




2022

A Pen, A Pencil, or a Keyboard: Writing Center Tutors' Perceptions

Mirta Ramirez-Espinola
Grand Canyon University, espinola720@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wte>

 Part of the Educational Methods Commons, English Language and Literature Commons, Higher Education and Teaching Commons, Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons, Secondary Education Commons, Secondary Education and Teaching Commons, and the University Extension Commons

Recommended Citation

Ramirez-Espinola, Mirta (2022) "A Pen, A Pencil, or a Keyboard: Writing Center Tutors' Perceptions," *Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education*: Vol. 11: Iss. 3, Article 1.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wte/vol11/iss3/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education* by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



A Pen, A Pencil, or a Keyboard: Writing Center Tutors' Perceptions

Cover Page Footnote

A Pen, A Pencil, or a Keyboard: Writing Center Tutors' Perceptions Mirta Ramirez-espinoła, Ed.D, Adjunct Faculty, Grand Canyon University espinoła720@gmail.com/mirta.ramirezspin@my.gcu.edu/210-394-1254 Biography Mirta Ramirez Espinoła, Ed.D. is an adjunct faculty member in the College of Education at Grand Canyon University, a dissertation committee member at Southern Wesleyan University, and a test administrator with the University of Texas at Austin, and an adjunct faculty member at Indiana Wesleyan University. She has also served as an adjunct faculty member at South Texas College and PBS Teacherline, a research assistant at the University of Texas San Antonio, and a tech editor at Ohio Christin University. Before starting a career in higher education, she taught in the public school system for over 15 years.

A Pen, A Pencil, or a Keyboard: Writing Center Tutors' Perceptions

Mirta Ramirez-Espinola, *Grand Canyon University*

Introduction

According to Lieberman (2021), top companies are looking for a technologically savvy workforce that can work with a team and, more importantly, possess up-to-par writing skills. It's no surprise that writing skills are essential for almost any field. However, upon entering college, many students are ill-prepared to write adequately. Additionally, "Writing is considered the academic skill most linked to success at the college level and in the workforce, yet research shows that secondary and postsecondary students are not receiving the writing instruction they need or deserve" (Giouroukakis et al., 2021, p. 30). Universities across the United States have worked tirelessly to address this issue (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2010). Thus, a call to action to support those ill-prepared students and those who need additional support in writing at the undergraduate and graduate level results in writing center support. Most writing centers offer face-to-face writing support on campus. However, the literature supports the trend toward asynchronous and synchronous online writing tutoring to support students in writing centers in universities and colleges academically. Sarraf & Rafoth (2020) assert, "a central question facing university writing centers and the institutions in which they find themselves is how to help students prepare for the challenges of professional writing" (p. 139).

Writing centers and online writing tutoring have become places where tailored instructional support for students is provided to improve writing skills. Writing centers vary; thus, no "one way" is correct, but universities attempt to meet the needs of the demographics at their campuses. A writing center is diverse and cannot be precisely defined; therefore, there is a need for writing instruction in various modalities, including online writing tutoring (Kinhead, 1993). Moreover, improvements and new implementations are occurring, especially with the post-COVID landscape. Students, faculty, and the writing center, including directors and tutors, have technological advances that can support students in writing. More importantly, ZOOM and other applications can mimic face-to-face encounters where tutors can offer students instructional feedback (Bhakta, 2019). Thus, the

study aims to uncover phenomena supporting further improvement and future research on online writing tutoring.

Background

In this country, writing skill was something that not every individual participated in or needed in the past, but with the industrial revolution, women's and civil rights movements, society evolved, and universities and colleges grew to necessitate a great need for good writing skills in the workplace. The craft of writing was no longer just for the few elites-educated men. Writing well was a skill everyone needed. More individuals were attending higher learning institutions; institutions were available to women; with the advent of technology, the craft of writing was a necessity. As a result, higher education has evolved to meet the needs of students to become proficient and skilled writers. One-way higher institutions meet students' needs is to develop writing centers. Writing centers service many students across this nation. As they continue to adapt, studies evaluate the writing center framework, and this study is no exception.

Literature Review

The writing center is an active, engaging center where students come in for writing. Technological advancements created the need for online writing tutoring (Boquet, 1999; Harris & Pemberton, 1995). Some experts believe the possible benefits of online learning need more research (Calfee, 2007). However, the transformation from onsite writing support took a turn to include asynchronous and synchronous online writing tutoring. This turn evolved from the non-traditional students needing help. In these formats, offering feedback via comments and conversing about specifics using chat or, now more prevalent, SKYPE or ZOOM allows interaction and learning to occur (Mayer, 2005; Priest, 2007). These two forms of online writing tutoring can be used separately or together, depending on the student (Boquet, 1999). As writing centers continue to adapt to online tutoring, growth and improvement are inevitable, but planning effectively is necessary (Harris & Pemberton, 1995). Research has focused on online tutoring strategies (Anderson, 2002; Rafoth, 2004), observing that writing centers and online writing formats have evolved to meet the demands of today's students. "A compilation of theories about technology, literacy, and computer-mediated collaboration will shape the things to come for writing center practice" (Anderson, 2002, p. 72). The face of the writing center continually transforms. Purdue University (OWL online writing lab) has a thriving online writing tutoring site of its kind, a leader of its time in supporting college students (Mayer, 2005). The Purdue OWL helps to improve specific writing skills or discover teaching materials for assisting students in learning about writing, including sample papers and insights on how to formulate and organize paragraphs.

