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# Counselors' Claims of Insufficient Knowledge in Academic Writing Consultations

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## ABSTRACT

Contributing to academic literacies research, this study investigates how counselors at university writing centers in Sweden and Finland handle the micro-level management of knowledge in advice-giving. While writing counselors are experienced in academic writing, they are not necessarily familiar with students' subject areas and may also lack access to other relevant information, such as specific writing instructions. Using Conversation Analysis, we examine how writing counselors address their lack of relevant knowledge through claims of insufficient knowledge (CIK). CIKs are typically used in assessment activities, to downgrade both positive and negative assessments, but sometimes also to upgrade positive assessments. Our findings demonstrate how the distribution of knowledge is negotiated in academic writing consultations and illustrate the epistemic complexity of this setting.

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## Introduction

In this paper, we study writing consultations at universities in Sweden and Finland from a micro-level interactional perspective. By exploring the interactional details of this specific literacy event, we contribute to the scientific field of academic literacies (e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Lillis & Scott, 2007). Research within the field of academic literacies typically takes student writing, the contexts and practices surrounding it, and the problems related to it, as starting point (see Lillis & Scott, 2007). This study focuses on a specific practice surrounding student writing, namely *writing consultation* aimed at developing the students' texts and writing abilities. Our perspective is practice-oriented (as opposed to text- or context-oriented, see Hynninen, 2018), but not on a macro-level. We scrutinize the micro-level interaction itself and the use of a particular interactional resource deployed by writing counselors, that is, explicitly claiming lack of knowledge. Our approach to the field of academic literacies hence involves a radically empirical exploration of the practice of writing consultation from the emic and inductive point of view offered by Conversation Analysis (CA).

Adopting Barton and Hamilton's (2000, p. 12) idea that academic literacy practices are, as other literacy practices, "patterned by social institutions and power relationships" and "embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices", we begin with a brief contextualization of the practice we study, as well as an illustration of the interactional resource in focus.

Most universities in Sweden and Finland offer writing consultation as support for students in their academic text production. This service is typically provided by a writing or language center that is

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affiliated with or part of the university. During the writing consultation, a student meets a writing counselor who, within the Swedish and Finnish context, is employed by the university as an expert on academic writing, but not necessarily on the student's subject area. The counselor's expertise in academic writing, and sometimes limited knowledge of the topic of the text, open up for negotiation of knowledge domains. Example 1 illustrates how a writing counselor at a Swedish university may invoke questions of expertise through an explicit claim of insufficient subject knowledge (marked in bold).

### Example 1. Counselor's claim of insufficient knowledge<sup>1</sup>

- 01 COU: de [blir inte riktigt så sammanhållet.]  
it [ doesn't get so coherent. ]
- 02 STU: [de blir kanske lite trögt å läsa, ] [näe, ]  
[it gets perhaps a bit sluggish to read,] [no, ]
- 03 COU: [ja lite ]  
[yes a bit]
- 04 tröglä[st ble-] blev de faktiskt.  
slugg[ish it-] it got actually.
- 05 STU: [mm, ]
- 06 COU: **.hh nu kanske de beror på att jag inte (.) riktigt förstår**  
*.hh now maybe that's because I don't (.) really understand*
- 07 **[fämnet så m(h)enf ]**  
*[fthe subject so b(h)utf]*
- 08 STU: [ ((laughs)) ]

Claims of insufficient knowledge (Beach & Metzger, 1997), such as the one produced by the counselor in lines 6–7, constitute the focus of the current study. Adopting Conversation Analysis (CA) as theoretical and methodological approach, we investigate authentic writing center interactions at Swedish-speaking universities in Sweden and Finland to address the following research question: When and for what interactional purposes do writing counselors claim insufficient knowledge? With this study, we shed light on how the institutional roles and the knowledge domains of counselors and students are negotiated in writing consultation interaction, with the ultimate aim of contributing to the fields of academic literacies and higher education studies.

In the following two sections, we discuss counselor-student interaction at writing centers and the management of knowledge in writing consultation. After outlining the data and method of the study, we present our analysis. The paper ends with a concluding discussion.

## Academic Literacy and University Writing Consultations

Academic literacy, and specifically academic writing, are skills that students develop throughout their academic education. How students practice and approach academic literacy within specific institutional contexts, how instructors and institutions within higher education support this endeavor, and the pedagogical and practical challenges and possibilities surrounding this process, are issues explored within the field of academic literacies (Lillis & Scott, 2007). Research within this field has shown that students often find it difficult to handle the distinct requirements and writing practices associated with different institutions, subjects, and courses (Lea & Street, 1998). While students typically develop their writing abilities implicitly, as they read and write within different academic genres, many universities also offer academic writing support to help students actively work on their academic literacy skills.

<sup>1</sup>COU = Counselor, STU = student; see Appendix for further transcription conventions.

