THE EXPANDING CENTER:
CREATING AN ONLINE PRESENCE FOR THE UMBC WRITING CENTER

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In September of 2006, the director of the Writing Center at UMBC (University of Maryland–Baltimore County), Mary Hickernell, asked me to research the practice of online peer tutoring. Specifically, Professor Hickernell wanted to know how other schools were approaching the idea of online tutoring in writing and what would be involved in the incorporation of such a program at UMBC. My initial research focused on the "spaces" involved in online tutoring—chat rooms, message boards, emails, and other such environments—as well as the types of methods and tutor training necessary to begin an online tutoring program.

Based on my initial research, it became clear to me that developing and implementing an online tutoring program was not something one could jump into headfirst, particularly with the few affordances and great number of limitations faced by UMBC's Writing Center. Specifically, there would be very little, if any, funding available for such a program, so any efforts toward making online tutoring available to students would have to make use of resources already available to us. To that end, I developed an online environment using Blackboard, and I prepared materials and plans to aid in the training of tutors in online tutoring.

Our initial efforts in online tutoring were to serve as an exploratory pilot; we wanted to see what could work for us, what wouldn't, and, overall, whether offering online tutoring services would be both feasible for the center and beneficial to the UMBC community. Through the pilot program, offered only to a limited number of classes in multiple disciplines, the importance of two realities became very clear: the perspectives of professors whose students would use online tutoring services would be integral to how online services should be offered, and any online tutoring efforts should be considered a counterpart to, as opposed to a replacement or substitution for, our traditional f2f tutoring practices.

My personal experience with one student in particular, whom I will call Lana, serves to illustrate many of the conclusions I came to about how online tutoring differs from f2f practice, highlighting the affordances and limitations of each, as well as how the two approaches can be used together in order to enhance the tutoring services we offer to students.

Overview of UMBC's Writing Center

The goal of my research has been to explore ways in which the UMBC Writing Center can use available online resources to expand its mission of providing help in writing to students from all disciplines. The writing center helps students improve their writing—this is, in the simplest terms, the organization's mission at the university. Tutors are not proofreaders of papers; they are peers who take time to read, comment on, and discuss students' writing with them in order to help them become more effective writers. To that end, tutors concentrate on higher-level concerns such as organization, content development, cohesion, and other primary factors while ensuring that papers meet the requirements of the assignment or purpose for which they are produced.

To ensure that sessions focus on these higher-level concerns, tutors at UMBC are trained in the

basic procedures that can be expected to take place during one-on-one tutorial conferences like those described in Emily Meyer's and Louise Z. Smith's *The Practical Tutor*. During a typical session, tutees read their work aloud as tutors follow along. Tutors make minimal markings on the pages at points where issues can be discussed when the reading is completed. Discussions are often guided by questions focusing on issues such as how portions of the tutees' writing connect to the purpose of the piece as a whole, what is intended to be accomplished in a particular section of the text, and other such queries designed to allow tutees to recognize higher-level issues. The discovery of such issues is the major stepping-stone that leads tutees to improving the effectiveness of their writing.

To date, all tutor training and instructional materials have focused purely on the f2f environment, as the UMBC Writing Center has not had a substantial online presence. Therefore, any move toward online tutoring would require not only new electronic environments in which to work, but also new methods by which tutors could successfully interact online with tutees. One concern is how social interactions between tutors and tutees may be impacted when they become "disembodied" in the online environment (Bennett and Marsh). For example, a friendly smile on the face of a tutor is not seen through an online chat, and there are no tables on which to place style and usage guides to be viewed together by tutor and tutee. In f2f tutoring, tutees' writing is often positioned between them and their tutors in its physical, printed form, allowing them to gesture and point so that each can follow along in shared interactions with the text. When interactions are taken online, the lack of physical proximity presents problems that must be compensated for through other mediational means. Accomplishing the goal of my research would, therefore, include creating an online environment conducive to tutoring, developing methods to be used during online tutoring sessions, and preparing tutors for fulfilling their roles in this new environment.

