

Cross-Curricular Consulting: How WAC Experts Can Practice Adult Learning Theory to Build Relationships with Disciplinary Faculty

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So I've been toying with the idea of just going with groups of four and then I would have all the groups in both sections being the same size. So is that better or is it better to do an experiment where I've got one set in groups of three and one set with groups of four? Then, would they somehow be unhappy if, you know, if you were in one section and you were in a group of three but you could have been in the other section and been in a group of four?

—Food Science Professor

These questions were posed by a food science professor who incorporates group assignments and laboratories into her courses in order for students to learn disciplinary content and to prepare them for professional practice. The query is similar to those of other faculty members who participated in the study reported here: disciplinary faculty members who carefully and deliberately integrated communication activities into their classes but whose primary expertise lay in their own discipline rather than in the discipline of communication studies, of which I am a part. My initial response to the professor's question was that among the decisions she would make as she developed the group activity, the number of students assigned to each group would not be the most pressing. Before I responded, however, there were two decisions I needed to make: first, whether to respond to her query or direct her to what I felt were more pressing group issues; and second, the best way to initiate whichever group issue I would decide to tackle first. I see similar dilemmas in the writing across the curriculum (WAC) literature where, for example, Cole (2014) points out that for WAC consultants, grammar is only a very small piece of the pie, while for disciplinary faculty members, it appears to be a very large piece. The issues in both of these scenarios are first, whether it is advisable to respond to priorities set by disciplinary faculty members or steer them to what the cross-curricular consultant views as more pressing priorities; and second, determining the best approach to managing the interaction. The present discussion is based on the assumption that neither cross-curricular consultants nor disciplinary

faculty members have sufficient knowledge to remedy all disciplinary dilemmas. They must work together, discovering the assumptions that drive each, questioning the basis of those assumptions, and eventually arriving at a resolution based on the expertise each group brings to the table. In the examples given, both parties could clarify their assumptions about the role of issues important to them (such as grammar or group size) to the benefit of the other. The cross-curricular consultant might learn that what seems to him or her to be an inconsequential disciplinary issue assumes an important place in preparing students for professional practice. Similarly, the disciplinary faculty has an opportunity to learn that writing is more than grammar or that group work is more than seating individuals around a table.

Admittedly I am external to the work of WAC consultants, but I've learned much from reading the WAC research that is rich in strategies for writing consultants who work with what sometimes appear to be a "close-minded [disciplinary] faculty" (Jablonski, 2006). I've also identified areas in the WAC research where my expertise in communication might be useful to WAC consultants, and in this discussion I will share one main area where WAC and CXC might have mutual interests: adult learning theory. But first I want to note the shared challenges to which adult learning theory might speak. As a member of the communication studies discipline, I also work with faculty members in other disciplines to support their efforts, and as a communication across the curriculum (CXC) consultant, I help them develop presentation assignments and group and interpersonal communication activities. Although there are differences in written communication and oral communication (Vrchota and Russell, 2013), our disciplines are branches on the same family tree (both grew out of rhetoric, though they parted ways one hundred years ago in 1915), and for both writing and communication experts, our work with members of other disciplines is an increasingly important part of what our disciplines do. My reading of the WAC research indicates that we also share similar challenges as we work with disciplinary faculty members. In particular, there are two common areas of concern where I will suggest a communication approach to working with disciplinary faculty members: the challenges of building professional relationships with disciplinary faculty members and the need to develop a common foundation upon which to conduct our work. Although it is possible that WAC consultants already practice some or all of the communication approaches I will suggest, perhaps by theorizing them it may be possible to consult more consciously and mindfully and to be aware when one is not practicing these approaches.

First, the challenge of building professional relationships with disciplinary faculty members, which is experienced by communication consultants and which is also discussed in the WAC research, may be more onerous for WAC consultants. In WAC literature, the resistance of disciplinary faculty members is attributed to reasons

such as a lack of training about writing, the view that writing assignments and their subsequent grading are time-consuming and detract from more important disciplinary activities, and the view that writing is drudgery because it is about uninteresting activities like grammar, or other areas that appear to have no tangible or immediate outcome (Cole, 2014; Jablonski, 2006; Rodrigue, 2012; Ronesi, 2011; Rutz & Grawe, 2009; Stout, 2011; Tarabochia, 2013). WAC consultants may, at times, perceive that disciplinary faculty members view them as “coercive, manipulative, and controlling” (Donahue, 2002, p. 35), causing disciplinary faculty members to avoid them, ignore their efforts to reach out, and “refuse to make eye contact” (Donahue, 2002, p. 34).

