes that a nondirective session involves a nonhierarchal environment because the consultant defers to the writer, giving the writer power (Carino; Clark and Healy 39). Because writing centers “have almost uniformly maintained their identity as nonhierarchal, friendly places where students can feel welcome” (Carino 101), it is easy for writing centers, scholars, and practitioners to unintentionally privilege the nondirective approach, from which they believe
nonhierarchical environments derive—even if they consciously promote both approaches. This positions the nondirective approach as the go-to, to be used unless certain circumstances make the directive approach more useful for the writer. So, despite lack of contention, scholars and practitioners often feel the need to justify the directive approach. But listening shows otherwise: collaboration can occur under both nondirective and directive approaches.

**Collaboration and Tutoring Approach**

Collaboration and the nondirective approach are assumed to go hand in hand (Clark and Healy; Gillam et al; Hoffman et al.; McCarroll; Rollins et al.). After all, that is how the nondirective approach developed, with the understanding of writing, learning, thought, and conversation as social, deriving from writer and consultant working together with an equal balance of power. It is thus often assumed that the nondirective approach facilitates collaboration, and, further, that the directive approach precludes it. Writing centers pursue the elusive nonhierarchical session, in which power is balanced and consultant and writer collaborate, and the way to do this, writing centers assume, is through nondirective tutoring.

Scholarship and my data suggest that this is not the case. Collaboration can still occur during more directive consultations, and, moreover, the nondirective approach can even inhibit collaboration. First, some writing center scholarship on the directive approach does argue that sharing and cocreating need not be limited to the nondirective approach. As Carino put it, “a nonhierarchical environment does not depend on blind commitment to nondirective tutoring methods” (109). And in their discussion of how directive tutoring can emulate master classes, Shamoon and Burns argue that directive
tutoring allows consultants to also be the “subjects” of the consultation, in comparison to nondirective tutoring, where the subject is only the writer’s text (145), thus allowing the writer involvement necessary for collaboration.70 Along these lines, Joan Hawthorne’s description of elements of the directive approach includes the dialogic: “[e]ngaging in a back-and-forth discussion with the student where both of you generate ideas, meaning, ideas for organization” (5). And Thompson et al. dismiss as “writing center lore” that “tutor dominance, often reflected in directiveness and possibly attributable to their greater expertise, upsets the collaboration by taking away students’ control and makes writing center conferences oppressive” (79).

Grimm astutely distinguishes between directive and direct (Good 34).71 A consultant is direct when they speak plainly with writers, giving it to them straight. Consultants can be direct without being directive: they can tell writers about something without telling writers to do something. In other words, consultants can be direct even as writers retain agency. Consultants do not have to engage in verbal gymnastics to equivocate for the sake of appearing nondirective. Josh, for example, discussed how he tried to be very clear “that if I were doing it, this is how I would do it, but this is not necessarily how you have to do it.” He argued that sharing options with writers does not have to detract from collaboration. This hearkens back to Vanessa and Christopher’s consultation in which Christopher presented options that she could between (or choose to

70 The mastery on which these courses are based does conflict with the renunciation of mastery involved in listening, and the directing of these class is likely less collaborative than that of consultations. The takeaway, though, is that the acknowledgment of a differential in knowledge and skill can contribute to learning and collaboration and, when deliberately incorporated into a session, deserves to be welcomed rather than eschewed. The difficulty of mastery may also be a matter of terminology, with *masters* possibly connoting an end of learning, as well as control over the learners.
71 Carino similarly distinguishes between authoritative and authoritarian (97).
ignore). Being direct allows for possibility, whereas being directive is a definitive statement of what should be done.

The differentiation between direct and directive leads to a complication in terms: after all, *directive* has a primary position in the term *directive tutoring*. I will continue using the term *directive tutoring* because it is widely used in scholarship and practice. When I use that term, I do so to refer to the general approach. Choices within that approach, though, can be direct or directive.

The differentiation between *direct* and *directive*, along with the former’s role in collaboration, is exemplified by Beth and Kathryn’s consultation, parts of which exemplify directive tutoring. Kathryn was writing a book review for three books. At one point, Beth suggested that it might be useful for a reader of the book review to know that one of those books was less autobiographical, less personal, than the others. She suggested “maybe just a signal phrase, like, ‘the most research-based and empirically-argued of the three books in this review.’” At another point in the consultation, Beth offered a well-stated interpretation of Kathryn’s ideas, which Kathryn proceeded to write down, potentially word for word. At these moments, Beth made statements rather than the questions or oblique hints that would be common in the nondirective approach.

However, I would argue that these moments were direct, not directive. Kathryn did not feel bossed around. Instead, as she expressed in our interview, she felt that Beth listened to her at the beginning of the consultation when she explained her needs and that Beth designed the consultation around meeting those needs. In other words, Beth and Kathryn were working together toward the same goal. Also, like Josh and Christopher did with their writers, Beth gave Kathryn specific suggestions, but she did not behave in a
directive manner; she avoided pushing Kathryn to write the suggestions down (though Kathryn did) or even to use them. Further, Kathryn actively participated during these times. She took notes and was engaged in the conversation, frequently responding to Beth’s statements even when Beth did not ask a question.

Notably, both Kathryn and Beth described the consultation as collaborative. In the post-consultation survey that each filled out, they were asked to rate their level of agreement, on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with the following two statements: “During this consultation, the other person behaved collaboratively” and “During this consultation, you behaved collaboratively.” Both participants chose “strongly agree” for both statements. The consultation’s direct elements thus did not have a negative effect on Kathryn’s and Beth’s perceived level of collaboration (or at least not an effect that moved the ratings below strongly agree), suggesting that collaboration can occur under the directive approach.

Second, the nondirective approach does not always facilitate collaboration and can even obstruct it. As Gillam et al. argue, “tutors’ efforts to be nondirective and to reshape the tutorial interaction along collaborative lines can be interpreted as another way of taking charge and asserting tutoiy authority . . . [P]eer tutors assert their authority by refusing to play the authority and direct the learning by indirection” (194). Steven J. Corbett notes the same concern in his 2008 review of literature on directive versus nondirective tutoring, finding that scholars argue that “a strict minimalist approach forecloses the act of collaboration that could take place in a one-to-one, collaborative negotiation that takes both the tutor’s and the tutee’s goals into consideration” (“Tutoring”). And Valentine similarly worries that a consultant’s choice to “disavow a
teacherly role by choosing to listen to a student rather than talking” is, or can be, the consultant’s choice rather than the writer’s (105). In such cases, the nondirective approach can actually inhibit collaboration.

As Phillip J. Sloan asks, “Can we prioritize higher-order concerns and a holistic, nondirective approach—even as students explicitly request something else—and rightly call ourselves ‘student-centered’? We conceptualize our work in terms of student ‘need,’ but can we be student-centered if we do not do what the student wants?” Given that collaboration involves working together toward the same goal, how can directing a consultation against writer wishes be collaborative? I would argue that Kathryn and Beth’s consultation was not collaborative despite its direct moments but rather because of them. I would guess that if Beth had attempted to be (or appear) more nondirective, Kathryn would have considered the consultation less collaborative, since Beth would not have been keeping her preferences in mind.

Further, dogmatic use of the nondirective approach can come across as “manipulative” (Corbett, “Tutoring”). Writers can feel that they are being pushed into the nondirective approach, that they came to the writing center for help, but those who hold the expertise that they seek are deliberately holding back (Denny et al.; Gillam et al. 193; Rollins et al. 120). When it is a choice made unidirectionally by the consultant, use of the nondirective approach decreases writer agency and decreases collaboration. More, it can mask the actual power dynamic. In Lunsford’s words, “the tutor is still the seat of all authority but is simply pretending it isn’t so” (7). Some of Clark’s graduate student

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72 Rollins et al. find that, in fact, consultant and writer often work together—“collude”—to keep up the charade of collaboration, though they may not do so consciously. Rollins et al.’s consultant participants spoke in the first-person plural (of which I am often guilty) and referenced external authority, such as genre conventions, rather than their own. They “de-emphasized directives” (125) and blamed themselves, rather
consultants go so far as to argue that, despite appearances, “[w]riting center tutoring is not really non-directive anyway” (qtd. in Clark, “A Critique” 195), and, as discussed in the next chapter, even the Socratic approach is to some degree directive. Thus, not only can the directive approach promote collaboration, but also inflexible use of the nondirective approach can actually detract from it.

It is always possible that writers choose not to follow consultants’ suggestions or that consultants persuade writers that what the writers want is not the most effective use of the consultation. Or writers may choose to incorporate the consultants’ ideas, but those may end up negatively impacting the writing. Still, as long as the other person’s ideas are taken into account, this is still a collaboration, a working together toward a common goal, regardless of whether the way that they work toward it is directive or nondirective.

*Tutoring Approach and Listening*

Listening theory further shows how collaboration can occur under the directive approach. It demonstrates that the level of power balance, and the nondirective approach’s association with power balance, cannot be the sole predictor of collaboration. More, listening facilitates collaboration under the directive approach just as it does under the nondirective approach.

First, listening theory renders moot the argument that power balance is directly tied to collaboration or to the nondirective approach. The nondirective approach is thought necessary for collaboration due to the belief that this approach facilitates an equal balance of power. On the other side of the coin, the directive approach is thought to lessen collaboration because it involves power imbalance. However, as discussed in the

than the writer’s text, for their lack of understanding. It would be interesting to explore whether this collusion is itself a form of collaboration.
previous section, power dynamics are much more complex. An equal balance of power is not necessary for collaboration, nor is it even possible. More, listening facilitates collaboration within power differentials. Power balance alone, then, does not facilitate or preclude collaboration. This means that the associations of power balance with the nondirective and of power imbalance with the directive (regardless of whether these associations are correct) do not define whether a consultation is collaborative. Therefore, it cannot be argued that the tutoring approach determines collaboration.

Second, listening is just as compatible with the directive approach as it is with the nondirective approach, so the ways that listening facilitates collaboration are equally applicable to the directive and nondirective approaches. Under the directive approach, a consultant may behave more as informant than facilitator (e.g., giving specific suggestions, responding directly to writers’ questions, or explaining rhetorical processes), but this does not mean that they are not listening.

A recap of listening theory demonstrates listening’s compatibility with the directive approach. According to Floyd, dialogic listening involves the following six elements:

1. **authenticity**: listening and responding honestly
2. **inclusion**: working to understand the speaker to the extent that is possible
3. **confirming the other**: finding value in the speaker because the speaker is a person
4. **presentness**: staying in the current moment and actively paying attention to the speaker
5. **spirit of mutual equality**: listening without bias and only then evaluating what the speaker has communicated
6. **supportive climate**: results from the other five characteristics (130-2)

All of these elements can take place under the directive approach. Ratcliffe defines the four moves of rhetorical listening as follows:

1. Promoting an **understanding** of self and other
2. Proceeding within an *accountability* logic
3. Locating identifications across *commonalities* and *differences*
4. Analyzing *claims* as well as the *cultural logics* within which these claims function (26)

As with Floyd’s elements of dialogic listening, these moves of rhetorical listening are compatible with the directive tutoring approach. And Lipari describes listening otherwise as accepting that the other person is other. It involves acknowledging preconceptions and remaining open to other perspectives, and to the idea that we will never fully understand the other person. All of these moves can be followed under the directive approach. A consultant may be direct, but they can still remain present, work toward understanding, take context into account, reflect on their own assumptions, and so on. More, nothing in this listening theory suggests that listening is *more* compatible with the nondirective approach. Therefore, the collaboration that listening facilitates is just as applicable to the directive approach.

Kathryn and Beth’s consultation shows how listening can facilitate dialogue and agency in a directive consultation. Beth’s interpretations were direct in that she straightforwardly stated her thoughts, but she did so as part of a conversation, facilitated by listening. And Beth’s listening facilitated Kathryn’s agency by making room for Kathryn to codirect the consultation and to control her own writing. For example, Kathryn was able to use Beth’s direct—but not directive—interpretation to better understand the perspective of a reader. Kathryn could then file away that specific interpretation for later, when she could choose to use it or a variation of it, or to not use it at all. The dialogue and agency that are promoted by listening and that promote collaboration are thus just as possible under the directive approach.
More, it was precisely because of listening that the directive approach was used in their consultation. Beth listened in order to better understand Kathryn’s needs and goals, and taking that into account is what led her to the directive approach. John and Liz’s consultation also illustrated how listening might lead to the directive approach. John took the lead in developing the session, even as Liz specifically aimed to give John directive feedback. He “had so many questions, guiding questions, even,” Liz said, such as, “‘What about this,’ ‘What do you think about that,’ ‘How does that play in.’” And once John was satisfied with the answer, he was ready to move on. In one instance, he asked questions about locating and citing sources, and he followed up with, “Give me an example. Help me with that.” Halfway through the consultation, John even asked Liz how much time they had remaining so that he could figure out how to best proceed. Because, according to Liz, “[h]e seemed to have a clear idea of what he wanted to get done in the session and was able to direct it easily,” she was better able to address his needs. It was in part because of the way that John directed the session that Liz chose to give more directive feedback.

Listening is a stance of openness, one that can be taken, or not, regardless of tutoring approach. It is creating a space between, which can occur at different levels of directiveness, as long as consultant and writer are building ideas and the consultation together. Listening helps consultants understand writers’ needs and wants, where writers want the consultation to go. Listening also means that consultants are more likely to be open to writers’ ideas and goals. As shown above, listening facilitates collaboration across power differentials, which allows for collaboration under both approaches. And without listening, collaboration cannot occur, even under the nondirective approach.
Try It at Home: Listening with Attention to Power

How might we listen with an attention to power in order to facilitate collaboration? As one of many responses to that question, I turn to Ratcliffe’s third way of facilitating listening (*Rhetorical*). The first two ways of facilitating listening, discussed in the previous chapter, involve engaging with positive and negative terms and acknowledging cultural similarities and differences (94-95). Ratcliffe’s third way is to take “three functional rhetorical stances—recognition, critique, and accountability” (96). These stances can help consultants build a sense of how they and writers fit into academic and other power networks, and how they might use this knowledge.

The first of Ratcliffe’s three stances is recognition. This stance promotes an awareness of how the self is situated in society and time, and how this situatedness lends certain advantages and disadvantages (*Rhetorical*). Recognition contrasts with denial, which, in effect, puts a halt to the awareness that Ratcliffe advocates. The next stance is critique, which moves beyond recognition to an evaluation of others’ claims and our own. Ratcliffe explains critique as “put[ting] all the claims, assumptions, and conclusions into play while continually asking: What’s at stake? For whom? And why?” (97). To critique is to ask questions and be open to different answers. This contrasts with defensiveness, with protecting ourselves from what we do not want to hear at the cost of raising walls that impede conversation. The final stance is accountability. To be accountable is to use recognition and critique to ethically direct our actions, rather than feeling guilty or blaming others for the situation.

In the writing center, recognition would involve consultants’ reflecting on how they fit into the academy and society at large. They might ask themselves, “In society and
academia, what advantages and disadvantages do I have? How has this affected me and my experience?” This could involve recognizing, for example, the advantages they have because they attended an excellent high school or the difficulties they face as someone with mental illness. Such recognition can take place within the consultation itself but also outside of it. Christopher took a stance of recognition through awareness that his presentation as an “apparently white, cis, heterosexual man” lent him many advantages, as mentioned in the previous chapter.

Consultants would take a stance of critique by evaluating their and others’ claims, reflecting on “What’s at stake? For whom? And why?” (Ratcliffe, Rhetorical 97). For example, a consultant might reflect on why they decided to help a freshman writer shape their essay to fit standard academic discourse. If an observer or the writer were to argue against the consultant’s choice here, the consultant could respond defensively. Or the consultant could instead critique their claim. One reason that the consultant believes that the writer should adhere to the standard academic model might be that the writer’s grade is at stake, and the writer shared that they are not familiar with this essay format due to a lack of educational resources growing up. The consultant wants the writer to understand what the writer does not know. Or it could be because the writer’s grade is at stake, and the consultant wants the writer to do well in their course. Or it could be because the writer’s grade is at stake, and the consultant’s conceptualization of their role is to help the writer get a better grade. Though seemingly what is at stake—the writer’s grade—is the same across these three scenarios, critiquing the claim would allow the consultant to see that in the latter two scenarios, what’s really at stake are the consultant’s emotional...
response to the situation and the consultant’s self-image, respectively. By critiquing their own claim, then, the consultant becomes more aware of what is driving that claim and their behavior.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Christopher had worked with a writer who was writing about the time his mentor was killed. This writer was a police officer attending UofL’s Southern Police Institute. He was, in Christopher’s words, “reporting clinically on the page,” as is typical for police reports, but it was clear that the writer himself was far from detached. What might have been at stake for Christopher was the desire to have a useful consultation in which he helped the writer strengthen his writing. Christopher might have wanted to build a relationship with this writer by sharing his own related experiences. But Christopher was also aware of what was, in his interpretation, at stake for the writer: “he needed to get across to me that the story . . . was a very intense personal story for him.” There were other things at stake for the writer—such as strengthening the writing—but what was most at stake, or at least most at stakes at that moment, was sharing this emotionally-weighted essay with a stranger.

Ratcliffe’s final stance is accountability (Rhetorical). Under this stance, the consultant’s recognition and critique help them act responsibly. Rather than feeling guilty that they received a better education than the writer or rather than blaming the writer for lack of knowledge, for example, the consultant recognizes and critiques, which helps them become aware of how power is functioning within and outside of this consultation. Consultants can then be accountable by keeping this power balance in mind, and even by

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73 There are, of course, many other reasons why consultants might make this claim.
74 The Southern Police Institute “is a division of the Department of Criminal Justice, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Louisville. It is an advanced education and training institute whose mission is to enhance the professional development of law enforcement practitioners” (“Home”).
making it explicit to the writer. Christopher recognized that as a white male and a doctoral student, it was easy for him to default to taking over the conversation. He critiqued what was at stake for him and for the writer. And he then held himself accountable: instead of dominating the conversation and the consultation, he listened.

**Listening and Power beyond the Writing Center**

Listening thus helps us interrogate and address issues of power in the writing center. It proves false two common presuppositions: that collaboration requires a balance of power and that collaboration requires the nondirective approach. Through attention to individual differences and the relations between self and other, listening shows that there will always be power differentials. Writing center professionals should therefore understand that there is no evading asymmetrical power relations and, more, that power imbalances do not preclude collaboration. Instead, listening can facilitate collaboration within power differentials because listening is itself a form of collaboration and because listening facilitates dialogue and agency. Further, redefining the nondirective approach in terms of working toward together rather than in terms of power allows us to see how collaboration, facilitated by listening, can occur under the directive approach, as well as the nondirective approach.

Beyond facilitating better understanding of power relations and facilitating collaboration in consultations, listening’s benefits extend to more macro issues of power. I began this chapter with the warning that even as writing centers work to build a nonhierarchical atmosphere and to disrupt academia’s systems of privilege, writing centers’ very beliefs—when unexamined—about the path toward power balance and disruption of norms can serve as impediments. The presuppositions I have argued
against—that collaboration requires a balance of power and that collaboration requires
the nondirective approach—contribute to such obstruction. Among other concerns, belief
in the possibility of symmetrical relationships can lead to assumptions about the writer,
and the nondirective approach can lead to gatekeeping.

