

TUTOR'S COLUMN

CONVERGENCE: AN INSIDER'S LOOK AT LONG-DISTANCE TUTORING

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Chocolatey warm air mixes with the smell of floor wax as I open the basement door of the library. I walk down to the open doorway at the end of the hall, heading for the Tutoring—Learning Center (TLC) at the University of Wisconsin—Stevens Point (UWSP). For the past two years I have been a peer tutor for the TLC's Writing Lab. As I get closer to the doorway, the noise increases and I can see the Writing Lab is full of early morning activity. I enter the open doorway to join the other students milling about, fueled on fresh baked cookies. Some are checking the binder at the front desk for appointments; others are sitting at a small table waiting for their appointments, while a group of peer tutors are gathered around a large conference table talking. We congregate at this table while we wait for our learners; this waiting area is more than just a place to sit. While we wait, we play Scrabble, do homework, and form new friendships with people we might not meet if we were not at the TLC.

Tutors and learners come from all the disciplines at this small midwest university. Our conversations around the table with other tutors and in the booths with our learners have increased our ability to relate to others in a variety of disciplines outside of our own. The administrators of the TLC worked hard to create a people-focused center to not only serve the learning needs of students but also create a community for the students. In light of the current trend toward on-line writing labs, I wonder about the future of the TLC's Writing Lab. Our culture is quick to accept technological advancements as a replacement or an "upgrade" to the way we had done something before. But as we use the upgrades, we run the risk of losing benefits the old way provided. As writing lab administrators question what technological approaches to implement, it is important to consider, "the powerful sway that technology-linked educational programs hold over the public through a deeply rooted cultural assumption that technology holds the answers to problems" (Hobson 481).

As our culture moves toward an acceptance of receiving education through electronic media, it is imperative that administrators of writing labs find ways to serve the needs of students who cannot come to the lab. Administrators may view offering an online writing lab as a simple solution. Some students may view going to the lab as a hassle or think an online writing tutorial will save them time; such students may opt to use electronic tutoring services instead of going to the lab. But, using distance learning programs to serve all students, replacing physical writing centers, would be a great loss indeed. The tutors, learners, and administrators at writing centers have the ability to form learning communities; it is the strength of that community that helps students learn. The TLC is a unique part of the UWSP campus. Because the TLC has one of the oldest writing labs in the country, the people at the learning center have created an atmosphere conducive to promoting relationships while helping a variety of students across the disciplines. Students interested in working on improving their writing can participate in a semester-long independent writing course referred to as the "English '57 Series." The students can repeat the course three times for credit. Students who take English '57 have the opportunity to improve their writing skills by working one-to-one with a peer tutor on whatever kind of writing they choose.

When the need arose for the TLC to help two students who couldn't attend programs on campus but wanted to participate in the English '57 series, I was asked to tutor in a new pilot long-distance tutoring program. Because I feel interacting in-person with people is the most effective way to get to know and help the learner, I decided not to interact with the two learners strictly by e-mail. I "met" with each learner over the phone several times a week. Though I did not work solely through computer communication with the learners, my experience has shown me that the more distanced we are from each other, the more this distance creates and intensifies problems.

The two learners who became part of the TLC's extended community had very different reasons for seeking a long distance learning program. The first student (Sandra, as I will call her) was a full-time middle school teacher working on a master's degree who needed an independent writing class. She lived over 60 miles from the campus and couldn't find this type of class in her area. The second student (Molly) was a full-time student who had a baby very early into the semester. She was unable to bring her newborn to daycare and could not commit to weekly appointments at the TLC. She had completed one credit in the English '57 series, and she thought a two credit English '57 long-distance program would work for her. My sessions with Sandra and Molly were held in the evenings. Sandra and Molly e-mailed me their writing prior to each over-the-phone tutorial. Just as Sandra and

Molly had different reasons for enrolling in a long distance learning program, I experienced challenges different from those I met tutoring students face-to-face at the TLC.

In general, during face-to-face tutorials, there are minimal distractions. Sometimes the center is humming with the noise of a dozen students reading papers out loud and triumphant calls by the Scrabble players. Once the session is underway, though, the noises seem to vanish, and the learner and I can concentrate on the task at hand. At home both Sandra and Molly contended with distractions during our sessions, though they were of a very different nature.

Most of the time when I talked to Molly, she was holding her baby or had her baby very nearby. If her baby was sleeping, she would talk in a hushed tone, and if she was holding her baby, she would struggle to juggle her baby, read her writing, or make notes. After a few sessions, I grew concerned about her not making substantial revisions in the story she was writing. In each session we discussed many different areas of her story for her to work on, but each time I received her revised writing, I noticed she only had made minimal changes. We would end up re-discussing the same areas several times. I wanted her to progress in her story, so we would have time later in the semester to work on other areas in her writing. At the beginning of one session, I asked her why she hadn't worked on a large part of her paper as we had previously discussed. She told me she was only making a mark next to areas in her paper that needed revision. So when she went to revise her writing, she would find the mark but had forgotten what it referred to. If Molly and I had sat together in the booth, I would have noticed her mark-making right away and could have encouraged her to make more detailed notes to refer to later.

