

7-12-2014

Beyond the Lore: A Research-Based Case for Asynchronous Online Writing Tutoring

Kathryn M. Denton

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**BEYOND THE LORE: A RESEARCH-BASED CASE FOR
ASYNCHRONOUS ONLINE WRITING TUTORING**

by

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
English

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

May, 2014

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express thanks to everyone who has made this work possible.

It has been a pleasure to work with my dissertation committee. Many thanks to Chuck Paine for his guidance from day one, and to Cris Elder, for her chapter-by-chapter input. I'd like to express gratitude to Daniel Sanford, who has been a mentor to me through both the good and the challenging times. I would also like to thank Michele Eodice for joining my committee and for being so engaged in my work.

I'd also like to say thank you to everyone at CAPS. CAPS quickly became my academic home here at UNM, and I am so grateful for my colleagues, current and former. Those who work at CAPS have a passion for what they do, and getting to work among such dedicated people is inspiring. It's an honor to focus my dissertation on the great work that happens at CAPS.

Finally, none of this work would have been possible without my friends and family. Dwight and Derric, thank you for your support, encouragement, and for helping me to keep it real. Lindsey, I'm so glad that we were able to support each other through the end stages of our graduate school work.

My family has been there for me through every step of this journey, and words cannot express how much that means. Aunt Barbara, thanks for encouraging me along the way. Mom and Dad, none of this would have been possible without you, and I want to thank you for that.

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ABSTRACT

Asynchronous online tutoring is a highly contested form of writing tutoring. Critics of asynchronous online tutoring argue that it is ineffective, running contrary to traditional notions of what writing tutoring should look like and how it should be practiced. Supporters of asynchronous online tutoring advocate for its inclusion in the tutoring canon, suggesting that it should be one of many formats available to students. Noticeably absent from this ongoing debate is a grounding in research, as there are few current contributions to this field of research, with the exception of works, most notably, Beth Hewett's *The Online Writing Conference*.

This project responds to the current climate surrounding asynchronous online tutoring interactions, offering a research-based exploration of asynchronous online writing tutoring. This work represents a move away from the question "Is asynchronous online tutoring effective?" and towards "What are some of the ways tutors and students are engaging in effective asynchronous tutoring interactions?" "What support can we provide to promote effective asynchronous tutoring interactions?" and "How can we

present asynchronous online tutoring to students in such a way that they can decide whether it works for them?”

Chapter one offers the historical context of the debate on asynchronous online tutoring and offers an overview of the works that have been published to date. Chapter two lays out the qualitative research design created to explore the phenomenon of asynchronous online writing tutoring. Chapter three explores the research findings, arguing that the findings counter critiques of asynchronous online tutoring as ineffective and disengaging on the part of tutor and student alike. Chapter four concludes by looking to future possibilities for how we can further enhance our understanding of asynchronous online writing tutoring through research, how we can begin to understand best practices for asynchronous online tutors, and how we can support tutor development through training. Finally, drawing on the concept of directed self-placement, I advocate for a model of self-evaluation that empowers students to choose the tutoring format that works best for that individual student, given that student’s needs.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Lay of the Land: An Overview of the Debate over Asynchronous Online

Tutoring

On a nearly annual basis, a familiar subject makes its appearance on the Wcenter listserv. On May 22, 2013, Rachel Liberatore (writing center coordinator at Albright College) reopened the conversation. She wrote:

One of my goals for next year is to shift our online tutoring from adding comments to e-mailed papers into a more interactive method...I think this would be more philosophically sound, but I also expect it to be less popular since it requires more out of the students than their simply e-mailing a paper.

For those who have made such a switch:

1. How did you articulate the need for a change?
2. What was student reaction given that you are now asking more of them in terms of involvement?
3. Do you find the tutoring to be higher quality?
4. Are you glad you made the switch? Are students glad?

The questions Liberatore posed are insightful and reflect a concern for sound writing center pedagogy, but the post also reflects a somewhat common privileging of synchronous over asynchronous tutoring among a core group of writing center professionals. Discussions that reflect this valuing of synchronous tutoring emerge with some frequency on the Wcenter listserv, and reflect the split among those who believe

synchronous tutoring is the ideal and arguably sole legitimate form of tutoring, and those who promote asynchronous online writing tutoring as one of several formats that can be effective and should be available to students. Katherine Kirkpatrick, writing lab coordinator at Clarkson College, responded, for example,

Our tutors find the [synchronous] tutoring to be higher quality. They did **not** enjoy the asynchronous process. Tutors complained about the lack of communication, mostly. The thing they loved most about tutoring—working with students and talking with them—sometimes did not occur with asynchronous tutoring, and tutors often lamented about the lack of contact and communication with students. One even mentioned she felt like she was sending comments into a vacuum. I know other centers have gotten around this by requiring student responses, etc., but we were never able to make that work. In short, the tutors **much** prefer synchronous online appointments.

She adds,

I know the CCCC online teaching SIG promotes offering an asynchronous online tutoring option for online students, but asynchronous online tutoring never felt right and was **not** the right fit for our College or our online students.

This post was authored by a professional with an awareness of the possibilities and potentialities of asynchronous tutoring. Kirkpatrick's biases toward asynchronous online tutoring are clearly present, as reflected in how she describes tutor perceptions of asynchronous tutoring and rebuts the CCCC stance on asynchronous online tutoring.

The way these administrators discuss online tutoring is telling; they lodge critiques of asynchronous online tutoring on the grounds that it is presumably undemanding of student participants, that it is unrewarding for tutors, that it just doesn't feel right. Interestingly, these critiques highlight tutor preferences and biases, elevating them over student preferences and needs. The assumption seems to be that students who seek asynchronous online tutoring are lazy and disengaged, seeking a quick fix from a drop-off service, and the tutor is in turn forced into the role of working with a resistant writer without any hope of the payoff of a rewarding tutoring interaction.

In contrast, other responses reflect an openness to multiple tutoring formats, as evidenced by the following post from Neal Lerner at Northeastern University:

We didn't switch from asynchronous to synchronous tutoring; instead, we added synchronous consulting and also expanded asynchronous services a bit, too. On the whole, at my institution I think different groups seek different kinds of tutoring experiences, and some students will in and of themselves seek different kinds: Our spring data shows that some students who had several appointments chose f2f and online, perhaps depending on availability, stage of the project, etc. How and why students make those choices would be a good research study for someone to pursue!

Instead of dismissing asynchronous online tutoring as invalid or ineffective, Lerner sees the possibility for further research and development that could enhance our understanding of how asynchronous online tutoring works.

Other responders took a different tack, encouraging the Liberatore to consider her motives for preferring synchronous to asynchronous online tutoring:

Can I ask about the impetus for this switch? Is it for more student involvement and ownership, more dynamic interactions with tutors, or because you suspect it will result in student writing skill improvement? Just wondering... I would be concerned about switching completely to another mode; I like Neal's idea of giving students the option of synchronous or asynchronous. Would that work in your situation? (Hillary Wentworth, coordinator of undergraduate writing initiatives at Walden University's Center for Student Success).

Beth Hewett, author of the most comprehensive work on asynchronous online tutoring to date, *The Online Writing Conference*, weighed in on the Wcenter thread as well, using the discussion as a chance to interrogate the poster's preference as well:

I really like the way this discussion is moving toward providing the variety of online services that students need. The CCCC Committee for Effective Practices in OWI recommended in its recently published position statement (<http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/owiprinciples>) that online students should receive writing support through the same modality and media that they use for online courses (see OWI Principle 13). Thus, students in asynchronous courses should have available asynchronous tutoring; students in synchronous courses should have available synchronous tutoring. Availability of both modalities means that students with different learning styles and abilities/disabilities can meet their needs through their choices.

Hewett adds,

I think we should examine the long-held preference for onsite tutoring as the key reason that tutors express preference for synchronous online over asynchronous online tutoring. When the training emphasizes that any online tutoring is a deficit model in comparison to traditional tutoring, then it is a sure bet that the average tutor's bias would be for synchronous tutoring because it more closely mirrors the traditional model. Broadening the perspective to think about benefits and differences—not deficits—among the onsite traditional, online synchronous, and online asynchronous models would help tutors move away from their biases and into a service perspective where students' potential needs are raised above communicative norms or preferences—many of them supported by lore rather than empirical evidence or even sufficient qualitative inquiry.

The debate ran on. Posters who agreed with the initial poster argued that asynchronous online tutoring is akin to a student who drops off a paper at the writing center, without dialogue or interaction, and leaves, expecting to return to a paper with ample comments. “Dynamic” and “interactive” were the adjectives associated with synchronous tutoring among these posters, who likened asynchronous tutoring to adjectives such as “ineffective” and “unrewarding” for tutors.

The critiques laid out on the listserv thread are grounded firmly in pedagogies of writing instruction and assistance. The following post best reflects the anti-asynchronous but pro-learning stance these critics occupy. Paul Ellis, writing center coordinator at

Northern Kentucky University, first set forth the metaphor of the student dropping off a paper without any engagement, and then reflected,

Asynchronous online tutoring—responding to unfinished student papers without input from or discussion with the student writers—is what writing teachers have done for years. Writing teachers, very highly trained and very much practiced, can be quite good at it. Peer tutors are not. Peer tutors need guidance from their writer clients, to ensure that progress occurs. Only synchronous online tutoring can provide that guidance, that give and take of questions and answers and understandings, that helps students become better writers and write better papers.

Many of the posters who were against asynchronous tutoring advocated for an online form of tutoring as necessary, but emphasized that such tutoring should be synchronous if it is to be effective and pedagogically sound. These posters invoke writing center orthodoxy as the reason for their stance, and given that orthodoxy, bring up legitimate areas of concern. Others, Hewett chief among them, argue that tutoring should be available in each format in which instruction is available, since students who seek out support within an asynchronous online format may be driven by the same constraints that may have led the student to opt for asynchronous online instruction, constraints that could prevent them from having the means to find synchronous tutoring interactions accessible. What do we do, for example, with the online student who is taking classes from abroad, unable to make use of traditional tutoring hours? Can we, and should we, limit a student with real-time cognitive processing difficulties to synchronous interactions, if every course they take is online and asynchronous? Is it fair to restrict the student with a full-

time course and work schedule and could not, due to time constraints, use the writing center during the times it is open? The questions of access and availability will continue to hold relevance as funding cuts across the nation limit how and when tutoring centers can offer services.

The Rise of Asynchronous Online Tutoring

The Wcenter listserv conversation speaks to a long history of debating asynchronous online tutoring, a tradition that has existed nearly as long as the tutoring format has been around. When online tutoring became a service that many writing centers could feasibly offer in the mid-1990s, asynchronous online tutoring was the more prevalent mode of online tutoring, as it was the format of online tutoring that had the fewest technological constraints. Synchronous (real-time) tutoring calls for programs, platforms, or applications that allow for simultaneous communication on the writing center's and student's ends, whereas asynchronous tutoring takes place largely through email interactions that occur as the student's and tutor's time and access to technology allows. Since extra software and applications are not necessary to the extent required to support synchronous online tutoring, asynchronous tutoring quickly became the preferred format for writing centers that offered online tutoring. However, even though asynchronous online tutoring became the default for many writing centers, this did not mean that asynchronous online tutoring entered the tutoring scene unquestioned. Instead, from its beginning, online tutoring in general and asynchronous online tutoring in particular, has been a contested tutoring format. Now that access to technologies that facilitate synchronous online tutoring interactions are more widely and readily available, discussions of the value of asynchronous online tutoring interactions have become

increasingly divisive, with some scholars embracing the possibilities, others critiquing the pedagogy, and many calling for a middle ground in the discussion of the place of asynchronous online tutoring within the greater context of tutoring formats available to students. The Wcenter listserv interaction outlined here exemplifies the conflicted perspectives of writing center professionals regarding asynchronous online tutoring, as well as the biases that underpin these conflicting stances.

The Call for Research

Regardless of whether posters defended or criticized asynchronous online tutoring interactions on the Wcenter listserv, evidence to back up assertions was largely absent from the discussion. While writing center professionals continue to call for theories and approaches grounded in research, we often resort to beliefs, observations, and lore to ground our ideals. While these ways of knowing are great starting points for further research, often we let them guide and support what we do, why we do it, and why we value what we do. Rather than seeing challenges and our experienced-based ideas as starting points for investigation and inquiry, we often are constrained by them instead. As several posters pointed out, asynchronous online tutoring interactions can be problematic. On the other hand, synchronous tutoring interactions can be problematic as well, but the literature abounds with discussions of how to ameliorate those challenges rather than eliminate the sources of the challenge.

There are many assumptions implicit in the critiques of asynchronous online writing tutoring exemplified in the Wcenter thread. These critiques can be grouped into three main categories:

1. Tutors are forced to do most of the work, contrary to the ideology of non-directive tutoring so valued in writing center literature.
2. Asynchronous online writing tutors are forced to deal with the text only, leaving aside the writer, which is contrary to North's tenet that "[O]ur job is to produce *better writers*, not *better writing*."
3. Asynchronous online writing tutoring is ineffective, failing to engage the student, is a stretch on tutors' time, and the students who submit papers asynchronously don't benefit from this form of tutoring.

The critics of asynchronous online writing tutoring would argue the solution to these challenges is to eliminate asynchronous tutoring altogether, and limit the writing center's online presence to synchronous interactions. Those who favor asynchronous online tutoring as one of many options the writing center should embrace do not deny that there are challenges associated with the asynchronous tutoring format. However, whereas those opposed to asynchronous online tutoring view the challenges as barriers, proponents see opportunity.

Furthermore, as the many calls for more rigorous research by professionals in the writing center field underscore, assumptions, lore, and observations done in the field only get us so far in understanding what happens in all tutoring interactions.

What counts as research? As early as 1998, Hobson was calling for research on online writing center work in the introduction to his collection of essays *Wiring the Writing Center*. As Hobson points out in his opening essay, there are several factors contributing to the lack of published research on online writing centers. The reasons include a lack of time as writing center professionals rush to move programs online,

occupying the initial stages of focusing on the types of questions that can and should be asked, unfamiliarity with research methodologies that might apply to online writing center research, or unfamiliarity with how to discuss research in the context of writing center work.

Hobson's point about writing center scholars' unfamiliarity with how to discuss research in the context of writing center work is worth considering, as it plays an important role in the history of writing center scholarship. Despite repeated calls for research through the past several decades, writing center research remains a contested and sometimes troubled area, as writing center professionals continue to negotiate what counts as research. As Alice Gillam points out in her introduction to *Writing Center Research: Extending the Conversation* (2002),

Since the inception of a professional discourse about writing centers, the center has been imagined as a kind of "natural laboratory," a research site that would yield unique insights into students' writing development and the pedagogies that assist such development. In the inaugural issue of *Writing Center Journal* (1980), for example, editors Lil Brannon and Stephen North express high hopes for the "great new discoveries" about the learning and teaching of writing to be discovered through writing center research. Some 20 years later, opinion varies over the current state of writing center research although most agree that this great promise remains as yet unfulfilled and probably unable to be fulfilled in the ebullient terms originally imagined. Such decidedly mixed opinion about the current state and future direction of writing center research suggests a need for

more explicit talk about what we mean by research, what should count as research, and how to conduct research. (xv)

As the title of that anthology suggests, there is no consensus on what counts as research in the writing center, and in fact, what we currently call research is based largely on lore and observable situations and trends. While there is much value in this type of knowledge, there seems to be a consensus among writing center scholars that we need to move beyond our current understanding of what constitutes research. Doing so will require much work, from defining writing center research to creating and enacting new models of inquiry. The time and effort it will take to reinvigorate writing center research can lead to invaluable payoffs, as creating a body of research that moves beyond lore and observation can help writing center work to gain credibility as an area of study as well as yielding important insights into student writers.

Beyond the lore. The call for research persists. In *Researching the Writing Center: Towards an Evidence-Based Practice* (2012), Rebecca Day Babcock and Terese Thonus weigh in on what research could look like in the writing center context. They also offer an important distinction on the role of lore in writing center work. They provide an important assertion from James Sosnoski (1991): “[Lore] count[s] as understanding for teachers of writing. It is not, however, formed in the way that disciplines paradigmatically produce knowledge. It is contradictory. It is eclectic. It takes feeling into account. It is subjective and nonreplicable” (qtd. in Babcock and Thonus 7-18). The authors then point out that while lore is valued in writing center scholarship, it is also limiting: “Scholars need to talk about what they know, what they have experienced (locally produced knowledge), but they also need to move beyond that step and

problematize writing center issues more broadly” (18). Within this perspective, lore can be viewed as a guiding factor in informing local research, which in turn can have implications on a more global level. Lore can be a starting point for conversation, but as the debate on the Wcenter listserv illustrates, conversations based only on lore will at best be circular, debating the same points repeatedly, never approaching a consensus.

Research helps us to hold our ideas up to the light, to examine the bases for our beliefs, and offers us the opportunity, even when we are unable to reach a consensus, to establish some common grounds on a given issue.

Despite Gillam’s call for research and Babcock’s and Thonus’s discussion of the problems that arise when we rely on lore, there persists in writing center work a lack of a body of scholarship grounded in or informed by academic research. This lack of scholarly work extends beyond the scope of online writing center work; Gillam argues that as a whole, all aspects of writing center work are stunted by a lack of vigorous research. Given the repeated call for action through the decades, writing center professionals have an obligation to design scholarship grounded in research, yielding insights into the field and related disciplines. If we are to understand what happens when tutoring moves online, in both synchronous and asynchronous formats, we should consider how to create research that explores, challenges, and questions the as of yet lore- and observation-based ideas and assumptions that inform our understanding of writing tutoring pedagogy across tutoring formats.

Strides have been made within the field of composition studies in discussing what constitutes research within that field, and some of the principles can and should be applied to writing center research. In the article “NCTE/CCCC’s Recent War on

Scholarship” (2005), for example, Richard Haswell argues that research within the field should be replicable, aggregable and data-supported. Haswell avoids the term “empirical” and “theory” in favor of the RAD model because, as he argues, “this provisional category of scholarship has the advantage of cutting across polemical trenches that have stalemated profitable talk about research in the teaching of composition,” (202), a statement that could be applied as well to writing center research, which has likewise been stalemated by such debates.

Chris Anson makes a similar call for “a more robust, evidence-based view of teaching writing and learning to write” (24). These mid-2000s calls for a reenvisioning of the nature of writing research have ushered in a wave of research in published scholarship. This increased scholarship in the field of writing instruction, however, has not yet translated into increased rigorous scholarship in writing center studies.

Project Overview

Against the backdrop of the debate over asynchronous online tutoring, the discussion of what counts as research, and the call for research that spans all writing center work, my study began to take shape. The intent of this study is to respond, in part, to this call for more writing center related research. My focus will be to explore the nature of asynchronous online writing tutoring and interrogate its effectiveness as it is currently employed. I will begin by establishing that there are two main perspectives that influence our current conversations of writing center work. The idealist paradigm tends to be tutor-centered, and adherents of this perspective view the writing center as an idealized space in which tutor and student come together to collaborate and construct meaning. The pragmatic paradigm is more student-centered, and cites the writing center’s

predominant asset as the individualized attention offered to students. The idealist perspective traces its history to tutoring orthodoxy and what McKinney calls writing center's "grand narrative," while the pragmatist perspective embraces a variety of tutoring options and formats, celebrating Hewett's idea of eclecticism (*The Online Writing Conference*). In the remainder of this chapter, I will offer an overview of existing writing center literature, tracing the history of both perspectives to establish how the two paradigms differ and to illustrate how each is grounded in a history that informs its perspective of asynchronous online writing tutoring. In the chapters that follow I will then offer my own line of inquiry, a course of research that explores what happens in asynchronous online writing tutoring interactions from the perspective of student, tutor, and an examination of the interaction itself. I lay out my research design in service to the call for more rigorous and replicable research (Haswell), then offer my findings, which refute the critiques of asynchronous online writing tutoring.