The job of writing centers, according to Grimm, is not “strengthening” writers’
writing by teaching them to adhere to the mainstream but rather helping writers navigate
the complex power relations and discourses of various contexts (“New” 22). Marilyn
Cooper makes a similar argument (“Really” 102), as do scholars from postcolonial
(Bawarshi and Pelkowski; García, “Unmaking”), queer theory (Denny, “Queering”), and
post-process (Shafer) perspectives. In line with Grimm, Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie
Pelkowski write that writing centers should strive “not to subvert academic discourse or
to suggest that students reject it, but rather to teach students how self-consciously to use
and be used by it—how to rhetorically and critically choose and construct their subject
positions within it” (44). Harry Denny similarly describes the importance of giving
writers the tools to make choices about whether and how to disrupt (“Queering”). Having
these tools, he argues, allows writers to decide when to subvert the conventional. When
writers make an informed decision not to be subversive, this is not giving in but rather
“manipulating discourse and populations in ways that advance individual needs while
undermining the status quo” (Facing 53).

But because consultants and other writing center professionals are often hired due
to their ability to succeed in the mainstream expectations of academia, these academic

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75 And exposing and helping students navigate power relations is particularly important when working with
writers marginalized by the institution (Bawarshi and Pelkowski; Cooper, “Really”; Denny, Facing; Denny,
“Queering”; Grimm, Good).
conventions—along with these conventions’ relationships with systems of power within and outside of academia—can become so familiar as to be invisible. It can therefore be difficult for consultants to notice when norms are oppressive to the writers who do not fit or do not understand these norms (Grimm, *Good* 57-58). Because of this, consultants may validate these norms by presenting them as natural and inevitable instead of lifting the curtain so that writers might see how such norms interact with power (Davila).

Listening with an ear to power helps consultants avoid this mistake in two ways. First, through listening, consultants can increase their awareness and understanding not only of power within consultations, but also of larger systems of power that impact and transcend consultations. After all, listening requires and facilitates openness and an attention to power and privilege. It involves becoming aware of our own preconceptions and how they may have become naturalized, and then disrupting these preconceptions. Through listening—such as via Ratcliffe’s stances of recognition and critique (*Rhetorical*)—consultants can increase their awareness of power and its ramifications.

Second, listening’s spaces between facilitate the discussion of power with writers. These spaces function like Pratt’s contact zones: “spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other,” and all this “often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt 34). It is in these spaces that meaning can be made and understanding changed, that open dialogue can take place. This corresponds to spaces that Bawarshi and Pelkowski and Gregory Shafer describe as allowing for power awareness and discussion. Shafer presents writing as a series of choices dependent on the rhetorical context, rather than as a matter of following the “rules.” To him, the process of writing while attending to rhetorical context is itself a contact zone (296). And, drawing on Gloria Anzaldúa,
Bawarshi and Pelkowski discuss mestiza zones: border sites where there is friction between levels of power and between cultures. These spaces allow for exploration of similarities and difference, creating an environment conducive to writer and consultant discussions of power. Listening facilitates the cocreation of these spaces and of the meaning within them, and therefore facilitates conversations of power.
CHAPTER V: UNDERSTANDING

Of the three themes that I discuss in this dissertation, understanding has perhaps the most obvious connection with listening. As Abigail, a consultant, explained, listening “does have a lot to do with knowing.” I claim no great revelation in drawing this simple connection. After all, listening is a way of gathering information from the other person. But listening is more. Abigail soon added,

[W]hen you hear someone speak and you listen to their words, you’re hearing them put into language their thoughts and their beliefs and their person, which are things that can’t be put into words completely. Like, you can’t transfer a whole person into words, or into language. But if you’re listening to that person, then you’re grasping at that, at what of that person can be put into words. What of their thoughts and their emotions and their being, what words overflow out of their person.

The understanding that we strive for as listeners extends beyond merely comprehending the words exiting the speaker’s mouth, beyond what Z.D. Gurevitch describes as “the grasping of what is said in language” (162). By listening, we attempt to understand the speaker’s ideas, strengths, concerns, personality, feelings—in Abigail’s words, their “being.”

This difference is reflected in a distinction that LaShondra, a writer, made between what she termed listening to understand and listening to respond. When listening to respond, we work to comprehend what the speaker says in order to prepare to
present our own thoughts, which might not incorporate what the speaker has just shared. In the vocabulary of this study, I would label this *hearing*. On the other hand, in both LaShondra’s and my terms, listening to understand is an attempt at a deeper form of understanding.

There is minimal writing center scholarship on the connection between listening and understanding, so, unlike the previous chapter, which draws from the extensive writing center literature on power, this chapter has only a thin layer of soil from which to grow. In the past two chapters, I used listening to better understand openness and to complicate the long-running conversation about power. Here, I form what basis in the literature that I can, but, by necessity, I mostly draw from disparate strands of writing center scholarship to contribute to a nascent conversation.

And this conversation must be built around the idea of difference. After all, at the most basic level, the need to understand presupposes difference. Imagine that we are all exactly the same—we look the same, have the same values, share each and every experience, think the same way, have the same quirks. If we were all identical, there would be no need to try to understand because we would already know.

But in her review of consultant guidebooks, Kathryn Valentine finds that their connection between listening and understanding is reductive because they do not take difference into account. She states that “the attention [listening] does receive focuses on listening mostly as a means of developing a tutor’s understanding rather than a means for working from, with, and across differences without flattening or ignoring those differences” (94-95). These guidebooks discuss listening based on homogenized groups
(e.g., the group of “typical” consultants), without accounting for the differences within those groups and the roles that such differences play in understanding.

In this chapter, I complicate the guidebooks’ connection between listening and understanding by arguing that listening to understand is a means of working toward understanding precisely because it attends to difference. We cannot attempt understanding until we acknowledge our own preconceptions and try to be open to the other person, their ideas, and change. Openness is necessary for listening, and it is through openness that we can work to transcend preconceptions, navigate power imbalance, and facilitate collaboration. Listening to understand thus involves a giving up of mastery, along with an acceptance that full understanding may not be possible. It is only by doing this that we can listen and move toward understanding.

This chapter first discusses how listening to understand contributes to consultations by helping guide choice of approach, strengthening writers’ development, and facilitating writer-consultant collaboration. The following section describes two strategies for listening to understand: listening to the seemingly irrelevant and asking questions. Next, an exploration of misunderstandings argues that they are both necessary and beneficial. Finally, I discuss how misunderstanding and listening help explain the need for improvisation in consultations and also help facilitate this improvisation. A detailed list of the codes used in this chapter and an overview of code development can be found in Appendix B, under Listening and Understanding and Questioning.

**Listening to Understand in Writing Center Consultations**

The majority of my participants highlighted understanding—or an attempt at such—in their explanations of listening. For example, David, a writer, described
understanding as “the point of listening.” To these participants, listening involves taking in and “processing” what the speaker communicates. As mentioned earlier, LaShondra distinguished between listening to understand and listening to respond. The former involves “carefully considering” what the speaker has to say, whereas listening to respond (i.e., hearing) means that “you’re only listening so that you can get your thought out.” And Beth, a consultant, explained that listening involves taking in not just the explicit content of the communication, “but also maybe the intentions or the meanings behind someone’s words.”

So, as described by Abigail at the beginning of this chapter, listening is an attempt to understand not just the content of the communication but also the communicator themselves. Quaid positioned listening similarly, explaining that it is “vital to understanding. Not only in just the sense of understanding a concept or an idea. It’s understanding the person who is behind it or the person you’re interacting with in general.” Listening to understand thus requires attention to the individual, which means an attention to difference.

When applied to writing center consultations, listening to understand serves three major functions: helping consultants make informed decisions about approach, contributing to writers’ learning, and facilitating collaboration.

**Listening to Guide Consultation Approach**

Writing center scholarship—including consultant guidebooks—tends to agree that listening can lead to better understanding, including better understanding of writers, what writers are trying to say, their strengths and weaknesses, their feelings about writing, and how they want to approach the session (Bleakney et al.; DiPardo; Fishbain; Reit;
Seckendorf; Taylor; A. Thomas). My study builds on this scholarship by more closely attending to awareness of the self and the other person, regarding both similarities and differences. Listening helps consultants make choices based on the individual with whom they are meeting, rather than their assumptions of that person.

Writing center scholars argue that consultants’ listening to writers and working toward understanding them can help the consultants decide how to approach the consultation, including how to interact with each writer. Diana Torres Cardeñas stresses how listening can assist with consultants’ assessment and the planning of consultations (91-92). Janet Fishbain similarly finds that listening provides consultants with useful information for planning by helping consultants understand what writers think about their assignment, their writing, and their writing abilities (10-11). According to Valentine, consultant guidebooks see listening as “helping tutors to gain insight or information about the writer and their writing and thereby helping the tutor decide on an approach to take in the conference and to balance the amount of help given” (102). Consultants also need to listen in order to learn how the writers want to approach the session (Seckendorf).

Collaborating with a writer to plan the consultation could not happen without this attempt at understanding.

This planning is not limited to the initial stages of the consultation. Listening to understand throughout the session can help writer and consultant modify approach when appropriate. Listening gives the consultant feedback, helping them assess and reassess (Fishbain 11-12). Brian J. Fallon goes so far as to argue that “listening is the only way to discern whether or not tutoring is doing any good” (118).

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76 Listening can also provide writers insight into consultation approach, but that perspective is not covered in the literature.
My study more deeply explores the importance of listening to understand and of attending to difference as ways of deciding how to approach the consultation. Consultants Liz and Josh in particular raised this in our interviews and demonstrated it in their consultations. According to Liz, she paid attention to what she learned, through listening, about her “writer in their context.” She then very consciously used this information to craft an approach. In her words, “I really tried to just completely focus in on what he was saying and tried to apply it in my brain to how I’d approach the session, how I would address his questions, how I would work with him.”

Liz worked with John, an older writer who had been out of school for 50 years. At the beginning of their consultation, John discussed the assignment and the course, but he also placed this in a larger context, explaining his background and why he had returned to higher education in the first place. A math and science major when an undergraduate, John also earned an associate degree in computer programming. Many years later, his sister “pressed” him to take courses at UofL, and, at the time of the consultation, he had already audited one or two courses the semester before. Now, though, John felt a bit lost in his humanities class, and he came to the Writing Center for help with a paper. He had not written one in 50 years and was worried about how genre conventions might have changed.

Particularly because John had been so forthcoming about his background, Liz was able to listen and then, she said, “form a mental picture of [him].” Doing this, however, required more than just hearing his words. Liz also had to be aware of differences and similarities between her and John and between John and other writers. For example, John made it clear that he was a nontraditional student. Until the previous semester, he had not
taken classes for quite some time. Liz could draw from her personal experience because she too had been a nontraditional student as an undergraduate, but she also had to think about how John, as distinct from other writers, might perceive and approach academia. Based on her experience, Liz believed that nontraditional students tended to be more comfortable asking for something—such as for the session to move in a particular direction—because, for nontraditional students, “the help is not offered to you . . . The services are not geared towards you . . . [Y]ou have to take it for yourself in some ways.” Liz could then refer to this foreknowledge when making decisions about the session. On the other hand, she also had to be aware that there were differences between her and John, including, but far from limited to, age.

By listening, Liz created her “mental picture,” concentrating on John as a “STEM guy” and as a nontraditional student. She had a specific process for how she used this information, based in part on similarities and differences. Listening to John talk about the class and the assignment, she tried to figure out his strengths and weaknesses, and thus his needs. She explained that “STEM majors often kind of need that multistep situation, the clear, direct instructions. I imagine them kind of like APA style. They’re just like, ‘Get to the point. Tell me what is going on here.’” Based on this, Liz worked to make straightforward, firm points in the session. She also paid attention to John’s discomfort, as a nontraditional student, with academia, and she “tried to give him that reassurance that [she] felt like he was seeking.” She decided, “I needed to be a generous listener, and I needed to make sure that he felt some form of confidence.”

77 I experienced this myself during the interview with John. When he felt that he had thoroughly responded to a question and had nothing more to say, he would prod us forward, using prompts like “That’s probably enough. You can ask me something different.”
Here, Liz was faced with that challenge of drawing on generalized foreknowledge while also attending to the individuality of the current context. She had to try to think beyond her own perspectives and be aware that her assumptions might not apply. All of this then informed her understanding of John’s strengths and needs. I do not claim that Liz or anyone else could be completely aware of their preconceptions or know exactly which foreknowledge to use in a situation. Rather, I suggest that part of listening is to try.

Josh described a past session in which he similarly worked to understand a writer and their context through listening and then used this understanding to decide how to approach the session. Speaking of this previous consultation, Josh said,

И had one session, this was a very powerful session for me. . . . [T]he writer had all of these terrible comments from the professor. They weren’t necessarily malicious but they definitely weren’t encouraging or nice or edifying, and . . . if we were ever going to get to the writing, if we were ever going to actually be able to address it in a way in which she wasn’t completely anxious, and it was going to be productive, there first had to be a discussion about the anxiety or a discussion about the frustration or the disappointment. And so I feel like listening enabled me to hear what she was feeling and hear what she was saying but then also be able to engage it in a productive way. So obviously it wouldn’t have been appropriate to just immediately jump into the paper, right, like that, and I only knew that because I was willing to listen and be aware of what was going on with her.

Because Josh listened, he thought that they should first discuss the writer’s emotions instead of going straight into discussing the text, as is perhaps more typical in a consultation. Josh explained that working with a writer must begin with understanding:

If your job is to meet the person where they are, to sort of know what their concerns are, then you first have to hear them, and I feel like that’s what listening enables you to do, is you’re able to hear them in such a way that you hear their anxieties, whether they’re attached to the assignment . . . or background or whether or not they have some stigma about the Writing Center.

In other words, understanding is key to consultations, and listening facilitates this understanding.
Both Liz and Josh thus listened to their writer in order to better understand. This went beyond comprehension of the writers’ communication (which itself can be challenging): they attended to similarities and differences between them and the writer and between that writer and writers with whom they had worked previously. Liz and Josh processed and interpreted that communication in an effort to learn more about the writer, and they then actively considered how this might affect the session. Liz paid particular attention to the writer’s background and Josh to the writer’s emotions. This enabled them to make informed decisions about how to approach the session, including how to approach the writer.

To quote Abigail once again, “[I]f we want to know our writers, our default mode must be one that listens before speaking.” In order to do this, to effectively listen to understand, we must attend to similarity and difference so that we can work toward moving beyond our preconceptions to know the actual person.

**Listening to Strengthen Writer Development**

In addition to helping guide approach, consultants’ listening can also help writers bring out their own knowledge and ideas. As Susan Harpham McClure puts it, listening is one skill that consultants use “to help the student writers help themselves” (iv). By functioning as an audience, consultants can help writers to better understand their own thoughts and then, ideally, to complicate and strengthen those thoughts.

In this way, the consultant is often conceptualized as a sounding board or as a mirror. A quick Google search for “writing center” and “sounding board” led to a number of writing center webpages (e.g., “Consultation”; “Faculty”; “Get”; “Thesis”; “Undergraduate”; “Writing”) that present serving as a “sounding board” as one function
of consultants. The understood, everyday connotation of *sounding board* in this context is “a person or group on whom one tries out an idea or opinion as a means of evaluating it” (“sounding board”). Somewhat similarly, the idea of consultant as mirror involves reflective listening: listening to the writer explain their ideas and then sending those ideas back to them, helping the writer better see their thoughts. Alexandra Marie Burghardt finds that reflective listening provides a basis for discussion, leads to an increase in writer enthusiasm, and helps writers gain a better understanding of their thoughts (2, 3).

Consultant as mirror, compared to consultant as sounding board, takes a more objective stance to the content being reflected: it is a restatement of the writer’s idea rather than an assessment. Still, both of these representations of consultants demonstrate one way that consultants can help writers expand their understanding, even when the consultants themselves might not understand.

In my study, I found that consultants’ acting as audience did facilitate increased writer understanding. However, the mirror and sounding board metaphors need to be complicated to consider listening to be an active process and the consultant listener to be a complex individual who differs from the writer. First, listening is a form of creation. Communication scholar Lisbeth Lipari, informed by Gemma Corradi Fiumara, refers to listening as “midwifery” (*Listening* 199), and Fiumara explains that “others may understand our questions and our true intentions better—that others may help us give birth to our own thoughts” (qtd. in Lipari 187). The listener actively works with the speaker to help create something new.

Second, listening involves interpretation, and this interpretation depends on perspective, on differences between consultant and writer. Within a theater context, Alice
Raynor urges us to complicate the common understanding of audience as homogenous entity, as “an aggregate of individuals that together constitute a larger yet still singular individuality” (3). And even one person does not provide a singular, unchanging audience: “[t]he individual hears with varying capacities, from varying positions, from differing interests, from one moment to the next” (4). Each consultant is a multiplicity that differs from the writer.

The sounding board metaphor refers to the structure placed behind an orator to focus and increase sound (“sounding board”). Similarly, a mirror returns light at the same angle at which it hit. But the consultant’s role is not to merely repeat the writer’s words at a higher volume or similar cant. The conceptualizations of consultant as mirror or as sounding board thus unintentionally mask that listening is a process of meaning making and that the consultant is an individual with their own thoughts, beliefs, and experiences.

Using the examples of two consultations—those of Abigail and LaShondra and of Beth and Kathryn—I argue that we should think of consultants as prisms rather than as mirrors or sounding boards. Prisms better account for the interpretation and perspective that listening involves. The refraction that takes place in prisms suggests the effort that occurs as a consultant works to interpret and understand, as well as the consultant’s unique positionality. When light enters a prism, it bends according to the prism’s nature. The prism changes the light’s properties—direction, wavelength, speed—and the light that emerges from the prism is not the same light that entered it. Similarly, when consultants act as audience, they do not bounce back the writers’ words and ideas but rather interpret those words and ideas and share them slightly changed. More, consultants have facets and angles, and their understanding or their approach to understanding may
change depending on how the light hits. When serving as an audience to the writer, then, consultants do not reflect but refract.

LaShondra and Abigail’s consultation serves as an example. Abigail, consultant, helped LaShondra better understand and uncover her ideas by serving as her audience. Abigail and LaShondra met to discuss a draft of an annotated bibliography, which was an early step in LaShondra’s thesis for her MFA in performance. Her thesis explored how music can help actors find their character. LaShondra wanted to think more about some of the sources that she had listed as citations but not yet annotated, so she and Abigail spent some time brainstorming, which Abigail described as “let’s explore what’s in your brain.” In Abigail’s words, “we went through those [sources], and she pretty much just talked out loud to me about what the sources were and how she thought they would relate to her research, so kind of like an oral annotated bibliography to me.” As the “recipient of the brainstorming,” Abigail gave LaShondra room to think and then share those thoughts. Abigail, as she put it, assisted LaShondra by allowing LaShondra to “voice her ideas” because “sometimes it helps just to say these things out loud.”

As it stands, this description of Abigail’s actions supports the sounding board or mirror metaphors, but Abigail did more than reflect LaShondra’s ideas: there was the added element of interpretation. By listening to LaShondra’s ideas and then explaining her own understanding of those ideas, Abigail helped LaShondra become aware of other interpretations and use this to strengthen her writing. At one point in the consultation, LaShondra read her annotated bibliography entry about a book on the song “Dancing in the Street.” Abigail then shared her understanding of that entry: “Okay, so, what I’m hearing is . . .” Comparing Abigail’s explanation to what LaShondra had intended
prompted LaShondra to further explore and explain what she was trying to communicate. This led to further discussion, and LaShondra began taking notes right away. Explaining her ideas to Abigail and hearing Abigail restate these ideas seemed to give LaShondra further insight into her argument, and perhaps into how to express it.

