ONLINE TUTOR CONFERENCING:
EXTENDING THE WRITING CENTER TO SERVE A COMMUTER POPULATION

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A Thesis

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Abstract

of

ONLINE TUTOR CONFERENCING:
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Student writer accessibility to the tutoring service provided by the California State University, Sacramento University Writing Center (UWC) is limited by three main factors: the availability of funds for paid tutors, the number of intern tutors available, and the face-to-face nature of the service. This study addressed the third limitation by using collaboration software over the Internet to determine if online tutoring could be as effective as face-to-face tutoring and result in more students, particularly part-time and commuter students, taking advantage of UWC services. The study used online surveys to collect data from both student writers and tutors regarding whether they considered their experience with online tutoring successful and if the online service met their needs. The online tutoring offered through the project was not well used and did not return enough data to determine if online tutoring would expand the reach of the UWC. However, the project did provide data on issues that need to be addressed improve the online tutoring service in the future. These issues include practical issues in technology and scheduling as well as tutor acceptance and student experience.

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Purpose of the Study

The California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) Writing Center has served the student population by providing tutoring assistance with writing skills for decades. The University Writing Center (UWC) “provides encouraging, focused, and non-judgmental one-to-one tutorials” (Writing Center) that focuses predominately on writing process skills such as planning, organization, and revision, as opposed to editing services for student papers. Tutors meet with student writers in the UWC during the day or in the University Library in the evening to provide one-on-one assistance. Student writer accessibility to the tutoring service provided by the UWC is limited by three main factors: the availability of funds for paid staff tutors, the number of available unpaid tutors interning as part of a class, and the face-to-face nature of the service. This study will address the third limitation by exploring the issues involved in implementing an online tutoring service that can serve students without the need to be on campus. These issues include practical issues in technology and scheduling as well as tutor acceptance and student experience. By using collaboration software over the Internet, online tutoring may be able to address the limitations of the face-to-face service for a large segment of the CSUS student population.

I became very aware of the limitations of the face-to-face service when, as an intern tutor, I worked with two different student writers who came to campus just for an evening tutoring session. Both were graduate students who worked full time and took classes at night, voluntarily spending on additional evening on campus each week for her tutoring appointment. Another student frequently drove from her mountain home to take advantage of the service, and a fellow
intern tutor had to commute over sixty miles through rush hour traffic after teaching high school all day to providing evening tutoring services.

I am a non-traditional, part time student myself, and am familiar with how difficult it can be for commuter students to take advantage of University services. I have spent nearly twenty years supporting the technology needs of government and corporate users, specializing in recommending, planning, implementing and supporting ways to use computers to share information for much of that time. I have both implemented and used web-enabled collaboration technologies to work with business associates throughout the country without the need for travel. To implement this technology in the UWC seemed a logical recommendation.

The University Writing Center Environment

Before we discuss extending the UWC to serve an online population, it makes sense to provide some background information about its pedagogy and operations. The UWC is run by the CSUS English Department and occupies physical space in the English Department building that includes a large area with tables and chairs where multiple face-to-face tutoring sessions may be ongoing at any time during the day. A back room is available for tutors to gather when not working with student writers, fostering a collegial atmosphere that encourages collaboration among tutors and supports the social constructivist epistemology that provides a theoretical grounding for the Writing Center practices.

Computers were added to the UWC in 2007. Writers and tutors use these computers to access the Internet to research information relative to a tutoring session, such a style sheets, specific grammar rules, or idea generation. Some UWC tutors prefer printed documents for tutoring, so these computers are also used to print documents brought to the tutoring session in electronic format. Recently the use of the computers has been expanded to provide electronic access to handouts covering a wide variety of writing concerns that can be given to student
writers, replacing paper copies that were maintained in several large file cabinets. Overall, the computers have not been used to their full potential in the UWC, particularly as a tool to improve student writer access to UWC services.

Although this study will not review the voluminous scholarship that exists on writing centers, the UWC pedagogy is centered upon the idea that the writing center should be student-centered and focus on developing the student as a writer and thinker, rather than polishing a specific text (North, 1984; Grimm, 1999). Tutors are encouraged to privilege higher order concerns such as idea generation, organization, and writing processes over lower order concerns such as spelling, punctuation, and grammar (McAndrew and Reigstad, 2001). The UWC is open to all University students, providing assistance not only with English Composition papers, but also with research papers in writing-intensive classes across the curriculum, graduate thesis work, even application essays and letters. The UWC’s peer tutors are drawn predominately from students within the English department, although students from other disciplines can become tutors. Tutoring sessions are primarily available by appointment to assist student writers, and recurring appointments for the full semester are strongly encouraged, as this follows the UWC philosophy of focusing on the student as a writer, rather than on a specific paper. However, occasional drop-in student writers will be accommodated if there is an available tutor.

Although the tutor training model used allows for the exploration of other composition theories, the social constructivist pedagogy that suggests knowledge is developed through social interaction in discourse communities (Bruffee, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978; Bakhtin, 1981) predominates in the UWC. The collaborative learning environment of the UWC and the small discourse communities that occur naturally in the peer tutoring model acculturate student writers to the academic conversation. This social constructivist epistemology is also evident in the administrative organization of the UWC. The Writing Center Director and Assistant Director
ensure the funding and overall organization of the UWC, with the day-to-day functioning primarily handled by student Graduate Assistant Coordinators. The emphasis on a peer management structure provides everyone within the UWC a voice in any decision-making process and requires greater group involvement in any change within the UWC.

Research Questions and Methods

Based on my experiences as a tutor in the UWC, as a non-traditional university student, and as an experienced web collaborator, I felt online tutoring using web collaboration software could be as effective as face-to-face tutoring. I also felt it would result in more non-traditional students as well as commuter students taking advantage of UWC services. I designed the study to examine the validity of these beliefs, based upon how both the tutor and the student writer perceived the online tutoring experience. Did both the tutor and the student writer have their needs met in the online session? Did they feel the online experience was equivalent to the face-to-face experience? Or would it be a less-desirable option that was better than no access at all? Would commuter students take greater advantage of UWC services if they were more accessible or are there other unknown factors that will still need to be addressed?

I chose to use online surveys to collect experiential data for this project, as online access was a prerequisite for participating in the study, and online surveys were easy for both students and tutors to access, complete and return even if they were off-campus. The use of surveys to determine student and tutor perceptions of the tutorial process has been shown to be successful in other research projects. Carino and Enders (2001) used surveys to correlate number of student visits to the writing center with perceived satisfaction, as did Kastman-Breuch and Racine (2000) to determine online tutoring time requirements. Stuart Blythe (1998) also offers surveys and interviews as a valid means of obtaining data in usability research.
The Pilot Project

I tested the concept of online tutoring during a three-week period in April 2009. This pilot test was designed to identify the technology and process issues involved in developing a successful online tutoring program and to test potential solutions to these issues in order to implement the program in Fall 2009. The original plan for the pilot test was not successful and it was modified several times throughout the three-week test in an effort to find processes that worked. But my analysis of the failures, which I will discuss in Chapter 3, provided more useful information than I would have learned from an easy success. After analyzing the initial failures and the eventual successes, I developed a better understanding of the issues that would need to be addressed in order to implement online tutoring in the UWC, although this understanding still proved insufficient for a fully successful implementation.

While recruiting participants for the pilot, I talked with a number of tutors in the UWC to understand their views of online tutoring, which seemed to be directly related to their individual computer literacy. Tutors who described themselves as comfortable with computers or had prior experience with online collaboration software viewed online tutoring as interesting and potentially valuable. However, tutors that self-evaluated as having minimal computer skills were generally uninterested in the online tutoring program. It was clear from this test that online tutors need training to be familiar with the collaboration software used, and thereby enthusiastic about the online tutoring process. During the pilot test, one tutor received a higher level of training and support on the iMEET software. This tutor, and the tutee, had the most positive reactions to the online tutoring experience.

As a final piece of the pilot project, the Writing Center Assistant Director added some questions regarding online tutoring in the semester-end survey provided to the UWC student writers. Although this survey is generally used to assess the services provided, the additional
questions asked students whether they would expect to use online services should they be made available as well as information about their status as part-time or full-time students.

*The Study Itself*

The research phase of this thesis project was scheduled during the Fall 2009 semester. During this semester we tested the feasibility of offering online tutoring in the UWC. In particular, we wanted to verify the usability of the campus-supported iMEET software to determine if the issues uncovered in the pilot test of the previous semester could be overcome with better tutor training or if technical issues would continue to disrupt tutoring sessions. We also wanted to uncover any additional, unexpected issues before the service was rolled out on a larger scale to campus students.

The Fall 2009 rollout had some successes, particularly in the case of a tutor who was unable to meet her tutoring commitments during regular tutoring hours and provided two hours of tutoring on Saturday mornings. As this condition was precisely one of the reasons for implementing the online tutoring program, this was an exciting development for the project. Overall, however, the response to the Fall 2009 rollout was underwhelming, with very few student writers participating and only two of six volunteer tutors having any online sessions. For the Spring 2010 semester, the online service was again offered, this time with defined hours for the online tutoring option. This revision to the project resulted in a broader use by more student writers, but the limitation of just two available hours of online tutoring per week restricted the collectable data.