Contrary to the critiques of asynchronous online writing tutoring, I have found that asynchronous online tutors work hard to create a shared context and to construct a dialogue, inviting students to take an active role in revision. In my findings chapter, I will present two case studies centered on two tutors, Michael and Mary. As Michael and Mary participated in this project, they spoke candidly about their thought processes and the factors that informed the decisions they made about how they constructed asynchronous online tutoring interactions. Both Michael and Mary changed their tutoring perspectives and approaches over time, and both articulated reflections on practice that had long been part of their internal tutoring process. Based on the feedback the students who worked

with Michael and Mary offered, both tutors were considered effective in their attempts to work collaboratively with their online students.

My study demonstrates, furthermore, that the work these tutors are doing is important. There are many reasons why some students are drawn to asynchronous online tutoring, and these reasons are valid. I believe it is our responsibility, then, to take a look at our critiques of asynchronous online tutoring and work toward an understanding of a more encompassing pedagogy and course of training for our asynchronous online tutors. These tutors are interested in knowing more about how to function and interact effectively within the asynchronous tutoring format; both Michael and Mary embraced the opportunity to participate in this study and to add to the scholarship on online tutoring. Both expressed an interest in learning more about findings from the student's perspective, and on learning how their practices could develop as a result of the insights this study offer. My work began with an interest in the students who use and the tutors who work within the asynchronous tutoring format, working toward the eventual goal of applying this research to help shape the most effective interactions we can envision within this format of tutoring.

A Historical Overview of Online Writing Center Scholarship

To understand the current state of asynchronous online tutoring discussions, it is helpful to understand the history of scholarship that has shaped our understanding of it. From the beginning, pioneering scholars of online tutoring have tended to offer tentative discussions of how technology changes the way we can imagine tutoring. Likening Internet access to the Western frontier, in "Straddling the Virtual Fence" Eric H. Hobson explores the new horizons afforded by the online environment, as well as the difficulties

that arise when educators enthusiastically embrace a move to the online setting without a clear plan of action and a model for promoting and sustaining an effective online presence: “[L]ike their historical predecessors, many educators moving online do so with little chance of achieving their idealized visions of success and limitless bounty for their students and themselves: they use obsolete or inadequate technology; have little-to-no guidance; aren’t prepared to deal with hostile neighbors and other predators; haven’t planned beyond the initial trip” (ix). Despite these cautions, Hobson explores the possibilities a wired writing center allows, and calls for research that will reinforce the impressions administrators have after their initial forays into online tutoring.

Muriel Harris and Michael Pemberton’s “Online Writing Labs (OWLS): A Taxonomy of Options and Issues” (1995) also takes a cautionary stance towards technology in the writing center. Harris and Pemberton outline the technologies available at the publication of this work, urging that when writing centers adopt new technologies, they make careful planning decisions regarding how these technologies are used, for what purposes, and how these technologies are made accessible to students.

Dave Healy likewise raises a note of caution in “From Place to Space: Perceptual and Administrative Issues in the Online Writing Center” (1995). Healy argues that when writing centers implement an online writing lab, that center runs the risk of becoming decentralized, and following this premise, weighs the pros and cons of the addition of online tutoring to a writing center. Online tutoring, Healy argues, can enhance the writing center’s offerings, but it can also endanger the center itself and its independence. While overall Healy views the possibilities afforded by online tutoring, he argues writing centers need to proceed with caution when implementing online tutoring, as there are

obstacles the center needs to avoid if it is to continue to be successful in the face of changing tutoring modes of delivery.

In “Computers in the Writing Center: A Cautionary History,” Peter Carino first raises the issue of the divide among technology proponents and technology detractors. On the one side, Carino argues, are those who romanticize technology, adopting technology largely wholesale and later exploring the implications. On the other side, Carino places those who decry technology, fearing their own obsolescence should computer-mediated work become the norm. Although the stances have changed somewhat since Carino’s 1998 examination of attitudes toward online work, conflict is arguably still at the core of current discussions of online tutoring. Carino rightly argues that viewing the technology conversation as one of conflict limits the other lenses through which we could trace the “techno-history” (172) of writing centers, contending “[t]his tension between technological endorsement and technological resistance marks writing center discourse on computers since the early 1980s” (172), and gives context to the current polarities. Although opponents of asynchronous online tutoring are no longer opposed to all technology, the conflict Carino traces reflects that the same ideologies that underpinned initial technological resistance now underpin critiques of asynchronous online tutoring specifically. And while there are many lenses through which the history of technology in the writing center could be viewed, the current conversation seems to mirror the initial conflict Carino outlines.

These early articles on online tutoring rightfully urge caution, as caution and deliberate decision making should be a part of any process of adopting new modes of instruction and support. Still, they also reflect the conflict over the effectiveness of

asynchronous online tutoring, a conflict that continues to mark writing center scholarship. The conversation did not end with these early pioneering online writing tutoring scholars, but the discussion did go largely dormant from the late 1990s through the early 2000s.

A few transitional works emerged in 2000, most notably James A. Inman's and Donna Sewell's *Taking Flight with OWLs: Examining Electronic Writing Center Work*. Inman and Sewell's work is an edited collection of essays centered on how online writing labs can function, and suggestions for creating and implementing an OWL for the first time. Inman and Sewell do not take a stance on the value of OWLs so much as they aim to aid writing centers considering adding an online writing lab to their offerings.

The second wave of scholarship on online tutoring takes on a more in-depth exploration of the possibilities opened with online writing labs, tempered with the caution that marked the first wave of scholarship. Stuart Blythe published "Why OWLS?: Value, Risk, and Evolution" in 2008, arguing that technology changes the way an organization functions, and exploring how the adoption of an OWL can impact the physical writing center. Also in 2008, Paul J. Johnson added to the conversation with "Writing Space: Technoprovocateurs in the Late Age of Print." In this work, Johnson examines how OWLs were currently implemented in the writing centers that offer online tutoring, discussing not only the possibilities illustrated by these OWLs, but also the ways that OWLs subvert traditional conceptions of literacy and literacy-related behaviors.

The conversation once again slows down towards the end of the 2000s. The occasional article has been added to the discussion, but these articles seem to mirror the same stances and tones that previous scholarship offers. Recently the conversation has

once again started up with the publication of Beth Hewett's *The Online Writing Conference*. In many ways, Hewett's work relates closely to Inman's and Sewell's *Taking Flight*, in the sense that Hewett takes a comprehensive look at the possibilities that surround online writing conferences. In contrast to other scholars, Hewett includes considerations for writing instructors as well as writing tutors, exploring the strategies that instructors and tutors employ within online tutoring. Hewett offers less a cautionary stance, and more a tone of inquiry. In *The Online Writing Conference*, Hewett promotes a theory of eclecticism; that is, while writing centers have largely referred to online tutoring as if it is one entity that exists in one way, there are many ways that tutoring may take place online, and we should embrace the different lenses that can shape our view of writing center work, and explore the options available for creating tutoring strategies within the online context.

While Hewett's work represents a turn in the conversation away from caution and toward inquiry, other evidence suggests that conflict still exists in writing center discourse about technology, although the crux of the conflict now centers on the value of asynchronous tutoring. Almost all writing center administrators agree that technology needs to be a part of the writing center, since technology is a part of the student's larger academic life, so the grounds have shifted to debate what forms of technology are "legitimate." Most administrators will willingly endorse an online repository of writing resources, a website that establishes the center's presence, and some form of online tutoring. Disagreement arises at this point: Should tutoring be offered in real-time? Should asynchronous tutoring be an option? Why or why not? At first glance, those who promote synchronous tutoring may seem progressive, embracing the possibilities

available for synchronous interactions. However, such a view is subverted when the issue of asynchronous online tutoring enters the conversation, as these same embracers of technology will cringe at the idea of “outdated” or “ineffective” asynchronous tutoring interactions. Supporters of asynchronous tutoring, on the other hand, seem to demonstrate a closer alignment with technology endorsers. The rationale these supporters cite in defense of asynchronous online tutoring emphasizes this group’s desire to offer tutoring through a variety of formats, asynchronous being one option, synchronous online interactions among the other possibilities we should promote. The debate regarding the merits of asynchronous online tutoring continues on and constitutes a conversation still very much alive and unresolved.

Writing Center “Grand Narrative”: A Challenge to Asynchronous Online Tutoring

Besides the tradition of urging caution in discussions of online tutoring, the debate over the nature of asynchronous online tutoring is also influenced by the threats it poses to the way we view the nature of writing center work. In *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*, Jackie Grutsch McKinney critiques what she terms the grand narrative of the writing center. McKinney argues that within the grand narrative, the writing center is a comfortable, iconoclastic place where students actively seek out one-on-one tutoring interactions.

McKinney cites Nancy Grimm in her work, who in *Writing Centers and the New Racism* (2011) makes the case for retheorizing writing center work. Although Grimm is addressing the important issue of racism within the writing center, her call for retheorizing applies across all contexts surrounding writing center work. Grimm argues, “Theories, especially tacit inherited theories, guide our decisions, support our

assumptions, and inform our judgments. These tacit theories tell us what's 'normal' or what's 'right'; thus, they have real consequences for people who are subject to our decisions, assumptions, and judgments" (78). In the service of calling for a retheorizing of writing center work, Grimm examines "ubiquitous writing center mottoes that 'carry' [writing center] theory" (81). These include:

1. A good tutor makes the student do all the work.
2. The ultimate aim of a tutorial is an independent writer.
3. Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing. (81)

These mottoes, Grimm argues, form the ideologies that surround writing center work, ideologies intended to maintain the status quo (81). Grimm further argues,

These mottoes may have originally appeared in an early piece of writing center scholarship, such as Stephen North's "The Idea of a Writing Center" (1984) or Jeff Brooks's "Minimalist Tutoring" (1991), yet as a field we invoke them without attribution in workshops and presentations and in tutor education materials and publicity materials. They have become our common sense, and they illustrate our familiar, unexamined, and sedimented tacit theories. (81)

These theories, then, are problematic precisely because they are tacit and because they are so ubiquitously cited without context, going largely unexamined. McKinney further cites writing center ideology through the work of Teddi Fishman, who in *Multiliteracy Centers* maintains that tutors are trained to follow certain tenets:

1. The focus of any session should be on the development of understanding and skills, rather than the development of a particular text.

2. Whatever the work is, it is the student's work.
3. The student should set the agenda.
4. Associates are not permitted to offer options about or assessments of grades.
5. Associates can neither interpret nor critique assignments. (Fishman 68-69)

Furthermore, McKinney argues, these ideologies have been cited and upheld for decades. In 1988 Muriel Harris's "SLATE (Support for the Learning and Teaching of English) Statement: The Concept of A Writing Center," outlines six tenets that all writing centers hold in common:

1. Tutorials are offered in a one-on-one setting.
2. Tutors are coaches and collaborators, not teachers.
3. Each student's individual needs are the focus of the tutorial.
4. Experimentation and practice are encouraged.
5. Writers work on writing from a variety of courses.
6. Writing centers are available for students at all levels of writing proficiency. (qtd. in McKinney 59)

There is much overlap in these oft-cited tenets, without much variation and change through time. Against this landscape, McKinney argues, it makes sense that online tutoring, particularly asynchronous online tutoring, is deemed problematic among some writing center professionals. In many ways, it challenges the grand narrative comprised by the tenets outlined here; it does not look like what we have deemed writing center work to look like; it goes against standard practices and defies convention.

Citing this grand narrative, McKinney argues that it is understandable that asynchronous online tutoring is an especially disputed mode of tutoring. She asserts,

Many involved in writing center work have internalized what I have called the writing center grand narrative and when confronted by new ideas, our instinct is to see how the new idea fits into our existing internalized, collective narrative. Failing this, we might reject ideas that we cannot place within our existing story of our work. For many, the move to online tutoring in the 1990s was a new idea that was hard to place. The writing center story told of students together, face-to-face in cozy spaces over physical texts. (16-17)

The result, according to McKinney, is that

Some writing center practitioners were able to resolve themselves to online tutoring only when it looked more familiar—when it was able to capture human bodies and voices through audio-textual-visual tutoring. In constructivist terms, they could map audio-textual-visual tutoring more easily onto traditional face-to-face tutoring and thereby audio-textual-visual tutoring began to make sense as part of that already established narrative. (17)

The implication of McKinney's assertion is clear. Asynchronous online tutoring, which is not so easily mapped onto the grand narrative, is rejected, maligned, or marginalized by those that hold to traditional notions of the writing center.

All this is not to say that all writing center professionals cling to tradition and dismiss the experimentation and practice that Harris cites in her "SLATE" statement, an aspect of tutoring largely absent from the literature of the writing tutoring canon. As

illustrated in the Wcenter discussion that opens this chapter, many writing center professionals embrace possibilities and welcome the idea of eclecticism. The problem as it currently exists is twofold: first, some professionals do adhere closely to tradition, rejecting challenges to the grand narrative (often unintentionally), and second, writing center scholarship does not reflect the increasing openness to new approaches, innovations, and experimentation.

Two Paradigms: The Idealists and the Pragmatists

As McKinney's work suggests, the divisive nature of the discussions of asynchronous online tutoring is largely the result of two conflicting perspectives on the nature of writing center work, which will here be referred to as the idealists and the pragmatists. Those who subscribe to the idealist paradigm view the writing center as an idealized space, a space romanticized in writing center literature. From this perspective, the writing center is characterized by engaged, willing, and enthusiastic students who gain insights into their writing through dialectic discussion with a tutor. Within this paradigm, the ideal tutoring session is one in which the student comes with questions or something they wish to work on. The tutor works with the student to establish some context, and then leads the student to insights through redirected questions, dialectical conversation, and observational comments. Throughout the tutoring interaction, the student remains in control of his or her own work. In contrast, the pragmatists tend to take a more practical view of writing center work. They prescribe to the Aristotelian view of rhetoric; just as Aristotle defined rhetoric as the ability in any particular case to see the available means of persuasion, pragmatists view the nature of writing center work as tutors coming together with students, identifying the students' needs and the strategies

available to meet those needs. Those who function within this paradigm cite the personalized nature of tutoring interactions as the writing center's greatest strength. Tutoring, to pragmatists, is tailored to the student seeking assistance, and the tutor is responsive to the student's needs. Consequently, pragmatics tend to embrace a variety of tutoring formats and approaches, since more possibilities mean more opportunities to engage students in a way that works for them.

Both paradigms stem from an intellectual history and have a body of writing center scholarship to back up their respective perspectives, and a closer examination of the roots of each will shed light on how each paradigm's views of asynchronous online tutoring are part of a much deeper conversation on how each group describes the nature of writing center work—what it should look like, what it should do, how it should work, and why.

Given the divergent perspectives of the idealists and pragmatists, it is clear that tutoring practices are evaluated differently by these two groups. While most tutoring practices speak to the values of both groups, the split in perspective is epitomized in the discussion of asynchronous online tutoring. Asynchronous online tutoring presents a challenge to traditional notions of writing tutoring and calls for a reimagining of the narratives of idealists and pragmatists alike.

The Idealist Paradigm: Challenges to Asynchronous Online Tutoring

Those who subscribe to the idealist paradigm object to asynchronous online tutoring on the grounds that it is ineffective, running contrary to tutoring orthodoxy and best practices, and that it is furthermore unrewarding for tutors who are asked to function

within an asynchronous environment. A look at the ineffective argument is worthwhile—at first glance, citing tutoring orthodoxy and best practices as contrary to asynchronous online tutoring practices seems sound. A closer look at the history of writing center work through the lens of the idealist paradigm, however, will reveal that the discussions of tutoring orthodoxy and best practices alike are not an established, agreed upon set of conventions, but rather a live, highly debated, and multifaceted conversation. The active nature of this discussion is an asset in the composition community rather than a threat to our understanding of the way we work when we talk about and engage in writing tutoring.

What is tutoring orthodoxy? When tracing the history of writing centers as a field of study, there is a common narrative arc that professionals in the writing center agree on: writing center scholarship began largely as a result of Stephen North's "The Idea of a Writing Center" and his call for writing center autonomy; nondirective tutoring became the accepted norm for writing tutoring pedagogy, ushered in by the work of Brooks; our conception of the writing center's place in the academy has shifted over time, as the way we view writing instruction in the field of composition studies has changed. Every field has an origin story, or as McKinney argues, a grand narrative, and this is the writing center's. Where we can start to see a dissensus among writing center professionals, though, is when we see writing center scholars begin to call for research and interrogation of the writing center's traditional narrative and subsequent lore. In response to this call, the idealist subset of writing center professionals has held firmly to the idea of the writing center as autonomous, a haven for student writers and tutors, with non-directive tutoring as the most effective means of meeting student needs. Subsequent

observation- and experience-based scholarship emerged in support of this perspective, reinforcing rather than challenging the traditional telling of writing center history. On the other end of the spectrum are the pragmatists, who are accepting of the traditional narrative of the writing center as the foundation of contemporary scholarship while also offering their own, largely observation- and experience-based scholarship that challenges how effectively this narrative stands up to current writing center practices and how we conceive of the writing center. As new technologies and possibilities for tutoring have arisen, the differences among these two groups have become more pronounced, as exemplified in the discussion of asynchronous online tutoring.

For both paradigms, North's "The Idea of a Writing Center" (1984) is largely cited as the foundational text of writing center work. In this article, North argues for student-centered rather than text-centered tutoring, suggesting that the writing center should focus on the student's process of writing rather than the finished product. North also emphasizes the importance of dialogue in tutorials: "[the] opportunities to talk with excited writers at the height of their engagement with their work are the lifeblood of a writing center" (443). As is clear from the critiques of asynchronous online tutoring cited above, writing center administrators and tutors still consider direct dialogue and enthusiastic feedback to be core values of writing center work. North's issuing of this statement, echoed for the decades following, reinforces the idea of the writing center as an oasis of sorts, the space standing in contrast to the writing classroom, where presumably disengaged students are forced to write. The writing center is where students come to care about writing. (The pragmatist would counter this ideal: Is that really the case? Is it our right/privilege to feel our work is rewarding? Should the onus be on

students to make that happen?) And the cornerstone of the rewarding writing tutoring interaction is dialogue: “We [writing tutors] are here to talk to writers” (North 440). As North continues,

The essence of writing center method, then, is this talking. If we conceive of writing as a relatively rhythmic and repeatable kind of behavior, that rhythm, has to change—preferably, though not necessarily, under the writer’s control. Such changes can be fostered, of course, by work outside of the act of composing itself—hence the success of the classical discipline of imitation, or more recent ones like sentence combining or the tagmemic heuristic, all of which, with practice, “merge” with and affect composing. And indeed, depending on the writer, none of these tactics would be ruled out in a writing center. By and large, however, we find the best breaker of old rhythms, the best creator of new ones, is our style of *live intervention, our talk in all its forms*. [emphasis added] (443)

North then refutes the idea of the writing center as the “proofreading-shop-in-the-basement” conception he believes academics outside of writing center work hold about it. This conception will resurface years later with the emergence of online tutoring, the conception attributed this time towards asynchronous online tutoring as one of the main critiques and condemnations of it.

It is at this point that the idealists take a different turn than the pragmatists; idealists tend to overlook North’s follow-up article, “Revisiting ‘The Idea of a Writing Center’” (1994) in the history they trace, whereas scholars within the pragmatist paradigm draw influence from the article. Idealists take North’s ideas of what tutoring interactions

should look like in “The Idea of a Writing Center” as tenets that are still the ideal for tutors to follow today, which is interesting when viewed in light of North’s introspective second article.

In “Revisiting ‘The Idea of a Writing Center,’” North backs off from what he considers some of his overly stated or overly idealized views of the writing center. In contrast to his original article, for example, he allows that while students who visit the writing center are motivated to write, they are motivated by the same constraints and concerns that they have in the classroom: getting the assignment finished, earning a good grade (North 11). North concedes that his strongly stated stances from “The Idea of a Writing Center” and his idealized vision of the writing center may have “outlive[d] their usefulness” (17). It is telling that idealists continue to cite North’s former essay while mostly omitting the latter from their overview of the scholarship.