At another point in the consultation, when Abigail did not understand how one of the sources related to the thesis, LaShondra ended up brainstorming connections, which she could then include in her annotated bibliography. In LaShondra’s words, she came to the Writing Center not only to “to talk [Abigail] through some ideas” in order to explore what she currently had in her annotated bibliography, but also to expand on that and “talk[] her through further ideas on where I would like to take my annotated bibliography from there.” Hearing Abigail’s understanding as an audience helped LaShondra to better understand what her writing was communicating and, perhaps, what it was missing, as well as to prompt her to continue exploring these ideas.

Such interactions are not just acts of reflection, where the consultant—a mirror or sounding board—bounces back the writer’s ideas. Instead, the consultant is a prism. They encourage the writer to emit their ideas as a way of increasing awareness and, ideally, understanding of these thoughts, and the consultants then go a step further, taking in these ideas and reemitting them in a slightly different form, in some way changed by the consultant’s perspectives, knowledge, and interpretation. Consultants take in writers’ thoughts, refracting them through their different perspectives, different angles, and then produce their own unique interpretation for the writer to explore.

Kathryn and Beth’s consultation also supports the idea of consultant as prism and is particularly illustrative of the refraction process as representative of interpretation.
Kathryn came to the consultation to work on a review of three books for a medical rhetoric journal. Kathryn sometimes had difficulty moving her ideas from her head to the paper, and she found that Beth’s listening helped her better understand these ideas. In connection to this understanding, Kathryn brought up the idea of translation:

I sometimes struggle with how to put my research and ideas into writing . . . and so the best writing center relationships I have are with people who are able to listen to me talk (I talk through my ideas more clearly than I do in writing), and then the consultant helps me translate what I said into words that fit the parameters of whatever document I am writing. . . . Listening is a key part because the tutor needs to listen to what I am directly saying but also help me see what I am not saying in my writing, or when I talk, to help me get my thoughts in order.

Beth did not merely bounce back Kathryn’s ideas. Reflecting the same ideas would not be as effective in helping Kathryn better understand. Instead, the ideas need to be translated through Beth’s perspective so that Kathryn can better see (and thus understand) what she wanted to communicate.

For example, in her draft, Kathryn argued that one of the books, which discusses the author’s experiences with endometriosis, “[i]n some ways . . . highlights the personal as political, but in others, it sometimes seems to elide [the author’s] emotional and childhood traumas with her illness experience” without really delving into the complexities and implications of this connection. Kathryn was concerned that, due to the lack of complication of this connection, the book (likely unintentionally) supported the problematic argument that endometriosis results in part from the psychological. After Kathryn explained this to Beth, Beth offered an interpretation: “[The book] explores a somewhat tenuous connection between personal trauma and an experience of illness, while maybe making that link more strongly than other people who may have also experienced trauma would not connect with their physical illness.” Kathryn took notes as
Beth spoke and added that this is what she had been trying to communicate in her text but had been currently only “dancing around.” By listening to Kathryn and then sharing her own perspective, Beth helped Kathryn better understand the argument that she had been trying to make, perhaps assisting Kathryn in expressing that argument more clearly.

When consultants listen, then, they act as prisms, not sounding boards or mirrors. They help draw out writers’ ideas so that the writers can better recognize and understand them. When a consultant refracts these ideas, the differences between the consultant and the writer help the writer experience their thoughts in a new light and thus better understand. Serving as a prism in this way can help writers uncover inchoate ideas and understandings.  

This idea of prism can be taken one step further by applying it to the writing center itself. In our interview, LaShondra explained that she deliberately used consultations to explore her ideas from different perspectives. A frequent user of the UofL Writing Center, she intentionally made appointments with different consultants in order to learn their different understandings of her writing. Different consultants would interpret and share her ideas in different ways, helping her consider a variety of understandings and thus make her writing and ideas stronger. As she said, “I think it’s very valuable to have a spectrum of people look at it from different angles.” I have been describing individual consultants as prisms, whose viewpoints and contexts produce a spectrum of understandings. LaShondra suggests the writing center itself as a prism, with each consultant and context as a facet. The concept of writing center as prism illustrates

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78 Again, it is worth noting that any listener—including writers—can serve as a prism. However, because the focus of writing center sessions is helping the writer grow, I focus on that dynamic here.

79 Differences between consultants that LaShondra took into account include gender and race.
the writing center as a means for interpretation and understanding, which can facilitate the writer’s strengthening of themselves and their writing.

**Listening to Collaborate**

In addition to helping guide consultation approach and strengthen writer development, listening to understand facilitates collaboration (e.g., DiPardo 140). As discussed in the previous chapter, collaboration occurs within a consultation when writer and consultant work together toward a common goal, which involves sharing responsibility for the consultation. Listening requires collaboration and also facilitates collaboration in the face of inevitable power imbalance. Here, I focus on collaboration with regard to understanding, rather than power.

Listening to understand helps writer and consultant move forward (or sideways) together. In this vein, Josh, a consultant, discussed how he “want[ed] to work from where the writer is as a person,” but he could only do that if he understood where that was. And because writers do not always know (or know how to express) what they need help with, it is especially important to listen with the intent of understanding.

Abigail’s discussion of brainstorming serves as one example of the necessity of listening to understand for collaboration. She told me,

> The consultant must listen to the writer’s initial ideas/concerns/fears in order to ask questions that lead the writer to expand on her ideas and come to realizations. The writer must listen to the consultant’s guidance in order to direct the brainstorming in a productive direction. Without listening, the consultant and writer might come up with ideas on their own rather than together.

Listening to understand is necessary for writer and consultant to work together, rather than wandering in different directions.

And, as discussed in the previous chapter, LaShondra felt this way with Abigail—they were on the same page, moving toward the same end. She also appreciated that this
end was driven by her paper and by her and Abigail together, rather than just by Abigail. LaShondra said, “I like that she listened to all of my ideas thoroughly, and then we pushed in the same direction, as opposed to having their own thought . . . and pushing my paper in a different direction. And sometimes it’s a great direction to go in, but it was not the intention. It was just not where I was originally taking the assignment.” Abigail listened in order to better understand LaShondra, including LaShondra’s preferences, and used this to inform the session. This allowed them to collaborate, to move together.

Collaboration is impeded by a lack of listening to understand. In Liz’s words, “You can just kind of talk at each other instead of with each other,” and, according to Beth, “If you’re not listening to each other, you’re looking at two different things.” There is a pull between writer and consultant.

LaShondra had sometimes experienced this pull in regard to ownership (agency) over her writing. In some consultations, consultants wanted her to take her paper in the direction that the consultant wanted to move in, pushing her to write her paper about the Whopper instead of the Big Mac. If the consultants had listened to understand her, they would know that, even if the Whopper was “a great direction to go in, . . . it was not the intention.” LaShondra came to the Writing Center for feedback, but not this type of feedback. “I think it’s just great to have a second opinion,” she said, “but they can’t really give that if we don’t start with the same page of what we’re doing with it.” In contrast to Abigail, these consultants made unilateral decisions about LaShondra’s writing that had more to do with their wants than LaShondra’s needs. In LaShondra’s terms, these
consultants listened to respond rather than to understand, and that hampered collaboration.⁸⁰

**Try It at Home: Listening to the ‘Irrelevant’ and Questioning**

Listening to understand thus contributes to consultations by helping consultants make informed decisions about approach, strengthening writers’ understanding of their own thoughts, and facilitating collaboration. The two major strategies for listening to understand that emerged from the coding process are listening to that which might seem irrelevant and asking questions.

*Listening to the “Irrelevant”*

Liz discussed how attending to writers’ ostensibly tangential talk can facilitate a deeper understanding of the writers and their needs. This can offer insight into what is unique about each writer, which the consultant might not otherwise be aware of.

At the beginning of her and John’s session, John spent a while discussing the context of his visit. He acknowledged this in our interview, saying, “Liz was quite patient. I was trying to give her background, so just rolling through lots of stuff.” Liz learned a lot by listening to this background, and this greatly contributed to her understanding of John, helping her to make those informed decisions discussed earlier in this chapter. In her words,

>[W]hen he came to me and the first thing he started was talking about his classes and how he was handling his class, I think sometimes [consultants] would consider that to be very irrelevant information, but for me it was a starting point to understand his self-confidence, his understanding of his academic abilities, and just gave me a better window into his needs as a writer.

⁸⁰Again, this is based solely on LaShondra’s retelling of such sessions.
Listening to John’s account of the class and his return to academia made it clear to Liz that he was not comfortable with writing. It was through listening to what Liz described as what “often times people would discard . . . as not being relevant” that she learned about John’s strengths and weaknesses, about his being a “STEM guy.” Listening renders this tangential talk particularly meaningful. Through openness and attempt at understanding, Liz could listen for information about the writer hidden in these ostensible digressions that she could then use to best work with him.

In her discussion of how to build off of current context rather than past assumptions, Kate Pahl argues for the importance of listening for what might otherwise go unnoticed as a way of better understanding and operating within the current context (142-43). This is in accord with Becky Bolander and Marcia Harrington’s argument that rather than considering such talk “aside[s]” (1), “digression[s]” (2), “crevices” (2), “[e]xtraneous” (4), consultants should explore what that talk might teach them about the writer. Bolander and Harrington refer to this as “gold”: “those valuable insights, glimmers of deeper understanding, or that sense of ‘aha!’ we realize as we reflect either during or after the tutorial” (2).

Bolander and Harrington give the example of a consultation in which the writer came in for help rewriting a literature analysis but ended up spending the time discussing her frustrations with her job as a nurse. The consultant initially viewed this as tangential and felt “anxious to get back to the substantive part that would yield the results [they] both desired” (1). As the consultation progressed, however, what initially seemed irrelevant in fact offered the consultant a path to better understanding the writer’s writing background. The writer began talking about the charts that nurses fill out regularly, which
call for objective, factual writing. Listening to the writer discuss this genre, the consultant realized part of the trouble the writer was having with her paper: the analysis assignment called for opinion, but the writer, due to her familiarity with nurse charts, was used to writing fact. The consultant was able to discuss this with the writer, and they used this insight to together figure out next steps (1-2).

Bolander and Harrington argue that writers enter our centers with full lives of which we are unaware and which surely impact their writing. “Part of the tutor’s role,” they write, “is to discover ways to transfer those experiences into useful and accessible writing strategies” (2). Thus, part of listening to understand includes listening to what might not seem relevant at first but may actually reveal information that can help the consultant and writer better work together.

Listening to the seemingly tangential occurred during Kathryn and Beth’s consultation. There were times when, instead of directly discussing the book review, they would talk about Kathryn’s chronic illness. Though this diverted the consultation from the actual text, it contributed to Beth’s understanding of Kathryn’s background and perspective on illness, which then affected Kathryn’s writing about books on chronic illness. The book review was not about Kathryn’s illness, per se, but it was directly informed by it. For example, having a better understanding of which parts of the book review emerged directly from Kathryn’s experience helped Beth think about whether that content was something that readers would find useful. This seeming side discussion contributed to Beth’s understanding of the book review and of Kathryn, which helped her provide more useful feedback.
During our interview, Liz, partly joking, mostly serious, raised an interesting question: Is there anything irrelevant in writing center sessions? She wondered whether there is anything that does not “either shape your conception of the writer or shape your conception of the writing process.” I would argue no: listening to this information helps consultants learn what they might not have known otherwise, which could be instrumental for making informed decisions about the consultation. Information may be more helpful or less helpful, but never completely irrelevant.

This does not mean, however, that all topics should be pursued or that they should be pursued to the same degree: their relevance and significance can differ. Particularly given the time limitations of consultations, the consultant must prioritize what directions to encourage and what to gently end. Further, listening to such topics has diminishing returns: after a point, the amount that the consultant learns by listening becomes lower and lower. The consultant must decide, in the moment, when what is learned from this topic is less valuable than what could be learned by doing something else.81

It is through listening to understand that we can find meaning in the seemingly irrelevant. Encouraging writers to communicate their thoughts, rather than guiding them right back to their text, requires a sharing of control and an openness to learning more about the writers (not to mention an openness to the idea that this somewhat tangential topic will be worth the time). Doing this in an intentional manner helps consultants learn more about each writer’s context and thus contributes to consultants’ understanding of the writer.

81 This does not take into account other reasons for letting the writer talk about the seemingly irrelevant, such as giving the writer an opportunity to vent.
**Questioning**

A second strategy for listening to understand is asking questions. Questioning has proven integral to understanding for my participants—writers and consultants alike. The use of questions in consultations—which are often described as dialogic and Socratic—has been much touted (Brooks; Cofer; Harris, “Collaboration”; North; Scott et al.; Smith; Thompson and Mackiewicz), so discussion of questions in a writing center context was not a surprise, but my participants raised this topic in connection with listening much more frequently than I had expected, and this idea of asking questions as a means of listening has not been deeply explored in scholarship.

The primary connection that the participants made between listening and asking questions was that asking questions facilitates listening to understand. Some participants even described asking questions as a part of listening. For Josh, listening necessitates engagement, and one form of engagement is asking questions. When giving advice on how to listen well, Abigail suggested that the listener “ask questions, and when you ask questions, and when they answer, think of more questions to ask, and think of more questions to ask.” Beth also found questions integral to listening because they give us something to listen to: “[I]n order to listen well, the student has to be speaking, and in order to get them to speak in a way that reflects deep critical thought, I think you have to ask a good question.” Along those lines, John’s advice for how consultants could better listen to writers was to coax them to “[a]sk me a question back.”

In this section, I explore how asking questions supports the three major functions of listening discussed earlier in this chapter: facilitating consultant understanding, writer development, and collaboration. I focus on consultants’ (rather than writers’) questions
because that is what participants—both consultants and writers—discussed most. This is consistent with the finding that consultants ask the vast majority of the questions in writing center consultations (Thompson and Mackiewicz 45).

As I discuss asking questions, I use Thompson and Mackiewicz’s explanation of question (40-41). Thompson and Mackiewicz differentiate between what a question does and how a question is phrased. For the sake of this study, I concentrate on question purpose and effect. This tells me more about the relationship between questions and listening than would determining whether a question follows the more typical interrogative syntax (“What do you mean here?”) or a noninterrogative syntax (“Tell me more about what this means.”) For this study, then, a question is simply something that “invites some reply from another person” (40).

Thompson and Mackiewicz break down questions into five different types, three of which hold particular relevance to this discussion: questions of common ground, questions of knowledge deficit, and leading and scaffolding questions. Questions of common ground try to learn more about what the other person “needs, wants, knows, and understands about an assignment” (42). With questions of knowledge deficit, the asker seeks to learn something that they genuinely do not know. The third relevant question type is leading and scaffolding questions. A leading question attempts to get the listener to reach a particular conclusion that is held by the speaker. These are typically yes or no questions. A scaffolding question, on the other hand, is less directive and is meant to expand the listener’s thoughts (53-55).

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82 The two other question types are social coordination questions (discussing consultation actions) and conversation control questions (Thompson and Mackiewicz 43). These are less relevant to my topic, plus Thompson and Mackiewicz find that these types of questions occur relatively infrequently in consultations (47).
These question types connect to different factors of listening to understand. All question types apply to all factors, but knowledge deficit and common ground questions seem most relevant to increasing consultant understanding. Scaffolding and leading questions connect most with facilitating writer development. All three question types come into play with collaboration.

Guiding Consultation Approach: Common Ground and Knowledge Deficit Questions

As with listening in general, asking questions can help consultants learn more about writers. Consultants can do their best to listen to figure out what writers want or need, but that is not always the best interpretation or the best focus for the session. Asking questions facilitates listening both by encouraging writers to speak and by directing them to specific information that the consultant wants to know. In my study, the types of questions that were asked to facilitate consultant understanding (or that had the effect of facilitating consultant understanding) were common ground questions and knowledge deficit questions.

Many consultants mentioned asking open-ended questions of common ground, particularly at the beginning of sessions, in order to learn more about the writer. For example, toward the beginning of their consultation, Quaid asked Chris, the writer, “Where are you in the process?” Such questions, according to Josh, “prompt [writers] to give me more information so that I can further process and put together a bigger picture before I try to jump in.” As Beth put it, if we ask the “right” question, the writer’s “answer will inform the direction in which we take the conversation.”

According to Christopher, he would ask the same general question in every session: “What are you trying to do?” The way he phrased that question, though,
depended on the context, on “the assignment, who [the writer is], and what apparently they’re trying to do.” This question is the first step in the development of the consultation, and, in Christopher’s words, “[a]ll other questions are follow-up questions.” Similarly, Liz would often begin sessions with first-year students with the simple question: “How’s your semester going?” She would then ask different follow-up questions, depending on the writers’ responses, and this information helped inform how she approached each session.

As Abigail explained, when working with a new writer, “I don’t know their background, I don’t know their knowledge or their skills or . . . I don’t know their main needs.” To learn about this, one must “ask all these questions to figure it out.” While working with LaShondra on an annotated bibliography for her thesis, Abigail asked clarification questions to better understand the context in which the consultation was taking place. She first asked where LaShondra was in the overall thesis process: “So with your thesis, do you have a main question or hypothesis that you’re working towards, or are you just kind of just starting the research?” She also asked about LaShondra’s level of familiarity with the annotated bibliographies genre in order to figure out how to approach the session.

Vanessa brought a response essay for her honors English class to her consultation with Christopher. At the beginning of the session, Christopher offered her three options of how to approach the session: she could read the paper out loud, and they would pause as topics for discussion arose; she could read it out loud and pause at a predetermined point in order to discuss what she had just read; or she could read it out loud all the way through, and they would then discuss the piece in its entirety. When she expressed no
preference, Christopher asked her two questions about her essay in order to make an informed choice about session approach: “Is it argumentative?” and “How long is it?” He did not just fire off these questions, though. After each question, he waited for her response, ostensibly listening to that response and using it to choose his next question and his choice of approach. Likely due in part to the paper’s brevity (two pages), he recommended that they read it all the way through and then discuss.

Though the above examples focus on the beginning of consultations, common ground questions are useful throughout. Another, generally more pointed, use of questions of common ground is to find out whether the current approach is helpful and whether the writer understands what the consultant said. As Josh put it, “I was trying to ask [Kevin] questions to make sure that we were going in the directions he wanted to or making sure that he was understanding those specific places that we talked locally.” And Katie brought up the importance of directly asking writers if they are understanding consultant input.

Consultants also ask knowledge deficit questions—questions to which they legitimately do not know the answer—in order to better understand. Josh pointed out that consultants often work with writers in other disciplines and with advanced texts, like dissertations. Consultants may not be familiar with the subject, the lexicon, or even the genre. They therefore may need to ask questions about what the writer is working on in order to better understand it. This was the case in Beth and Kathryn’s consultation, which revolved around the topic of disability. Kathryn, the writer, had personal experience with disability and an academic background in disability studies, whereas Beth identified as “able-bodied” and was less familiar with scholarship on disability. Because of this, Beth
told me, “[T]here were a lot of context questions about illnesses or parts of the field that I have to ask questions about.”

In LaShondra and Abigail’s consultation, Abigail asked about the argument of the thesis itself. Before she could help judge how relevant the sources were to LaShondra’s project, she first needed to understand what that project was. Further, because Abigail was less familiar with the annotated bibliography genre and because LaShondra did not have detailed guidelines for the annotated bibliography or the thesis, Abigail frequently inquired about requirements, often doing so before making a suggestion. For example, LaShondra asked her whether the annotated bibliography should be single-spaced. Abigail began to respond but then interrupted herself to ask whether LaShondra would be turning this in. She then used LaShondra’s response to decide on her suggestion (“I don’t think it really matters”).

