

Spring 5-2-2014

# Mode, Method, and Medium: The Affordance of Online Tutorials in the Writing Center

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## Recommended Citation

Holtz, Erik V., "Mode, Method, and Medium: The Affordance of Online Tutorials in the Writing Center" (2014). *Honors Scholar Theses*. 357.

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### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to offer my thanks to Dr. Tom Deans for his support and expertise as an advisor throughout the research process, as well as to Dr. Anke Finger and the honors program at the University of Connecticut for challenging students like myself to conduct independent and original research projects. I would also like to thank the Office of Undergraduate Research at the University of Connecticut for the IDEA Grant and Travel Grant; their support allowed me to conduct and present this research. Finally, I would like to thank John Christensen, Francoise Dussart, and the Individualized Major Program for their commitment to interdisciplinary exploration in student work. This project would have suffered without their assistance. Finally, my thanks to the writing centers, including my own at the University of Connecticut, that offered their time and assistance in making this project a reality.

**Mode, Method, and Medium:**

## The Affordances of Online Tutorials in the Writing Center

With the proliferation of digital media into nearly all aspects of our culture, including education, the expectations of the writing centers to likewise go online increased dramatically. Research conducted by Anderson-Inman suggests that, amid the digital services offered by writing centers, they are content producers, an information gateway, and of course, a source for online tutoring services (1997). In the first two endeavors, the writing center has done fairly well; writing centers have produced modules for writing instruction that still provide, while perhaps less effectively than formal writing tutorials, perpetual access to writing knowledge to anybody with access (Sheridan, 2010). Furthermore, the vast majority of writing center websites contain links to tips and tricks on common errors with general solutions; an excellent example is the Purdue OWL website, which offers assistance common issues like citation and grammar that the writing center's demographic constantly faces. The writing center website itself is a gateway to online resources that help people face the complex demands involved in writing a paper.

When it comes to the third activity, however, writing centers seem to be uncertain about how to forge ahead. Across campuses and communities, writing centers vary wildly in their approaches to online tutoring, with some avoiding online tutoring services completely, while others offer a robust – and yet often underutilized – service. In this literature review I focus on these online tutorials, and situate them in the broader contexts of online writing pedagogy, systems engineering, and computer-supported cooperative work in an attempt to further understand the qualities that make online tutorials a worthwhile endeavor in the modern writing center. An analysis of interviews of writing center tutors who have first hand experience with online tutorials follows this review. This analysis also includes some concluding thoughts and directions for future research.

### **A Brief History of Online Writing Tutorials**

A review by Singh-Corcoran and Emika (2011) provides a comprehensive look at the development of both the tools used for online writing tutorials, as well as the conversation surrounding them. Their work demonstrates that, with the first mentions of digital technology in the late 1970s, writing centers began their discussion of how computers might affect their centers. It is not until the late 1980s, however, that writing centers began to seriously consider the potential for digital technology to change the centers' pedagogical practices.

Singh-Corcoran and Emika indicate that writing centers reached a "tipping point" in 1995 as scholars began producing literature regarding the role of computers in online tutorials. *Computers and Composition*, for example, had a special journal issue devoted to online writing center issues that year. The general consensus seems to have been that computers themselves weren't much of an issue in the writing center itself; its new potential to be a part of writing tutorials, however, was quite novel – and controversial. Researchers began to see online spaces as completely distinct, with "unique operational capabilities", and they also began to note the potential for online tutorials to "take on dystopian features." Despite optimism regarding online tutorials, writing centers quickly realized that mediating digital tools with their own practice posed a number of difficult problems for their service.

As the literature regarding online tutorials has increased in sophistication, the technology used in the tutorials has improved accordingly. Yergeau et al. (2010) note that the increased sophistication of interfaces and interactions has been beneficial to the online tutorial. Especially in the rising accessibility of synchronous online conferencing tools, a writer can "situate herself in that tutor's moment, in that tutor's physical space." This is a primary objective of any tutorial, as the tutor works to build rapport with the writer before opening the door to the critical analysis of that writer's document.

This analysis also points at the concept of media richness, or the idea that certain media lend themselves to communication due to physiological forces which indicate “there is strong evidence that human beings have been engineered by evolutionary forces to communicate primarily in a co-located and synchronous manner, as well as through facial expressions, body language, and speech” (Kock, 2005). The increasingly sophisticated digital tools employed by writing centers are starting to imitate qualities of the original, physical tutoring environment, but also to a richer medium. It is important, however, to note that this doesn’t indicate that synchronous online tutorials are identical to face-to-face tutorials, or that asynchronous online tutorials are ineffective. Instead, it helps place these forms of media into context; they exist on a spectrum of richness, and being aware of this helps to inform the implementation of these sorts of writing tutorials.

### **Other Online Writing Tools**

Moving writing tutorials online has provided a more complex challenge. Designers and engineers have developed writing assistants, which are programs that are meant to mimic writing center assistance. Yet, the algorithmic writing assistant doesn’t possess the same nuance as an actual writing tutor. For example, Gandomi and Ryokai (2009), developers of *The Interactive Writer*, even go so far as to mention that their program serves as a last resort for students who seek help after-hours in an absolute pinch. Furthermore, they acknowledged that their program has a fundamental basis in Twitter, and so despite being process-oriented and peer-driven, doesn’t attempt to provide the specialized service seen in writing centers. This is particularly damaging to their work because writing center researchers are not only using social media like Twitter to start conversations about writing; they’re outright advocating it and establishing the uses of the medium (Misek et al., 2013).

