

# Talking Through Text: Using Tutor/Student Perceptions to Implement an Asynchronous Tutoring Program

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## INTRODUCTION

- All of UM's writing centers want to ensure that all students, and especially those who are distance-learners, have the means to obtain quality feedback about their writing projects from trained tutors. In some instances, this requires forms of online tutoring sessions.
- Asynchronous, or delayed response, online tutoring is, for the most part, considered inferior to synchronous, or real-time tutoring; it is often seen as being a type of "drop-off" service that invites students to abdicate responsibility for their writing and encourages prescriptive "fix-it" approaches on the part of tutors, setting up a tension between "idealist" and "pragmatist" approaches to asynchronous tutoring. (Denton, 2018).
- Scholarship focusing on asynchronous online tutoring is scarce or outdated (most of it pre-Internet), and much of it relies on narrative and lore. Denton (2018) has called for a more intensive, data-driven investigation into use and perceptions of such tutoring for both students and tutors.

## OBJECTIVES

This research focuses on understanding and applying effective praxis for asynchronous writing center tutoring (which we have implemented under the descriptor of "correspondence tutoring") that incorporates perspectives of student writers (tutees) and those who tutor them (tutors). The purpose of this study is to use these insights to more effectively support student writers who access the services of the University's writing centers online and to provide specific training for tutors who will be working as correspondence tutors.

Two phases: Piloting Correspondence Tutoring (AY 2017/2018);  
Data Collection and Analysis AY 2018/2019

Research questions focus on three areas the researchers for this project (both writing center professionals) see as crucial for developing and implementing correspondence online writing tutoring programs that students will find beneficial and productive:

- 1) What are student perceptions of benefits?
- 2) What are tutor perceptions of session effectiveness?
- 3) How can writing center administrators develop tutor training for asynchronous tutoring that acknowledges and makes use of the very real differences between tutoring online and tutoring in physical locations?

## FRAMEWORK

### Taxonomies and Models for Writing Center Research

- Liggett, Jordan, and Price (2011) posit three particular methods for writing center research: practitioner inquiry, conceptual inquiry, and empirical inquiry. Our research makes use of all three (student experiences are part of "practitioner research."

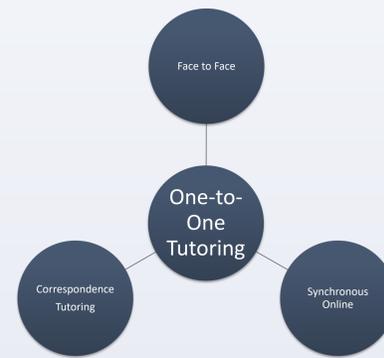
### Writing Center Positionality within Institutional Context

- Should be represented using rich textures that convey the full scope of literacy studies, reflecting the complexity of "writing center sites and the people who populate them" (Boquet & Lerner, 2008, p. 185).

### Investigation and Perception of Writing Center Norms

- Grimm (2011) synthesizes writing center norms as 1. Good tutors make students do the work of writing, 2. Ultimate aim of tutoring writing is an independent writer, and 3. writing centers produce better writers, not better writing (p. 81)

## BACKGROUND



Types of Tutoring Sessions and Identifying Features

While there is some existing research used in support of online asynchronous tutoring, most research relies on qualitative data gathered from writing center administrators and teachers who provide narratives about the impact of such tutoring on their students' writing projects. First-hand student and tutor perspectives are often absent.

Responding to recent calls for more RAD research, the researchers seek to gather information that yields both quantitative and qualitative data on both student and writing center tutor perceptions of online sessions held via "correspondence tutoring."

### Context

From the instructor's point of view and previous experience, there seemed to be various levels of responses with too many problematic issues in mechanics, language use, content, or both. Students admitted in surveys to seeking little or limited input on their writing before submission. When students did seek feedback, it was predominantly from family and friends. The Writing Center director/staff regularly observed that students who did seek support in the center often arrived with an expectation that all of the problems would be fixed by the consultant.