These two small forays into the world of online tutoring provided little insight into the questions driving the study and generated limited data regarding the tutor and student writer perceptions of the online tutoring experience as compared to the face-to-face tutoring experience and whether the commuter student population of CSUS would take advantage of the greater
access provided by online tutoring. A more surprising finding from the study was the reaction of
the UWC community to the online tutoring experiment. The collaborative, social constructivist
nature of the UWC environment viewed online tutoring and the resulting lack of face-to-face
interaction with deep suspicion. That it was implemented by someone who was a virtual outsider
to the community only increased this wariness. With no personal experience with the service and
limited computer literacy in general, the Graduate Assistant Coordinators (GACs) were
uncomfortable recommending online tutoring or answering questions regarding it. In order to
continue building an online tutoring service and recognizing the potential for extended access to
UWC services, addressing this issue will be critical.

The online tutoring test implementation was not well used and did not return enough data to
fully address the initial research questions, but did provide empirical data on implementing online
tutoring in the UWC. This thesis will analyze the issues that I encountered and discuss the
lessons learned in implementing online tutoring in the UWC. The following chapter will provide
a review of the relevant literature. Although a great deal of literature exists relating to writing
centers and the introduction of computers into them, I’ll focus mainly on research related to
online tutoring programs. The literature review will also discuss the needs of commuter students
as they relate to student services such as the writing center. Chapter 3 will provide details the
project itself, including the initial decisions made, and noting any significant successes or
failures. Chapter 4 will provide analysis of tutor and tutee surveys and interviews, as well as an
analysis of the project itself. Chapter 5 will provide conclusions about tutor and tutee perceptions
of the online tutoring experience, and next steps in expanding online tutoring in the UWC.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The commuting students I tutored during my University Writing Center (UWC) internship reflect a large percentage of the campus population. CSUS is among the largest of the twenty-five campuses in the California State University system with a total enrollment in the Fall 2009 semester of 29,241 students. It is an urban university, occupying 300 acres just five miles from the center of the city, and predominately serves the citizens of the community. Three quarters of the student body in the fall of 2009 were residents of the County of Sacramento or of the five contiguous counties of Placer, San Joaquin, Solano, Yolo, and El Dorado (“University Fact Book,” 2009, p. 15).

One effect of this heavily local population is that CSUS is a commuter campus. Less than six percent of all CSUS students live on campus (“University Fact Book,” 2009, p. 12), and only thirty percent of incoming freshman (“University Fact Book,” 2009, p. 6). These numbers can more easily be understood by comparing them to the same statistics from the University of California, Davis (UCD), located just twenty miles away. At UCD, ninety one percent of incoming freshmen live on campus, with a total on-campus resident population of twenty two percent ("UC Davis Profile," 2009) of a campus enrollment totaling 32,153 ("Student Population Headcount," 2009). In addition to a limited residential campus population, CSUS’s student population also boasts a substantial part-time enrollment. While twenty percent of CSUS undergraduates are part-time students, just one percent of UCD undergraduates carry less than a full class load (“University Fact Book,” 2009, p. 12; "UC Davis Profile," 2009).

Kevin Kruger (2000), in a study of commuter students published in New Directions for Higher Education and Marcia Roe Clark (2006), in a similar study in About Campus, found the
university experience of commuter students, whether full time or part time, is often very different from that of residential students. Commuter students often have weaker connections to campus activities, and less interaction with faculty and peers. “Commuter students have a variety of nonacademic needs and experiences that generally shape their college lives to a greater extent than students on other types of campuses.” These needs may include more night classes, campus services available for longer hours, or on-campus child care services (Clark, 2006, p. 3). Even the simple matter of commuting, including the need to allot extra time for travel, whether by public transportation, bicycle, on foot, or by auto (with the attendant parking issues), adds a layer of complexity to an already challenging experience.

The UWC already offers extended service hours to support commuter students by offering evening tutoring in the CSUS Library several nights per week. But the service is still limited to face-to-face, on campus tutoring where attendance can be difficult for commuter students who may only be on campus for class hours. Although it seems logical that providing writing center tutoring online to this at-risk student population will improve their access to the service, the effect may not be a direct as it may seem. Marcia Roe Clark’s “nonacademic needs” may still limit usage in unforeseen ways.

Certainly, this project is not the first attempt to offer online services in a writing center. Writing centers have been experimenting with online services for over twenty years. In the late 1980’s, early adopters implemented services that used the technology available at the time, but would be considered rudimentary by today’s standards. These were strictly text-based services, and were often limited to providing tutorial handouts and answering questions or conducting one-to-many seminars. (Palmquist, 2003; Sewell & Inman, 2000).

The advent of the World Wide Web in the early 1990’s provided more user-friendly graphical interfaces, but the results were often uneven. Writing center budgets, generally lean,
could not always be stretched to cover the hardware, software, and support necessary to develop and manage dynamic and useful online sites (Brown, 2000; Colpo, Fulmer & Lucas, 2000; Shadle, 2000). Purdue University’s Online Writing Lab (OWL) is probably one of the best-known and most successful OWL’s. Starting as a text-based email service delivering handouts and providing email communications with tutors, it grew into a Gopher-based document retrieval system in 1993, and moved into the World Wide Web in 1994 (Palmquist, 2003; Purdue OWL, 2009).

As technology advanced, so did the various implementations of the online writing center. Online tutoring was a natural next step to integrate technology into the writing center. In the 1990’s, online tutoring was mainly centered on asynchronous, text-based conferences through email or responding to documents electronically. Given that the subject of the conference is writing, using a written medium would seem a natural and helpful process. But early adopters faced a number of challenges. Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch and Sam J. Racine (2002) found the time required to respond to texts in writing was often twice the time that would be spent in a face-to-face session. Written comments had to be crafted with greater care toward clarity as the asynchronous nature of the communication meant immediate feedback to indicate understanding or confusion was not available. And student writers, often already struggling with their writing skills, were not always able to communicate in writing about their writing problems. Jackson’s (2000) experience in the Purdue OWL found email-based conferences required greater writer responsibility to direct the tutoring by asking specific questions to which tutors would respond. In order to ask for relevant feedback, writers needed to independently reflect on their writing without the encouraging questions that are a normal feature of face-to-face tutoring. Many writing centers offering email tutoring also dealt with writer expectations of the email service as a final proofreading and editing service rather than a tutoring service. J. A. Jackson (2000), Dana
Anderson (2002), Joanna Castner (2000), and Ann Litman (2007) all report the need to address this issue in setting up their programs. This project did not include email tutoring, in part due to these issues and in part to focus on synchronous tutoring that more nearly replicates the face-to-face model currently in use.

When real-time, web-based collaboration became available, online tutoring reached a closer resemblance to the face-to-face tutoring model by using white boards or chat rooms. The tutor and student writer could both view the paper and correspond in real time using instant messaging tools. Although the faster feedback and a give-and-take exchange is more similar to verbal conversation, Dan Melzer (2005) found the limitations of chat room technology encouraged overlapping conversations that occasionally interrupted the flow of the tutoring and required the tutor to provide feedback in short phrases to avoid the appearance of long paragraphs of instruction and better replicate a face-to-face session.

With their focus on helping students become better writers, writing centers have discovered that incorporating online technology adds additional complexity to the tutoring sessions. As Beth Hewett and Christa Ehmann note in Preparing Educators for Online Writing Instruction: Principles and Processes (2004), “there is generally some type of learning curve for both students and instructors in using particular technological platforms” (p. 117). Ann Litman (2007) found that no assumptions should be made about computer literacy for tutors or student writers online, and the student writers using online tutoring services had the same need for easy access and clear instructions as center-based student writers. Mark Hall and Thia Wolf (2003) found the same was true for online tutors. They initially assumed different needs for designated online tutors, isolating them from face-to-face tutors and not including them in regular training and staff meetings. This model proved unsuccessful as they learned “we undercut our own values because we let the technology lead us, instead of leading it. In spite of our efforts, online tutoring felt
different to us, and so we treated it differently” (p. 5). Breuch and Racine (2000), however, found that though the tutoring experience itself is different in an online conferencing environment, the basic tutoring pedagogy need not change. They found tutors must be comfortable in the online environment, able to concentrate on the tutoring session without being distracted by using the technology. Randall L. Beebe and Mary J. Bonevelle (2000) further expanded the tutor’s role in the online environment, claiming tutors have a responsibility to assist student writers in using the technology.