(Landsberger, 2001). Writing centers are evolving to include more digital components.

Additionally, other writing centers produce and use podcasts, downloadable radio shows, instructional videos, and digital audio files that can be loaded onto a laptop, phone, or tablet (Burns, Cunningham, and Mulcahy, 2014). Writing centers vary across the country, most providing face-to-face tutoring, but synchronous and asynchronous online tutoring is the focus of this study. Asynchronous online writing tutoring offers a secure space for those students who are more reluctant to seek support before they try synchronous online or writing tutoring. Some students may never migrate to a synchronous method of tutoring. However, these students may prosper in the asynchronous setting (email) and can internalize feedback to improve their writing. A drawback for some students could be the lack of immediate feedback, but as individuals are unique in their learning styles, further research may be needed (Priest, 2007). The process of synchronous online writing tutoring is almost the same as an on-site writing tutoring session. Online tutors using SKYPE or chat provide immediate feedback, with sessions typically lasting 30 to 45 minutes (Priest, 2007). Some individuals perceive this as an accessible and valuable venue for tutoring writing because it provides an opportunity for immediate feedback and implementation. Overall, both these types of sessions support various types of learners. These tutoring methods consider both views of online tutoring while examining how it can be improved as technology has made its way into writing centers globally (Priest, 2007). Burns, Cunningham, and Mulcahy (2014) suggest, “Discovering ways to enhance online support is crucial to the success of distance learning programs— and the success of students” (p. 130). In review, asynchronous online writing tutoring includes email correspondence regarding a piece of writing awaiting feedback that is not immediate. Synchronous online writing tutoring involves an interaction using SKYPE or ZOOM, web-based platforms with a camera or phone where the tutor and student discuss a piece of writing in real-time. Some tutoring sessions can include both asynchronous and synchronous for a specific writing assignment. The evolution of the writing center adapts to various individuals learning styles.

Theoretical Foundations

Social Constructivism is the theoretical foundation for this study. Social Constructivism suggests that knowledge is obtained with more than instructor support or direct teaching alone and that students excel in peer or group interactions (Jaramillo, 1996). Thus, this theory can be utilized to examine the writing center format between tutors and those tutored. Furthermore, interaction is an essential component of this theory, which is significant in facilitating learning (Ellis, Tanaka, & Yamazaki, 1994). It is crucial to view the format of a writing center and how it

supports its students. Carino (1995) asserts that writing centers have helped students in various forms in higher education institutions for decades.

Moreover, the history of writing centers creates a foundation for current writing onsite and online centers where tutors can help students. In the 1890s, American college students requested more individualized instruction (Moberg, 2003). Thus, the initial writing lab was created and has continued to adapt to what is seen at many higher learning institutions today. Writing tutoring can consist of an individual or group tutoring experience both online (asynchronous and synchronous) and face-to-face on campus. Technology has contributed to considerable changes to the format of writing centers, but overall, the goal remains to meet students' needs.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the qualitative case study:

- How do university writing tutors at a south Texas 4-year college perceive their pedagogical behaviors and strategies during online tutorial consultations?
- How does a university writing center at a south Texas 4-year college train tutors in pedagogy using an online tutoring program/platform?
- What is the dynamic between tutor pedagogical strategies and training in online tutorial consultations at a south Texas 4-year college writing center?

Method

This study was a qualitative progressive case study that included open-ended research questions via Survey Monkey to facilitate open-ended responses to uncover phenomena based on participants' perceptions. A qualitative case study methodology is well-suited to understand the perceptions of tutors working in online writing tutoring. Since there is limited research on tutor perceptions of online writing tutoring, the research questions were general in nature to facilitate open-ended responses to uncover phenomena (Creswell, 2013).

Data Collection

The data collection included a research progressive developmental design to research a problem in the real world. It was essential to uncover phenomena in response to a problem through phenomenological research using open ended-interview questions anonymously to ensure a deeper grasp of richer examples, perceptions, and experiences (Belotto, 2017). Researchers used director and tutor surveys and document analysis as instruments for this study. These participants contributed to this case study by sharing their challenges and opportunities and expressing their experiences, which can influence best practices and administrative

decisions. Creswell (2013) discusses how interviewing individuals for a study involves individuals experiencing phenomena of a particular issue.

Furthermore, the research explored the process of online writing tutoring through many lenses, using a triangulated approach to attain a wide-ranging perspective and a better overall understanding (Creswell, 1998). Data was collected from tutor and director interviews and a review of documents regarding training, resources, policies, and hiring protocol, which the writing center provided. The email interviews and document reviews were the basis of data collection for this study. Interview questions were inserted into a link in an email to Survey Monkey, asking participants to consent to continue with the interview. After two weeks, the data on Survey Monkey was downloaded for analysis. The researcher organized and interpreted data, creating a system where patterns emerge through analysis (Shepard, 1997). Coding or collecting data involves reading, listening, segmenting, and arranging data (Chowdhury, 2015; Shepard, 1997). All data were stored securely, collected, and coded.