The second challenge shared by communication and WAC consultants is the need to build a foundation upon which consultants and disciplinary faculty members can work together, honoring both their own and the other’s disciplinary traditions. This second challenge may also be more pressing for WAC than for communication consultants due to the fact that discussions of communication are sometimes lost among other details of an assignment or classroom activity, whereas a written text is a visible entity, perhaps making it more distinct. Several possible solutions have been offered in WAC literature, such as a shared meta-language for talking about writing in an effort to provide a common basis to facilitate WAC and disciplinary faculty interaction (Melzer, 2014). Others advocate the development of standardized tools such as university-wide rubrics (Bohr & Rhoades, 2014; Cole, 2014). Another group of WAC consultants calls for cross-curricular consulting approaches that honor differing writing traditions specific to individual disciplines and acknowledge faculty freedom of choice to implement suggestions that come from writing experts. Writing experts who support this approach cite the necessity of speaking the language of disciplinary counterparts (Allan, 2013; Anson & Dannels, 2009; Bohr & Rhodes, 2014; Cole, 2014; Paretti, 2011; Robinson & Hall, 2013; Rutz & Grawe, 2009; Soliday, 2011; Tarabochia, 2013; Walvoord, Hunt, Dowling, & McMahon, 1997; Wolfe, Olson, & Wilder, 2014.) These concerns resonate with CXC research and theory (See for example, Dannels, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005; Dannels, Anson, Bullard, & Peretti, 2003; Dannels, Gaffney, & Martin, 2008; Dannels & Norris Martin, 2008; Darling & Dannels, 2003).

Of course, despite these shared challenges, neither WAC nor communication consultants have become so discouraged as to give up their efforts to provide assistance to their colleagues in the disciplines and have developed numerous strategies intended to overcome disciplinary faculty resistance, recognizing that “it’s difficult to collaborate even though we know it’s important” (Tarabouchia, 2013). The overarching need of both WAC and communication consultants is to find a way for us to utilize our expertise in a manner that will be recognized and valued by disciplinary faculty members. For much of my career, I have worked with faculty members in other disciplines, assisting them to develop communication activities for their classes.

I also conduct qualitative research in order to learn more about the integral connection between communication and disciplinary traditions that, in turn, helps me to provide more useful assistance to the faculty (see, for example, Reitmeier, Svendsen, & Vrchota, 2004; Reitmeier & Vrchota, 2009; Vrchota, 2015a, 2015b, 2012, 2011; Vrchota & Russell, 2013). Since 2000 I have worked with faculty members in three pre-professional programs, all housed in a food science department. The programs are dietetics, food science, and nutrition; each program studies food, but the focus of each differs. What I have found to be vastly different across the three programs is the connection of communication traditions to the disciplinary content of each: in dietetics, interpersonal communication is crucial in order to conduct patient interviews; in food science, most work in the food industry occurs in groups; in nutrition, presentation competencies are key to disseminate research at professional meetings and to secure funding. I will use qualitative examples from the data I collected while working with faculty members in these three programs in order to illustrate the consulting approach I promote in the present discussion.

In all of this work, the most helpful set of tools I have found are from the field of adult learning theory. It has guided my overall approach to disciplinary faculty members. As cross-curricular consultants, we know our relationships with disciplinary faculty members are potentially perilous, often because of the very reasons we are working together: e.g., our disciplinary roles and our own disciplinary traditions. Jablonski (2006) described the interaction between disciplinary faculty members and cross-curricular consultants as much more complex than “brown bag lunch” collaborations (p. 12). Despite the complexity of our relationships and our disciplinary influences, at our cores, as Donahue (2002) observed, faculty members are adults, and cross-curricular experts are teachers who are teaching adult teachers. It is our core identities as adults that ground the suggestions I make about relationship-building with disciplinary faculty; these suggestions are framed by two prominent adult learning theories: andragogy (Knowles, 1980) and transformational learning theory (TLT) (Mezirow, 2000).