Comfort with the technology was not the only concern with online tutoring. The online environment itself can make it difficult to build the personal relationship that is at the core of what Muriel Harris (1980) identifies as the three roles of the tutor: coach, commentator, and counselor. In the online environment, tutors and student writers must build a relationship without ever meeting face-to-face. Concerns about building a relationship in an online environment were raised by David Carlson and Eileen Apperson-Williams (2000) in their experience in developing online tutoring at CSU Fresno. Dan Melzer (2005) notes that it usually required repeated sessions to build building a rapport with students writers online.

Despite the differences in online versus face-to-face processes, “the goals underlying writing tutoring should remain the same,” according to Breuch and Racine (2000, p. 248). Yet incorporating online technology into the tutoring session can affect the writer-centered, non-directive philosophy of the writing center. David Healy, as quoted by Sara Kimball (1998), notes that the electronic documentation available from an online session provides a more permanent record with imputed completeness that can take on directive, instructional qualities that may not exist in more ephemeral spoken conversation. Sharon Thomas, Danielle DeVoss, and Mark Hara (1998) agreed that email and chat room technologies fostered a more evaluative tutoring session with less give and take, but also found the technology allowed tutors to expand the service and
work with a broader range of texts that included multi-media applications. Karen Kalteissen and Heather Robinson (2009) found using a hybrid approach that incorporated online chat and email response with face-to-face tutoring session allowed the student writer to retain control of the writing process while encouraging the more independent work.

Writing centers have struggled for over two decades to incorporate technology into their practice. From the initial text-based systems that provided grammar tutorials to the MOOs and MUDs of early networked computers, from static Web sites listing services to interactive web-based collaboration and tutoring, each advance in technology has required writing centers to rethink how to take advantage of the possibilities while staying true to their pedagogical values. The majority of literature on the topic, published from 2000 through 2004, coincides with the rapid rise of the Internet and the explosion of personal computer ownership. Although compositionists have moved on to newer areas of research, the struggle integrate new uses of technology into the writing center continues.
Chapter 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research phase of this thesis was scheduled during the Fall 2009 semester. During this semester we planned to test the feasibility of offering online tutoring in the University Writing Center (UWC). In particular, we wanted to verify the usability of the campus-supported iMEET software to determine if the issues uncovered in the pilot test of the previous semester could be overcome with more tutor training or if technical issues would continue to disrupt tutoring sessions. We also wanted to uncover any additional, unexpected issues before the service was rolled out on a larger scale to campus students.

The Pilot Test

The pilot test was designed to replicate in an online fashion the way face-to-face tutoring occurs in the physical environment. Online sessions would be scheduled ad hoc in response to requests. The student writer and the tutor would each receive an emailed appointment notice with an embedded URL link to a private session in the collaboration software, and would complete an online survey after the tutoring session to evaluate the online session from a technical and process viewpoint. In addition, each online session was recorded through the collaboration software. These recorded sessions would include any setup and pretesting done as part of the testing process as well as capturing audio and screen images from the online tutoring sessions. This original plan for the pilot test was not successful, and it was modified several times throughout the three-week test in an effort to find processes that worked. The process to set up an online session was too cumbersome; it proved difficult to find students, already stressed by the last few weeks of the semester, who were willing to take a chance on a new technology, and the technology itself proved to be less user-friendly than anticipated. Three of the four online
tutoring sessions held during the pilot test abandoned the technology midway, and finished in a face-to-face fashion. Despite these setbacks, the feedback from the student writers who participated showed enough continued interest in the online option that resolving these issues and moving forward with the implementation of an online tutoring program seemed worthwhile.

Determining the Structure of the Online Program

Dr. Melzer, the University Writing Center Director, and I discussed several possibilities for structuring the online program. We needed to balance testing the concept of online tutoring with providing service to the existing on-campus demand that regularly taxed the available tutor staff. We discussed whether set hours should be available for online tutoring, whether tutors should focus solely on online tutoring or in-person tutoring, and whether the service should be broadly advertised or offered on a more limited basis. Each of these decisions came with advantages and disadvantages to be weighed, and were complicated by concerns about the potential demand. If the online option was broadly offered and turned out to be very popular, would the UWC be able to provide successful online tutoring to these students? If the online option was lightly used, would potential tutoring hours be unused as dedicated online tutors would not be available to assist in the UWC?

We decided the online tutors would maintain a regular schedule of on-campus, in-person tutoring in the UWC during daytime hours or in the Library in the evenings, but would be trained to provide tutoring in the online environment as well when online sessions were scheduled. The tutors in the UWC could move to one of the Internet-connected computers in the Center for any online tutoring sessions. Library tutors would need to have a personal laptop that could be connected to the campus wireless access for scheduled tutoring sessions. This decision allowed the best use of the tutors in the uncertain experiment. They could participate in testing the online
tutoring concept, but would always be available for on-campus tutoring if demand for online tutoring was limited.

We anticipated the need to recruit at least six online tutors, and ended with seven volunteers. The online tutoring option was offered to both staff and intern tutors, with five interns and two staff tutors accepting the challenge. One intern tutor had scheduling problems and was unable to schedule the required five hours on on-campus tutoring during the UWC’s regular Monday through Thursday schedule. This provided the opportunity to have a tutor scheduled for dedicated online tutoring on Saturday mornings. This Saturday schedule was the only dedicated hours for online tutoring. Other online tutoring was scheduled by request only.

We decided to limit publicity about the online service as we were uncertain about the demand for online tutoring and were concerned about potentially overwhelming the UWC’s ability to provide quality services. Students could learn about the online tutoring service through a sign posted at the UWC front desk, and UWC Coordinators would be able to offer the option to students having difficulty finding available time to use the UWC services while on campus.

The concerns we addressed with these decisions mirror the concerns raised at other academic institutions that have implemented online writing services. The University of Toledo developed an e-Writing Center in 2005 to support a campus-wide distance education program, but the service was limited to just 12 hours per week due to budget constraints (Santovec, 2005). Writing Centers at California State University, Chico (Hall, & Wolf, 2003) and Salt Lake City Community College (Gardner, 1998) faced similar challenges with balancing online and face-to-face tutoring while providing service to the widest range of student writers.

The iMEET Technology

Selecting the software tool was an important task. The primary requirement for the tool was that using the technology would not take precedence over providing the tutoring services.
This meant that, for both tutors and student writers, the tool needed to be easy to acquire, simple to install and set up, and with training available but minimally required. In addition, technology support had to be available in case of problems. The CSUS Academic Resources and Creative Technologies team supports an online collaboration tool that is offered at no charge for academic uses. The tool is often used for distance education classes, and is used by some faculty to provide online office hours. As with many technology services provided by the Academic Resources and Creative Technologies team, the tool, Elluminate Live!, has been rebranded as iMEET for the CSUS campus. This is the same tool used for the pilot test.

As noted above, the pilot test exposed the potential for serious technical problems with the iMEET software, and other possible tools are freely available on the Internet. Concerns about the limitations of campus-supported educational software tools were explored by Reilly and Williams (2006). They noted that most academic institutions choose to purchase commercial software such as WebCT, Blackboard, or Elluminate Live! rather than using open source software than provides the opportunity for individual faculty customization. Although we chose to trade the flexibility of freely available tools for the support provided by standardized commercial software, this is a decision each writing center will need to make based on their needs.

Following the lessons learned in the pilot test in the Spring of 2009, we knew that creating individual sessions ad hoc in response to requests involved unnecessary administrative activity. To create an individual session, the Graduate Assistant Coordinator needed to schedule the session in the UWC scheduling program, create the virtual writing center session in the iMEET software, then email a very complex link to both the tutor and the tutee. This administrative overhead did not add any benefit to the tutoring session. We chose the simpler solution of creating a Virtual UWC that allows students to enter and receive services in much the same way they come in to the on-campus UWC.
This choice to create a Virtual UWC that mimics the physical UWC created an additional issue that we needed to resolve. Just as the physical UWC needs to be unlocked with a key before students can enter, the Virtual UWC needed to be controlled by a moderator before a tutoring session could take place. By campus policy, moderator accounts are provided only to faculty or staff and are not generally available to students. Since all of the tutors were students and would change from semester to semester, creating a moderator account for each student tutor was not only against the normal process but would be additional overhead for both the UWC and the Academic Resources and Creative Technologies staff. Although the Academic Resources and Creative Technologies department discourages the practice of shared accounts, they agreed to create a shared moderator for the UWC that could be used by all tutors to log in as a moderator and control the technical functions of the tutoring session. Dr. Melzer was then able to create a Virtual UWC that is always available and listed on the University’s iMEET site. Student writers can enter the Virtual UWC using a simple and clearly posted password for the session. The software does not limit the number of attendees to the session, so additional users can “drop in” in the same way they can enter the physical UWC. If additional users “drop in” to the Virtual UWC during a session, their presence is easily identifiable on the screen. The ability to eavesdrop undetected in an online forum or conference call, usually referred to as “lurking,” is not possible with the iMEET software.