Data Analysis

Data analysis included topic coding to examine topics addressed, analytical coding to understand responses and documentation, categorizing, clustering, or combining ideas and labeling them using memoing to aid in creating categories into themes. Memoing is reflective and utilized to explain the meanings attributed to codes to clarify, organize, develop ideas, highlight vital information, and distinguish connections between principles and assumptions related to a topic (Razaghi, Abdolrahimi, & Salsali, 2020). The analysis process helped make sense of the data and address research questions. Additionally, the training material outlines the pedagogy tutors utilize in the tutoring sessions. Moreover, document analysis also included a review of researched-based articles used for training at the writing center, hard copy materials and resources for tutoring purposes, hiring guidelines and processes, and the continuous professional development directors and tutors had to undergo.

Coding

Furthermore, the act of coding is analytical. Raw data is condensed and synthesized into a conceptual framework culminating in a list of codes, which can be organized according to various code categories, including definitions and example data segments (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). During coding, the researcher used highlighters, colored pens, post-it notes, reading, and re-reading the interviews to uncover trends in data. Excel was used to organize notes and codes and expose the frequency of specific phenomena that emerge through coding the interview responses and the document analysis. Hatch (2002) suggests that patterns can be

characterized by: similarity (things happen the same way), differences (they happen in predictably different ways), frequency (they often happen or seldom), sequence (they occur in a specific order), correspondence (they happen concerning other activities or events), and causation (one appears to cause another) (p. 155) Additionally, open coding was used to code responses from the interview sessions based on the repetitive occurrence of themes. The analysis uncovered phenomena to address gaps in current tutor training resources and provide future online writing tutor training protocols. The various data sources informed the study's findings (Flick, 2014).

Study Sample

There are no specific rules to define sample size; however, quality data should be collected to address the research question (Gill, 2020). For this study, participants, including tutors and directors, were chosen from the writing center at a university. Participants were deemed relevant to addressing phenomena, and the research questions were chosen (Given, 2008). Furthermore, purposive non-probability sampling was used. Twenty-two tutors were employed as tutors at the writing center. Thus, the twenty-two individuals employed as writing tutors would presumably yield data to correlate to the research questions and the purpose of the study. Purposive sampling is a random selection of the population with the most information on a particular attribute of interest (Emmel, 2013). Through purposive sampling, twenty-two tutors and all directors were given a consent form; from those, only seventeen tutors and the two directors elected to participate in the study.

Discussion

This study aimed to look at how tutors perceived online writing tutoring. As tutors, they constantly tutored online (asynchronously and synchronously) or face to face on site. In this study, the analysis showed that the directors had experience teaching in various settings, and some tutors had previous mentor experiences or were proficient in the writing process, in grammar, or were enrolled in education courses; others were guided or shaped by the literature, their backgrounds, their experiences, their education, and the policies they must adhere to as tutors. Ultimately, tutors expressed the need for diverse modes of writing tutoring online (asynchronous/synchronous)—analysis of data exhibited how technology impacts students in higher education institutions differently. From the data gathered, it is essential to offer the choice at a Writing Consultation Center. Thus, online writing tutoring provides a necessary resource for students wanting to improve their writing; however, technology can present challenges. At any rate, diverse learners can benefit from various tutoring modalities. Moreover, the study showed that instruction and technology are evolving and improving continually to meet the challenges some students face in writing proficiency.

Summary of Findings

Four themes emerged through analysis: *experienced tutor center*, *tutor behaviors*, *accessibility*, and *tutor's experiences*. The significance of themes emerging in the study played an essential role in understanding the tutors' perceptions of online writing tutoring. All these themes culminated in understanding how training and pedagogy dynamically intertwine to support students who struggle in writing. Moreover, the themes that emerged through analysis and coding were supported by the tutor and director's responses from the online interviews, which corresponded to the research questions that helped the document analysis. Several categories supported each theme.

Experienced Tutor Center

Table 1 offers examples of responses to open-ended responses for the theme, *Experienced Tutor Center*, including *training techniques*, *interview process*, *site responsibilities*, and *guidelines and policies*. Thus, this theme emerged to address how intensely the tutoring center invests in training its tutors by providing continuous rigorous professional development and a lengthy interview process. Additionally, the long evolving history of the tutoring center supports the theme of experienced. The assistant director and an ex-student remembered the history of the writing center's predecessor, which was in the late 80s, and early '90s, English tutoring, which was part of the Learning Assistance Center. Documentation and memories concurred that writing support had been provided to students for over 30 years. It had evolved from its previous beginnings. Thus, the long-standing support at this university's writing center could be called "experienced."