Another foundational text in the writing center narrative is Andrea Lunsford’s “Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center” (1991). Lunsford builds on North’s model of dialogue as the ideal mode of tutoring and contends that the writing centers that have proven most successful are those that place collaboration at the core of tutoring interactions. Lunsford describes the characteristics of a collaboration-centered tutoring interaction:

Such a center would place control, power, and authority not in the tutor or staff, not in the individual student, but in the negotiating group. It would engage students not only in solving problems set by teachers but in identifying problems for themselves; not only in working as a group—but in monitoring, evaluating, and building a theory of

how groups work; not only in understanding and valuing collaboration but in confronting squarely the issues of control that successful collaboration inevitably raises; not only in reaching consensus but in valuing dissensus and diversity. (8-9)

This “idea of a center informed by a theory of knowledge as socially constructed, of power and control as constantly negotiated and shared, and of collaboration as its first principle” (97), Lunsford argues, “challenges our ways of organizing our centers, of training our staff and tutors, of working with teachers. It even challenges our sense of where “we” fit in this idea. More importantly, however, such a center presents a challenge to the institution of higher education” (9).

These principles seem difficult enough to translate into a pedagogy of face-to-face interactions, but become even more challenging when applied to asynchronous tutoring. How, for example, can an asynchronous tutor engage the student, negotiate with the student, reach a consensus or wallow in dissensus? Lunsford does not provide specifics on what this pedagogy would look like in synchronous, much less, asynchronous interactions, but she does not close off the pedagogy to possibilities, either. She concedes, “We must also recognize that collaboration is hardly a monolith. Instead, it comes in a dizzying variety of modes about which we know almost nothing” (7).

In “The Writing Center and Social Constructionist Theory”, Murphy attempts to reconcile the shift in writing center theory away from the writing-as-process paradigm North was working within and towards social constructionist theory in which Lunsford works. Murphy points to potential shortcomings of social constructionism. Murphy critiques Lunsford’s lack of discussion of how her ideas on collaboration can be applied

in writing instruction and tutoring, warning against wholesale adoption of this or any paradigm, and advocating instead for plurality. Lunsford embodies her stance in an excerpt of James Phillips' "Hermeneutics in Psychoanalysis: Review and Reconsideration," (1991): "'the consequence of multiplicity of models is not chaos and capriciousness' but 'a dialectic process' in which, no matter what theory we espouse, we must be sure not to use it 'to foreclose, rather than to continue inquiry'" (169).

Within early writing center texts, it is interesting that author after author calls for writing center scholars to embrace a multiplicity of theories, frameworks, and ideas that inform our understanding of writing center work. Writing center scholars call for inquiry as an opening up of possibilities rather than a way of quantifying writing center work. They caution against reductive views that take writing center work to a one-dimensional, one-size-fits-all approach, and both idealists and pragmatists would agree that this is an essential perspective to take, in theory. The trouble arises between the two paradigms, though, when foundational texts on tutoring pedagogy enter the discussion.

The concept of minimalist tutoring began with Jeff Brooks's "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work" (1991). In this piece, Brooks argues for a minimalist, hands-off approach to tutoring that focuses on higher order (organization, logical progression of ideas) rather than lower order (sentence-level, mechanics) concerns. Brooks invokes North, citing his approach as in keeping with North's idea that writing centers should produce better writers, not better writing.

Brooks outlines explicitly his idea of an effective minimalist tutor, arguing that the tutor should sit beside the student rather than across the desk as a means of resisting the

hierarchy of power that students are tempted to place on tutors. In addition to sitting beside the student, the tutor should get the student to be physically closer to his or her paper than the tutor is. The tutor should make sure that the pencil is in the student's hand at all times and should have the student read his or her paper aloud to the tutor, as the student will often identify errors using this strategy (3-4). By design, Brooks is advocating for a student-centered approach that resists power residing with the tutor, and promoting active and engaged learning on the student's part. While Brooks accomplishes this in his article, he also offers a somewhat prescriptive approach to tutoring that does imply the one-size fits all perspective of tutoring pedagogy. Future scholars will challenge Brooks' minimalist tutoring pedagogy, but it is an approach still promoted by writing center professionals functioning within the idealist paradigm. Interestingly, many recent tutoring handbooks also advocate these tutoring ideas as if they are the one correct and effective way to facilitate an effective tutoring interaction. Given the extent to which Brooks' minimalist tutoring approach is cited in the scholarship through present day, Brooks' "Minimalist Tutoring" arguably established the "tutoring orthodoxy" many cite in their own work. This has occurred despite early writing center scholars arguing for theory as a means of opening up rather than limiting or closing down further discussions of the nature of tutoring and what constitutes effective tutoring practice.

Referring to Brooks' approach as "pure tutoring," Linda K. Shamon and Deborah H. Burns directly challenge this nondirective tutoring approach in "A Critique of Pure Tutoring" (1995). Shamon and Burns argue that there is a place in the tutoring pedagogy canon for directive tutoring, and that directive tutoring, when applied ethically, can promote student learning and insight that may not have otherwise happened in a tutoring

interaction. Shamon and Burns advocate for a reexamination of what has run the danger of becoming writing center orthodoxy:

Current writing center and tutoring practices...mak[e] an orthodoxy of process-based, Socratic, private, adisciplinary tutoring. This orthodoxy situates tutors of writing at the beginning and global stages of writing instruction, it prevents the use of modeling and imitation as a legitimate tutoring technique, and it holds to a minimum the conduct of critical discourse about rhetorical practices in other fields. If writing center practices are broadened to include *both* directive and non-directive tutoring, the result would be an enrichment of tutoring repertoires, stronger connections between the writing center and writers in other disciplines, and increased attention to the cognitive, social, and rhetorical needs of writers at all stages of development. (148)

The “tutoring orthodoxy” that we cite in scholarship today is also influenced by the work of Muriel Harris. In “Collaboration Is Not Collaboration Is Not Collaboration: Writing Center Tutorials vs. Peer-Response Groups” (1992), Harris argues that the characteristics that are hallmarks of effective tutoring—the tutor guiding the student rather than giving answers, a focus on process rather than product, and helping students to arrive at insights rather than telling the student what to do—set tutoring apart from peer response work. Two interesting insights can be deduced from Harris’ work: first, that the features Harris points to as the keys to an effective interaction are the features that have become associated with “tutoring orthodoxy,” implying that what began as suggestive strategies have evolved over time to take on the status of certainty within the idealist paradigm, and second, that the lines become blurred when we are speaking of peer tutoring, a model that has some overlap with peer response groups. Then again, as

John Trimbur argues in “Peer Tutoring: A Contradiction in Terms?” (1987), the term “peer tutoring” is problematic, and underlies a contradiction between the concept of “peer” and “tutor.” Nonetheless, this second point is key for pragmatists, for whom this evidences the possibilities we should embrace when we consider tutoring options. Pragmatists embrace the eclecticism Hewett advocates for, and the fact that boundaries and “lore” are not straightforward reinforces their perspective.

What constitutes best practices? The scholarship outlined here illuminates the commonalities and differences that exist among the idealist and pragmatist paradigms. An examination of the literature makes clear how each side is steeped in tradition, and that each side speaks of asynchronous online tutoring and other technologies based on the literature that has shaped their ideas of what writing center work looks like. A further complication of evaluating asynchronous online tutoring in terms of best practices arises, as there is little consensus on what constitutes “best practices” in writing tutoring, or in the larger field of writing instruction. The repeated calls for research illustrate the extent to which those in the writing center field diverge on what constitutes best practices. These research calls reinforce how much work needs to be done if we are to move from “lore” and “orthodoxy” to research-based discussions on the range of possibilities that comprise our understanding of best practices. Given the open-ended nature of this discussion, it is problematic to conclude that asynchronous online tutoring is ineffective because it runs contrary to “best practices.” To do so is to assume that there is a concept of “best practices,” a canon of prescribed moves tutors can and should make, or if we reject that idea of a canon, to do so is to treat an ever-changing discussion as instead a

fixed and knowable concept. Either way, to cite best practices in this manner oversimplifies the discussion and forms a shaky foundation for evaluation at best.

Tutoring writing practices are most closely connected to theories and approaches of working with student writers in the classroom. Extending the discussion to the field of rhetoric and composition illustrates how little consensus there is on “best practices” in working with student writers. The discussion of responding to student writing, extended to include rhetoric and composition, mirrors the nature of the discussion in writing center scholarship—it is ongoing, dynamic and active, and does not offer definitive ideas of best practices.

The lack of consensus and definitive ideas within this conversation is an asset rather than a weakness. Active debate invigorates the field, keeping the discussion vital and acknowledging that our understanding of practices and approaches changes and that this discussion constitutes an active discussion in an active field.

But if we can't offer definitive ideas of what constitutes best practices, why do we treat tutoring approaches as “dogma,” or as fixed orthodoxy? And how can asynchronous online tutoring be deemed ineffective based on this fixed ideology, when doing so is to equate something viewed as fixed with something that resists definitive judgments? If the conversation is live, multifaceted, and changing, shouldn't our understanding of tutoring approaches reflect these values as well?

In light of this openness, asynchronous online tutoring cannot run counter to best practices, as our discussion of best practices is inclusive and changing rather than fixed. Furthermore, in light of this understanding of the conversation as live and changing, the

practices and approaches tutors employ in asynchronous tutoring interactions can only enhance, rather than run counter to, our understanding of best practices, and the possibilities for how we think and talk about writing support and instruction.

The Pragmatist Paradigm: Support for Asynchronous Online Tutoring

If the idealist paradigm falls short under examination, what insights can be gained from analyzing the pragmatist paradigm?

As illustrated in the overview of the literature, the pragmatist perspective on tutoring has had a space in the history of writing center scholarship as well. The idealist paradigm is still very much alive; writing tutoring guides will cite the dominant tutoring orthodoxy almost without question. But it is also becoming increasingly common for writing center professionals to question this orthodoxy. At national writing center conferences, writing center practitioners are acknowledging that nondirective tutoring is not the only way to tutor, nor is it always the most appropriate. More scholarship is being published that suggests, for example, that for English language learners, nondirective tutoring can be frustrating for the student and counterproductive for both student and tutor. Disability studies are starting to become a thread in the writing center conversation, and with that will come additional discussions that challenge writing center orthodoxy as the epitome of effective tutoring.

These challenges suggest that there are no quick and encompassing answers to what constitutes effective tutoring, and where online tutoring and especially asynchronous online tutoring fit into the equation. Given the competing views of asynchronous online tutoring illustrated in the Wcenter listserv thread, which serves as an

unofficial barometer of the opinions of active writing center participants, coupled with the scarcity of research to back up those perspectives, any quick dismissals or endorsements of asynchronous online tutoring are arbitrary so long as these judgments lack evidence as support.

My examination of writing center literature, for example, illustrates how some writing center scholars refute both writing center as idyllic space and online tutoring as disengaged and lacking interaction, the two themes that underpin most critiques of asynchronous online tutoring.

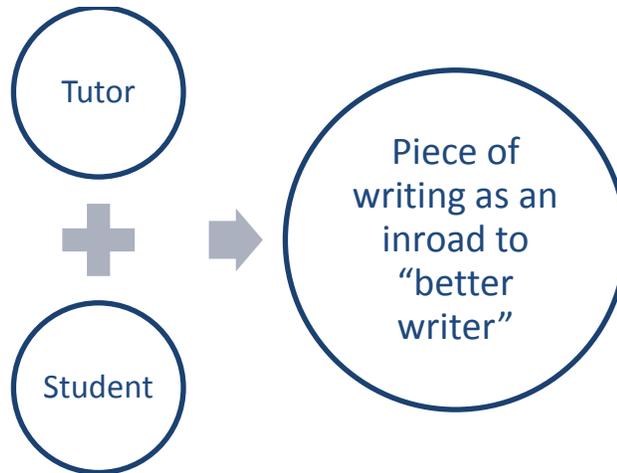
Increasingly, writing center professionals, Hewett chief among them, challenge the idealist paradigm, arguing that tutoring interactions are dynamic and can be just as engaging as face-to-face and synchronous online tutorials. If there are asynchronous interactions marked by disengagement, these professionals argue, the cause is most likely the pedagogy employed, rather than the tutoring format. After all, there are synchronous tutoring interactions in which students are likewise disengaged, and there are discussions of pedagogy that center around working with disengaged students. And authors working within the pragmatist paradigm argue that this dynamic view of tutoring is an asset, highlighting that one of the fundamentals of writing center ideology should be tutors' ability to respond, in the moment and in a personalized approach, to students' particular needs.

Furthermore, even if face-to-face interactions succeed because they are interactive, student-centered, and tutor-guided, based on guiding questions and focused dialogue, the fact that asynchronous online tutoring interactions encompass a different set

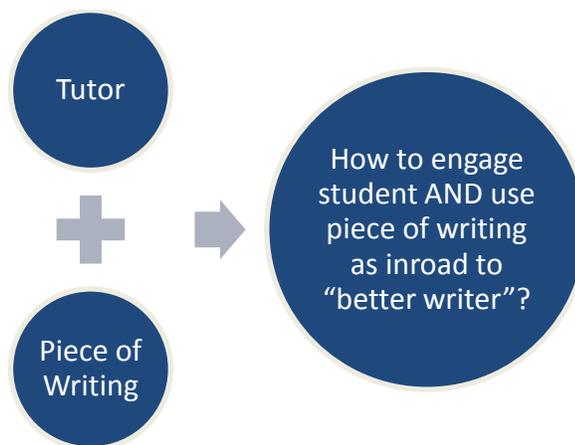
of strategies does not necessarily mean that these tutorials are not also student-centered and interactive. Interactions are different, undoubtedly, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Fig. 1. A pedagogical comparison of synchronous versus asynchronous online writing tutoring interactions

Face-to-Face Interactions



Online Tutoring Interactions



The two guiding factors in a face-to-face interaction, as illustrated in Figure 1 are the student and tutor, who come together to discuss a piece of writing. The tutor engages the student in discussion, using the paper to help the student reflect on writing-related issues that are applicable beyond the paper. The tutor's objective, in essence, is to shape a tutoring interaction that responds to North's call for better writers, writers that walk away with strategies and insights that they can apply beyond their current piece of writing. In a sense, the piece of writing is a vehicle, a means to an end (better writer) rather than an end in itself. In asynchronous tutoring interactions, in contrast, the tutor and the piece of writing become the guiding factors. The tutor receives a piece of writing, often via email. Most likely, the tutor will have some student-provided context: most online writing lab submission pages ask a student to provide a description of the assignment and specify his or her concerns in addition to attaching the paper itself. The end goal remains the same; the tutor wants to help the student beyond the paper in front of him, and so his challenge is twofold: to engage the student within the asynchronous tutoring format, and to concurrently help the student to arrive at insights applicable beyond the given writing situation. Even though the focus shifts from a student-center to a text-centered emphasis, this change in context does not have to preclude or exclude interaction. Based on Figure 1, one can make the argument that asynchronous online tutoring is problematic and contrary to the values that are so important to face-to-face interactions, or one can make the case instead that the nature of tutoring changes online, not necessarily in a negative way, and that these asynchronous tutoring interactions warrant further study that will result in a greater sense of what asynchronous online tutoring pedagogy and effective approaches within this tutoring format can look like.

It is also important to acknowledge that advocates for online tutoring in general and asynchronous online tutoring in particular are not suggesting that these interactions completely replace face-to-face tutoring interactions. To a person, these proponents are arguing for a multiplicity of tutoring approaches that are grounded in student needs, how these students do work, and how they can best receive feedback, with asynchronous tutoring serving as one of several options available to students.

Synchronous online tutoring is an appealing option, and the impulse to move online tutoring services entirely to this format are understandably appealing. However, this debate over how online tutoring should be made available to learners is part of the larger debate of online instruction and questions of how knowledge should be made accessible and delivered to learners online. As technology continues to change, it is tempting to see new offerings as a linear evolution, changing modes of instruction to fit with the latest technology available. Rather than assuming that each new technology is useful, value-neutral, and will work for each learner, we need to consider that the multiplicity of technologies means that different online learners have varied levels of background knowledge, different specialized understandings of technology, and that synchronous online activities may not even be ideal for some of these online learners. We need to carefully consider who is excluded by each technological innovation just as carefully as we consider who it welcomes in. Multiple technologies mean a multitude of possibilities for online learning, and those who advocate for asynchronous offerings are doing so not from an adversarial position, or a refusal to change with new technologies, but are instead arguing that asynchronous instruction and support should be one of a number of options available to online learners. Furthermore, these proponents are

searching for ways to incorporate new technologies into asynchronous formats in a way that will enhance these interactions while still reaching those who benefit the most from asynchronous online learning experiences.

Given the compelling reasons for reconsidering asynchronous online tutoring, the problem as I see it is not the existence of asynchronous online tutoring. The problem for me is the lack of research-based inquiries into asynchronous online tutoring interactions. Hewett set the precedent with her work, but there is still much to learn about the possibilities afforded by examining what online tutoring looks like in practice. Each objection or concern raised regarding asynchronous online tutoring should not be sent forth into a vacuum; instead, these objections can form the basis for research-based inquiry. If we are to argue that asynchronous online tutoring is contrary to best practices, but there is no research on what practices tutors currently employ in asynchronous online tutoring interactions, what grounds do we have to stand on? If we argue that asynchronous online tutoring interactions preclude interaction and student engagement, but we have not explored asynchronous tutoring interactions from the perspective of the student, how far can we get? The concerns raised regarding asynchronous online tutoring are valid, deserving of consideration, and speak from a long line of writing center scholarship. But these concerns are an opportunity for growth; first, growth in the form of research that interrogates the nature of asynchronous online tutoring as it currently exists, and then, growth in the form of a discussion of the possibilities that exist to improve asynchronous online tutoring interactions. After all, pedagogy is enhanced when we explore possibilities, and our understanding of best practices and possibilities are strengthened when they arise in the service of addressing concerns.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Revisiting the Call for Research

This project serves as one response to the call by writing center professionals for more research in the field. In particular, my own experiences with asynchronous online writing tutoring piqued my curiosity about this tutoring format, and as I sought out research, I found the majority of work on asynchronous online writing tutoring focuses on setting up online writing centers, and legitimizing its possibilities when it first began, as laid out in the previous chapter. Little work has been done on examining asynchronous online writing tutoring interactions and potential approaches to tutoring in this format. Hewett's *The Online Writing Conference* is one of the few exceptions to this dearth of research, and her work illustrates the potential directions research can take and the insights that can result.

Hewett's work should mark the beginning of research on online writing tutoring interactions. Her research is comprehensive, offering an overview of asynchronous and synchronous online interactions, and covers both student-to-tutor and student-to-instructor interactions. More focused, in-depth studies of particular types of online interactions represent a logical progression flowing from Hewett's *The Online Writing Conference*.

My interest in focusing my research on asynchronous online writing tutoring interactions also stems from the fact that this tutoring format is so debated and contested. As established in Chapter 1, critiques of asynchronous online writing tutoring are simultaneously tradition-based, established within the boundaries of one strand of writing

center history, and lore-based, as detractors of asynchronous online tutoring base their objections on observation and belief without subsequent research that interrogates these critiques.

Qualitative Research: A Rationale

As a writing center tutor with a stake in understanding asynchronous online tutorials, I am driven to create research that explores what happens when tutor and student come together to participate in asynchronous tutoring interactions. For years I have read the literature on online tutoring, and for years I have found my experience to be counter to the critiques of asynchronous online tutoring. I am driven by the need to add to the research rather than weighing in only with my own experience, precisely because I have been frustrated by the widespread availability of discussions based on experience and lore and the relative absence of research-based explorations of this tutoring format. My research is local, based on asynchronous online tutoring that takes place at the learning support center at my institution, Center for Academic Program Support (CAPS) at University of New Mexico. Although CAPS has access to a wealth of quantitative data (including the number of tutoring interactions that take place each semester, total number of tutoring hours for the semester, number of visits per student), I am looking for what happens within these quantifiable interactions. CAPS' numbers are great, and tell the story of the rise of online tutoring, particularly asynchronous online tutoring, at CAPS. As I approached this study, I wanted to know the story behind the numbers—the pedagogy and theories that can inform asynchronous online tutoring, how the interactions are perceived by student and tutor, what decisions online tutors make as they shape

asynchronous interactions, and how they conceive of their work. Considering the nature of my inquiry, qualitative research quickly became the starting point for this study.