_Tutor Training_

In the pilot project in the Spring of 2009 one tutor received a higher level of training and support in the use of the collaboration software, and this was the only successful online tutoring session. Tutor training in the iMEET software and their comfort level in using it was clearly an important factor in limiting the number of technical issues that could detract from the success of a tutoring session. We created two one-page instruction sheets customized for tutors and student
writers with step-by-step instructions on installing, logging in, and using the software. In addition, I provided all the volunteer tutors with links to the online iMEET training offered by the Academic Resources and Creative Technologies team as well as scheduling preliminary sessions to give tutors the ability to test the software in a live environment before they had an online tutoring session scheduled. Other writing centers have required substantially more training for fledgling online tutors. For example, the Indiana State University Writing Center trained tutors for one hour per week for five months prior to starting online tutoring (Enders, 2000). Because our tutors were volunteers for the project, we allowed them to self-select whether they received training. In retrospect, it is clear that a minimum level of formal training should be required for all new online tutors.

**Scheduling Appointments**

An unexpected issue appeared when it came time to schedule online appointments. The scheduling software used by the UWC was not configured to provide the ability to easily identify a tutoring session as online or in the UWC, yet the tutors needed to know whether a tutee was expected in person or should be met in the Virtual UWC. A temporary solution was to identify online sessions in the “Notes” box of the tutoring reservation form. This proved to be unreliable. Based on the reports from the scheduling software, I identified 98 individual online appointments for three tutors and 48 different student writers. Two of the three tutors showed every one of their tutoring sessions identified as online. In following up, however, one of these tutors reported no online sessions throughout the semester. In fact, I was able to confirm only two student writers using the online tutoring service throughout the semester. The unreliability of identifying online appointments through the scheduling software contributed to confusion in obtaining research results for this project.
Answering the Research Questions

I chose to use online surveys to collect experiential data for this project, with a request to follow up with personal interviews. Given the very nature of online tutoring, the use of a print survey form was not a suitable solution. As online access was a prerequisite for participating in the study, it seemed likely that participants using an online tutoring service would be more likely to respond to an online survey, and online surveys were easy for both students and tutors to access, complete and return from off campus. The use of surveys to determine student and tutor perceptions of the tutorial process has been shown to be successful in other research projects (Carino, & Enders, 2001; Kastman-Breuch, & Racine, 2000; Blythe, 1998). I hoped the surveys would provide answers several questions about the online tutoring experience.

I wanted to know if both the tutor and the student writer would have their needs met in the online session. While a student writer’s need is ostensibly assistance with a piece of writing, the UWC also provides a community in which to discuss writing and the how to approach writing in the academic world. In other words, while they may want a quick fix to the specific piece, they also hope to learn how to write text that doesn’t need to be “fixed” because, as Stephen North writes, “they are self-selectively enrolled in a program – a coherent four year sequence of study – that values writing” (North, 1994, p. 16). The tutor also has needs that must be met in the tutoring session. To be helpful and provide the assistance and community the student writer desires is certainly one need. But tutors may have additional needs to engage in conversations about writing: to find meanings in the texts of the student writers, to be a part of a writing community, or other, more individual needs.

Whether or not the tutor or student writer had their needs met in an online tutoring session, I hoped to learn if they felt the online experience was equivalent to the face-to-face experience, or would it be a less-desirable option that was better than no access at all. Like the first question,
this would be subjective for each tutor and student writer, and might be different from student to
student, and even from session to session. Just as all tutoring sessions are not always successful, I
did not anticipate that every online session would be successful. I hoped to learn, though, if even
sessions that participants felt were not equal to a face-to-face session still had value.

The final question I hoped to answer was whether commuter students would take greater
advantage of UWC services if they were offered online. Although it seems intuitively that this
would be true, as a non-traditional, commuter student myself I felt there might be other, unknown
factors that would inhibit adoption by these students. To understand whether this target group
was taking advantage of the online service, I asked for demographic data on each student writer.
Because the tutors were known, there were no demographic questions included on that survey.
However, tutors were provided the opportunity to volunteer for an interview just as the student
writers were.

Although the surveys were short, just five to seven questions using an ordered category
scale, only one student writer responded to the survey during the Fall 2009 semester and did not
agree to be interviewed. No tutors responded to the survey in the Fall semester. One tutor agreed
to an interview, but failed to attend the scheduled interview. (The Student Writer Survey is
attached as Appendix A. The Tutor Survey is attached as Appendix B.) As a result of this poor
response and the resulting lack of data, I continued the research project into the Spring 2010
semester.

Spring 2010 Follow-Up

In Spring 2010 the UWC officially began offering online tutoring as a formal service. Two
tutors signed up to provide online tutoring for an hour each week, and time was set aside in their
schedule strictly for online tutoring, allowing them to tutor from an off-campus location. The
service was announced as part of the outreach to campus writing classes, and according to Mandy
Proctor, Assistant Director of the University Writing Center, students responded to the announcement with obvious interest. In addition, the service was announced on flyers distributed around campus regarding the services available at the UWC. As with the Fall 2009 semester, I offered individual and group training on the software to the tutors.

Although the research project officially ended with the end of the Fall 2009 semester, I followed up throughout the Spring 2010 semester to collect additional data from tutors and student writers for this project that could be incorporated into the results for the project. Two additional student writers responded to the surveys in the Spring 2010 semester, although none agreed to an interview. Both Spring 2010 tutors responded to the survey, and one submitted to an interview.

Given the limited number of responses, three student writers and two tutors, very little analysis of the data was possible. As a result of this small data set, I expanded my research to include the UWC staff and management. Three Graduate Assistant Coordinators who manage the scheduling process and day-to-day operations of the UWC agreed to interviews, along with the Writing Center Director and Assistant Writing Center Director. The results of these interviews provides insight into the ambivalence a Writing Center community may feel toward online tutoring, and provides guidance for addressing these concerns.
Chapter 4
ANALYSIS OF DATA

By any objective analysis, this project was not a complete success. The low usage of the service makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to validate any assumptions about the potential of the service into the future. The sample size of student writer responses to the survey questions was not large enough to draw any conclusions about the type of student who would be most interested in using the service and whether the service meets their needs. More information was available from tutors and University Writing Center (UWC) staff, providing some insight into the potential of online tutoring from within the UWC itself.

The limited usage and resultant dearth of data, however, does provide insight into the issues surrounding the implementation of online technology into a Writing Center. This analysis will look at the selection, cost, and supportability of the technology, the training of tutors and staff, and the impact of the theoretical and ideological questions raised by introducing distance learning into the intimate space of a Writing Center.

Analysis of the Project Structure

Like many Writing Centers, the UWC often struggles with a demand for services that exceeds the available tutoring hours. As part of the normal year-end survey in the spring of 2009, the UWC included questions to judge student writer interest in online tutoring. Of those who responded, thirty-two percent said they would use the service if it was available, while fifty-seven percent were not interested or did not have access to a computer off-campus. While these were responses were from existing clients of the UWC, the interest level indicated created concern that the potential demand could overwhelm the Center’s ability to provide quality services. As a result, the online service was not heavily marketed, relying instead on a small sign at the
reception desk and suggestions from the Graduate Assistant Coordinators (GACs) if students indicated an interest.

Despite having six tutors with a minimum of 30 hours per week of tutoring available, I was only able to positively identify two students who took advantage of the online tutoring option during the Fall 2009 semester. Both of these student writers worked with a tutor who had time constraints preventing her from meeting the five-hours-per-week requirement on campus and tutored online only on Saturday mornings. This arrangement also provided some validation for the assumption that, in addition to providing access to tutoring services to CSUS’s part-time commuter students, the availability of online tutoring would allow tutors, who are also students sharing the same constraints, to tutor more hours and provide tutoring at more convenient times.

During the Spring 2010 semester, two tutors were assigned to online tutoring with two hours per week set aside specifically for online training. Again, these tutors with fixed hours for online tutoring did have students use the online service during the hours set aside for it. Although the service was announced on flyers and in classroom presentations, I could find no evidence that student writers asked for the service. In talking with the GACs making tutoring reservations, they expressed reluctance to push the service, either because they were not familiar enough with the service to be able to explain it or were not fully supportive of the online option in principle.

It is clear from these experiences that having tutors with specific hours dedicated to online tutoring resulted in more online tutoring being scheduled. What is less clear is why. Is it indicative of GAC reluctance to support online tutoring or simple inertia in the face of something new? In interviews with several of the GACs, I asked about this and received mixed answers. Given the limited hours, most admitted inertia was a contributing factor in scheduling online appointments when the option of face-to-face tutoring was available. When certain tutors have specific hours in which they will only do online tutoring, GACs scheduling appointments at that
time must acknowledge the online tutoring option and discuss it with the student writer before scheduling the appointment. If the tutor has the option of online or on campus tutoring, the GACs can simply offer the on-campus option only. Some GACs also acknowledged they were reluctant to schedule online tutoring when on-campus tutoring was available because they didn’t feel online tutoring offered the same connection between the tutor and the student writer that is available in a face-to-face environment. Although not all GACs felt this way, it is important to acknowledge that, just as online tutoring is not a good fit for all student writers, it is also not a good fit for all tutors. There are those who need the more personalized tutoring environment of the physical Writing Center, and those who are more comfortable with the distance and anonymity that can be available with online tutoring.