Academic writing support takes diverse forms around the world. At many universities, students have the opportunity to discuss their own academic texts with professionals or peer tutors, for example undergraduate or graduate students, at writing centers (for an overview of writing center research, see Babcock & Thonus, 2018). In the United States this service has been available for more than a hundred years, while Swedish writing centers have emerged within the last two decades (for further comparisons and a discussion about writing centers in Sweden, see Lennartson-Hokkanen, 2016). In Sweden and Finland, where our data collection took place, the writing center (*språkverkstad* or *språkcentrum*) is usually a complimentary part of the university services. In our data, writing consultations are provided by employed professionals, here referred to as *counselors* (in Swedish *språkhandledare*). In a recent survey of the various writing centers in Sweden (Bjernhager & Grönvall Fransson, 2018), only two universities answered that they also rely on peer tutors in addition to employed professionals. In both Sweden and Finland, the counselor is typically a junior or senior lecturer, or an experienced university instructor.

During writing consultation sessions in Sweden and Finland, a student meets a writing counselor in order to discuss a work-in-progress text, for example a bachelor's thesis. Typical writing consultations last 20–60 min and the meetings are normally limited to one or a few encounters. The institutional aim is to improve a specific text, written in the national language(s) or possibly English, and to enhance the student's academic literacy. Writing consultation can be offered either as a freestanding support service, or as an integrated part of a course in academic writing or the like.

Writing consultations involve both present and absent participants adopting different institutional roles. The writing counselor participates as an expert of academic writing, typically as an experienced counselor, and as an institutional representative of the university. The student participates in the role of advice-seeker, but also as expert (to be) of his/her own subject area, the topic of the text, and the ongoing writing process. Since the counselor is not necessarily familiar with the discipline (e.g., humanities, social sciences, or natural sciences), the subject area (which can be e.g., pedagogy, medicine or law) or the specific topic of the text, the student's subject knowledge offers a crucial contribution to the consultation (Lennartson-Hokkanen, 2016). Hence, although the counselor participates as the institutional expert in this setting (Park, 2012), the expertise of both student and counselor is fundamental to a successful writing consultation session (Nelson et al., 2019). In addition, the student's subject-specific supervisor (henceforth "supervisor") is often referred to by both counselor and student as an authority of issues regarding the writing process, and thus enters the conversation as an absent third party, what Thonus (2001, p. 61) refers to as a "silent participant". The supervisor also occupies a gate-keeping position, as s/he typically is the one to judge whether the student's text is ready for examination or not. The complex participant framework shapes the way knowledge is negotiated in the specific institutional setting.

## The Management of Knowledge in Writing Consultation

The distribution and negotiation of knowledge is a central concern in most institutional interactions (Heller, 2017). In writing consultation, the different domains of expertise of counselor and student are brought into relevance in various ways. As an example, the student might ask the counselor for advice on how to organize the text, a domain of which the counselor has more knowledge (see Park, 2012). The counselor, on the other hand, might ask the student about the writing process, to which the student has first-hand experience. In addition, the participants regularly leave questions unresolved, as these are referred to consultation with the supervisor of the essay. As an illustration, in one of our interactions the counselor refrains from giving a clear advice by saying: *jag vet int de där e en sån där fråga du får nästan bolla med handledaren* "I don't know that's the kind of question you might need to discuss with your supervisor". Thus, although the writing counselors are experts on academic writing, they often lack crucial knowledge that would facilitate advice-giving, for example regarding the subject area, specific writing instructions, or the text in its entirety, and they recurrently invoke this lack of knowledge in the interaction. In the analysis, we focus on

moments in which counselors highlight their lacking expertise through claims of insufficient knowledge (CIK).

Claiming insufficient knowledge is a way of explicitly orienting to the local epistemic ecology (Goodwin, 2013), that is, how knowledge is distributed among the participants and in which domains and to what degree the participants are knowledgeable. In conversation analytic research, the study of epistemics documents how participants position themselves and each other with regard to knowledge through various interactional means (e.g., Heritage, 2012a, 2012b; Stivers et al., 2011). Claiming insufficient knowledge constitutes one way of positioning oneself epistemically. Of course, speakers' explicit claims or disclaims of knowledge do not necessarily reflect their *actual* knowledge or lack thereof, as "claiming and demonstrating knowledge (and lack thereof) can be revealed as distinct sorts of activities" (Beach & Metzger, 1997, p. 563). Speakers deploy claims of insufficient knowledge for various specific interactional purposes. In response to a question, CIKs have been observed to function for example as a response per se, as a pre-positioned hedge of the response that follows, or as a way of displaying responsiveness without giving an explicit answer (Beach & Metzger, 1997; Tsui, 1991). In first position turns preceding assessments, the precise expression *I don't know* may function as an epistemic disclaimer or hedge rather than an actual claim of insufficient knowledge (Weatherall, 2011). Hence, it occurs with bleached semantic content, as an epistemic discourse marker (cf. Kärkkäinen, 2003). When used as discourse markers, epistemic disclaimers tend to be morphophonologically reduced, such as in the case of *dunno* (Lindström et al., 2016).