Online Resources for Tutorials in Writing

When developing an online tutoring system, we must first consider the type or types of environments most suited to our specific goals. For example, email is a commonly used online medium of communication, familiar to most students and professors, which may be used in an online tutoring program. Purdue University offers tutoring via email through its OWL, employing a number of tutors who work to fulfill their goal of reviewing students' papers within twenty-four hours of receipt ("Online Tutoring"). This asynchronous communication, however, lacks the social interaction that many writing center theorists find so valuable. For this reason, Muriel Harris suggests using email to review papers and offer suggestions for lower-level concerns, but suggests using synchronous (real-time), interactive modes of online communication for discussing content and generating ideas about how writers can improve the higher-level aspects of their work (21–22). In this way, email can be thought of as offering potentials similar to those of the marginalia that is common in peer-review writing workshops, while more interactive, synchronous "chats" can be thought of as the discussion that takes place during a tutoring session. Chats and email, however, are not the only types of synchronous and asynchronous online modes of communication to consider for online tutoring.

Advancements in technology and higher bandwidth standards have made it possible for Internet-based voice conversations to be achieved as easily as telephone calls. For the purposes of online tutoring, however, voice chats may be considered less desirable than text-based chats for a number of reasons. Voice chats require that each party possess a headset or microphone and speakers, and the success of online voice chats depends on the proper technical installation and functioning of these devices. Also, text-based chatters have the advantage of being able to read and reread the remarks of other par-

ticipants before constructing a well-thought-out response. While voice-based chats may provide a more personal medium for conversation, their limitations and constraints make them impractical for most tutoring considerations.

Video chats are another way that Internet-based communications can perhaps become more personal in nature, but this medium shares many of the impracticalities of online voice chats. In addition to the need for and proper functioning of a webcam, video chats also consume an enormous amount of bandwidth, which is not available to many dial-up Internet users, including those on campus who use UMBC's Resnet dial-up service. For these reasons, I determined that the potential drawbacks associated with video and voice chats outweigh any advantage that could be gained by enabling tutors and tutees to see and/or hear one another on their respective computer screens; therefore, I settled on text-based environments as the optimal spaces in which our tutors and tutees would converse.

In addition to conversing with one another, tutors and tutees must also be able to share the documents on which their tutoring sessions are based. While documents can be sent via email, any changes or markings made to them would require additional copies to be mailed back and forth to be seen by the parties involved in the tutorial. Furthermore, email is not always instant, so each occurrence that required a new copy of a document to be sent would result in a lag in a synchronous online conversation. There are, however, synchronous collaborative document-sharing applications and tools that allow real-time manipulation and editing of documents that can be seen by all parties involved in an online interaction as it occurs. But the user interfaces of these document-sharing applications are often much more complex than chat applications, and the intricacy of their operation could be problematic or intimidating to some students and tutors.

UMBC's Blackboard system includes several tools for online collaboration, including text-based chats, message board postings, user groups, journals, voice chats, voice emails, file-exchange tools, video chats, desktop sharing, interactive drawing, questionnaires and surveys, and virtual classroom environments. The system also includes a third-party "Live Tutorial" add-on, with which I have performed several hours' of testing. I have become comfortable working in the environment, but I do find its interface to be overcomplicated and confusing. Furthermore, the environment's features are not well suited to the work of writing center tutors, as it is geared toward large groups rather than one-on-one or small-group tutorials.

Aside from Blackboard, there are other freeware and open-source tools available to suit a number of potential needs of the writing center. While many of these free tools are well developed and easy to use, there are possible technical and security issues that must be considered before using them in an academic program. For example, AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) could be used for document sharing, text-based chat, video chat, and audio chat all in one application, but users behind firewalls may be required to configure their network hardware to allow such communications through specific ports, which may be blocked for security purposes ("AIM: Starting Out"). Furthermore, there is no built-in authentication process that could be used to verify the identities of clients using third-party software, whereas Blackboard requires that students log in using their UMBC usernames and passwords before accessing resources.

Considering the potential for problems arising from the use of third-party, nonsecured software, and the extremely high cost of secure, commercially available online tutoring software, I concluded that it would be best for the center to use Blackboard and email for its initial efforts in online tutoring. Based on these findings, the center's director, Mary Hickernell, approved my plans for testing an online tutoring pilot program during the spring semester of 2007.