Clearly, writing tutors, and not just writing centers, play an important role in the development of writers. When considering Anderson-Inman’s predicted migration of the service

online, the challenge isn't just putting the service onto a website. Instead, it's a question of translating the interactivity of a trained writing tutor into a digital environment. While writing centers primarily work on writing strategies, the service extends beyond this; tutors address emotional hurdles facing writers, the nuances and formalities of academic language, and a multitude of related issues that writers bring into the center (Harris 1984). *The Interactive Writer* assumes a certain level of literacy with the vocabulary and skills surrounding the writing process, and therefore spends time focusing on collaboration and revising a current draft. As usual, however, "our job is to produce better writers, not better writing" (North 1984). The online space still requires the work of tutors because of the human nuance required to look past the current draft, and get at the process that produced the writing.

### **Key Terms and Definitions**

For the purpose of this paper, online tutorials will refer to synchronous tutorials through a visual medium (e.g., Skype or Google Hangouts) with the assistance of a collaborative document (e.g., Google Docs.) Asynchronous (i.e., e-mail) tutoring will be referred to as 'asynchronous' online tutoring. Furthermore, rather than using "online" as a description of the *writing center*, "online" will be used exclusively in reference to *tutorials*. This is to encourage consideration of digital technology as a part of the writing center, rather than as tools for establishing a completely distinct digital center. Furthermore, though vocabulary regarding appropriate distinctions between digital and physical spaces lacks clear standards (Boellstorf, 2010), I will use "physical" to refer to tutorials that occur in actual writing center locations, and "online" to refer to tutorials that occur over a digital medium.

Finally, the term "affordance" will be used to describe the qualities of an object that make it useable. Although originally described by ecological psychologist J. J. Gibson (1986) as "what [an

object] offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill”, industrial designer D.A. Norman (1998) more recently described affordance as “the perceived properties of the things that determine just how they could possibly be used.” Norman’s definition stresses that physical properties interact with the “goals, expectations, values, existing knowledge, and experiences” of users (Lu & Cheng, 2012). In the context of writing center tutorials, this paper will refer to affordance as the properties that determine possible uses of an instructional medium (e.g., physical tutorial, e-mail tutorial, or Skype tutorial).

### **The Status Quo of Online Instruction**

Naturally, online tutorials have been implemented effectively in settings outside of writing centers. Research conducted by Chi Ng indicates that online tutorials are not just a viable alternative – instead, their sample was often enthusiastic about the online space, particularly because it widened access and enhanced convenience (2012). One interviewee noted that they “prefer online tutorials, as [they] live quite far so [they] don’t need to travel to a specific location to attend the class. There are factors such as [their] full time job, children... et cetera” (Chi Ng 2012). These concerns reflect the media naturalness hypothesis mentioned earlier, and online tutorials, including the asynchronous variety, help overcome the simple challenge of distance. While the conversation about writing instruction and its relation to space persists outside of the discussion of online writing centers (Grego & Thompson, 2008), tutors working at various writing centers have spoken to the issue of space, location, and distance, which will be discussed later.

More broadly, Chi Ng’s research points towards the idea that online tutorials share a surprising number of commonalities with physical tutorials; the tutor’s tasks remain generally constant, but the strategies and outcomes change alongside the medium. As posited by Wolf and Griffin, the data regarding online tutorials provides compelling evidence that they are a viable

alternative to physical tutorials while still providing unique affordances that may even make them more effective tutoring options.

Although writing tutors work as peer tutors rather than writing instructors, some literature in online writing instruction highlights “best practices” for online writing instruction, which provides interesting insight into writing centers’ apprehension of online tutorials. For example, the Conference on College Composition and Communication charged themselves with the task of investigating the “best strategies for online writing instruction” in various types of online writing courses, noting a set of core “principles” that, when implemented, should contribute to successful online writing instruction.

Furthermore, *The Online Writing Conference* by Beth Hewett devotes an entire chapter to the differences between verbal and written feedback while stressing the need to provide constructive feedback rather than simply editing a paper (Hewett, 2013). Core writing center philosophy indicates that guides regarding online writing instruction should be handled delicately for the sake of avoiding evaluative practices; yet, *The Online Writing Conference* suggests that online instruction actually shifts the ideology and best practices of writing pedagogy into the realm of tutoring philosophy. Instructors still play an evaluative role, but Hewett advocates for the modeling of editing strategies rather than direct editing of paper. In many ways, the guide’s best practices demonstrate that the core values of writing centers are further implemented in writing instruction when instruction is moved online.

It is important to note that these sources don’t indicate that online writing tutorials have revolutionized the field of composition education. Instead, the trend seems to be that online tutorials facilitate some of the key goals of writing instruction – for example, active learning through the practice of drafting and revising, discerning priorities for student revision, resisting the urge to line edit, or shifting instructor emphasis to formative, rather than summative, comments (Deans,

2013). This sentiment is further echoed in other areas of innovation and playing with new media; work by Sommers, for example, notes that audio commentary from instructors generally takes on this more formative tone (2011). Although his findings are interesting, it's critical to note that formative commentary is highly valued in the broader conversation about writing instruction, whether online or off.

These key goals line up rather nicely with many of the objectives writing tutors observe within their sessions. Rather than working as an instructor or critic, tutors are urged to act as readers and coaches with appropriate levels of knowledge. They are intended to develop a writer's skill, not take over or clean up the document the writer brings into the writing center. In other words, in many cases there are no major differences between online and physical pedagogies. Medium may change, which means affordances change, but instructional values and practices typically stay consistent. Knowing that online tutorials help to push the adoption of this philosophy in writing instruction, it only seems natural that the online space could be well designed for achieving the goals of many forms of writing center sessions.

