Rhetoric in First-Year Writing Sessions at the Oakland University Writing Center

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to explore rhetoric in first-year writing (FYW) sessions at the Oakland University Writing Center (OUWC) conducted by two groups of tutors – those experienced with rhetoric and those less-experienced with rhetoric – while analyzing the differences and discussing their implications. Observations of ten different FYW sessions were conducted, as was an interview with the Operations Coordinator of the OUWC, and data was retrieved from the Center’s database. In the end, the results indicate that the tutors in this study exposed to rhetoric through either their course work or the OUWC conduct sessions in more indirect ways and pay attention to higher order concerns while those less experienced with rhetoric have a more direct approach and focus on lower order concerns. Ultimately, this paper suggests that more concrete training on how to handle rhetoric in FYW writing sessions and how to blend the various binaries of writing center tutoring can help OUWC tutors of all backgrounds better address rhetoric in FYW sessions while still meeting their individual students’ needs.

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**Introduction**

At Oakland University (OU), writing is at the core of the general education curriculum. With students having to complete a writing foundations requirement and two writing-intensive classes (one in general education and one inside the major), OU aims to help students learn “elements, writing processes, and organizing strategies for creating analytical and expository prose” along with developing “effective rhetorical strategies appropriate to the topic, audience, context and purpose” (Oakland University General Education, 2015). As this paper will describe, such rhetorical strategies play a major part in OU’s writing program, and rhetoric itself is a pivotal influence.

To elaborate, the first-year writing (FYW) program at OU that fosters such skills is composed of four classes: WRT 102 (Basic Writing), WRT 104 (Independent Study), WRT 150 (Comp 1), and WRT 160 (Comp II). During the past winter semester of 2015, 2,142 students were enrolled in the FYW program with 18 in WRT 102, 13 in WRT 104, 246 in WRT 150, and 1,864 in WRT 160 (Oakland University Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2015). Since WRT 160 counts as the university’s “writing foundations requirement” and WRT 102 and WRT 150 are possible prerequisites depending on student placement, it’s clear that the FYW sequence is an important part of students’ education. With the most recent enrollment numbers at OU (20,711 enrolled students) at the highest they’ve ever been, it’s clear that this university is constantly growing (Oakland University, 2015b). With more students taking the required “writing foundations” courses, then, more students will need help acclimating to college-level writing.

One of the most prominent things that FYW courses offer are the unique tie to rhetoric due to the program’s rhetorical focus, which will be explored more thoroughly in the background sections. At the OUWC, rhetoric also has a presence since FYW students represent a significant population of the sessions – according to the Writing Center’s records, approximately 33% (829) of the 2,539 appointments held at the OUWC during the winter of 2015 were part of the FYW program. This percentage is consistent with the rising trend of FYW sessions in the OUWC, with 35% (944 of 2,658 appointments) of FYW sessions in the winter of 2014 and 36% (925 of 2,533 appointments) in the fall of 2014. Therefore, more and more FYW students are being seen at the OUWC, which makes them an important part of its services and an important group to study.

With that being said, more rhetoric is clearly being presented to the OUWC, so how are the consultants handling such assignments and how are they conducting their sessions? What factors may affect how well the OUWC consultants tutor FYW students and their rhetorical assignments? What is rhetoric’s role in FYW sessions at the Writing Center (regarding both the student and the tutor), and how heavily is it talked about and explored?

It’s important to recognize and examine such concepts at the OUWC, so in an effort to better understand and analyze the role of rhetoric in FYW sessions, this study will explore the Department of Writing and Rhetoric (WRT) and its FYW program and will investigate such FYW sessions at the OUWC directly. This paper will be split into six sections (this introduction, the background, methods, results, discussion, and conclusion sections) and will explore rhetoric’s presence in FYW sessions at the OUWC while examining consultants’ awareness and utilization of it. Specifically, certain types of tutors will be observed to distinguish if any patterns arise and to determine how the OUWC consultants are currently handling rhetoric in the OUWC. In the end, the results will be shared and discussed, and the findings will be used to look forward to how rhetoric can be addressed at the OUWC in training and professional development.

**Background**

In order to truly understand and recognize the diversity and independence of OU’s FYW writing program, the OUWC, and the FYW sessions, it’s important to take a look at where the FYW programs originated and how its department evolved. This background section will briefly describe the history of OU, the development and mission of the current Department of Writing and Rhetoric (WRT), and the emergence and goals of the OUWC.