Of course, sometimes it is the writer doing the questioning, often in order to find out something new or to ask the consultant to clarify. These are also knowledge deficit questions. David, who strongly tied understanding to listening, argued that if writers do not understand something, they must ask the consultant, or else they “miss the point of listening.” In keeping with this, he often asked clarification questions during his consultation (e.g., he asked Josh to clarify when to use or versus and). Liz, too, recommended this for writers, suggesting that they “seek[] out those clarifying questions, restating, making sure that [they] understand it, that [they]’ve comprehended it.”

In this way, then, asking common ground and knowledge deficit questions can help consultants better understand the writer and the context, and this can facilitate informed decisions about the consultation.
Strengthening Writer Development: Scaffolding and Leading Questions

As discussed earlier, listening can help the writer develop, with the consultant functioning as a prism, interpreting and re-presenting the writer’s ideas. Asking questions is one such form of interpretation, helping the writer to gain awareness, further explore ideas, and express these ideas in new ways. The relevant question type here is scaffolding and leading questions.

Tutoring scholarship connects asking questions with generating higher order thinking. M.E. McWilliams and Jack Truschel both tie questions to Bloom’s taxonomy, which hierarchizes different domains of thinking, from least to most complex. These domains—typically represented as a pyramid—are remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating, respectively (Truschel 63). McWilliams and Truschel suggest that consultants ask writers questions that are appropriate for the writer’s current domain in Bloom’s.

Truschel also discusses how questions can help writers move upward on the pyramid by taking into account Lev Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development. The zone of proximal development is a means of helping the learner develop. It refers to the area just beyond the learner’s current capacity, an area that the learner can reach with assistance. One way for consultants to help writers move forward is by scaffolding their learning to function in the zone of proximal development, and one way to do that is through asking questions. Asking writers questions can lead to higher order thinking, moving the writer further within the relevant Bloom domain, or perhaps to the next domain (Truschel 66).83

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83 For a list of questions geared to each level of Bloom’s Taxonomy, see the appendix in Truschel.
There is a clear connection between scaffolding questions and the overall concept of scaffolding. Scaffolding questions provide support but leave the person being questioned the room to do the work. By asking that person to think and contribute, scaffolding questions aim to facilitate that person’s development (Thompson and Mackiewicz 42-43, 53). These questions tend to be less directive, more “negotiatory” (54), meant to expand thinking rather than direct it. Along these lines, Gary Jaeger distinguishes between guiding writers to a particular end and to “some end” (emphasis added), arguing that we should not direct writers to specific conclusions, but we should still guide them enough to move them forward, while remaining “willing to discover [conclusions] alongside them.” In other words, scaffolding questions are more open-ended than leading questions.

However, leading questions can also scaffold writer development. Leading questions attempt to drive the writer to a specific conclusion that the consultant has in mind, as in, “Do you think that you should switch these two paragraphs?” With this question, the consultant is actually recommending this change. But that recommendation still supports the writer as they work to strengthen their knowledge and their writing. Even though it is pretty clear which choice the consultant thinks that the writer should make, it is still a choice (more so than if the consultant said, “Let’s go ahead and switch these two paragraphs”), which calls for at least a little reflection.84

And though scaffolding questions are more open than leading questions, they, too, dictate some level of direction. The scaffolding element of scaffolding questions necessarily “constrains, and therefore directs” response (Thompson and Mackiewicz 55).

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84 A follow-up question—such as “Why?”—could further facilitate thinking and learning.
For example, in trying to help a writer understand that they used the wrong part of speech, a consultant may scaffold a question by asking “What part of speech should be here?” rather than just “Do you notice anything about this sentence?” By offering those choices, the consultant provides the writer with some support, as is appropriate for the zone of proximal development. At the same time, these choices direct the writer to certain conclusions, though the writer has a choice between them. Scaffolding questions thus provide some degree of directivity, though less than that of leading questions.

Leading and scaffolding questions form a continuum, not a binary. Both leading and scaffolding questions are directive to some degree, and both facilitate writer development to some degree. What changes is the amount of scaffolding: leading questions are more directive than scaffolding questions. The level of scaffolding has an inverse relationship with the level of directiveness.

The consultant participants never explicitly referenced Bloom or Vygotsky, but they did discuss how questions can facilitate writer development. Like McWilliams and Truschel, Beth explained that questions are meant to inspire thinking. Abigail similarly hoped to use questions to “lead writers to maybe think in ways they hadn’t thought of before, or realize they have ideas that they didn’t know they had.” According to Abigail, when a writer is earlier in their process, working to develop a topic, Abigail would often ask what she referred to as “personal questions”—such as “What do you want to write about?,” “Why is this important to you?,” and “What are you fascinated by?”—as a way to prompt such realizations.

In the observed consultation, Abigail used questions to help LaShondra “find her ideas, understand her purpose better.” For example, to help LaShondra think about why
she chose a particular source and how that source might contribute to the thesis, Abigail asked a question that was more scaffolding than leading: “Are there any other ways that you think it might be, or directions it might point you in, or like any other— How . . .” Abigail then crossed her arms and gazed in the direction of the wall, seemingly thinking about her question herself. This question was meant to bring LaShondra to a specific place in the sense of learning more about why she chose that source, but it was still fairly open because Abigail did not restrict the question to a choice between particular reasons.

In response, LaShondra explained that this source discussed how music stimulates the brain and sticks in memory, even for people who have difficulty with memory (such as those with Alzheimer’s or dementia). This connection between music and memory supported LaShondra’s idea that music can help an actor recall and enter a character. By the end of this explanation, LaShondra had not only clarified the relevance of this source but also expressed that it was actually what had inspired her project in the first place. LaShondra had not drawn this connection in the annotated bibliography, and this point might not have emerged had it not been sparked by Abigail’s question.

In our interview, LaShondra discussed how being questioned (in this consultation and others) helped her further explore her ideas. She viewed consultants who asked challenging questions as surrogate teachers, in that their questions helped her decide which ideas to develop further, as well as other changes that she should make. She explained, “[W]hen I get this pushback now, I feel like, oh, this is a step further, this is a step further, this is something I didn’t think about. So, when I turn in that paper, I know . . . I’ve unpacked every idea. So, I really appreciate that.” Questions scaffolded the
development of her writing by directing her to an extent while also giving her room to choose what changes to make and how to make them.

Questions can help writers come to a better understanding of not just their ideas, but also their needs (or their perception of their needs). Beth said, “[T]here’s the saying you don’t know what you don’t know, so a lot of students won’t know what they need, and they won’t tell you what they need until you learn how to ask certain types of questions.” Kathryn similarly used questions to draw out writer needs:

[O]ne thing that I always do is I say, “Okay, what would you like to work on today,” and [writers] usually, you know, take out the thing or they talk about the assignment. Then I ask, “Tell me about the assignment,” if they haven’t, and then I’ll say, “What would you like to look at, what would you like my feedback on,” and that’s when they say grammar or flow or whatever, and then I say, “Okay, anything else.” And then they have to think a little bit harder about if there is anything else, and sometimes that gets into the things that are more interesting . . .

By asking questions, Kathryn pushed against writers’ surface explanation of their needs, asking them to dig deeper. Even if the writer does not have a name for what they want help with, questions can help consultant and writer move toward a better understanding of it. And if the writer does not know what they want help with, then the consultant’s questions can help them work together to try to figure it out. The discussions that result from these questions can help the writers learn more about what they know but do not know how to say, or what they do not know at all.

_Collaborating: All Question Types_

Questions also promote collaboration. Common ground and knowledge deficit questions facilitate collaboration by facilitating understanding. Leading and scaffolding questions are more complicated: they facilitate collaboration but also pose a risk to it.
On the one hand, questions can serve as a form of scaffolding, with the writer and consultant working together to help the writer learn. The Socratic (and Rogerian) method, in which consultants ask the writer questions to draw out what the writer already knows, is likely one of the first things that comes to mind when thinking of writing center consultations. This method can help writer and consultant create an open space that they inhabit, building meaning together. Liz was aware of this kind of questioning in her consultation with John. In their consultation, guided by John’s questions, Liz and John were able to collaborate, to, in her words, “riff off each other and build up ideas.” She told me that, as compared to questions in many classrooms, questions in consultations should not be leading; they are meant to open things up and encourage exploration.

The danger with leading and scaffolding questions, though, is that they may be nondirective in appearance only. Because questions, by definition, “invite[] some reply” (Thompson and Mackiewicz 40), when a consultant asks a question, the response is then in the hands of the writer. It appears that writers are given the control to direct their own answer. However, that may only seem to be the case. As discussed in the previous section, the appearance of questions can bely their function—they may actually be more directive than they seem. Thompson and Mackiewicz state that leading questions “mitigate tutors’ directiveness” (54). Under this view, when a consultant asks something like, “What do you think about revising your thesis statement so that it reflects the order of your main points?,” they bring up the possibility of a change, rather than directing the writer to make that change. However, I would argue that it is not so much the directiveness as the appearance of this directiveness that these questions mitigate. When asking this type of question, even if the consultant intends to offer a neutral choice, the
writer—knowingly or unknowingly—might treat it as an imperative rather than a suggestion.

This issue can be located within the Socratic method itself based on Plato’s presentation of Socrates. Matthew Capdevielle argues that a close look at how Socrates is presented in Plato’s *Gorgias* shows that

> In spite of Socrates’ claim that what he’s doing is posing genuine questions to help his interlocutor “work out his ideas,” he ends up engaging in a sort of caricature of the method. The form of questioning and dialogue remains but the exchange is actually monologic, devolving into a lecture . . . At another point in the dialogue, Socrates even tells his interlocutor what his response should be.

Socrates asked leading questions, sometimes to such an extreme that his questions were, in actuality, answers. Nancy J. Allen makes a similar argument using Plato’s *Phaedrus* and then applies this to two consultant roles: the Authoritarian consultant, who makes specific suggestions based on their own knowledge, and the Inquirer consultant, who follows the Socratic method. Allen argues that the Inquirer is, in fact, not far from the Authoritarian. Both consultant have a “Truth” in mind, and both “lead[] the student to it, either by explicit directions or by guiding questions” (6). In short, the Socratic method is not as straightforwardly open as it may seem, and leading and scaffolding questions can be misleading.

That a question can be directive is not a problem per se. As discussed in the previous chapter, collaboration can occur regardless of level of directiveness. The concern is that level of directiveness should be a conscious choice based on context rather than a kneejerk strategy that has been mistakenly considered nondirective. For example, Susan Blau et al. found that, when working with English languages learners, consultants attempted to be collaborative by asking open questions, when, in reality, they “fell into the trap” of asking questions with only one right answer (33). With English language
learners—who do not always have a native speaker’s knowledge of the language—in particular, these closed questions, mistaken for open ones, can lead to “less of an exploration of ideas and more of a guessing game” (33). Blau et al. give the example of a consultant asking questions to get the writer to arrive at the correct preposition to insert into the phrase “how to ask directions” (33). In this transcription, T stands for tutor and C for client.

T: You’re missing a word. How to ask . . .
G: The?
T: How to ask . . .
C: A?
T: Nope.
C: How to ask directions.
T: For directions. (33)

In this situation, the consultant might have thought that they were being nondirective because they were asking a question, but really it was a closed question (“Which preposition should be used here?”) in search of one response (“For.”). To avoid pseudo-nondirective questions, consultants must be aware that questions can be directive and then choose their phrasing intentionally.

Further, consultants need to pay attention to how questions can mask directiveness for the writer (Hawthorne 2), making it more difficult for them to determine what decision stems from them and what decision stems from the consultant. For example, after suggesting a change in organization, a consultant might ask, “Do you want to move this paragraph over here?” This might seem like an opportunity for the writer to make a choice about their writing, but it could just as easily be intended or interpreted to mean, “You should move that paragraph over here.”

Given the danger of concealed directiveness, consultants and writers should be conscious of how questions function, and questions must be chosen intentionally. When
the questioner makes conscious choices about questions, these questions facilitate consultant understanding, writer development, and collaboration, serving as one way of listening to understand.

**Misunderstanding**

In this chapter, we have discussed how, in order to attempt understanding, we must listen. However, listening to understand is not as simple as merely opening our ears. As argued in the previous chapter, listening requires a renunciation of mastery and control and an attempt to transcend preconceptions. In other words, we must acknowledge that we cannot ever fully understand. 85

**Misunderstanding as Part of Understanding**

Given that we can never fully understand, there will always be some level of misunderstanding. Lipari describes the term *misunderstanding* as “an inescapable aspect of communication” (*Listening* 8). This may seem like an argument against listening: if we can never fully understand, then what’s the point of listening to understand? Actually, though, the argument goes in the other direction: misunderstanding is essential to understanding.

To listen to understand, we must give up our (mis)conception of mastery. Krista Ratcliffe emphasizes the importance of such receptivity in her discussion of one of her four moves of rhetorical listening: “Promoting an understanding of self and other” (*Rhetorical* 27). She describes this as “letting discourses wash over, and around us” (28) and calls for us to “transpose a desire for mastery into a self-conscious desire for

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85 This is particularly true within the constraints of a writing center session, as Abigail pointed out: “Knowing my writer well is deeply important to me as I attempt to help them, but, of course, 50 minutes is not much time to get to know someone.”
receptivity” (29). We aim for a state like John Keats’s Negative Capability: “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats).

This type of understanding differs from the common conceptualization of understanding—comprehension of words—that I discussed in the first paragraph of this chapter. Gurevitch explains this more complex type of understanding as not just “the grasping of what is said in language,” but also “the act of recognizing in another person another center of consciousness” (162). To him, understanding is not a knowing of the other but an acknowledgment of their otherness. He explains it as a “movement from a state of inability to understand to a state of ability to understand” (163). Understanding is not a destination but a constant state of trying.

Misunderstanding is an essential part of this state of trying. Gurevitch differentiates between the “ability to understand” and the “inability to not understand” (163; emphasis added). What we believe is the former is, in reality, often the latter: when we think that we can understand another person, it may actually be that we do not realize that we cannot understand them (162-64). Because our assumptions run deep, we do not realize that we are “taking the other (or ourselves) for granted,” and so we do not recognize our lack of understanding (164).

Misunderstanding helps us recognize the impossibility of full understanding, which then enables us to move toward a deeper understanding, toward the ability to understand. Misunderstanding facilitates listening and understanding by, in Lipari’s words, “inspiring (or frustrating) us to listen more closely to others, to inquire more deeply into their differences, and to question our own already well-formed
understandings of the world. . . [I]t reminds us, again and again, that our conversational partners are truly ‘other’ than us” (*Listening* 8). Misunderstanding emphasizes difference. This helps us realize what we do not know so that we can pursue a better understanding, instead of assuming that we already know it all.

So far, I have treated misunderstanding as an inevitable (and desirable) occurrence, but it can also be conceptualized as a mindset to strive toward, as a welcoming of misunderstanding as an occurrence. To distinguish between occurrence and mindset, I will refer to the latter as (mis)understanding.

Vasudevan refers to (mis)understanding as unknowing, which she describes as a state between knowing and not knowing, as “an act of dwelling in the imaginative space between declarative acts of knowing and not knowing; an invitation to wrest our modes of inquiry and our beings away from the clutches of finite definitions of knowledge and instead rest our endeavours in the beauty of myriad ways of knowing” (1157).

(Mis)understanding involves acknowledging and welcoming the alterity of the other, being aware of what we do not and cannot know, and knowing and trying to know in multiple ways. In other words, the mindset of (mis)understanding requires openness.

Pahl also discusses how openness allows for unknowing. During her time as an ethnographer, Pahl and collaborators created an exhibition of objects lent by families. The families attributed to these objects—which were often nondescript and inexpensive—a great value that the researchers could only begin to understand when the families told the objects’ stories. Pahl explains that the families “own[ed] the knowledge about the story,” and when listening to others’ stories, “it can change us, and it is in that process of change that we experience unknowing, which for the purpose of listening to
stories is the best space to be in” (104). Allowing ourselves to change is in part what allows us to not know.

(Mis)understanding can be thought of as a form of defamiliarization: the recognition of the familiar as strange (Gurevitch 163; Lipari, Listening 185). Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky coined the term defamiliarization to explain the purpose of art: breaking us from our habitual daydream to make us once more aware of life. In Shklovsky’s words,

Automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war. . . . And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. . . . By “enstranging” objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and “laborious.” The perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to its fullest. (5-6)

Lipari, too, emphasizes the importance of seeing the world with new eyes, listening to it with new ears, of “step[ping] outside of the quotidian order of things” (Listening 103). She quotes T. S. Eliot: “And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time” (205). Defamiliarization is a way of becoming aware of what we assume, a way of disrupting our preconceptions.

Though each writing center consultation and writer is unique, there are also similarities, which lead to the need for defamiliarization. These similarities can be exacerbated through various circumstances, such as when a consultant works with a number of writers from the same course. For example, Kathryn discussed how it is not uncommon for consultants to see many of the same type of assignments in a row. (Literacy narratives come to mind.) Seeing the same, or similar, assignments hour after hour, it is easy to sink into the flow of them, to fall into Shklovsky’s habitual daydreams, to, as Kathryn put it, “go into autopilot.” Similarly, Christopher, who had been working
with medical students on personal statements for residency, became used to working with polished texts. He would find himself caught in that “rhythm,” and—from his perspective—he by habit fell into that rhythm during his consultation with Vanessa, even though she was working on a different type of assignment. He felt that he was taking notes and then discussing them as he would when working with medical students on personal statements, rather than doing more to invite Vanessa into the conversation. To break from these circumstances that Kathryn and Christopher discussed—the unthinking assumption of knowing, the automatic thoughts and reactions of which Grimm (*Good*) warns us—we must deeply examine these assumptions and explore them from other perspectives.

In this way, (mis)understanding helps form a space of collaboration and creation in which understanding can evolve. Pahl writes that unknowing “constitutes a reflective and listening space of practice that can hold together disparate groups,” and it is through this unknowing that we can “create a shared epistemological space of practice” (27). In the space created by unknowing, an “as if” space (163) filled with a thousand understandings, meaning—drawn from these many ways of knowing—can be co-created. To do otherwise, “to insist on one,” Lipari says, “is to kill the living movement of understanding” (*Listening* 138). Reaching toward understanding involves this type of collaboration. This means, in Jaeger’s words, that we must be to “be willing to discover . . . alongside [the other].” The space of unknowing created by the listener and cohabitated with the other is a space not for searching for understanding, but for co-creating new understandings.
In this vein, Stephanie L. Kerschbaum explains that collaboration is necessary to work toward understanding (Toward). Given that differences are mutable, relational, and emergent, they can never fully be known. Kerschbaum draws on Ratcliffe’s discussion of the metonymic gap (which I refer to as the space between) to argue that we—self and other, speaker and listener—therefore need to work to be comfortable with “a space of not-knowing” (Kerschbaum 58). Self and other need to work together to build understanding. In her words, “teachers should not aim to know their students as much as willingly participate with them in processes of coming-to-know one another” (59). As we try to understand difference, then, we should approach the process as “learning with,” not “learning about” (57). Self and other collaborate in meaning-making to work toward understanding the differences between them.

More, Kerschbaum proposes listening as an intervention to facilitate this learning with. “Teachers cannot study difference and respond to it by cataloguing or even predicting all the potential differences . . . So what might happen if we learn to listen . . . to difference as it takes shape . . . ?” (66). Through listening and (mis)understanding, consultant and writer can collaborate to work toward better understanding.

