Helping students write literary analyses: Some challenges and opportunities for writing center consultants specializing in literature

As a graduate student in literature and a tutor in the Writing Lab at Purdue University, I found that some of the most difficult tutorials I faced were those that required me to tutor undergraduates taking literature courses. A tutorial dealing with a literary analysis can be, paradoxically, an exceedingly stressful session for graduate students who are immersed in the study of literature, precisely because we have so much to say about the subject matter. As writing consultants, we are trained to help students do their own work without being unduly directive; as students and teachers of literature, we strongly desire to help the students with whom we consult be more careful and thoughtful readers.

I have outlined some of the scenarios that a literature student tutoring a student on a literary paper might face. I suspect that these scenarios are readily transferable to other disciplines and thus can stand in for the general difficulty that writing center consultants might face when consulting with students who are dealing with subject matter about which the consultants already possess some expertise.

1. Jennifer comes into the writing lab distraught because she has received an essay about a short story back from a professor known for her rigorous grading standards; the paper is covered with annotations and has received a C-. Jennifer reveals that she is an English major who is taking her first literature class within the major and is used to receiving A’s on her essays. She is startled that the professor has stated that her essay consists of little more than clichés and unsupported generalizations. “This is how I always write!” she exclaims with an air of frustration. “And anyway, what does she mean when she says that I haven’t read the story closely enough?” she asks. As you read over her essay, you realize that she has combined plot summary and free association rather than focusing on the story itself.

2. Kevin has come in because he would like to have “another set of eyes” go over his essay on Michel Foucault’s essay “Panopticism,” which has been assigned to him in a course in literary theory. Halfway through Kevin’s essay, you realize that he has not understood the material he is discussing at all; rather, he is stringing together quotations from the text and using terminology from the text with little regard for what the terms mean.

3. Janice is writing a “close reading” essay on an Emily Dickinson poem, and she confesses that she doesn’t “get” the poem. “Poetry isn’t something that I’m good at,” she says apologetically.

The questions raised by these examples address issues related to personal expertise and its role in the writing center. When we consult with students who are writing papers in areas that are very familiar to us, perhaps even for courses we ourselves have taught, where is the line between acting as an “informant” about the discipline in order to help the student understand his/her writing task and arrogating to ourselves the role of teacher within the discipline (a role that, in another context, we can justifiably claim)? How do we negotiate this crucial boundary?

I will offer some suggestions about how to handle such tutorials using the three scenarios I have provided:

In Scenario 1, Jennifer is facing several problems common to students in introductory literature classes. First, she may not understand the assignment. The professor’s commentary seems to indicate that Jennifer is not really engaging the text with which she is dealing at all. Instead she is trying to use the text as a springboard for reflections about her experiences, the human condition, or some recent event. A complicating factor here is that in introductory composition courses and first-year humanities or social science seminars a short story or poem might be used in exactly this way. This provides the opportunity for the tutor to act as an informant about the discipline by explaining that essays for a literature class demand a tighter focus on the text itself than for essays she may have been assigned in the past. Therefore, by doing with a literary work precisely what she has been asked to do in a previous class, she is actually failing to accomplish her task in this class. The role of the tutor in this case is to act as an informant by explaining to her the difference between disciplinary expectations in literature courses and those in other courses that also make use of literary texts. In this situation the authority a graduate student in literature derives from his or her position can be helpful.

One approach to working with Jennifer would be to start by asking her why she chose to write about this story in the first place. Often, students will only be able to articulate the answer to this question vaguely at first (unless
the answer is "Because my professor said I have to!"). Nonetheless, the process of articulating what they find to be significant about a particular story is often the first step toward developing a coherent thesis. Once Jennifer has begun to explain her response to the text, the next step would be to ask what elements in the text evoke these responses. This step is important because it actually relates the existential concerns that make the text interesting to her to the process of analyzing and critiquing the text. Many students see literary analysis as a rather boring game, the rules of which they are never quite able to master. When they see that the process of looking at the ways in which the text’s components fit together can be a way of explaining the response they have to the text, the process of writing a literary analysis becomes much more interesting. By getting Jennifer to talk through her own response to the text and by showing her how her response can interact with disciplinary expectations, a writing lab consultant can help Jennifer to write more confidently and meaningfully about literary texts.