This ambivalence to online tutoring is not unique to the UWC. Each advance in online tutoring, from asynchronous comments emailed back and forth to synchronous chat tutoring to synchronous tutoring with voice communications has come closer to emulating the traditional face-to-face tutoring environment. But the physical distance inherent in online tutoring continues to cause concerns among Writing Center scholars. David Carlson and Eileen Apperson-Williams (2000) describe this concern clearly. “For us, the face-to-face relationship is one of the joys, as well as the reason for success, in a tutoring session. With online tutoring, this relationship is severed. The tutoring table is replaced with a computer screen: cold, sterile, and, to many, uninviting” (p. 129). A research project at Rutgers University in 2007 (Kalteissen, & Robinson, 2009) testing online tutoring found the tutors so skeptical of the ability to build a relationship in the online environment that they chose to limit the outreach value of online tutoring by implementing a hybrid approach where online tutoring supplements face-to-face tutoring, but does not replace it.
What is not clear from the experience with scheduling is the potential response of student writers to offering online tutoring as an option. Although the student response on the Spring 2009 survey and anecdotal responses to announcing the availability in classroom presentations showed a definite interest, that did not translate into demand at the scheduling counter. This is consistent with the response to online tutoring offerings from other Writing Centers. Mark Hall and Thia Wolf (2003) at California State University, Chico, found initial student response to online tutoring so light the campus Provost declined to continue funding the program. Doug Enders (2000) also found initial student writer response to online tutoring built slowly. The data collected has not provided any answers as to why, but speculation provides two possibilities. The first possibility is that the Writing Center is envisioned as a service to support students in a challenging academic environment. They may be reluctant to risk their academic success on a new and untested service. Although research about student writer response to online tutoring in Writing Centers is limited, a 2001 study of distance education (Brady, 2001) found that 35 percent of students who participated in online classes felt online education was a student-only function that required minimal involvement from the instructor. Students who are seeking input from a tutor may not believe they will receive the feedback online they would receive in a face-to-face session. The second possibility is that the same inertia exists among student writers as exists among GACs. It is easier to schedule the standard on-campus tutoring session than to explore the new option, even if it may ultimately be more convenient. The same 2001 study found most students enrolled in distance education were full-time students living between five and ten miles from campus. These students would be able to attend on-campus tutoring with little trouble.
**Analysis of the iMEET Technology**

Any technology tool selected will always have what Breuch called the “frustration factor, or the degree to which the technology is easy or difficult to use” (2004, p 98). The campus-support iMEET software selected for this project was no exception. The project did show that the software works as the online tutoring software, although it is not particularly intuitive for users. The software is compatible with both the Windows and Macintosh operating systems recommended by CSUS Information Resources and Technology (IRT) for use by students at the University. Just as important, the software is supported by the campus, so tutors or student writers can obtain assistance from the IRT Service Desk if necessary.

The iMEET software is in use throughout the University to provide online classes and “virtual office hours” for professors. The creation of a “virtual writing center” is in keeping with the design and intended use of the software and did not require any unique configurations. However, technical problems with the iMEET software were the biggest complaint for UWC staff and tutors. Upon investigation, the technical problems tutors and student writers experienced with the iMEET software were not a result of a flaw in the technology itself, but were due to difficulties in the installation of the technology on the tutor or student writer computer. Although information on installation and setup was provided to both tutors and tutees prior to their first appointment and is also available from the IRT, this proved insufficient. The University of Pittsburgh Writing Center faced similar issues and found “clear, explicit communication with students during appointment setting, advertising and promotion, and online communication” (Litman, 2007, p. 7) using email was necessary to give student writers the information needed to have a successful online tutoring session. Writing Center administrators setting up online tutoring services will need to consider what instructions student writers will need to obtain and install the collaboration software and how to provide it.
The iMEET installation issues revolved around two primary issues—Java software downloads and audio setup problems. The iMEET software requires the Sun Microsystems Java Web Start library, a common component needed to run web-based software, be installed in order to install the iMEET software. If the client system does not have the Java Web Start library installed, the iMEET software provides the link to install it. Installing this prerequisite software proved confusing to some users. In addition, the time needed to download and install the software was highly dependent upon the speed of the user’s Internet connection. The Quick Start instructions provided to both the tutor and student writer directed them to perform the initial installation and test the connection well before the start of the tutoring session but this suggestion was not always followed. As a result, some tutoring sessions were cut short due to initial installation delays. Once the tutor or student writer had installed the required software however, subsequent sessions required only a few minutes to initiate.

The audio setup issues were very similar in that once they were resolved they did not tend to recur, but the initial setup could be confusing. The iMEET software provides an Audio Setup Wizard that identifies possible audio devices and provides step by step instructions for identifying and testing the speakers and microphone devices. However, if the user had multiple audio devices available, identifying the correct device to be set up required some computer literacy or the patience and willingness to test different configurations.

In response to the installation problems experienced by a number of users, a video of the installation process was developed by one of the Graduate Assistant Coordinators (GACs) in Spring 2010. This video will be made available on the UWC web site beginning in Fall 2010 and should provide additional assistance for tutors and student writers who prefer a more visual instruction medium than that provided by written documentation.
Studies investigating computer literacy and computer-based learning acceptance among today’s college students (Kipnis, & Childs, 2005; Oblinger 2003) reflect student’s broad experience with Internet research and social networking tools such as email and Facebook, however, this experience does not always translate into comfort with other computer technologies. Student experience with web collaboration software does not appear as widespread. As a result, a higher level of computer literacy or prior experience with web collaboration software may be required for online tutors to allow them to assist the student writers with the program as necessary.

The iMEET tool has audio, video, and chat capabilities built into the software. In setting up this project, instructions were provided for the use of the audio features only, with the chat feature available as a backup in the case of audio problems. The audio feature caused most of the technical issues during a tutoring session, and occasionally the chat feature was used to exchange telephone numbers to continue the session with off-line audio. Using the telephone instead of the online audio proved an equivalent substitute for the online audio, but raised concerns in some tutors about individual privacy as it required one party be willing to share a phone number with the other. To eliminate any privacy concerns, better instructions on the use of the online audio should be preferred over encouraging the exchange of telephone numbers.

The iMEET video capability is available as a standard component and can be enabled by the tutor and incorporated into any tutoring session if both parties have webcams configured on their systems. Adding the webcam-based video capability into the tutoring session would provide visual feedback and more closely replicate the face-to-face nature of an on-campus tutoring session. The visual feedback also adds an additional element of connection between the tutor and the student writer. Video is provided through the use of onscreen windows, one showing the camera’s view for each endpoint of the web conference. However, as Doug Enders (2000) found,
too many viewing windows can create a distraction from the shared text, and with the technical problems experienced surrounding the use of the system audio, additional issues can be expected during the setup of the web camera functions. Only if both parties are comfortable with the software and the device configuration should video be added to a tutoring session. The setup and use of the many features of the software should not take time away from the tutoring session itself. This concept of not letting the availability of a variety of features overwhelm the utility of the software is one I have followed successfully in my experience in business software implementations. Just because a feature is available doesn’t mean it must, or even should, be used.

*Analysis of the iMEET Software Training*

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the results of the Spring 2009 pilot project indicated that tutor training on the iMEET software would be important to the success of online training. In addition to handouts for both tutors and student writers, every volunteer tutor received links to the online iMEET training offered by the Academic Resources and Creative Technologies team. Tutors were also offered one-on-one training and the option of attending training sessions to give them the ability to test the software in a live environment before their first online session. In addition to learning the software functionality, the training would have helped each tutor work through any installation issues prior to the first tutoring session.

In the Fall 2009 semester, a couple of the six volunteer tutors went through the online training and felt they were comfortable with the software. I scheduled one-on-one sessions with two additional tutors to provide more in-depth training. No tutors joined the pre-scheduled training sessions. In the Spring 2010 semester neither of the two online tutors took advantage of any preliminary training, although I did meet with one halfway through the semester in response to specific complaints about audio issues. The audio issue is one that is covered in the handout.
and was easily resolved with a little training. As noted above, had this training occurred before
the first online session, the issue would have been addressed and resolved prior to disrupting any
online tutoring sessions. In order for online tutoring to be a success, the tutors must be
comfortable with the software and must be trained in the use of the moderator tools. Offering
training as optional is not sufficient to allow for a successful online tutoring session. In addition
to the tutor understanding how to use the moderator tools, the tutor must be able to coach the
student writer through the steps to share a paper in the iMEET software.

In addition to training on the software itself, tutors need training to conduct effective online
sessions. Lee-Ann Kastman-Breuch and Sam Racine (2002), Karen Kalteissen and Heather
Robinson (2009) and Sarah Rilling (2005) all discuss the need to provide even experienced face-
to-face tutors with additional training in the online environment. Since online tutoring in iMEET
does not require written feedback via chat, tutors do not need additional training in written
feedback, but practice in manipulating the software and building rapport with the student writer in
the absence of visual clues are important to their success in the online session.

