Abstract

This work in progress aims to briefly present the application of writing tutoring as it relates to writing programs and writing centers. The practice of face-to-face tutoring is compared to online tutoring. The initial literature review and the pilot interview found mixed responses to online tutoring among developing ESL writers.

Background

Much can be learned from the experimentation and implementation of writing programs in institutions of higher learning in North America. In response to the mass education policy in the 1930s and the open admission in the 1960s that caused a huge influx of students from diverse background to the universities, resulting in the literacy crisis in the 1970s, North American universities initiated and gained much success from various writing curriculum reforms [1]. These reforms manifested in writing programs such as First-Year/Freshman Composition, Writing Across the Curriculum, and Writing in the Discipline.

In the course of introducing these writing programs, the practitioners found that the classroom or lecture method of writing instruction produced neither good writers nor good writing [2,3]. As a result, writing centers mushroomed to provide complementary tutorial support to student writers and the implemented writing programs. Today, the non-directive and non-evaluative individualised student-centered one-on-one tutoring conducted by writing centers has been proven more successful in nurturing better and more confident writers [4,5].

This kind of tutoring, also known as writing conferencing, involves a student writer meeting a writing consultant at the writing center, either voluntarily or required by a lecturer, through a pre-arranged appointment. The writing tutor usually uses the Socratic method of asking probing questions to guide the student writer step by step in seeing the writing problem [6]. Through the years this writing tutoring has been recognised as a unique practice of writing centers, and until the 1990s, it has been conducted on a face-to-face basis.

The Emergence of Online Tutoring

From 1994, when writing centers expanded into cyber space and evolved to include online writing labs (OWLs), writing tutoring began to take place online through various synchronous and asynchronous communication software. In practice, asynchronous tutoring through e-mail seems to be more popular than synchronous tutoring through a MOO (Multi-user Object Oriented) site, or certain Chat software such as Microsoft NetMeeting. This is evidenced by the statistics provided by IWCA (International Writing Centers Association) that recorded 29 writing centers offering e-mail tutoring, with only 5 conducting multi-user domain tutoring [7].

In essence, online tutoring differs from face-to-face tutoring by slowing down the interaction, and “by collapsing the self into text”, making the interaction more rhetorical than social [8]. When the interaction becomes rhetorical, certain practitioners have the valid concern that online tutoring threatens the social constructionist theory and practice of writing centers [9].

As with all other computer and networked technologies, online tutoring has both plus and minus points. Harris and Pemberton [10] comment that the cyber tutorial has the negative loss of paralinguistic cues in face-to-face tutorials, but the positive loss of social pressure. According to Blythe [11], the absence of facial expressions and voice tones is in fact a good start to effective writing, because student writers have to think more carefully and systematically when they phrase questions to get help from writing tutors, as they have to rely entirely on their writing to communicate meanings. The writing tutor too has to write clearly and logically to ensure the tutee understands the issue at stake, and thus in a way demonstrating clear writing to the developing writer.

Research on Online Tutoring

Several studies on online writing tutoring are presented in Inman and Sewell’s Taking Flight with OWLs. Referring to their Cyberspace Writing Center Consultation Project through MOO meetings, Jordan-Henley and Maid [12] report that their student writers were more interested in revising their drafts than normally happened in a composition class. In another survey study conducted at the Utah State University, the response from students who consulted online tutors varied [13]. While some students found online tutoring impersonal and they would rather meet the tutor at a
walk-in center, others preferred online tutoring because it was less intimidating. These students also felt that they communicated their writing needs more clearly online, and they were also more focused and more inclined to stay on task.

In addition, Mabrito [14] found that highly apprehensive writers interacted slightly more frequently with their writing tutors online than face-to-face. He reasons that highly apprehensive writers are more inclined to participate in an online environment because of the anonymity and the psychological distance. Furthermore, online tutorials also promote equal participation because the hierarchy in social relationships such as tutor and tutee and different ethnic or social background is not obvious.

**Tutoring ESL Writers Online**

While much research has been done on the effects of online tutoring on native student writers, not much has been reported on its effects and implications for developing ESL writers. The limited literature seems to provide contradictory findings. For example, a writing center director comments that his ESL students were not comfortable interacting online because their culture prefers face-to-face communication[15]. Yet Sullivan and Pratt [16] found that ESL students had more to gain than native students because the networked technology gave ESL students time to think about what to ‘say’, thus reducing their anxiety and also writing errors.

In a pilot interview with a class of fifteen ESL academic writing students at Massey University, the number of ESL students who would prefer online writing tutoring was slightly higher than those who chose face-to-face tutoring. It should be noted that all of these students had online access both on and off campus. Those who preferred online tutoring seemed to have experienced tutors who spoke very fast and in a very different accent, whereas in an online tutorial, full attention can be focused on the written exchanges. These students also said that online transcripts are useful references for them to improve their writing assignments. On the other hand, those who preferred face-to-face tutoring felt that it was more difficult to ask questions online.

**Conclusion**

The mentioned pilot interview is part of a larger research project aims to investigate the applicability of OWL theory and practice on tertiary ESL writers. More findings will be reported from time to time in the near future. The above limited findings related to tutoring developing ESL online are by no means conclusive. The mixed findings might imply that online tutoring is an alternative rather than a preferred technique.

**References**