Similarly, the application of concepts from my own discipline to relationship-building with disciplinary faculty members is crucial if I wish to make any progress with them. In the following sections I provide more specific information about communication competencies useful to cross-curricular consultants as they build relationships with disciplinary faculty.

Finally, Tarabochia (2013) observed that “writing specialists need strategies for communicating across disciplinary differences” because of “the unique intersection of disciplinary difference, ideologies, epistemologies, value-based principles, and objectives (among other forces) shaping the interactions.” In communication studies, there is a situated framework (Dannels, 2001) that acknowledges the integral connection

between communication and a discipline, a connection that guides cross-curricular consultants to identify the framework of disciplinary oral discourse. I will suggest questions based on this situated framework that may be useful to writing consultants in understanding other disciplinary traditions and in creating those integral connections.

Conducting Cross-Curricular Consulting with Adult Learning Theories

Two prominent adult learning theories provide guidance for building the consultant-faculty relationship: andragogy (Knowles, 1980), which defines adults as particular kinds of learners within a learning context, and transformational learning theory (TLT) (Mezirow, 2000), which describes the qualities of an adult learning relationship and the roles of the individuals within it.

According to andragogy, adults are defined as self-directed individuals who prefer to partner in their own learning; they possess a repertoire of life (professional) experiences and, on the basis of these experiences, they know what they need or want to learn—they are problem-solvers who seek immediate applications to solve their problems. When I began consulting with the three programs, communication activities designed for the purposes of meeting accreditation mandates and preparing students for professional practice in their respective areas of study were already part of many classes. When the activities fell short of providing the experiences for students that the faculty members anticipated, they asked me to suggest modifications in response to the flaws they perceived in those activities so that they could meet accreditation mandates and provide more valuable professional preparation for students.

The characteristics andragogy attributes to adults explain the varying degrees of receptiveness with which disciplinary faculty members respond to consultants' suggestions. For WAC consultants, for example, andragogy would propose that the apparent preoccupation that disciplinary faculty members show regarding grammar, described in WAC literature (Cole, 2014; Peretti, 2011; Rodrigue, 2012), is unlikely to disappear on its own; grammar needs to be dealt with if it is the issue the faculty members conclude they need to understand and view as a problem that needs a solution. The focus of andragogy on the qualities of self-directedness and the need for adults to partner in their own learning implies a relationship of equality, calling for cross-curricular consultants and disciplinary faculty members to seek solutions together rather than through what is sometimes described as a doctor-patient relationship (Schein, 1987), an arrangement in which the doctor (cross-curricular consultant) diagnoses the problem and tells the patient (disciplinary faculty member) what to do about it.

TLT supports andragogy by proposing that adults in learning contexts acquire the knowledge they need by disclosing to others the assumptions upon which they base their actions. According to TLT, learning is the result of dialogue where the

participating parties are “trying on another’s point of view” (Mezirow, 2000, p.21) as they express and test their own and the other’s assumptions in order to arrive at a common understanding (Mezirow, 2003). This theory seems particularly apt for the cross-curricular consulting context, where each participant, the disciplinary faculty member and the cross-curricular consultant, is an expert in his or her own discipline but must learn about the assumptions that are the basis of the other’s discipline before both participants can work to meet the disciplinary faculty member’s need. For example, I needed to understand the disciplinary assumptions that guide the patient interviews so crucial to the work of dietitians. Similarly, dietetics faculty members need to know the assumptions upon which interpersonal communication is based in order to understand why my suggestions might help them. What TLT does not address is the means by which the interactants proceed in order to acquire knowledge of the other’s assumptions; that means is suggested by some principles drawn from communication theory and research, which I will turn to next.

Testing Assumptions and Communicating Across Disciplines

The approach proposed by TLT of expressing and testing assumptions is consistent with definitions of human communication, defined as: “making sense out of the world and attempting to share that sense with others” (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2014, p. 3). The communication competencies relevant to the consulting context originate in interpersonal communication, often described as face-to-face communication, where individuals concurrently send and receive messages through verbal and nonverbal channels with the goal of achieving common understanding, a goal in concert with TLT. The specific interpersonal competencies that I find most relevant to the exchange of assumptions necessary for both andragogy and transformational learning theory are empathic listening and psychological immediacy.

