COLLABORATIVE NETWORKING FOR DIRECT FEEDBACK IN THE NDU WRITING CENTER: PREFERENCES AND PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

The role of the Writing Center at Notre Dame University – Louaize, Lebanon is to help students develop their writing skills by offering one-on-one tutoring. Specifically, Writing Center tutors meet with students by appointment to provide them with direct feedback on their work. Because this is a relatively new center with a limited capacity, tutors may not always be able to provide students with one-on-one appointments. According to Al Chibani, Ghosn Chelala, and Hindi (2011), collaborative networking can be used to motivate students by providing direct feedback to students on their writing. This paper explores how such an approach may be received and utilized at the NDU Writing Center. The findings indicate that this approach would be positively received and can ameliorate the problem of feedback clarity and limited capacity.

INTRODUCTION

This section provides an overview of the NDU Writing Center and areas of difficulty at the writing center as well as the purpose of this paper. In the paper *direct feedback* is defined as commentary on student writing given on the spot. *Collaborative networking* means peer/instructor collaboration through online computing.

Overview of the NDU Writing Center
The Writing Center at Notre Dame University – Louaize is a facility which students use as a tool to improve their written papers and writing skills. It is a free facility where students have one-on-one meetings with English tutors. In the writing center, seven computers with Internet access are also available for student use. Students can use these computers to type or fix their writing and do online writing activities including grammar and vocabulary practice exercises selected by writing center tutors. A vast number of handouts to help students improve their writing skills are also available both on the writing center website and in hard copy at the center. Some areas of writing center work hinder the rhythmic progress of the center. A description of these areas follows.

Areas of Difficulty at the Writing Center

There are three main areas of difficulty at the writing center:

- Tutors are not always available to cover back-to-back shifts, so sometimes enough tutors may not be present to help students. If the writing center opens from 8:00 am till 4:00 pm, which is a full day, and the tutoring session is 20 minutes, each tutor can help 24 students per day or 120 students per week or 480 per month. If there are two tutors at the same time, the number can be doubled; 480 = 960 students per month; however, the availability and cost of tutors is a factor which has not enabled this to happen. According to Carey (2011) users of the Center for Writing at High Capacity face a similar problem with one student recounting being behind on final assignments but unable to get an appointment with a writing center tutor.

- The seven computers in the writing center at NDU – Louaize are often idle and when used by students, tend to be used for a multitude of non-writing related activities such as checking e-mail and working on projects. The writing center needs to find ways of efficiently utilizing computer resources.

- Giving students feedback on their writing is the most prevalent part of the work done at the writing center. The amount and clarity of feedback has not been empirically measured using different methods. It is an element that could potentially undergo modification of strategies used for giving feedback. In their work, Stern and Solomon (2006) and Treglia (2009) insisted on the efficient role of the teacher's commentary on students writing assignments. The concept of the importance of extensive feedback through technology is not new; nevertheless, its implementation has been slow to non-existent at NDU. In a time of change, practices should not remain unaltered; flexibility is needed (Deal, 1986).

Purpose of This Paper

Change, especially in technology, is a rapid and ongoing process that affects the way educational services are delivered: "Advances in technology require teachers and administrators to review their curricula, approaches, and educational tools, and at the same time lead them to consider the possibility of incorporating technology into their teaching" (Timucin, 2006, p. 262).

Accordingly, this paper aims to address the prevalent problems at the NDU Writing Center with a focus on those that could be solved through collaborative networking technology. The paper further focuses on whether students and writing center tutors at NDU perceive the collaborative networking approach as positive.

Resulting recommendations for how collaborative networking could be positively used to assist in the progress of the writing center focusing on areas of difficulty as well as the center's main task, which is to provide direct feedback to writing center users about their writing, will be presented.

Literature

This section presents the literature on ideas and attitudes about feedback and technology for writing as well as the effects of electronic feedback on which this research is built.