**Institution Background**

To better understand the nature of Oakland University (OU)’s first-year writing program, it’s important to get a sense of how the university first emerged and then how both the university and its writing programs later evolved. Established in 1957 by Alfred G. Wilson and Matilda Dodge Wilson, Oakland University was originally created as a truly “academic university” in that non-academic parts of the college experience (such as athletic teams, on-campus housing, fraternities, sororities, and other types of programs) were not present (Chong & Nugent, 2015). Likewise, OU gathered faculty from various top-tier schools throughout the country in an effort to have high academic achievement and, during its earlier curriculum, the university didn’t offer remedial coursework (calculus was the lowest level of math, for instance). Also, there were no freshman composition courses as the university currently has today (Chong & Nugent, 2015).

After opening and enrolling students, however, OU suffered from deep academic failures during its first term – 36% percent of the students received at least one failing grade in their classes. Due to such high failure rates, the chancellor of the university allowed students to retake courses without harm to their grade point averages, and as the years progressed and professors and university officials realized the standards they originally set weren’t on par with the students, OU had to adapt such standards and re-evaluate their curriculum and their university, especially since recruitment and enrolled decreased after having such high numbers of failure rates (Chong & Nugent, 2015).

It wasn’t until 1972 that the university created its original first-year writing program housed in an administrative unit: the Department of Learning Skills. This program continued over the years, and by 1981, the FYW program had a considerable population and was later changed to be called the Department of Rhetoric, still not housed in an academic department. After quickly combing with other academic departments, however, the program became known as the Department of Rhetoric, Communication and Journalism (RCJ), and in 2008, the rhetoric faculty of that department proposed the creation of the Department of Writing and Rhetoric, which eventually came to fruition and stands as an academic department today with its own major and minor while housing the current FYW program (Chong & Nugent, 2015).

From this brief institutional background, it’s clear to see that the university had an original goal for its students and has changed considerably throughout the years. In a sense, OU strived to be a higher-level institution located in a populous metropolitan area, but due to the populated area, the university attracted more students locally than from elsewhere, which limited the academic level and diversity. Therefore, the university had to tailor its curriculum to better meet its students, and that’s where the first-year writing program and the Department of Writing and Rhetoric ultimately come into focus, which will be detailed in the next section.

**Department of Writing and Rhetoric Background**

As previously mentioned, the WRT Department developed in 2008 after having merged from the Department of Learning Skills to the RCJ Department. According to a program profile of the major published by Lori Ostergaard and Greg Giberson (2010), the original mission of the WRT major was to “develop students’ abilities to write independently and collaboratively, to become engaged participants in democracy, and to be critical readers and thinkers in academic, community, national and global environments” (para 4). Since then, the goals of the major have evolved as it is “designed to address the evolving nature of persuasion and written communication in the 21st century, with an emphasis on digital media technologies and civic engagement” (Oakland University Department of Writing and Rhetoric, 2015). At its core, though, the WRT major and minor still focus on more global and civic engagement as it relates to written communication and critical thinking.

It’s from this mentality, then, that the first-year writing program resides – in a rhetorical program that encourages students to connect with their communities and utilize their writing abilities in varying settings. The first-year writing sequence is composed of WRT 102 (Basic Writing), WRT 150 (Comp 1), and WRT 160 (Comp II). For the purposes of this project, though, the focus will be on two of the FYW classes – WRT 150 and WRT 160, since they consist of activities that are more rhetorical in nature.

WRT 150 is described as “a course emphasizing the rhetorical and stylistic demands of college writing through focus on experiential, analytical, and expressive writing” (Oakland University, 2015a). Most notably, the WRT 150 curriculum has projects that focus on students’ chosen career fields. Project 1, for instance, calls for students to “identify a document within [their] field to analyze and perform that analysis successfully by asking critical questions about the document's context, audience, and purpose” (Ostergaard, n.d.). In a similar vein, another professor asks her students to “consider issues [in their] field of study and to “enter the ongoing conversation” by finding sources about their field and performing rhetorical analyses on them (St. Pierre, n.d.).

As the final installment in the first-year writing sequence, WRT 160 “emphasizes processes of writing and revision with a focus on information literacy, critical thinking, and effective communication in diverse rhetorical contexts” (Oakland University, 2015a). Certain professors focus on “present[ing] these arguments through a variety of forms, genres, and media platforms, including on paper, online, and on video” (VanKooten, n.d.) while others “emphasiz[e] processes of writing and revision with a focus on information literacy, critical thinking, and effective communication in diverse rhetorical contexts” (Mooty-Hoffmann, n.d.). The curriculum and specialties of WRT 160 are more flexible than that of WRT 150, but still, each course follows certain rules and guidelines that ultimately expose students to the particular set of skills as advertised in the course’s catalog description.