Empathic Listening

Cuny et al. (2012) advocate empathic listening as a means of building relationships at communication centers where staff members interact with individuals from differing disciplines; these relationships require “an active level of listening” (p. 249) so that staff members may understand the assumptions and needs of their clients. The relationship of communication-center staff members and their clients is similar to that between cross-curricular consultants and disciplinary faculty members. The model of empathic listening includes being attentive to the other, encouraging the other’s words and ideas, and reflecting on the other’s perspective and goals achieved through the following: 1) questioning, 2) paraphrasing, and 3) responding.

Questions are invaluable for initiating and conducting a cross-curricular consultation in order to learn the assumptions upon which the disciplinary faculty is operating

and to build a foundation that allows consultants to communicate across disciplinary differences. There are specific questions that cross-curricular consultants can ask that will enable them to understand the connection between their expertise and the discipline within which they are working, based on Dannels' situated framework (2001). Dannels credits the work of writing specialists such as Bazerman (1997), Herrington (1985), and Winsor (1999) with the inspiration to develop a situated framework that theorizes the nature of oral communication in the disciplines. The framework proposes communication as a context-driven activity where oral genres are sites for disciplinary learning, oral argument is a situated practice, and standards for oral competence are generated within the discipline. The view is consistent with recent proposals by writing specialists (Blakeslee, Hayes, & Young, 1994; Hall & Hughes, 2011; Hansen & Adams, 2010; Walvoord, Hunt, Dowling, & McMahon, 1997), all of whom agree about the need to offer assistance to disciplinary faculty members in ways that integrate writing into courses while honoring disciplinary traditions. I suggest four questions, corresponding to the tenants of the situated framework, that are useful to learn about the connection between communication (and writing) and the discipline:

1. What communication (writing) activities do you include in your classes? What is your purpose for including these activities?
2. What are the communication (writing) activities in which students must be competent for professional practice? How do you prepare students for these activities?
3. What do you expect of students as they engage in these activities and how do you know whether they've met your expectations?
4. What are your concerns about developing and implementing communication (writing) activities? What support can I provide that would be helpful to you?

The responses to questions one and two result in information about the connection between communication (writing) and the discipline. In pre-professional programs, such as those described in the present discussion, the answers to these two questions often overlap. For example, one food science laboratory activity required students to take samples from food processing equipment and identify the proper tests to be used to determine bacteria levels. The assignment afforded practice in reviewing various food testing protocols and also applied to professional practices in the food industry where maintaining sanitary food processing equipment is crucial. When the instructor described the activity, I was prompted to ask whether professionals work alone, in pairs, or in groups or teams to conduct the testing. This led to suggestions to incorporate additional group competencies into the laboratory activity. The responses to these questions may also be enlightening to the instructor. A faculty member who taught

a dietetics course online responded to question one by describing expectations that students should conduct their e-mail communications observing professional writing protocol. When I asked question two, I also asked if the e-mail expectations were part of the interpersonal communication competencies dietetics students were expected to acquire. The startled response was: “No, I don’t even cover that. Isn’t that crazy?”

Questions three and four are useful to understand the faculty member’s knowledge of communication—or writing—and to preview the nature of the work the consultant may be called upon to provide in the discipline. I noticed the faculty would often not admit their uncertainties about communication, but their responses to question three on assessment procedures provided an avenue for them to express concerns that indirectly revealed a need for additional information. For example, one faculty member stated a concern about group activities: “I want to give better examples of things I would like the [peer] evaluators to say. Not just ‘good job.’” Using empathic listening, I concluded the concern indicated an area about which the faculty might not know, which enabled me to address the concern and also give additional information about groups.

The response to the fourth question is a more direct indication of faculty questions and needs. One dietetics faculty member explained her need for time in order to integrate additional interview assignments that would prepare students to communicate with patients and health care professionals. I suggested developing a stock interview assignment to familiarize students with interview basics. Rather than participating in five interview role-plays with five different individuals, students would participate in one interview role-play and write or discuss brief descriptions of ways the basic interview would be modified to interact with patients and health care professionals.