Training techniques

Analysis from directors and tutors showed that tutors completed coursework for continued professional growth. Training is essential, and at the writing center, tutors participate in the required weekly training and are required to read and reflect upon research-based literature during meetings. Some tutors shared how their styles and newly learned approaches from training would guide their tutoring. Analysis showed that all tutors had opportunities to practice and shadow experienced tutors. The responses indicate that training techniques in Table 1 are connected to an "experienced tutor center." It would follow that the center consists of tutors who are continually participating in professional growth opportunities frequently. Analysis of responses and documents showed that training techniques were conceived and supported the theme "experienced tutor center."

Interview Process

The "experienced tutor center" requires an *interview process* in Table 1 to show how to vet tutors. Tutors first had to respond to questions about their experience with writing, tutoring, and training. Tutors had to complete a sample essay and

provide a detailed explanation, including relevant experiences to the writing tutor position. Tutor applicants had to read a sample essay and develop an approach with feedback, including a mock discussion with a student. During the interview, tutor applicants had to revise a document to assess a tutor's knowledge base. The interview would cease if the tutor applicant did not meet the requirements of the sample essay revision. Document analysis showed that revising a sample essay was required by the writing center and noted in the writing center interview inquiries in Appendix A. Moreover, the writing center includes a vetting process where various interview questions were asked of tutor applicants, such as "...why are you interested in this position, what experience or training do you have that might help you be an effective tutor, and ...why do you think a university writing center would focus on tutoring and not editing?" The questions elicited responses to locate the right fit for the writing tutor position. During the interview process, some tutors noted they had tutoring experience in the past, some with only face-to-face tutoring; however, they thought it could translate to the online environment quickly—the procedure of the interview process aligned with the objectives of the writing center and the university. Document analysis in Table 1 includes the hiring interview questions and the process of interviewing applicants, resulting in the *interview process* category. Thus, the arduous interview process represents an "experienced tutor center."

Roles and Site Responsibilities

In an "experienced tutor center," *roles and site responsibilities* in Table 1 focus on tutor professional actions daily at the writing center. The writing center requires an intake form for students seeking tutoring. This form allows tutors to read and analyze student work and offer meaningful feedback to students. Tutors seemed to understand their responsibilities based on tutor responses via data analysis. Tutors are responsible for keeping current with a weekly reading of instructional literature for discussions and self-evaluation/observations of experts who present monthly training on writing technique support. Tutors are observed and evaluated annually. Both directors and tutors are responsible for collaborating to address professional growth regarding training, self-reflection, and required reading. Furthermore, tutors' understanding of their site roles and responsibilities aligns with their objectives and impact on students as an "experienced tutor center."

Guidelines and Policies

Both tutors and directors follow *guidelines and policies* consistently at the writing center, supporting the theme "experienced tutor center" in Table 1. Tutors follow the required time frame for sessions and display a professional rapport while engaged with students. Tutors focus on creating ideas at various stages of the

writing process, implementing editing and revising strategies, increasing an understanding of structure and content, and promoting confidence in students' writing. Tutors can support students by sharing resources. Tutors adhere to training, required readings, and their mission statement to guide them during their sessions with students.

Tutor's Behaviors

The types of "Tutors' Behaviors" found in examples of responses shown in Table 2 include *facilitating*, *feedback*, and *resources* that arose through data analysis. The behaviors of tutors highlight their perceptions of their pedagogy when supporting students online during tutoring sessions. Thus, the way tutors conduct themselves towards those in need of writing tutoring, including how tutors may facilitate a tutoring session, offer feedback, and provide resources to students, are included under this umbrella. Thus, tutors' perceptions suggest that training is vital to tutoring students in writing.

Facilitating

Facilitating is a way to help a student understand a concept or make improvements by promoting and discussing it (Rein, 2009). The tutor's role is to facilitate the improvement process as a guide in the student's writing. Tutors support the progress of student writing through analysis and student engagement, and conferences. Tutors facilitate through modeling and providing resources. A tutor is a supportive role. Because document analysis in Table 2 includes tutor perceptions in their own words, their view of themselves is that they foster and facilitate learning through guiding techniques from training and their experiences to apply in their tutoring sessions with struggling writers. Thus, their most crucial "tutors' behavior" is to become student *facilitators*.

Feedback

Offering feedback to students with information about their current status and necessary improvements is essential and supports progress (Rein, 2009). After reviewing the responses regarding feedback, both tutors and directors agree that feedback is crucial to students. Feedback can include comments where tutors share a need for students to focus on specific portions of text or share strengths, they notice in some text areas. In this feedback format, students are offered positive feedback and guidance to improve their work. The focus of feedback is to provide examples or resources or call attention to necessary improvements while still encouraging students. Thus, the tone is critical. Document analysis in Table 2 highlights how feedback can provide guidance and explanations so students can internalize feedback and improve.

Resources

In Table 2, resources provided to the students is a “tutor behavior” that emerged from the analysis. Some resources provided included writing examples, links to websites, resources on how to cite sources, and strategies for writing both in paper and digital copies. Tutors supported online and onsite students, but this study focused on online tutoring sessions, so digital support was critical. Additionally, resources provide a guide for students to follow and were instrumental in supporting the feedback given to students by tutors. Tutors referenced the ease and accessibility of providing resources online to students using the OWL Purdue site for extensive student resources. Also, the literature tutors used for professional development outline the importance of resources coupled with feedback to aid students in following through better to improve their writing. As shown in Table 2, document analysis highlights that those online resources are included as attachments in emails or ZOOM chat links. Overall, the end goal is to use the resources long after the tutoring session is complete, and the resources are used throughout the college experience.