As a whole, the WRT Department has made efforts to shift their FYW curriculum from a more anecdotal teaching emphasis to a more research-proven one, which is detailed in an article written by WRT faculty Elizabeth Allan, Dana Driscoll, David Hammontree, Marshall Kitchens, and Lori Ostergaard (2015). They advocate that a program-wide emphasis on research can help strengthen and unify faculty, both full-time and contingent, and they have found ways to use assessment as research from the department’s initial launch and continually tie evaluation, research, and professional development together. From this, then, the WRT Department models and demonstrates the type of critical thinking and data-driven approaches it teaches its FYW students, and this attitude carries over to the courses, its students, and the different academic programs related to them.

**OUWC Background**

Though the OUWC is not associated with any academic department on campus, the relations between the OUWC and the WRT Department are strong due to their shared pool of students. Established in 2006 by benefactor and professor emerita of English Joan Rosen, the Oakland University Writing Center (OUWC) of today strives to be the “Write” space on campus for the entire Oakland University community. Indeed, their mission is to “engender independent writing practice in a friendly and welcoming environment” while “serving all clients regardless of discipline or task” in order to “supplemen[t]… the array of communication and writing courses offered by various departments” (Oakland University Writing Center, 2015). Led by Director Sherry Wynn Perdue, the OUWC’s eighteen writing consultants come from varying backgrounds themselves– eight are majoring in English, four in writing and rhetoric, one in psychology, one in international relations, one in public administration and public policy, one in criminal justice, and one is completing her PhD in counseling while another is pursuing an MA in liberal studies. Additionally, eleven are pursuing either minors or secondary majors in the fields of writing and rhetoric, English, journalism, sociology, marketing, Spanish, French, and biology.

Clearly, there’s a diversity of writing center consultants at this writing center, and likewise, there’s a variety of clients that they see, ranging from first-year writing students to graduate-level engineering students. The OUWC’s training has overseen extensive revision over the years, and there are currently two different tracks – the WRT 320 track and the outside track. Traditionally, most writing center consultants have applied to the Writing Center either during or after taking WRT 320: Peer Tutoring in Composition, which focuses on introducing students to the theories and practicum of tutoring college-level writing. As of late, though, the university’s WRT 320 class has dealt more with childhood literacy tutoring through a partnership program with the Baldwin Center in Pontiac, MI and has been geared more toward education majors. To compensate for the lack of interested students applying to the Writing Center from the WRT 320 courses, Ashley Cerku (the Operations Coordinator) and Paige Brockway (a writing consultant) have revamped the Center’s e-space portal to include more detailed training.

This e-space page, available to all consultants, has the following main sections: Introductory Sources, Official OUWC Correspondence, Professional Development Resources, Consultant Training, Consultant Resources, Forthcoming Conferences, Writing Center Publications, and Writing Center Correspondence. Consultants-in-training must navigate through the site and read all the material before they complete various modules that cover APA, MLA, and Chicago in addition to finishing four mock sessions where they explain how they would go about tutoring the proposed situation. This method of training was created due to the recent trend of not necessarily requiring new hires to have taken WRT 320 prior to starting work at the OUWC.

As it stands, the Writing Center currently has eight writing consultants who have not taken WRT 320 compared to ten that have. The amount of tutors that haven’t taken WRT 320 could increase over the years as curriculums change and current tutors graduate, so likewise, the amount of training would also be expected to increase and adapt. The OUWC has already made efforts to address this gap by offering full-day training sessions before the fall semester for the past three years, and bi-weekly professional development meetings have also been implanted. At these meetings, tutors read academic articles, discuss them with each other, and attend workshops held by either WRT faculty or experienced tutors that focus on specific areas.

Though the OUWC’s team of tutors have had experience with the WRT Department (be it by majoring in Writing and Rhetoric or having taken WRT 320), there’s no clear, direct link between the OUWC and rhetoric. In fact, this seems to be the case at other universities as well – at the time of this writing, there is to date a lack of literature on the topic of rhetoric’s presence in the writing center, as there is likewise a dearth of writing programs as rhetorically-focused as OU’s. This concludes, then, that certain connections and relations need to be made regarding rhetoric and writing centers, and this paper will attempt to provide some observations and connections that might contribute to the field and this void.

**Methods**

In order to explore rhetoric’s presence in the OUWC and examine how consultants are handling rhetoric in FYW sessions, three main types of data collection were used: observations, an interview with the Operations Coordinator (Ashley Cerku), and the OUWC data base. To start, observations of writing center tutors were conducted (13 sessions, 10 different tutors). These observations were conducted over the course of roughly three weeks (10/5 – 10/29) and allowed for a variety of tutors to be observed.