Although I do not have a specific script of questions to be used for testing assumptions and for engaging in empathic listening, from communication studies come general suggestions about questioning. An examination of my interview transcripts reveals several goals that motivated the questions I asked faculty: to unearth the assumptions that undergird the goals of the discipline and the faculty (“What are the contexts within which a nutritionist would give a presentation?”); to make suggestions to faculty in a nonthreatening manner (“Would it be useful to hear some ideas about responding to a patient’s unwillingness to disclose?”); to support consultants’ suggestions in ways that make faculty resistance difficult (“Since you are concerned about the class time consumed by lengthy presentations, should we talk about ways to meet your assignment goals with reduced time requirements?”). Questions facilitate consultants’ learning what they need to know in order to offer useful advice and provide a grounding with the disciplinary faculty.

One thing I have found is that faculty members tend to express concerns as part of their narration rather than asking questions, further emphasizing the importance of empathic listening. For example, the dietetics profession is increasingly concerned

about professional dietitians' reticence to communicate with medical doctors and other health care professionals. One dietetics instructor designed a role-play, the goal of which was to reduce the reticence. Her descriptions of students' responses—"they laughed, they giggled, they thought it was funny that they should have to practice this . . ."—is probably a means of asking for suggestions for ways to encourage students to respond to the assignment more seriously. That is my cue to find out the nature of the help needed: "What was the goal of the assignment?" or "How did you introduce the assignment?"

One piece of advice about questions: order your questions so that you aren't asking those with a limited response range too soon. Introducing the conversation with a question to which there are few possible responses ("How many writing—or speaking—assignments do you give your students?") potentially limits the content of the response and, as a result, crucial information might not be revealed. Start with the big questions first. "What are your most effective communication (writing) assignments?" will give you hints about follow-up questions you didn't even know you should ask, the answers to which are likely to be useful to you in learning disciplinary assumptions.

Questions identify assumptions, but once assumptions have been identified, paraphrasing serves other important functions: first, paraphrasing checks the accuracy of your interpretation of what was said. Since you are working with faculty members from another discipline, the terminology or disciplinary definitions of your disciplines may differ. A nutrition instructor and I talked at length about presentations. Early paraphrasing on my part would have clarified that one of us was referring to public speaking and the other to nonverbal communication. A second reason to paraphrase is to check your understanding of disciplinary traditions. For instance, when a food science instructor expressed concern about students who described food products in personal terms—"Yum, I like it"—I responded with "You are saying that students cannot express whether they like the foods they make." My paraphrase of what I thought was the instructor's point gave her the opportunity to explain that students are expected to learn and use food science terminology to describe their responses rather than to respond personally. Third, by paraphrasing, you are giving the other individual an opportunity to reflect on the logic or accuracy of his or her thought: "You're saying that the fixed seating in your room prohibits you from having group activities" prompted the instructor to consider whether that was the real reason he avoided group activities. Finally, paraphrasing provides an entry to make a suggestion from the perspective of the disciplinary faculty. To a nutrition instructor who felt she did not have the time to prepare students for a major presentation, my paraphrase was the following: "The students present complex proposals to the class for which you are

unable to provide preparation and you've indicated some concerns about the quality of the proposals. I suggest"

The third area of empathic listening is making suggestions. The cross-curricular consultant's response to the concerns the disciplinary faculty member has implicitly or explicitly voiced may become a risky action for either party. Dannels (2010) describes disciplinary faculty members who dare to teach subjects other than their own as risk-takers who are willing to step outside of the comfort zones of their own disciplines, and this risk is exacerbated when faculty concerns become public through their disclosure to cross-curricular experts. Taylor (2000) observes the disclosure resulting from the TLT approach can be painful, containing moments when both parties may feel they are losing or acquiescing in some way to accommodate the other. The cross-curricular consultant is also engaged in risk-taking by suggesting a course of action that may be ignored or criticized. In order for both parties to save face, I have found disciplinary faculty members to be more receptive to suggestions that are phrased tentatively rather than as unequivocal statements. Suggestions expressed tentatively also leave the door open for additional discussion. Also if there is resistance to the suggestion, the consultant can always fall back on "it was just a suggestion." Here are methods for phrasing suggestions in a tentative manner:

1. Base suggestions on disclosures from the disciplinary faculty: "You indicated uncertainty (concern, etc.) about _____. One thing you might try in that situation is _____."
2. Present suggestions as questions: "I wonder if you've considered trying _____?"
3. Ask permission to give suggestions: "I have an idea. Is this a good time to bring it up?"
4. Explain the reasoning for your suggestion: "In writing (communication), we have found that _____. There are similarities to your class, so you might want to try that."
5. Create empathy by admitting a similar dilemma and giving the solution that worked for you: "That same thing happens in my classes, so I do this: _____. It seems to work."