### **Training Tutors in the Art of the Online Tutorial**

At the moment, it appears that writing center tutors have access to limited training materials that adequately address the unique affordances of online tutoring, despite the overarching philosophy between physical and online tutorials staying constant. *The Longman Peer Tutoring Guide*, a standard training manual for writing tutors, devotes roughly three pages to asynchronous tutoring strategies (Gillespie & Lerner 2008). While this limited instruction reflects the writing center community's lack of consensus regarding the effectiveness of online tutorials, as well as the limited scholarship on the topic, the implications are immense. Typically, writing center tutors enter their initial sessions with certain fundamental philosophies and strategies. Online tutoring, on the other

hand, seems to be treated as an eclectic manifestation of writing center tutorials; despite the widespread use of digital media mentioned previously, online tutorials are considered to be outside of the status quo for writing centers.

This is reflected in *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors*, as well. As early as 2003, the sourcebook addresses online tutorials alongside drastic caveats about online tutorials, noting a variety of “potential drawbacks to online tutoring” without addressing any justifiable positive affordances (Murphy & Sherwood, 2003). This is a stark contrast to Chi Ng’s enthusiastic interviewees, and the experience of writers who want access to the writing center service, yet lack the ability to access it. In a later edition of the sourcebook, the article remains, with the same treatment. Despite the rapidly changing technology, which was noted by Singh-Corcoran and Emika, the sourcebook only removes an article on MUDs and replaces it with an article about “The Anxiety of Distance” in online tutorials (Murphy & Sherwood, 2008). Although the anxiety article addresses the potential benefits, similar challenges remain stated – the scholars seem to interpret the online tutorial as a cold and heartless creation by virtue of design.

The sourcebook takes a dramatic – and important – shift in its fourth edition, where the online tutoring section is reframed to discuss the multimodal writing center. The sourcebook begins to take on a more accepting timbre, looking to establish a general literacy about online writing centers. Yet, in the aforementioned tradition of the writing center, the sourcebook skews towards training tutors to become content producers and information gatekeepers. While each component’s training comes across as a supplement, rather than a core, the skill of online tutoring, which seems the most valuable according to instruction and the general idea of media richness, seems particularly anemic (Murphy & Sherwood, 2011).

This disregard for – or perhaps simply misunderstanding of – non-physical tutoring mediums, while justifiable, suggests a particularly troublesome oversight when returning to the

concept of affordance. This oversight makes sense, though. As I will discuss later, online tutorials move from a peripheral service to a core aspect of the service as time passes. The research publication model – and by extension the training guides – simply cannot keep up with technological advancements. As tutors move across physical and digital media, however, sensitivity to shifting affordances would help optimize their effectiveness and ability to adapt to the different media.

### **Affordance and its Theoretical Implications in the Writing Center**

Norman exemplifies the concept of affordance through the case study of a fairly simple, yet often poorly designed, mechanism: the common door (2008). Most doors have vertical handles, flat plates, or some variation of the two. Intuitively, the design choice helps users understand what to do with the door: a handle suggests that the door *affords* pulling, since users can grasp the handle and yank. Conversely, users can't physically grasp a plate, and so it makes sense to push it – thus, doors with plates *afford* pushing.

Further consideration shows that these standards might not always be appropriate. For example, a particularly fancy hotel might feature golden handles on the “pull” side of their doors, and a metallic plate – no matter how brilliant its luster – simply feels too industrial. Designers have established an elegant solution that still accounts for affordance. One can simply take the vertical “pull” handle, and make it horizontal. This provides a cohesive aesthetic for the system while still highlighting that this particular handle is much better suited to pushing the door.

Norman's example of the door establishes that slight modifications to similar systems can create the potential for drastically different interactions – but perhaps more importantly, he notes that poor implementation can be maddening. Although it seems straightforward, if a user should push a door, then it should feature the horizontal bar or the plate – a vertical handle results in confused tugging at a door that's meant to be pushed.

Understanding the affordances of designed systems, while still an ongoing process, tends to hover between two major theoretical frameworks: technological determinism and social constructivism. The technological determinist would argue that the use and effects of a system could be fully designed and, essentially, produced (Bimber, 1990). In this understanding of technology, design is polarized and can be modified for prosocial or antisocial aims at the whim of the designer. Meanwhile, the social constructivist argues that usage and consequences of technology are constructed by a society - essentially, layers of cultural understandings will take the neutral phenomenon of technology, and no amount of intentionality in design can ensure that a technology will have the intended impact (Winner, 1993). It is worth noting, however, that the true nature of design and implementation could rest at the intersection of these two frameworks – while design has some influence on the impact a technology will have, society and culture are still powerful forces, and people can easily repurpose technologies that were designed with explicit social aims.

In the discussion of writing centers, this suggests that online and physical tutorials, by nature of their medium, design, and material circumstances, will have unique affordances. In the broader theoretical understanding of affordance, however, deterministic arguments about online writing tutorials fail to account for the design present in writing tutorials. The previous analysis of both the Longman and St. Martin's tutoring guides show that tutors have had minimal exposure, if any, to online writing tutorials. Before online tutorials are either eschewed or embraced, writing centers must acknowledge that physical tutorials have been designed. I propose that the appropriate implementation of tutorials makes the tutoring job tricky, and the writing tutorial successful. Moving forward, tutors need to develop a flair for implementing various media – including online spaces - to ensure that they leverage the affordances of each medium and optimize their ability to develop better writers on and off-line.