Specifically, the groups of tutors can be broken down into two groups as it relates to rhetoric: five writing center tutors more experienced with rhetoric (four tutors had three or more years’ experience at the OUWC with two of those four being WRT majors while one student was a WRT minor) and less-experienced tutors (each tutor was either on their first or second year tutoring and also did not have previous exposure to rhetoric besides the FYW curriculum). Also, four of the tutors in the more-experienced group had taken WRT 320 whereas only one student tin the less-experienced group took WRT 320. It’s important to note that these sessions were not observed in a judgmental way – no tutor was being evaluated for his or her effectiveness as a tutor, which was explained to each of them before the observations. Also, nor was there bias going into this research – I noted the majors/minors and years’ experience of the tutors but recorded information in the same manner for each session. Indeed, each tutor was closely watched to see how rhetorical they were and how they specifically addressed rhetoric in their FYW sessions, and that was the only objective.

The approach to these observations was a detailed, minute-by-minute recording of various interactions made during the session. In order to keep track of the rhetoric present during the session, I highlighted activities I perceived as rhetorical and made notes and abbreviations around them to clarify how they were rhetorical (as an example, “IMP AUD” meaning “implied audience” for when a tutor told the FYW student to elaborate on what they mean by a term to “be clear.” This is directly addressing and considering the audience, but it isn’t implicitly said, which is why I would label it as “IMP AUD.”).

Regarding the interview portion, I interviewed Ashley Cerku (the Operations Coordinator) and received information concerning the materials used for tutor training and rhetorical direction that the Writing Center would like to move in. Finally, information stored on the OUWC databases was collected. These databases included background information on the consultants and the number of students seen at the writing center in specific areas.

**Observation Results**

This section will detail the observations conducted and will be split into two sections: the Experienced OUWC Consultants section and the Less-Experienced OUWC Consultants section. Each consultant’s session will be described in terms of how the tutors started their sessions, what type of assignments they were working on, some of the key areas on which they focused (rhetorical and non-rhetorical), and their general approach to the session. The purpose of this section is to qualitatively portray the sessions and make room for their greater meaning in the discussion section.

**Experienced OUWC Consultants**

*Rachel[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Tutoring a WRT 150 student working on his narrative learning assignment, Rachel approached the session in a very conversational way, opening up by asking the student how he felt about the content of the paper and asking if he could tell her about it. After the student explained where he was coming from and where he wanted to go with the paper, Rachel proceeded to read through his paper aloud and correct grammar, address word choice, and question content as she read along.

Though Rachel’s main style was paper-focused in that she read the paper and centered her suggestions around its reading, she paid attention to more purpose-oriented concepts as well. Toward the beginning, she mentioned to the student that he “want[ed] a central idea, a thesis” in his paper, and she proceeded to explain what a thesis’s function was and promised to return to it after reading the whole paper. She also noted how effectively (or ineffectively) he related to his audience, be it through the emotion of his story or the words he chose and how that affected the reader, and she likewise described academic tone and helped him keep his paper academic as well as expository.

She ended the session by reviewing what they covered and helping in create a clear revision plan. She also chatted with the student and he told her that she had helped him tremendously and that she gave him confidence in his writing. In sum, her chosen approach was a read-through method, but throughout the reading, she paused to address more higher-order areas of concern like organization, structure, audience awareness, and genre awareness, though she mostly dealt with the lower order concerns.

*Monica[[2]](#footnote-2)*

Much like Rachel, Monica started off her WRT 150 session by asking the student what they would be working on and what concerns the student had. After clarifying that they would be working on a career profile essay, Monica started to read through the paper aloud, making notes about grammar and punctuation as she went along. As they read through it, Monica stopped a couple times to ask the student if she had any questions.

The student had a strong paper and Monica didn’t have much to suggest in terms of content and argument revisions, but they checked the assignment sheet again and went through each of the criteria. After checking over the MLA citations and formatting, the two talked about college writing in general, and Monica explained how direct and straightforward one had to be and how students sometimes struggled with that. The student agreed that she wasn’t always comfortable being so direct and she shared that she felt repetitive when she wrote her papers, and Monica assure her that it was what she was supposed to do and praised her for how professional her essay sounded.

This was a shorter session (only eighteen of the allotted forty minutes), and the student left content and feeling better about her abilities to write academically. As a whole, Monica conducted this session in a read-through style while still concentrating on higher-level elements of academic tone and audience awareness, with most of the session devoted to discussing and explaining academic writing itself.

*Carly[[3]](#footnote-3)*

Though Carly started her session about eight minutes late, when she sat down at the table, she took the time to ask the student about the assignment and went over the assignment sheet with him. She was told it was a career profile essay, and she clarified what his paper needed to include and asked what his main concerns were regarding the paper. They then went in with reading the paper aloud, but after reading the introduction, Carly stopped to ask the student questions about who he interviewed for the paper, what he did research on, and explained how this was the type of information he needed to have in his introduction paragraph so that his readers would know what to expect later on.