Accessibility

Table 3 shows responses that led to the theme and sub-themes for Accessibility, which has onsite and online access. To better understand accessibility, the analysis showed how students’ access to support in writing through either an onsite campus tutoring center or additional accessibility online to students who fit different demographics may need access to more than onsite writing tutoring. Thus, having both options available to traditional and non-traditional students of writing tutoring support was essential and uncovered through analysis. However, since this study focused on online writing tutoring, accessibility for tutoring opportunities that were both asynchronous and synchronous online tutoring was available. The asynchronous options allowed students to send documents for support, while others preferred synchronous tutoring opportunities where ZOOM or SKYPE was used to discuss writing guidance.

Tutor Experiences

Lastly, Table 4 response examples of *Tutor Experiences*, which includes their experiences and perceptions of the onsite or online (asynchronous and synchronous) tutoring through this research study. Tutor’s Experience guided their responses and interactions with students struggling with writing proficiency. The analysis demonstrated the tutor’s interview process, and the professional development supported the professionalism of tutors being vigilant of the specific time frame during sessions. Many tutors reported favorable perceptions of their

experiences with online writing tutoring in synchronous and asynchronous settings. More importantly, their perceptions of approaching students were also guided by their continued weekly training, collaboration with other tutors, and observations of students' needs. In short, tutors allowed their training, experience, and student needs to inform instructional tutoring in writing. Thus, Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 demonstrate some example responses by tutors or directors that helped steer data analysis into categories to uncover phenomena.

Table 1

Experienced Tutor Center-Example Responses

| |
|--|
| <p><u>Experienced Tutor Center</u></p> <p>The director responded to the question regarding the history and inception of the writing center, stating, <i>“The writing center at Mar University opened about fifteen years ago due to concerns that students needed additional help with writing in many classes”</i>.</p> <p>The assistant director stated, <i>“When I was a student at MU in the late 80's, early 90's, English tutoring used to be a part of the Learning Assistance Center. When I returned in 2006, it was already the Writing Center, so I don't really know why it was opened.”</i></p> |
| <p><u>Training Techniques</u></p> <p>Tutor Isabella mentioned, <i>“Training entailed presentations by multiple speakers, but also included activities we had to practice.”</i></p> <p>Tutor Armando stated, <i>“My supervisor trained us very well by giving us approaches and providing us with how-to guide students.”</i></p> <p>Maria stated, <i>“I observed other veteran tutors before I was allowed to tutor on my own. I was also being supervised through my first online sessions.”</i></p> <p>Tutor Ysa mentioned, <i>“Training entailed weekly and continued training including reading research-based literature on tutoring and student.”</i></p> |
| <p><u>Interview Process</u></p> <p><i>Ysa explained more elaborately, “I was interviewed in September of 2014. My application required me to provide not only my resume but a writing sample as well. During the interview, I was asked questions regarding my experiences as a writer, my thoughts on tutoring, and my involvement in certain campus organizations on campus. Further, I was given a writing sample and left alone for about fifteen minutes, during which I was tasked to read and provide feedback on the piece and why I provided it.”</i></p> |

Armando stated, *“I had to revise a sample essay.”*

Armando stated, *“I think if you have experience with one-on-one tutoring, you’ll easily adapt to the online writing tutoring environment.”*

The sample essay provided an opportunity for the applicant to read the essay and develop an approach with feedback to discuss with the student in a mock setting.

Various interview questions were asked for example: *“...why are you interested in this position, what experience or training do you have that might help you be an effective tutor, and ...why do you think a university writing center would focus on tutoring and not editing?”*

The questions focus on extrapolating responses that would reveal the right individual for tutoring writing.

Site responsibilities

For example, Mirella mentioned, *“Tutors are required to read *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* by Leigh Ryan about writing and tutoring, and that is our responsibility.”*

The required reading posed a foundation and a flow for how online writing tutoring would occur.

The director noted, *“We ask students to complete an intake form-that is our responsibility and one of our roles at the writing center.”*

Lorenzo stated that their responsibility as a tutor was to *“read and examine students’ papers offering feedback in order to help the student improve their writing.”*

Flora responded, *“I attempt to conduct my online tutoring sessions in a way similar to the face-to-face sessions. So, I work as a facilitator to guide them in the direction to best assist them.”*

Aida stated, *“The writing center impacts the role of a one-to-one environment because we can interact with different students and ideas.”*