Ideas and Attitudes About Feedback and Technology for Writing

The concept of the importance of extensive feedback through technology is not new. Personalized and more readily available feedback by cognitive technologies is also not new as well as using such technologies to help introduce writing strategies and enable writer to refine their strategies (Pea & Kurland, 1987).

With the development of Internet technology over the past few decades, Frazee (2008) highlights the movement of professional coaching from face-to-face to e-coaching whereby there is easier access to resources, flexibility, individualized learning, and just-in-time learning and coaching. Collaborative software is a tool for this type of instruction and facilitates just-in-time instruction. This shift in thinking has resulted in writers being able to communicate with human tutors online rather than technology being the tutor. According to Goodyear, Jones, Asensio, Hodgson, and Steeples (2005), "Human-human interaction is an essential part of networked learning" (p. 474).

Many terms have been used to describe this strategy, one of which is collaborative networking, using any kind of collaborative e-learning software. Goodyear et al. (2005) defined networked learning as "learning in which information and communications technology (ICT) is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners; between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources" (p.473). Advantages include the ability to provide immediate feedback for students, accommodation of own pace learning and multiple learning styles (individualized learning), increased student motivation, different resources and materials accessible from one place, and learning can be anytime, anywhere (Nguyen, 2008).

Effects of Electronic Feedback

To date, only a few empirical studies have investigated effects of networked computers on English as a Second Language (ESL) student writing. Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) noted, "It follows that the challenge to education researchers is to further investigate the features of online teaching that will most benefit students" (p.116). In one study, the networked setting was shown to promote better writing and more peer and teacher feedback. The traditional setting was shown to promote more improvement in writing. This was attributed to first

drafts in the networked classes being closer to students' maximal performance (Braine, 2002). According to the findings in Al Chibani, Ghosn Chelala, and Hindi (2011), NDU students' overall perception of using collaborative software as part of an English course, English (ENL) 110, was positive. Pertaining particularly to feedback on student writing, the survey revealed 89% of students like to get quick feedback from their instructor and 89.7% wish for detailed feedback with explanation.

Studies have shown the positive results of teacher feedback. Through collaborative networking, we may be able to increase the amount and clarity of feedback (Nguyen, 2008). In one study that examined the effect of electronic feedback compared to face-to-face interaction during the revision stage of essay writing, the mean of students who do not shy away from the computer and depended on all types of feedback (online postings, online indirect feedback, and face-to-face feedback) had about three-points over those who refrained from getting any type of feedback. However, subjects who relied on face-to-face feedback gained only two points (Matsumura & Hann, 2004). Therefore, the greatest degree of improvement occurred with students who received more feedback.

In Yeh and Lo (2009), an online corrective feedback and error analysis system called Online Annotator for English as a Foreign language (EFL) Writing was developed that was motivated by the increased need for effective writing feedback and correction methods in online composition classrooms. According to Yeh and Lo (2009),

> The experimental group received corrective feedback with the developed system whereas the control group used the paper-based error correction method. After the treatment, students in both groups conducted corrective feedback activities by correcting the same document written by an EFL student. The experimental results were encouraging in that the analysis of students' corrective feedback revealed significantly better performance in the experimental group on recognizing writing errors. (p. 882)

"Electronic annotations also can take advantage of electronic databases to provide EFL teachers and learners a more constructive environment for error correction and feedback," noted Yeh and Lo (2009, p. 889). In fact, they claimed, research is needed to compare the benefits of paper-based and electronic annotations.

Research Tools

This section describes the questionnaire tools used to collect data on which the recommendations are built.

Questionnaire

Questionnaires of 12 and 8 questions were adapted from those used in Al Chibani, Ghosn Chelala, and Hindi (2011) for tutors and students respectively. Questions were adapted to the context of using collaborative networking in the writing center rather than in a particular course.

Tutor questionnaire. The first part of the tutor questionnaire includes questions on background. The second part includes questions on preferences and perspective regarding giving feedback at the writing center. The third part contains questions pertaining to ameliorating progress at the writing center.

