Tutoring with Technology: A Telementoring Pilot Project

Incorporating technology into writing centers is currently a hot and controversial topic. Purdue University, the leader of Online Writing Labs (OWLs), offers e-mail based online tutoring, and professionals in the field are in a debate about whether or not online writing consultations are effective and appropriate. Skeptics assert technology cannot replace the fundamental aspects of face to face (f2f) tutoring and that the danger of a center becoming an editing service is ominous. Enthusiasts are eager to allow tutors and clients more flexibility with their work by offering online sessions. Can technology be used to support writing center pedagogies while providing a good experience for the tutor and tutee? This pilot project attempts to answer that question.

Over the course of four months, I worked as a telementor writing consultant using various media. Currently, a small percentage of writing centers offer online tutoring, and the ones that do rely on e-mail alone. Since there are several more advanced technologies available, I wanted to see how a variety of media would affect the quality of the consultation. During each session, I used my experience as a writing consultant to adhere to common writing center practices and pedagogical approaches.

Throughout the pilot project, I worked with “Patrick,” a young fiction writer living in West Virginia who was revising manuscripts to send out for publication. Patrick and I had worked together in writing workshops in the past, so a rapport was already established. Admittedly, this set up is not typical of a writing center, where consultants typically work with undergraduate, academic writing from a variety of clients. Having a
regular client is generally discouraged. However, the nature of telementoring contradicts these views and encourages communication and collaboration over an extended period of time (Harris 1999). Since several writing center directors were not comfortable with letting me do a pilot project with their clients, I chose to adopt the telementoring theory and work with one writer over time. For the purposes of this study, having one client work with each technology was a helpful way to assess the effectiveness of the media.

Patrick and I used a variety of technology in our five different types of sessions:
1. Asynchronous e-mail exchange 2. Asynchronous e-mail exchange using various Microsoft Word functionality 3. Synchronous chat 4. Moon Edit, a synchronous writing tool and 5. Moon Edit combined with synchronous chat. For each type of session, I detail how the media and experience supported or did not support writing center theory, whether or not I felt the session was an overall success, how Patrick perceived the experience, and my recommendations for incorporating this type of technology into an OWL.

**Asynchronous E-Mail Exchange**

Our first session was conducted through asynchronous e-mail exchanges. Since Patrick had never taken part in consultations through a writing center, it was important for me to briefly explain my role as a consultant. Specifically, I wanted to stress the importance of Patrick providing me with specific questions about his paper, which is a key writing center principle. Research around telementoring also stresses the importance of establishing expectations before an online conversation begins (Telementoring 2005; Hudson 71). To this end, my first e-mail establishes my expectations, defines my role, and asks if he has any questions:
“Let's start with email-based consultations. Can you email me one of your stories and also tell me some specific questions/concerns you have about it? Please help to guide my reading by telling me what you'd like me to focus on. Are you worried about organization? Plot development? Language? Also, please let me know what stage you think the story is in. Is it a pretty polished draft that you're getting ready to send out, or is it an early piece that needs some development? I'll read and will get back to you via email with some comments/suggestions for improvements.

Please know that I won't be "correcting" grammar and will not be editing your text. I'll follow up with a detailed email but won't mark up your writing too much. Does that sound good? Please let me know if you have any questions.”

Looking back, the language of this initial email seems a bit formal and might have been intimidating to a first-time client. I found that my language in asynchronous exchanges was in general much more formal that my conversational tone or my language in later synchronous conversations, since the medium allowed me to carefully articulate and draft a response. This more formal tone is not common in writing center sessions, as dialogue is supposed to be casual and conversational.

Patrick, however, was able to keep a casual tone in his asynchronous posts. For example, he responded to my e-mail with, “Here's the story I'm working on now. It's at about the 3rd draft, but it'll need a few more. I want the voice to be consistent throughout, and the characters to be realistic. I think the ending might be too cheesy. And do I even need the first section?” While his e-mail is brief, he addresses all of my questions: he tells me where in the process the piece is and directs me to specific parts of the essay. This is a strong way to begin, and the e-mail exchange allowed for us to properly and effectively begin our session.