The UMBC Online Tutoring Pilot Program

For the UMBC Writing Center's initial efforts in online tutoring, I designed and tested a Blackboard-based tutoring program to assess the effectiveness and feasibility of three approaches to online tutoring. The first and simplest approach involves only email with no synchronous component. The second method utilizes Blackboard message boards as the environment for one- or multipart interactions between tutors and tutees. The third approach begins with a quick review of a paper by a tutor, followed by a more in-depth interactive text-based chat between the tutor and tutee during which higher-level concerns and content considerations could be addressed.

The simplest of the three approaches is correspondence via email. In this method, tutees send papers as attachments to be reviewed and returned to them by their tutors with comments and suggestions. Such comments and suggestions could potentially take the form of endnotes, tracked changes (a tool used in MS Word to show alterations of a document from its original form), or marginalia comments, depending on the format of the document being reviewed and the preference of the tutor.

The message board approach to online tutoring involves the creation of private Blackboard-based groups for single tutees. Through these groups, tutors and tutees can access file-exchange and message board tools for posting, commenting on, reviewing, revising, and reposting documents in an asynchronous, threaded context. A tutor can cut and paste all or portions of a tutee's paper into a message and make comments and suggestions or ask questions throughout in different colored or weighted fonts. The tutee might then respond by addressing the concerns of the tutor, and, if necessary, supplying updated revisions of the text to be reviewed by the tutor to assess its improvement over the former version.

In online chat tutorials, tutees begin by emailing or posting their papers in much the same way as the other messages; however, rather than returning those papers with comments, tutors make minimal markings in the text as indicators of which parts of the document are to be discussed during an interactive synchronous chat. Chat-based tutorials take place in Blackboard, using its integrated "office hours" chat tool. This tool is very simple to use, even by novice Internet users, and allows other online resources to be accessed and referenced by tutors and tutees simultaneously without interfering with their text-based chat. In this way, both higher- and lower-level concerns could be addressed in one medium in a single session.

To test these various methods of online tutoring during the pilot, I created a Blackboard environment, a number of static online documents to be used as reference material during online sessions, online- and document-based preliminary tutee questionnaires, and documents and plans for tutor preparation. Together, these components have been used as an instructional system to promote students' writing through online tutoring, as well as a means to test the feasibility of using such tutorials as a part of the writing center's practices. The online environments, tutors, and training incorporated into such a system, however, represent only one side of the program as a whole. Tutees and their professors are just as important in any online tutoring program's success, particularly in terms of their needs and their attitudes toward online methods' potentials for addressing those needs.

Results

While the sample of students who took part in our study was too small to draw definitive conclusions about the efficacy of online tutoring as a whole, the pilot resulted in a number of valuable conclusions that we did not anticipate. Such considerations included the dependability of voluntary tutee participation, a climate of unease among some professors regarding the appropriateness of online tuto-

rials in writing, and the value of an online/f2f hybrid approach to tutoring as opposed to the exclusive usage of either method on its own. I believe that our findings regarding these considerations are at least as valuable to the planning of our future online efforts as the comparison of the methods and approaches we tested during the pilot.

Dependability of Voluntary Tutee Participation

Our pilot's first round of tutoring involved an initial opportunity for approximately ninety students from American studies and English courses to take part in online tutorials over spring break while the writing center was to be closed. All of the students invited to take part in the program had papers due the first week after spring break, and all were encouraged by their professors to use the writing center's online services.

Of the ninety or so students invited to take part in phase one of the pilot, seven signed up to submit their papers for online tutoring over the break. I had anticipated tutoring five to ten tutees as a result of this initial invitation, so the number of responses we received was consistent with my expectations. I registered the seven students for the program and randomly assigned two sessions to be conducted via email, two via online chats, and three to take place as online message board tutorials. Tutees were then sent simple instructions via email informing them how to submit their papers and pertinent information about their assignments.