(Mis)understanding through Questioning

The thing about (mis)understanding, though, is that it’s hard. Most people are not very good at it and do not find it particularly enjoyable. It is difficult to become aware of our preconceptions and to put them aside. When communicating, shared understanding is generally assumed (Gurevitch 162-63) and is often pursued. As Lipari writes, “our dialogic encounters are typically governed by a search for shared connections and familiarity that confirm our already shaped understandings of ourselves and others, and
the world” (*Listening* 140). Ratcliffe similarly argues that when trying to identify with others, we search for commonalities (*Rhetorical* 32). Such ostensibly shared understandings and characteristics do not challenge us but rather reinforce what we already believe. They do not disrupt our habitus. This is comfortable, and so we seek it out.

(Mis)understanding, on the other hand, requires rethinking what we think we know because this knowledge can be known in so many other ways. It requires, in other words, challenging ourselves. This giving up of mastery—in this case, mastery of understanding—requires “great strength” (Lipari, *Listening* 139). To open ourselves to the defamiliarization of (mis)understanding, we must put ourselves into what Alan Wall refers to as “a state of radical unpreparedness” (20). But most of us are uncomfortable with not being ready, not being sure, with “the painful ambiguities of not understanding or knowing and, in turn, of being misunderstood” (Lipari, *Listening* 140). We do not know how to dwell (Vasudevan), how “to simply stay with something . . . without having to fit it into some tidy box of ‘understanding’” (Lipari 136).

One way we can allow ourselves to reach this state of unknowing is through asking questions. Questions can involve letting go of control (though, as discussed, this is not the case for all questions). They are “a move away from answers” (Vasudevan 1157), from mastery of knowledge. Along these lines, Beth advised writers that when a consultant asks them a question, they should “take ownership, and . . . indicate that [ownership] in a way that a consultant will respond to you effectively and say, ‘No, that is your choice, that is your decision to move forward in this way.’”
Asking a question can put the ball in the other person’s court. For example, Abigail told me that she asked LaShondra “plenty of questions” to “make sure [she and LaShondra] primarily followed LaShondra’s concerns.” When asking a question, Abigail gave LaShondra the opportunity to take control of the conversation and the consultation. This is also apparent in Beth’s consultation with Kathryn. Ten minutes into the session, Beth asked Kathryn how she would like to approach the session. Immediately after asking, Beth listed two possibilities, along with an open query: “Do you want to just go with the [book review section] that’s most formed, or start backwards, or how would you like to . . . ” This question gave Kathryn choices, which could be helpful if she did not know how she wanted to proceed, but it also gave her ample room to herself propose a plan. The way Beth trailed off, too, indicated that this was not a clear-cut decision that needed to be made immediately. Kathryn could think about how to proceed, could discuss it. The question thus provided an opportunity for Kathryn to guide the session—to the extent that she was comfortable doing so.

More, asking questions can serve as one way of welcoming misunderstandings. The asker, ideally, is aware of where they are coming from and acknowledges that they do not know. They then ask a question to learn more about what they do not know or to try to understand, from a different perspective, something that they think they know. Returning to Gurevitch, asking questions can help us move from “a state of inability to understand” (163) to “recognizing in another person another center of consciousness” (162). And Ivor Goodson and Sean Gill agree that questioning is important in trying to
understand a different person, to help us surpass our preconceptions (75). Asking questions helps listeners to become aware of assumptions that they may be making and to move past these assumptions.

Two of my participants explicitly brought up questioning as a way of noticing and working to transcend assumptions. Kathryn suggested that consultants ask questions to avoid hidden preconceptions, that sense of assignment blending into assignment, consultation blending into consultation. She said that “asking the writer about their day or asking them what they want to work on and how they feel about their assignment are both good ways to see each writer as an individual rather than just one of many people coming in.” Asking questions is one way of facilitating defamiliarization.

John argued something similar from the writer’s perspective: asking questions helps consultants approach each session differently, rather than relying on past consultations. He warned against “trying to use other people, trying to use, you know, this worked with me in the past with this person, or this worked with this person, or this person said this to me, so I’m sure that all of them all expect the same thing. We don’t, I’m sure. We would have different failure points.” Asking specific questions, then, helps consultants avoid the pitfall of automatically applying past approaches to the present situation.

Gurevitch provides an excellent example of how a question can bring preconceptions to light: a discussion between religious and secular Israeli teachers about

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86 In contrast to the view that I propose, Goodson and Gill distinguish understanding and misunderstanding, arguing that misunderstanding is something to be avoided (75). Still, this does not detract from their point about questioning.
the role of religion in Israeli schools. At the beginning of their discussion, each group tried again and again to explain their side to the other group. This got them nowhere. Though the groups tried to be “honest listeners” (167), “[e]ach side [still] understood the other according to its own terms” (168). It was not until a secular teacher asked, “What, you mean to tell me that you really believe in all this?” (qtd. in Gurevitch 168), that they began to get somewhere. This question helped each group to interrogate their and the other group’s understandings, to begin to become aware of their assumptions and then attempt to move past them (168-69).

(Mis)understanding, then, often leads to and results from questions. Asking questions can contribute to a realization of being stuck at the “inability to not understand” phase and to an attempt at moving toward “ability to not understand,” which is a step on the road toward understanding (Gurevitch 164). Questioning is thus an integral part of understanding and (mis)understanding.

(Mis)understanding and Improvisation

A corollary to (mis)understanding is the need for improvisation. Because we cannot rely on assumptions, we must make decisions in the moment—i.e., improvise. Pahl even refers to the “space of unknowing” as a “space of improvisation” (143). Each writer, consultant, and surrounding context—along with the differences between them—are unique and dynamic. As Kerschbaum puts it, “No two individuals will ever have the same relation to each other as they do to any other individual, and no situation will be exactly like any other current, past, or future situation” (Toward 68). This means that collaboration, which is built on these changing factors, is itself dynamic, is, in Russell

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87 Though the differences between these groups may seem larger or more heated than what we may face on an average day in the writing center, this stark divide helps make Gurevitch’s point more salient.
Mayo’s words, “often incredibly conversational, spontaneous, and improvisational.” Each consultation, then, is necessarily unique and unpredictable.

The concept of improvisation in consultations is not new. Kalen Arterburn and Caitie Leibman apply Kerschbaum’s theory of difference to the writing center to argue that consultations are necessarily unique. They posit that differences between writer and consultant should be assumed, rather than taken as exceptions. “Perhaps,” they write, “consultant preparation has too long been conceived of as a site for training staff to react in x ways, given y writer. Consultant preparation, instead, could start by creating a framework of difference that defines difference as norm.” And because differences are always present and always changing, consultants should be given “tools for their toolboxes but not instruction manuals.” In other words, consultants need to be free to make choices based on the particular situation, not stuck to a script or a set process.

Less recently, Steve Sherwood discusses the surprise that “is the rule” during consultations (57). Such surprises are noticeable in conversations, through unexpected leaps between topics, for example (56). Sherwood goes on to consider improvisation, explaining that it is unavoidable “thanks to the continual need to react to changing circumstances” (59). Given the uniqueness of each consultation and the inability to fully understand each writer, consultations necessarily involve decisions that cannot be planned.

Improvisation does not preclude preparation. There is a difference between being prepared and being prescriptive. After all, consultants necessarily bring their knowledge and experience to each consultation. More, Sherwood points out that experience with improvisation itself better prepares a consultant for future improvisation (59), making
every consultation both rehearsal and performance. Elizabeth H. Boquet discusses a consultant, Jay, who also refers to consultations in that way: “Although the only rehearsal for a session is a session itself, we have the opportunity to recreate the experience in the next session, and to change it based on reflecting on the last session” (qtd. in Boquet, *Noise* 127). The only way to practice for future consultations, to rehearse, to form a base for replication, is by actually participating in a consultation, by performing. Each consultation thus helps us prepare for the next one. At the same time, we may do something new in this rehearsal/performance. Each consultation is a mixture of replication and improvisation: consultants use what they know as part of the basis for improvisation.

But improvisation involves risk. Like being open, (mis)understanding and improvisation require a willingness to being challenged and to being vulnerable. Boquet argues that solely replicating past sessions is the safe choice, but it leads to “mere competence,” not excellence, not the “exceptional” (*Noise* 81). This “low-risk/low-yield” tutoring model is based on consultant “error-avoidance,” fear of “falling below [their own] expectations” (81). Improvising, on the other hand, makes such mistakes more likely. Molly Wingate similarly states, “Tutors have to take chances . . . Writers come to the writing center to move their projects along; what a shame to lose them because the tutors try too hard to stay on safe ground. Tutors should not worry about taking chances or making mistakes; we are human, after all” (13-14). But how can we help consultants

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88 And, as Boquet (*Noise* 77) and McCaroll (243) point out, writers have already taken a risk by coming to the writing center and sharing their writing.
not worry? How can we encourage consultants to “voyage out,” as Boquet asks, to be more comfortable when leaving the known behind (80)?

Boquet goes on to ask, “[H]ow might I encourage this tutor to operate on the edge of his or her expertise?” (Noise 80). Listening, with the improvisation it involves and facilitates, provides one answer, and does so in musical terms. As discussed in Chapter 3, Lipari compares listening to the improvisation of jazz (Listening). So, when Boquet suggests that consultants ask themselves, “[W]here is the groove for this session? Where’s the place where, together, we will really feel like we’re jammin’ and how do we get there?” (80), listening can help them answer those questions. To find that groove, consultants should be aware of what they are bringing to the consultation but not let it limit them. By doing this and attending to the writers, they can then riff (Lipari 132).

Also connecting improvisation in consultations to jazz, Sherwood explains that improvisation requires the jazz musician’s “rapt attention” (60). Listening, then, with its tie to improvisation, can facilitate improvisation in consultations.

More, even as (mis)understanding necessitates improvisation, (mis)understanding can also facilitate it. Specifically, (mis)understanding helps consultants make informed decisions on how to improvise, frees them from trying to make the “correct” choice, and shares risk between consultant and writer.

First, (mis)understanding helps consultants make informed decisions or suggestions about the consultation, and having such a basis for their choices in the moment can help consultants feel more comfortable with those choices. As discussed earlier in the chapter, listening to understand—which we can now think of as listening to (mis)understand—helps consultants consider how to approach the consultation. Part of
this is deciding the extent to which to improvise: how much to rely on training and what has worked in the past, and how much to venture past it.\textsuperscript{89}

In our interview, Beth described understanding in terms of landscape. Through listening to (mis)understand, consultants (and writers) get a sense of landscape, where the river, where the sea, what waters lie choppy, and where shores wait in the distance. By navigating this landscape, consultant and writer can navigate a session. For example, when Josh worked with the writer who received negative and unconstructive feedback from her professor, Josh learned about her emotions by listening. After getting a sense of the landscape, he decided to follow a less conventional approach, addressing the writer’s emotions before approaching the text.

Second, consultants might experience (mis)understanding as a loosening of strictures. Knowing about (mis)understanding means that consultants are aware that they cannot understand everything, and this is in itself a kind of freedom. Vasudevan asks, “What might it mean to truly embark upon an inquiry that is not immediately encumbered by a need for definitive conclusions?” (1157). In a consultation, this includes the freedom to pursue one of many directions, to change course, and to visit multiple lands. Rather than worrying about making the right decision or suggestion, consultants can focus on making a good one.

Finally, (mis)understanding facilitates collaboration, and improvisation can be more palatable when it and its risks are shared. Goodson and Gill discuss the fusion of one person’s horizon with that of another. They describe the horizon as the distance one can see from their particular perspective. In order to discover another person’s horizon,

\textsuperscript{89} This might not be a conscious decision, and the consultant might not think about it in these terms.
we must be aware of our own. It is through a fusion of such horizons that collaboration can occur. And this fusion involves “not a melting together in which all tensions are laid to rest but an attentive to-and-fro between the person and the otherness of that which addresses him/her. It is an interplay in which tensions are uncovered and brought to the fore rather than glossed over” (Goodson and Gill 79). I choose to interpret this not-quite-fusion as an existing between. The other person’s horizon may be but haze in the distance, but by inhabiting this shared space, writer and consultant create a landscape together.

This landscape is built of differences and of similarities, of the “stretch [of] our conceptual horizons” that Grimm argues is necessary for working with writers with different backgrounds and in different contexts (Good 1). According to Lipari, this space between “creates a space for movement beyond the horizon of self and other” (Listening 134). This begins with an awareness of our own positionality. As Cornwell and Orbe argue, “a person with no acknowledged horizon has great difficulty seeing beyond his or her own life circumstances” (88). By listening to (mis)understand, and by knowing that they will never fully understand, writer and consultant can step into the same landscape, even if they stand at different vantage points. In this space between, both familiar and unfamiliar, writer and consultant can co-construct meaning.

Earlier, I discussed how Allen problematizes the Socratic method and the Inquirer consultant. She goes on to suggest another option inspired by Socrates: the Explorer consultant (7-8). The “Truth” in such sessions is not predetermined by the consultant, but rather is built through dialogue between consultant and writer. This consultant is open to
the unknown, to exploring a landscape that may not be familiar, to working with the writer to explore and create meaning together.

Such shared understanding can facilitate consultant comfort with improvisation. The sharing of power and decisions that collaboration involves suggests that no single person is responsible for the session, which means that no single person need feel all of the pressure for the consultation to go well. If we build an understanding together, we create that space together, and consultants may feel more comfortable venturing out in a shared landscape, perhaps even on a shared boat. Beth takes this idea even further. If the consultant encourages the writer to have agency over their writing, over the session, then the writer “is sailing this ship . . . and the course [they] steer is up to [them].” In such cases, the writer, even more than the consultant, may be responsible for the ship. (Mis)understanding thus contributes to comfort with improvisation by helping consultant and writer share the responsibility, the landscape, and the journey.

Conclusion

On a larger scale, (mis)understanding and the improvisation that it necessitates and facilitates can be applied to the writing center itself. Scholars argue that for writing centers to address difference and changing contexts, writing centers themselves must improvise. Romeo García (“Unmaking”) and Grimm (Good), for example, each call for writing centers to consistently undergo change. Along these lines, Anis Bashawari and Stephanie Pelkowski state that “the writing center can, in a truly postmodern sense, become a structure within the university that examines and exposes its own structurality, a place that is continuously engaged in deconstructing its context at the same time as it functions within it” (54). And Terrance Riley warns that writing centers’ “pursuit of
success and stability, as conventionally measured, may be our undoing” (20). When writing centers seek to become more established and recognized as a discipline meriting respect, they are in danger of believing or following academia’s problematic “mythology of expertise and permanence” (32) rather than resisting it. Ongoing change in the writing center is improvisation in a slower sense, following institutional pacing. For useful change to occur, writing centers, too, would need an awareness of preconceptions and the limits of what they can know, while at the same time pursuing understanding and openness to change.

The concept of listening to understand—which we can now also conceive of as listening to (mis)understand—thus has implications for consultations and for writing centers themselves. The attempt to understand is a core part of listening, and it can facilitate choice of consultation approach, writer development, and collaboration. Two strategies for listening to understand are attending to the supposedly irrelevant and asking questions. As we work toward understanding, we must welcome the inevitable misunderstandings as reminders of the impossibility of fully knowing others and as motivators for continuing to try. Listening to (mis)understand also contributes to writing center scholarship on improvisation by explaining that need from a different angle, and it presents some ways that this conceptualization of understanding can mitigate the risk inherent to improvisation.

Perhaps most important, listening to (mis)understand acknowledges difference, addressing Valentine’s concerns about consultant guidebooks’ presenting listening as an easy way for consultants to understand writers. Simplistic and abstracted, these presentations of listening draw on generalizations and do not account for writers and
consultants as individuals. My exploration of listening to understand, on the other hand, derives from treating differences as the norm. It presents understanding as impossible: complete understanding is, in Lipari’s words, a “myth” (*Listening* 138). The listener attempts to understand while also making room for the other person through renunciation of mastery and openness to alterity. Understanding is not something that we can have, that we can hold, but rather something that we work toward by being open, receptive, and willing to think beyond the comfortable. Therefore, we should (mis)understand, welcoming the misunderstandings that remind us of our preconceptions and of otherness. A listener with the stance of (mis)understanding has the attitude that misunderstandings do not obstruct understanding but rather are a necessary part of the journey.
CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

To listen is to work with another to create a shared landscape, even as we are positioned at different vantage points. Listening allows us to draw from the categories through which we understand the world while at the same time attending to the individual in that moment. We remain open without denying what we bring to the interaction and to the relationship.

The previous three chapters have addressed themes about the roles of listening in the writing center—openness, power, and understanding—that show the benefits, if not ease, of listening. In this chapter, I write across these themes to explicitly address my research questions. In response to my third question, I present a listening framework called listening within difference as one way of conceptualizing listening in the writing center. Next, I explore limitations of my study and discuss avenues for future research. Finally, I explore how this research might be applied to pedagogy, and I address caveats of listening, including criticism of rhetorical listening.

Research Questions

This study investigated the following questions:

Overarching question: What are the roles of listening in writing center consultations?

1. How do writer and consultant participants conceptualize listening in writing center consultations at the University of Louisville University Writing Center?

2. How might listening affect participants’ consultation experiences?
3. Based on the above questions, how might I conceptualize listening in the writing center?

I address these questions now, integrating what I have learned about listening in connection to openness, power, and understanding.

**Q1: Writer and Consultant Conceptualizations of Listening in the Writing Center**

1. How do writer and consultant participants conceptualize listening in writing center consultations at the University of Louisville University Writing Center?

   This question approaches participants’ intuitive understanding of listening, what they found most fundamental. Therefore, this section focuses on participants’ explanations of the components of listening, not listening’s effects or significance, not how to listen well or to determine whether someone else is listening. To convey which components were most frequently addressed by participants, I specify the number of participants who included that component in their explanation. These numbers have not been statistically analyzed and are not intended as generalizable data.

   In answering this research question, I drew specifically from instances when participants stated that they were defining or explaining listening. In other words, to get at the core of how participants understood listening, I only took into account moments when they expressed that the components that they were discussing were core. All of these moments occurred during the in-person interviews, most frequently in direct response to the interview question asking participants to explain what listening meant to them. The other moments that I considered to be explanations of listening occurred later in the interviews if and when participants explicitly stated that an element should be added to their earlier explanation.
The most frequently addressed listening components were brought up by the majority of writer and consultant participants. These components are understanding, listening beyond the verbal, and engagement. The idea of listening as an attempt at understanding was most common, mentioned by 77% of participants. They described listening in connection with understanding as taking in and “processing” (a frequently used term) what the speaker communicates, even prompting the speaker for more information in an effort to better understand. Listening thus involves attending to the speaker and to their intentions.

The importance of listening to more than what was said was brought up by 62% of participants. This involves attending to the context of the situation and to nonverbal markers, such as gestures and body language. It may also mean attending to what remained unsaid.

Finally, 54% of participants discussed engagement: being active and present during the interaction. To be engaged is to choose to put effort into attending to the other person.

Each of the following four categories was discussed by slightly under the majority (46%) of participants: listening as compared to hearing, response, respect for the speaker, and openness. Six participants discussed listening as differentiated from hearing, and this sometimes served as the starting point for those participants’ explanations of listening. The major form of differentiation between listening and hearing that they noted was the attempt at understanding that listening involves. Participants also presented response—a way of demonstrating that listening is taking place—as part of listening, rather than as a step that follows the listening process. One participant described response as
performative. Another category participants raised was the respect that listening involves. This includes acknowledging the speaker and their thoughts (which overlaps with response) and demonstrating that the speaker is being taken seriously. This idea of showing respect by acknowledging the speaker and taking them seriously connects with another category: openness. Not only do we need to show that we are listening, but we also need to be open to the content of that message. Whether or not we agree, we should be receptive to considering it and to potentially changing our understanding, beliefs, and practices.