The e-mail that I sent back to Patrick addressed high-order concerns, since this is a tenet of writing center consultations. Similarly, the importance of higher-order
outcomes, the opportunity to construct knowledge, and task ownership are all important aspects of telementoring (Spitzer et al. 1994). The online environment was well suited for focusing on these high-order concerns, since it allowed me to conduct the session with question-dialogue. For example, I asked Patrick why he chose to put a fight sequence first (to get at his question of “do I even need the first section?”) and why he made several decisions throughout the piece. I was hoping that his answers would guide his revisions. For example, if he could not articulate why he wanted the fight sequence first, then maybe it would follow that it shouldn’t come first. As a reader, the opening sequence didn’t make sense to me, but rather than suggest a reorganization, I wanted Patrick to come to this decision on his own. This kind of strategy is a key part of Writing Center pedagogy and helps the writer answer his own questions and attempts to improve the writer, not necessarily the writing (Brooks 1991). Similarly, research around telementoring addresses the importance of asking good questions to promote meaningful dialogue, showing that giving the student “skills to find one’s own answers is sometimes better than giving information answers” (Telementoring 2005).

The asynchronous medium gave me the ability to carefully phrase and convey my questions, but big piece of the consultation went missing: the dialogue. Patrick thanked me for my work but never replied to any of my questions, so I was unable to know if the session was helpful in guiding revision. The most important part of a consultation occurs when the student is answering the tutor’s questions, as this helps him cultivate his metacognitive ability to understand his writing and also teaches him how to talk about writing (Jackson 2000). The very nature of asynchronous discussion “allows for timely silences or absences – built-in pauses in communication – so important for absorption
and integration of material, creativity, stress reduction, and deepening connections
between ourselves and others” (Fontaine 42), but in this first exchange, the silence was
much too long. Patrick felt this, too, as he commented that the session, “lacked any sort
of back and forth interaction that I find integral to understanding a reader’s ideas on one
of my pieces.” I could have followed up with more e-mails to encourage a conversation,
but instead I wanted to see if a different medium would naturally foster the dialogue.

**Asynchronous E-mail with Various Word Functions**

Our next session involved working on a piece of writing asynchronously via e-
mail, but this time we incorporated the comment tool and track changes feature in
Microsoft Word. Again, it was important for me to emphasize the goals and expectations
of the session. When he sent me his draft, for example, Patrick did not pose any specific
questions or point me to a specific area of concern. Before I read his paper, I responded
to his e-mail and asked him to address these specifics, since it is a crucial component to a
session. After a push, he wrote back, “it's been through a few drafts, not ready to send out
though. focus on the same stuff: voice, plot, transitions.” I was a bit concerned about his
short and indecisive e-mail, especially since voice, plot, and transitions were things that I
discussed in my first session. I wasn’t sure if he was telling me what I wanted to hear of
if he was generally concerned about these ideas.

This brought a dilemma to the asynchronous discussions. If this were a f2f
session, I would have pushed a bit more, but since 2 days had passed since he originally
sent me his document, I felt awkward writing another e-mail that asked him to further
elaborate. Again, the “silence” that comes with asynchronous discussions that Fontaine
points out was problematic, and I went on to work with is draft even though I was a bit hesitant.

Using the track-changes feature also made me a bit uncomfortable, as it heightened my feeling of being an editor. Tutors are never supposed to mark up a client’s paper. Instead, the client is supposed to always hold the pen and control the writing during sessions (Brooks 1991). When tutoring moves online, a big concern is that a writing center will become a “grammar fix-it shop” or will be seen as an editing service. Correcting a paper will never help the writer develop, and it is crucial that the paper remains the intellectual property of the student.