Isabella responded, *“I utilize many techniques implemented in a one-to-one tutoring session by placing comments next to a student’s writing. By this, I mean that I ask questions of tutees to incite their critical thinking skills. I find it my*

| |
|---|
| <i>duty or role to help them produce the best writing they can and to avoid just being an editor for them.”</i> |
| Guidelines and Policies |
| <p>Following guidelines on how tutors approach students are important.</p> <p>Isabella explains, “<i>Students can attach their writing pieces and fill out a form on the writing center website to voice their concerns.</i>”</p> <p>Aida describes her rapport with students to “<i>facilitate rather than edit and to provide students with feedback.</i>”</p> <p>Vince stated, “<i>Approach and treat the online session as you would with any other session and with the same purpose,</i>” in response to offering advice to other tutors.</p> <p>Isabella explains, “<i>Students can attach their writing pieces and fill out a form on the writing center website to voice their concerns.</i>”</p> <p>Sessions are timed.</p> <p>Tutor uses training, required reading and additional resources to support students. Any guidelines and policies put in place make sure there is an organized and efficient writing center.</p> |

Table 2
Tutors’ Behaviors-Example Responses

| <u>Tutors’ Behaviors</u> | Facilitate | Feedback | Resources |
|--|---|--|---|
| A tutor’s behavior is a behavior that the tutor acts upon or communicates that represents it as such. For example, <i>offering feedback in a</i> | <p>A common consensus among tutors and directors is that “a tutor shows and does not tell.”</p> <p>Elsa explained, “<i>I aim to be a guide in the student’s writing, and I am</i></p> | <p>Feedback is something a student can read and internalize.</p> <p>Most tutors mentioned, “<i>My job is to provide feedback.</i>”</p> <p>Maria explained, “<i>I often times give examples and</i></p> | <p>Those resources can include web sites, specific handouts, and links to additional resources.</p> <p>Flora explained, “<i>I utilize handouts provided by the writing center and</i></p> |

| | | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| <p><i>comment box is a “tutor behavior.” guiding the student to self-realize a concept is also a “tutor’s behavior.”</i></p> | <p><i>there to point out patterns of error where students can fix on their own after I have defined and explained the problem.”</i></p> <p>Carlos stated, “<i>I describe my role as a facilitator rather than an editor.</i>”</p> <p>Elsa explained, “<i>I aim to be a guide in the student’s writing, and I am there to point out patterns of error where students can fix on their own after I have defined and explained the problem.</i>”</p> <p>“<i>The goal is self-discovery</i>” most tutors concede.</p> <p>The director noted, “<i>we incorporated online tutoring to have more engagement with</i></p> | <p><i>explanations through the comment feature, but I combine it with the highlighter feature to emphasize my explanations.”</i></p> <p>Ysa highlighted that, “<i>listening, being very accommodating and patient with students is my goal.</i>”</p> <p>About feedback, the assistant director responded, “<i>tutors use comment bubbles in the margins for feedback and devote specific time to respond to online submissions.</i>”</p> <p>Flora stated, “<i>I use intertextual comments and end notes when I believe something needs to be focused on, strengths, and areas in need of revision.</i>”</p> <p>Vincent describes his experience with</p> | <p><i>resources from other colleges like Purdue’s online writing center.”</i></p> <p>The director responded, “<i>Tutors use OWL Purdue as a reference to offer information to the students, and a series of university approved handouts and resources that are provided to the students.</i>”</p> <p>Isabella explained, “<i>We have pdf versions of the resources we offer to our students, and we can give them hard copies or digital copies.</i>”</p> <p>Resources vary and in the digital age they can consist of examples of writing, resources on how to cite sources, definitions of terms, and</p> |
|--|---|--|--|

| | | | |
|--|---|--|---|
| | <p><i>students during our sessions.”</i></p> <p>Online tutoring allowed tutors to become facilitators.</p> <p>Thus, a facilitator guides a student to the answers or to an epiphany and does not provide the answers.</p> | <p>feedback, <i>“I’m careful how I approach the student and addressing their writing, making sure I don’t say anything to discourage the student.”</i></p> <p>Maria and other tutors incorporate feedback in various formats to compel students to thoughtfully incorporate the feedback to improve their writing.</p> | <p>strategies for writing both in digital and hard copies.</p> <p>Most tutors agreed that, <i>“one of the strengths of online tutoring is the ability to provide resources easily.”</i></p> |
|--|---|--|---|

Table 3
Accessibility-Example Responses

| |
|---|
| <p><u>Accessibility:</u> Various forms of writing tutoring (online and onsite) are offered (accessibility). Students expect online support from tutors.</p> <p>Onsite and Online Access: The director stated, <i>“in the early 80s and 90s, English tutoring at this university was part of the learning center, but about 15 years later, the writing center opened its doors exclusively as a writing center due to the needs of students, then online writing tutoring was made available.”</i></p> <p>The director responded to a question about accessibility, <i>“We wanted to serve our students on weekends, so online tutoring facilitated this.”</i></p> <p>Because writing takes place in all disciplines at higher education institutions, the writing center provides a need for many students. The assistant director reported, <i>“Particularly with our distributed campus, we needed a way for students who</i></p> |
|---|

are not physically on campus often or who are taking online courses to have access to writing assistance.”

