Online Writing Tutoring: A (Partial) Review of the Literature
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Online writing tutoring falls into two broad categories: asynchronous and synchronous. In both forms, feedback may be provided through text only, or text supplemented with audio or video. Studies of online writing tutoring tend to consider one or two of the following: content of sessions, post-session revisions and their relation to session content, and student and instructor perceptions.

Asynchronous Text-based instruction (E-mail or document upload).
By far the most common type of online writing tutoring is text-based asynchronous instruction. Neaderhiser and Wolfe (2009) conclude, based on the 2006 Writing Center Research Project (WCRP) survey, that 90% of online tutoring uses this format, and our own 2016 survey of mid-to large Canadian universities online instruction confirms this. For this type of instruction, a student uploads or emails an assignment draft to an instructor, the instructor writes comments, usually including marginal notes and a summative paragraph or two, and returns it to the student. While in theory students submit, with their assignment, specific questions that indicate their areas of concern, in practice many requests are vague (what can I improve?) or nonexistent. Similarly, instructors often invite students to submit follow-up questions by e-mail, but most students do not do follow up.

Asynchronous written feedback tends to be document-focused (Honeycutt, 2001), which can be both a strength and a weakness. Comments address particular features of the text (Honeycutt, 2001) and students comment positively on the efficiency and precision of corrections, and the ease of implementation (Silva, 2012) implying that they may sometimes see the revision process in mechanical terms rather than rhetorical ones—that is, as a process of identifying and fixing problems rather than as an opportunity to improve communication with a reader. One reason for this may be that this form of feedback clearly has many similarities to course instructor feedback to students on written assignments, which students are accustomed to interpret as explaining and justifying a grade—i.e. identifying what is wrong with the text. It may also be a sign of the level of the students, as it is consistent with Faigley and Witte’s (1981) description of approaches typical of inexperienced writers—and students in the study were developmental and first-year writing students. Written online feedback may not do much, in and of itself, to move students toward the approaches of more skilled writers.

Content analysis of student revisions based on online feedback (Hewett 2005) indicates that most changes students make as a result of the feedback are correct, and tend to be meaning-preserving or meaning-altering in small ways (e.g. improve clarity or focus). As a result, they tend to have a low to moderate impact on the text. Text-based feedback may thus have its greatest value in the late stages of revising and editing.

Hewett (2015), in her extensive work on text-based instructional commentary, suggests that some apparent limitations of asynchronous instruction shown by studies may be caused by unclear language on the part of tutors, and can be addressed by explicitly training instructors for effective online commentary. She argues for a need for “semantic integrity” (xviii) whereby feedback “accurately addresses what students need to know to develop and improve their writing” (xviii). She recommends 3 practices: modelling writing and revision, targeted mini-lessons that require students to do something specific, and listing next steps that explicitly guide students towards future drafts.

Asynchronous audio or video tutoring—or text supplemented by audio or video (AVT).
A second type of asynchronous tutoring is Audio-Video-Textual, or AVT. In this broad category, textual feedback is supplemented by audio or video. That is, a writing instructor may or may note write notes on a text, then makes a recording—audio only or including video as well—of herself giving feedback. While no studies of student revisions following this kind of feedback were found, one study comparing student response to videotaped feedback vs text-based feedback reported that 8 out of 17 students preferred the video mode because of its conversational quality, broad overview of improvements, and clear explanations, while another 6 had no preference (Silva, 2012). In another study, both instructors and students felt that the use of screencasting for assignment feedback increased attention to macro-level concerns, enhanced student engagement with feedback, and fostered instructor-student dialogue (Vincelette & Bostic, 2013). In audio or video feedback, instructors may also ask questions and model reading strategies, thus giving the student writer some sense of the rhetorical impact of the paper, and the impression of dialogue (Vincelette & Bostic, 2013).

Whether asynchronous feedback is delivered entirely through text, or in mixed media format, it inevitably resembles
the feedback associated with grades that students receive from instructors because of the time delay. The process is essentially the same: a student “hands in” a text, and then waits to receive feedback, while an instructor, separately from the student, reads and assesses the text. Text-only feedback has additional similarities to graded work because they share the combination of in-text comments and some kind of summative feedback. Asynchronous feedback, particularly text-only, is easy to implement precisely because of its similarity to grading, as well as its relatively low dependence on technology. At the same time, however, the process that so closely resembles grading attenuates the dialogue between student and instructor that is a central part of writing centre pedagogy. Submitting a paper and receiving feedback on it comes perilously close to Stephen North’s “fixit shop” where students drop off papers and come to collect them later. While instructors do not “fix” the paper, they do offer suggestions for how to do so.

Synchronous Online Tutoring (Conferencing).
Synchronous conferencing attempts to reproduce in-person tutoring mediated by technology. Tutor and tutee are present at the same time, just not in the same place, and technology is used to bring them together to discuss a student’s assignment. The big distinction between synchronous and asynchronous tutoring is that synchronous conferencing attempts to reproduce the dialogue of an in-person tutoring session by creating such a meeting mediated by technology. Synchronous tutoring, like asynchronous, can be text-only, using chat or instant-messaging, or shared whiteboard technology, or google docs, or mixed media, incorporating video and audio (e.g. Google Hangouts) which are often, though not always, recorded. The range of options makes it difficult to compare or synthesize, because studies are often looking at slightly different models—e.g. even though both may be synchronous, online whiteboard with text-based chat offers a very different experience from a skype meeting.