Student questionnaire. The first part of the student questionnaire includes questions on background. The second part includes questions on preferences and perspective regarding receiving feedback from the writing center on a writing assignment. Samples of writing center tutors (n=5, N=6) and students (n=60, N=152) who tutored in/used respectively the writing center during the Fall 2011 semester were surveyed using the above-described questionnaires.

Questionnaire Results

In this section, the results of the questionnaires are detailed. The frequencies for each of the questions in tutor and student questionnaires are shown in Tables 1, 2 and 3.

Table 1

Frequencies of Tutor Responses to Questions about Perceptions of and Preferences for Collaborative Software and Electronic Feedback

Question	Tutor Responses		
	Agree	Disagree	Total
1. I would like to give students feedback electronically	5	0	5
2. Online peer feedback will enhance student motivation to write	3	2	5
3. Online tutor feedback will enhance student motivation to write	3	2	5
4. I will increase my feedback to students through collaborative software	4	1	5
5. Collaborative software will help me serve a higher number of students during my shift	4	1	5
6. Collaborative software will help me standardize the way I provide feedback	5	0	5
7. Collaborative software will help me provide immediate feedback to students	5	0	5
8. I am comfortable with using Blackboard	5	0	5
9. I am comfortable with using computer software	5	0	5

Results of questions about perceptions of and preferences for collaborative software and electronic feedback. As seen in Table 1, all tutors were positive about wanting to give students electronic feedback and about the potential advantages of using collaborative software and electronic feedback at the writing center, with all tutors surveyed agreeing collaborative software would help them standardize their feedback, and provide immediate feedback. All tutors also agreed they would be comfortable with using such software including Blackboard. Out of five tutors, four agreed that they would increase their feedback to students through collaborative software and that they could serve a higher number of students during a shift.

Table 2

Frequencies of Student Responses to Questions about Perceptions of and Preferences for Collaborative Software and Electronic Feedback

	Student Responses		
Question	Agree	Disagree	Total
1. Electronic/online discussion makes interaction with the Writing Center tutor easier time-wise	52	8	60
2. Electronic/online discussion makes interaction with the Writing Center tutor easier location-wise	53	7	60
3. I can interact more confidently with the Writing Center tutor in electronic/online discussions than face-to-face communication	36	24	60
4. Online discussions with the Writing Center tutor help me improve my writing	46	14	60
5. I would like to get feedback from the Writing Center tutor electronically while I am doing an assignment	45	15	60
6. I like to get quick feedback from the Writing Center tutor on writing assignments	50	10	60
7. I would like to get more feedback from the Writing Center tutor on writing assignments	44	16	60
8. I would like to get more explanatory feedback from the Writing Center tutor on writing assignments	54	6	60

As seen in Table 2, NDU students positively received the concept of collaborative networking. Out of 60 students, over 50 agreed that they would like to get more explanatory feedback from their writing center tutor and that collaborative software would make interaction with a tutor easier time-wise and location-wise.

Forty-six students agreed online discussions would help them improve their writing and 45 indicated they would like to receive on-the-spot feedback electronically. Forty-four students indicated they would like to receive more feedback and 36 students said they would be more confident receiving feedback electronically rather than face-to-face.

Results of questions about problems experienced. As illustrated in Table 3, three out of the five writing center tutors surveyed experienced problems with tutor availability during Fall 2011. Regarding the amount of feedback to students, four out of five tutors said they had not experienced any problems. Furthermore, no tutors had experienced problems with the writing center location. For appointment schedule flexibility and clarity of feedback to students, two out of five tutors indicated they had experienced problems whereas three indicated they had not.