Characteristics of qualitative research. Broadly speaking, qualitative research is a flexible, recursive process of inquiry and interpretation. In *Qualitative Research and Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, John Creswell offers a helpful encapsulated view of qualitative research:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and it extends the literature or signals a call to action. (37)

My research study encompasses these values of qualitative research. “Natural setting” is defined as the site where participants experience the issue or problem under study (Creswell 37), which in this case will be the writing center I focus my study on, CAPS Writing & Language Center. Extending the conversation laid out in “Research versus Assessment,” I view this study as middle ground between research and assessment. Particularly, I am using a local context as a site of inquiry. This localized study, though, has emerged in response to national conversations among writing center professionals:

the call for more rigorous and replicable research in writing center work in general, and the conflicted lore-based perspectives of asynchronous online writing tutoring. I seek to study asynchronous online tutoring within this local context, designing a course of research that could be applicable to other writing centers. At the same time, I am using my local findings to speak to the larger questions about the nature of asynchronous online writing tutoring. This move back and forth between the local and broader context, in my opinion, is one potential response to the call for more rigorous writing center research. This study is not meant to offer definitive ideas on all asynchronous online writing tutoring; instead, it is meant to suggest trends that translate to the nature of asynchronous online writing tutoring. It is also meant to escalate the conversation about the nature of asynchronous online writing tutoring to the level of research- or assessment-based rather than solely lore-based inquiry. Finally, this study ends not with definitive conclusions but instead more questions and ideas to further this area of study. It is meant as an opening, an imagining of possibilities, and one step in the big picture of the need for more research-based explorations of writing center work in all of its forms and formats.

My study encompasses the key features that mark qualitative research. In qualitative research, the researcher is a key instrument, gathering information firsthand, and developing his or her own instrument of study rather than relying on instruments developed by other researchers. This is certainly the case here, where my goal is to develop a research-based model of gathering data at the local level, and suggesting how the process I use could be employed by other writing centers as well. Qualitative researchers also typically gather data in multiple forms; I designed my study so that it draws on several sources of data, from the “artifacts” of asynchronous online writing

tutoring interactions (the student's OWL submission and the tutor's reply to that student), to the responses and reflections offered by both the student and tutor following the tutoring interaction itself. I analyze the data inductively by following the qualitative "bottom-up" approach to analysis, in which researchers begin with the data, organize that data into themes, and continue to organize themes into increasingly complex schemes to create a comprehensive picture of the subject of the study. Participant meaning is crucial to qualitative research, so even though I have some "insider knowledge" of writing tutoring, I will be examining the phenomenon anew, with a focus on how participants in asynchronous online writing tutoring construct and negotiate meaning. The perspectives of these participants are important to my study, and are represented comprehensively in my findings chapter.

Emergent design is another characteristic of qualitative research, and that has been one of the defining characteristics of this study. Although I created an initial plan for research, my initial research questions needed to be revised, and the initial set up of my student survey instrument proved ineffective. This first attempt at inquiry was a disappointment and an opportunity; in the course of re-administering my student survey I had the opportunity to fine-tune my questions as well. The adaptive nature of qualitative research is therefore a good fit for this project.

Finally, qualitative research allows for a complexity and multiplicity of meanings. The final two characteristics of qualitative research, as described by Creswell, are interpretive inquiry and holistic account. In terms of interpretive inquiry, "Qualitative research is a form of inquiry in which researchers make an interpretation of what they see, hear, and understand. The researchers' interpretation cannot be separated from their

own background, history, context, and prior understandings” (39). Beyond that, “After a research report is issued, readers make an interpretation as well as the participants, offering yet other interpretations of the study. With the readers, the participants, and the researchers all making interpretations, we can see how multiple views of the problem can emerge” (39). Theoretically, this approach appeals to me because of the complexities the research allows for; the variety of interpretations inherent in qualitative research represents an opening up of a conversation, where I offer an interpretation and invite others in as well, rather than offering a definitive interpretation of asynchronous online tutoring interactions. And through the creation of a holistic account, the research further allows for a complex rather than reductive representation of writing centers. Creswell notes, “Qualitative researchers try to develop a complex picture of the problem or issue under study. This involves reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges. Researchers are bound not by tight cause-and-effect relationships among factors, but rather by identifying the complex interactions of factors in any situation” (39). Again, since qualitative research allows for the complexities of meaning making, my project, in following the qualitative tradition, represents a contribution to the discussion about the nature of writing center research and assessment, which is one of the driving forces for my project. In my findings chapter, I attempt to represent the complexity through the visual organization of my data.

Qualitative research strategy. Within the broad heading of qualitative research, there are many approaches one can adapt. For my study, I have chosen to follow a phenomenological approach of inquiry, as I believe this approach best suits my goals. In

a phenomenological study, a researcher focuses on a phenomenon of interest, reflecting on essential themes and not only describes the experience that is the topic of inquiry but also seeks to interpret it by “mediating” between different meanings of that experience (Creswell 59). A phenomenological research study, as Creswell discusses, is best suited to projects in which it is important to understand individuals’ common or shared experiences “in order to develop practices or policies, or to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon” (60). These characteristics of research align closely with the goals that motivated this study.

The Local Context: Online Tutoring at CAPS

Chapter 1 established the relevance of the topic of my study to the field of writing center studies. This project is timely on a global level, given the call for research for all areas of writing center work, and the scarcity of research-based scholarship on online tutoring interactions. At my institution, the timing is equally appropriate, as online tutoring continues to grow, a trend reflected across all CAPS services.

Since 2006, I have worked in various positions at the Center for Academic Program Support (CAPS), University of New Mexico’s undergraduate learning center. The University of New Mexico is New Mexico’s flagship university and is, in addition, a Hispanic-serving institution with a diverse student body consisting of 27,278 students at the main campus as of the Spring 2012 semester (<http://www.unm.edu/welcome/about/index.html>). CAPS has long been a part of the UNM community, as it was established in 1979 and has grown exponentially since then. Five main programs are housed within CAPS: the supplemental instruction program, the learning strategies program, the math and science program, and the program that forms

the focus of this study, the writing and language program. In the Fall 2013 semester, the most recent semester for which data is available, CAPS served 3, 874 students in 20,902 visits for a total of 26,063 hours.

The CAPS Writing & Language Center responds to UNM's diverse student population in a variety of ways. As Daniel Sanford points out in "The Peer-Interactive Writing Center at the University of New Mexico," (2012) UNM serves a highly multicultural and multilingual student population, and CAPS strategically houses writing and language tutoring within the same center. This pairing of writing and language tutoring has important implications for the students CAPS serves. Writing tutors are available to all undergraduate students at UNM working on writing for any course, and students can also seek tutoring for application writing, scholarship writing, and résumé writing. Furthermore, language tutors work with students on both their speaking and writing skills within the languages offered at UNM. Since language tutors are fully fluent in both the language they tutor and in English, they can speak to students about writing and language concepts in both languages. Furthermore, the CAPS online writing lab accepts writing submissions written in any language that CAPS supports. The emphasis on supporting diverse students with diverse needs extends to the tutoring format options CAPS offers as well. The CAPS Writing & Language Center offers tutoring in the form of one-on-one individual appointments, tutoring in a drop-in lab setting, and online tutoring. Since 2006, writing and language tutoring at CAPS has moved from taking place entirely through individual appointments. Peer-interactive drop-in writing tutoring, with an emphasis on writing as a dynamic, multistage process, was introduced in 2008, and is now the predominant form of writing tutoring at CAPS (Sanford).

The year 2008 also marks the initial growth of online writing tutoring at CAPS. At first, this tutoring format was underutilized, with fewer than ten online writing lab submissions a semester. Online tutoring at CAPS has grown exponentially since then; in Fall 2013, CAPS writing tutors responded to about 200 OWL submissions. In the first few semesters, I was the sole responder to these OWL submissions, but as online writing tutoring expanded quickly, other writing tutors began working online as well. The online tutoring program continues to grow; in 2012 CAPS began to offer embedded online tutoring, a program in which tutors are placed within an online course and serve as a tutor for that course. For the past several years CAPS has also offered virtual tutoring labs through which students can chat live with a tutor within a specific discipline during set hours, and another online option is submit-a-question, an email-based format that allows students to submit questions about specific course content they are working with. As the online program continues to develop and branch out, OWL submissions are still the most frequently used online tutoring format, and will continue to have an important place in the CAPS online tutoring program. A more in-depth understanding of what these tutoring interactions look like in practice and the pedagogy employed by online tutors will help to shape the way the online tutoring program develops and how tutors are trained to interact online, and can help us to better appreciate asynchronous online tutoring as a legitimate and valuable tutoring offering.

As the online tutoring program at CAPS has grown, so has my interest in how asynchronous online tutoring interactions look in practice and what strategies tutors employ in working with students in this format. So far, lore has comprised our knowledge of asynchronous tutoring interactions. In approaching this study, I wanted to design a

course of research that moves beyond lore. It is lore that led to the initial marginalizing or even dismissing of asynchronous online tutoring, so I felt lore could not progress the conversation further. Instead, I want to engage in inquiry, put aside my own and other writing center professionals' preconceptions of asynchronous online writing tutoring, and see how research will yield insights and further our understanding of asynchronous online writing tutoring interactions. I begin with the idea of writing as social. If writing is indeed a social act, and real-time tutoring interactions can reinforce the social nature of writing, what happens with asynchronous online tutoring, tutoring that seems to take place in isolation, outside of real-time and seemingly without a negotiated context?

Other questions quickly follow. What is the pedagogy of asynchronous online tutoring employed by tutors at CAPS? How is it similar to and different from other pedagogies employed at CAPS? In what ways is it responding to writing, and by extension, writing tutoring, as a social act? What does asynchronous online tutoring look like from a student's perspective? From a tutor's perspective? What choices do tutors make and what considerations drive those choices? How do students make meaning from the asynchronous online tutoring interaction? Are they feeling their needs are met? What the research tell us about asynchronous online tutoring pedagogy, especially at CAPS? Is this pedagogy in line with current practices at CAPS? If so, how? If not, should it be? Are there areas that need to be addressed moving forward?

Methodology: Interrogating Asynchronous Online Writing Tutoring Interactions

For the sake of this study, I designed my research based on the reality of asynchronous online writing tutoring as it takes place at CAPS. To begin, I examined the

rhetorical situation of asynchronous online writing tutorials at my targeted study site, CAPS at UNM. At CAPS, online writing tutorials are email-based, with a student uploading a paper after filling out a few fields of information about the assignment they are working on, the course the writing assignment is for, and what concerns they have (fig. 2).

Fig. 2. A screenshot of the CAPS OWL submission page

• CAPS will accept submissions for the **Spring 2014 semester** between **Monday, January 27th** and **Wednesday, May 7th, 2014 at 12:00 noon.**

• Papers must be:

- Double Spaced
- Microsoft Word (.doc), Text (.txt), or Rich-Text (.rtf) format

• **NOTE:** CAPS *will not* proofread papers.

Turnaround Time

Under normal circumstances, your undergraduate paper will be reviewed and returned to you within 48-72 hours, Monday through Friday. That is, if you submit a paper on Friday afternoon, you can expect a response by the end of the day on Wednesday. Please check the [CAPS Calendar](#) for holidays or special occasions that may delay the return of your work. We accept submissions in English, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Latin, Greek, Navajo, Portuguese, and Russian.

Complete the Following Form to Submit Your UNDERGRADUATE Paper

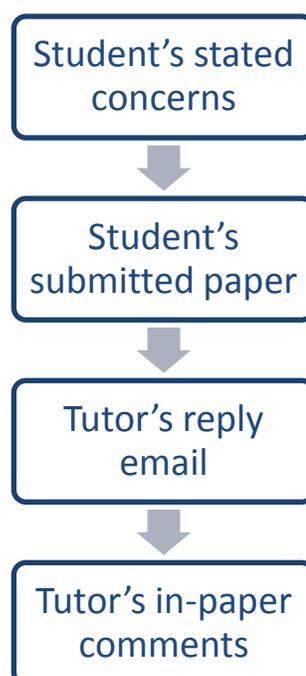
Full Name:	<input type="text"/>
UNM ID#:	<input type="text"/>
Phone Number: (Optional)	<input type="text"/>
UNM Email Address:	<input type="text"/>
Course Name and Number:	<input type="text"/>
Section Number:	<input type="text"/>
Professor's Name:	<input type="text"/>
Professor's Department:	<input type="text"/>
When is this assignment due?	<input type="text"/>
Have you submitted this paper to the CAPS OWL before?	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input checked="" type="radio"/> No
Briefly describe the assignment:	<input type="text"/>
<p>Describe one or two specific concerns you have regarding this paper: (If your concerns are not clear and/or your request goes against our proofreading guidelines noted above, we will communicate with you via email, which may delay the anticipated 48-72 hour turnaround time)</p> <input type="text"/>	
Attach your paper:	<input type="button" value="Browse..."/> No file selected.

For each paper submitted, an email is generated to an associated tutoring email account that includes the information from the corresponding fields the student was asked to fill out. The email includes an attachment of the student's paper. The tutor uses the cues the student provides, as well as the submitted paper itself, to set an agenda for their response to the paper. The tutor has several options when commenting on student writing.

They have the email response which is sent to the student. For in-text comments, tutors are encouraged to use the comment boxes featured in Microsoft Word Track Changes, or if they prefer, they can also make comments within the text using a different color of font. In addition to the comments tutors include in the student's paper, they also use their reply email to give overview statements about the student's writing and to help students to make sense of the comments they provide in the student's document, which they attach in the reply message.

The rhetorical elements of an asynchronous online writing tutoring interaction are best exemplified in Figure 3.

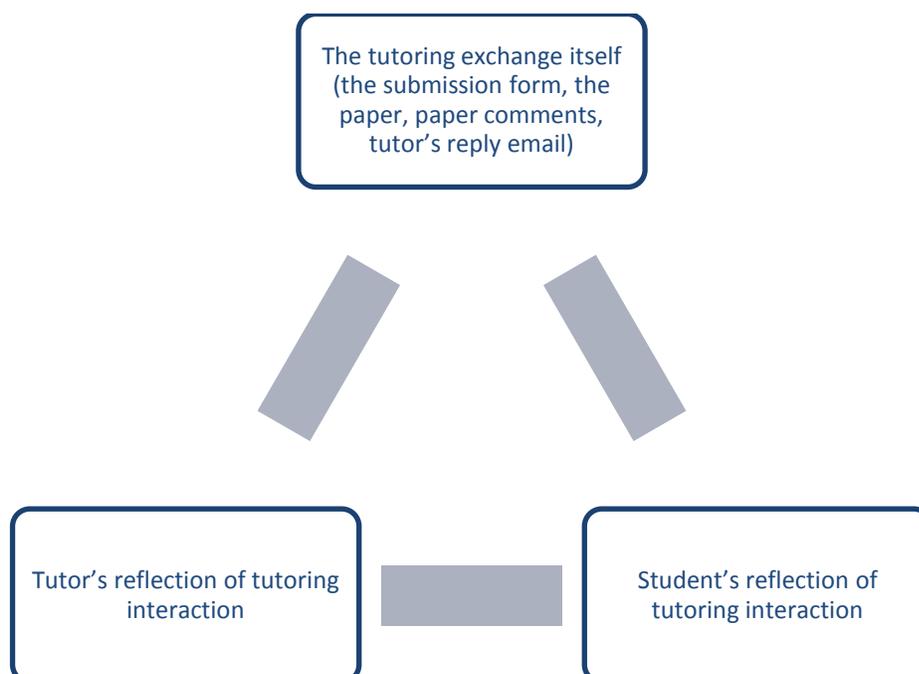
Fig. 3. Elements of asynchronous online tutoring interactions



While the “artifacts” of the tutoring interactions may tell a story about the online interaction, I wanted to go beyond examining the student's stated concerns and submitted paper and the tutor's reply email and in-paper comments. In the initial stages of this

project, I strove to design a multidimensional exploration of online asynchronous online tutoring interactions at CAPS (represented here in fig. 4). My study would not be limited to the tutoring interaction itself, but would also explore how the student perceived the tutoring interaction, and how the tutor worked within the context of these sessions.

Fig. 4. A multidimensional exploration of asynchronous online tutoring interactions



To gain insights about the student's and tutor's perceptions of the online interactions, I designed a survey for students to fill out, and reflection questions for the tutor to respond to (see fig. 5 below). With students, my motivation was to craft a research instrument that created minimal demand for participants. I decided a survey with a few carefully chosen questions would best encourage participation on the part of students. For tutors, I asked participants to consider their perspective of online tutor prior

to the study (fig. 6) and to reflect, via a series of questions, on each tutoring interaction they engaged in during the study at the time the interaction occurred (fig. 7).

Research Design: Student Perspective

In alignment with IRB approved protocol, each student who submitted an online writing lab submission during the Spring 2013 semester received an initial automated email indicating that the OWL submission had been received, and announcing that once that student received a response from a tutor, they would also be invited to participate in a survey about their experience. The email response from the tutor then included a link to the survey. IRB deemed an informed consent form unnecessary; it was assumed that if a student clicked on the link they were implying consent. Figure 5 contains the questions included in the survey for students who submitted papers to the online writing lab at CAPS. In total, six students participated, and of those six respondents, three worked with Michael and three worked with Mary.

Fig. 5. Survey questions for students using the OWL

Question 1: Please provide your NetID:

Question 2: (check boxes)

How often do you use the CAPS online writing lab (OWL)?

I am a first time user

I use the OWL once a semester

I use the OWL a few times a semester

Question 3: Going into your tutoring interaction, what were your expectations?

Question 4: (check boxes, followed by the follow-up question and field to enter response)

Did your tutoring interaction

Exceed your expectations?

Meet your expectations?

Fail to meet your expectations?

Why or why not?

Question 5: (check boxes and then a field to enter a response to the follow-up question)

Please describe the tutor's response style:

My tutor asked a lot of questions about my writing

My tutor provided instructions about my writing

My tutor offered suggestions about my writing

My tutor used a combination of these strategies

Did your tutor's response style work for you? Why or why not?

Question 6: Describe the feedback you received from your tutor. What suggestions did your tutor give you about your paper?

Question 7: Were your tutor's suggestions helpful? How?

Question 8: After your online tutoring experience, do you feel prepared for the next stage of your writing process? Why or why not?

Question 9: Do you feel the next draft of your paper is going to improve as a result of your tutoring interaction?

Question 10: Do you feel like your understanding of how you write has improved as a result of your tutoring interaction? Why or why not?

Research Design: Tutor Perspective

The tutors who were invited to participate in this project were those who worked with a student who subsequently responded to the survey. Ultimately, two tutors were able to participate in the study. These tutors, Michael and Mary, consented to their role in the research. They were then asked to engage in two levels of reflection. At the initial stage of their participation, they were asked to reflect on their perceptions of asynchronous online tutoring, and how they position themselves as asynchronous online tutors. The reflection questions are included in Figure 6.

Fig. 6. Initial reflection questions for online tutors

Background Questions for Online Tutor Participants

- How would you describe your general attitude toward online tutoring?
- Do you tend to think of online tutoring in a positive or a negative way?
- What is your general approach in working with a student asynchronously online?
- How do you set an agenda? What is your strategy in balancing student needs versus what you see in an online writing lab submission?
- How would you describe your online writing tutoring response style?

Each time a student responded to the survey, I would match that student with his or her respective tutor. That tutor would then be asked to respond to a series of questions about that tutoring interaction (fig. 7). For each interaction included in this study, the tutor would be given a print-out of the email exchange and the paper with tutor comments to help refresh the tutor's memory of the interaction.

Fig. 7. Tutor Reflection Questions on Individual Interactions

Reflection Questions for Online Tutor Participants

- Describe your experience of this tutoring session. How did you approach this interaction? What drove the choices you made?
- In this tutoring interaction, what were your successes? What went well?
- In this tutoring interaction, what did you feel could have gone better? Did you face any challenges in responding to this student?

The initial questions Michael and Mary responded to form the context for the tutoring biographies included in the next chapter. Once they submitted their responses to the questions that pertain to specific tutoring interactions, those responses were compiled with the student's survey responses on the same interactions. The data was then analyzed first for initial trends that would inform further analysis. Then, interactions were grouped by tutor, and each tutoring interaction was analyzed in turn. Chapter 3 will lay out the framework for this study's data analysis, present the findings of this study, and compare and contrast the approaches and strategies Michael and Mary employ in shaping asynchronous online tutoring interactions.