Continuing with her reading, Carly addressed some grammar and punctuation as they came up but primarily focused on the student’s use of language, asking him if he felt certain words and sentences were too repetitive while explaining the purpose of citing and using secondary sources. She talked about the assignment itself, explaining that “the research is providing information on the subject but the artifacts are just supposed to be an example,” and she pointed out how the student didn’t always explain his sources and encouraged him to “show how it pertains to [his] study.” Toward the end of the session, Carly addressed the structure of his paper and noted how he “jumped around.” She suggested that he move certain paragraphs around, and regarding the inner organization of his paragraphs, she made a suggestion to “mesh [observations] together with the research.”

In general, she told him that “[he] should really have more secondary sources to support what [he’s] saying” and suggested that he add more information to his thesis to make the goals of his paper clear to his reader. Overall, this session mixed reading through the paper and talking about it and focused primarily on the student’s utilization of sources, organization, and academic tone.

*Wilson[[4]](#footnote-4)*

After clarifying that the student was working on a WRT 150 career profile essay, Wilson starting reading the paper aloud and paused almost instantly, explaining the purpose of a thesis statement and how important it is for the readers to know what’s coming later in the paper. Also talking about some grammar, punctuation, and MLA citations as they came up, Wilson commented on the content and the arguments, saying things like “I wouldn’t keep this unless you talk about how it affects her communication” and “does she [the person he interviewed for the assignment] make any argument *why* it’s a good home?”

Progressing with the paper, Wilson continued to read for general understanding and content while also checking for grammar and punctuation. He made suggestions to “describe the rhetorical aspects of technology for communication” and to talk about the “different audiences” of the student’s career field, and he also addressed the rhetorical part of the assignment. The student had to talk about how rhetoric is present in the field, and Wilson said that, “one of the easier ways to talk about rhetoric is to talk about it when it’s bad. It shows its importance.” He continued this pattern of stopping to evaluate if the student had met all the requirements of the paper and then helping them find ways to do so if the student hadn’t.

They finished reading through the paper and worked on citation and formatting issues before discussing the best way to end the paper. Wilson encouraged the student to end the paper with a sentence toward the end of the body section since it was “really strong” and discouraged the student from writing long, “filler” sentences to end a paper. In general, his approach was a blend of reading through the paper and talking about it, and he ultimately stressed the importance of adding rhetorical aspects to the paper and having strong, complete arguments.

*Sarah[[5]](#footnote-5)*

Working with a student on a rhetorical analysis assignment, Sarah started her session by asking the student what she wanted to achieve during the session. The student had feedback on a rhetorical analysis from her professor and wanted to revise it, so Sarah looked through the feedback, asked the student for a general summary of her paper, and then clarified what the two would do during the session.

Instead of reading through the paper, Sarah talked to the student about her audience since that was one of the biggest concerns with the paper. She asked the students questions like “is there any other way you think you can better connect with your audience?” while they chatted about what an academic audience is and how the student could write for it. After clearing up some understanding on that issue, they then discussed the different rhetorical appeals and moved around the paper to concentrate on the specific areas of concern. The student had a difficult time finding ethos in her artifact (a movie poster), so Sarah asked questions that were intended to guide the student to the answer. The poster’s setting was on Broadway and it was about a play, so Sarah asked”If [the creator] were to use a less well-known place, would it be as effective?” in an attempt for the student to understand that the setting itself was ethos. The student didn’t pick up on that, though, and kept asking what authority and ethos meant, which Sarah explained and continued to try and demonstrate.

Throughout the session, Sarah pointed out potential weaknesses of the student’s arguments and explained why they were weak and proposed how they could be better. Again addressing ethos, Sarah explained that the visual components the student chose were “well-known images” and she encouraged the student to think about “how... this lead to [their] credibility.” The session ran overtime and Sarah ended by fixing some quick MLA citations, and she encouraged the student to come back to the Writing Center before she turned her paper back in since the student still had many questions regarding the rhetorical aspects of the paper. As a whole, Sarah skipped around in the paper to talk about the importance of the writer’s audience and about ways the student could better show the importance of ethos.

**Less-Experienced OUWC Consultants**

*Kyle[[6]](#footnote-6)*

Working with his client on a career profile paper, Kyle started the session by looking over the rubric and asking the student what they wanted to focus on in the session. They clarified that they wanted to concentrate on grammar, ideas, and the general flow of the paper, and Kyle began reading through the student’s paper. He stopped fairly early on to discourage the student from using “you” and to “just consider who [his] audience is here.” After reading the first paragraph, Kyle addressed the student’s thesis and said that, in the thesis, “[the] reader needs to see the *why* in it, and [the] body paragraphs are the *how.*”

While going over the body paragraphs, Kyle also addressed the rhetorical elements. He pointed out that “[they were] making an appeal to authority with Brad” and he asked his student to “tell [him] who he is and why [he] should listen to him.” Kyle also stated that “placement and organization” is key while continuing to read through the paper, pointing out punctuation and grammatical errors as they went along. He also talked about the rhetoric requirements of the paper and explained what the different rhetorical appeals were, telling the student that he was “aware of how rhetoric is different” but that he “had to show it” in his paper.