Psychological Immediacy

Empathic listening allows disciplinary faculty members and cross-curricular consultants to reveal the assumptions that drive their respective courses of action. But the efforts that go into the verbal exchange of assumptions will be most successful if accompanied by strategies to create psychological immediacy, a sense of psychological

closeness (Mehrabian, 1981). Both verbal and nonverbal methods are recognized as ways to reduce distance and increase psychological immediacy (Witt & Wheelless, 2001). Verbally, immediacy is achieved through such approaches as use of inclusive pronouns (“we” vs. “I”); active verbs (“I’m working with you . . .” vs. “I’ve been asked to work with you . . .”); expressions of concern (“I want you to feel more confident about . . .” vs. “Students need to understand . . .”); and addressing by name (“John, how do you feel about . . . ?” vs. “How do you feel about . . . ?”). Nonverbally, immediacy is attained through displays such as frequent eye contact, relaxed posture, relevant and animated gestures and facial expression, and vocal variety (Mehrabian, 1981). Research in classroom settings has shown that high levels of verbal and nonverbal immediacy on the part of the instructor resulted in higher affect with students. Similarly, I’ve found that disciplinary faculty members are more receptive and involved in the consulting process if I display nonverbal actions that contribute to immediacy. I meet with faculty members in locations of their choice, usually their offices, because the comfort of talking within their own territories seems to reduce the threat of disclosing their concerns. I try not to take too many notes—for long-term consulting I tape conversations if faculty members agree—so I can be free to respond to their disclosures with appropriate facial and vocal expression. When relevant, I work to control my facial and vocal expression to mask signs of disapproval (or horror) because I don’t want to come across as rigid or disapproving. I also nod to offer encouragement and support, and I maintain eye contact.

The interpersonal communication concepts presented here, empathic listening and psychological immediacy, work to enable the cross-curricular consultant to initiate and cultivate a relationship with disciplinary faculty members in order to gain information about the faculty and the disciplinary context so as to be most helpful. TLT identifies both participants, cross-curricular consultant and disciplinary faculty member, as learners and educators. The cross-curricular consultant learns about the disciplinary traditions of the faculty member in order to provide assistance to the faculty, while the disciplinary faculty member learns from the expertise of the cross-curricular consultant as he or she reveals information about the discipline. Both reflect on their own assumptions, and each may have those assumptions questioned by the other.

The adult learning theories upon which the present discussion is based frame the relationship of the disciplinary faculty member and cross-curricular consultant as one of equal engagement in learning; however, operating within this framework does not relieve the consultant of obligations he or she maintains as part of the consulting role. There are several general observations that I offer regarding specific situations that may emerge within the framework of adult learning theory. First, the cross curricular consultant should respond to inaccurate assumptions of faculty members when those assumptions interfere with faculty members reaching a disciplinary goal.

One nutrition instructor assumed all students in the class should provide peer feedback for every other classmate's presentation but was unable to reconcile the time the feedback took from other class activities and considered dropping the feedback activity. I suggested the instructor have students give feedback on a rotating schedule; that is, for each speech, a limited number of students would be designated to give feedback to each speaker or, alternatively, would be the feedback designees on a given day. The instructor took my suggestion without having to sacrifice students' opportunities to learn from the feedback or from other class activities.

Second, understand that the exchange of assumptions places both the disciplinary faculty member and the cross-curricular consultant in the role of learner. When the consultant accepts the role of learner, he or she may be more empathic about receiving information from the faculty member, which, in turn, should enhance the value of the suggestions given. Early in my work with the food scientists, the instructors in a food laboratory gave students a food testing assignment for which they would work in groups. I questioned the instructors' reasons for placing the students in groups that seemed very contrived rather than having the students conduct the testing individually. Their first response was to laugh and reply, "Because you told us [in a previous conversation]." They went on to explain:

Very rarely do they [students] do things individually [in professional contexts]. In the food science discipline, it's more important maybe than in other disciplines [to be able to work in groups]. People in food science, you have to really work together. And it's extremely important for the students.