With the student population spanning ages, lifestyles, and socio-economic status, the accessibility to obtain writing support was necessary. Several tutors commented, *“The strengths of online tutoring are what makes us as writing consultants more accessible to our students.”*

Isabella responded to a question about being an online tutor stating, *“The experience of tutoring online for me is like any other session, though the student is not in front of me, I am to address their paper as if they were in terms of time, help, and professionalism.”*

Ysa reported that, *“Tutoring online is relatively easy-it’s a matter of noticing patterns and pointing them out through comments.”*

Responding additionally about synchronous online writing tutoring, Carla stated, *“I see my experience of tutoring as very accommodating for the student and tutor.”*

Table 4
Tutor Experiences-Example Responses

Tutor Experiences: Tutors come from various backgrounds and experiences, holding varied morals, judgments, and perceptions of online writing tutoring.

Tutor Perceptions: Two Sides-Through this study, tutors viewed their tutoring experiences of both asynchronous and synchronous online writing sessions as conflicted. Vincente replies, *“My perception of responding to students’ writing online is like how I respond to a student’s writing in person. I am careful of how I approach the student in addressing their writing making sure that I don’t say anything to offend or discourage the student. I give the same amount of concern and attention as I would with any writing session.”*

Armando described the synchronous online experience as, *“Tutoring online is different from a traditional tutoring session in that you are not necessarily in the same location as the student although you are still able to communicate as you would in person Other than experiencing some technical difficulties, I see*

synchronous online writing tutoring as a step towards reaching out to even more students than the amount that is already being helped.”

Flora’s response is common to others, “*While I enjoy this form of tutoring, I have found that I’ve needed to be especially aware of word choice while online tutoring. Since there is no body language or voice in online tutoring, I try to craft my writing so that it doesn’t come across as authoritative, demanding, condescending, or rude in any way.*” Flora is describing asynchronous (email) online writing tutoring.

These categories emerged to support the tutor and director’s work at the writing center. Their responses outlined experienced directors who held their tutors to a high standard based on their interview protocols and continuing education opportunities. Document analysis supported the literature and resources used to guide tutoring practices at the writing center. The experiences shared were more focused on (email) asynchronous online writing tutoring with some input on the value of synchronous (face-to-face) online writing tutoring as an effective mode of tutoring writing. However, because tutors were from varied backgrounds and experiences and at different levels in their training, there was a wide array of perceptions of online tutoring. Ultimately, further innovation in both technology and education will impact the framework of online writing tutoring.

Limitations

The study’s interpretation of findings may be limited due to the small sample size. More research can be done to analyze tutor perceptions at other writing centers in various universities across the United States. With the continual advent of technology, the tools utilized to tutor online may have vastly improved. Thus, additional studies could offer more insight.

Implications for Future Research

Future studies should be considered for a larger-scaled research study on tutors’ perception of a *Writing Consultation Center*, including more universities, longer duration, more participants, additional questions, and more data gathered. The benefits of technology to meet the needs of diverse learners and the constant collaboration of stakeholders to make decisions about improving writing tutoring is necessary. Ultimately, further research at university writing centers could improve the online writing tutoring program design and scrutinize the effectiveness of multimedia use.

Research Reflection

Writing can be a challenge when various styles of writing are required in higher education courses. Some students come to university ill-prepared to write academically. Ramirez-Espinola (2018) suggests a higher demand for non-traditional students who need access to web-based education and tutoring. Luckily, higher education institutions fund and include top-notch tutoring accessible on campus or online to help students improve their writing. Understanding how technology can support students in improving their writing skills is vital. With continuous technological improvements and well-trained tutors and directors, writing centers at universities and colleges can benefit students struggling with writing proficiency. After reflecting on the benefits of tutoring centers nationwide through research and reading, their services are needed and appreciated.