After interviewing several of the GACs, I believe training them on the use of the software
and the basic functionality offered should also be required, even though they won’t be tutoring
using the tool. Only one GAC had used the software in another class. Most were not aware of
how the software functioned or how it replicated certain features of the in-person tutoring session.
The lack of knowledge made them reluctant to encourage use of the online tutoring option, and
they felt unable to answer any questions regarding the service. Providing Writing Center staff
with training, perhaps during a staff meeting, will give them the background knowledge they will
need to feel comfortable talking with students about the online tutoring option. They will also be
better prepared to answer questions or direct student writers to technical help if needed. Writing
Center staff training may also counter the ambivalence Writing Center staff feel about the
pedagogical implications of online tutoring. Experience with online tutoring can reduce concerns about the loss of face-to-face interactions (Carlson, & Apperson-Williams, 2000).

The final group that needs training on the iMEET collaboration software is the student writers themselves. Although the iMEET software is commonly used at CSUS, it is possible for a student to go through his or her entire baccalaureate program and never encounter a class using iMEET. As Kipnis and Childs (2005) and Oblinger (2003) found, students do not have a uniform level of technology skills. Students who are not computer literate or who have not used collaboration software in the past may require more technical assistance than can be given in a tutoring session. Although asking students to self-select whether they are comfortable with the technical requirements of online tutoring is necessary, non-technical students may still opt for online tutoring. One online tutor noted that she had student writers who would take the timeslot because it was convenient or the only one available, but would then try to convince her to meet them in the Library rather than use the online service. As has been shown with the tutors and GACs, once student writers are familiar with the iMEET tool, they should become more comfortable with the online tutoring option. Student writer concerns with installing and learning collaboration technologies is a logical area for further study.

**Analysis of the Survey Responses**

Given the distance-learning nature of online tutoring, using a web-based survey for data collection seemed the best option. The idea was to make it as easy as possible for tutors and student writers to provide feedback. Two surveys were created, tailored to the tutor (see Appendix B) or the student writer (see Appendix A). Both surveys solicited qualitative rather than quantitative data using an ordered-category scale, and focusing on the quality of the online tutoring experience as perceived by the tutor or student writer. I felt the qualitative approach respected the tutoring session as a social experience as well as an instructive one.
A link to the tutor survey was sent to each of the seven online tutors. Two responded via email stating they had never had an online session, including one who was listed as the tutor for more than a third of the online tutoring sessions scheduled in the UWC’s scheduling software. This clearly proved the information in the scheduling software was inaccurate, and no hard data was available as to the number or identity of students who participated in the online tutoring project. None of the tutors responded to the online survey. The one tutor with dedicated online hours agreed via email to an interview, but was unavailable at the scheduled time and did not reschedule.

A link to the student writer survey was sent by email to each of the 48 student writers identified in the scheduling software as having at least one online tutoring session in the Fall 2009 semester. The email address was collected from the scheduling software. Just four student writers responded to the survey, with two of those providing the information that they had never had an online tutoring session. All four student writers refused the request for a more in-depth interview as to their experiences with online tutoring. The low response validated the information from the tutors that the data in the schedule software was inaccurate.

The responses of the two students who used the Virtual UWC were mixed. One student writer, a part-time student on campus three days per week, liked the service and found it easy to use. When asked to indicate whether this respondent liked or disliked online communication, the respondent noted he or she liked the online communication method, but in the area for comments added “I like communicating face to face, also.” When asked to rate the overall Virtual UWC experience, this student selected “I got the help I wanted” and would recommend the service to others. The second student writer, a full-time student, was not as pleased with the online service. This student clearly preferred the face-to-face tutoring offered in the UWC, stating “I understand better from learning first hand.” This student rated the overall Virtual UWC experience by
selecting the option “It was okay, I guess.” This respondent made it clear that he or she would be less likely to use the UWC if services were through online services.

Interestingly, the two responding student writers who had never used the Virtual UWC had almost exactly the same divergent feelings about the idea of online tutoring services. Both were part-time students, and one, a graduate student, clearly stated “I prefer in-person tutoring” despite never having experienced the online service. The other, a junior, indicated an interest in using the Virtual UWC and would recommend the option to others.

I also sent surveys to the tutors and student writers who participated in the Spring 2010 online tutoring program. One student writer, a full-time student on campus four days per week, completed the survey. This student clearly liked the idea of the online tutoring, but had technical issues that prevented a successful tutoring session. One of the issues, difficulty in sharing the paper, could have been easily resolved with better training. The second technical issue, a slow response time due to a limited Internet connection, will continue to be a concern in an online collaborative environment.

Both tutors completed surveys in the Spring 2010 semester, and one tutor agreed to an interview regarding the online tutoring option. Both tutors indicated they had technical issues that hindered their tutoring sessions, with communication and document sharing issues as the primary concern. One tutor did not feel she was able to successfully provide the assistance the student writers needed using the online service, and the other perceived the tutoring sessions as “Okay, I guess.” Neither tutor felt the online service was equivalent to the face-to-face tutoring model. The tutor who agreed to the interview made it clear she felt the online tutoring service needs to continue, but that it is not the right solution for every tutor or student writer. She also felt that online tutoring sessions should be scheduled for sixty minute sessions only, as thirty
minute sessions did not provide enough time without the non-verbal cues from face-to-face communication.

Analysis of Interviews with UWC Staff

In addition to attempting to collect information from the tutors and student writers who used the online tutoring service, I interviewed the UWC Director, Assistant Director, and most of the Graduate Assistant Coordinators to gain insight into their views of online tutoring.

The most consistent feedback from those working in the UWC is the need for required training for tutors and GACs in the installation and operation of the software. Even those GACs who rated their computer literacy as relatively high indicated that lack of specific knowledge of the iMEET software made them hesitant to support it as an online option. There was a general agreement that providing hands-on training for the GACs and the tutors in the software, operating the software both as a tutor-moderator and a student writer, will provide the staff with the knowledge to feel more confident the quality of tutoring that can be provided online and in answering potential questions from student writers.

There was less agreement on the need for training for the student writers. Although a number of those interviewed were adamant that only student writers with a high level of computer literacy were good candidates for the online tutoring option, this was by no means a unanimous opinion. The iMEET program is used in many schools within CSUS, and supports students of varying technical levels. However, the student needs to take some responsibility for obtaining technical assistance when needed. The tutor interviewed noted that the student writers having technical problems expected her to be able to assist them. Providing students with information on campus-supported technical assistance may help address this expectation, but additional tutor training may allow them to be helpful in certain circumstances. Both Enders
(2000) and Breuch and Racine (2002) noted that tutoring sessions should last at least one hour to allow time for any delays in technical connectivity.

Perhaps the area of least agreement among Writing Center staff is how the online tutoring program in the UWC should be designed in the future. Most agreed that if the program continues, more tutoring hours dedicated to online tutoring are needed. Yet in talking with the UWC directors and staff, it is clear that while there is an interest in the possibility of reaching more student writers online, it is mixed with a fear of losing the personal connection to an impersonal technology. Suggestions included requiring a mix of online and on-campus tutoring for student writers wanting online tutoring, perhaps similar to the program implemented at Rutgers University (Kaltiessen, & Robinson, (2009), and finding a method for evaluating students for computer literacy and online “fit” prior to scheduling appointments. While most agreed that offering online tutoring may allow access for more student writers, they did not want the new service to change the basic social constructivist nature of the UWC.
Chapter 5

CONCLUSIONS

This project was envisioned to test the concept of online tutoring in the University Writing Center (UWC) over the course of two semesters at California State University, Sacramento. The original goal in implementing online tutoring services was to extend the reach of the UWC to more part-time and commuter students, and provide greater availability of tutoring hours by allowing tutors to provide services from more convenient, off-campus locations. By surveying tutors and student writers, I hoped to learn if online tutoring could provide the same focus on developing the student as a writer and thinker that underscores the philosophy of the face-to-face sessions in the physical UWC. Would both the tutor and the student writer have their needs met in the online session? Did they feel the online experience was equivalent to the face-to-face experience? Or would it be a less-desirable option that was better than no access at all?

The online tutoring offered through the project was not well used and did not return enough data to fully address the questions, although it did provide some hints as to what might be found by continuing to provide online tutoring to collect a larger data sample. The project also provided empirical data on implementing online tutoring in the UWC that can be used to improve the online tutoring service in the future. Of equal interest, the project also discovered some clear impediments that will need to be addressed in order to gain better acceptance for online tutoring.