Learning about the privileged role of groups became an important factor in the development of many of the communication activities with faculty in the food science discipline and affirmed the crucial need for cross-curricular consultants to learn about the disciplines in which they work.

Third, know that you won't always make the sale. At times, cross-curricular consultants may need to quit pushing no matter how logical or evidence-based their suggestions are because faculty members just aren't interested. A nutrition instructor offered students the opportunity to present a short speech summarizing a lecture in order to earn extra-credit points while emphasizing that giving the extra-credit points was the purpose of the activity: he was "not nearly as concerned about the presentation, per se, the mechanics of it." At the same time, he was dissatisfied that the students' summaries were so detailed as to verge on transcripts of the lectures. I offered to help the instructor develop a brief guide to assist the students in generating the summaries he had in mind, assuming that if more attention were paid to the mechanics of the assignments, the students could still receive the extra-credit points, and, in the process, have an opportunity to practice their presentation (and writing) skills. In

response, the instructor replied, “Your question has made me just sit here and think, ‘what is my goal of that?’ And I would have to say, it’s probably the points.” Should I have forced the issue? Although the activity was a perfect way to reinforce important disciplinary knowledge and, without a great deal of effort, provide the opportunity for students to practice speaking, that wasn’t the instructor’s priority. The lesson I learned is that understanding the other’s assumptions signals the point at which to stop.

Fourth, anticipate faculty frustration about a lack of control over student outcomes on communication (and perhaps also writing) assignments. A food science instructor complained, “All this group stuff takes more time. It [the group activity] never reached the conclusion that I thought we were going to get to. When will they learn this idea?” In some disciplines, the dominant pedagogy of the discipline is lecture, with students assessed through quizzes or examinations, allowing faculty a high degree of control. When students engage in communication activities, the act of communicating also becomes the pedagogy (perhaps the same thing occurs when students engage in writing assignments), which makes it difficult to guide students to arriving at a specific answer. In instances such as this, knowing the assumptions of the faculty is paramount in order to help them, particularly knowing the instructor’s learning goal. When the learning goal is for students to acquire disciplinary facts or procedural knowledge, lecture may be the best pedagogy. If the learning goal is for students to apply the factual or procedural knowledge to circumstances Huba and Freed (2000) name “ill-defined problems”—that is, disciplinary problems that “cannot be resolved with a high degree of certainty” (p. 203)—a communication (or writing) activity may be the best approach. Ascertaining the purpose of an activity is crucial.

Finally, there are times when the planets line up almost perfectly and the sharing of assumptions results in an outcome that gives satisfaction to both cross-curricular consultant and disciplinary faculty member. One such experience occurred with a dietetics instructor who wanted help developing a protocol for site visits with dietetics interns. The individual was just out of graduate school and struggling with the discrepancy between what she had been told about the goals of the site visits by more experienced faculty members and what she had noticed herself. On the basis of my own assumptions, I anticipated discussing interview competencies. The dietetics instructor’s assumptions were vastly different. She described interns reporting feeling physically ill as they anticipated their site visits; site visits occurring without privacy in busy hospital hallways, making each interaction and constructive feedback difficult while also adding to the interns’ anxiety; and a tradition dictating that interns were to discuss charts of patients they’d never seen before, which resulted in interns overlooking important notations due to their lack of familiarity with the cases. After I learned about the circumstances of the supervisory role from the dietetics instructor’s perspective, my question was, “When your site visit is completed, what do you want

accomplished?” Her stated goals were to create an environment where interns were not physically ill; to implement roles in which she and the interns were partners in learning; and to eliminate the tradition of unfamiliar charts—however, her goals resulted in uncertainty about how to conduct the site visit. The conversation went like this:

Me: And if they’ve already reviewed the chart, they would know something about the patient.

Her: And I could say “tell me about the patient.”

Me: What comes after “tell me about the patient”; what do you expect?

Her (thoughtfully): “Tell me about the patient.” That would include things like their diagnosis, their lifestyle, medications they’re on [she continued to describe the details she would expect]. Well and also, if there’s something I’m not real clear on, if there is the opportunity, typically they have a few resources with them, then I could say “Well, let’s see what we can find about this.”