Despite consistent follow-up emails sent to all seven students over an eight-day period, phase one ended without a single paper being submitted for online tutoring. Because a number of the students who signed up for the initial round did so enthusiastically, thanking me and the writing center for the opportunity, the complete lack of follow-through was surprising and unexpected, but it was certainly of great value to the planning of our continuing efforts.

The lack of response to this initial opportunity prompted me to make some changes in my plans for the remainder of the pilot. Considering the limited number of tutors and hours available in the writing center's budget, I determined that it would not be feasible for the center to offer online chat tutorials due to the potential for lost time resulting from missed appointments. Therefore, in the later stages of the pilot program, I no longer attempted to schedule online chats, and I instead concentrated my efforts on email- and discussion board–based tutorials only, since these methods would not require tutors to "meet" online with tutees at any predesignated time.

Climate of Unease among Some Professors

Although many of the professors who took part in our study over the course of the semester did so enthusiastically, some professors expressed unease regarding the potential for using online methods for tutoring in writing. In fact, some professors outright refused to allow their students to take part in online tutorials at all, citing the importance of "getting away from the computer," "talking to the writing center staff in person," and "writing things by hand." When I received such responses from professors, I explained that one of the goals of our pilot was to "open new doors" to students who had never before used the services of the writing center, but, unfortunately, none of my follow-up communications resulted in replies from professors who initially rejected participation in the program.

While I did anticipate some level of unfamiliarity and even unease with the idea of online tutoring from some professors, I had not expected to find absolute and final rejection of its potential. Again, while this realization was not ideal for the purposes of our pilot, the fact that some professors would not allow their students to take part in online tutorials is extremely valuable in consideration of the writ-

ing center's future plans. Should such online services be offered to all students as a standard practice of the writing center, we must take into account how electronic sessions could be viewed negatively by professors, as well as how those negative perspectives might come to bear on the students taking part in online tutorials.

The Value of an Online/F2F Hybrid Approach to Tutoring

Our greatest success during the pilot was in the tutoring of students from a 700-level graduate chemistry class. Students in this class are required to bring papers to the writing center before turning them in, so tutors working with these students online had worked with most of them before in the f2f environment. Tutors were familiar with the types of papers with which they would be working, tutees were familiar with the types of feedback they would be given on these particular types of assignments, and both tutors and tutees were quite familiar with the methods employed during traditional f2f tutorials. The preexisting, mutual experience in the f2f environment allowed both tutors and tutees to easily transition their interactions from one "mode" to the other, allowing online tutorials to be quite successful. In fact, the professor of this course indicated that, although the sample was small, students' work "continued to get better over time," a sign that online tutoring has been successful in helping students improve their writing.

Based on my experience in this study, I do not believe that any single method or approach to tutoring in writing is perfect, nor do I believe that any approach is entirely without benefit compared to another. I have been inspired by the teachings of Professor Jody Shipka to constantly consider the "affordances provided by the variety of mediational means" (283–84) I navigate and employ on a daily basis. Applying this to the results of our online tutoring pilot program, I have reaffirmed my belief that online tutoring is best employed as a counterpart to, and not a replacement of, traditional f2f tutoring. Such a hybrid approach allows the affordances of both methods to complement one another, resulting in a level of success greater than that of either f2f or online tutoring alone. These assertions regarding the benefits of an online/f2f hybrid approach to tutoring were validated throughout this pilot, and especially through my experiences with one student in particular.

Lana: A Case Study of an Online/F2F Hybrid Approach to Tutoring

During our initial online tutoring pilot in the UMBC Writing Center, a particular tutee, to whom I will refer to as Lana, was a graduating senior at UMBC, about to receive her bachelor's degree in English literature. She was a successful student with a cumulative GPA of 3.4. However, before she could graduate, Lana was required to write three ten-page research papers for Advanced Argumentation and Expository Writing (ENGL 391), a class she had taken the previous semester and received an "incomplete." I tutored Lana frequently, both online and f2f, throughout the semester, and I found that this "hybrid" approach to tutoring resulted in benefits that were unlikely to have been achieved through the use of either method on its own. The following record of our interaction reflects only a small portion of our communications, yet it is empirical evidence supporting the value of a tutoring system that incorporates both online and f2f methodologies.