With that in mind, I had to reexamine the pedagogical decision of having the student control the pen. If I was working with a client f2f, I might point out a few errors by saying something like, “you missed an apostrophe here” or “this needs a close-parenthesis.” While the student would physically make the change, I was really dictating what change needed to be made. Since this is not the primary focus of the consultation, and grammar errors are a very minor part of the entire session, I found that it was ok to make a few grammar suggestions/changes directly to the text. The track changes feature blatantly points out the change to the student, who has to decide whether or not to accept the change. Because of this, learning will still take place. I used less than ten instances of track changes, and more than half were for misused words (for example, he used “they” instead of “the”, didn’t use capital letters, etc.). While the fear of becoming an editing service is a major concern to writing center professionals, Jackson puts it best by advising, “if you don’t want to be a grammar hotline, then don’t be one” (Jackson 2000).
In contrast, what I used more, and what I found extremely supportive of Writing Center pedagogy, was Word’s comment tool. I was able to continue with my guiding questions and could easily draw Patrick’s attention to specific areas of concern. For example, I inserted more than 20 comments in the 10-page paper (more than double the number of track-changes), and used the tool to ask questions such as, “Here you’re moving through time quickly. Do you think you need the section before this one?” and “Do you think these 3 paragraphs would make more sense as one?” Again, the comment tool and asynchronous form supports the question technique which, when done effectively, “elicits a thoughtful answer and requires careful phrasing” (Spritzer et al 1994). Rather than changing text or reorganizing paragraphs to a way that I thought was more effective, I asked Patrick if he thought it was a good idea. That way, he had to think about his rationale, how revision might change the piece, and had to make the change himself.

The comment tool was also useful to praise sections that were particularly well-written and effective. For example, in the first paragraph I inserted the comment, “This is a really nice opening sequence. It’s well written, concrete, and has nice transitions. Nice job!” Praise is an important part of any session and is particularly important online, since “online forums somehow seem to magnify people’s sensitivities” (Hudson 59). Praise was much easier and more effective with the comment tool. Rather than the general “I think this is a great piece” comment in my e-mail, the comment tool draws Patrick’s attention to a particular spot that I wanted to praise, which was much more meaningful.

The blending of media – using asynchronous discussions coupled with tools in Word – was very successful. My ability to comment on high-order concerns was
enhanced by the comment tool, and Patrick was able to see exactly where I was talking about. He appreciated that he could “see specific words, sentences and sections that [I] thought needed work along with comments specific to those parts.” I still missed the immediate answers to my questions and was concerned about the lengthy silence that lingered after I send back my suggestions. However, a sign of the session’s success was that a few days later I received a revised version of this essay. While Patrick did not explicitly answer my questions, the revision showed that he carefully considered my comments and revised his piece after thinking about my questions. It is interesting to note that the only time I received a revision was after this session.

**Synchronous Discussion in a Virtual Environment**

Our next session was held in Tapped In (TI), a virtual online community. Patrick met in my office, and we worked on a piece of writing that I had not previously read. This was an attempt to make the session as true to f2f as possible, which does not allow the tutor to read a paper ahead of time. The idea of dropping off a paper before a consultation is heavily criticized, so I wanted to see if not reading ahead of time would translate well online.

In this session I also tried to virtually convey the physical space and mood of a writing center, which is designed to be a casual environment that promotes conversation. Usually, centers are furnished with comfortable couches, and the peer-tutoring environment is quite relaxed. To convey this, I made small talk with Patrick, used casual language, and inserted emoticons. The attempt to create a comfortable, casual writing center online is similar to Bo Gyllenpalm’s discussion of creating a “virtual knowledge café,” which is based on Juanita Brown’s research. F2f cafes, similar to writing centers,
create a room that “evokes intimacy, warmth, and collaborative conversation” (421), and it was important for these principles to uphold online. While asynchronous e-mails were a bit formal and polished, the synchronous chats allowed for a more natural conversation and were more successful in evoking the mood of a writing center.