### **Exploring the Affordances of Online Tutorials**

Research conducted by Wolf & Griffin discusses the phenomenon of online writing centers with an implicit understanding of affordance (2012). By using transcripts of, and surveys of writer and tutor attitudes towards, one of three conditions: a physical tutorial, an asynchronous online tutorial, or a synchronous online tutorial. The research, which allowed for cross-media comparison, indicates that online tutorials may indeed have unique affordances; writers utilizing online tutorials produced up to 20% new text, as compared to the 2% of new text generated in the asynchronous online or physical tutorials. Despite these findings, the authors note that writing centers grudgingly accommodate online sessions – they are perceived as a necessary evil as technology barrels into all spheres of the human experience. Yet, the results, in conjunction with the concept of affordance put forth by Norman, provide compelling evidence to embrace, rather than simply accept, online tutorials. Furthermore, these results point to the fact that successful implementation is indeed possible and will yield desirable results for online tutors.

Other researchers, utilizing surveys of writers who have participated in online tutorials, as well as informal interviews of online writing tutors, look at some of the language surrounding the implementation of online tutorials in the writing center (Shapiro 2013). Shapiro points out that, in a conference, individuals tended to mention that they were “toying with the idea” of incorporating online writing tutorials into their writing centers. This language of play, while worth exploring, is juxtaposed by popular conceptions of online tutoring in its synchronous and asynchronous forms. Shapiro even goes so far as to spell out that “e-mail tutoring is not simply in-person tutoring by other means” (2013), stressing that the media are indeed discrete, despite perceived similarities. Therefore, while “toying” with online tutorials would appear to suggest a higher level of experimentation and actual implementation, Shapiro seems to have identified the exact opposite in actual writing center practice; centers shy away from implementing the service, and when they do,

there is an extreme focus on trying to mirror the physical sessions that characterize the writing center service.

Shapiro, alongside Chi Ng, indicates that online and physical tutorials may share more inherent similarities than immediately evident. For example, Shapiro notes that the challenge of developing a relationship with writers in the span of minutes persists across media. The issue, therefore, isn't that relationship development can't happen online; realistically, the online space is simply mediating two independent locations (i.e., that of the tutor, and that of the writer). Thus, these relationships not only develop – they persist into physical space (Boellstorff 2008). The challenge rests in the sheer oddity that is developing an online relationship; the methods for rapport building may be fundamentally transformed, especially in the context of the asynchronous online tutorial.

The idea of transformative practices when implementing digital media isn't necessarily novel in the study of online writing centers. Further research on online writing tutorials indicates that online writing tutorials aren't simply a tool – they're a strategy that can be uniquely integrated into individual writing centers (Yergeau, Wozniak, Vandenberg, 2008). This reflects Norman's definition of affordance, in which context (here, the university writing center) influences the effective implementation of online writing tutorials. Yergeau, Wozniak, Vandenberg intentionally avoid specific instructions regarding online tutorials for the purpose of allowing for exploration of what effective implementation looks like at the respective university. Considering the limited number of resources available to writing center tutors regarding the actual philosophy of online tutoring, however, it seems that developing an understanding of affordance, and the specific affordances of different tutoring media, could help catalyze this process of discovery. As suggested by Shapiro, the online writing tutorial could be toyed with, and different tutors at different centers could explore the affordances of different media. Unlike the case study of the door, the complexity and nuances of

tutoring could manifest in a number of practices that may result in varied levels of effectiveness at new writing centers. Ultimately, the intentionality that comes with the concept of affordance would help ensure the effective implementation that tutors require for successful sessions.

### **Methods for Investigating the Affordances of Online Tutoring**

The main method for data collection was unstructured interviewing of writing center tutors at three large public institutions. Participants were informed of the purpose and methods of study in order to give them ample time with which to decide whether or not they wanted to be involved in the study. Willing participants either had, or were required to gain, experience with writing center tutorials, which were established at their host institution.

Participants at the Midwestern Universities were recruited using an email request. They were asked to share their experiences with online Writing Center tutorials, as well as face-to-face Writing Center tutorials with research. They will go through a consent form with the student researcher before the interview takes place that informs them of the nature and purpose of the study including risks; they will be asked to sign if they agree to participate in the study. The interviews will take place at a time and location that is convenient for the Writing Center tutors, and will be unstructured to ensure that the participants have maximum freedom to share their opinions and feelings about each tutoring medium.

Tutors were asked to participate in an hour-long, semi-structured interview about their experience during online tutoring sessions. Semi-structured interviews helped give tutors full freedom to share their opinions and feelings about the novelty of online tutoring. These interviews were recorded. The researcher took notes throughout each interview, which were used to help establish patterns in participant responses.

The method of unstructured interviewing was chosen for a variety of reasons, including the novelty of the method in the academic conversation around online writing tutoring, as well as the ability of interviews to get at more nuanced experiences from online writing tutors. When handling the concept of affordance, simple observation can often be helpful when dealing with an artifact. When dealing with a more complex concept, however, like online tutoring, interviewing individuals who have had experience with online tutorials helps understand the medium's affordances, as the tutors on 'the front line' or the writing center service perceive them. Essentially, the method of inquiry fits the fundamental research question posed in this paper (Blakeslee & Fleisher, 2007). Furthermore, it seems appropriate to observe online tutorials as a distinctly human process, despite the interjection of computers into the interaction. Although scenarios involving technology often appear to demand a strictly positivist approach, a humanistic take on computer-supported cooperative work helps provide a more holistic, robust understanding of online tutorials (Bernard, 2011).

In order to conduct this research, I established online writing tutorials at my host institution. Originally, I intended to interview each of the tutors who participated in this new service. I found, however, that few writers chose to engage in online writing tutorials. Therefore, while some tutors had traffic and were able to provide their perspective on online writing tutorials, I spend some time investigating possible reasons for the lack of traffic for online writing tutorials. This work relies on a brief review of relevant literature rather than the primary method of interviewing.