When I began tutoring Lana on the completion of her ENGL 391 papers, it was puzzling to me why Lana had trouble writing for this class when she had been able to write successful literary criticism in the courses she had taken for her major. We spoke about such writings, and she indicated that, to her, they were a very different type of writing from that of "research papers." Furthermore, she did

not believe that her ability to produce A-work for literature papers would in any way help her to write the research papers required to complete her argumentation class.

Lana had received high scores in ENGL 391 for her group presentation and in-class participation, but she did not complete any of her three major writing assignments. During one of our f2f meetings, Lana told me, "I can't write a ten-page argument."[1] Despite the instruction and explanation she received in class about an argument's structure, rhetorical components, and research methodologies, Lana said, "I don't have any idea how to make an argument. I can't write a cohesive ten-page paper. I don't even know how to start thinking about an argument's thesis and how to use 'clear lines of reasoning.' It's just not going to happen."

I assured her that we could work together on those issues, and that she would be able to complete the papers if she were willing to do the research and write about her findings.

She insisted that I was wrong: "You don't understand. I cannot do it. I *cannot*! I can research stuff and find a bunch of information, but I can't bring all that together into something that's going to make sense to somebody else."

It became obvious that Lana's fervent belief in her inability to write research papers had been a primary factor in her failure to complete the course. She committed, however, to work with me on an ongoing basis throughout the spring 2007 semester so that she could complete her work and graduate on time. To that end, Lana and I periodically met and worked together, both f2f and online through the UMBC Writing Center's Blackboard portal, email, and instant messaging. During a f2f meeting early on in the semester, Lana and I discussed feminism as a possible topic for the first of her three arguments. She had brought with her approximately nine books, a stack of printed articles, and several pages of handwritten notes about the material.

As we talked, I asked Lana open-ended questions, which I hoped would bring out some of her main interests on the broad topic of "feminism." I had used such questions many times in the past when tutoring students in the planning stages of their writing. These types of questions are helpful in narrowing down large issues to manageable topics. Our goal was to identify a topic specific enough to be the focus of a ten-page paper and then to create a rough outline of the subtopics that it might address.

I asked, "What specific concerns do you have about women's rights?"

Lana replied by showing me some highlighted and underlined portions of articles and books that described various women's groups and the diverse attitudes and agendas they endorsed.

When I asked her how she could apply this information to an argument, she responded by saying, "See, I'm not sure, but . . ." and continued to rifle through other printed resources to show me other snippets that she found particularly interesting.

The research that Lana had done was extensive, and the portions of the texts she had highlighted were interesting, even shocking in some cases. However, Lana seemed unable to "connect the dots" between her various resources in order to come up with a central topic—a thesis—on which she could base an argument. I continued asking questions, and she continued referring to her printed, bound resources.

Our time for that f2f session came to an end after over an hour of discussion, yet we were unable to pinpoint a topic narrow enough for an argument, much less create a "blueprint" for the paper as we had planned. So, following Peter Elbow's example, I asked Lana to do some freewriting before our next meeting as a way of transferring some ideas from her mind onto a blank page. I told her that when your thoughts are externalized, it's often easier to see some connections you might otherwise be missing. I asked that she write, either online or on paper, whatever she could think of on the topic of feminism. I

told her to just start writing about feminism, as she understood it, without stopping to think about it at all, and to do so for about fifteen to twenty minutes, nonstop. I asked her to then read her freewrite and identify some central questions or ideas in what she had written.

As reflected in the quote below, Lana's freewrite, which she posted online a couple of nights later at 7:48 p.m., resulted in the documentation of valuable ideas, which our book- and article-based f2f conversations had failed to do:

> I say WOMEN'S STUDIES: response could be "Well . . . uhh what about men's studies?" or "what's the point of that?" "oh great now you need your own major?" I say I'M A FEMINIST: response could be "So you're a lesbian, you don't shave and you want equal pay to men?" my counter responses have been: WOW! men's studies? are you serious? what the hell do you think we've all been taught our entire lives? by white men, for the advancement of white men, the white man's history as told by white men. No, i'm not a lesbian, i do shave, and not only do I want equal pay to men, I also want equal respect and opportunity like everyone else especially men.