Studies comparing in-person tutoring with synchronous online conferencing suggest that students appreciate the practical aspects of online conferencing, citing the flexibility of online tutoring (Wolfe & Griffin, 2012), reduced travel and wait times (Casal & Lee, 2014). They also reported affective difference: feeling more comfortable during online interactions (Wolfe and Griffin, 2012). In a comparison of in-person and online text-based chat, online interactions were more egalitarian than in-person, with students controlling the discussion more, and taking more initiative online, while tutors were more likely to control in-person discussion (Jones et al, 2006). In terms of content, in-person sessions tended to include more emphasis on text-based concerns, such as grammar, vocabulary and style, whereas chat sessions focused on global concerns such as content and process (Honeycutt, 2001; Jones et al, 2006).

Content analysis of text-only synchronous whiteboard tutoring sessions (Hewett, 2006) observed that while a significant percentage of interactions are interpersonal rather than writing-related, often focusing on technology, nearly 2/3 of interactions can be connected to writing and revision. Revisions made by the students after the session were meaning-preserving and of low to moderate rhetorical force. In this way they are very similar to the document-based feedback also analyzed by Hewett (2005), but, in contrast to the document-based feedback the sessions were were highly collaborative. That is, results in terms of student actual revisions appear to be quite similar, though the process is different.

It seems ironic that the majority of writing centre online feedback occurs in a medium that resembles course instructor feedback associated with grades, while synchronous conferencing, which seems intuitively to mimic the conditions of in-person sessions more closely, is much rarer. The explanation may lie in the greater complexity of the technology required to duplicate the multimodal effect of in-person interaction. In an in-person tutoring session, both student and instructor have shared access to a text, as well as access to visual and auditory feedback from one another. Even at its best, technology does not entirely reproduce the full effect of being in the same room with another body. This limitation is balanced by the practical benefits of online instruction: ease of access and reduced travel time,

Value of Online Instruction for Multilingual Learners.
Online tutoring is often regarded as valuable for multilingual learners because it easily produces a record, whether textual or audio-visual, that students can review, in contrast to ephemeral in-person dialogue, which depends on student recall and any notes taken. The fact that students report feeling more comfortable online is also regarded as important for multilingual learners, who may be more likely to experience shyness or discomfort because of difficulty speaking or understanding discussion.

Value of learning writing through textual exchange.
The idea of teaching and learning writing through writing has some intuitive appeal in that form and content seem to be working together. Hewett, in particular, emphasizes the value, for students, of being forced to articulate their ideas in
writing. However, the appeal of teaching writing through writing is countered by instructor concern with the lack of immediate feedback provided by facial and body movements in in-person dialogue. In constructing textual feedback, the instructor must imagine the writer and where he or she is at in relation to the writing, and directs comments at this imaginary audience/writer. The instructor is also dependent on the student writer’s ability to read the tone encoded in the language—e.g. to read a question like “what do you mean here?” or “I’m not sure what you mean here” as expressing encouragement and curiosity rather than criticism or judgment. AV allays some of these concerns, as AV feedback allows tone to be conveyed directly, and, in the context of synchronous tutoring, facilitates the instructor in seeing or hearing some feedback from the student, though not as much as in-person.

**Conclusion.**

Asynchronous textual feedback is the easiest type of online instruction to implement. Its chief risk is that students may focus exclusively on implementing minor textual changes recommended by the instructor, essentially using it as an editing service and ignoring more substantive comments and needs. When feedback follows best practices (modeling, targeted mini lessons and specific recommendations for next steps) (Hewett, 2015) in order to mitigate similarities to grading comments, it can lead students to making limited effective changes. Including an audio or video component makes the interaction more collaborative and thus consistent with writing centre principles, and may help reduce the tendency to focus on textual detail. Asynchronous feedback automatically generates its own record, which allows students to review feedback on their work more than once.

There are fewer studies of synchronous conferencing, no doubt because it is much less common. It is also difficult to summarize results, as synchronous conferencing is done using many different platforms, and with a dizzying number of variations of text-based, audio, and video, combined or not with shared whiteboard. Overall, synchronous feedback appears to be more collaborative and student-driven than asynchronous. Chat-based options focus more on global concerns such as content and process, while sessions where tutor and tutee share access to an assignment draft (usually through a whiteboard) focus more on revision. Significant time (up to 30% of a session) may be spent managing technology, particularly when the technology is new.

Both synchronous and asynchronous online feedback lead students to meaning-preserving revisions that are of low to moderate impact on the draft. Online feedback facilitates creating records of sessions, which allows students to review feedback and may be of particular benefit to multilingual students. Both synchronous and asynchronous are viewed very positively by students, who value the flexibility and reduced travel times, and often report feeling more comfortable in online than in-person interactions.

In sum, with the possible exception of the value of recorded sessions in allowing students to review feedback easily, the limitations of both synchronous and asynchronous tutoring suggest that they do not offer significant pedagogical advantages over in-person conferencing. Limitations are generated by, in the case of asynchronous feedback, its resemblance to grading and its power imbalance, which may lead students to simply implement suggested text-based changes without engaging actively in learning, and in the case of synchronous tutoring by the time and energy spent managing technology. However, practical benefits include increasing accessibility to students, reducing affective barriers, and reducing travel times. Given recent concern about student experience, and recognition of the interdependence of academic achievement and many other factors, there is reason to consider online options.
References


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