There is limited research on CIKs in educational contexts, and to our knowledge, all existing studies focus on CIKs produced by students. In classroom settings, one of the core tasks of the teacher is to monitor the students' knowledge and lack thereof (Heller, 2017; Sert, 2011). Previous classroom studies (Sert, 2011; Sert & Walsh, 2013) document the way in which CIKs made by students are related to how teachers ask questions and allocate answering turns. These types of CIKs may also occur in the form of non-verbal conduct, such as headshakes and change in eye gaze direction (see also Jakonen, 2014). Park's (2012) study of writing conferences shows that students may produce CIKs to invoke instructors' epistemic primacy. Our research contributes to this field by examining how CIKs are used by institutional representatives (writing counselors) in academic writing consultation. Doing so, we also contribute more broadly to the interactional research on epistemics in educational contexts (e.g., Björkman, 2018; Jakonen & Morton, 2015; Koole, 2010; Skarbø Solem, 2016; Skogmyr Marian & Kunitz, 2017).

## Method and Data

The methodological approach of the study is based on applied Conversation Analysis (CA). CA relies on micro-level sequential analysis of naturally occurring interactions to uncover the systematic procedures speakers use to accomplish social actions (ten Have, 2007). Applied to institutional settings, CA can shed light on how the institutional context, such as the courtroom, the doctor's office, or the classroom, is established and maintained through the participants' talk (Antaki, 2011; ten Have, 2007). Applied CA may also reveal how people orient to different membership categories involved in institutional settings (ten Have, 2007), such as the categories *writing counselor* or *student*. Thus, by analyzing the interactional micro-structures of writing consultations, we can better grasp not only how these consultations are organized, but also how writing counselors and students understand the activity itself and their institutional roles.

The data consist of recordings of nine writing consultations, held in Swedish at universities in Sweden and Finland.<sup>2</sup> During a consultation, a counselor and a student discuss a text that the student is working on, usually based on an excerpt of a few pages. The counselor has typically read the text in

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<sup>2</sup>The data were collected in 2014–2015 by Stockholm University and the University of Turku, within the research program *Interaction and variation in pluricentric languages – Communicative patterns in Sweden Swedish and Finland Swedish* (funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond 2013–2020, Grant Number: M12-0137:1).

advance, and taken a printout of the text to the meeting. The meetings are 18–67 min long, amounting to a total of 6 h and 40 min. One student and one counselor are present in each meeting. In all, nine students (eight female, one male) and four counselors (all female) participate. Eight consultations were audio and video recorded; one meeting was audio recorded only (on the student's request).<sup>3</sup> The excerpts presented in the analysis have been transcribed according to standard CA transcription conventions.

The students in our data come from different academic disciplines, such as social sciences, law, and education. Academic writing in these different fields represents different academic literacies, with their own writing traditions and requirements; something that both students and writing counselors must take into account when working with the text. In our data-driven analysis, however, we have not *a priori* assumed that the way counselors deploy specific interactional resources related to the negotiation of knowledge will be affected by the academic discipline of the student. Instead we have analyzed whether and how the participants themselves invoke issues related to subject-specific expertise and writing traditions.

The analysis focuses on CIKs uttered by the counselors. While many prior studies have investigated the English *I don't know*, or its counterparts in other languages (e.g., Lindström & Karlsson, 2016; Pekarek Doehler, 2016; Weatherall, 2011), other studies (e.g., Jakonen, 2014; Sert, 2011; Sert & Walsh, 2013) take a more encompassing perspective, analyzing various manifestations and interpretations of CIKs including those done through non-verbal conduct. In line with these latter studies, we do not only consider cases with the lexical string *jag vet inte* "I don't know", but also other expressions of negative epistemics (see Lindström et al., 2016) such as *jag förstår inte* "I don't understand", *jag kan inte* "I don't know", and *jag är inte insatt i* "I am not familiar with". For reasons of limited space, we only consider verbally expressed CIKs.

## Analysis

The analysis focuses on the CIKs that are characteristic of the writing consultations we have studied: in one way or another they address the counselor's ability to provide writing advice. Typical of these interactions is that CIKs occur in the context of assessment activities, either when the counselor negatively assesses some part of the student's text or suggests revisions, or when the counselor positively assesses the student's work.<sup>4</sup> Most CIKs have a downgrading function, and can be placed before, after, or within the assessment. In the following, we present examples of downgrading CIKs (Examples 2–5), after which we discuss a counter example (Example 6) in which the CIK instead upgrades the assessment.

### CIK to Downgrade Assessments

When counselors produce CIKs in connection to negative assessments or suggestions for text revisions, they typically work as downgraders or disclaimers. In Example 2, the counselor has read only the introduction of the student's work, and she starts positively assessing the presentation of the aim as *välformulerat* ("well formulated", line 1). The student responds to the assessment by invoking a potential problem with the aim, that it is "rather short" (line 3). The counselor, however, clarifies that it indeed should be short (lines 9–13, lines 15, 18). The part of main interest to us starts in line 20, after the student has accepted the counselor's explanation (line 19). At this point, the counselor returns to the topic initiated in line 1, invoking a potential problem with the aim, namely that its scope is rather broad (lines 21–22). She uses a CIK to hedge the critical remark.

<sup>3</sup>The data collection and archiving procedures have received ethics clearance in Sweden and Finland.

<sup>4</sup>CIKs occur in the Sweden-Swedish and Finland-Swedish data to a similar extent, and thus seem to be a pervasive practice used by Swedish-speaking writing counselors regardless of the linguistic variety. Minor differences exist in the linguistic formatting of these turns between the two datasets, but these differences are not the focus of the present study.