As a whole, this session was very idea and content focused as Kyle focused on what the student’s paper said and suggested ways for him to be clearer, and Kyle paused several times to explain concepts and brainstorm with the student on ideas he could add to the paper. He was very clear with that they were doing in the session, tell the student “since [the student] will be adding stuff, [Kyle] would look more at [the] ideas” in the paper, and they looked at the conclusion of the paper but recognized that the student would have to rewritre the conclusion that reflected the new ideas of the paper (which is that rhetoric was involved in the career field). Overall, then, Kyle’s approach was one that read through the paper but that also focused on the “how” parts of the paper and on having a clear rhetorical section of the paper.

*Lyla[[7]](#footnote-7)*

In her session, Lyla worked with a WRT 150 student working on the career profile essay, and since it was the student’s first time at the OUWC, Lyla explained how the sessions worked and then started with helping the student format her paper in MLA. After fixing the format, Lyla read the student’s theis to get an idea of what the paper was about. The student didn’t have a clear thesis, though, so Lyla decided to start reading through the paper and come back to the thesis once they finished reading through it.

Lyla’s approach was to read through the paper and point out areas of concern as they came up. She would often react as a reader, saying things like “I was confused here” and asking “what do you mean by ‘job outlook’?” Lyla utilized the Purdue Owl for discussing citation rules, and she focused on the general flow and comprehension of the text as she read through it and addressed issues.

The rhetorical part of the assignment was brought up once, in which the student asked what ethos was. Lyla explained that “ethos is credibility” but quickly went back to the rest of the paper. At the end, they went back to the student’s thesis and Lyla tried to help her write one that best captured the aim of her paper. The student didn’t really understand how to write her thesis and the session was up, so Lyla encouraged her to make another appointment and to seek further guidance if she needed more help. In general, Lyla’s session focused primarily on grammar, punctuation, and word usage while going back to the importance of having a thesis and an overall claim to the paper.

*Gina[[8]](#footnote-8)*

In her WRT 150 session, Gina worked with a student on revising a personal essay. Gina had the student explain the assignment, and the student showed her previous versions of his essay and said that he needed help revising it. They proceeded to read through the paper together, working through one paragraph at a time and addressing grammatical and punctuation errors as they went along,

Since they were working on a revision, Gina asked which parts the student wanted to focus on, and she followed his lead and jumped around in the paper. She looked at the professor’s feedback and helped him dig deeper into his paper, asking questions like “what made you figure out that this is what you want to do?”. The session was primarily dominated with grammatical and punctuation edits along with clarify of language (Gina would point out how parts of a sentence didn’t make sense and would help him fix it), but it wasn’t as read-through focused since they switched around to the sections he wanted revised. Ultimately, Gina’s session was more task-focused and concentrated on fixing grammar, punctuation, and word choice while she skipped around to work on particular parts.

*Gunnar[[9]](#footnote-9)*

Working with a student on the career profile paper, Gunnar started the session by asking the student what she was concerned about and then proceeded to glance over the MLA formatting. After making some corrections and explaining them, he began reading through the paper, stopping to clarify meaning on certain sentences and addressing how certain parts were vague. He mostly focused on the ideas and content and brought it back to how the reader would perceive it, saying things like “I would get rid of the exclamation mark because we’re going for a more academic audience” and “you might want to clarify that because someone like me doesn’t know.”

When the student was confused about incorporating ethos into her paper, Gunnar explained that “you know what you’re doing [in her field] and it establishes your own ethos,” and explained that ethos is “credibility and how and why they [people] are qualified.” For the remainder of the session, Gunnar continued to read through the piece and address clarity of wording throughout the session, and at the end, he wrapped up what they accomplished and reminded her of what she needed to revise. Overall, then, Gunnar had a paper-reading approach very much concerned with how the wording of the paper came across to the reader while also fitting into the academic tone of writing.

*Stephanie[[10]](#footnote-10)*

Working with a WRT 150 student on her career profile paper, Stephanie started the session by asking the student to clarify the assignment before reading the paper aloud. She read through the paper and addressed issues as they arose (telling the student not to use “you” because it’s important to “avoid that in formal writing”), and she also briefly addressed the audience of the paper, encouraging the student to be “more clear about [what she was saying]”.

This session was very brief and mainly covered punctuation and wording issues. The student didn’t have very many questions on the content or the assignment, but Stephanie did make suggestions dealing with more organizational aspects, saying, “maybe put [a couple sentences] in the beginning and add general information.” She also made word choice suggestions (saying “attempting” instead of “trying”) and wrapped the session up with some final grammar and word choice edits. As a whole, this session was shorter and took the read-through approach while primarily focusing on word usage, academic tone, and grammar, though Stephanie did make a suggestion concerning the organization of a few sentences.