Lana also posted the following themes and questions, which she indicated were "sparked" by the ideas expressed in her freewrite:

- feminism/feminist have a bad rap
- nobody can decide on what a feminist is or what they are striving for
- feminists have mixed agendas that cause part of this bad rap &/or confusion
1. Who decides on the definition of feminism?
2. Does feminism really include every woman?
3. How has the media contributed to feminism/feminist/movements?
4. Backlash to feminism etc etc

Lana later told me that she had "put off" doing the freewrite until she "felt like messing around with it," and then "cut and pasted stuff from [the freewrite] into lists on Blackboard." In this case, the online message board was used simply as a medium through which Lana could share the thoughts and ideas she had come up with on her own, outside of our online and f2f meetings; it was the freewrite, not the message board, that brought out Lana's ideas. However, the importance of the message board as a medium was that it was readily available to Lana as a means to construct, compose, and share her ideas at the moment that they were fresh on her mind, even though I wasn't available to read them until the next morning. I do not believe that Lana's freewrite would have been as fruitful for her as a writer had it not been done on her own time, "when she felt like it."

Lana and I later discussed the ideas from her freewrite through email and instant messages, and she came up with the following thesis statement on which to base her paper:

> Groups, rights, and ideologies associated with feminism have such a vast array of definitions and viewpoints of what it means to be a feminist that no single, clear agenda or unity of feminists has or can be made.

I found her claim to be rather broad, but I knew that she had performed many hours of research to get to this one sentence about her findings. So, we agreed that this would be the working thesis of her argument.

During our subsequent meetings and online exchanges about her first paper, which she entitled "The 8-Letter F-Word," Lana continued to struggle with her writing. For example, in support of her claim about the diversity of feminists, she wrote:

> The Combahee River Collective is used as an example of an exclusive Black feminist organization that was formed in order to satisfy the needs of Black women who faced not only sexism, but also racism simultaneously. Unlike most feminist groups, they choose to include and fight for the oppression of Black men. The criticism that all feminists are "man-haters" therefore cannot be applied to this group. In addition, the women realized that a white woman is not a credible source to speak on behalf of what Black women need from a movement. The white women are in a dominant position and have not faced the same oppressions of other races. In turn, this group responded to the predominantly white groups and informed them that racism was prevalent. The Black feminists made it clear they could handle their own representation and continued their feminist campaigns from an anti-racism, anti-sexism stance.

Lana began this paragraph by saying that the particular group "is *used as* an example," language demonstrative of what I saw as a disconnect between what she knew or believed to be true and the methods through which she expressed those ideas in her writing. In other words, Lana clearly recognized the uniqueness of this group, but rather than simply representing it as such, she chose to inform the reader that the group "is used as an example"—an identification of the group's rhetorical function in the written text as opposed to a representation of her beliefs or observations. Furthermore, the rest of Lana's paragraph highlights the group's uniqueness, using a relevant and meaningful juxtaposition with predominately white feminist groups; however, the effectiveness of her descriptions is hindered by wordiness and awkward constructs. I did not recall any of these problems being present in the papers Lana had written for her literature classes, so, during our next f2f meeting, I asked Lana a bit more about her writing processes.

Referring to Lana's successful writing in her literature major, I asked, "What is the difference between writing lit crit and writing an argument?"

Her answer surprised me: "With lit crit, you can put your own spin on it and give your opinions. But when you write an argument, you have to back it up with references from authority and stuff, so it's not nearly as fun as writing lit crit."

I thought about what she had said for a moment, and then I asked, "So, you can't give your opinions in your arguments?"

"Well, you can, kinda," she said, "but you have to have 'clear lines of reasoning,' so that means that you have to prove what you're saying instead of just giving your interpretations like in lit crit."