*OWI Principles: A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for OWI (Online Writing Instruction)* by The Conference on College Composition and Communication Committee for Best Practices in Online Writing Instruction (2013)

**OWI Principle 13:** OWI students should be provided support components through online/digital media as a primary resource; they should have access to onsite support components as a secondary set of resources.

**OWI Principle 14:** Online writing lab administrators and tutors should undergo selection, training, and ongoing professional development activities that match the environment in which they will work.

## METHOD

The researchers use a case-study, ethnographic method. However, the case study is not of an individual, but rather of programs. The programs under observation are three Undergraduate Writing Centers at the University of Mississippi: Oxford campus, Southaven campus, and Tupelo campus writing centers.

As part of the case studies, the researchers invite tutors and students to complete a survey, and at their option, to participate in an interview. The researchers plan to conduct focus groups with tutors who may offer suggestions for the proposed tutor training program. Also, existing data that is part of the online scheduling program used by all three writing centers will be studied. The data includes session reports that the researchers will analyze using textual analysis methods to discover key terms and outcomes identified by tutors and tutees.

## RESULTS from Phase 1

During the rollout and piloting, the researchers have gathered feedback from writing center tutors, using the following questions.

1. What, would you say, have been your biggest challenges with correspondence appointments? What have you struggled with?
2. What has been working well with the correspondence appointments? What have been the biggest advantages from these types of appointments?
3. Is there any thing else you would like to say about correspondence appointments?

Findings from Q1- Tutors struggled with feeling as if they had to respond to every concern and/or error they found in the tutee's writing. Students struggled with understanding what the process was for sending in their writing and with making the appropriate appointment.

Findings from Q2 – Tutors liked being able to think carefully through a response before actually committing it to writing. They noted (in a positive way) the difference between a real-time conversation and the potential to speak before thinking and the ability to linger in thought. They also liked being able to find and share specific resources with student writers.

Findings from Q3 – Students need to be given clear expectations about how much (or how little) material a tutor can cover in one 45-minute time slot. Some students seemed to expect the entire paper to be copy-edited, and that is not within the purview of the session.

*"As a tutor, I think students struggle most with making appointments. I don't think students understand that there is a distinct difference between the correspondence appointments and online appointments. I feel there needs to be more differentiation so students won't get so confused. Even though it is defined, I think the word correspondence may confuse many who schedule appointments."*

– WC Consultant

*"I feel it is much easier to assist students through this type of online appointment. Being able to read their paper, make comments in the margins, and send it back to them is easier than the traditional online appointments."*

– WC Consultant

*"It's been great having the time to focus on the paper without the additional task of communicating directly with the student at the same time, which divides one's focus, as well as reducing the amount of feedback one has time to offer."*

– WC Consultant

*"When a student understands how to schedule this appointment and fills out the appropriate form, I think this type of tutoring works well. It allows for a more manageable schedule for busy students as well as off campus students."*

– WC Consultant

## CONCLUSIONS

In Phase 1, the researchers are recording the implementation of correspondence tutoring sessions in a planned, gradual rollout that began in AY 2017 at the Tupelo Writing Center. The second rollout was in spring 2018 at the Southaven Writing Center. The third and final rollout will be at the Oxford Writing Center during the fall of 2018.

Early results indicate that this method of tutoring has a place in the lineup of one-to-one tutoring. Initial results suggest that once a student writer understands the method of correspondence tutoring, he or she is very likely to continue to use this particular approach.

The researchers hypothesize that student interviews will reveal that students who use this form of support regularly for their writing projects develop a sense of planning and process (because there is a delayed turnaround for the tutor's feedback) that leads to more polished and coherent final products.

## IMPLICATIONS

The researchers plan to develop focused tutor training modules that include modeling asynchronous response feedback tools like marginal references and end notes in order to help tutors understand that they must recognize the benefits and challenges of responding within the time of one session, even when engaged in asynchronous tutoring.

Focus groups will help the researchers and writing center administrators develop language to explain the term *correspondence tutoring* to students.

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