Chapter 3: Findings

Overview

As laid out in the second chapter, two tutors and six students participated in this study. When I received responses from student users, I matched the responses to the tutor the student worked with, and organized my finding by tutor. As I worked through my data, I attempted to represent the story behind the tutoring interactions studied. Below are my findings by tutor. For each tutor, I begin by providing context for the tutor's approach and thoughts on his or her tutoring pedagogy (fig. 6, ch. 2). I then offer an examination of each tutoring interaction, organized by student, and by chronological order of interaction. I draw on the initial online writing lab submission form the student completed (fig. 2, ch. 2), particularly focusing on the student's description of the assignment and his or her specified concerns. I also reference the tutor's comments, provided both in-text and in the email response the tutor sends to the student. I also consider the tutor's reflection of the tutoring interaction (fig. 7, ch. 2) and the student's reflection of the tutoring interaction (fig. 5, ch. 2). Drawing on this data, in this chapter I will create a visual representation of the tutoring interactions from the perspective of the student and tutor, and a description of the interaction itself. These representations are offered in figures throughout this chapter.

Both Michael and Mary work in several functions as online tutors at CAPS, roles which inevitably influence their experiences and the moves they make online. The formats Michael and Mary work within influence and inform their tutoring strategies in the other tutoring formats they work within. CAPS offers two main forms of asynchronous online tutoring: embedded online tutoring and the online writing lab. The online writing lab, as outlined in Chapter 2, is open to all UNM undergraduates working

on class- and other academic-related writing. The CAPS embedded online tutoring program connects tutors with specific fully online courses. Within these courses, the embedded online tutor participates along with the class, gaining insider knowledge of the course content. The tutor then facilitates discussion on the online course discussion posts, provides resources to students, and offers comments on student work within the course. Both Michael and Mary are embedded online tutors who specialize in writing assistance, and both spend hours each week responding to the general online writing lab. In contrast to the interactions that take place in the online writing lab, as embedded online tutors, Michael and Mary get to know the students they are working with over the course of the semester, and also work closely with the course instructor, giving them more context and feedback than is possible through the online writing lab. As a result of this increased context, as well as a more in-depth knowledge in the areas of online learning and online writing tutoring, Michael and Mary have a broader pedagogical base for their tutoring than they would otherwise have had, and both are interested in how their practices in one asynchronous tutoring setting influences their work in other formats. Both likewise have a unique stance of participating in an asynchronous setting where they receive feedback on their effectiveness (through close communication with students and instructors in their embedded online tutoring work), and the online writing lab, where student feedback is rare and instructor feedback nonexistent. They apply what they find has worked in embedded tutoring to the online writing lab, but, likewise, since embedded online tutoring is a new format to CAPS, they use their more extensive experience responding to online writing lab submissions to inform their responses to students enrolled in embedded online tutor supported courses. Michael's and Mary's interest in furthering their

understanding of their practices and imagining other possibilities make them ideal candidates for this study.

Analysis of the data

Through my analysis of Michael's and Mary's work with students, I argue that my findings run contrary to the drawbacks that critics of asynchronous online tutoring cite. To recap, the main critiques lodged against asynchronous online tutoring are:

1. Tutors are forced to do most of the work, contrary to the ideology of non-directive tutoring so valued in writing center literature.
2. Asynchronous online writing tutors are forced to deal with the text only, leaving aside the writer, which is contrary to North's tenet that "[O]ur job is to produce *better writers*, not *better writing*."
3. Asynchronous online writing tutoring is ineffective—the students who submit papers asynchronously don't benefit from this form of tutoring.

My data indicates these critiques of asynchronous online tutoring are not reflected in actual asynchronous tutoring interactions. Through my research surrounding Michael, Mary, and the students they tutor, I have found:

1. Asynchronous tutoring is labor-intensive, but no more so than face-to-face or synchronous tutoring interactions. Writing center orthodoxy suggests the tutor should be situated as an interested but unknowing peer asking directive questions that promote student engagement and lead the students to new insights. Absent from this orthodoxy is:

- a. an acknowledgement of how time- and energy-intensive this form of tutoring can be. This type of tutoring is not an effortless prospect, though the literature does not reflect this reality.
- b. an acknowledgement that this is not the only way to shape a tutoring interaction, nor is it always ideal or appropriate. Among the six characteristics that all writing centers hold in common cited in Harris's 1988 "SLATE" statement is the recognition that experimentation and practice are encouraged. Tutors absolutely improvise, experiment, and practice flexibility and innovation in tutoring interactions, regardless of how little this is discussed in writing center literature.

Michael and Mary devote time and energy to their asynchronous tutoring interactions, but they likewise devote time and energy to students in synchronous tutoring interactions. Furthermore, Michael and Mary both offer comments that promote revision; they do not rework a student's paper, and they don't copyedit. Their comments focus on the student's revision process, and they pose questions and offer observations with the intent of facilitating the student's revision process.

2. Although the cues that Michael and Mary work with are textual only, they use those cues to construct an idea of the student they are working with. For them, it is important that their interactions do not feel impersonal, depersonalized, or anonymous, because they acknowledge that is the point at which the interaction would feel pointlessly time- and energy-intensive. In discussions with Michael and Mary, as well as in countless online tutor trainings, tutors cite this drive to

envision the student they are working with, drawing ideas from the student's stated concerns and cues about how they can personalize their tutoring interaction in ways they hope will work for that individual student.

3. Each student participant indicated that their respective tutoring interaction was beneficial. This study relies on self-reporting, so it is unclear how the tutoring interaction influenced the student's revision process, but self-efficacy is crucial to a student's success, and if the tutoring interaction reinforces the student's sense of ownership and authorship, I consider that a success regardless of the student's actual revisions.

Michael and Mary both deliberately draw on the resources available to them to recreate shared dialogue and context. Although they differ in the specific strategies they employ, the choices they make in shaping their tutoring interactions are deliberate, and based on each tutor's best inferences of what will most effectively meet the individual student's needs that they are working with.

Framework: Hewett's *The Online Writing Conference*

In my data analysis, I will examine each tutor in turn, offering commentary throughout the tutoring interactions included in the study. Once all tutoring interactions that correspond to the respective tutor are described with commentary, a more in-depth discussion of strategies follows. This discussion will center on Hewett's discussion in Chapter 7 of *The Online Writing Conference*, a chapter entitled "Using What Works." Since Hewett offers the most definitive exploration of online tutoring to date, her

framework is a first published attempt to codify best practices. I will map Michael's and Mary's tutoring strategies onto Hewett's five stated practices in her chapter:

1. Engagement

Hewett offers several suggestions for ways that asynchronous tutors can promote and reflect engagement:

- Using student's names and speaking directly to them.
- Signaling attentiveness with context cues such as specific references to the student's writing.
- Asking students open-ended and contextually based questions rather than yes/no, rhetorical, or leading questions. (122-123)

2. Where to comment

Hewett argues local comments should be embedded in a student's text, using methods such as bracketing, placing in-text comments in bold, or using a different font color for comments, or by using comment balloons (referred to in this study as comment boxes). These comments should "point or link to specific sentence-level issues (strengths and weaknesses) for student writers to address in revision" (127); Hewett argues that she suspects "the closer the feedback resides to the student's actual text—without interrupting or overwhelming it—the more helpful the feedback is for students" (127).

3. Too much and too little commenting

Acknowledging that the length and extent of comments is a balancing act, Hewett offers two guidelines applicable to asynchronous tutoring interactions:

- “Adjust the length of embedded comments to make them (a) complete and clear and (b) short and succinct” (136).
- “Asynchronously, remember that less can be more when it comes to a conference. Students don’t need to (and probably won’t) read comments that are as long or longer than their own writing. It’s also unlikely that students will act on all of those comments” (136).

4. Modeling by proofing and editing

According to Hewett, “while it is not the online instructor’s [or tutor’s] job to do the proofreading or editing for students, I maintain that it is the instructor’s [or tutor’s] responsibility to teach them how to proofread and edit—and then remind them when and how to use these skills” (137).

As Michael’s and Mary’s tutoring interactions will demonstrate, these four strategies are key to shaping asynchronous tutoring interactions. Both tutors will employ these strategies to varying degrees, depending on what each individual interaction calls for, throughout their work and across interactions.

Tutor 1: Michael

Michael has been a CAPS tutor for five years, and has worked as an online tutor for the past three years. Michael serves in two capacities as an online tutor; he works as an embedded online tutor, and also responds to the general online writing lab submissions.

Throughout the course of this study, Michael demonstrated flexibility and adaptability in his communication style and tutoring strategies. As a seasoned CAPS

tutor, Michael has extensive experience tutoring writing face-to-face, and the strategies he employs face-to-face became the starting point for developing his online tutoring approach. At the study's beginning, Michael tended to respond within a student's text using a different color of font, and his feedback tended to be nondirective. As the study progressed and Michael reflected more in-depth about his tutoring style, he became more versatile in his approach, expressing more confidence in adopting a style he believed would work well for a given interaction, and moving back and forth between directive and nondirective approaches. As a result of discussions with other online tutors, he also began to experiment with comment boxes in Microsoft Office's Track Changes feature, believing that doing so kept his text separate from the student's text, an approach he believes aligns with what constitutes effective face-to-face interactions (keeping the pencil/revision in the student's control, listening and weighing in rather than overtaking and making definitive statements).

Michael's response to the background questions for online tutor participants indicates that he views tutoring in a positive way, and that he sees his approach evolving as he gains experience. He reflects, "My attitude towards [online tutoring] is one of increasing enthusiasm and admiration. For the first several semesters that I worked particular courses, there seemed to be a general sense of ambiguity about the role that tutors should play within the online paradigm, but, especially over the past year, I have begun to witness a significant role emerging for online tutors." Likewise, when Michael was approached to participate in this study, he expressed a particular enthusiasm for the way his style has changed over the course of the semester in which the study takes place. He commented especially on the role Track Changes has played in his emerging tutoring

style. This shift will be illustrated in the tutoring interactions included in this study. For the first and second respondents Michael worked with, he made comments within the student's text, offsetting his comments in colored font and parentheses. In the time between these and his third interaction, Michael had experimented with Track Changes, and he employed Track Changes in his third tutoring interaction. CAPS tutors often prefer to offer comments to paper drafts online using Track Changes, inserting comments in the comment boxes, while avoiding adding or inserting wording into the student's paper since doing so could afford students the chance to choose "Accept All Changes," without critical reflection and deliberate decision-making on the student's part. When Michael used the Track Changes comment boxes, he felt doing so helped him to take a rhetorical leap. Michael reflects, "I felt bad writing in a student's text, because I felt like I was taking over the student's paper in some way. With [inserted comments in the comment boxes of] Track Changes, my comments are off to the side, and don't interfere with the text. My comments feel less intrusive this way, and I feel more effective." For Michael, as with several other online tutors, Track Changes strikes a good middle ground between commenting on a paper and overtaking the paper within an online, asynchronous tutoring context. CAPS tutors are trained on the traditional tutoring approaches, which encourage students to maintain ownership of their writing, and to keep paper and pencil in front of the student. For Michael and fellow online tutors, Track Changes comment boxes are the closest approximation of working with, rather than writing on, a student's paper.

Michael describes his online tutoring style as a balance of supportive and instructive: "My approach is to be sensitive and encouraging, but at the same time, to

look for elements of real significance that student may be lacking, and to be very direct in letting the student know what needs serious improvement.” In balancing student-specified needs with what he observes as areas for the student to work on, Michael’s strategy is to “read through the complete piece of student writing and considering the student’s stated intent or desired outcome. The next step after this is to try and connect the student’s goals with the elements of the writing that need the most work.” He tends to give mini-lessons within his in-text comments, offering suggestions to the student within the context of writing or grammar conventions (i.e., “consider doing x because of y ”).

Throughout the course of this study, Michael worked with three students who subsequently provided feedback on their interactions. Student A1 is a self-disclosed English language learner enrolled in an upper level management course. Student A2 is an English 100 student, a course which serves as preparation for students who have not yet placed into the required two-semester first year writing courses offered at UNM. The third interaction involves a second upperclassmen enrolled in a 400-level management course. Michael demonstrates three distinct strategies in his tutoring interactions: in the first, he positions himself as a grammar informant, taking a directive stance in his comments; in the second, he takes the role of resource facilitator, helping the student he is working with to use the resources available to her in a way that makes sense to her; in the third interaction, he plays the role of interested reader, offering observational questions and suggestions. As the student reflections indicate, the students find his approaches successful, although, as Michael is quick to point out, he always sees room for improvement in how he interacts with students in an asynchronous online context.

Throughout his tutoring interactions, Michael relies heavily on context, analyzing student cues and adapting his approach accordingly.

Tutoring Interaction A1

The first interaction between Michael and a student reflects the beginning stages of Michael's ongoing search for a writing tutoring response style that works for him. In this and the second interaction studied here, Michael writes within the student's paper and takes a somewhat directive stance. These choices are deliberate, but more the result of Michael's uncertainty about his options than a lack of pedagogical application.

Michael reflects:

I am still quite new at responding to these OWLS and so I feel I have written in some suggestions that may [be] difficult for an ELL or ESL student to correctly interpret, such as areas where I make some suggestion for a segment of a sentence. For example, something like "...make room for..." may be difficult for such a student to correctly place without a more detailed explanation. I was not familiar with track changes, so I feel I missed an opportunity to provide greater clarity.

The following figure illustrates the tutoring interaction between Michael and student A1. Notice how Michael plays the role of "grammar informant," a role he enacts in response to the context of the tutoring interaction.

Fig. 8. Tutoring interaction A1: Michael as “grammar informant”

Interaction A1 : A student enrolled in an upper-level management course.

Student concern: “I really worry about the grammar mistakes.”

Sample comments (excerpted from text, tutor’s comments in italics):

“Till the end of 2012, KFC have opened 223 restaurants cross 35 cities and (*Consider rewording as, “By the end of 2012, KFC had opened 233 restaurants, and...”*) will have 500 restaurants cross 75 cities by 2015.”

“[As a] First step, KFC hired manager[s] who knew the best(“who were well educated” or something like this is clearer).”

Michael’s reflection: “In this interaction, I found the student's comprehension of the material discussed to be very high, and so I made a decision to help with more immediate concerns, namely the student's admission that s/he worried about the grammatical content. As a result many of my comments to the student are recommendations of word usage, grammar and syntax, and other issues not related to the often-tutored aspects of form, and flow of information.”

Student’s reflection: “I always tend to have a lot grammar mistakes and tutor’s suggestion not only help me correct it but also show me the mechanism in it, which was very nice.”

Despite Michael’s claims to discomfort with this initial tutoring interaction, he is strategic and cognizant in how he works with his student. To begin, Michael analyzes how the student describes his assignment and concerns, as well as the paper itself, in setting the agenda:

In this interaction, I found the student's comprehension of the material discussed to be very high, and so I made a decision to help with more immediate concerns, namely the student's admission that s/he worried about the grammatical content.

Based on the writing, I made a guess that this student may be an ELL or ESL student, and that an explanation of these lower level grammatical problems may provide this student with a greater insight into not only grammatical, but cultural and social norms. As a result many of my comments to the student are recommendations of word usage, grammar and syntax, and other issues not related to the often-tutored aspects of form, and flow of information. As I worked through the paper I could see more and more clearly that this student had written a well-formed piece of writing, and had numerous well-constructed paragraphs, which confirmed my strategy.

In this interaction, Michael demonstrates a response strategy that he applies to each subsequent interaction. He uses his email message reply to the student to provide guidance on how to read his feedback, and reserves the feedback itself for the student's document. In his response to student A1, for example, he begins with a greeting, and then explains that the student will find an attached copy of his paper with comments included in blue font. In addition to using the email response as a guide, he also uses it as a chance to offer the student support and encouragement. In describing his comments, he indicates they are meant to "help [you] to smooth out some of the minor grammatical problems" in the student's text. In the following sentence, he offers more overt support, saying, "You've done a very nice job with this paper," before concluding and signing the email. Through this email reply, Michael provides the parameters for making sense of his feedback, and builds a supportive rapport with the student. Michael initiates this tutoring interaction by reading through the student's description of the assignment on the submission form, as well as the student's stated concern (grammar mistakes), and reads

through the submitted paper. Through this initial process Michael creates a shared context, imagining the type of student he is working with and what style of tutoring will work for this student; this shared context is reinforced through his supportive comments.

In the paper itself, Michael's approach in interaction A1 is to focus on the student's concerns throughout, since those concerns align with the concerns Michael feels should be addressed. At the end of the paper, he offers a supportive recap: "All in all a very nice job. Your organization and flow of content work very well, and my suggestions primarily relate to surface-level grammatical and syntactical errors, so to speak."

The student Michael is working with suggests the tutoring session worked for him, indicating that his tutor provided instructions about his writing. When asked if his tutor's response style worked for him, the student responds, "Yes, it did. I always tend to have a lot of grammar mistakes and tutor's suggestion not only help me correct it but also show me the mechanism in it, which was very nice." The student even indicates that "the paper just flowed more smoothly after the correction," which suggests that contrary to Michael's concern that his comments would be unclear to the student, the student felt confident applying Michael's suggestions precisely because they were so directive. Michael inferred through his work with student A1 that he was interacting with an English language learner, and therefore chose a directive approach in working with this student. It is Michael's directiveness, especially in the online context, that the student appreciates in this tutoring interaction.

Tutoring Interaction A2

In contrast to the “grammar informant” role that Michael takes on in interaction A1, Michael demonstrates a second strategy in interaction A2, helping the student he is working with to use the resources available to her in a way that makes sense to her. The student provides Michael with some useful context: she is specific in what help she is seeking (APA formatting) and the textbook she is using. Based on this information, Michael takes the lead in guiding the student and modeling how she can use her resources to address her concerns. The summary of this tutoring interaction appears in the following figure.

Fig. 9. Tutoring interaction A2: Michael as resource facilitator

Interaction A2: A student working on a paper for an upper-level management course

Student concern: “I’m not sure I am citing things correctly using APA format. The professor is grading according to *Writing Today*.”

Sample comments (excerpted from text, tutor’s comments in italics):

According to Trader Joe’s web page, *The Good Stuff in Your Neighborhood*, (*According to pg. 539 of “Writing Today,” the italicized title of this webpage is correct*)

(Thompson, Peteraf, Gamble and *(use the ampersand (&) instead of the word, “and”*) Strickland, 2012)

Michael’s reflection: “My experience during this interaction was fairly traditional. I spent the majority of the time referring the student to the textbook, “Writing Today,” which made my evaluation of the writing in question much easier.”

Student’s reflection: “The suggestions have helped me better understand my paper, but I feel like I should resubmit. The tutor provided rewording, suggestions, and helpful hints. The comments and suggestions are easy to understand.”

Michael reflects a comfort with this interaction that he has not expressed in his first interaction:

My experience during this interaction was fairly traditional. I didn't find myself especially challenged by the student's queries. I spent the majority of the time referring the student to the textbook, "Writing Today," which made my evaluation of the writing in question much easier. I decided to provide the student with very thorough source information, because so much of the student's writing was very good, and citation styles seemed to be nearly the only deficient aspect.

His confidence in his strategy here seems to be a result of the alignment of the student's assessment of what she needs to work on with Michael's assessment of what she needs to work on, as well as his confidence occupying the position of resource person. She has submitted a fairly polished draft of her writing, and her citations do seem to be her priority at this stage of revision. Michael is also confident that with a little work, the student will be able to use her textbook as a reference in understanding APA citations.

At the same time, Michael reflects after the interaction that he could have taken an even less directive role with the student, inviting her to be more proactive in using her textbook if he modeled how to do so initially:

After reviewing the document I feel that I could have placed more responsibility on the student, and behaved less like an editor. I handed the student a good deal of information, but I also completed some of the work for her, which may not be the most helpful approach. It's easy to just start writing, and ignore these issues of balance during a busy week, and when working on a mass amount of OWL submissions.

As Michael attests to in this evaluation of his strategy, tutoring is a balancing act, and discerning when to be directive and when to be less directive can be challenging. This challenge may be confounded in the context of asynchronous online tutoring, when it seems as if the tutor has one chance to reach the student effectively, and sometimes tries to cover everything at once in response to this pressure. The student does consider the interaction successful, though, noting, “The tutor provided greate [sic] recommendations and checked the formatting on my references...I feel ready for the next stage [of the writing process] because I feel confident that my work is correct.”