I began to think back to our earlier f2f meeting, when I would ask Lana a question, and she would immediately turn to her stacks of books and pages of notes while answering. It then dawned on me that what was missing from Lana's understanding of writing "research papers" was, indeed, the value of her own ideas, thoughts, and opinions. Lana was comfortable with her literary criticism being based on her interpretations, as they were substantiated by the texts about which she wrote; however, she failed to realize that the basis of an academic argument is also a substantiated opinion, which is simply an interpretation of truth based on the analysis of given facts. Lana's approach to writing research papers had basically been attempts to find proofs of some external, static truths that didn't really exist. Still, she looked for those truths in the various publications she read during her research, as opposed to making her own judgments, which can be the only real basis of any argument.

All along, I had wrongly assumed that the source of Lana's struggle was what her professor and others had referred to as "idea generation," when it turns out that generating ideas was perhaps her

greatest strength. The problem was that Lana did not believe that her ideas had a place in research papers, as she saw her role as a researcher as being a compiler and rearranger of other people's published information—to "re-search" the stacks at the library that had already been searched by others, looking for those preexisting truths that would allow her to piece together a successful paper.

My new understanding of how Lana approached the writing of a research paper became central to my decisions on how to interact with her as a tutor. However, Lana's beliefs about the process of writing research papers became evident to me only because of what I saw during our f2f meetings—her unfailing practice of looking through her books and notes to find the content she believed was necessary to answer my questions. I do not believe that I would have made this connection had our interactions over the semester been limited only to online environments. At the same time, our online communications allowed a space in which her ideas could be documented and shared at any time; this resulted in a much greater number of contacts, which aided in her writing between f2f sessions. In all, we made more than thirty posts to her private message board and took part in at least twenty-five instant messaging sessions and email transactions regarding her writing. The online and f2f tutoring environments complemented one another as components of a dynamic support system for Lana's writing that could not have existed in either environment alone, as each has its own set of affordances and limitations.

Implications—Recommendations for the Future of Online Tutoring at UMBC

Based on the results of this pilot program, I have been able to draw a number of conclusions about the feasibility of online tutoring for the UMBC Writing Center. I have also determined a number of areas in which the center could benefit from further research before implementing any permanent online tutoring program. These conclusions and determinations are based on a number of factors, including budgetary and resource concerns, technical considerations, and the affordances and limitations of online tutoring as a practice.

Affordances and Limitations of Online Tutoring

As highlighted in the case study of Lana, there is much to be ascertained about tutees, their writing practices, and their potential problems from f2f sessions, because the issues may not be as apparent through online interaction. At the same time, online tutorials offer freedoms for both tutors and tutees, particularly in terms of when contributions to the process can be made by either party. This type of freedom is beneficial not only for reasons of scheduling, but it also allows tutors and tutees to address issues from places where and times that they feel most comfortable or "ready" to take on particular tasks. Therefore, I believe that a balanced combination of online and f2f tutorials would result in a greater benefit to writers than either approach on its own.

I have also come to believe, as a result of this pilot, that the online environment is, in general, more effective in the tutorial of certain types of writing (and of certain writers) than others. For example, some approaches to the teaching of technical writing, science writing, and expository writing may be effectively supported by tutoring in UMBC's available online environment; the same quality of support may not be as feasible in the online environment for other types of writing, such as creative writing (fiction, poetry, or CNF), in which f2f, real-time interaction can generate ideas, promote open discussion, and allow for a more free-flowing exchange of information between tutors and tutees. Moreover, some writers—and, indeed, some professors—may be more receptive to tutoring in the f2f environment than the online environment, based purely on their preferences as individuals.

It was my recommendation that the UMBC Writing Center continue to offer online tutoring on a limited basis to certain students or certain courses. The determination of which courses and which students may or may not be candidates for online tutoring will likely be an ongoing process should the writing center adopt online tutoring as part of its practices. However, based on my experiences in this pilot, I would recommend researching the following as possibly having the highest potentials for online tutoring:

- Courses in which writing center tutoring is required by the professor
- Students taught by professors who desire tutors to concentrate primarily on lower-level issues
- Frequent visitors to the writing center who often require multiple sessions for a single paper over long periods of time
- Follow-up sessions to tutorials in which extensive planning or revisions were discussed.