## Example 2. Pre-positioned downgrade of negative assessment

- 01 COU: mt å jag tyckte att ditt syfte var mycke välformulerat  
*mt and I thought that your aim was very well formulated*
- 02 °har jag (.) [skrivit här°.]  
 °I have (.) [written here°.]
- 03 STU: [jå de ] e ganska kort men ja:g  
 [ yeah it ] is rather short but I:
- 04 [men (de där behov-)]  
 [but (that nee-)]
- 05 COU: [°okej mm (.) m°, ]  
 [°okay mm (.) m°, ]
- 06 COU: [näe, ]  
 [no, ]
- 07 STU: [(eller),]  
 [(or), ]
- 08 (0.4)
- 09 COU: alltså de finns instruktioner där man får ha °mm°  
*PRT there are instructions where one can have °mm°*
- 10 de ska se ut just så här,  
*it must look just like this,*
- 11 en mening syfte,  
*one sentence aim,*
- 12 rubrik,  
*title,*
- 13 en mening punkt nästa stycke.  
*one sentence dot next paragraph.*
- 14 STU: o[kej, ]  
 o[kay, ]
- 15 COU: [nästa] fævsni[tt hf]  
 [next ] fsecti[on hf ]
- 16 STU: [jå:, ]  
 [yea:h,]
- 17 STU: [fjå:f, ]  
 [fyea:hf, ]
- 18 COU: [fså att de ] får f inte vara heller längre,  
 [fso that it's ] not allowed f to be longer either,
- 19 STU: nå okej [just de, ]  
 no okay [right, ]
- 20 COU: [jag ba tän]kte (.) **nu: kan jag ju int innehålle**  
 [I just thought (.) no:w I don't PRT know the content
- 21 de ba känns som att du har (.) ett ganska stor:t (.)  
*it just feels like you have (.) a fairly bi:g (.)*
- 22 du ska täcka ganska mycke men att (0.7)  
*you are covering quite a lot but that (0.7)*
- 23 [°men att°] (0.2) de blir intressant att läsa.  
 [°but that°] (0.2) it will be interesting to read.
- 24 STU: [°mm:°. ]

- 25 (0.3)
- 26 COU: °(xx)°,
- 27 STU: *jå de e sant.*  
*yeah that's true.*
- 28 (0.4)
- 29 COU: °.jå°  
°.yeah°
- 30 COU: [jå men dedär ]  
[yeah but that ]
- 31 STU: [men kanske sen] vid avgränsningarna så måste jag  
[but maybe then] in the delimitations I must
- 32 av[gränsa mig °(lite)°. ]  
de[limit myself °(a bit)°. ]
- 33 COU: [jag tänkte just säga att de där] kollar du  
[I was just about to say that that ] you'll check
- 34 med ha- handle[daren sen] i de skede när du=  
with the su- super[visor then] at the point when you=
- 35 STU: [ jå:, ]  
[ yea:h, ]
- 36 STU: =jå:,=  
=yea:h,=
- 37 COU: =märker att nu har du skrivit fyrti sidor å du har först  
=notice that now you have written forty pages and you have only
- 38 kommit till de £ena£,  
arrived at £one£ of them,
- 39 STU: £jå£  
£yeah£

After *jag ba tänkte* (“I just thought”, line 20), produced in overlap with the student’s turn (line 19), the counselor claims insufficient knowledge of the content of the essay with the CIK *nu kan jag ju int innehålle* (“now I don’t PRT know the content”, line 20). By using the particle *ju*, she constructs this statement as shared knowledge between the participants (cf. Lindström, 2008, p. 74, on the particle *ju*). The CIK thus works as a disclaimer to the upcoming negative assessment: both participants know that the counselor has limited knowledge of the content of the essay, and the negative assessment should be seen in light of this fact.

Although the counselor finishes her turn with another positive remark about the essay – that it will be interesting to read (line 23) – the student’s *jå de e sant* (“yeah that’s true”, line 27) acknowledges and agrees with the counselor’s criticism. The student then further displays her understanding of the counselor’s remark by asserting that she has to delimit the scope of the essay when she comes to the section that treats the scope (lines 31–32). In her response to this, the counselor invokes another epistemic authority, namely the supervisor (cf. “silent participant”, Thonus, 2001, p. 61). She suggests that the student checks the issue with the supervisor in case she ends up writing forty pages on merely the first part of the aim (lines 33–34, 37–38). Thus, the final decision on how to proceed with this topic is delegated to the supervisor.

The example hence shows a pre-positioned CIK about the content of the essay used to produce a disclaimer to an upcoming criticism. The CIK functions similarly to *I don’t know* in Weatherall (2011), hedging a potentially problematic action such as criticism. The counselor also renounces some of the responsibility associated with giving writing advice, as she refers the student to the expertise of the supervisor. She thereby formulates an epistemic “gap” related to her institutional role as a writing, not a subject-specific, expert.