### **Expanding Access to the Writing Center**

I found that each of the writing centers I investigated also offered their service across the campus in an effort to increase capacity, accessibility, and to reach specific student populations. Online tutorials, at the very least, dismiss geography as a concern, and open access to any writer with an

Internet connection. In a surprising number of cases, writing tutors had online appointments with students in unique living situations. At one center, tutors mentioned that a large number of their online sessions were being conducted with students at a satellite campus; a tutor at another center noted that his online appointments frequently featured commuter students, or students at satellite campuses from his own university. One tutor noted,

I commuted my freshman year, so I know that struggle of trying to find resources... A lot of the time, I'd have classes from nine to ten, and then I would go home. So, if I couldn't get an appointment at ten, and I couldn't really get one until two, that's really inconvenient, and then I have to worry about driving during rush hour, and I also have a job... So the online option, to [writers], is awesome.

This helps illuminate the challenges that, while common, may go unnoticed in the writing center because the population never actually utilizes the service. While writers in these situations clearly have busy lives, they have a desire to engage with the writing center, and in the college environment, the technology to do (i.e., a webcam and microphone) has reached borderline ubiquity. Online tutorials help meet the writers where they are – and in the process, bring conversations about writing to the broader university community.

As noted in the work of Grego and Thompson, this conversation surrounding the writing center space isn't a novel one. Yet, when considering the writing center's space and its relationship to online tutorials, the experiences of tutors suggests that the writing center's walls are breaking down in favor of the networks which online networks organically generate. Online tutorials open up access to the writing center by bringing the writing center's resources to the writer.

It is critical to note that, in some cases, these relationships with satellite campuses are intentionally designed, while in others the students adopt the service spontaneously. Each use case, however, notes the value of online tutorials for students who may not work from or live on a main

campus. More broadly, this also suggests that other populations in higher education could use online tutorials as a means for generating a larger conversation about writing: for example, students with disabilities who may feel uncomfortable coming into the writing center, students who are studying abroad and lack writing center resources (both in their native language or at all), as well as non-traditional students who juggle jobs, families, and other commitments that make a visit to a physical writing center difficult, or even impossible.

For some tutors, this affordance was particularly salient, and they felt a high investment in the implications that this posed to the writing centers and their mission. One tutor shared,

I hope the implication for writers is that getting feedback for writing isn't this discrete thing that happens only on campuses – that it's not just about academic rigor. It's about how any writer of any kind in any place – literally – will benefit from talking to someone about their writing.

This tutor's sentiment persists across media, as well as in physical tutorials. Writing tutors acknowledge writing as a social process, rather than an isolated one; online tutorials, however, offer a unique opportunity with which to expand this access. And while the conversation surrounding demographics and access may be more prevalent on the writing center administration's end, tutors seem have a natural level of investment by virtue of the work that they're doing. This is interesting, as it may help change the predominate perception of online tutorials; where Wolf and Griffin viewed online tutorials as a necessary evil, Yergeau, Wozniak and Vandenberg saw online tutorials as having variable uses from center to center. This observation of expanded access helps to shift from the former observation and tether the latter; online tutorials are necessary, and they have a persistent use across centers.

### Valuing Writing

Tutors often expressed the fact that writers begin to overcomplicate and over-process ideas as they write them down. Some tutors noted that writers in online tutorials, which sometimes utilize text-based communication, return to this habit. Synchronous, media-rich tutorials are particularly helpful for writing center tutors because of their ability to generate spontaneous responses from a writer. Tutors placed a high value on this affordance, and tutors working across asynchronous media even noted that they missed the presence of an oral conversation with the writer. One tutor went so far as to say, “If you’re typing synchronously with someone, it’s slower, so that... Unless you’re [a video chat], matter how synchronous your typing is it’s always going to be asynchronous in a way. And that just makes it harder.” Another lamented, “Typing is terrible. It’s exhausting, and... It does not work well at all. The flow of the conversation is delayed.” This suggests that media richness – or, more accurately, the presence of audio feedback – characterizes current writing center training, and holds a central place in many tutors’ practices.

Sometimes, this can work in the other direction, and tutors can overvalue the writing done by the tutor within a session. This is typical of physical sessions, where tutors find themselves wary of providing ‘textual gifts’, or tutor-generated, unoriginal content that a writer accepts and utilizes with or without criticism (Moskovitz 2010). One tutor admitted,

I’m not sure that the differences are really that big... So like, using Google Docs is kind of like having [the paper] between us, but it’s harder for me to not just type on it – like, to resist editing. I think there’s power in giving an example of something, and like... Showing someone. But I think that it too quickly takes away the agency of the writer if I type on the Google Doc.

This disclosure helps indicate the particular complexity that comes with a shared, recorded document. In physical tutorials, tutors at each of the centers used their own paper and pen, which

gave them a space to write without making marks on the writer's document. One tutor still used this notebook-in-hand method and mentioned that he held his paper up to the screen in order to get his points across – but that same tutor found the online document to have its uses. Rather than asking writers to jot an important discussion point down, the tutor would write them out, and the Google Doc made that feel less invasive. The tutor even developed this into a strategy by creating quick numbered lists that could be used as a “fill-in-the-blank” for the writer to engage with.

