A New Window: Transparent Immediacy and the Online Writing Center

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In this presentation, I consider the online writing center session through the lens of Bolter and Grusin's theory of remediation. From this perspective, the online writing conference serves as a remediation of a face-to-face, on campus writing conference. I use the concept of transparent immediacy to consider some of the benefits and drawbacks to different modes for online writing conferences, where asynchronous conferencing offers less transparent remediation, synchronous conferencing more transparent remediation, and video conferencing the current most transparent remediation of online writing conferencing. Ultimately, I argue that although transparency can be desirable in the online writing conference to increase the immediacy and presence of the tutor, breaking the transparency of synchronous online writing conferences can be a strategy to encourage students to engage in metacognitive thinking about their writing processes and composing tools. To engage students in this transparency breaking metadiscourse, I offer strategies for conversing about the online writing conference: positioning the remediation as resource, positioning the remediation as process, and positioning the remediation as limitation.

After spending the first ten minutes of an online writing center session getting a student logged into Google Hangouts and pulling up her Drive folder so we both could see her document, the student stopped suddenly and asked, "Wait, can I use this outside of the writing center?" "Of course," I told her. Hangouts isn't licensed through the writing center; she could use her own account to generate links. She continued, "We have a group paper coming up. This would change everything." At the time, I didn't pursue the point further; I thought we'd wasted enough of her time getting set up and it sounded like she had a lot she wanted to discuss. But I wish I had—we could have talked about what would have changed for her group, why composing together this way would have been so different. It could have been a productive conversation about writing process, technology, and their influences on each other.

In an early discussion on working with students in online writing center spaces, Joel A. English (2000) recounted similar stories. He explained that face-to-face writing centers are good at metacognition, at helping students to "describe how and what" they learn about writing processes, while helping them to apply that knowledge to future writing (p. 172). However, in the online writing center, students may be uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the technology used to conduct the session, and so tutors must acclimate students to the new online environment before they can facilitate this metacognitive work. Once students are comfortable working one-on-one in an online writing conference, however, how do we continue to encourage thoughtfulness about composing? And in the mediated space of online conferencing, how do we encourage students to think about their writing processes and goals not only across writing projects but across media? One opportunity for this work is in deliberate attention to the online writing conference as remediation of the on campus writing conference.

In this article, I begin by considering the online writing center conference through the lens of Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's (2000) theory of remediation. I then offer three approaches to this strategy of disrupting the transparency of the online writing conference to encourage student metacognition about their writing processes and tools. These strategies include directing students' attention to the resources of the mediated session, asking students to think about the various processes being remediated, and acknowledging the limits of the mediated session. Explicitly invoking these three approaches can push students to think and converse about both the conference and their writing on a deeper level.

Remediating the Writing Conference

In her article on the role of the Microsoft Word (MS Word) interface in a writing center session, Amber M. Buck (2008) urged writing center scholars and practitioners to pay conscious attention to technology in the writing center, because even the seemingly invisible interface of a word processor can

change moves and outcomes within a session, for better and for worse. It is more difficult to relegate the online conference interface to an invisible backdrop in the session but no less important to consider its effects, particularly in the distance created between tutor and student. Those working in online writing instruction stress again and again how important it is for instructors and tutors to convey a sense of immediacy and presence online (Docktor, 2016; Hewett, 2015). For example, Beth Hewett (2015) has described using first person language and instant message (IM) pinging to connect with students in online writing courses to help the students feel an authentic connection with her. Students responded well, recognizing her as a real, dimensional person in ways they would have otherwise struggled to without the face-to-face contact of an onsite classroom. New strategies were necessary to adapt the feeling of talking about writing with another real person to the new space and technology.