Example 3 (presented in part as Example 1 above) occurs in the context of a longer critical assessment of the structure of the student's text. After the counselor has described the problem pertaining to the many chapters, the student verbalizes her understanding of the consequences of the problematic structure by offering a negative assessment of the readability of the text (line 12). The counselor accepts this interpretation by reformulating the student's turn in similar wordings, and then adds a CIK that downgrades the strength of the negative assessment.

### Example 3. Post-positioned downgrade of negative assessment

- 01 COU: .hh [men du kan] inte skriva liksom (0.4) e:h eh  
 .hh [but you can] not write like (0.4) e:h eh
- 02 STU: [ ja, ]  
 [ yes, ]
- 03 COU: hur många kapitel blir de sammanlagt,  
 how many chapters are there in total,
- 04 STU: [jag har n]og-  
 [I have probably-
- 05 COU: [ ni:e, ]  
 [ ni:ne, ]
- 06 STU: aa men ni- aa men [precis nie tie sidor aa aa, ]  
 yeah but nin- yeah but [exactly nine ten pages yeah yeah, ]
- 07 COU: [aa men de e som att de e nie p]m som  
 [yeah but it's like it's nine p]m that
- 08 ra[das på varann, ]  
 co[me one after the other,]
- 09 STU: [ aa men precis, ] [ aa, ]  
 [ yeah but exactly, ] [yeah, ]
- 10 COU: [å de: ]  
 [and i:t]
- 11 de [blir inte riktigt så sammanhållet.]  
 it [ doesn't get so coherent. ]
- 12 STU: [de blir kanske lite trögt å läsa, ] [näe, ]  
 [it gets perhaps a bit sluggish to read,] [no, ]
- 13 COU: [ja lite ]  
 [yes a bit]
- 14 tröglä[st ble-] blev de faktiskt.  
 sluggish[it-] it got actually.
- 15 STU: [ mm:, ]
- 16 COU: .hh nu kanske de beror på att jag inte (.) riktigt förstår  
 .hh now maybe that's because I don't (.) really understand
- 17 [fämnet så m(h)enĒ ]  
 [Ēthe subject so b(h)utĒ]
- 18 STU: [ ((laughs)) ]
- 19 STU: nej men de e [jätte]bra att [(man kommer in] på andra) [perspektiv,]  
 no but it's [really] good to [ (come in ] on other) [perspectives,]
- 20 COU: [ ja:, ] [ ja:, ] [ ja: ja:, ]  
 [yes:, ] [ yes:, ] [ yes: yes:, ]
- 21 STU: [de e (ju de som e) aa (.) aa, ]  
 [it's (PRT that that is) yeah (.) yeah,]
- 22 COU: [ja jag ser de på ett annat sätt] där då.  
 [yeah I see it in a different way] there then.
- 23 STU: aa de e ju jättebra.  
 yeah that's PRT great.

After the counselor's criticism of the structure of the essay (until line 8), the participants in overlap give parallel upshots formulating the consequence of the problematic structure (lines 10–14). In the

next turn, the counselor displays her agreement with the student's upshot by recycling the student's characterization of the text as *trögläst* (approx. "slow" or "sluggish", line 14). She then immediately offers a disclaimer of the negative assessment, in the form of a CIK: *nu kanske de beror på att jag inte riktigt förstår ämnet så men* ("now maybe that's because I don't really understand the subject so but", lines 16–17). Similar to the CIK in Example 2, the counselor hence downgrades criticism by disclaiming subject expertise, although here the CIK is placed after the criticism. The smiley voice and laugh particle toward the end of her turn (line 17) index the dispreferred nature of displaying lack of expertise (cf. Petitjean & Cangemi, 2016; Sert & Jacknick, 2015). However, the student shows her affiliation with the counselor by laughing in overlap (line 18), praising the counselor's feedback and highlighting the advantage of getting input from another perspective (lines 19, 21, 23).

The CIK in this example has at least three functions. Besides downgrading the strength of the negative assessment, it also works as an account for the criticism and as a way for the counselor to diminish her responsibility for the assessment. While the counselor to some extent orients to her lack of knowledge as problematic, it is not treated as such by the student, who instead invokes the positive aspects of having different subject expertise.

CIKs do not only occur in the context of criticism and suggestions for text revisions. Counselors also use CIKs in connection to positive assessments, as disclaimers that downgrade the strength of the assessment and flag for potential problems with issues that lie outside the counselor's epistemic domain. Examples 4 and 5 illustrate such cases.

Before the start of Example 4, the student has told the counselor that he is waiting for comments from his student opponent, and the counselor has advised the student to be a bit careful before incorporating the comments from the opponent and perhaps even ask for the supervisor's opinion before doing so. The counselor motivates this advice by expressing her own positive impression of the text (lines 1–4, 7–9), and the CIK occurs in connection to this positive assessment.