It is interesting (though not surprising) that the student is focused on the notion of “correct” writing, an idea writing tutors resist and try to likewise deflect when working with students. The student’s reflections of her tutoring interaction underscore the tension between the view of writing as a linear, right or wrong concept, and the view of writing as a process. Whether this emphasis on correctness is reflective of Michael’s directive role in the interaction or not is beyond the scope of the student’s reflection, but it is at least worth noting that his directiveness may have reinforced the student’s perception of writing as something that can be “correct.” Still, the student also indicates that despite Michael’s editorial stance, she feels some confidence in transferring what she learned in this tutoring interaction to future writing work: “I know what mistakes I have made and can avoid them for next time.”

Tutoring Interaction A3

Michael demonstrates two distinct strategies in his first two interactions; in the first, he positions himself as a grammar informant, taking a directive stance in his comments, and, in the second, he plays the role of resource insider, helping the student to

navigate a reference that will help her as she develops an understanding of citation styles. In the following interaction (represented in fig. 10), Michael employs a third strategy; he plays the role of interested reader, offering observational questions and suggestions. He has to take a more proactive approach to setting the agenda, since this student has a vaguely stated concern of “flow.” In writing tutoring interactions, “flow” often serves as a catch-all phrase for students who sense that their writing needs some work, but aren’t sure what specific areas need to be worked on. Lacking clear cues from the student’s stated concern on the online writing lab submission page, Michael turns to the paper itself for his cues, and establishes a shared context accordingly.

Fig. 10. Tutoring interaction A3: Michael as interested reader

Interaction A3 : An English 100 student revising an essay originally written in class.

Student concern: “My concerns are is the essay well written, meaning does it flow well?”

Sample comments (excerpted from text):

Student: “The advice from this story is that the first God element is mentioned in the memoir.”

Michael: “You might consider being more specific. Does this story refer to the Judeo Michael God, i.e. Michaelity and Judaism,? If that is the case, you might reword this with more clarity, for example, ‘...is the first mention of the God of the western Michael world’ or something more specific.”

Student: “Treat people the way you would like to be treated fairly in return. “

Michael: “Consider keeping the same point of reference in the text, that is to say that in the previous sentence, you were discussing William’s realization, but the next sentence is phrased in a general and nonspecific way to some wide reaching audience. Perhaps you could rephrase this as, ‘William learns to treat people the way he would like to be...’”

Student: “The stories are also significant in William’s life because they structure it.”

Michael: “This is unclear. Do you mean that this knowledge informs his decisions? Or perhaps he realizes that these stories are a sort of moral code by which those in his society live?”

Michael’s reflection: “I had an interesting time deciding what to emphasize in this interaction because this student seems to have some unique advantages and disadvantages. Namely this student has a good comprehension of the overall form an essay should take, but has many lower level grammatical problems similar to an ELL or ESL student. I gathered however that this student was not necessarily an ESL so I decided to use more sophisticated explanation than I might have otherwise.”

Student’s reflection: “The suggestions have helped me better understand my paper, but I feel like I should resubmit. The tutor provided rewording, suggestions, and helpful hints. The comments and suggestions are easy to understand.”

As indicated in Michael's narrative of getting started, he began by taking his cues from the information the student provided and the draft of writing the student submitted. The student's stated concern is whether the essay is well written and how it flows, so Michael had to rely more heavily on the other cues provided. The course details supply some context; at UNM, English 100 is a course for students who have not yet placed into the traditional course of writing at UNM (English 101 and English 102). The English 100 course emphasizes the structure of academic writing and concepts such as organization, incorporating sources, and grammatical concepts, and as in any writing course, the concepts students will find challenging varies from individual to individual. When Michael turned to the essay, then, the first read served as an exploration of what concepts to focus on. Michael reflects,

I had an interesting time deciding what to emphasize in this interaction because this student seems to have some unique advantages and disadvantages. Namely this student has a good comprehension of the overall form an essay should take, but has many lower level grammatical problems similar to an ELL or ESL student. I gathered however that this student was not necessarily an ESL so I decided to use more sophisticated explanation than I might have otherwise.

Michael's comments may be somewhat misleading, especially his use of "sophisticated explanation" as something he offers uniquely to native English language speakers. In reality, Michael offers in-depth explanations of grammatical concepts to each student he works with. Given the context of the interactions included in this study, it is likely Michael is referring to the ease with which he can spot patterns of error in native versus non-native English writers. Whereas he feels comfortable explaining grammatical

concepts to this student, in interaction A1 he takes a more directive stance, and also is more painstaking in interaction A1 in pointing out the errors he identifies with that student's writing. In both cases, though, Michael is attempting to apply the pedagogy of providing instruction that is transferrable to future writing tasks. Michael's reflection of interaction A1 supports this pedagogy: "I was able to pinpoint specific types of the same repeated error to the student which hopefully allowed him or her to not only correct aspects of this paper, but to apply this knowledge to other pieces of writing." In other words, while his approach for these two students diverges, his underlying goal of transferability underpins both interactions.

In terms of response strategies, Michael moved to Track Changes as his mode for offering feedback in this interaction. He observes, "I was able to provide concise feedback for almost all problem areas, and I accomplished this by using track changes, so it was easier for the student to read. I tried not only [to] recommend changes but to explain them in detail." As with his first interaction, in this interaction Michael uses his email reply message to provide the context for how the student can read his comments. He then reserves his comments for the student's document itself, using Track Changes to offer comments, observations, and strategies for the student to consider.

It is difficult to distill Michael's actual comments into a few useful categories. Instead, his comments tend to run the gamut in terms of the areas he is focusing on. This lack of cohesion may be the result of the student's vaguely stated request and the fact that this paper is moving from an in-class essay to a revised, out-of-class essay, with some inconsistencies one would expect to occur as the student attempts this transition. Nevertheless, Michael is strategic in his commenting. He positions himself as reader,

offering the student comments that will help the student to understand how someone seeing her paper for the first time will approach it, and what areas can benefit from revision. Figures 11 and 12 highlight how Michael positions himself as reader in the comments he provides.

Fig. 11. Excerpt of interaction A3

son, but always remember, with God on your side, they have no powers" (15). The advice from this story [s that the first God element is mentioned in the memoir]. The significance of this quote is the idea that William strongly believes in the stories told of Wizards, but his father is telling him to also have faith. William should have faith in [God].

Another story told by Trywell, which includes important advice, is the story of the

Comment [C7]: You might consider being more specific. Does this story refer to the Judeo-Christian God, i.e. Christianity and Judaism?, If that is the case, you might reword this with more clarity, for example, "...is the first mention of the God of the western Christian world" or something more specific.

Comment [C8]: Same issue here. Maybe explain which God?

In Figure 11, Michael reflects his engagement with the text and with the student writer by posing questions and balancing his observations with comments framed as suggestions, a trend that will continue in the excerpted comments in Figure 12.

Fig. 12. Excerpt of interaction A3

The stories told of the Malawian people shape William's life and also shape the memoir. Each story has a significant value to a Malawian. The stories are also significant in William's [life because they structure it]. From his childhood to his adult state, he becomes more aware of his surroundings and stays true to his nature. As an individual, I can relate to William's stories because stories that are told in my culture are important to my [tradition language and ancestral knowledge]. This is similar to the Malawian culture, and others that tell stories that are passed down from generation to generation.

Comment [C19]: This is unclear. Do you mean that this knowledge informs his decisions? Or perhaps he realizes that these stories are a sort of moral code by which those in his society live?

Comment [C20]: "traditional language" or "tradition, language,..."?

Figure 12 highlights a slightly different strategy. Michael still employs a less directive tone and poses questions, but in the two comments provided in Figure 12, he is doing so to point to the ambiguity present in the student's word choice. Michael provides in his

questions the ways the text could be interpreted, reflecting an interest in the student's ideas while also giving the student the space and information she needs to make informed editorial decisions.

The student indicates that Michael's approach was to pose a lot of questions about her writing, which is consistent with a reader-based approach to responding to writing. She found these comments, specifically the "suggestions and helpful hints" Michael provides as effective, stating that they helped her better understand her paper. She indicates that the comments are easy to understand, and that she feels she is equipped to approach the next stage of her writing process. At the same time, she acknowledges that she feels she will need more than one subsequent draft to produce the writing she wishes to achieve, observing, "I feel like I should revise it with the tutors help and resubmit it."

Michael: Discussion

Michael applied the precepts Hewett identifies as key to successful asynchronous interactions throughout his work with students.

Engagement. In interaction A1, Michael engages with the student from the beginning of the interaction. In his email reply to the student, he begins with a greeting and a statement of support ("You've done a very nice job with this paper") before explaining how the student can use his feedback. Michael also engages the student through his word choice, reflecting a positive perspective; Michael tells the student in his reply that his comments are meant to "help smooth out some of the minor grammatical problems," wording that implies the paper itself is strong, and that at this point the student can focus on *smoothing* the *minor* errors present in the paper. Furthermore, at the

end of the paper itself, Michael offers his overall impression of the paper: “All in all a very nice job. Your organization and flow of content work very well, and my suggestions primarily relate to surface-level grammatical and syntactical errors, so to speak.” This is a trend continues for interactions A2 and A3 as well; Michael begins each of his email responses by introducing himself, offering positive language in reference to the student’s work, and pointing out what the student does well to balance his suggestions for revision.

Interaction A3 also demonstrates how Michael engages with the students he works with through his use of comments. When there is more than one way to interpret a student’s sentence, he offers some questions that indicate where misinterpretations can arise. He addresses the student directly (“Do you mean...?”)

Where to comment. In interaction A1, Michael offers in-text comments at the site of the revision he is suggesting, setting his text apart from the student’s by including his in blue font. This holds true in interaction A2 as well; in this case, the student is concerned about APA-formatted citations, and Michael points out relevant details for revision at the places where they occur in the student’s writing. In interaction A3, Michael moves to comment boxes for his comments, but these comments still point directly to the sentence/paragraph/idea Michael is commenting on.

Too much and too little commenting. Michael strikes a balance in his comments in interaction A1 by making strategic use of the email reply and the commented-on paper. In the email, he offers the student guidance, giving an overview of his focus and how the student can apply his comments; Michael reserves the paper for his actual, paper-specific comments. Interaction A2 reveals that in addition to finding a balance between too much

and too little commenting, a tutor must also negotiate how directive to be. His comments are succinct but also tend toward interpretation as commands (“Use...” “This should be...”) Michael acknowledges he was less than successful in this regard in his reflection of interaction A2.

Michael reflects that of the interactions examined in this study, interaction A3 was the most challenging for him. The student he was working with had ideas Michael found interesting, but interpretation was difficult because of the way the student worded sentences. He struggled with how to address questions he had about the student’s text in an asynchronous interaction, but ultimately tried to find a balance by posing questions, making suggestions, and offering observational comments. Some of these comments are a little lengthy, but they accurately reflect the places where misunderstandings may arise for readers of the student’s text.

Modeling by proofing and editing. Throughout interaction A1, Michael avoids general comments like “consider rewording” and instead provides wording suggestions for the student. Interaction A2 reveals the challenges that come with modeling. In his reflection on this interaction, he points out that, “After reviewing the document I feel that I could have placed more responsibility on the student, and behaved less like an editor...I also completed some of the work for her, which may not be the most helpful approach.” Since Michael was familiar both with APA formatting and with the textbook the student was using, he tended towards being overly direct. Nonetheless, he did attempt to model editing, in this case, he provided strategies for using the textbook, and for navigating the technicalities of APA formatting. Throughout interaction A3, Michael offers specific

interpretations that may come from the student's ambiguous wording, and also specific ways the student can reword some of the sentences that are unclear.

Tutor 2: Mary

Mary has worked as a CAPS writing tutor for the past two semesters. From the beginning of her time at CAPS, Mary has spent more time working as an online tutor than she has in the writing drop-in lab. She divides her online time between serving as an embedded online tutor and responding to online writing lab submissions.

Mary's approach to online tutoring is a holistic approach: "I like to read the prompt and to look at the general concerns that the student has. Often they are things like 'flow' or 'grammar.' Once I have a feel for what should be in the essay, I generally provide comments while I read." She elaborates on her rationale, explaining, "I try to offer questions or advice about my first impressions because I don't think a professor is going to read any essay more than once (most of the time)." In comparison's to Michael's more extensive in-text comments, Mary tends to scaffold her feedback, beginning with more in-depth explanations or strategies and scaling back her presence as she moves through the paper: "I generally try to give less specific feedback as the paper progresses, although I will sometimes continue to highlight particular patterns."

Whereas Michael creates dialogue through the Track Changes comment boxes, Mary produces her dialogue in email responses. In her reply email, she tends to offer her observations, followed by a specific task or strategy the student can apply in addressing a revision of the areas Mary identifies. She uses Track Changes as a supplement to her email, using the comment boxes to then highlight and illustrate when and how to apply

the strategies she has suggested. The resulting dialogic effect will be illustrated in the three interactions highlighted in this study.

Interaction B1

Mary's first interaction (illustrated in fig. 13) in this study exemplifies her approach to tutoring in an asynchronous online environment. Notice how Mary takes her lead from the student's specified concern; she provides a formula for a thesis statement and advice for topic sentences in her email response, and then models in the paper how the student can craft her thesis statement and how she can refine her topic sentences. Mary positions herself as an insider to academic writing, offering for the student the conventions of academic writing and suggestions on how to rework her paper to meet these conventions.

Fig. 13. Tutoring interaction B1: Mary as insider to academic conventions

Interaction B1: An English 102 student working on a rhetorical analysis of a speech.

Student concern: "My thesis should be stronger but I need help with it. Also My topic sentences should be stronger."

Mary's response:

Hi [student],

I have taken a look at your paper and included my comments and suggestions on the attachment. Look for opportunities to say things more directly and concisely. Sometimes it is ok to split sentences up if they contain multiple ideas. Try reading aloud, it will help you catch a lot of little things you don't notice while reading silently. Your topic and thesis statements seem like they are ok, but I don't understand why they are underlined. Maybe just try to integrate them by using transitional phrases. A good formula for a thesis is:

Although X, it is Y because of Z. (For example: Although dogs are cute, they are a lot of work because they shed their fur).

You can use that formula to create a strong thesis statement with the information you already have in your paper.

Thanks for using CAPS OWL,

Mary

In-paper comments are mostly general questions that highlight areas that need work: “Can you reword?” “Can you elaborate here?”

Mary’s reflection: “In this interaction, I focused a lot on phrasing. There were some phrases that just needed simple changes in order to be more direct. The ideas were all fairly well developed, but some of the minor problems with grammar/capitalization/phrasing were getting in the way of the ideas. For this student, I used a lot of questions to try and get the student to think about why certain elements were included in the essay.”

Student reflection: “My tutor asked a lot of questions about my writing, and gave me everything I need with good practical tips. She provided a formula for a thesis. I am not a very good writer but this gave me confidence to keep at it.”

In tutoring interaction B1, Mary demonstrates the balancing act sometimes inherent in online tutoring. Whereas in synchronous tutoring, student and tutor can work together to negotiate an agenda, asynchronous tutoring calls for tutors to make decisions at times without the input and consensus of the student. In this case, the student has asked for help with her thesis statement, and Mary agrees that this is an area that could be addressed during revision. However, Mary also identifies wordiness as an area that needs work. In constructing this interaction, she addresses both of these concerns.

Interaction B1 is illustrative of Mary's style as an online tutor. The email itself contains Mary's observations ("Your topic and thesis statements seem like they are ok"), advice ("Look for opportunities to say things more directly and concisely," "Sometimes it is ok to split sentences up if they contain multiple ideas") and strategies ("Try reading aloud, it will help you catch a lot of little things you don't notice while reading silently" and a formula for a thesis statement). Her comments in the student's paper focus on the student-specified concern, thesis formulation, and her identified concern, wordiness. At times Mary points out a few "outliers" as well, small areas of revision that do not quite fit with either of the two areas of focus. Her comments pick up where her email response left off, pinpointing areas where the student can apply the revision strategies and advice Mary lays out in her email. She highlights words and phrases, asking questions and making comments such as, "Can you rephrase," "I'm not sure this is the word you want," "I don't think you need this."

Mary describes her rationale for shaping this tutoring interaction:

In this interaction, I focused a lot on phrasing. There were some phrases that just needed simple changes in order to be more direct. The ideas were all fairly well developed, but some of the minor problems with grammar/capitalization/phrasing were getting in the way of the ideas. For this student, I used a lot of questions to try and get the student to think about why certain elements were included in the essay.

In reflecting on what she could have done differently in this interaction, Mary points to difficulties that arise when moving from synchronous to asynchronous tutoring formats:

I think I probably could have looked more closely at the thesis (one of her main areas of concern). I probably could have provided some examples of statements based on her information. It is always a challenge to know if I have met the needs of the student. It is also sometimes difficult to zoom out and look at the patterns where there are small editing type mistakes which stand out. I struggle with not “fixing” every single mistake with the small details.

Several themes arise out of this reflection. First and foremost, Mary’s words speak to the difficulties of working asynchronously, dealing mostly in one-time interactions. Without cues or feedback from the student, it is impossible to know whether the student’s needs have been met. Likewise, in an online format, where the student will have “written transcripts” of the tutoring interaction in the form of the email response and in-paper comments, tutors face a certain amount of pressure to point out every type of error, since there is such a concrete record of the interaction that the student can later point to. More telling to this study is Mary’s discomfort with how successfully she has negotiated the agenda. While she does address the student’s concern with her thesis, she feels she could have been more thorough in her comments on that area. Still, what Mary has offered the student is valuable, and I would argue, necessary. If Mary had dismissed the student’s concerns entirely in favor of her own agenda, she increases the likelihood that the student will feel dismissed and subsequently dismiss the feedback that is offered as irrelevant. By addressing the student’s concerns and balancing the concerns with her own, Mary is creating a context within which she and the student can meet to strategize revision. Furthermore, her comments serve as demonstrations of how her comments can be applied, pointing to specific areas.

Just as she creates shared context, Mary is cognizant of how she can shape her feedback in a way that invites dialogue:

I feel that I gave the student some good suggestions and made some observations which will help her to formulate new phrases and expand her ideas. I also provided her some examples she can use later to help with introductory and linking phrases and to help her think about word and phrase choice.

In other words, Mary creates a response style that offers possibilities rather than gives directions. She explains how and why the student should consider the revisions she highlights, but does not give prescriptive orders for the student to follow.

When asked to describe how her tutoring interaction worked, the student indicated that the interaction addressed “Everything I need with good practical tips,” indicating that she understands Mary’s style of offering strategies for revision. She identifies Mary’s response style as one of providing instructions, which is true of the email reply Mary sent as opposed to the in-text comments she included. However, the student is quick to point out that the “instructions” she identified as Mary’s approach do not translate into orders to follow. In response to the question of whether Mary’s response style worked for her, the student replies, “Yes she didn’t do it for me but told me how to do it,” which is more in line with Mary’s comprehensive approach to responding online. The student evaluates the tutoring interaction as effective, reflecting, “I am not a very good writer but this gave me confidence to keep at it,” and that Mary supplied her with a formula for a thesis statement. Overall, it seems that Mary has created a shared context in which the student is invited to consider the paper from her perspective, and offers a range of options in

keeping with a conversational type of interaction, rather than “musts,” which tend to close off conversation, particularly when the student does not have the option to raise objections and discuss alternatives in real time.

Interaction B2

The style Mary draws on in interaction B1 is reflected in interaction B2 (fig. 14) as well. In this interaction, Mary once again positions herself as knowledgeable about conventions for academic writing, and offers the student strategies that will help the student align her writing with these conventions.

Fig. 14. Tutoring interaction B2: Mary as academic writing strategist

Interaction B2: An English 102 student working on a research paper.

Student concern: “I feel like I am everywhere in this paper and it does not flow well what so ever but I am having trouble meshing it together.”

Mary’s response (excerpted from email):

“...I do think that the information is not really integrated together. There were times when I wasn’t sure if I was reading a summary of the research or your conclusions. Some of the constructions are a bit awkward or wordy; try to be as direct as possible. Read it out loud, does it sound natural? There are some formatting things to look at, which I have indicated on the attachment. My other comments and suggestions are also included there. I hope that this is helpful! Good work so far!