How then, do we approach a case like Kevin’s without becoming surrogate authors of his paper? Clearly, one thing that we cannot do is offer an “authorized” interpretation of the text to which he must conform. Such an approach is completely alien to our training as writing consultants and is ultimately counterproductive. On the other hand, there is a basic level of grammatical competency that a reader must have in order to form a meaningful opinion about any text. If the reader simply fails to grasp how an essay (or story, poem, play, or novel) fits together, then the reader simply has not read the work in any meaningful sense.

In Kevin’s case, a consultant might start by reading several important passages of the essay with Kevin and asking him to summarize them in his own words. He would likely be resistant to this process at first. At this point, a strategic assertion of authority as someone who has studied this material before might be useful. (Surely one of the paradoxes of writing lab instruction is that a consultant must at times establish a persona of authority in order to persuade the student to embrace a non-directive approach!) As Kevin answers the consultant’s questions, he likely will begin to see for himself that there are more focused and interesting directions in which he can take his essay.

Janice’s case is also fraught with pitfalls. Again, proposing an interpretation of Dickinson’s poem for Janice to plug into her paper, while it is manifestly what Janice would like, is not an option. I have found that the most successful approach to a tutorial such as this is to walk the student through the process of reading the poem. I try to encourage the student to read through the poem in grammatical units, simply trying to make sense of the most literal meaning of what is on the page. Often I find that there are words in the poem with which the student is unfamiliar. I find that in this instance, the process of modeling good academic practices (walking over to the bookshelf, picking up the dictionary, looking up the word with the student, brainstorming about which meanings might apply) is the best way to help the student. As with the other scenarios, asking questions that clarify what the significance of the text is for the student, encouraging the student to see a relationship between textual elements and the reader’s response to the text, and requesting that the student summarize or paraphrase portions of the text orally can be exceedingly helpful. If Janice can be helped to see that there are concrete steps that she can take in order to make sense of a poem, the result will be greater success, not only on this essay, but in any course that she takes that involves textual analysis.

One element that all of these scenarios have in common is the importance of having the text available to the student and the consultant while the consultation is going on. On a structural level, writing labs can make these kinds of encounters more likely by recommending during lab tours and other informational sessions that students bring texts and resources with them to the writing lab for their consultations. The best writing lab tutorials on literary subjects almost always occur when student and consultant are able to pore over the text together. This act of being able to approach the text together and to interrogate the text jointly provides an opportunity for learning that is difficult to reproduce inside the literature classroom, and can have the effect of significantly improving a student’s inclination and ability in close reading of texts.

Ultimately, the lesson that I would suggest that we take from these scenarios is that reading, like writing, is a skill that can be developed using the non-directive pedagogical skills that we who work in writing labs strive to develop. Furthermore, because of the intimate link between reading and writing in the process of knowledge creation, it is a mistake for us to refrain from seeking to address issues related
to the reading and interpretation of texts out of a fear of being too directive. If those of us who are students and teachers of literature can achieve the balance necessary to offer the same non-directive skills that we apply to writing tutorials to reading comprehension, our students will reap significant benefits.

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Notes

1 Another possible scenario I don’t deal with directly here is the tutorial in which a consultant is forced to reveal to a crestfallen student that he or she has not, in fact, read the text that the student is considering. In many ways this type of scenario simply takes us back to the standard writing lab con-

sultation in which the student must help to provide the information necessary for the consultant to understand the student’s work. In other ways, this tutorial can closely resemble the three discussed in this essay, in that as a student of literature, the consultant is providing information as a disciplinary insider, even when direct knowledge of the text at hand is lacking.

2 One objection to this approach to dealing with literary analyses is that there is a limited amount of time available in a writing lab tutorial. At Purdue, we typically have a 30-minute time limit for our tutorials that must be observed to some degree in order to make sure that all the students who are signed up get their turn. I have found three effective ways of dealing with the time constraints when they apply to tutorials such as these. The first is to stress to the student the fact that our tutorials are necessarily incomplete—it makes much more sense for a student to try to apply the lessons of one tutorial and then return for a second, preferably with the same consultant, than to seek to accomplish everything in one session. The second is to make a student aware of the resources that he or she already has. For example, if there is a section on writing about literature in the back of the assigned textbook, the student can make use of this resource in completing the assignment. The third strategy is to introduce the student to new resources, whether print resources physically present in the lab or electronic sources like the Purdue Online Writing Lab and other OWLs, which have online resources for students writing literary analyses. The strategies can extend the effectiveness of a tutorial far beyond its time limit.