#### Example 4. Downgrade within positive assessment

- 01 COU: ja precis #nåmen de e bra du vet de för att jag# .h  
*yes precisely #no but that's good you know that because I# .h*
- 02 tycker ju att den här texten #verka:r eh så där# (1.3)  
*think PRT that this text #see:ms eh like# (1.3)*
- 03 (du) har åtminstone e- en bra uppfattning om (0.9)  
*(you) have at least a- a good perception of (0.9)*
- 04 mt tycker jag om om #om teorin å kan förklara#  
*mt I think of of #of the theory and can explain#*
- 05 (0.6)
- 06 STU: oke[j, ]  
*oka[y, ]*
- 07 COU: [å ] dina variabler å å så där jag tycker liksom att  
*[and] your variables and and so I think PRT that*
- 08 de (.) verkar som att du har tänkt igenom de här ganska bra  
*it (.) seems like you have thought this through rather well*
- 09 så att (0.7)  
*so that (0.7)*
- 10 STU: [ o]kej,  
*[ o]kay,*
- 11 COU: [mt]

- 12 (0.4)
- 13 COU: men men (.) **jag kan ju int ta ställning ti innehålle**  
*but but (.) I can PRT not take a position on the content*
- 14 men så som du framställer de i text så °så tyckte jag°  
*but the way you present it in writing so °so I thought°*
- 15 °att liksom (.) [(mm)] (0.4) kändes det som (.) ganska° gediget.  
 °that like (.) [(mm)] (0.4) it felt like (.) rather° thorough.
- 16 STU: [.hhh]
- 17 (0.7)
- 18 STU: ja,  
*yes,*

After the counselor's positive assessment of the student's work and the student's receipt of this (lines 6, 10), the counselor utters a CIK about her inability to take a position on the content (line 13). Similar to the CIK in Example 2 above, she deploys the particle *ju* to characterize her claimed lack of subject-specific expertise as shared knowledge. The counselor thereafter immediately continues her positive assessment of the writing by assessing it as *ganska gediget* ("rather thorough", line 15). By giving the assessment in past tense (*tyckte jag*, "I thought", line 14), the counselor distances herself from her own opinion, and frames it as indirect and unobtrusive (cf. Henricson & Nelson, 2018). In this example, the counselor hence uses a CIK to downgrade the reliability of the positive assessment of the student's work, while also disclaiming her responsibility for content-related matters.

The final example of downgrading CIKs occurs in the context of an overall positive assessment of the text. In Example 5, the counselor first spends over a minute reading through a part of the student's essay (line 1). She then initiates a strongly positive assessment of the text (starting in lines 2–3). Within the positive feedback she inserts several disclaimers of her understanding and access to the text in its entirety, to flag for potential problems with terminology.

### Example 5. Downgrades within positive assessment

- 01 (73.1) ((quiet sounds from papers being turned over))
- 02 COU: .h asså mitt (0.2) allmänna intryck e att de (.) funkar  
*.h PRT my (0.2) general impression is that it (.) works*
- 03 alldeles utmärkt.  
*just perfectly.*
- 04 STU: okej,  
*okay,*
- 05 COU: °de e: (0.7) e:h° (0.3) **vissa saker (0.4)**  
 °there a:re (0.7) e:h° (0.3) some things (0.4)
- 06 **har jag svårt å förstå** men jag j-  
*I have difficulties understanding but I I-*
- 07 STU: °mm°.
- 08 COU: uppfattar de som att de är för att jag inte har läst  
*perceive that it is because I have not read*
- 09 f(r)esulta[ten så att säga] ((skrattar))  
*fthe r(h)esu[ts so to say] ((laughs)) ]*
- 10 STU: [ fja] ((skrattar)) ]  
 [ fyes] ((laughs)) ]
- 11 STU: ja precis.  
*yes exactly.*
- 12 (0.4)

- 13 COU: e:h [ jag ] uppfattade de inte som att de e liksom språket som (0.3)  
e:h [ I ] did not perceive it that it is PRT the language that (0.3)
- 14 STU: [°mm°.]
- 15 STU: okej.  
okay.
- 16 COU: som trasslar till de utan (0.4) **de e vissa begrepp**  
that complicates it but rather (0.4) there are some terms
- 17 **som jag inte vet**  
that I don't know
- 18 STU: °aa jag förstår°.=  
°yeah I understand°. =
- 19 COU: =**va dom betyder v- va du lägger i dom å så** men jag (.)  
what they mean w- what you put in them and so on but I (.)
- 20 [f:år ] utgå från att du har förklarat de (0.3)  
[ha:ve] to assume that you have explained that (0.3)
- 21 STU: [mm:.]
- 22 STU: ja,=  
yes, =
- 23 COU: =tidigare i texten men (0.4) °de e° de e (.) svårt å avgöra men  
earlier in the text but (0.4) °it is° it is (.) hard to tell but
- 24 .h men rent språkligt så: så tycker jag att de flyter på:  
.h but purely linguistically so: so I think that it flows o:n
- 25 jag (0.6) upplever att de finns en (0.7) en liksom  
I (0.6) perceive that there is a (0.7) a PRT
- 26 innehållsmässigt en struktur som jag (0.5) hänger me i.  
content-wise a structure that I (0.5) can follow.
- 27 STU: okej.  
okay.
- 28 COU: °så att de e:° (0.8) aa.  
°so that it is° (0.8) yeah.
- 29 STU: °e:h° aa precis de [va nog den ]  
°e:h° yeah exactly it [was probably that]
- 30 COU: [ nu har jag] inte liksom fdjupstuderatf den=  
[ now I have] not PRT fdeep studiedf it=
- 31 STU: =ne[:j.]  
n[o:.]
- 32 COU: [då ] som sagt eftersom att °jag° .h såg den först nu  
[then] as mentioned since °I° .h saw it just now
- 33 men men mitt allmänna intryck är att de (0.3) funkar bra  
but but my general impression is that it (0.3) works well
- 34 å- å att de liksom är (0.4) den (0.3) den typ av diskussion  
and- and that it PRT is (0.4) that (0.3) that kind of discussion
- 35 som man förväntar fsig if diskussionsdelen å så.  
that one expects finf the discussion part and so on.
- 36 (0.7)
- 37 COU: °så att de e° (0.3)  
°so that it is° (0.3)
- 38 STU: jaha,  
okay,
- 39 (0.3) va bra.  
(0.3) great.