References

- Anderson, D. (2002). Interfacing email tutoring: Shaping an emergent literate practice. *Computers and Composition*, 19(1), 71-87.
- Belotto, M. J. (2018). Data analysis methods for qualitative research: Managing the challenges of Coding, interrater reliability, and thematic analysis. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(11), 2622-2633.
<https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2018.3492>
- Bhakta, S. (2019). Writing in a Global World: The Increasing Prevalence of Online Writing Centers.
- Boquet, E. H. (1999). 'our little secret': A history of writing centers, pre- to post open admissions. *College Composition and Communication*, 50(3), 463.
- Burns, S. Cunningham, J. & Foran-Mulcahy, K. (2014). Asynchronous online instruction: Creative collaboration for virtual student support. *CEA Critic*, 76(1), 114-131.
- Calfee, J. (2007). Online tutoring and student success in developmental writing courses. *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*, 15(1), 77.
- Carino, P. (1995). The writing center journal: Early writing centers: Toward a history [s.n].<https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2018.3492>
- Carino, P. (1995). Early Writing Centers: Toward a history. *The Writing Center Journal*, 12(2), 103-115.
- Chowdhury, M. F. (2015). Coding, sorting and sifting of qualitative data analysis: Debates and discussion. *Quality and Quantity*, 49(3), 1135-1143.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-0140039-2>
- Creswell, J.W. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J.W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Ellis, R., Tanaka, Y., & Yamazaki, A. (1994). Classroom interaction, comprehension, and the Acquisition of L2 word meanings. *Language learning*, 44(3), 449-491.
- Emmel, N. (2013). Sampling and choosing cases in qualitative research: A realist approach. GB: Sage Publication. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473913882>
- Flick, U. (2014). The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis. London: SAGE Publication Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446282243>
- Gill, S. L. (2020). Qualitative sampling methods. *Journal of Human Lactation*, 36(4), 579-58. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0890334420949218>
- Giouroukakis, V., Kramer-Vida, L., Siegel, K., & Jaccarino, V. (2021). Addressing the High School and College Writing Gap: Democratizing Writing Instruction. *THE ENGLISH RECORD*, 30.
- Given, L. M. (2008). The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909>
- Harris, M. & Pemberton, M. (1995). Online writing labs (OWLs): A taxonomy of options and issues. *Computers and Composition*, 12(2), 145-159.
- Hatch, J.A. (2002). Doing qualitative research in education settings. State University of New York Press, c/o CUP Services, Box 6525.
- Jaramillo, J. A. (1996). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and contributions to the development of constructivist curricula. *Education*, 117(1), 133-140.
- Kinkead, J. A. (1993). 10 The Land-Grant Context: Utah State University's Writing Center. *Writing centers in context: Twelve case studies*, 192.
- Landsberger, J. (2001). Purdue's OWL: Online writing lab. *TechTrends*, 45(6), 53
- Lieberman, M. (2021, March 3). U.S. companies: Key job skills students need post-pandemic. *Education Week*, 40(24), 1420. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v14n12p40>
- Mayer, G. A. (2005). Online writing lab at Purdue (OWL). *Choice*, 99.
- Moberg, E. (2010). Best practices and technologies of the modern college writing center.
- O'Connor, C., & Joffe, H. (2020). Intercoder reliability in qualitative research: debates and practical guidelines. *International journal of qualitative methods*, 19, 1609406919899220.
- Priest, A. M. (2007). Dialoguing at a distance: How do we communicate with external Students?. *Journal of Academic Language and Learning*, 1(1), A113-A122.
- Ramirez-Espinola, M. (2018). *Tutors' Perceptions of an Online Writing Consultation Center* (Doctoral dissertation, Trident University International).

- Rafoth, B. (2009). Responding online. *ESL writers: A guide for writing center tutors*, 149-160.
- Razaghi, N., Abdolrahimi, M., & Salsali, M. (2020). Memo and Memoing in qualitative research: a narrative review. *Journal of Qualitative Research in Health Sciences*, 4(2), 206-217
- Sarrafi, K.S., & Rafoth, B. (2020). Don't Forget the End User: Writing and Tutoring in Computer Science. *The Writing Journal*, 38 (1/2), 131-164.
- Shepherd, M. (1997). Making Sense of Qualitative Data. *Applied Geography*, 3(17), 252-253.
- The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. (2010). Beyond the rhetoric improving college readiness through coherent state policy: The gap between enrolling in college and being ready for college.

Appendix A

Student's Name _____ Date _____

Interview Questions, New Tutors

Tell them about the UWC. Ask if applicant can attend Friday meetings (1:15-3:15). Discuss continuous training sessions and blackboard.

1. Tell us a bit about why you are interested in this position and what experience or training you have that might help you be an effective tutor. Please include any experience working with people for whom English is their second language.
2. The Writing Center is a tutoring center with a goal of increasing student writers' skills over time. We do not fix students' papers for them. How would you explain the differences between tutoring and editing?
3. How would you describe your knowledge of responding to student writing? Explain what you know about addressing the importance of genre, purpose and audience in writing. Although each student's needs are different, in general, what would be the two or three things you would probably focus on first, and why?
4. Aside from walk-in services, the Writing Center has expanded its service to include online tutoring and Skype tutoring services as well as Blackboard training for our tutors. In addition to Microsoft Office, what experiences have you had with computer tools, specifically Skype, Google Hangouts, and Blackboard?
5. Tutors are trained in several ways: we have weekly trainings on Friday afternoons; concentrated pre-semester training on CRLA-related topics; and Blackboard trainings (usually) done individually. Level 3 tutors complete a major Writing Center-related project. We also encourage tutors to attend and even to present at professional conferences and to begin working toward their first scholarly publications. Are you willing and able to devote yourself in an ongoing way to continuous professional development?
6. On occasion, mostly early in the semester, there may be times when you will not be working with students or on writing center projects, what would you do during this "down time" that would advance your professional development?
7. Can you tell us about a time when you teamed up with a co-worker (or another student) to complete a complex task? What were some of the difficulties? What were the successes? If you had it to do over, how might you do things differently?
8. Take a few minutes to look over the sample essay, thinking through how you would approach tutoring a student who came to the Writing Center with this draft.
 - How would you begin the session? What would be some of the first things you would tell and ask the student?
 - What would you ask the student in order to get a better idea of the assignment prompt and the student's drafted response to it?
 - What strengths do you see in the draft, and how would you help the student build on those?
 - What are the 2-3 main things you would focus on with this student, keeping in mind that the session will only be about 30 minutes long?
9. What questions do you have for us?