Infeasibility of Online Chat Tutorials

I do not believe that there is, at this time, a realistic potential for online chat tutorials to be used as a standard practice by the UMBC Writing Center. As evidenced by the failure of students to follow through with their scheduled online tutorials during phase one of our pilot, to employ any type of synchronous tutoring that would require that a tutor be standing by at an appointed time would likely result in an unacceptable number of broken appointments and wasted hours, which could otherwise be spent helping walk-in tutees.

This realization regarding online chat tutorials not only eliminates a form of online tutoring from the short-term possibilities, but it also greatly reduces the potentials for the types of work tutors can achieve in asynchronous online environments. Synchronous chats are the online mode of communication that most closely resembles real-time interactive, two-way, verbal conversations. These types of interactive conversations are essential to much of the work tutors do in the writing center in helping students think through ideas in order to plan their papers or expand their content. While a "back-and-forth" conversation of sorts could take place on message boards or via email, the asynchronous nature of those exchanges would be problematic in terms of the number of exchanges that would need to take place, and the time required to do so. The infeasibility of online chat tutorials would greatly limit the center's ability to counsel students online for papers in the early stages of development; therefore, our online efforts would be best focused on assisting students primarily on lower-level issues or in the later stages of their revisions, while f2f sessions should take place for idea development and open discussion of content.

Preference of Message Board Tutorials to Email Tutorials

Both email- and message board–based tutorials were successfully used during the pilot, but the message board tutorials were preferable to tutors due to the greater flexibility they offer in the formatting of responses. The greater flexibility of message boards over email exchanges is primarily due to the technical limitations of email. Tutors are discouraged from making comments or suggestions within the text of students' digital documents due to the risk of such "embedded" or "tracked changes" becoming difficult to remove or problematic to the format of the students' papers (see Ryan and Zimmerelli). Therefore, any comments made within a paper to be emailed back to a student must be placed at the end of the document.

Alternatively, tutors could cut and paste the document into the body of an email to avoid problems caused by embedding changes in the document itself, but many features, such as font weight, highlighting, page breaks, indents, and graphics, may not be available or formatted properly in one email client or another. On the other hand, Blackboard message boards offer a shared environment in which tutors and tutees can be confident that the work they send one another within the body of a message will appear the same to both of them regardless of computer platforms or Internet client software. Therefore, tutors can make use of highlighting and colored fonts when commenting on students' papers that have been cut and pasted into the body of a message.

It is important to note that at two points in my research and testing, I attempted to access Blackboard for online tutorials and was unable to do so due to server errors. Therefore, because Blackboard may be subject to occasional technical problems, email tutorials should be considered as a backup system to be used in the event of server problems affecting Blackboard.

Economic Considerations

This pilot program used resources available at no charge to the UMBC Writing Center. There is a cost, however, even to a limited system using available resources such as Blackboard. Such a system requires maintenance and organization; someone must administer the system, assign tutees to tutors, and verify that online tutoring is fulfilling the needs of the writer. This is no small undertaking, and it is not something that could be done by an employee of the center during downtime, especially during busy periods when there is no downtime.

Should any substantial online tutoring program be adopted by the UMBC Writing Center, I believe it would be necessary for an administrative position to be created in order to maintain and organize the program. Therefore, budget limitations are likely to be the most prohibitive factor in implementing a permanent online tutoring program in the UMBC Writing Center.

Conclusion

If any lesson has been definitively learned through this pilot, it is that there is great value in traditional f2f tutoring, and that this value cannot be duplicated through an online tutoring program alone, at least not with the cost-free resources and staffing available to the UMBC Writing Center during this study. However, it is just as clear that online tutorials can offer effective support to students who require more frequent attention (particularly reluctant writers), live or work off-campus, or are required to be tutored frequently throughout a particular course. Therefore, I see the most effective use of online tutoring as a counterpart to f2f tutoring. This type of hybrid approach utilizes the potentials of the Internet to expand—not replace—the effectiveness of f2f tutoring within the center.

Notes

[1]My conversations with Lana took many forms, including face-to-face and telephone conversations, emails, message board posts, and instant messaging sessions. During our verbal conversations, since no digital record would exist, I took handwritten notes on what was said, including Lana's comments as quoted in this section.

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