After the counselor has positively assessed the text as working *alldeles utmärkt*, (“just perfectly”, line 3) and the student has received this (line 4), the counselor initiates a turn with a claim of insufficient understanding of “some things” in the essay: *vissa saker har jag svårt å förstå* (“some things I have difficulties understanding”, line 5–6). She then immediately provides a possible explanation: that she has not read the results section (lines 6, 8–9). The student confirms this (lines 10–11), and the counselor thereafter reformulates the same thing with another, more specific CIK: *de e vissa begrepp som jag inte vet va dom betyder v- va du lägger i dom å så* (“there are some terms that I don’t know what they mean w- what you put in them and so on”, lines 16–17, 19) and again provides an explanation that refers to lack of access to a different section of the text (lines 19–20, 23). She then continues positively assessing the writing, both in terms of the purely linguistic aspects and of the content-wise structure (lines 24–26). After the student’s receipt (line 27), the counselor initiates an upshot formulation which she abandons (line 28).

The student starts responding to this but is interrupted by another disclaimer from the counselor (line 30). This disclaimer is not a claim of insufficient *knowledge*, but rather of insufficient *reading*, which has to do with the fact that the counselor received the text “just now” (line 32) as opposed to in advance of the meeting. The disclaimer is again followed by a positive assessment of the text (lines 33–35), and this is responded to by the student through the positive assessment *va bra* (“great”, line 39).

In this example the counselor inserts CIKs within an overall positive assessment to downgrade its strength, point out potential problems with the text, and assign the student responsibility for the parts of the text with which the counselor is unfamiliar. The example illustrates a recurrent challenge associated with writing consultations: sometimes the counselor’s ability to give advice is hindered by his or her limited access to the student’s work or by a last-minute submission of the text. Claims of insufficient knowledge or insufficient “reading” may thus work as a resource for counselors to renounce responsibility for assessments of which they are not entirely sure and to highlight the students’ own responsibility.

### CIK to Upgrade Assessments

We conclude the analysis with a counter example, which shows how CIKs can be used to upgrade an assessment (Example 6). Before the start of the excerpt, the counselor has pointed out a minor unclarity in the text and the student has said that she and her writing partner will correct the issue. The counselor now gives a high-grade positive assessment of the writing, which is reinforced by a CIK.

#### Example 6. Upgrade of positive assessment

```

01  COU: .h men annars som sagt nej alltså jag tycker att det e
      .h but otherways as said no PRT I think that it is
02  #mm:# (.) jag tycker ni skriver väldigt bra.
      #mm:# (.) I think you write very well.
03  (0.7) ((COU and STU look at each other, STU nods))
04  STU: [aa va roligt å fhör(h)aE ((skrattar))]
      [oh how nice to Ehea(h)rE ((laughs)) ]
05  COU: [ eh å de: ((skrattar)) ] e:h (1.2)
      [ eh and i:t ((laughs)) ] e:h (1.2)
06  de e väldigt okomplicerat=
      it's very uncomplicated=

```

- 07 STU: =aa,  
=yeah,
- 08 COU: skrivet.  
written.
- 09 (0.6) ((COU and STU look at each other, STU nods))
- 10 COU: °e:h° (.) de e inte liksom tillkrånglat å även jag som inte kan  
°e:h° (.) it's not like tangled and even I who don't know
- 11 STU: mm,
- 12 COU: eh förstår (.) nästan allfoting heh [°heheh°f]  
eh understand (.) almost everything heh [°heheh°f ]
- 13 STU: [okej, ]  
[okay, ]
- 14 STU: aa men de e [eh bra jag gillar] den här att de ska in-  
yeah but that's [eh good I like ] this that it should no-
- 15 COU: [f.hhhf °eh° ]
- 16 STU: ska inte ligga på (.) för hög nivå.  
should not be on a (.) too high level.

In line 2, the counselor positively assesses the writing as *väldigt bra* (“very well”, line 2). The student responds with nods (line 3) and by expressing her appreciation of the feedback (line 4). The counselor extends the assessment by characterizing the writing as *väldigt okomplicerat* (“very uncomplicated”, lines 6, 8), and after further nods by the student (line 9) again expands the sequence by reformulating the prior assessment: *de e inte liksom tillkrånglat* (“it’s not like tangled”, line 10). Then, she adds a CIK: *även jag som inte kan* (“even I who don’t know”, line 10), *förstår nästan allting* (“understand almost everything”, line 12), which highlights that the text is clear also for a reader who does not know the subject. The student responds by showing her appreciation of the counselor’s feedback (lines 14 and 16).