UWC Provides More than Tutoring

The publicized goal of the UWC is to “offer help with reading and writing at all points in the process, from initial planning and organizing through developing and revising a paper or understanding difficult texts” (Writing Center). This is usually provided through peer tutoring. When described in this way, the UWC provides a straightforward service, not terribly different
from other advisory services requiring a certain level of expertise such as a financial advisor or nutrition counselor. From this viewpoint, providing a writing tutor service in a more efficient manner would seem to be a natural goal. In my interviews with tutors, however, it was clear that providing the tutoring service was not considered a service transaction, but was instead seen as building a collegial relationship between two writers talking about writing. This emphasis on building relationships echoes the coach, commentator, and counselor roles Muriel Harris (1980) identifies for the writing tutor, and is a central concern for others (Melzer, 2005), (Carlson, & Apperson-Williams, 2000), (Kalteissen, & Robinson, 2009) when considering online tutoring services.

Building relationships may also serve an important function for student writers by, as Nancy Grimm points out, supporting “students’ efforts to enter into a relationship with academic values, disciplinary texts, [and] mainstream literacy” (1999, p. 19). Seen in this light, the convenience of online tutoring for commuter or part-time students can be outweighed by the importance of an academic community that provides a comfortable portal into the University world. Although building relationships through synchronous online tutoring is possible, the very medium itself indicates a distance between participants. Whether it is called “online tutoring,” or the broader term “distance education” is used, the implied separation makes building and maintaining a relationship seem more complex.

Kevin Kruger (2000) and Marcia Roe Clark (2006) both note that commuter students often have weaker connections to campus activities and less interaction with faculty and peers. Providing easier access to campus services and academic interaction through online technologies seemed to be a logical step, but the inherent distance may exacerbate rather than improve the lack of connection to the campus. This inferred causality was neither proved nor disproved by this project, but the inference is
strengthened by statistics that show distance learning programs experience drop-out rates significantly higher than classroom-based courses (Carr, 2000).

Limitations of Student Writer and Tutor Computer Literacy

The resistance shown by both tutors and student writers to engaging in online tutoring may also be evidence of a more general lack of confidence in their technology skills. This may seem counterintuitive to anyone who has watched students as they use cell phones to text friends, send an update to Twitter or Facebook, watch a video from Youtube before class, or access the Internet to look up a disputed fact during class. However, while most university students today have been surrounded by digital technology for most of their lives, their use of technology tends to be limited to specific areas. Researchers in Australia, Canada, Switzerland, and the United States (Bullen, Morgan, Belfer, & Qayyum, 2008; Kennedy et al., 2007; Kvavik, 2005) have found that “university students do not really have a deep knowledge of technology, but that this is often limited to basic office suite skills, e-mailing, text messaging, [Facebook], and surfing the Internet” (Kirschner, & Karpinski, 2010, p. 1238).

These studies make it clear that, despite the popular mythology that all students are technologically literate, there is a wide variation in the level of computer literacy among students (Kirtley, 2005). Students already challenged by the rigors of academic writing may be understandably intimidated by using an unfamiliar technology to obtain assistance. Joe Baggaley makes the case clearly in “The Luddite Revolt Continues” by stating “not all teachers, nor all students, strive enthusiastically to embrace the latest technological approaches” (2010, p. 337).
The Conundrum of Online Education

A 2008 report by the U.S. Department of Education found over two-thirds of U.S. colleges and universities offered some form on online education (Parsad, & Lewis, 2009). The report also found that, of those offering online education, 68 percent said that meeting the needs of students who required more flexibility was a factor in making the decision to offer online education. Yet, as this project found, students and instructors are not always eager to lose the face-to-face classroom environment. It’s a conundrum; educational institutions are using technology to meet the needs of the students, yet students are hesitant to use technology for education.

University administrators and researchers often disagree on student attitudes toward technology in education. For example, researchers have found that students not only prefer to learn from books over computers, but they expect to learn more from the books (Noyes, & Garland, 2006), and that traditional teaching methods were strongly preferred over technology-based methods (Hunt, Thomas, & Eagle, 2002). Yet the September 2010 issue of University Business found that “today’s students are demanding newer and more innovative technologies as part of their college experiences” and that a majority of Information Technology professionals felt that online collaboration skills are important for college graduates (Clayton, 2010).

One method being explored for resolving conundrum of online education is the hybrid or blended model. This model combines a reduced amount of classroom teaching with more extensive online education. A 2009 report by the U.S. Department of Education found this approach provided greater advantages than either method individually (Ash, 2010). Many school administrators like the model as it allows for better interaction between students and teachers as well as better oversight (Cavanagh, 2007) while students in blended or hybrid classes have
reported both positive and negative responses. “Convenience, instructor availability, and online interactions were cited as positives for the online course while the negatives were technology hiccups and a sense of feeling lost in Cyberspace” (El Mansour, & Mupinga, 2007). This hybrid model may provide a good model for online tutoring in the UWC as well, as discussed in the next section.

Maintaining the Personal Connection

The prevailing imagery of the Writing Center is that of tutor and student writer with heads bent together over a paper, fostering a personal connection as they discuss the higher level concerns of writing. The idea of tutoring as an interpersonal bond is part of a pedagogy of social constructivism embraced by the UWC and many other Writing Centers that celebrates the peer relationship of student tutor and student writer coming together as “colearners who collaborate to negotiate meanings and construct knowledge” (Murphy and Sherwood, 2008). It is understandable that Writing Center staff and tutors are wary of losing this connection through the physical distance inherent in online tutoring.

Using online tutoring software such as iMEET with synchronous audio provides some interpersonal connection even through the distance. The tone and inflections of voice, along with back-channel cues and phatic language, can provide feedback beyond the words used. But the lack of non-verbal feedback and visual connection inevitably reduce the interpersonal feel. Indeed, it would be possible, even likely, that a tutor and student writer could meet online weekly for an entire semester and still walk past each other on campus without recognition. Whether this should be considered a negative or positive outcome of online tutoring will be different based on each individual’s need for interpersonal connection and recognition.

One way to enhance the interpersonal connection through online tutoring is the use of the video options incorporated in most collaboration software. As noted before, adding the video
windows can be a distraction from concentrating on the shared text, and will add an additional technical element to each session. However, training can be provided to enable the tutor-moderators to enable the feature in the iMEET software if agreed to by both the student writer and the tutor. It should be noted that the anonymous nature of online tutoring may be part of the draw for some student writers, and they may not wish to enable their web-cam even if it is available. This desire for personal privacy should be honored.

The use of a hybrid model may be a good way to enhance the interpersonal connection by requiring at least one face-to-face, on-campus tutoring session prior to beginning online tutoring. This will assist the tutor and the student writer in visualizing the connection even without video windows on screen. This requirement may inhibit the ability for some commuter or part-time students from taking advantage of the online tutoring services as they may not be able to schedule an on-campus meeting at a convenient time. However, as data showing greater usage of UWC services by part-time and commuter students was not gathered as part of this project, this is a surmise and may be a topic for further study.

Improving the Service

The most visible area for improvement found in the study is resolving the technical issues that interfere with the tutoring session and reduce tutor and student writer satisfaction. Using campus-supported iMEET software has certain benefits for a Writing Center, including support for campus-recommended operating systems and browsers, technical support, and published service levels. However, iMEET if the software proves unusable, other web-based collaboration products are available, and it may be beneficial to test these products. Web-based collaboration tools designed for business use may be easier for students to use, but will likely have licensing, usage, or technical support fees associated with their use. Similar tools may be obtained at no charge via the Internet, but
usually do not offer technical support, published service levels, or multiple operating system or browser support.

Web-based collaboration is a growing field and new tools are being developed and existing tools improved at a rapid pace. The digital literacy of students in web-based collaboration software may not be at a high level now, but continued exposure to and use of the tools will likely increase their comfort level in much the same way that exposure to and use of Internet search and social networking tools have increased students computer literacy in those areas. Until that time, hands-on training in the iMEET online tutoring software should be required for all Writing Center staff and online tutors to enable them to understand the software tools as both a moderator-tutor and a student writer.

Writing Centers considering adding an online tutoring service should also schedule a sufficient quantity of tutoring hours dedicated to online tutoring on a weekly basis to allow online tutors to meet regularly with student writers, and the availability should be publicized. Online tutoring sessions should be scheduled for a minimum of sixty minutes, not thirty, to allow for the added communication needed to overcome the lack of visual feedback. Any instructions provided for student writers should be clearly posted on the Writing Center website and student writers should be directed to them prior to the first scheduled appointment. And as mentioned before, tutors should be empowered to refer student writers back to the face-to-face tutoring method if they prove unsuited to the online tutoring environment.

Should Online Tutoring Continue?

The limited data collected from student writers and online tutors cannot answer the primary question as to whether both the tutors and student writers had their needs met in the online session. Of the five ordered-category choices offered in the survey, all three responding
student writers who attended online tutoring sessions perceived their tutoring session differently, choosing the following options: I got the help I wanted; It was okay, I guess; and I don’t feel I got the help I wanted with the online service. On the same scale, the two tutors who responded to the tutor-specific survey were evenly divided between satisfaction and lack of satisfaction with the results of the tutoring session, choosing the options “It was okay, I guess” and “I don’t feel I was able to provide the help the tutee wanted with the online service” when asked to rate the overall online tutoring experience.