In asynchronous online tutoring, however, tutors noted that writers tend to undervalue the tutoring session. While the physicality of a visit to the writing center may put a performative spin on writers, the anonymity of asynchronous tutorials lowers the writer's commitment to submitting their best possible work. While this doesn't necessarily interfere with the writing centers aforementioned goal of producing better writers, it may generate discontent in writing tutors who feel that their work is being undervalued because of the lack of tangible collaboration that occurs in the asynchronous model; essentially, the exchange feels very one-sided.

In dealing with this drawback, it seems important to note that synchronous tutorials benefit from the media rich model; rather than using chat features, writing centers should strive to utilize video conferencing tools such as Google Hangouts or Skype. This alleviates the need for the chat feature, and provides writers with the freedom to express themselves through speech, rather than writing. In the case of asynchronous tutorials, however, even tutors seemed resigned to the perceived lack of dialogue in the asynchronous tutorial model. One tutor remarked, “You may see that draft again... But for the most part, it's over. You have to trust that your comments have been conversation, and not just direction. My hope is that it can prompt them to think about things as not just correction. Typically there's not a lot of back and forth.” This doesn't immediately suggest that asynchronous tutorials should be disregarded; instead, it may be necessary to establish new policies to ensure that the tutor feels valued (e.g., requiring a physical tutorial prior to an asynchronous

tutorial becoming available.) In addition, writing centers should investigate strategies for ensuring that the writer maintains investment in the asynchronous tutorial, as well.

### **Synchronicity & Training**

When discussing training with tutors, many pointed out that they had received specialized training for the online medium. In the case of synchronous tutorials, this often manifested as an introduction to the technology utilized by the writing center, as well as some general strategies for taking advantage of the software in the writing center. In the case of asynchronous tutorials, however, more intensive training was necessary: tutors worked with a template to control the amount of feedback they could provide, while also establishing strategies for effectively providing feedback to a writer who wasn't physically present. Many tutors noted that providing successful feedback could be difficult in the asynchronous model, because they lacked immediate feedback from the writer, which would normally be used to provide clearer explanation of a difficult concept (for example, a thesis statement.)

Yet, tutors also noted an interesting phenomenon: as they tutored across media, their strategies for physical tutorials began to implement concepts gleaned from tutoring across media. One tutor reminisced,

I made three freshman girls, in one week, cry... And I think that I was trying to do too much. I would spend the appointment talking about the all the things that were not working... And I think that I was giving them too many things to work on, and it was really overwhelming. I think that email helped me learn, as a tutor, how to prioritize.

This tutor expressed enthusiasm regarding the asynchronous tutorial's template, which demands that tutors distill their critique into two issues to address and express the critique in linear text rather than in conversation exchanges. In physical tutorials, they transferred this practice to identify a

manageable number of issues, and did so more efficiently and systematically. The asynchronous model helped this tutor develop flair for finding the primary issues in a paper – and it empowered them to be content with focusing on those issues. According to the same tutors experience,

My own email training has made me more conscious of when a more directive approach might actually work in a session. I used to be mostly a question asker – and I still do that a lot – but I’m less hesitant about saying what I’m seeing as a reader, or making a suggestion, and then we can talk about it.

It seems that, in this case, email tutoring helped drive home the writing center goal of improving the writer’s process, rather than their immediate product. Another tutor suggested that asynchronous online tutoring helped make his practices, “Not directive, but more direct.” Tutors feel more comfortable participating in the session as an active reader because the asynchronous online medium regularly places them in that role. In some way, this also modified the affordances for writing tutors; best practices for online tutorials became viable strategies, and tutors found new ways to interact with their physical writing tutorials.

Various tutors echoed this sentiment and felt that their tutoring practices evolved as they worked across media. Many felt that they utilized online content more liberally in online writing tutorials. In physical tutorials, this helped familiarize tutors with a set of helpful writing resources that could then be shared across tutoring sessions. This could, admittedly, be stressed more liberally when training writing tutors. The online space helps the writing center fully embrace its role as an information gateway, and so it may be a more natural starting point for training tutors to ‘outsource’ their services to more readily available resources (e.g., Grammar Girl, or the Purdue OWL). This suggests an interaction between Anderson-Inman’s breakdown of the digital services offered by writing centers mentioned earlier in this paper; the information gateway component and online

tutorial component clearly don't exist as discrete entities. Therefore, in order for writing centers to reach their full potential in any one digital service, it may be valuable to fully explore the others.

Finally, one tutor believed that email tutoring provided a more genuine reader reaction than an in-person tutorial can afford. The tutor noted that in one session they “were sitting there and thought... ‘Wow. This paper would be a really good fit for email. And that was the first time I felt that in an in-person appointment.’” This suggests that tutoring sessions could be further improved simply by virtue of the medium. In a sense, alternative media generate better tutoring strategies, but also create unique contexts in which tutoring can occur; while Wolf and Griffin's earlier work, mentioned in the section *The Status Quo of Online Instruction*, clearly demonstrate that significant differences exist between online and physical tutorials, further investigation could help clarify the pedagogical significance of these effects, and thus allow tutors to take ownership of both those effects and the media in which they work.

### **Initial Awkwardness**

Some tutors acknowledged uniquely awkward introductions in their online tutorials. They pointed out the myriad issues they faced, including technical difficulties and lack of physical interaction, as barriers to establishing rapport at the outset of a writing session. In a physical tutorial, tutors have established practices for initial contact, like a professional handshake, as well as a shared space that has no technical needs. Meanwhile, in online tutoring, tutors note that overcoming issues with audio, video, or faulty Internet connections can interfere with the initial stages of a session. One tutor noted, “In person is a little less awkward – and I think awkward is a really good word for it... It's definitely a force in my session. I don't know if anyone else picks up on it, it just makes me uncomfortable.” One can see that, rather than engaging with each other directly, both the writer and

tutor may have to navigate the technical difficulties rather than establishing a relationship – and most importantly, developing effective writing strategies.