In-paper comments highlight the aspects of a research paper that need to be addressed in revision. Mary points out these areas and offers advice.

Mary’s reflection: “I tried to provide some wording options and point out areas of concern; I also tried to indicate where she could be more specific or offer less summary and analysis. I felt that I offered a lot of good examples and a lot of options for the student to consider.”

Student reflection: “Told me what was good about my writing and what needed to work on and gave examples of changes I could make to manke (sic) my writing better.”

Interaction B2 is a challenging tutor interaction to shape in an asynchronous online environment. The paper is a research paper for the second semester writing course for first-year students. However, as the student indicates on her submission form, she had difficulty putting a draft of her paper together. The draft itself reads as a paper cobbled together; there are elements of a research paper present in this draft, but overall it lacks a logical organization and structure. Papers like this are common in face-to-face interactions, and tutors engage students in face-to-face sessions through dialogue,

separating the words of sources from the words of the student, looking at sample research papers together, and talking about how research papers can be structured. Without the chance to ask questions in real time, particularly about when the student is quoting and paraphrasing research and when she is instead analyzing it (one of the main points of confusion in the draft), Mary must be more direct with the student about strategies for revision and then trust that the student will understand how to apply those strategies to her paper. A draft such as this student's, which needs quite a bit of revision, calls for what I think of as a multi-stage revision. In other words, ideally the student would work with a tutor several times, focusing on different aspects of the research writing process in her drafts each time.

Translated to the asynchronous online setting of the online writing lab, facilitating an interaction like this and conveying the various aspects of revision is challenging. Mary reflects,

I think that the difficulty for this response lies in the ambiguity of the assignment. I was not sure if this was a research paper which required separate sections or more of an analysis. Unfortunately, the nature of the OWL does not allow me to really ask those kind of questions before I give feedback. Looking back on it now, I wish I had offered her a place to look at samples of research papers just in case she needed to follow a specific format.

Mary decides that her best approach is to be straightforward in her evaluation of the student's writing. She draws on her typical style of offering observations and strategies to the student in her email response, and pointing to the places where the student can apply

those strategies and consider revision using the Track Changes comment boxes within a copy of the student's paper.

Mary's email is excerpted here, because it is worthwhile to see how she sets the tone for her interaction.

Fig. 15. Mary's email response to student B2

Interaction B2: Mary's response email

Dear [student],

It is clear that you put a lot of time into gathering your research and that you have a good understanding of the articles. There is a lot of information here and you present your summaries of the articles. There is a lot of information here and you present your summaries of the articles in a clear way.

I do think the information is not really integrated together. There were times when I wasn't sure if I was reading a summary of the research or your conclusions. Some of the constructions are a bit awkward or wordy; try to be as direct as possible. Read it out loud, does it sound natural? There are some formatting things to look at, which I have indicated on the attachment. My other comments and suggestions are also included there. I hope this is helpful! Good work so far!

Thanks for using the CAPS OWL,

Mary

Mary's email serves a few purposes. Throughout her email, Mary establishes a rapport with the student. She offers a substantial number of comments within the student's paper (20 comments within a five page draft), which in the absence of context, could be discouraging for the student. But Mary initiates her email with positive feedback, and after describing her observations, offers the student encouragement. This email reply also serves as a guide for the student in navigating Mary's feedback. In her second paragraph

of the email, Mary offers suggestions that she will build on through her in-text comments. Finally, Mary uses the reply to offer concrete strategies for revision. This is a key feature of Mary's response style; she tends to use her email reply to establish her dialogue and offer her observation plus a strategy or task for the student to apply during subsequent revision. In essence, she is creating a shared context with the student, establishing common ground for the interaction. Mary's strategy works because she puts her email reply in conversation with her in-text comments, and invites the student into the conversation through her response as well.

If taken alone, the observations Mary offers in her email response would be vague and difficult for the student to translate into concrete strategies for revision ("awkward", "wordy", "read it out loud"). However, Mary then takes to the student's text, pointing to areas that highlight the issues she sees. For example, when the student opens her paper with a quote devoid of context, Mary comments, "Be careful about starting with a quote, this puts the person who said it in the reader's mind before you even get going. Also, where is this quote from? Who said it and why? What does it mean in terms of your subject? Quotes always need context." In this comment, Mary models how quotes should be used through the questions she prompts the student to consider. Through her questions she also walks the student through how context is important, rather than simply stating "Quotes always need context." Mary likewise highlights a lot of the phrases for which it is unclear whether the student is summarizing or analyzing, asking the student questions about how the accompanying text is working within the paper. She points to "awkward" or "wordy" phrasing in the paper, asking questions that, if the student considers, can help her to rework phrases to be more concise. Given the difficulty in distinguishing the

student's words from the sources she uses, this tutoring interaction is challenging in an asynchronous environment. However, Mary replicates the dialogue and questioning that a tutor would most certainly employ in a face-to-face interaction with this student.

Although her reflection on the tutoring interaction includes her identifying the difficulty inherent in and the ambiguity of the assignment she is working with, Mary's insights also indicate that she feels that her interaction was overall a successful one. She went into the interaction with a concrete strategy: "This student had previously submitted the paper (according to her email), and so I wanted to specifically address the concerns she still had as best as I could. Overall, I felt that her biggest area of concern was content and meeting the requirements of a research paper while still maintaining readability." Mary's confidence in the shared context she creates, as well as her ability to replicate the dialogue that would mark a synchronous interaction, contributes to her feelings of success. She attributes the strategies she draws on to the dialogue she created: "I felt that I offered a lot of good examples and a lot of options for the student to consider. I also think I offered a fair amount of questions which the student can answer in order to more fully address the topic of the paper." The student concurs that Mary is successful, indicating that the tutoring interaction exceeded her expectations. She says of online tutoring, "They are a great help, I regret not using them last semester." The student also reflects that Mary's tutoring style works well for her; she states that Mary "Told me what was good about my writing and what needed to work on and gave examples of changes I could make to manke (sic) my writing better." As indicated in the student's response, Mary's combination of positive and constructive feedback and concrete revision strategies worked well for this student.

Interaction B3

Mary's third interaction of the study (interaction B3, illustrated in fig. 16) represents a continuation of the strategies she employs in interactions B1 and B2. This is by far Mary's most challenging interaction in this study, because of the blurred boundaries between the student's words and the sources the student is using. In Figure 16, notice how Mary outlines the academic conventions she feels the student needs to be aware of as she approaches the revision process. In this interaction more than in interactions B1 and B2, Mary's comments are more pervasive and highlights specific areas she believes the student needs to address in her revision.

Fig. 16. Tutoring interaction B3: Mary as revision strategist

Interaction B3: A student working on a 200-level philosophy paper

Student concern: “I’m not sure the paper is critical or persuasive. I have trouble organizing and flowing a cohesive thought.”

Mary’s response (excerpted from email):

Hi [student],

I have looked over your submission and attached my suggestions and comments. You have some really good arguments here and many of your conclusions are very solid. You begin the analysis very strongly, but you do get a little off track with the critical part of the assignment. Tie back to how the author is right / wrong and why...

Thanks for using CAPS OWL,

Mary
CAPS Writing Tutor

In-paper comments focus on creating more straightforward sentence constructions, removing qualifiers from the argument, and integrating examples into the body paragraphs.

Mary’s reflection: “I feel like I did a good job of finding some patterns and habits which are inhibiting the student. I also think that I found some places where she can expand her ideas and strengthen her argument, but without feeling like she had to start over.”

Student reflection: “[Mary] Pointed out strengths and weaknesses...I rewrote my conclusion as per Mary’s suggestions.

As in Mary’s other interactions, in interaction B3 Mary uses her email reply to create shared context with the student she is working with. The student has a full draft of an argumentative essay for her philosophy course, but feels she needs help with making her work more persuasive. Mary uses her email response to offer her observations of the

draft she has read: “You have some really good arguments here and many of your conclusions are very solid. You begin the analysis very strongly, but do get a little off track with the critical part of the assignment.” She then follows up with a strategy for the student to apply during revision: “Tie back to how the author is right/wrong and why.” Her in-text comments then focus on how the student can use this strategy, as well as how to create more straightforward sentence constructions, integrating examples that illustrate her argument, and removing qualifiers, all key features in the argumentative essay this student is working on.

Mary’s comments take an instructive tone in this interaction, as evidenced in the excerpts below.

Fig. 17. Excerpt of interaction B3

This paper will discuss professional ethics (e.g. a standard of behavior expected to be shared by people who are considered professionals in their field of expertise) as opposed to

Comment [CG1]: Try to avoid using constructions like this. Can you just make a statement about the two and how they are the same are different and then apply that statement to the article?

Figure 17 reflects the more directive stance Mary takes on in interaction B3. She knows her first sentence, which includes advice, does not provide enough context for the student to make the connection on how to go about revising. She models the process the student can undertake in the question she poses in her follow-up to her first statement. Mary continues this balance of questions and modeling in Figure 18.

Fig. 18. Excerpt of interaction B3

habit, experience, etc.; i.e. “ordinary ethics”). My paper will illustrate that eCodification (external or romanticized) does not always inform the actor, and that ordinary ethics does not always inform the professional as to ethical behavior. [This is the case with politicians].
In his article title Just Another Day at the Office, Dr. Don Welch, an American English

Comment [CG2]: This is just sort of hanging there... why are politicians an important group? They can serve as a model of the principle? What role are they going to serve in the paper?

The comment in Figure 18 includes a statement and a question, although this time Mary is modeling how the student can add context to an otherwise vaguely worded sentence.

In Figure 19, Mary offers the student one of the important characteristics of academic argumentation—a tone that is objective. Mary models how the student can remove wording that reads as biased in favor of a more measured tone.

Fig. 19. Excerpt of interaction B3

to society²² as a special and higher ideal of a professional versus a layman is a good place to
examine the ethical applications. One of most visible and controversial professions is that of
 politician and the ethical questionability of the whole which brings into question the ethics of

Comment [CG8]: This is still not working quite right. I would suggest remaining objective and removing the I; it makes your argument more powerful and logical sounding.

In the second comment included in Figure 20, Mary extends her advice on shaping a conventional academic argument, prompting the student to make connections with the evidence she provides and indicating how that evidence furthers her main argument. Mary again employs a combination of questions and observational statements to achieve this goal.

Fig. 20. Excerpt of interaction B3

ethics that inform “right and wrong.” ~~I have shown that~~ Politicians are not operating according to ethical standards that apply to ordinary citizens ~~as set out above.~~

Comment [CG20]: Also not a complete thought. Try reading it aloud.

Comment [CG21]: And this is important because? Does this go with or against what Welch said? Do your conclusions refute or support his conclusions and why? This would be the place in the essay to use “I”

The comments included here are typical of how Mary comments throughout the student’s text. In each instance, she works with what the student already has, drawing on the student’s work as the basis for her feedback. She grounds her comments in the work, challenging the student to move her essay toward a more argumentative stance. She encourages the student to push her writing to a more critical perspective either through instructive observational comments or through questions that expose opportunities for revision. Mary reflects,

In this interaction I used a combination of questions and statements/suggestions to provide feedback for the student. This student seemed to have some incomplete ideas or muddled ideas and I felt like getting to the heart of her arguments was most important. This student had some easily identifiable patterns that were not quite working, but were associated with their style of writing. I felt it was important to bring those to her attention so that she could avoid repeating the habit. I felt that there was a foundation, but the evidence wasn’t quite holding up. I tried to use my own questions as a reader to encourage expansion.

Overall, Mary considers this interaction a success:

I feel like I did a good job of finding some patterns and habits which are inhibiting the student. I also think that I found some places where she can expand

her ideas and strengthen her argument, but without feeling like she had to start over.

Despite her successes, Mary acknowledges there are other aspects of the student's writing that she could have addressed in her feedback:

I probably could have offered more examples of phrasing or ways to break the habit but still retain the information the student felt they needed to include. I also think I could have highlighted more of the "good" things in the paper - sometimes I forget that encouragement is also a teaching tool. I think that I could have responded more directly to the concerns she indicated in her email. It was a challenge to specifically address those issues when other things in the paper seemed to be more important. However, I do think that fixing some of those other problems would go a long way to fixing the issues the student identified.

Despite Mary's critical assessment of the tutoring interaction, the student indicates that Mary's approach translated well for the student. The student indicates that the tutoring interaction exceeded her expectations, and that Mary effectively provided "feedback and general comments" which were "very helpful and supportive." When asked to describe the feedback she received, the student indicated that Mary "pointed out strengths and weaknesses" and that she "rewrote my conclusions as per Mary's suggestions." She furthermore reflected that "although I recognize where I go 'off track,' I am not always sure how to get back on track," and that Mary's suggestions will be influential in improving her understanding of her writing as she approaches the next draft of this paper and potentially, future writing tasks.

Discussion: Mary

Although Mary and Michael employ different strategies in shaping their tutoring interactions, both adhere to Hewett's features of effective asynchronous interactions. Mary's interactions provide contrasting examples of how Hewett's characteristics can be applied across varying contexts.

Engagement. Mary engages the students she works with in her email responses by speaking directly to them as she offers observational comments. She addresses the student's specified concerns in her email responses, even if the focus of her comments has shifted to cover other ground, as is often the case when students specify one concern but in reading the student's work, the tutor finds another area for revision they believe takes precedence. She begins each email by greeting the student, and ends each email by thanking the student for using the online writing lab.

Similar to Michael, Mary incorporates genuine positive feedback into her reply email responses to promote a good working relationship with her students. One of the challenges of asynchronous online tutoring is how to convey tone; often, the tutors reflect a concern that students will perceive a negatively critical tone on the tutor's part when they view the tutor's comments. This is not how the tutors wish to come across, so they strive to create paper-specific positive feedback alongside suggestions for improvement to convey the tone they are striving for.

Interaction B3 best exemplifies Mary's text-specific positive feedback. Although the student has quite a few revisions she could make, Mary wants to emphasize that the higher order aspects of the paper are working well: "You have some really good

arguments here and many of your conclusions are very solid.” These comments can go a long way in creating a tone that encourages the student to view the interaction as an engaged dialogue rather than a one-way critique.

Where to comment. To a greater extent than Michael, Mary uses the email response as a venue for feedback. Whereas Michael used the email reply to establish a working relationship with the student and to instruct the student on how to use his feedback, Mary tends to offer specific strategies and “lessons” in her email responses. At the same time, Mary makes use of her in-text comments to point to areas where the strategy outlined in the email should be applied. Interaction B2 exemplifies this approach. In her email reply, Mary observes, “I do think that the information is not really integrated together. There were times when I wasn’t sure if I was reading a summary of the research or your conclusions.” Within the paper, Mary then points to the places where she sees this happening, and offers the student options for revision.

Too much and too little commenting. Throughout this study, Mary reflected on her difficulty in balancing her comments. In her reflection of tutoring interaction B1, for example, Mary reflected, “It is also sometimes difficult to zoom out and look at the patterns where there are small editing type mistakes which stand out. I struggle with not ‘fixing’ every single mistake with the small details.” This reflection reflects an anxiety mirrored by other asynchronous online tutors as well; knowing that they are creating a written transcript of the tutoring interaction, online tutors sometimes feel the pressure to point out errors they would normally let slip by in favor of other prioritized concerns. This pressure is compounded by the recognition that most asynchronous online

interactions are one-time, so tutors carefully consider how to convey priorities for revision for the student to consider in the short-term and long-term stages of revision.

Mary balances her comments through strategic use of the email reply so that she doesn't overwhelm the student's paper with too much feedback. She constructs tutorials or mini-lessons in her email responses, a strategy I think works for Mary. If the tutorial appeared in the student's paper draft, the impression would be that of lengthy, text-dense comments. In the email message, the tutorials seem appropriate, and Mary carefully avoids being too lengthy in her explanations.

Modeling by proofing and editing. Mary offers students in-paper comments with options for rewording and reorganizing, demonstrated particularly in interactions B2 and B3. In B2, for example, Mary essentially is modeling genre writing. Through the writing choices the student makes, the paper tends more towards a summary than of a research paper. Mary points to specific examples of this in the paper itself, modeling signal phrases that will help the student move from summary to analysis and application of other scholars' findings. Mary demonstrates another way of modeling revision in interaction B1. In this interaction, the student's main priority is phrasing. Rather than providing the student with specific wording the student could potentially adapt without reflection, Mary asks questions that she hopes will prompt the student to consider alternatives ("Can you rephrase?" "Can you elaborate here?") that refer back to the advice she gives in her email reply: "Sometimes it is ok to split sentences up if they contain multiple ideas" and "Look for opportunities to say things more directly and concisely."

Summary of Findings

Michael and Mary demonstrate the importance of flexibility and strategic use of the resources available to them in shaping asynchronous online tutoring interactions, as illustrated in Figure 21.

Figure 21: A comparison of Michael's and Mary's tutoring approaches

Michael	Both	Mary
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility of roles (grammar informant, resource facilitator, interested reader) • Establishes relationship in the email response and offers specific comments in-text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take cues from student's online writing lab submission and the paper itself • Create shared context • Recreate dialogue • Demonstrate versatility in strategies • Adapt according to perceived student needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baseline strategy modified on student-by-student basis • Offers a strategy in the email response and guides student in-text on how to apply the strategy for revision

Both engage in self-reflection and think critically about their work as they refine their existing tutoring strategies and develop new approaches. The interactions included in this study illustrate that Michael and Mary make deliberate decisions about their tutoring interactions, and that, contrary to criticisms of asynchronous online tutoring, they employ strategies to promote engagement on the student's part and encourage revision. Both make conscious decisions based on the individual students they are working with, and see their work as a process of creation and invention rather than as restrictive and disengaging.

Michael and Mary demonstrate that online tutors are not doing all the work for the student, nor are they simply creating rote responses. Instead they are employing strategies with the goal of actively engaging the student in the interaction and promoting the revision process. Asynchronous online tutoring interactions are not the disengaged and disempowering process that critics imagine. A recognition of online tutors as active participants who support student agency has interesting implications for the ways we can perceive and foster asynchronous online tutoring interactions. The next chapter will discuss these implications, with specific recommendations for writing center professionals.

Chapter 4: Implications and Application

Implications

Research findings. My research findings offer a different perspective of asynchronous online tutoring than that offered by critics of it. Contrary to objections of asynchronous online tutoring as disengaged and pedagogically unsound on the tutors' part, my study indicates that tutors thoughtfully employ the strategies they do when they tutor asynchronously online. These strategies mirror but do not replicate the pedagogy the tutors employ in face-to-face tutoring. Tutors display cognizance and reflection in the way they approach and talk about their asynchronous online tutoring practices. Furthermore, students deliberately seek out asynchronous online tutoring not because they consider it a drop-off service, but because it is a format that works for them, and they are seeking feedback that will help to guide their revision process. Asynchronous online tutoring benefits the students who seek it out, and the effort that tutors put into shaping tutoring interactions comes through to the students who receive that tutor's feedback. As Michael and Mary have demonstrated, asynchronous online tutoring is not a one-size-fits all approach; there are many ways to shape asynchronous online tutoring interactions, and the pedagogy employed depends on individual tutor styles as well as tutors' approximations of what they believe will best help the individual student they are working with. There is room for improvement and further study, as is the case for any tutoring-related phenomena.

Limitations. There are several limitations to this study that must be acknowledged. First and foremost, the tutors and students involved in this study participated voluntarily. By its nature, self-selection comes with limitations. The students who opt into a study and take the time to reflect and provide feedback are potentially

more motivated in general than students who opt out. This can lead to skewed data, as these students may have more at stake in the tutoring interaction, the feedback they receive, and their revision process. Furthermore, each semester at CAPS, staff solicits student feedback through service evaluations, and have long noticed that respondents tend to be the students who have an overly positive or an overly negative experience with tutors. Few respondents offer moderate responses on their evaluations. Since none of the participants in my study offered negative feedback, I could deduce that the participants may be those who have had a perceived positive experience. Random selection could have yielded different results, and more moderate responses may give valuable additional insights into the phenomenon of asynchronous online tutoring from the student's perspective.