While evoking the true feeling of a writing center was a success, the overall session was ineffective. There were many awkward, silent pauses while I was reading over his work, and Patrick had to sit and stare at a blank chat box for a long time. This is problematic for an online community, where “our sense of presence is enhanced if we perceive that others are attending to us” (Fontaine 40). To try to convey that I was attending to Patrick, I typed “reading…” while I was looking over his paper, but we both felt the awkward silence. Based on this experience, I would argue that in virtual environments, reading a paper ahead of time is crucial. I had a hard time moving from the paper to the chat room and quickly getting my ideas out.

It was also difficult for us to synchronously discuss the paper without being able to view it together. For example, some quotes from the transcript include Patrick saying, “hold on, let me try to figure out what you are saying” and “where are you?” and me, confused about his questions about characters, asking, “well who do we have? jerry, fred, john, the steward, the foreman…anyone else? maybe i was just getting confused -- i thought there were more?” There were several times that we were both confused and not on the same page due not only to the fact that we could not look together but also to the fact that I was trying to answer his questions while reading the essay for the first time.

A successful part of the synchronous experience was that the question/answer dialogue worked much better than asynchronously. Patrick was able to answer my
questions right away, and there were several instances where he thought about a question and responded to it by entering revised text into the screen and then into his paper. This was much closer to a f2f session, where the client might answer a question and then revise his text right away. However, when this work moved online, it took substantially longer than a f2f session. Our session was one hour and 20 minutes, while consultants are trained to try to keep a session to no more than 30 minutes.

The length of time may have contributed to what Fontaine calls “ecoshock,” the symptoms of which are “frustration, fatigue, clumsiness, anxiety, paranoia, depression, irritability, and rigid thinking that interfere with adjustment and performance” (30). During our chat, Patrick made several comments about being a bad writer. For example: “oh man, it makes way more sense like that. good call. put it in your paper that i am a bad writer” and “you’re right. The way I had it was really dumb.” I knew that people’s emotions were heightened online, and that “successful operation of new technology can lead to a greater sense of intelligence and efficacy, but failure can evoke feelings of stupidity and ineptitude” (Rudestrom 9). As a result, I had to stop and reassess how our session was going by asking, “you keep making comments about being a bad writer -- are these workshops helpful or are they discouraging?”

Making Patrick feel bad about himself was something that I did not want to do, and I wasn’t sure if it was the technology or my attitude and the intensity of the session that was contributing to this. We ended up chatting about this for several minutes before getting back to the paper, and I think it was an important direction to move in.

Telementors and consultants alike never want to make the client feel inept, and that
feeling really came through in the synchronous chat. However, stopping to address the issue was a good way to reassess the situation.

In all, synchronous discussions had some benefits: the question/answer style was much more successful in the synchronous environment, but the awkward pauses made for a sloppy and forced session. Similarly, Patrick’s constructive and self-defeating comments were concerning, and the extremely long session may have contributed to his feelings. Ultimately, I would recommend that the theory of first-time reading be reconsidered when clients tutor online, as sessions were much more effective when I had a solid hold on the material being discussed.

**Moon Edit**

Our next session was a bit different: rather than work on a piece of fiction, we worked on a cover letter that Patrick wanted to send to literary journals to introduce his manuscript. We used Moon Edit, a synchronous writing tool, so that we could both look at the piece at the same time. Some key features of Moon Edit are that writing can be done simultaneously, users see what each other are typing in real time, and each user has his or her own color to indicate the text that he or she has entered.

After giving Patrick a brief demonstration of Moon Edit, I pasted his cover letter into the interface, and we started by talking about the letter. Initially, we used Moon Edit as a chat tool and then began revising the letter, which became a significant challenge. I tried several times to ask questions or guide some changes, but this type of dialogue was not supported in this environment. As a result, I mistakenly made several changes to the text, including substantial revisions. For example, I changed his sentence from “These types of rituals are still passed down from men to boys, and I want readers to see that” to
The story reminds readers that these types of rituals are still passed down and that men go to extreme lengths to define the moment where a boy becomes a man.” Revising a client’s work flies in the face of writing center theory, and the nature of Moon Edit, and of synchronous writing tools in general, made it extremely challenging to not edit the text.