Other aspects of listening were mentioned by only one or two participants. These categories are difficulty defining listening, listening to sound, listening as compared to following directions, listening as intuitive, listening’s relationship with memory, silence as part of listening, and listening as the creation and sharing of a mental space.

**Q2: Listening’s Effects on Writer and Consultant Experiences**

2. How might listening affect participants’ consultation experiences?

This question drove the meat of my dissertation, and my somewhat flippant response would be, “Wholly and utterly.” As Rachael Wendler writes in her own dissertation, “in one word, the argument of my dissertation is: listen” (244). I have found listening deeply integrated with consultant and writer behavior, understanding, and experience. It affects consultation direction and approach and the perceived usefulness of the session. More, listening can help writers and consultants reshape, and continue to reshape, how they experience the world.

The three effects (and elements) of listening that this study focused on are openness, power, and understanding. To listen is to take a stance of openness, to be
receptive to alterity. Through receptivity and the relinquishing of control, listeners make room for the other person. Listeners are open to views and experiences other than their own and to the potential of changing. More, listeners understand that they, too, are other. In this way, listening serves as a disruption of our assumptions. Through increased awareness of their own preconceptions and through openness to alterity, listeners can try to move beyond the schemas that help them function in the world but also limit what they understand and experience.

The openness that listening entails is essential for writing center consultations. Consultants and writers arrive at consultations with certain preconceptions, including those about writers and consultants, writing, and consultations. By helping consultants and writers transcend these preconceptions—not to rid themselves of preconceptions, which can’t be done, but rather to increase awareness so that they can try to hear beyond their boundaries—listening can facilitate writers’ and consultants’ expanding their understandings of rhetorical conventions and writing center practices, changing the consultation plan during a session, modifying their perception of the other person, and increasing their willingness to consider feedback. And listening helps consultants and writers respect the other person and the differences (and similarities) between them.

Next, listening allows for negotiating power structures and imbalance. And there will always be power imbalance. Given the constantly changing contexts and the differences between two people, it is impossible for there to ever be an equal balance of power. Listening can facilitate collaboration throughout this power imbalance because, first, to listen is to collaborate, to work together to create a space between in which
meaning and learning are also co-created. Second, listening facilitates dialogue and agency, which in turn facilitate collaboration within a power differential.

This discussion of listening and power contributes to the conversation about power and collaboration in writing center scholarship. It helps us take a practical approach that accounts for power in each individual consultation without abandoning the more common long-term, idealistic approach in which we try to balance power between the generalized group of writers and the generalized group of consultants (or even subcategories within those groups based on characteristics like race, writing level, etc.). The relationship between listening and power disproves two common writing center presuppositions: that collaboration requires an equal balance of power and that collaboration is precluded by the directive approach (and necessarily facilitated by the nondirective approach). Based on listening theory, consultants should enter a consultation expecting a power differential rather than attempting to flatten it.

Further, the connection between listening and power can help consultants feel more comfortable when using the directive approach. It is fairly well-acknowledged at this point that the directive approach has its benefits, but writing center professionals and scholars still often assume that the directive approach precludes collaboration. Consultants can therefore feel hesitant to follow this approach because it seems to contravene writing centers’ value of collaboration. My research shows that collaboration can occur under either approach, which might free consultants from the deep-seated sense of obligation to avoid the directive approach when possible. This can also serve as a reminder to consultants that the nondirective approach does not guarantee collaboration. Finally, considering these connections between listening and power can help consultants
discuss with writers the academic norms and power dynamics outside of the consultation, including how to navigate those dynamics through informed decisions.

A third way that listening impacts how writers and consultants experience consultations is through its effects on understanding. Understanding involves attempting to comprehend not just the other person’s message, but also the other person themselves, their feelings and intentions. At the same time, we can never fully know the other person. We must try for understanding while also maintaining awareness that this understanding is necessarily limited. The misunderstandings that inevitably occur within a conversation are reminders of the otherness of the other and of the impossibility of understanding. (Mis)understanding is the stance that welcomes these misunderstandings, treating them as motivation for continuing to try to understand even as we recognize the constraints of that understanding.

In the writing center, listening can help guide consultation approach, strengthen writer development, and promote collaboration. Two strategies that listeners might use to facilitate these benefits are listening to the seemingly irrelevant and asking questions. In addition, (mis)understanding illustrates from a new angle why writing center consultations call for improvisation: if each session is unique, dynamic, and not fully understood, then it must be addressed in the moment. To do so involves risk, but listening to (mis)understand can help. First, listening itself requires and facilitates improvisation. Second, listening helps consultants make informed decisions, which can help them feel more comfortable with their decisions or suggestions. The concept of (mis)understanding also suggests that there is no single right choice, which frees consultants from pursuing
an illusory ideal. Finally, through collaboration, listening to (mis)understand distributes risk among consultant and writer.

**Q3: Framing Listening as Listening within Difference**

3. Based on the above questions, how might I conceptualize listening in the writing center?

Throughout this study, I developed a listening framework that I call listening within difference (LwD). This framework positions listening as a way not of bridging gaps but rather of celebrating the differences from which these gaps derive and coinhabiting those spaces in order to collaborate in meaning-making. This holds particular significance in writing center consultations, which are ideally dialogic and collaborative.

I began conceptualizing this framework unintentionally from the start of my research when I began to explore listening theory that attended to difference. I narrowed down these theories to the three that served as touchstones for this project: dialogic listening, rhetorical listening, and listening otherwise. In the process of trying to understand and then synthesize these theories, I noticed certain principles that remained constant. My data helped me modify these principles, which form the framework of LwD.

Listening within difference is a stance that is built around the relationship between self and other. It is a way of approaching the world and, in this case, the writing center consultation. It comprises four principles:

- Recognizing self as other
- Turning toward
Co-creating a space between
Co-creating meaning

These principles are delineated for the sake of discussion, but really they are recursive, overlapping, inextricable, messy. More, LwD is not a template or prescription. It is meant as one way of furthering writing center listening scholarship and pedagogy by serving as a frame to flesh out and critique.

I will now explicate each principle in turn. Recognizing self as other means understanding that because difference derives from relationships, each of us is necessarily other when compared to someone else. Our perceptions are not the only perceptions. The ways that we make meaning are not the only ways of making meaning. When comparing ourselves and another person, we instinctively consider ourselves the norm. We serve as the nexus around which the comparison revolves. To recognize self as other, we must also think of the other person as nexus and ourselves as other to them. This requires a disruption of preconceptions and an attention to power and privilege.

The second principle of LwD is turning toward the other. Turning toward represents receptivity and attempts at understanding. It is demonstrating openness to alterity, to other perspectives and new ways of knowing. This requires attending to differences as well as similarities and recognizing the other person as an individual (located in a certain context), rather than as a representative of a particular group. These differences and similarities are built of the dynamic relationship between self and other and are therefore themselves mutable, tangled, and complex. As we try to understand the other person, we must keep culture, power dynamics, and privilege in mind. We must also remember that we can never fully understand. By recognizing self as other and
turning toward the other person, we try to learn the current limits of our understanding and preconceptions, and we try to push those limits at least a little bit farther away.

To co-create a space between, we contract to make room for the other person, and they do the same for us. We create room by relinquishing mastery and control, and this makes us vulnerable. In creating this room, we come together without denying individuality. The space between involves, to quote Richard H. Haswell and Janis Haswell’s apposite phrase, “unity without uniformity” (55). Creation of this space requires an openness to change, if not change itself.

Within the space between, self and other work together to co-create meaning. This collaboration can be difficult—transformation and meaning are forged within a clashing of experiences, beliefs, ideas, values, and power. By recognizing self as other and turning toward the other person, by being open to change, we can understand the current limits of our understanding and preconceptions and try to move beyond them. This involves improvisation, building off of each other in the moment to create something as of yet unheard. These spaces between self and other, then, are not gaps that need to be bridged for communication and collaboration to occur. Rather, they are places in which that very communication and collaboration are built.

**Limitations**

One cause of this study’s limitations was the minimal amount of research on which this study could be based. When I first began this project, there was relatively little scholarship on listening in the writing center to guide my research direction. Much of that scholarship is anecdotal or theoretical, which, though not inherently problematic, provided little in the way of models for research design. Because of this, though I
originally wanted to study listening’s role in writing center partnerships with the community, I realized that I had to build a foundation first. This meant that my study was broad and exploratory. It is typical in qualitative research for the study to evolve with analysis, but this study could have had a firmer base from which that evolution began.

Due to the time constraints of the dissertation process, I was inflexible with my sampling procedure. The case around which this project revolved was writers and consultants from the University of Louisville during University Writing Center consultations. There were many potential writer participants but a limited number of potential consultant participants. In fact, I worked with every consultant who wanted and was able to participate. This limited my writer participants to the pool of writers who made appointments with these consultants during times when I was available. In theory, I could have tried for typical, unique, or maximum variation sampling (Merriam and Tisdell 97-98), but, in practice, I felt pressure to collect data quickly so that I would have enough time to analyze and write. Future studies might benefit from more purposeful sampling.

Though I wanted this study to devote equal attention to writers and consultants, it ended up concentrating on the listening of the latter. This imbalance reflected the data: both writer and consultant participants tended to focus on how consultants’ listening affected writers. I did explicitly ask about writers’ listening in the interviews and surveys, but the topic was not really picked up by the participants. I therefore used writers’ experiences to contribute more to my analysis of effects of consultant behavior than to my analysis of the effects of writers’ listening.
Also, the quantitative data that I collected could not be statistically analyzed because the surveys were not tested for validity and reliability. The sample size was also likely not large enough. As stated, this study focused by far on the qualitative, but a statistical analysis of the quantitative could provide a more conclusive contextualization of the qualitative.

Finally, though difference is a major topic in this dissertation, my research design did not facilitate my gathering relevant empirical data. One of my interview questions—“What was it like to work with the other person during this consultation?”—and its corresponding probes were designed to facilitate discussion of difference. Examples of probes include:

- What stood out to you about the other person?
- How did your thoughts about the other person change over the course of the consultation?
- Tell me more about the other person you worked with.
- Tell me about differences between the two of you that stood out during the consultation.

(See Appendix E for all interview questions and probes.) However, these questions proved awkward and difficult to answer.

**Future Research**

Addressing the above limitations would provide useful steps for future research. In particular, given how central the concept of difference is for this study, it is worth highlighting potential changes that would facilitate learning more about difference. Data collection modification might include redesigning and reordering questions meant to get
at difference so that they can more easily be answered. Gathering more types of
demographic data (e.g., race) and asking participants about specific aspects of identity
could also facilitate learning about differences.

Further, Stephanie L. Kerschbaum provides one way of studying difference as
dynamic, relational, and emergent (*Toward*). In her words, “To mark difference is to
recognize and respond to others’ self-displays and to purposefully craft oneself within
particular social contexts” (83). She specifically ties this to rhetorical listening, stating,
“Marking difference is one way of bringing what Krista Ratcliffe calls ‘that-which-
cannot-be-seen, even if it cannot yet be heard’ . . . into relief by helping us explicitly
acknowledge what may be unconscious patterns in our everyday interactions” (113).
Following or drawing on the methods that Kerschbaum describes could contribute to
studying difference within the context of listening and the writing center.

Beyond modifications in studying difference, there are a number of avenues for
further research, particularly given the novelty of this topic. For example, other topics
that arose during analysis include authenticity, engagement, and differences between
listening and reading. Here, though, I focus on the three directions that—excepting
openness, power, and understanding—were most salient in my research: emotion,
response, and community engagement. Emotion and response were well-represented in
the scholarship and my data, and they provide additional answers to my second research
question: How might listening affect participants’ consultation experiences? Community
engagement was the initial motivation for this study and is one form of listening
application. Continuing in that direction has the potential to contribute to multiple fields
and to help us better listen to those who often go unheard: community partner participants.

**Emotion**

As I began researching listening in the writing center, my gut feeling was that listening would have a strong connection with emotion. I associated listening with the validation that being listened to can provide, as well as the emotional labor that listening involves. And during initial data analysis, as well as in listening scholarship in communication and in writing center studies, connections between listening and emotion were often made.

In some writing center scholarship, listening is described as sympathetic or empathic (also referred to as empathetic). Listening is an attempt to understand the other person (McBride et al.) and, according to some, to refrain from judgment (Morris 8). For Kimberly M. Cuny et al., empathic listening “requires listeners to refrain from judging the speaker and instead advocates placing themselves in the speaker’s position . . . to understand the speaker’s point of view” (250). Listening empathically can help writers grow in terms of emotion and writing (Morris; Taylor). Specific suggestions for facilitating empathic listening include nonverbal (Cuny et al.) and verbal (Taylor) methods of demonstrating listening, along with internal steps that listeners can take, such as listening to feelings in addition to message content (Reit).

Empathic listening is often connected to therapy. Karen Morris states that empathic listening has a therapeutic effect, raising self-esteem and confidence (8). She makes clear that this “does not mean that the tutor attempts to solve the student’s psychological problems, but only that he cares about the whole student, not just about the
writing problems” (8). Psychologist Carl Rogers’s empathic listening and empathic response are used to address writer emotion in writing center consultations (Cuny et al.; McBride; Reit). Other psychologists referenced include Richard E. Farson (Reit) and Theodore Reik (Taylor).

Listening is particularly positioned as a way of helping writers feel more positive. It allows consultants to show writers that they care, helping to increase writer confidence (Fallon; Fishbain; McBride et al.; Young), making the writer feel validated and facilitating rapport (Cardeñas 98; Cuny et al. 249; Fallon; Fishbain; Morris; Young).

Emotion in the context of listening would be an extremely rich topic to cover in the future. Emotion shows clear connections with openness and understanding. Notably, confirming the other, a principle in Floyd’s dialogic listening, is also one aspect of therapeutic listening. One topic of interest is the downsides of drawing on therapeutic listening models and whether these downsides might be mitigated by distinguishing between empathy and compassion.

**Response**

Listening response—how listening is communicated—also merits further research. Writing center scholarship on listening finds that response serves a number of functions, but, in the most general sense, it conveys to the speaker that the listener is in fact listening (Morris; Santa), suggesting engagement rather than passivity. And listener response does more than indicate active listening: response itself plays an active role in the conversation, influencing the speaker (Feibush). Further exploration of response has implications for consultant pedagogy and for listening research.
First, listening response plays important roles in not just listening but also conversations, rapport, and consultation development. Fiona Farr’s study of tutors and master’s student writers\(^{90}\) supports the importance of listener response in writing center consultations. Farr investigated how these tutors and writers acknowledged listenership through use of listenership response. Types of response include minimal response tokens, such as “Yeah” and “Mm hm” (75), and non-minimal response tokens, which are more elaborate responses that involve commenting or sharing an opinion on what was said (78). These types of response serve multiple conversational functions, facilitating smoother and more productive conversations, which can only help facilitate smoother and more productive writing center sessions.

A lot of the writing center research on response focuses on minimal responses and the subcategory of backchanneling. A minimal response, according to Jo Mackiewicz, is “a single-word acknowledgment of the other discourse participant that may or may not comprise the speaker’s entire turn at talk” (39). She describes five functions of the minimal responses “ok,” “uhhuh,” and “yeah,” which were used particularly frequently by writers (54). These functions include backchanneling, replying to yes or no questions, expressing agreement, and transitioning (61-62). Backchanneling is a minimal response that indicates listening without taking the main floor from the speaker (Mackiewicz; Thonus). It is usually interpreted as a positive contribution to the conversation, as a way of demonstrating attention, building rapport, showing cooperation, and indicating openness (Gilewicz and Thonus; Mackiewicz; Santa).

\(^{90}\) Though the tutors in Farr’s study were not specified as writing center consultants, the concepts of listenership and listenership devices remain relevant to the consulting performed in the writing center.
Listener response can be verbal or nonverbal. Other forms of verbal response include paraphrasing and briefly prompting the writer to elaborate (Morris). Nonverbal forms of response include eye contact and gaze, gesture, posture (such as leaning forward), nodding, and smiling (Bolander and Harrington 1; Feibush; Morris 15; Santa 6-7).

Second, study of listening response has much to contribute to design of listening research. Response is part of the behavioral processes of listening (Worthington and Bodie 4-5). By definition, it is an observable behavior, which means that it provides one way of (indirectly) measuring listening. Because response marks (perceived) instances of listening, it would allow researchers to better examine the listener’s behavior before, during, and after listening. More, because response pinpoints moments of listening, researchers could then use the observable (response) to learn more about the internal (participant experience). It would also be worth investigating when response corresponds to listening versus the appearance of listening, as well as whether the speaker or an outside observer could differentiate between the two. Finally, as Lisbeth Lipari explains, there is no vocabulary for discussing listening:

> there are dozens of ways to name, categorize, and punctuate speech acts. . . . But when it comes to listening, we are, ironically, at a loss for words. . . . [I]t is not even clear how we would begin to punctuate the listening act: Does it have a beginning, a middle, or an end? An inside and an outside? Does it even have a form? And, come to think of it, why are all these questions cast in spatial terms? (Listening 157)

Study of response could contribute to developing a language for listening, which would benefit our understanding of the listening process as well as our ability to study that process.
Community Engagement

A third avenue for future listening research is listening’s connection with community engagement. This study derived from interest in the roles that listening plays in writing center partnerships with the community. Study in this direction has the potential to benefit writing center studies, listening studies, and community engaged scholarship.

Community engagement has become more and more prevalent in higher education and, a little more slowly, in writing centers (e.g., Brizee and Wells; Rousculp). Writing centers make particularly apt community engagement partners, particularly given their collaborative approach, focusing on writing with writers (and the community) rather than writing for or about them (Brizee and Wells; Deans; Rousculp). As Linda S. Bergmann puts it, “Engagement . . . extends the range of inquiry and practices already established in many writing centers” (174).

Scholarship on partnerships between the community and writing center has been increasing, but largely absent from that scholarship is the role of listening. This absence has ramifications, given that listening is essential to the communication and collaboration that these partnerships involve. Bergmann demonstrates the significance of listening when describing one result of her writing center’s community engaged projects: “we learned to listen—to really listen—to our collaborators, in order to understand their needs, their potential, and their limitations” (167).

The lack of listening scholarship in this context is not surprising given that attention to community perspectives is lacking in rhetoric and composition overall. Randy Stoecker and Elizabeth A. Tryon argue this point with their aptly titled anthology
The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning. Often missing are the voices of the administrators of community partner organizations (Birdsall; Blouin and Perry; Cronley et al.; Kimme Hea and Shah; Sandy; Srinivas et al.; Stoecker and Tryon) but also those of the organizations’ members (Bialka and Havlik; d’Arlach et al.; Dempsey; Dorado and Giles; Doughty; Rousculp; Schmidt and Robby; Snow et al.; Wendler). As Linda Flower argues, the field of rhetoric and composition is practiced in teaching and thinking about speaking up or speaking against, but not so practiced in speaking with (78-79). The 2018 special issue of the Community Literacy Journal dedicated to listening takes steps to rectify this issue.

Research on listening in community partnerships with writing centers thus has the potential to add to not only writing center scholarship, but also rhetoric and composition scholarship overall. More, it would help us learn more about listening in a different context and in writing center consultations. Collaboration and power will likely be particularly relevant.