Table 3

Frequencies for Questions about Operational Writing Center Problems

	Tutors					
	Problem Experienced?			Could be Ameliorated Through Collaborative Networking?		
Question	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
1. Amount of Feedback provided	1	4	5	3	2	5
2. Appointments Schedule Flexibility	2	3	5	4	1	5
3. Clarity of feedback provided to students	2	3	5	0	5	5
4. Convenience of Location	0	5	5	1	4	5
5. Tutor availability	3	2	5	4	1	5
6. Other	3	2	5	0	5	5

Results of questions about amelioration through collaborative networking. Overall, four out of five tutors indicated tutor availability and appointment schedule flexibility would be ameliorated through collaborative networking. All tutors surveyed indicated they did not think collaborative networking would ameliorate feedback clarity, and four out of five did not think it would ameliorate convenience of location.

Results of questions about Writing Center priorities. The majority of tutors ranked tutor availability as top priority for the writing center. The item

perceived as second most important was appointment schedule flexibility. This indicates collaborative networking may have its place at the NDU Writing Center, as it is a well-suited tool for ameliorating both of the aforementioned items. For other items, the results did not show a majority opinion regarding importance. Tutors cited other valid concerns including students not showing up for scheduled appointments.

Recommendations for Implementation of Collaborative Networking as Perceived Suitable to the NDU Writing Center

The following are our recommendations for the progress of the NDU Writing Center utilizing collaborative networking as a tool:

- According to writing center tutors at NDU, they prioritize tutor availability and appointment flexibility and problems have been experienced with tutor availability. Collaborative networking can ameliorate this by enabling one tutor to serve several students who are online simultaneously. The current software available at NDU is Blackboard Learn + and tutors indicated they are comfortable using it. It provides a discussion board and wikis; however, feedback would not mimic a real-time situation using these tools. The discussion component could be used for students to upload their files and have tutors or even peers respond, as students, according to the questionnaire results, perceive discussion positively. However, if this software were changed to Blackboard Collaborate, essential tools for conferencing and electronic lecturing would be available which would allow virtual real-time/on-the-spot feedback for one-on-one and group tutoring in addition to the aforementioned functionalities.

- Alternatively, NDU could acquire and install a software package specifically for the writing center. To implement this feature, the cost of the software package would have to be considered. One available software (not specifically for ESL) is *A.nnotate*. The server license costs are under $3,000. Students can log on using any station, even their own netbooks from off-campus or through the on-campus wifi connection, which is available or through one of the computers at the writing center that are often idle anyway. Using the software, tutors could annotate the student's documents in an on-the-spot fashion as students progressively write and improve them.

- Tutors further indicated that sometimes students do not show up for appointments, which wastes tutor time and means other students in need of help are denied appointments. In a collaborative networking situation, a student not showing up would not have a negative effect as the tutor would be serving several students at the same time and any student who happens to be waiting online could easily fill up the space. As highlighted

in the literature, the flexibility of an electronic, collaborative approach is appealing for these types of learning situations. Further to this, using electronic scheduling, students may even be served based on priority depending on their assignment due dates, which would allow pressing cases to be served on time and defer others to a later date.

- Students indicated they were positive about the possibility of location and time flexibility being improved by collaborative software. Therefore, a session may not need to be a block of 20 minutes; it could be more or less, depending on the needs of the student as perceived by the tutor. In addition, students and tutors need not actually be at the writing center, making their daily schedules more convenient. Furthermore, for individualized and flexible instruction, which is a positive trend according to literature, writing center tutors would be able to directly post links or appropriate materials and discuss and annotate work with a student.

- Also, electronic feedback provides a means for standardizing feedback, so students can receive more homogenous feedback using well-defined terms, which are not based on individual tutor's feedback practices alone. Tutors need to establish a standard for providing feedback, which could then be part of a database for electronic use. This is especially important as students expressed they would like to receive quick feedback, more feedback, and more explanatory feedback.

Conclusion

Based on the findings in this paper, a collaborative networking approach would be received positively by writing center users and tutors at NDU. To keep up with changes in technology and demand for more efficient and flexible educational services, the Writing Center at NDU – Louaize can make use of collaborative networking particularly to address inadequate tutor availability and to provide more feedback to students.

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