In contrast, Patrick felt that this was the most successful session: “being able to see the exact spots where Andi would make a change or the exact changes she would make really allowed me to see my writing in a more objective way.” His comments show just how unsuccessful the session was. The fact that I made changes led to an ineffective learning experience for him, and the document ended up representing more of my work than his. This was even visually apparent given Moon Edit’s color features: all but three words were my color.

These issues are not only problematic for writing center pedagogy but for bigger ethical issues of plagiarism and intellectual property. With online collaboration, ethical issues are complicated: “issues of copyright and ownership of intellectual properties remain unresolved for virtual environments” (Agger-Gupta 127). The easiest way to avoid ethical dilemmas is to avoid making any changes to a client’s text, and given the difficulty of that with synchronous writing software, I would not recommend using Moon Edit alone for consultations.

**Moon Edit with Chat**

For our final session, we combined some of the media that we used over the course of our pilot. We synchronously chatted in Tapped In, I read his paper ahead of time and used the comment tool to get my thoughts in place, and we pasted chunks of text
into the Moon Edit interface so that we could look at it at the same time. Because of our initial Moon Edit experience, I decided not to make a presence there other than to paste text or use it as a chat tool.

This session led to the most effective learning experience and the one that was most like a f2f consultation. The synchronous chat allowed us to have a substantial, valuable conversation that relied on the question/answer dialogue, we were able to look at text at the same time in Moon Edit, and Patrick was able to make substantial revisions to his manuscript.

The learning in the session was quite effective, although the juggling of media was challenging. Fontaine discusses the importance of advantageous media characteristics, such as “image quality and size, viewing distance, proportion of a user’s field occupied by an image, motion, color, and dimensionality” (35), and in this session, media characteristics were quite ineffective. Patrick commented several times that managing several windows was difficult, and expecting clients to handle these challenges is inappropriate. Also, Patrick emphasized the importance of having a written record of the session – our asynchronous discussions left us with e-mails to look back on, and TI sent us chat transcripts – but there was no way to record this session, since the juggling between windows made for a disjointed chat transcript, and our discussions on Moon Edit were deleted as we progressed. In all, the blending of media could have been an ideal solution for Writing Centers that want to incorporate online tutoring. However, because we had to use free, low-end tools that were not all inclusive, the ideal solution was still not perfected.
Summary

This telementoring pilot project shows that online tutoring can be an effective learning experience. It is possible to use technology while staying true to writing center pedagogies, and effective sessions can be conducted online. For the most part, I was able to abide by the fundamentals of Writing Center theory, such as focusing on question/answer dialogue, making the client responsible for his own revisions, and creating a casual atmosphere that promotes the process of writing rather than just the final product.

For writing centers interested in offering online tutoring, I would recommend that a blended approach be taken. During this pilot study, the most successful sessions occurred while a blended approach was used, and sessions that relied on one medium alone were not effective. While none of the media that we worked with could stand on its own, ideally, a program that allows the client and consultant to both view the paper and mark it up while offering synchronous chat in the same window would be best. Programs such as Elluminate offer such a service but are expensive and not realistic for a center to purchase.

In addition to recommending a blended approach to online tutoring, I would also recommend that expectations are clearly laid out. Before each session, I made it a point to remind Patrick of our goals and to be sure that we were both clear about expectations. Having sample chat/e-mail transcripts on the center’s Web site would be effective, and briefly discussing expectations before a session begins is crucial. I would also recommend that consultants have specialized training in online tutoring. Even the best f2f
consultant may not be able to effectively tutor online, and differentiated training would
definitely need to be a priority.

While this study is small and does not completely replicate the most common
writing center sessions, it begins to show that online tutoring is not something that should
be immediately dismissed as ineffective. With proper training and a commitment to and
belief in writing centers theory, consultants can be successful online mentors who can
provide the client with a meaningful, effective learning experience.
Works Cited