Listening Caveats

Future research should also keep in mind that listening should not be treated as a panacea. I discuss three caveats here. First, listening does not always lead to resolution, and it does not always do so quickly. Ratcliffe explains, it is “not a quick fix nor a happy-ever-after solution; rather, it is an ongoing process” (Rhetorical 33). Further, listening is not a way of “solving” issues, but rather an attitude that we can take to start addressing them.

Second, there are limitations to how much we can listen. As Abigail, a consultant, argued, it’s not possible to listen to everything or to listen all of the time. There are many
stimuli simultaneously calling for our attention, and our attention is finite. And given the energy that listening takes, we cannot always listen and we certainly cannot always listen well. So we listen to some while others go unheard. More, the choice of who to listen to is not always a conscious one, and when that choice is conscious, it is not always an easy choice to make. As Kerschbaum writes, “The asymmetries of listening always affect who and what will be heard, and it is hard to know what to listen for” (Toward 62-63). Given our finite attention, listening requires a choice of who we listen to and what we listen for. This should entail an awareness that power structures and preconceptions, among other factors, can influence that choice. In other words, we must disrupt our listening habitus (Lipari, Listening 51-52).

Third, there may be times when listening is not appropriate, when we might choose not to listen. We might not want to listen when the other person is not making the same effort. As Ratcliffe explains, “We learn to listen by listening to those who do not agree with us, provided . . . desire in all parties to move our understanding forward. If the context is not one of genuine conversation, then refusing to listen may be appropriate” (Rhetorical 36). In this vein, Floyd raises concerns about deception on the part of the other person. This deception occurs when someone who is ostensibly dialogic is actually monologic—manipulative.91

In addition, there may be certain situations in which listening may be unwise, though I am not ready to confidently delineate for which situations this is the case.

Wayne C. Booth demonstrates this with two rather extreme examples:

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91 And, Floyd explains, this leads to a challenge: “one must be able to detect, identify, and reject undesirable and deceptive communication without rejecting the speaker as a person of worth and value” (“Listening” 138).
Would I try to [listen] if I were on an airplane and encountered a terrorist with a box-cutter threatening me or the pilot? I would naturally want to be able to get him to listen to my case against his action . . . But would I attempt to listen to his defense for his own case, in the name of good rhetoric? Obviously not. Should Churchill and Roosevelt have said to Hitler, ‘Let’s talk about it,’ just after Hitler took over Paris? (49)

Yet even these examples—which were designed, I assumed, to make it obvious that there are at least some situations in which we should not listen—give me pause. Though I don’t disagree that there are certain situations in which listening is not appropriate, I do think that this merits further exploration and complication. My research shows the benefits that listening can have for working toward understanding, for example, and even for helping the other person be open to feedback, and these are situations where that understanding and openness are particularly important. Joy Arbor provides further argument in this vein in her discussion of compassionate listening, whose values fit under listening within difference. According to the compassionate listening model, “listening is the foundation for reconciliation” (Arbor 221), and “commitment to listening to the other with nonjudgment and compassion forms the basis of future cooperation” (222). It is listening that allows for potential resolution of such situations, though I acknowledge that the long timeline of this resolution makes compassionate listening less appropriate for times of immediate danger.

Lisbeth Lipari opens her monograph with an anecdote about Marilyn Manson (Listening). In the movie Bowling for Columbine, Michael Moore interviews Manson and asks him what he would say to the people at Columbine. Manson replies, “I wouldn’t say a single word to them, I would listen to what they have to say. And that’s what no one did” (qtd. in Lipari 1). It may be overly idealistic to argue that we should pause and listen
where we are in danger or when we have moral objections to the speaker, but this should be explored further given that listening is a tool for navigating such situations.

Other situations in which we might choose not to listen are those in which listening is emotionally harmful, or emotionally exhausting, to the listener. For example, what should a consultant do if a writer makes a racist argument during a consultation? Does the consultant have a responsibility to keep listening? This is not an uncommon situation, and considering it through the lens of listening might lend additional insight. This issue also ties into the recent increase in scholarship on self-care in the writing center. And further study of when not to listen may also have interesting implications for cancel culture.

**Criticism of Rhetorical Listening**

Rhetoric and composition scholars have also raised concerns about listening theory—specifically rhetorical listening, the listening theory most referenced in the field. Major critiques include that rhetorical listening does not satisfactorily account for issues of identity, privilege, and material conditions (García, “Creating”; Johnson; Oleksiak). In addition, Romeo García argues that rhetorical listening can promote power imbalance by increasing the certainty of those in power that they can fully (and easily) understand the experiences of those not in power. I separate these into two concerns.

Before I continue, I want to be very clear that this is in no way an attempt to defend rhetorical listening at all costs or to dismiss the above concerns. Rather, in order to address these concerns, it is important to distinguish between concerns with the actual theory of rhetorical listening versus concerns with rhetorical listening’s continued development and application.
I interpret the first concern as addressing not the theory of rhetorical listening but what comes next. To listen rhetorically is to attend to identity, privilege, and material conditions. Rhetorical listening is meant as a way of communicating cross-culturally, with an awareness of differences and similarities, of which material conditions are a part. Ratcliffe references privilege in the move “Proceeding within an accountability logic” (Rhetorical 31); in the rhetorical stances of recognition, critique, and accountability (96-98); and in her tactic of listening pedagogically (157-79). Therefore, the concern is not that Ratcliffe does not consider these issues, because the very purpose of rhetorical listen is to facilitate communication with such issues in mind.

Rather, the concern is with how rhetorical listening is presented, understood, discussed, and further developed. Rhetorical listening theory may call on listeners to attend to such issues, but there is much to learn about how to do so, particularly when it involves awareness of our own preconceptions and privileges. Rhetorical listening can be expanded and complicated through application to various contexts and through examination via various lenses, such as peer review and queer theory, respectively (Oleksiak).

For example, García complicates rhetorical listening to advocate for a listening that can serve “as a form of intervention to writing center work on race, racism, and power” (“Unmaking” 33). He describes rhetorical listening as “a code for cross-cultural communication” (33) and contrasts it with a listening that is “a form of actional and decolonial work” (33). García promotes four stances to facilitate writing center dialogue that complicates race beyond the reductionist black/white binary. By my interpretation, these four stances—“recognition, critique, accountability, and responsibility”
correspond almost exactly to Ratcliffe’s stances of recognition, critique, and accountability (Rhetorical), which I discuss in detail in Chapter 4.\(^{92}\) I find that despite García’s concerns about rhetorical listening, his suggested stances go hand in hand with it. I therefore interpret his new form of listening—which he terms transformational listening (33)—as an extension and complication of rhetorical listening, with a focus on the action and responsibility that such listening should entail.

The second concern—that rhetorical listening perpetuates power imbalance by promoting assumptions of the possibilities of understanding—seems to be a problem with how rhetorical listening is understood rather than with the theory itself. García exemplifies this concern using a conversation with a past professor, during which the professor assumed mastery about the Lower Rio Grande Valley simply because he had read a book about it. This was particularly troubling given García’s lived experience and scholarship in this area (“Creating”). García describes the way that his professor interacted with him as “a type of rhetorical listening that denied me a space from which to speak or to be heard” and explains that such rhetorical listening “empowers white people to believe they can stand outside their positionality or identification within a dominant white culture” (13). In this way, García argues, rhetorical listening keeps the power with those already in power, like his professor.

I’m not convinced, though, that this is a problem with the overall theory of rhetorical listening (though I do agree with García that this problem is evident in Ratcliffe’s tactic of eavesdropping\(^{93}\)). The professor’s behavior was extremely

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\(^{92}\) I would argue that Ratcliffe’s stance of accountability (Rhetorical) incorporates García’s stance of responsibility (“Unmaking”). But including responsibility as its own stance does add emphasis.

\(^{93}\) García (“Creating”) references Ratcliffe’s tactic of eavesdropping—“purposefully positioning oneself on the edge of one’s own knowledge so as to overhear and learn from others and, . . . from oneself” (Ratcliffe,
problematic, but it cannot be attributed to rhetorical listening. To listen rhetorically is to try to attend to power, renounce mastery, and create space for the other person. It involves trying to increase awareness of asymmetrical relationships, and it facilitates interaction and collaboration within that imbalance. And Ratcliffe makes a point of noting the idealism (and thus impossibility) inherent to trying to understand the other person. She asks us to think of this as “strategic idealism,” which “is strategic in that people should recognize the difficulties and dangers inherent in such a project . . . and proceed knowingly” (Rhetorical 28). To listen rhetorically, we must be aware that listening is an attempt, and a difficult one at that. In García’s example, then, the problem was not that he was silenced by the professor’s rhetorical listening, but rather that the professor was not listening rhetorically.

Even if this concern does not derive from rhetorical listening’s theory, it is still a problem for rhetorical listening. Like the first concern, this demonstrates the need to think more about how to listen rhetorically, and it shows how important it is to be aware of listening’s limitations. It is incumbent on those of us researching and exploring listening theory to highlight and address these and other concerns, as well as to promote a diversity of voices within the growing conversation about listening.

**Recommendations**

As scholars and professionals, then, we should apply listening to different aspects of difference and complicate our understandings of listening in response. As we do so, we

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*Rhetorical* 105)—as especially worrisome, and I do see this as a place where Ratcliffe somewhat contradicts herself. She describes eavesdropping as a tactic “for hearing over the edges of our own knowing, for thinking what is commonly unthinkable within our own logics” (105). I interpret “hearing over the edges of our own knowing” as an attempt at understanding others, which is in line with Ratcliffe’s earlier presentation of rhetorical listening. However, I find that “thinking what is commonly unthinkable within our own logics” implies that such understanding is possible, which troublingly promotes the idea that people can step outside their own positionality.
should conceptualize listening as a stance, not a solution. Valentine finds that guidebooks commonly present listening as “a skilled activity” (90), classifying it as a resource, skill, strategy, or tool (98, 99). But, really, listening is an attitude, with implications for action and strategies for facilitation. It is a willingness to try to be open and to understand, along with the acknowledgment that this is an ideal that can never be reached. Along those lines, it must be emphasized that listening is not easy to do, and it’s definitely not easy to do well.

There is always the question of the practical, of the how. In the Try It at Home sections of this dissertation, I shared a few strategies to try out in the writing center (or in the classroom or other contexts). These include three of Ratcliffe’s ways of facilitating listening: focusing on positive and negative terms (Chapter 3), attending to similarities and differences within a cultural logic (Chapter 3), and taking the rhetorical stances of recognition, critique, and accountability (Chapter 4). Other strategies are listening to the seemingly irrelevant and asking questions (Chapter 5). We should work to try out, develop, and critique these and other listening strategies.

More, listening should be explicitly incorporated into consultant courses and training. Listening can be introduced as an attitude, perhaps in conjunction with discussions of writing center values, writing center ethics, or difference and inclusivity. As the topic is introduced, there is value in consultants’ uncovering their understandings of listening before being presented with listening definitions or theory. Judging by my data, both consultants’ and writers’ understandings of listening and its values are instinctual but often implicit. Just as listeners need to be aware of their preconceptions in order to be open to the other and to change, so must consultants acknowledge what they
already feel about listening in order to better understand listening. Consultants and the facilitator can then compare their explanations, noting themes and differences. All involved can thus develop an understanding of listening together. This is especially appropriate given that there is no single definition of listening (Bodie et al.; Purdy; Worthington and Bodie). Further discussion might include why we should listen (or not listen), how we can listen, and what roles listening plays in contexts beyond the writing center.

Incorporation of listening into pedagogy can also include discussion of listening strategies. Consultants can reflect on listening strategies that they already use and can also work together to develop additional strategies. This should involve an evaluation of the strategy, including the experience of using it and its effects on consultations. Discussion might also include how these strategies fit or clash with listening theory.

Because listening spans theory, values, and practice, consultants would benefit from reiteratively learning, reflecting, and doing. For example, consultants might record their own consultations, observe other consultations, or participate in practice scenarios in which consultants take turns listening to each other. This could then be followed (and preceded) by discussion, self-reflection, and application of theory. Preconceptions and their possible impact on the observed consultations might also be included in this discussion and reflection.

Keeping in mind the concerns from the previous section, explorations of listening should address what is difficult about listening (such as working to acknowledge our preconceptions) and what is impossible (such as moving outside of our positionality). Consultants should also be encouraged to raise their own concerns about listening.
And writing centers should do their best to support listeners, given the difficulty, vulnerability, and risk that listening involves. Better understanding listening and listening strategies can, to an extent, help mitigate that risk. Writing centers can also work to build environments where mistakes are considered part of the learning, listening, and consulting process. It may be useful to discuss with consultants the benefits and difficulties of taking risks, as well as what outcomes, if any, could impact their job. Concerns about risk would also fit well into consultant mentoring.

The above recommendations can be put into use by individuals. I also have two larger-scale recommendations. First, within or outside of the context of listening, writing center scholarship should address the two problematic presuppositions, discussed in Chapter 4, that writing center professionals often have about collaboration: that collaboration requires an equal balance of power and a nondirective tutoring approach. Second, as Valentine urges, consultant guidebooks should be updated with more complex representations of listening that draw from theory. These portrayals should be not only cognizant of difference but also built of the relationships from which those differences derive.

**Conclusion**

Listening is inherent to writing center consultations and also greatly impacts writer and consultant experiences during those consultations. When asked about listening, my writer and consultant participants expressed its significance to the writing center, and when asked to explain listening, they described many of the same characteristics and values that I found in listening scholarship: being open, attending to power, trying for understanding, listening for the nonverbal as well as verbal, staying engaged, responding.
Participants, then, had conceptualizations of listening that aligned, to a degree, with those of each other and of scholarship. But these conceptualizations were tacit: assumed, but not explicitly addressed or explored. Because listening seems—and, to a certain extent, is—so natural, it has become naturalized. We all listen, but that does not mean that we do so well or that we cannot do so better. Addressing listening in writing center theory and practice will bring listening into light, allowing us to develop our listening skills along with our understanding of listening. More, listening is endlessly applicable and has much to add to rhetoric and composition, the classroom, and beyond.

Listening can be enervating intellectually and emotionally, and it doesn’t guarantee reaching a resolution or even an understanding. It doesn’t even guarantee that we are moving in the right direction. But it does guarantee that we are trying. In Lipari’s words, “Listening is a risk. But it is a fine risk” (Listening 206).

Writing centers—staff, consultants, administration, writers—should take that risk. Listening involves and facilitates openness, navigation of power differentials, and understanding. It is essential to supporting the working with difference that is so inherent to the writing center. To build our knowledge of listening and develop our listening skills, we should approach listening more explicitly in theory and practice. Such exploration should also address how to nurture listening and support the risks that it involves. This dissertation and the framework of listening within difference can serve as one step forward in that exploration.

Ratcliffe’s monograph begins with a quote by Mary Daly: “In the beginning was not the word. In the beginning is the hearing” (qtd. in Rhetorical 17). We begin, not by speaking or telling, but by being open. We build ourselves and our differences through
dialogic relationships with others, and we create meaning and worlds together. To listen is to try to know ourselves and others, to be aware of the limits imposed by our preconceptions in order to push beyond them. It is a collaboration in (mis)understanding. It is attending to power imbalance and asymmetrical relationships so that differences fuel rather than impede collaboration. Listening is an attitude and an attempt, one that has implications for the writing center and beyond.
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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT AND CONSULTATION GUIDE

This appendix serves as a quick reference guide to the 14 main participants (see table 1) and as an overview of their consultations (see table 2).

Table 1
Introduction to Participants: Role and Self-Description

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Self-Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abigail</td>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>I am a first-year MA student and first-year writing consultant in the English department. I am female, 23 years old, Caucasian, American, from Kentucky, INFJ, Enneagram type 4 wing 5—I honestly whatever is helpful for you to include is fine with me! If you include our conversation about God and Scripture, it might be helpful to know that I am an Evangelical Protestant Christian—Southern Baptist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth*</td>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>I would describe myself as early 30’s, white, able-bodied woman, with about 5 years of experience in writing center work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Writer</td>
<td>[Not provided.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher</td>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>The above “apparently white, cis, heterosexual man” would be fine, especially if you’re talking at all about privilege. I’m allowed to get away with so much, often without noticing. You can mention the big beard and casual style of dress, if you like. I’m currently 38 and began my Associate degree at 28 while working full time. Born and raised in Colorado with my formative years with my dad, who was very much of his parents’ depression-era schools of thought on respect, work, food, finance, and education. For example, I was always told that I was going to college, yet my dad has zero comprehension of why I would continue after my Bachelor’s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Writer</td>
<td>I think one of my personal qualities is that I do not likes to talk about myself – good or bad – to others; but I have not</td>
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</table>
really care much about anyone describing me as however they see it.

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John*</td>
<td>Writer</td>
<td>American white male, age 70.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>I am only a first-year consultant and am still, by [and] large, attempting to find my way through it all.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathryn*</td>
<td>Writer</td>
<td>I am a Midwestern white woman in her thirties with average height and mid-length brown hair. I have a physical disability and live with chronic illness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>White, early-twenties, woman, brown hair, brown eyes, 5’3 Current English MA student at UofL from Texas, speaks English and some Spanish, interested primarily in rhetoric/composition and composition pedagogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LaShondra</td>
<td>Writer</td>
<td>An African American woman in the M.F.A. Performance program.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Liz | Consultant | ❖ First year graduate student  
❖ Have 2 years experience in the WC [writing center] setting  
❖ Interest and background in WC studies  
❖ Former early education teacher  
I think these pieces kind of form a lot of my perspective. |
| Madison | Writer | [Not provided.] |
| Quaid | Consultant | Quaid is a 1st year MA student in the English program at the University of Louisville. His academic focuses are within Rhetoric and Composition as well as Folklore Studies. Quaid is also serving as a consultant for the University Writing Center where he enjoys helping both creative and academic writers in learning more about themselves as writers and reaching that “eureka” moment when areas they struggle with start to come together. Once his MA program is complete, he plans to pursue a PhD in Rhetoric and Composition and hopefully continue work with a university’s composition program and in writing centers. |
Vanessa  Writer  I’m a junior in college. I like to stay active as much as I have time to – mostly I just go on walks. I am an average height and weight 20-year-old female. I take honors courses, but I am not an honors scholar (yet – I’m planning on applying for it soon and possibly writing a thesis). The class that this paper was for is an Honors seminar. I work part-time and I live at home with an autistic little sister and my mom. I love reading and writing. I am told by some of my friends who are also English majors, that I am a bit of a teacher’s pet – and I agree, I don’t think being a teacher’s pet is a bad thing. I like to be active in the classroom, if I’m not being active in the discussion I am listening and taking notes. I am also a creative writing minor, and I love the workshop courses at the university.

These self-descriptions were written by participants in response to one of my asynchronous follow-up questions.

*These participants chose to use a pseudonym.

Table 2
Consultation Summaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Consultation Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>Writer</td>
<td>Vanessa came to the writing center to write a visit reflection for one of her courses, and she and Christopher discussed her brief response to a novel. This discussion concentrated on embedding quotes and narrowing her argument.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher</td>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathryn*</td>
<td>Writer</td>
<td>Kathryn was working on a book review for publication in a journal. The review covered three books on disability. She worked with Beth to go over the journal’s requirements and to discuss whether her draft met those requirements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth*</td>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LaShondra brought a draft of the annotated bibliography that she was required to create at an early stage in her MFA thesis. She and Abigail went over annotated bibliography conventions and then what she had written so far. They discussed the sources that she had yet to include and brainstormed about how those sources might fit her project.