Me: That’s excellent. You’re learning together. It’s good to show that we always have learning to do.

There are both advantages and disadvantages to applying TLT to cross-curricular consulting. Advantages include comparing assumptions that provide the disciplinary faculty and the cross-curricular consultant with a common perspective from which problems can be tackled and learning the motivations of the disciplinary faculty in order to make suggestions that resonate with those motivations. Revealing the assumptions that guide cross-curricular consultants in their recommendations can be similarly informative to disciplinary faculty members. A dietetics instructor was hesitant to give constructive feedback to dietetic interns who she felt had not effectively consulted with cardiac patients. My response to the concern was that the feedback was just as instrumental in cultivating professional interviewing competencies as was the experience itself. The instructor thought about my remark and began to describe her own experiences where she benefitted from receiving feedback.

The major disadvantage of framing cross-curricular consulting work in TLT is the time-consuming nature of the activity. Sharing and exploring each other’s assumptions is beneficial to the consulting outcome and to building a professional relationship, but for short-term consulting, TLT may be impractical. A second disadvantage pertains to the frustration that can result when the consultant’s advice is ignored. My sense from reading the WAC literature is that writing consultants sometimes become frustrated when disciplinary faculty members choose not to implement their expert

suggestions, a frustration I've also experienced when working with disciplinary faculty members. Aside from experiencing the frustration of resistance, there is also the issue of the extent to which adults can or should influence other adults. I try to remember that I am invited into the discipline as a consultant only; I have no official capacity. I work to make a logical case for my suggestions and then go on to the next issue. Obviously, I want to make a difference in the way disciplinary faculty members develop and implement communication activities in their classes, but I also don't want to appear so rigid that my effectiveness is reduced.

Implications for Future Research

The purpose of this discussion is to respond to two concerns shared by WAC and communication cross-curricular consultants. Adult learning theory was proposed as a framework for relationship-building between disciplinary faculty members and cross curricular consultants; empathic listening and psychological immediacy were suggested to manage and share assumptions and communicate across disciplinary differences. As I formulated the suggestions above, two issues have emerged for me for future discussion and research that I hope will be taken up by WAC faculty members who engage in cross-curricular consulting.

First, are the proposals for cross-curricular consulting contained in the present discussion applicable to *WAC cross-curricular consultations*? One of the shared needs of WAC and communication consultants identified in the present discussion was "strategies for communicating across disciplinary differences" (Tarabochia, 2013). To what extent, if at all, does a cross-curricular consulting strategy that works for one discipline also accommodate the consulting of another discipline? The adult learning framework that was the basis of the present discussion advocates relationship-building and the exchange of assumptions while working toward a shared meaning, which are also foundations of the communication discipline. For me, I am in my disciplinary home with this approach. But is the cross-curricular consulting repertoire for one discipline a good fit for the consulting repertoire of another discipline due to the very foundations upon which that discipline is built? I sincerely urge WAC consultants to apply some or all of the ideas proposed in this discussion to their cross-curricular consulting experiences and write their own accounts of the subsequent outcomes.

Second, are the proposals for cross-curricular consulting contained in the present discussion applicable to the *disciplinary content* of WAC cross-curricular consultations? The purpose of consultants and disciplinary faculty members sharing the assumptions of their disciplines is to negotiate an outcome that will meet the needs of the discipline, a process that may result in modification of the principles of the consulting discipline. Communication concepts and principles are contextually situated, lending flexibility to their application in other disciplines. Is the writing discipline

similarly able to modify its principles and concepts to the needs of other disciplines? May the format or content of a memo be modified to fit disciplinary needs?

The resulting knowledge we gain from cross-curricular consulting benefits our consulting work and our disciplines by focusing on a place that Gallison (as cited in Huber & Morreale, 2002, pp. 2–3) referred to as “the trading zone,” that borderland populated by scholars of collaborating disciplines. Our work as cross-curricular consultants affords us insights about our own discipline based on the reflections we receive from those with whom we consult.

Note

Quotations and examples inserted in the discussion to illustrate the approaches I’ve advocated for working with disciplinary faculty members are taken directly from transcripts of my interviews with faculty and from my field notes and other research data. All research reported in this discussion was collected after receiving approval from the local institutional review board.

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