**Discussion**

A few prominent patterns arose from these observations, and in the following section, I will elaborate on such patterns and fit them into the conversation on writing center tutoring at the OUWC. I will connect them to theories and schools of thought that the tutors have been taught (as discussed in an interview with Ashley Cerku, the Operations Coordinator, and as is known through my own experience at the OUWC), and regarding the more rhetorical aspects, I will examine how rhetoric has been addressed in these sessions and what some implications might be.

*Read-through vs. Content-pick as Directive vs. Nondirective Tutoring*

One of the clearest patterns present in these observations is a binary of approaches – some tutors read the paper aloud and brought up issues as they came along while others centered comments and suggestions around the areas in which the student wanted to concentrate. In the writing center training materials that most tutors read either in WRT 320 or in preparation for this position, tutors learn about the ideas of “directive” tutoring and “nondirective” tutoring, which is a binary that mirrors this divide of approaches. According to Brooks (2011) nondirective or “minimalist” tutoring (which is where the tutor makes the student take initiative) is a great way to support the belief that “the tutor’s activity should focus on the student” (p. 132). Shamoon and Burns (2011), meanwhile, challenged this idea and claimed that “directive tutoring displays rhetorical processes in action” and “provides interpretive options for students when none seem available” (pp. 144-145). Clearly these are opposite schools of thought, and indeed, both of these approaches are used at the OUWC.

From the observed consultants, six of them approached the session in a more directive, read-through fashion (Rachel, Monica, Kyle, Lyla, Gunnar, and Stephanie) while four of them showcased more nondirective approaches by either skipping around in the paper, questioning their clients on the ideas and content, or asking what the student meant and how they could change their paper (Carly, Wilson, Sarah, and Gina). Of the four that were more content-focused, three of them (Carly, Wilson, and Sarah) are either majoring or minoring in Writing and Rhetoric while the fourth (Gina) was the only one tutor in the less-experienced group that has taken WRT 320. It may just be a coincidence given the small sample involved, but this also might point to an indication that the more rhetorically-exposed tutors focus less on straightforward, grammatical matters and approach sessions with more attention to ideas and arguments.

However, that isn’t to say that such an approach is necessarily better – at the OUWC, it’s encouraged for tutors to adopt a blend of the two approaches when they tutor. When training students at the OUWC, Cerku encourages “consultants to use a blend of both depending on the student and his/her assignment” (A. Cerku, personal communication, November 18, 2015). In general, they “usually encourage the consultant to use the first five minutes or so to gauge where the student is at in their assignment as well as determine the type of writer he/she is, that way the rest of the consultation can be more successful in achieving the student's goals.” Therefore, the mentality at the OUWC is to use a blend of the two approaches as is best for the individual student.

It’s also important to remember the genre of the FYW assignments. As the background section touched upon, the Project 1 career profile essays were meant for students to interact with their fields of study and highlight the more rhetorical qualities of it. Most of the tutors worked with students on career profile essays (seven), so in these seven sessions, all of tutors dealt with assignments that required background research and required them to apply rhetorical elements to their field. However, rhetoric was not treated equally in each of the sessions (four of the consultants glossed over rhetoric while three went into more detail on it, but interestingly, only one of these three was a Writing and Rhetoric major). This supports Cerku’s stance that each session is tailored to each specific student, and in the career profile sessions where the tutors didn’t focus as much on rhetoric, the tutors focused on other areas of concern that may have been better aligned to what the student wanted to accomplish in the session.

Still, from these observations, it can be said that the dichotomy of directive vs. nondirective tutoring does indeed exist at the OUWC (specifically in FYW sessions and, even more specifically, during the first project of WRT 150), and one can also conclude that, in this study, the more rhetorically-experienced tutors favored the nondirective approach while those less rhetorically-experienced favored a more direct approach. This isn’t to say that the more rhetorically-experienced tutors and their approaches are better; rather, it points to a trend in their particular approach toward these FYW sessions (especially as it relates to the WRT 150 career profile assignment). Rhetoric was still addressed in the sessions that were more directive (Gunnar and Kyle’s sessions were both very much focused on rhetoric, despite not being WRT majors) and each student during these sessions seemed satisfied with how their session went. I the end, this all might support Cerku’s earlier assertion that each tutor has to gauge their individual student, though it appears those more well acquainted with rhetoric might side with a more nondirective style.