Similar limitations arise with the tutors who also opted into this study. Michael and Mary approached this study with enthusiasm, and both cited a desire to learn more about how effective their tutoring strategies are and what insights can be gained about asynchronous online tutoring. The tutors I have encountered at CAPS seem to share this enthusiasm in common, so this aspect of self-selection isn't necessarily a limitation. However, since Michael and Mary were aware from the beginning of the study that they were participating in a semester-long research study, they may have approached their tutoring interactions with more self-consciousness than they otherwise practice on a daily basis. There are indications in the data that neither tutor was self-aware to the point of artificiality. Through their reflections, both discuss missed opportunities and points at which they felt they could have performed better, indications that they were not so painstaking in shaping their responses that their interactions were misleading or

unrepresentative of their daily practices. In his reflection of tutoring interaction A2, for example, Michael wondered if he should have been less directive with his student, and that he could have “placed more responsibility on the student, and behaved less like an editor.” In interaction B1, Mary reflects afterward that she could have focused more on the student’s stated concern of the thesis statement, and could have provided more examples of thesis statements. Following interaction B3, Mary reflects, “Sometimes I forget that encouragement is also a teaching tool,” and, “I think that I could have responded more directly to the concerns she indicated in her email.” These reflections indicate that although Michael and Mary are aware of their participation in the study, their work is still representative of their practices, although the frequent reflections they engage in for this study could have influenced their practices in ways not anticipated in the study design.

This study also draws on a small sample size that would preclude generalizability, another outcome of my study’s reliance on self-selection. My goal in creating this study was to gain insights into what asynchronous online tutoring interactions looked like from the perspective of the tutors and students who engage in these interactions at CAPS, and I feel I accomplished that. To make broader statements about trends across all asynchronous online tutors at CAPS, I would need to study all of the tutors and have several interactions per tutor to examine. Also, since my research is local, it speaks to a local context, although the research design could be adapted at other tutoring centers.

Future research. In this chapter, I will offer recommendations and one detailed application of my study. In addition, the study itself represents a starting point for future research. Revisiting my research design, this work could be extended to examine the

student's revision process. My study counted on the student participants to self-report on how effective they found the feedback, and I believe this is a valid start. In any tutoring interaction, the first measure of success is whether the student feels he or she has had his or her needs addressed and has received helpful feedback. Further insights could come from examining the revision process of students. In essence, such research could address the questions "How does the student incorporate the tutor's feedback into his or her revisions process?" "How accurately is the student interpreting the tutor's feedback, and how effectively is the student applying this feedback to the piece of writing?" "Does the student create substantial positive changes to his or her paper based on the feedback?"

If this research was extended to explore the revision process, when the student misinterprets feedback or does not effectively apply the feedback to the piece of writing, the feedback itself could be examined. Comparing and contrasting accurate and inaccurate interpretations of feedback could lead to the beginning discussions of what might constitute best practices when it comes to offering feedback in an asynchronous online tutoring environment.

Once a discussion of best practices is underway, there are direct implications for tutor training. If a set of best practices exists, how can we design a course of training for asynchronous online tutoring that connects tutors to these practices? What other possibilities exist beyond the identified best practices, and is it appropriate to go beyond these best practices? Under what circumstances?

This and related studies also have implications for the field of composition and rhetoric. Future work could focus on how student's identify the concerns they specify when they request tutor feedback, and how their stated concerns align with what the tutor

and what the instructor would consider the concerns the student should concentrate on in the drafting process. The field of composition studies rightly emphasizes the importance of student's reflection abilities as they relate to the student's identity as a writer and the student's writing process. A setting like the online writing lab, where students are called on to specify their concerns, is a good place to gather data that could yield further insights into the reflection processes of developing student writers.

Recommendations. Based on my research, I have reached several conclusions. I propose that rather than debate the merits of asynchronous online tutoring, we should:

1. Continue examining what happens in these tutoring interactions so that we can understand the nature of asynchronous online tutoring, an understanding grounded in research on practices.
2. Acknowledge that no writing center professionals are advocating for asynchronous online tutoring as the only option that should be available to students, nor is it always the best format for students. However, students who seek asynchronous online tutoring do so for a variety of reasons, and my research indicates that students are benefitting from their asynchronous tutoring interactions.
3. Recognize that contrary to critiques of asynchronous online writing tutoring, initial research indicates that tutors make deliberate decisions based on the student they are working with to construct interactions that they feel are most appropriate for that student's needs.
4. Move the conversation away from the question "Is asynchronous online tutoring effective?" and towards "What are some of the ways tutors and

students are engaging in effective asynchronous tutoring interactions?” “What support can we provide to promote effective asynchronous tutoring interactions?” and “How can we present asynchronous online tutoring to students in such a way that they can decide whether it works for them?”

5. Consider more closely who best benefits from asynchronous online tutoring, and the possibilities tutors can draw from in shaping effective tutoring interactions in the asynchronous online tutoring environment.

My beginning of a response to these recommendations is laid out in the next section, where I propose a self-assessment based on the model of directed self-placement.

A Application: A Model for Self-Assessment

Problem. Most of the objections raised by critics of asynchronous online tutoring are valid and worth considering. Asynchronous online tutoring is effective in some circumstances and for some students, but it is by no means a one-size-fits-all format ideal for everyone. I would argue that no one tutoring format fulfills that role, and asynchronous online tutoring is no exception. Given the specificity of the tutoring practices employed online, asynchronous online tutoring can be highly effective, but because of its asynchronicity, lack of nonverbal cues, and true dialogue, it can also be problematic.

However, if we embrace the pragmatic perspective of celebrating a variety of tutoring formats and Hewett’s ideal of multiplicity, how do we help a student to find the tutoring format that will work best for that individual student, given that student’s present needs and circumstances? And how does the pragmatic perspective of writing center work fit within the grand narrative of writing center studies?

For years, writing center studies has been grounded in the unspoken assumption that writing center administrators know what works best for students, but the decisions often lack a foundation of rigorous research. These assumptions are epitomized in the grand narrative of writing center studies (McKinney). The literature tells us that tutoring is best in a one-on-one setting, with an engaged student participating in lively dialogue with an interested tutor who knows how to ask the right questions to spark student insights. In practice, tutoring is more flexible, responsive to the moment and to student needs, and has a practical basis not often reflected in the literature. We should acknowledge that what the literature says writing center work looks like and the way it actually looks are often two very different realities, and to see the variety of approaches and formats as a strength worthy of a place in the literature. The time seems right to offer counter-narratives that challenge the way we view the nature of writing center work.

Counternarrative: students as decision-makers. Part of a counternarrative of writing center work must acknowledge that, for years, at least according to the literature (Harris, Gillam, McKinney), writing center professionals have made top-down decisions about what works best for students. But if one of the goals that all writing centers have in common is empowering students, we should consider not only how to empower students as writers, but also as decision-makers capable of deciding what works best for them. The self-assessment model I detail in this section is designed to illustrate to students the range of tutoring format options that are available to them, and place the onus on them to select the option they feel fits them best. This model furthermore shows students the feedback options available for them to request of tutors.

Counternarrative: tutors as adaptors. A second narrative that challenges the writing center grand narrative and critiques of asynchronous online acknowledges tutors as conscientious adaptors who are flexible in their work with students. According to my findings, tutors are already making deliberate decisions about how they shape their tutoring interactions, and the decisions they make are driven by what they feel will be best for the student, given the cues they pick up from the student's online writing lab submission form, particularly the student's specified concerns, and the piece of writing the student authored. This flexibility both reinforces asynchronous online tutoring interactions as thoughtful exchanges and highlights the tutor as an asset, bringing a variety of experiences and strategies to bear in shaping tutoring interactions. The next logical step seems to be to capitalize on these strengths by introducing a model adapted from the concept of directed self-placement like the one I will discuss in this section. If we are to empower students by providing them with the resources they need to make decisions about the assistance they feel will best benefit them, we can extend the model beyond laying out options for tutoring formats and also include options for how students receive feedback. As Michael and Mary both indicated in their reflections, they make their best guess at what will most closely match the individual student's needs. Right now they are making these decisions at an intuitive level, but both have indicated that if they knew what the student wanted, they would gladly respond accordingly. In addition to the self-evaluation tool as empowering students, therefore, it also empowers tutors, demystifying to some extent the student they are working with and what type of feedback that student would prefer.

At CAPS, the online tutors already participate in weekly hour-long trainings centered on online tutoring pedagogy and practices. In these meetings, tutors discuss the theoretical basis for online tutoring, as well as the tools available to them, and strategies they currently employ. The tutors learn from each other and try out strategies that other tutors use. They share their successes and brainstorm possible ways to address questions and challenges they face as online tutors. This training could easily expand to focus on specific feedback formats and how tutors could make strategic use of each format, expanding their skill set in the process.

Methods. Directed self-placement is one strategy that we can draw on as we envision how to connect students with their individual needs and to the corresponding tutoring format that could work best for them. Directed self-placement is a concept that has existed in composition studies for several decades (Royer and Gilles). As Daniel Royer and Roger Gilles describe in *Directed Self-Placement: Principles and Practices*, “there is no single DSP method. But we would say that DSP can be any placement method that both offers students information and advice about their placement options....and places the ultimate placement decision in the students’ hands” (2). Anne Ruggles Gere, et. al., further adds to the discussion of directed self-placement, suggesting in her work that the most effective methods for directed self-placement are marked by two important features: “they are locally based and affirm student agency” (606). This method has been applied at various institutions to help students make decisions about what level of composition class to enroll in, and, while composition professionals have debated the merits of directed self-placement versus more formal assessment measures (standardized test scores, previous grades, entrance exams), some have reported that this

method is as effective as assessment measures in predicting a student's success in a course. When applied to writing center work, exciting possibilities open up. Directed self-placement can become the strategy we employ in creating an instrument that helps students evaluate the tutoring format that could work best for them, while also educating them on the range of options available to them. This second point is important since student needs might change over the course of time, over the course of various writing projects, or over the course of varying circumstances. So even as we help students to target an option that might best suit their needs, we can offer them an overview of all options, helping them to assess and choose the option or options that might work best for them.

As I began to think of applications of directed self-placement to writing center work, I imagined creating a self-evaluation for students in the form of a quick survey students could take, similar to quizzes they already take on social media sites. Their responses to the self-evaluation questions would correspond to tutoring formats that speak to those responses, and, in the case of online tutoring, to a type of feedback that might best suit their needs. Following in the tradition of Anne Ruggles Gere, the instrument I have drafted arises from the local context, and is centered on tutoring formats and feedback offered by CAPS to students who seek out CAPS services. Like Gere, et.al., students are positioned as decision makers who will ultimately choose what service they opt into (609).

Design. Appendix A illustrates a mock-up of the first iteration of a self-evaluation instrument I have drafted. Included here is the full text for each part of the instrument. This instrument is a work in progress, and the finished product would be more visually

appealing and more dynamic, with pathways that move students through the self-evaluation process. The questions I include in the pilot phase of this instrument can be categorized:

A. Learning support preferences

Question A asks:

In class, I work best when professors:

- lecture
- create PowerPoint presentations they read from
- post notes online
- incorporate a lot of pair or group work

B. Homework habits

When I do my homework:

- I prefer to sit alone at my laptop, in a quiet spot
- I like to study with a group
- I like to study alone, but in a busy place

C. Learning practices

In class, I:

- take notes
- tape record the lecture
- listen, and later recall what I learned

D. Online preferences

When I am online, I prefer:

- to read articles and blogs

- to watch videos
- to listen to podcasts

E. Feedback preferences

When I get feedback, I prefer:

- written comments
- screen capture videos that narrate comments
- voice recorded comments

As I drafted the student self-evaluation instrument, I did so with the intent of including

it on the CAPS website. A link to the instrument would feature prominently on the website, and students could take the assessment if they were new to CAPS or looking for an overview of the services available to them. In the CAPS physical space, moreover, computers are set up in the front lobby and are reserved for CAPS student users. Students could also be guided to these computers if they were interested in taking the self-evaluation during an initial visit to CAPS.

Discussion of questions and rationale: The rationale I offer here is based on my ideas of what may work. The details will be refined in future iterations of the self-assessment, and the correlations that I draw here are speculative and will be modified as I move through the implementation process (peer review, pilot, revision, refinement). My rationale is an approximation and represents a starting point rather than a definitive model in its final draft. For each question, students will be able to select as many options as they feel are relevant, recognizing that we work in a variety of ways, and the responses will be weighted to arrive at the overall recommended tutoring format. Question A will

help to distinguish between face-to-face and online options. Students who indicate a preference for group work might prefer the writing drop-in lab, which is a social setting where tutors promote and facilitate collaboration among students, while students who prefer a lecture, PowerPoint or posted notes might prefer the more structured setting of an individual appointment. Question B further explores setting preferences; students who prefer sitting alone might need the more structured time afforded by an individual appointment or the process time that online tutoring allows, while a student who prefers a more social situation, even working individually but in a bustling location, might appreciate the writing drop-in lab. Question C speaks to response styles that might work best for students who opt for online tutoring; among the options that online tutors at CAPS offer, students can request a Jing screen-capture video with narration, voiceover comments, or written responses. Those who take notes might respond more fully to text-based comments, while students who record lectures may prefer audio-based comments, and those who listen and recall may be drawn to feedback embedded in a screen-capture video. Question D helps students who may choose the online writing lab to identify what type of feedback will work best for them. Those who prefer sites like YouTube may be drawn to screen capture comments, whereas students who prefer text-heavy sites may be drawn more to text-based comments. Question E works in conjunction with Question D; it is relevant to identifying whether a student needs real-time feedback or not, and also, if the student opts for the online writing lab, she will know what type of feedback she should consider requesting.

Targeted tutoring format options. The student self-assessment includes a second tier that compiles the results of the student's responses and describes the service

that most closely corresponds to the responses, as well as the other options available. This second page is described here, and a mockup is included in Appendix B. Based on the outcomes of the survey, each student will be directed to a webpage that identifies the service that might work best for them. The wording will be, “Based on your responses, the CAPS service that may work best for you is [the drop-in lab, an individual appointment, the online writing lab with written feedback, the online writing lab with voiceover, the online writing lab with video feedback].” Acknowledging that the identified service may not work best for that student, and also that student needs change for a variety of reasons over time, the page will then invite readers to read more about all of the services available to students. Each service description will include a link to details (hours, locations, how to contact CAPS) about that service to get the student started.

Feedback format. The description of asynchronous online tutoring which appears in the second tier of the student self-evaluation will include a link to a final, third tier that helps students decide what feedback format works best for them. The third tier will mirror the second tier, highlighting the best match based on the student’s responses to the initial evaluation, and then offering an overview of the other available options. The third tier will allow students to view an example of each feedback option as well. When the student submits work through the online writing lab, he or she can then request the feedback option they would prefer.

Implementation. Testing this self-assessment is beyond the scope of this work. So far, I have speculated on the insights that may be garnered from the self-assessment questions. The next step is to field test the questions with other writing center professionals, tutors, and students, to see how the questions can be refined, and if

possible, condensed. The correlations I draw here are approximations, and a pilot that tests how effectively students are matched to the service they feel is the best fit would follow. In the long term, CAPS stakeholders could be asked for input about how best to use the self-assessment instrument. For example, should the self-assessment be a tool for the student's use only, with the assumption that students could use the instrument to inform the format they choose and the feedback they request? Or would the self-assessment generate a student profile that tutors have access to, so that they can also have some context for the tutoring interaction? How would students be encouraged to participate in the self-assessment, and how would they be guided to use their findings? Are there other ways to help students gain access to information about tutoring options that might be a better fit? These are all questions worth considering, and the decisions that surround these questions can enhance, rather than detract, from the spirit in which this self-assessment has been drafted.

Benefits. I created my self-assessment, inspired by directed self-placement, as a means of empowering students and tutors. Ultimately, students can use this model to choose among the tutoring options available to them, rather than defaulting to a format based on limited knowledge of their options. While the self-assessment will point students to the format that might be the best match for them, it is designed to show students a representation of each option available to them. This is done intentionally, so that the student has the information he or she needs to make an informed decision. This model also acknowledges that needs change over time, so the format that is the best match for a student this week, or for this assignment, might change in the near or distant future. So many factors influence what format might work best for a student that this

model puts the options at the student's fingertips, offering a recommendation but placing the onus on the student to choose for himself or herself.

Similarly, this model offers students options for how they can receive asynchronous online tutoring feedback. Michael and Mary have demonstrated versatility in their practices, and this model capitalizes on that versatility. The third tier of the proposed self-assessment would provide examples of text-based, voice-recorded, and screen capture feedback so that students can see what each option looks like and consider how it fits with what works for them. They can then be advocates for their feedback, requesting the format that speaks most directly to their needs and preferences.

The model I propose here benefits tutors as well; as Michael and Mary have demonstrated, tutors consider flexibility key to tutoring, and draw on the practices they hope will best meet student needs. One of the biggest drawbacks of asynchronous online tutoring is the scarcity of cues about the student a tutor is working with. Although Michael and Mary have both illustrated how they work the best they can to construct an understanding of the student they are working with, if they had access to the more context, they would adapt according to their more informed understanding of each given student. In essence, students would be empowered through this model to request specific types of feedback, and tutors would benefit from this added context and adapt accordingly. This model is currently in the drafting stages, and will undoubtedly change as it moves through the steps of pilot, review, and refinement, but it represents the beginning of a response to the findings of this study and the critiques of asynchronous online tutoring.

Closing Thoughts

When it comes to asynchronous online tutoring, just as tutors make deliberate decisions as they shape their tutoring encounters, students should be empowered to make decisions about tutoring formats and feedback options that work for them. Asynchronous online tutoring should be one of a variety of options, and, rather than solely debate the merits of it, we should consider how to offer support and vision for future directions of this and other writing center work.

As writing center professionals, it is our responsibility to turn a critical eye towards tutoring formats, practices, and approaches. We fall short of our responsibilities, though, when we stop at the critique itself. For it is also our responsibility to engage in inquiry, examining tutoring concepts, how they work in practice, and imagining possibilities for positive growth and change. Likewise, it is our responsibility to be both tutor-centered and student-centered as much as possible. We need to think critically about how we can increase the effectiveness of our practices, how we can promote best practices among tutors, and how we can increase our efforts to meet student needs. When either tutors or students are not having their needs met, we should examine what is at the center of the disconnect. The case of asynchronous online tutoring exemplifies the importance of this type of inquiry, and how critiques absent of inquiry represent a missed opportunity. It is through research and discovery that we can grow our understanding of tutoring practices that, at first glance, don't fit the traditional mold. As this exploration of asynchronous online tutoring emphasizes, there is always room to increase our effectiveness as writing center professionals and practitioners. In this case, we can focus on educating tutors and students, providing tutors with training opportunities to hone their tutoring in an asynchronous online environment; for students, we can consider the

ways we can provide them with the information they need to choose among tutoring options, to identify what options best meet their needs.

In his NCTE/CCCC statement, Haswell points out, “Scholarship grows or it does not grow” (204), and it is up to us to decide how we want the field to move forward. There is a tradition in writing center scholarship to call for research, a call which sometimes seems to go unanswered. When writing center professionals respond to that call, we open ourselves to possibilities for change, for the chance to imagine the possibilities, to advance as a field, to shape the future directions of the field of writing center studies, and to ensure that we are doing all we can to promote the growth of tutors as they support the students we serve.

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Appendix A: Prototype of Student Self-Evaluation (Tier 1)



Appendix B: Prototype of Student Self-Evaluation (Tier 2)

Welcome to CAPS!

Based on your responses, the CAPS service that may work best for you is the online writing lab. Read on to learn more about the online writing lab, as well as other services available to you.

The service that might work best for you: CAPS Online Writing Lab



The online writing lab is an email-based tutoring service. Once you submit your paper with your concerns, a tutor will review your work and offer comments. Read more about the online writing lab [here](#).

Read more about other CAPS services:

CAPS Writing Drop-In Lab

The CAPS Writing Drop-In Lab has laptops set up for your use and tutors who are ready to help you. No appointments necessary—stop by any time our drop-in labs are [open](#). Find more information about the drop-in lab [here](#).



CAPS Writing Individual Appointments



Work one-on-one with a writing tutor during an individual appointment. Appointments are available for 25 or 50 minutes. Read [more](#) about individual appointments and to learn how to [schedule](#) one today.