Contrary to the previous example, here the counselor uses a CIK to further reinforce an already strongly positive assessment of the text. In this case, the counselor’s lack of subject-specific knowledge is oriented to by both participants as an asset in that it helps verifying the clarity and intelligibility of the text.

## Summary and Discussion

In this study we have addressed academic literacies from a distinct point of view. Contrary to many other studies in the field (see Lillis & Scott, 2007), we have not analyzed students’ written text production within specific academic disciplines. Instead, we have focused on a particular literacy event involving students from various subject areas, namely when they discuss their text-in-progress with counselors at university writing centers. More specifically, we have investigated some of the ways in which students and counselors negotiate knowledge in Swedish academic writing consultations at universities in Sweden and Finland.

Our results reveal that writing counselors often claim insufficient knowledge in the context of assessments of students’ texts. Counselors deploy CIKs primarily to downgrade the strength of either positive or negative assessments of the text or the degree of certainty of such assessments. This finding is similar to Weatherall’s (2011) observation about *I don’t know* as a hedging device. These types of CIKs are also a means for writing counselors to disclaim responsibility for content-related and subject-specific decisions. As seen in Examples 2 and 4, counselors sometimes format their CIKs with specific discourse markers to invoke shared understanding of their lack

of knowledge and to present this lack as a natural part of this institutional activity. While the specific subject area of the student may possibly affect whether or not a counselor deploys CIKs, in our data, we have observed that this resource is used regardless of the student's academic field.

Although our interactional analysis takes a micro-level perspective, our observations shed light on some of the "social structures" in which literacy practices are embedded (see Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 7), specifically relating to the institutional constraints of writing consultations. The CIKs highlight some of the challenges associated with the consultation work, such as the counselors' sometimes limited knowledge of the subject area and the topic of the text, or of specific writing and task-related instructions (see also Lennartson-Hokkanen, 2016). The advice-giving is complicated by the fact that the counselor usually has only read parts of the text, and sometimes receives the text just before the meeting. As seen in Example 5, this may engender difficulties related to how terminology has been dealt with in other sections of the work. CIKs can be used to make this difficulty explicit in the interaction and to remind the student to take the counselor's epistemic limitations into account when considering the advice.

Not all CIKs are used to address the challenges associated with writing consultations, however. Counselors also deploy CIKs to upgrade positive assessments and highlight the benefits of getting input from a reader without thorough subject knowledge, for whom clarity is particularly important. Such a CIK is illustrated in the last example (Example 6), where the counselor's CIK points out that lack of subject knowledge is an asset, as it helps verifying the clarity and comprehensibility of the text. As the student's positive response to this CIK shows, input from readers with different perspectives and expertise can be a valuable resource in academic writing (see also Example 3).

In a larger perspective, the counselors' use of CIKs highlights the social dimension of literacy events (see Barton & Hamilton, 2000) as involving the coordination between different institutional roles and responsibilities. Writing consultation offers support in a text production process in which knowledge is distributed among a number of present and non-present participants, such as the student, the writing counselor, the supervisor, and the examiner. By claiming insufficient knowledge, the writing counselor implies that someone else involved in the writing process may have sufficient knowledge. Sometimes, this means referring the student to the supervisor. Other times, it is the student who is oriented to as the one with more knowledge of the specific question. In these cases, the counselor's CIK may help increase the student's agency in the writing process and decrease the epistemic asymmetry between advice-giver and advice-seeker (cf. Park, 2012). CIKs should therefore not be seen as only a means to invoke problems, but as a flexible interactional resource that can serve multiple purposes depending on the situation.

Counselors' use of CIKs brings knowledge positioning to the interactional surface and sheds light on the complex epistemic ecology of writing consultation. Previous studies of CIKs in educational contexts have primarily focused on how students claim insufficient knowledge in the classroom (Jakonen, 2014; Sert, 2011; Sert & Walsh, 2013). In our study, it is the institutional representative who claims insufficient knowledge. Our analysis demonstrates the dynamic nature of participant frameworks in institutional settings, and offers insights into the ways students and counselors construct and negotiate their institutional roles in academic writing consultation.

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## Appendix

### Transcription Conventions

[	Overlap onset
]	End of overlap
=	No break or gap
(1.1)	Pause length in tenths of seconds
(.)	Micropause of less than 0.2 seconds
<u>word</u>	Marked stress
::	Prolongation of sound (marked per ten milliseconds)
.	Falling intonation
,	Low-rising intonation
–	Abrupt cut-off
°word°	Lower volume than surrounding talk
#word#	Creaky voice
£word£	Smiley voice
.word	Word uttered with inbreath
.h/.hh/.hhh	Inbreaths (number of ‘h’s indicates length of inbreath)
h/hh/hhh	Outbreaths or laughter tokens, in parentheses within words: (h)
(x)	Unintelligible talk, each x corresponds to a syllable
(word)	Uncertain talk
((comment))	Meta-comments
<i>Italics</i>	English translations of Swedish talk