The Teaching Tree

SYSTEMATICALLY LINKING CONSULTING APPROACHES TO CLIENT UNDERSTANDING

CDT Ruth Talbott ('20)

When you first started consulting in the Writing Center, did you consciously think about how exactly you were going to engage with your clients—or simply favor your own preferences? Did you lean toward question-based 'minimalist' approaches or more directive techniques (for instance demonstrating for a client options they have for restyling a topic sentence or prodding them prodding them to produce revisions on their own)? Were you uncertain about when to privilege one or the other approach?

After lots of reps, I determined that the choices we make as consultants are best based on our clients' demonstrated understanding of how to tackle challenges in their own writing. Then, drawing on my own training as an engineer, the "Teaching Tree" was born: a flow chart designed to equip writing center consultants with a more systematic way of sorting through the different options we all have as teachers and consultants.

The "Teaching Tree" offers a model you can adapt to address many different challenges—gaps in understanding—that clients often bring to writing center. Here are just a few:

♦ **Enforcing continuity and cohesion of a central argument throughout an essay.** In many cases, students will have a thesis that either a) doesn't fully encompass the range of claims the essay makes, or b) is entirely disjointed from other claims made in the essay's body.

♦ **Using passive voice appropriately, in view of its strengths and weaknesses.** Many students don't understand what passive voice is or why it's often—though not always—regarded as an inferior stylistic construction. Others understand its meaning in mechanical terms but don't know when or how to deploy it in targeted ways to enhance their writing.

♦ **Crafting clear and relevant topic and transitional sentences.** Sometimes, a paper can be entirely missing a key transition, leading to a lack of flow; other times, topic or transitional sentences don't neatly encompass the point of the paragraph that follows or fully link paragraphs to one another.

♦ **The "5-Paragraph" essay.** Many first-year students limit themselves to writing only in a five paragraph essay format which, while fine for high school students and fine in certain other contexts, is not sufficient for college-level writers. This issue often stems from a lack of confidence or simply not knowing other options for structuring essays.

This decision-making tree illustrates how consultants may choose different teaching styles in response to a client's demonstrated understanding of different writing challenges—or lack thereof.
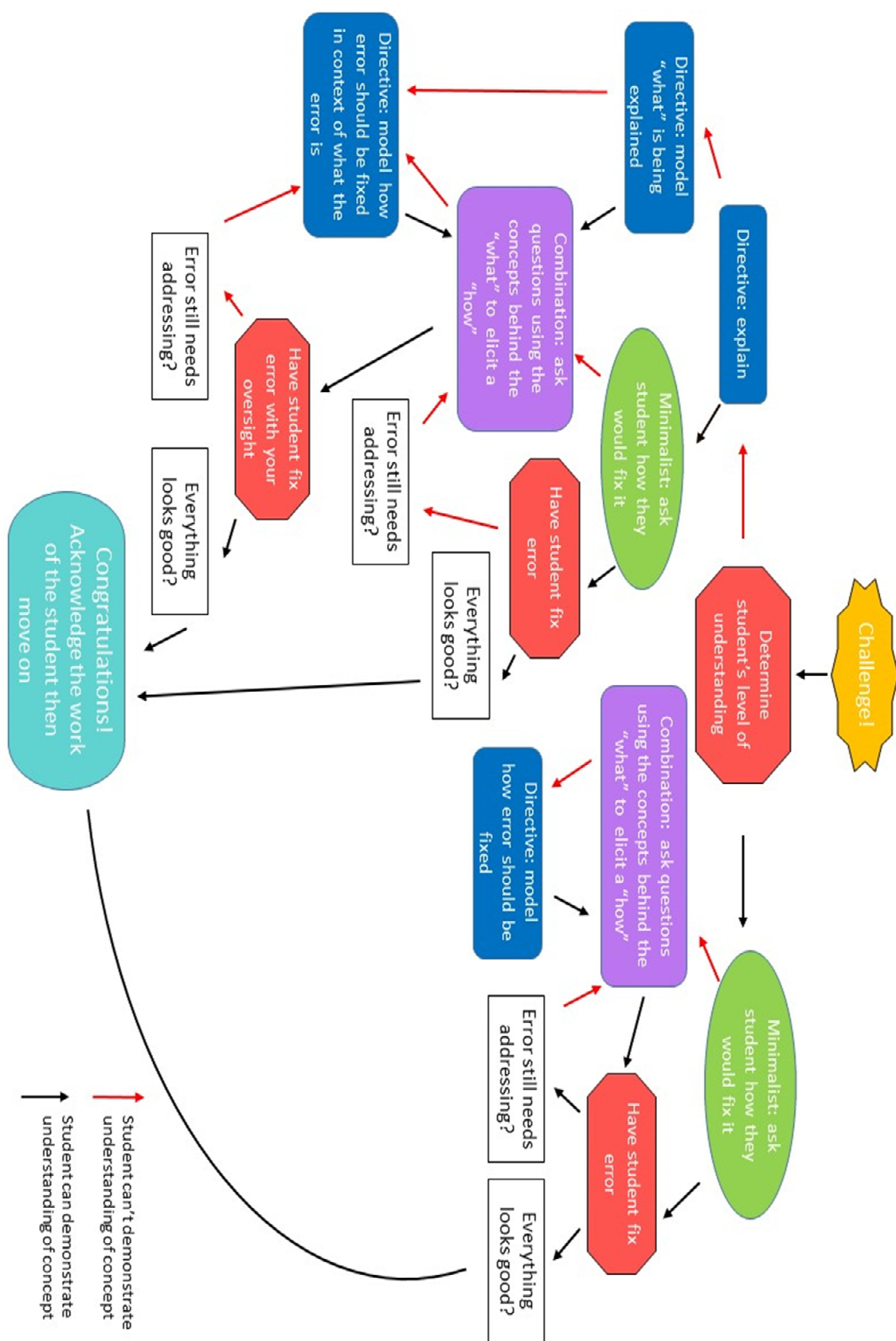
WHERE TO GO FROM HERE:

Fast forward a bit. You've familiarized yourself with the "teaching tree" process. You now let the student's understanding drive the consulting session rather than your own methodological leanings. **But now what?** Should you use this chart, or one like it, to dictate every decision you make in your sessions? Of course not. Once you've internalized the general principles and processes, this sort of evidence-based decision-making becomes a part of how you teach—another tool in your kit that you use for more effective teaching and learning.

Legend

- Assess student's understanding
- Use minimalist techniques
- Use directive modelling
- Use combination of minimalist and directive methods
- Student can demonstrate understanding of concept
- Student can't demonstrate understanding of concept

Challenge!

Determine student's level of understanding

Combination: ask questions using the concepts behind the "what" to elicit a "how"

Directive: model "what" is being explained

Directive: explain

Directive: model how error should be fixed in context of what the error is

Minimalist: ask student how they would fix it

Have student fix error

Error still needs addressing?

Everything looks good?

Have student fix error with your oversight

Error still needs addressing?

Everything looks good?

Directive: model how error should be fixed

Minimalist: ask student how they would fix it

Have student fix error

Error still needs addressing?

Everything looks good?

Congratulations! Acknowledge the work of the student then move on