Abigail discussed the sources that she had yet to include and brainstormed about how those sources might fit her project.

John wanted to discuss an essay assignment for the course that he was auditing. He and Liz went over the assignment and talked about his proposed topic and whether it met the assignment requirements. They also touched on potential sources.

Liz went over the assignment and talked about his proposed topic and whether it met the assignment requirements. They also touched on potential sources.

David and Josh had met twice before this consultation to review David’s thesis. During this consultation, they went over David’s latest chapter, spending much of their time on local concerns.

Chris and Quaid reviewed a draft of Chris’s essay, which was a response to a movie. The consultation included discussion of potential reorganization and of restructuring the thesis to better reflect Chris’s argument.

Madison brought in a draft of an argumentative essay. Katie’s feedback focused on encouraging Madison to emphasize her voice rather than relying on summaries of sources.

This table is ordered by date of consultation, beginning with the first consultation observed, and then by role.

*These participants chose to use a pseudonym.
APPENDIX B: CODES

This appendix provides detail on the codes used in this dissertation. The five code categories used are Listening, Openness, Power, Understanding, and Questioning. For each category or pair of categories, I list the individual codes and their frequency in a table. Below this, I explain the meaning of the category, though this meaning was more emergent than strictly defined, given that I was using the coding process to create and better understand those categories (and vice versa). Next, I state which chapter focused on that category, and I then give an overview of that category’s code development. (See Chapter 2 for more on the overall coding process.)

Listening

Table 3

Listening Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category: LIS (Listening)</th>
<th>Grounded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIS – difficulties</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIS – engagement</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIS – explanation</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIS – facilitating</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Listening category, further explained below, encapsulates those codes that provided an overview of participants’ understanding of listening (see table 3). This category was referenced evenly throughout the dissertation.

During initial coding, the Listening category served as a bit of a catchall. It was a difficult category to code. Because listening was the framework on which my study drew, it could fit many of the codes that I developed early on. Codes ranged from “defining listening” to “listening is important” to “listening well” to “what it’s like to have trouble listening.” At that point, there were 52 codes in this category.
During the recoding process, the number of codes in this category drastically decreased to seven, four of which were used for this dissertation. The Listening category came to cover instances that provided an overview of participants’ understanding of listening. Some of these instances focused on listening somewhat abstracted from (though still connected with) the context of the other categories. For example, Vanessa, a writer, suggested that writers could listen better by taking notes. This concept did not have a significant tie to openness, power, understanding, and questioning, so I coded it as “LIS – facilitating.” Other instances were more obviously connected to other categories while still providing an overview of listening. These instances were double-coded. For example, Madison, another writer, wrote the following in her survey: “Listening to me means to be open and fully take in what someone is saying to you.” This was coded as “LIS – explanation” because she was defining listening, and it was also coded as “OPN – explaining” because she was explaining her understanding of openness.

I was able to greatly decrease the number of codes during the recoding process because many of the concepts that had earlier fallen under the Listening category began to fit better under other categories. For example, “listening as an *attempt* at understanding, which can never be fully reached” moved to the understanding category, becoming “UND – listening as an *attempt* at understanding.”

Another change in the Listening category during recoding was adding the concept of engagement. At one point during coding, I had a category dedicated to engagement (ENG), which comprised, in order of increasing frequency, “ENG – consultant level,” “ENG – writer level,” “ENG – affects engagement level,” “ENG – listening requires energy,” and “ENG – part of listening.” However, these codes did not prove rich enough
to merit an entire category, so I merged them into one code, which I put in the Listening
category: “LIS – engagement.”

By the end of the recoding process, Listening covered participants’
understandings of listening, what benefited listening, and what detracted from it. This
category also reflected that being active, rather than passive, is essential to listening.

**Openness**

Table 4

**Openness Codes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category: OPN (Openness)</th>
<th>Grounded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OPN – alterity</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPN – explaining</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPN – feedback</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPN – listening + openness</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPN – preconceptions – consultants</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPN – preconceptions – writers</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPN – transcendence</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPN – willingness</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Codes in the Openness category refer to the relationship between self and other,
with regard to acknowledgment of preconceptions and differences, and a willingness to
consider change (see table 4). As mentioned in Chapter 2, the code categories Openness
and Power were paired during coding and initial analysis due to their close relationship.
However, during later steps in the analysis and during the writeup, I found that each
category was very rich, so I separated them into two chapters. The Openness codes were
used most directly in Chapter 3.

During initial coding, my first stab at conceptualizing the Openness category was,
messily, “preconceptions, openness, receptivity, flexibility and change (and self-
awareness?).” Codes focused on breaking down listening in connection to openness, as in “listening involving awareness of self” and “listening involving turning toward.” Later changes included creating, merging, and deleting in order to better delineate my codes. I created “explaining openness” as a way of noting how participants’ understood openness. I merged “flexibility” with “listening as openness to change” because the former was really one way of describing being open to shifting approach. I also deleted the code “listening involving comparing other to self” and put the instances it had referred to into “listening involving awareness of self” and/or “listening involving awareness of the other.”

On reflection when beginning recoding, I decided that preconceptions, receptivity, flexibility, change, and self-awareness were significant and relevant concepts, but that openness was the umbrella under which they fell. I therefore changed the category title to Openness.

During recoding, Openness codes shifted to a focus on breaking down openness, not always with a direct connection to listening. “OPN – awareness” and “OPN – alterity,” for example, are relevant to listening, but the codes themselves focus on openness. Interesting but infrequent codes were noted but deleted as codes (e.g., the concept of being too open was mentioned only once). In the later stages of coding, codes that were the opposite sides of the same coin were merged (“OPN – awareness – other” and “OPN – awareness – self” became “OPN – awareness”). At the end, the extremely general code of “OPN – openness to ___” was broken up to fit other existing codes and the newly-created “OPN – feedback.”
Power

Table 5

Power Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Grounded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>POW – collaboration – conversation</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POW – collaboration – developing consultation together</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POW – collaboration – developing ideas and writing together</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POW – collaboration – overview</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POW – from knowledge/experience/connections</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POW – listening</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POW – power balance</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POW – writer agency</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Power category revolves around the relationship between self and other with regard to a person’s ability to influence someone or something else, even when resisted (Alsobaie; “power”; Werder), and how this connects to collaboration, agency, and listening (see table 5). As mentioned in Chapter 2, the code categories Openness and Power were paired during coding and other analysis due to their close connection. However, during later steps in the analysis and during the writeup, I found that each category was very rich, so I decided to separate them into two chapters. The Power category was used most directly in Chapter 4.

Though it took me some time to finalize my title for other categories, this category was called Power from the start. Power was a much simpler concept than openness to label, if not to define. Though the category was neatly titled, my initial codes were messy as I tried to come to terms with not just which potential themes were significant, but also how I wanted to delineate those themes. The best example of this is “consultants’ knowledge affects building rapport / asking good questions / conversation /
something like that.” During pattern and axial coding, I deleted this code, which had only been used twice. I had been tying level of knowledge to power, but while this code involved knowledge, the rest of it was less obviously relevant to power. I also merged “consultants ‘telling’ writers,” which had been used only three times, with “consultant/writer power balance over writer’s writing.”

In the later recoding process, I merged and divided codes. For example, I merged “POW – listening – silence” and “POW – listening + power dynamic” to form “POW – listening” because I felt that the connection between listening, silence, and power made more sense in the overall context of listening and power. I also found “listening + power dynamic” somewhat redundant, given that this code was in the Power category, so the final category became “POW – listening.”

Toward the end of this process, mirroring my division of the “OPN – openness to ___” code, I divided up “POW – collaboration.” This code had been used 51 times. Throughout recoding, I noted the emergence of different themes regarding collaboration, so I separated “POW – collaboration” into the four collaboration codes listed in table 5. A related change involved “POW – power balance – consultation” and “POW – power balance – writing.” I found that power balance in the context of guiding the consultation and guiding the writing was really a matter of collaboration, so I merged these codes with “POW – collaboration – developing consultation together” and with “POW – collaboration – developing ideas and writing together,” respectively. I also created a new code, “POW – power balance,” to mark instances that more strongly related to power balance as a general concept rather than specifically regarding collaboration.
Understanding and Questioning

Table 6

Understanding and Questioning Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category: UND (Understanding)</th>
<th>Grounded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UND – all is relevant</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UND – consultant as sounding board</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UND – listen to writer to understand and help</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UND – listening as <em>attempt</em> at understanding</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UND – others and their ideas through listening</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UND – writer and consultant taking different approaches</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category: QST (Questioning)</th>
<th>Grounded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>QST – consultant asking – better understand</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QST – consultant asking – help writer develop</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QST – how to ask</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QST – writer asking</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QST – writer likes being asked</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The categories of Understanding and Questioning were coded in concert. Understanding refers to what we think we know, how we can increase and modify that knowledge, and how to consider the limits of knowing. The Questioning category revolves around different aspects of questions, as defined as something that “invites some reply from another person” (Thompson and Mackiewicz 40; see table 6). These two categories were used most directly in Chapter 5.

My Understanding codes tended to be more stable throughout coding than were my codes for other categories. During the first round of coding for the Understanding category, the codes did not really change except for minor shifts in frequency of use. In comparison, with other categories at this point in the coding process, I tended to make a fair number of changes. More, the five codes that I used in this dissertation had all been
present in some form during initial coding. In other words, though I made some changes in the coding process, including changes in frequency and adding, merging, and deleting codes, the core concepts carried through. One example of changes during recoding is getting rid of the code “UND – listening for approach.”

There were times when I was confident in a code but not that code’s category. For example, I debated whether “UND – consultant as sounding board” (referring to times when the consultant helps the writer understand, expand, and revise their ideas through listening and reflection) would fit better in the Power category, since the code connected to collaboration. To make decisions about categories, I thought about the core of the code in question. In this example, I kept “UND – consultant as sounding board” under Understanding because I found the concept of increasing understanding more salient than the power relations that increasing understanding involves.

I created the Questioning category because, during initial coding, the concept of questioning came up again and again. I had assumed that this would be a subset of understanding because these questions tended to occur in the context of helping someone better understand. However, questioning became so rich that I made it its own category with 16 codes. Changes during early axial and pattern coding included merging and deleting. For example, I merged “consultant asking questions to better understand content” with “consultant asking questions to better understand” to form “consultant asking questions to better understand.” The infrequent codes “writer questioning themselves” and “asking questions to facilitate choice,” each used only once, were deleted. When recoding, I created ten codes, which I later decreased by merging and deleting. For example, I merged “QST – consultant asking – help them choose
consultation approach” with “QST – consultant asking to better understand.” I also deleted codes like “QST – easy,” which was only used twice.
### APPENDIX C: PARTICIPATION OVERVIEW FORM

#### Participation Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation Element</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Estimated Extra Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>We’ll video record one of your Writing Center consultations (I won’t be in the room).</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>You’ll take an online survey asking your thoughts about different aspects of that consultation.</td>
<td>5 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>We’ll have a conversation where you continue discussing the consultation from your perspective.</td>
<td>40 mins – 1 hr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email Follow-up</td>
<td>A few days later, I’ll email you with some follow-up questions for you to respond to via email.</td>
<td>30 mins</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Optional

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participate Element</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Estimated Extra Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>You might participate in another survey and interview following a consultation later in the semester.</td>
<td>5 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>You’ll have the option to share your thoughts on my transcripts, interpretations, etc.</td>
<td>30 mins – 1 hr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your Feedback</td>
<td>You’ll have the option to share your thoughts on my transcripts, interpretations, etc.</td>
<td>up to you</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D: COMMUNICATION FORM

Name: ________________________________________________________________

Email Address: __________________________________________________________

Please check one box for each of the following four categories:

Contact for Clarification Questions

☐ I am okay with being contacted by the investigators if they have clarification questions.
☐ I prefer not to be contacted by the investigators if they have clarification questions.

Future Analysis and Findings

☐ I am interested in learning more about the study’s future analysis and findings.
☐ I am not interested in learning more about the study’s future analysis and findings.

Potential Future Participation

☐ I’d like to be contacted later in the fall to learn about possible further participation.
☐ I’d not like to be contacted later in the fall to learn about possible further participation.

Pronouns

☐ They/their/theirs ☐ He/him/his ☐ ______________________
☐ She/her/hers ☐ Ze/hir
APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW GUIDE

It is ______ on ______ and I am here with _____________________.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>time</th>
<th>date</th>
<th>participant name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Doing a study on the roles of listening in the writing center

Conversation where I can learn about your experiences with writing centers and listening

First learn a little more about you to give me some context for the rest of the interview

1. What year are you?
2. What is your major/program?
3. How have you been involved with the UofL Writing Center so far?
4. What about other writing centers?
5. What has it been liking going to these writing centers?

Now I want to move into talking about the specific consultation that we recorded

5. Walk me through your consultation.
   – Remind me when your consultation was and who it was with.
   – What happened first?
   – What did you focus on?
   – What were some topics that you discussed?
   – What are some non-writing-related things that came up?
What stood out about this consultation?

What about this consultation were you pleased with?

What about this consultation did you find frustrating?

What did the writer come to work on?

What did you work on?

6. What was it like to work with the other person during this consultation?

How would you describe your interactions?

What stood out to you about your interactions?

In what ways did you work well together?

In what ways did you not work well together?

What do you know about the other person?

In what ways did you know the other person before this consultation?

What stood out to you about the other person?

How did your thoughts about the other person change over the course of the consultation?

Tell me more about the other person you worked with.

- Tell me about differences between the two of you that stood out during the consultation.
  - How did they affect the consultation?
- Tell me about similarities between the two of you that stood out during the consultation.
  - How did they affect the consultation?
Continue talking about the consultation, now focusing a little more on listening

7. Everyone defines listening differently, and there is no one correct definition. Before we talk more about it, I'd like to learn about how you understand listening. What does the word “listening” mean to you?

Now we’ll return to the consultation, focusing on listening

Tell me about a time during the consultation when the other person

8. Listened to you particularly well.

9. Did *not* listen to you well.
   - How did you know that they were/ weren't listening well?
   - How did this make you feel?
   - What impact did this have on the consultation?

Tell me about a time during the consultation when you

10. Listened to the other person particularly well.

11. Did *not* listen to the other person well.
   - How did you show that you were/ weren't listening well?
   - How did this make you feel?
   - What impact did this have on the consultation?
   - What was challenging about listening? Easy?
   - Why weren't you listening at this time?
Now that we’ve talked about your experiences with listening and the writing center, I’m interested to hear your opinions.

12. What advice would you give about how to listen well in writing center consultations?
   – What would you tell consultants?
   – What would you tell writers?

13. Based on our conversation and your experiences, what are some ways that listening might affect writing center consultations?
   – What were some ways that listening affected your consultation?

Great! We’ve reached the end of the particular questions I wanted to ask. Thanks for all your thoughts; they were super helpful.

We’ve talked about your writing center experience in general and in your recent consultation.

You explained what listening means to you and discussed listening in your recent consultation.

You gave some opinions on how to listen well and how listening might play into writing center consultations.

14. Is there anything you’d like to add?

15. Do you have any questions for me?
Survey on Listening and the Writing Center

Background Information

In this survey, you will respond to questions about your recent recorded University Writing Center consultation.

Questions will address both your behavior and the behavior of the other person. If you were the writer in this consultation, the other person is the consultant. If you were the consultant in this consultation, the other person is the writer.

1. My full name is:

2. The date of my recent University Writing Center consultation was:

   Date / Time
   MM/DD/YYYY

3. During this consultation, I was a:
   ○ writer
   ○ consultant

4. The name of the person I worked with during this consultation is:

5. Not counting this consultation, I have worked with this other person:
   ○ 0 times
   ○ 1-2 times
   ○ 3-5 times
   ○ more than 5 times
Survey on Listening and the Writing Center

This Consultation

6. Describe your recent Writing Center consultation in a few sentences.


7. Rate your level of agreement with the following statement:
This consultation was successful.

strongly disagree disagree neutral agree strongly agree

Please explain.


Survey on Listening and the Writing Center

The Other Person's Behavior in this Consultation

Please choose the number that best represents how you feel about the other person's behavior during this consultation.

8. During this consultation, the other person behaved:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>strongly disagree</th>
<th>disagree</th>
<th>neutral</th>
<th>agree</th>
<th>strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sensitively</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>supportively</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attentively</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collaboratively</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>authentically</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please explain.

9. On the previous page, you rated the success level of the consultation. How did the other person's behavior affect this success level?
## Survey on Listening and the Writing Center

### Your Behavior in this Consultation

Please choose the number that best represents how you feel about your behavior during this consultation.

10. **During this consultation, you behaved:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>strongly disagree</th>
<th>disagree</th>
<th>neutral</th>
<th>agree</th>
<th>strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sensitively</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>supportively</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attentively</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collaboratively</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>authentically</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please explain.

11. **How did your behavior affect the consultation’s success level?**


Survey on Listening and the Writing Center

Listening in this Consultation

Please choose the number that best represents how you feel about listening during this consultation.

12. During this consultation:

- The other person listened to me.
  - strongly disagree
  - disagree
  - neutral
  - agree
  - strongly agree

- I listened to the other person.
  - strongly disagree
  - disagree
  - neutral
  - agree
  - strongly agree

Please explain.

13. How did listening (by the other person and by you) affect the success of the consultation?

14. Is there anything you would like to add that this survey has not addressed?


CURRICULUM VITAE

Jessica S B Newman
Director of Tutoring Services | she/hers

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  Dissertation: The Space Between: Listening within Difference in Writing Center Consultations
  Chair: Bronwyn Williams

MFA  Creative Writing, University of Notre Dame  May 2015

MA  Language and Literacy, City College of New York  Feb. 2013

ScB  Cognitive Science, Brown University  May 2009

ACADEMIC SUPPORT APPOINTMENTS
Director of Tutoring Services  SU 2019 – present
  Learning Commons, Jefferson Community and Technical College

Assistant Tutoring Coordinator  SP 2019 – SU 2019
  Learning Commons, Jefferson Community and Technical College

Assistant Director of the University Writing Center  FA 2017 – SP 2018
  University Writing Center, University of Louisville

Assistant Director for Graduate Student Writing  FA 2016 – SU 2017
  University Writing Center, University of Louisville

Graduate Writing Tutor  FA 2013 – SP 2015
  Writing Center, University of Notre Dame

Writing Center Consultant  SP 2012 – SU 2013
  Writing Center, Center for Worker Education, City College of New York
TEACHING APPOINTMENTS
University of Louisville
  – Women in Literature SP 2018
  – Business Writing FA 2017

University of Notre Dame
  – Fiction Writing FA 2014 – SP 2015

City College of New York
  – Freshman Inquiry Writing Seminar FA 2012 – SP 2013

LaGuardia Community College
  – GED Bridge to Health SP 2013
  – Pre-GED Course SU 2012

ACADEMIC PUBLICATIONS
Refereed Articles


Refereed Chapters

Additional Publications

**SELECTED CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS**


“Listening and Conversation as Keys to Working with Individuals and Communities.” Conference on Community Writing, 19 Oct. 2017, University of Colorado Boulder, CO. Presentation.


**SELECTED LITERARY PUBLICATIONS**

“Another.” *Territory*, vol. 11, 2019.

“Promise Something Sweeter.” *Denver Quarterly*, vol. 50, no. 4, 2016, pp. 76-77.


**SELECTED AWARDS AND GRANTS**

University Fellowship 2015 – 2019
*School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies, University of Louisville*

IWCA Dissertation Grant 2018
*International Writing Centers Association*