*Grammar/punctuation vs. Content/Argumentation as Higher Order Concerns vs. Lower Order Concerns*

In the writing center community, this is a dual system of feedback referred to as “lower order concerns” vs. “higher order concerns.” As described in *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring* by Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner (2008), which served as a requirement for past WRT 320 courses and as a general guide at the OUWC, higher-order concerns (elements of a paper such an organization, ideas, argumentation, etc.) are supposed to come first in a paper whereas lower-order concerns (grammar, punctuation, formatting, etc.) are supposed to come last (p. 35). Tutors are taught not to focus too much on the grammar and editing of a paper (to resist against what Steven North (2011) called the “fix-it shop”) but to blend grammar and organizational/arguments throughout the session.

In my observations, though, it can be seen that most tutors focused on *both* lower order and higher concerns, with some focusing on lower order more than others. Of the observations, six of the consultants focused primarily on lower order concerns (Rachel, Monica, Lyla, Gina, Gunnar, and Stephanie) while four focused more on higher order concerns (Carly, Wilson, Sarah, and Kyle). With the exception of Kyle, all of the tutors who focused more on the higher order concerns are either majoring or minoring in WRT, and none of the tutors who focused more on lower order concerns are majoring or minoring in WRT (although Rachel and Monica have been at the writing center for more than three years and have more experience with rhetoric).

From this break down, one can ponder on how the tutor’s major influences how they tutor. In this study, the WRT majors/minors were the ones to focus on higher order concerns and tutor in a more nondirective way whereas the non-WRT tutors focused more on lower order concerns and tutored in a more direct fashion. The sample is too small to make any wide claims about WRT majors as tutors in a general sense, but as it relates to the OUWC, this sample represents a good portion of the population of overall tutors, which might give this data more prominence.

In the end, though, it’s clear from this study that tutors *do* address higher and lower order concerns in their sessions but that one level is more prominent than another in a session. Relating this back to the nature of the FYW program, it can be said that the more higher order areas of tutoring should have precedence (given the goals of the FYW courses and the WRT Department), but it’s difficult to isolate such instances since tutoring is a complex practice dependent on the specific student, which the OUWC expresses to its tutors. Overall, then, the choice of focusing on higher order concerns or lower level concerns is rhetorical in itself, and those more experienced with the discipline of rhetoric (either through the WRT Department or the OUWC) in this study tended to focus on concerns at the higher level.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, it’s clear that there is a variation of tutoring styles between the two groups of OUWC tutors examined. One group, more experienced with rhetoric and with the writing center itself, didn’t necessarily limit their sessions to reading through the paper, tutoring in a directive style, and focusing on grammar and punctuation. Indeed, some of the consultants skipped around in the paper, questioned the students, and focused more on their clients’ understanding of their topics and the overall meaning and purpose of the assignment; likewise, others focused more on the lower order concerns picked up through a read-through of the paper. These differences didn’t fit neatly within the two categories (some of the tutors in the less-experienced groups talked the most about rhetoric itself, for example), but the fact remains that this study saw evidence of a true binary of styles.

From this study, it’s also clear that there’s a blend of approaches being used in the FYW sessions at the OUWC, and it can’t be claimed that one approach alone is necessarily better or worse than the other in aiding the FYW students in this particular study. Moving forward to prepare for future FYW sessions, Writing Center tutors can share their various methods (like the ones noted in this paper) and discuss how each consultant approaches rhetoric in FYW sessions. They can ultimately build a foundation together and there can be a type of base from which all tutors could eventually draw.

Specifically, we can create a sort of “rhetoric cheat sheet” to be posted onto the OUWC’s e-space account, and we can have more rhetoric workshops throughout the year. To date, I gave a fifteen-minute presentation on rhetoric at our training day before the Center opened, Dr. VanKooten of the WRT Department gave an hour workshop in September on multimodal assignments that might come into the OUWC, and our Operations Coordinator and I gave a forty minute visual rhetoric workshop during a staff meeting in October, but we could create workshops that more directly apply to the rhetoric seen in FYW. For example, we could include various professors’ project descriptions and help the tutors assess how to handle the rhetoric involved, and we could have mock consultations stemming from that and share different strategies and pedagogies.

In the end, the OUWC is in a period of transition and evolvement as it shifts from having primarily WRT 320-trained consultants to possibly having a larger flux of non-WRT 320-trianed consultants. The Center has adapted its inaugural training and has expanded its ongoing professional development, but its already limited ties to the WRT Department are diminishing even further. As it stands at the time of this writing, four of the six WRT majors/minors will graduate from Oakland in April, as will two of the more rhetorically-experienced non-WRT tutors. Looking forward, then, it’s important to study and analyze what kind of impact this specific type of writing center tutor has on FYW students. This paper has identified how rhetorical training can make a difference on how a writing consultant tutors a FYW student, so when moving to an era that might not have as many tutors well-versed with rhetoric, the Center should continue to serve and foster rhetoric within its walls, and more rhetorical training can only support this endeavor.

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