While this observation never seemed to manifest as a central concern in writing tutors' practice, this demonstrates that videoconferencing technologies suffer from imperfections that could have implications in tutor training. Tutors may not need to become computer scientists or hackers, however, tutors should have an arsenal of alternatives prepared in the event that an online tutorial fails to work properly. For example, one tutor shared,

I started each session five minutes later than the set time – because I'd say, 'I'm going to read your comments, I'm going to think about what you said, I'm going to skim your draft...' And I just feel like I'm then able to make better use of that time that otherwise might be spent noodling around.

This helps create a buffer of time that can be productive for setting up the session, both as technologically and pedagogically. Furthermore, the tutor believed that it helped launch both the writer and tutor into the session more gracefully. In the case of technical difficulties, another tutor simply went to different software, while others spoke about using chat functionalities built into their videoconferencing software. In conjunction with the previous discussion of overvalued responses, however, it seems reasonable infer that text-based alternatives serve as a last resort.

I also believe that this tutoring observation makes the concept of media richness glaringly evident. In these moments of technological awkwardness, tutors experience the challenges associated with communication through a medium; although media have become increasingly rich and mimic certain facets of physical interaction (i.e., speech or written responses) their presence can sometimes result in “awkward” moments of “noodling around”. While this requires further investigation for confirmation, this indicates that tutors could benefit from being explicitly informed about the presence of a medium. Awareness of the tutoring medium could encourage creative

tutoring strategies that leverage the medium, rather than making attempts to suppress it; in the interest of well-designed tutorials, the writing tutors' job is not to make the medium invisible, but to make it work effectively.

### **Reconstructing Identities**

Power dynamics seem inherent to tutoring and instruction alike, and tutors actively work to break these down during sessions. Although many undergraduates find this barrier to collaboration lowered by virtue of their class standing, writing centers operate on various models. In many centers, graduate students and professors will work with undergraduates, and many writing tutors pointed this out in interviews. As mentioned previously, writing tutors value the voice of their writers, and some tutors noted that the role of "writer" and "tutor" is unfortunately analogous to that of the eager student and the expert.

Online tutorials create an interesting solution to this problem because of the freedom they afford with regards to location. Writers find themselves in a location of their choosing, rather than the tutors' writing center. Furthermore, the writer and tutor can have a glimpse into the other's world. In writing centers that allowed their tutors to work from home, the tutors noted that their identity became central to the tutoring process. They cleaned rooms and established spaces at which tutoring could occur. One tutor said, "I definitely had dogs in my face; the Internet upstairs sucks, so I had to go downstairs, but the dogs are downstairs, so I had to throw them out." In another's experience, the tutor recounted,

We're real people. Last night, when my husband brought me tea, and I was like, 'oh, my husband brought me tea' – because [the writer] probably had no idea what was going on. She was this undergrad in her dorm, and she just kinda laughed, and I feel like she was a little bit surprised. I kinda hope that that was the way that she realized: oh. This is this human person with a life who's talking with me from her home... And she was in her dorm, and it was

kind of hard to hear, so she tried to move around, and she was sitting in the hallway, and it was super loud, and so she was doing her thing – and I was cool with that. But I don't know if she realized that this is all a part of writing.

While the writing center space creates a hub for writing, these anecdotes highlight the unique opportunity writing centers have to humanize their tutors, their writers, and the writing process; tutors become people with pets and partners, and lives outside of writing instruction. Quite simply put, online tutorials may afford a very unique reconstruction of human identity because of its ability to place people in a natural context – a context in which actual writing might occur.

This construction of identity primarily happened with tutors working with videoconferencing technologies. Tutors encountered a variety of interesting situations, from the aforementioned noisy hallway to a completely darkened room. This may indicate the writer's preferred writing environment (e.g., a noisy room vs. a dark, quiet room) or perhaps provide other information about the writer's learning style. These situations might even disrupt a tutorial, distracting both collaborators from the document – but tutors can clearly leverage these as moments as highly intentional learning opportunities. This feels like a natural extension of the writing center service; while writing centers aim to develop writing skill, this often means generating a productive dialogue around writing as a craft and a skill. As mentioned in the Harris article, the writing tutor doesn't simply coach peers in writing strategies – in this case, tutors have the opportunity to generate critical analysis of the writer's process and the broader purpose of writing. Perhaps in a highly unexpected way, online tutorials afford writing centers the opportunity to critically investigate the human component of writing and the value that they place on writers and their ideas. From there, the center finds itself at a powerful, but perhaps not uncommon, intersection in which it can enforce those ideals - or even challenge them.

### Innovation and Technological Resistance

Although this project serves to establish some preliminary understandings of the affordances of online writing tutorials in writing centers, further research could provide explanatory power for these findings. Additionally, these interviews uncovered interesting trends in the adoption of online writing tutorials that would require further investigation.

Tutors indicated that few writers opted to utilize online writing tutorials of their own accord. At each center, the tutors noted a surprising lack of writers opting to use online writing tutorials. The reasons for this are unclear, but the trend initially makes sense relative to the technology adoption model, which can be seen in Figure 1 (Rogers 2003).