Although based on a handful of survey responses, this information indicates sizeable percentage both student writers and tutors thought the online tutoring session could be successful. This, combined with the Spring 2009 survey response showing thirty-two percent of respondents would be interested in using the online service, provides supporting data for continuing the experiment with online tutoring services.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If the Writing Center offered online tutoring, I would use the services.</td>
<td>32.6%</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If the Writing Center offered online tutoring, I would not use the services because I prefer meeting face-to-face.</td>
<td>54.3%</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If the Writing Center offered online tutoring, I would not use the service because I do not have regular access to a computer.</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Student Writer Interest in Online Tutoring

However, these percentages also show that online tutoring is not the best solution for all tutors or student writers. Student writers scheduling online tutoring because it is the only available or most convenient time may be more comfortable in a face-to-face environment. Student writers who
request face-to-face tutoring should be accommodated whenever possible, and tutors should be encouraged to recommend student writers request on-campus, face-to-face tutoring if they prove unsuitable to the online tutoring environment.

Areas for Further Study

This project did not provide answers to all the research questions anticipated at the start of the project, however it did provide valuable insight into the issues and concerns surrounding the addition of online tutoring to the services provided by a Writing Center. Although the response data obtained from student writers and tutors was limited, I believe the online service can provide tutoring that meets the needs of student writers and can expand the reach of the UWC to meet a potentially underrepresented group of students. As the service becomes a more consistent offering and more data is available, further research in this area should be undertaken.

In reviewing tutor comments in the online scheduling software, one tutor briefly mentioned using the chat feature of the online software to assist with tutoring for a hearing-impaired student writer. While this is anecdotal information that I was unable to verify through contact with the tutor or student writer, this may provide another area of outreach for the UWC, and is deserving of further study.

Final Thoughts

I hoped this project would show that providing online tutoring in the UWC extended the reach of the writing center to more part-time, commuter, and non-traditional students that don’t have convenient access to the services provided. I also wanted to determine whether online services could substantially replicate the face-to-face services provided. Although the web-collaboration technology mimics the tutoring interaction found in the face-to-face environment, the study showed that it doesn’t duplicate the community found in the UWC.
If the UWC continues to offer online tutoring, several issues need to be addressed. The difficulties in using the iMEET technology can be addressed with additional tutor training, and more comfort and familiarity with the technology can reduce the tutor reluctance to use the software. As free collaboration technologies improve, they can also be tested for ease and supportability. The distance inherent in the online environment can be minimized by using a hybrid approach that includes some face-to-face sessions as well as online sessions.

Although disappointing in some respects, I have enjoyed working on this project. I found peer tutoring at the UWC to be personally rewarding and I felt I provided assistance to the student writers with whom I met. The chance to expand that service to others, both tutors and student writers, who might not otherwise be able to take advantage of it and in the process implement something that might live on at CSUS provides a sense of accomplishment that goes beyond writing a thesis or obtaining a degree.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

Student Writer Survey

Online Student Writer Experience

Consent to Participate in Research

You are being asked to participate in research being conducted by Nancy Wilson, a graduate student in English (Composition) at California State University, Sacramento. This research will study the efficacy of an Online University Writing Center providing tutoring services via the World Wide Web.

You participated in an online tutoring session in Fall 2009, and you are being asked to complete an online survey about your experience. The survey should not take more than ten minutes of your time, and will ask questions to determine your opinion of the online tutoring experience. If you agree to be contacted, you may also be asked later to participate in an interview for a more in-depth discussion of the experience. The interview could last up to one hour.

There are no risks involved with this study.

You may not personally benefit from participating in this research. This study is expected to provide data to determine if extending University Writing Center services to students online allows the Writing Center to serve an otherwise underserved student population.

Your responses will be kept confidential to the degree permitted by the technology used. However, no absolute guarantees can be given for the confidentiality of electronic data. Anonymous surveys cannot be removed from the database should you later request it. Unless you agree to participate in an interview and provide an email address, you will not be asked to provide any personally identifiable information. You will be asked to provide some demographic data for aggregation only.

You will not receive any compensation for participating in this study.

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact Nancy Wilson by e-mail at njw22@csus.edu.

1. I understand my participation in this research is entirely voluntary. I have read this page and agree to participate in the research.

☐ Yes
☐ No
# Online Student Writer Experience

## Student Writer Survey Questions

1. **How does online tutoring compare to in-person tutoring?**
   - [ ] I prefer in-person tutoring
   - [ ] I prefer online tutoring
   - [ ] I have no preference
   - [ ] This is my first visit to the Writing Center

   **Tell us more!**

2. **Please rate the software based on following:**
   - Getting up the software
   - Accessing the online session
   - Sharing my text for discussion
   - Communicating using the software

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficult</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Easy</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Getting up the software</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accessing the online session</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sharing my text for discussion</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
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<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating using the software</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
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<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. **Did you experience any technical issues?**
   - [ ] Yes
   - [ ] No

   **Tell us more!**

4. **How do you feel about these features of online tutoring?**
   - I don't have to be on campus during the tutoring session
   - Uses an electronic document, not a printed page
   - Communication is online, not face-to-face

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Like</th>
<th></th>
<th>Dislike</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I don't have to be on campus during the tutoring session</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication is online, not face-to-face</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Tell us more!**
Online Student Writer Experience

5. Please rate your overall on-line Writing Center experience.

Select the closest option:
- [ ] I don't feel I got the help I wanted with the on-line service
- [ ] It was better than nothing
- [ ] It was okay, I guess
- [ ] I got the help I wanted

Tell us more!

6. Will the availability of online tutoring change your use of Writing Center services?
- [ ] More likely to use Writing Center services
- [ ] Less likely to use Writing Center services
- [ ] It won't make a difference

7. Would you recommend using the Online Writing Center to others?
- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

Tell us more!

8. Are you willing to be interviewed about this experience? (If so, you'll be contacted by email for an appointment.)
- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

Email Address: 

9. Please tell us about yourself.

Major: 

Academic Year: 

How often have you used the Writing Center this year: 

How many days per week are you on campus? 

Full-Time or Part-Time Student: 


APPENDIX B

Online Tutor Survey

Online Tutor Experience

Consent to Participate in Research

You agreed to participate in research being conducted by Nancy Wilson, a graduate student in English (Composition) at California State University, Sacramento. This research will study the efficacy of an Online University Writing Center providing tutoring services via the World Wide Web.

You are being asked to complete an online survey about your experience with online tutoring during the Fall 2009 semester. The survey should not take more than ten minutes of your time, and will ask questions to determine your opinion of the online tutoring experience. If you agree to be contacted, you may also be asked later to participate in an interview for a more in-depth discussion of the experience. The interview could last up to one hour.

There are no risks involved with this study.

You may not personally benefit from participating in this research. This study is expected to provide data to determine if extending University Writing Center services to students online allows the Writing Center to serve an otherwise underserved student population.

Your responses will be kept confidential to the degree permitted by the technology used. However, no absolute guarantee can be given for the confidentiality of electronic data. Anonymous surveys cannot be removed from the database should you later request it. Unless you agree to participate in an interview and provide an email address, you will not be asked to provide any personally identifiable information. You will be asked to provide some demographic data for aggregation only.

You will not receive any compensation for participating in this study.

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact Nancy Wilson by e-mail at njw22@csus.edu.

1. I understand my participation in this research is entirely voluntary. I have read this page and agree to participate in the research.

   - [ ] I Agree
   - [ ] I Do Not Agree
Online Tutor Experience

Online Tutor Survey

1. How does on-line tutoring compare to in-person tutoring?
   - I prefer in-person tutoring
   - I prefer on-line tutoring
   - I have no preference

   Tell us more!

2. Please rate the software based on the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficult</th>
<th>Easy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting up the software</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing the last for discussion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating using the software</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   Tell us more!

3. Did you experience any technical issues?
   - Yes
   - No

   Tell us more!

4. Please rate the overall on-line tutoring experience.

   Select the closest answer:
   - I don't feel I was able to provide the help the tutor wanted with the on-line service
   - It was better than nothing
   - It was okay, I guess
   - I think the tutor got the help she wanted
   - I don't think the on-line service made any difference in the quality of tutoring I was able to provide

   Tell us more!
Online Tutor Experience

5. Are you willing to be interviewed about this experience? (If so, you'll be contacted by email for an appointment.)

☐ Yes
☐ No

Email Address

6. If you could tutor on-line without having to be on campus, would it change your availability as a tutor?

☐ Yes, I'd be able to tutor more hours.
☐ No, I can find the time when I'm on campus.

Tell us more!
BIBLIOGRAPHY


*Purdue owl family of sites*. (2009). The Writing Lab and OWL at Purdue and Purdue University, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana. Retrieved from http://owl.english.purdue.edu