Sandra on the other hand, was very distracted by her responsibilities as a middle-school teacher. This led to her not calling at our scheduled times, sometimes not calling at all, or not e-mailing her writing to me on time. Sandra seemed to see her independent writing class as a low priority and an easy responsibility to forget. I grew concerned she that wouldn't fulfill her independent writing contract. I decided to send her an e-mail outlining what she needed to accomplish and the time frame she had left to complete her English '57 requirements. After I sent the e-mail, she made a point to call on time and to call to reschedule the appointments she knew she couldn't keep.

In the beginning, there was a noticeable difference in Sandra's level of commitment compared to Molly's. Even though at first Molly's revisions were slight, she always e-mailed me her writing on time and was home for each phone session. This could be attributed to Molly's prior experience with the TLC. Molly also made a point to come to the learning center with her baby to participate in the orientation each English '57 student is required to attend. Each English '57 student is also required to sign a writing contract at the orientation that outlines what the learner wants to accomplish. I was able to meet Molly face-to-face when she came in for her orientation. But, because Sandra lived so far away, we never met. She wasn't able to come to campus for an official orientation, and she filled out her contract by an e-mail. The difference in Molly and Sandra's attitudes towards their writing commitments may have been influence by one key factor. Molly physically went to the TLC, met the people she was responsible to, and therefore felt responsible to fulfill the contract she signed. Even though Sandra filled out an online contract, she didn't physically sign it or meet with anyone at the TLC. She was unable to establish a beginning relationship with me or the other people at the learning center. Because she never met anyone at the learning center, I think it was easier for her not to feel a personal responsibility to her tutor.

In Eric Hobson's essay, "Straddling the Virtual Fence," he tells a true story about an experience from his colleague's writing center. This story is a good illustration of how easy it is for students who have not met their tutor face-to-face to feel no personal connection to the tutor or their writing responsibilities. When an administrator asked a tutor how her online tutorials were going, the report was as follows:

The tutor mentioned that the process was slow and that she really wished she could talk (f2f) with the client in order to push the discussion to a needed level of depth about the project. Sensing the tutor's need to return to the tutorial, the director moved on.

Two students were using the center's computers in the adjacent room: one printing a paper; one "talking" online. Glancing at the screen, the director realized with a jolt that the student was talking to the tutor sitting less than twenty feet away, a situation the tutor was not aware of.

The student had opted for the online tutorial because, "I wanted to be able to leave anytime without feeling guilty. And I thought I could just get my questions answered and not have to talk about all that other stuff the tutors always want you to talk about, like who I'm writing to and why I need more info." (486)

These experiences show how the distance between tutors and learners can lead to impersonal relationships that impact the quality of the tutorial. When students don't know their tutor, they don't feel a personal connection to the tutor and are more apt to "not feel guilty" about leaving appointments early or not keeping their appointments.

Another challenge I dealt with was how to get necessary information to Molly. Tutors at the TLC have many resources immediately accessible to help their learners in a variety of writing areas. Tutors can go to the wall of reference books to look up information or gather specific handouts on a variety of topics such as study skills or writing prompts for poetry from two large filing cabinets. Tutors are also able to help learners in the booths on the computer. Tutors and learners can sit side by side, and the tutor can easily show the learner how to navigate library resources for research or use various program options to create stationery and résumés. For tutors and learners, having these resources available is extremely helpful and efficient.

Molly had minimal experience writing a résumé or business letters. So, for part of her English '57 writing contract, she decided to begin putting together her résumé and write a complaint letter. Not only did she lack experience in writing these types of documents, she also had little knowledge of how to use the options in Microsoft Word to create the necessary professional appearance for each document. We discussed what written elements each document should contain, but when the time came for me to tell her about the visual elements—I was stumped. Had we been in a booth at the TLC, I could have easily shown her how to create professional stationery for the complaint letter on the computer and give her handouts showing the many ways to lay out a résumé. I tried to describe a simple résumé and talk her through creating stationery, but she was struggling to create the visual elements I was describing. These were things I knew she needed to see first. After a frustrating session, I wondered how I could help her learn how to create these visual elements.

What I decided to do was put together a packet I could mail to her that contained various handouts on résumés and typed step-by-step instructions that explained how to create stationery. This way she could see the résumé layouts I was describing and read step-by-step instructions on creating stationery. Although I figured out a way to get her the information, it would take days for the packet to get to her. I called Molly and told her I put the packet together for her. Instead of waiting for the mail, she decided to stop by the TLC to pick up the packet, thinking she would get the information sooner. Unfortunately, it was a week before Molly was able to stop in and pick it up. Molly eventually got the information she needed; Sandra was able to successfully complete English '57; and I am now able to see the following: Flexibility and adaptability are fundamental to the idea of a writing center. Both literally and ideologically, writing centers are places that leave their doors open, places that cultivate the exchange of ideas, places that are receptive to experiment and expansion (Clark 561).

We are at a unique juncture in the way we provide tutoring to college students. Administrators must decide whether or how to use technology in a long-distance tutoring program. Although our culture is quick to accept new technologies as "must haves," we must realize that, "Technology does not drive change per se. Instead, it merely creates options and opportunities for change. It is our collective response to technology that drives change" (Saffo 269). From this perspective, we can see technology as a means to increase our ability to serve students unable to come to writing labs while retaining the valuable face-to-face interaction that can only happen in the physical writing center. Just as the waters of two rivers converge into one, we need to consider how to merge technology into our writing labs, so physical place and virtual place can work together to best serve the needs of all students. ♦

Works Cited

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