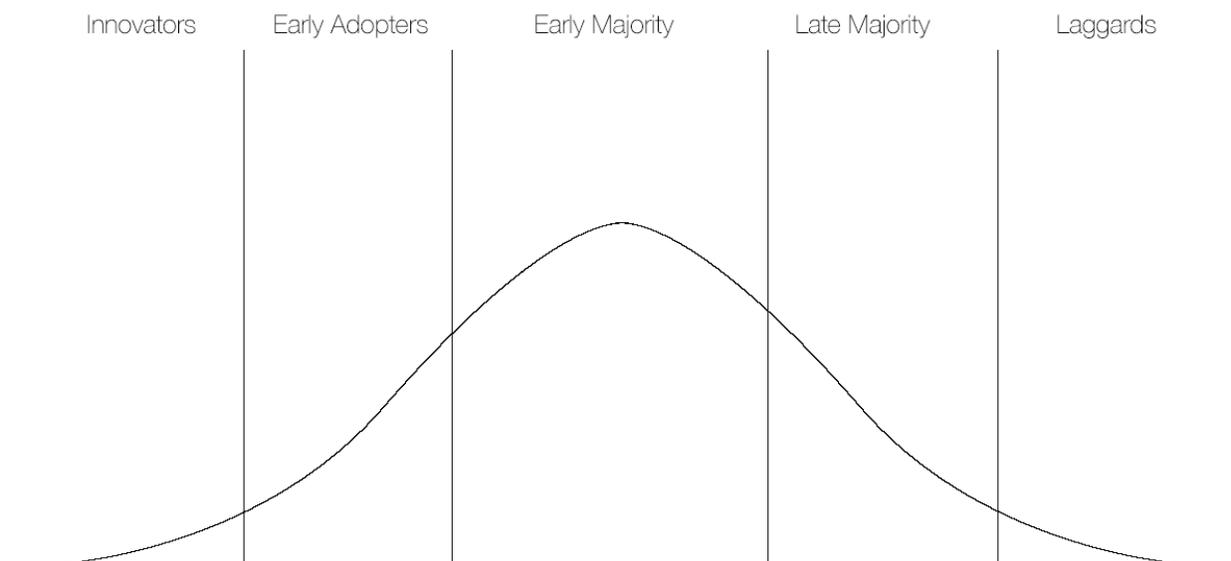


Figure 1: Technology Acceptance Model (Time vs. # of Adopters)

This model suggests that, upon release, very few individuals will accept a technology into their lives for a variety of reasons, including perceived ease of use, personal expense, and familiarity. As the technology persists, however, adoption will increase, with a majority of people accepting the technology later in the technology's life cycle. Everett's model may not be novel, and its application to writing goes back to classical antiquity: Plato feared writing as a medium for expression, but the medium has flourished in the Western tradition. Yet, writing center tutors in centers that have a

thriving online writing tutorial service note that the online tutorials were adopted after the physical center had reached a point of saturation. Once writers had no other option, they were willing to adopt the online tutorials – according to tutors, when given a choice between the two options, writers tend to select the physical tutorial.

This observation has interesting repercussions, because it suggests that both writers and writing centers undervalue or distrust online writing tutorials for reasons that are unclear. As previously mentioned, writing centers seem to perceive online tutorials as a “necessary evil”, despite the clear affordances associated with these tutorials. If writers feel the same way about their sessions, it is imperative to investigate why that is the case, and then to make attempts to address that concern. This will assist in the goal of creating a robust online tutoring program as efficiently as possible. Rather than online tutorials being considered a last resort, the experience of some tutors suggests that writers could be strategically placed in sessions that match their needs and wants; at well-established centers, some tutors report having such intuitions. They note that some papers feel well suited to asynchronous online tutorials, while other papers feel like they warrant a full physical tutorial. Yet, these same tutors note that they’re largely unable to act on this intuition, which could actually help serve writers more effectively. Moving forward, tutors should have the knowledge base to make these recommendations, and feel empowered to then provide that recommendation to a writer. This, in turn, furthers the goal established by North: to produce better writers.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Ultimately, the literature as well as my research regarding online writing centers speaks to a broader theme in the story of disruptive communication technologies. Lin and Atkin (2007) coin the idea of “dual effects”, which simply acknowledges that any innovation will have the potential for great good and dramatic bad. In the most dramatic example, one can look at current debates about

social media, where some scholars warn that online social networks are shades of actual interaction that are actually isolating individuals (Turkle, 2011). Meanwhile, other case studies indicate that social media can facilitate social interaction for individuals with high anxiety (Tian 2011), or even facilitate a movement for freedom fighters – or terrorists (Lin & Atkin, 2007). The writing center community has faced the dual effects of digital media, as well; for the most part, the information gateway and content provider tasks have been navigated smoothly. Yet, Wolf, Griffin, and even Hewett haven't fully embraced the affordances of online tutorials. This suggests that the preparation for online writing tutorials hasn't been successfully mediated, and that the positive potential hasn't been fully leveraged.

Moving forward, a variety of questions demand further investigation. These affordances, for example, rely on the anecdotes and experiences of various tutors, which provide power to understand perceptions, but very little information about cause, effect, or magnitude. Therefore, designing empirical, quantitative studies could help validate and mobilize the affordances noted in this research. Furthermore, this research focuses on the perspective of tutors; the voice of writing center administration, and the voice of writers, would be a worthwhile addition to the discussion of affordances. Different audiences perceive different uses, after all, and those uses would provide a clearer picture of the role that online tutorials play in the writing center.

Writing centers also need to investigate the adoption of online writing tutorials. While they may follow the technology adoption model, the actual mechanics of adoption are unclear; further investigation could help writing centers improve the digital components of their service in order to ensure that writers are accessing those components. This is particularly important because it appears that online writing tutorials do have a purpose and a place in the broader writing center. By further investigating the affordances of these online writing tutorials, writing centers can more fully integrate

digital technologies into their range of services with confidence that their tutors can continue to collaborate and engage with writers across tutoring media.

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