It is this sense of a real, authentic experience—here of a classroom, a writing conference, and a moment of learning—which Bolter and Grusin (2000) argued users seek in, and despite, remediation (p. 53). In their theory, remediation takes place when one medium is represented in another, while trying to achieve an immediate experience of the original (p. 11). In the online writing conference, the remediation is the in person, onsite conference with the print essay as represented through email, text message chatting, video, or other means. One way of achieving an authentic experience and sense of the real, Bolter and Grusin argued, is through a sense of transparent immediacy in which the interface erases itself, minimizing our awareness of the medium so that the experience of the remediated content is as close as possible to that of experiencing the original. It is impossible for the experience to be exactly the same, but the goal is to replicate the experience as transparently as possible. Transparency is not the only way remediation can try to create a sense of real presence; Bolter and Grusin also theorized methods of hypermediacy, in which multiple media are used to recreate the experience, despite thereby highlighting discontinuities between the original and remediation (p. 33). One of the more transparent modes for online conferences might be a video conference, and one of the more hypermediated might be a shared virtual whiteboard with corresponding chat window. In both cases, writing centers attempt to offer students the experience of a conference but choose different ways to remediate the session.

Transparency and Trade-offs in Choice of Conferencing Medium

When considering options for remediating the writing center conference, synchronous conferencing methods increase transparent immediacy, with video conferencing offering perhaps the most transparent option: the vocal and facial cues the tutor and student might notice when tutoring in the same room can still be communicated. Melanie Yergeau, Kathryn Wozniak, and Peter Vanderberg (2008) demonstrated the importance of having these cues available, explaining that video conferences restore some of the paralinguistic channels of communication like gestures, tone, facial expressions, and emotional cues which get lost when moving to text based media. Additionally, identity based markers of race, gender, or class may be more obviously present in video, cues that some may fear become invisible in media like email (Yergeau et al. 2008).

This is not to say that video mediated conferencing, or even synchronous conferencing more generally, is the best approach to online writing center work. Connie Snyder Mick and Geoffrey Middlebrook (2015) pointed out that synchronous work does increase immediacy and presence, but it is better at this interpersonal work than it is in helping with cognitive dimensions—asynchronous work can allow students more time to be cognitively present, to process information, and to reflect. There are other concerns with the transparency of video conferencing and ways in which it can cause students to struggle as well. Although Yergeau et al. (2008) noted that online conferencing allows students to work from their homes or dorms, comfortable environments that may give them a greater sense of ownership of their texts, it can also allow tutors to peek into students' private lives in ways they would not be able to in a less transparent medium. Additionally, in line with the cognitive benefits identified by Mick and Middlebrook (2015), Beth Hewett (2015) also noted that students may struggle to take in information aurally, to "hear, process, and retain oral advice" (p. 35), a problem that a more transparent method of conferencing would do nothing to alleviate, even with the ability to record or archive sessions.

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Ultimately, whether we choose transparent immediacy as our guiding strategy for deciding between modes of communication in the online writing center or not, there will be trade-offs: more time for reflection may come with the cost of a decreased sense of presence, increased privacy with less conversational ease, the addition of facial cues with a reduction in time for processing information. When focusing on synchronous conferencing, which is more transparent than asynchronous methods, it is worth asking a modified version of the question that guided Craig Stroupe's (2003) research in online writing instruction: "What can we do apart that we can't do in the writing center?" (p. 257). One answer to that is to break transparent immediacy strategically to encourage metacognition and reflection. Instead of trying to replicate the in person, face-to-face session as seamlessly as possible, we can emphasize the discontinuities between the two to help students think about what happens in the session. In the following paragraphs, I lay out three strategies for *breaking the window* of the online writing conference: identifying the remediation of the session to students as a resource, as a process, and as a limitation.

Remediation as Resource

In the online writing conference, regardless of the technologies used to conduct the session, there are different tools at the tutor and student's disposal than there are in the onsite writing center. Presenting the remediation of the writing center as a resource engages students in thinking about how they might make those differences work for them. In thinking about how to increase transfer and metacognition across media and modes of writing, Kara Poe Alexander, Michael-John DePalma, and Jeffrey M. Ringer (2016) theorized "adaptive remediation" (p. 33) to help students increase meta-awareness of remediation and make rhetorical decisions within the multiliteracy center through methods like charting the rhetorical moves of a text, cataloguing available semiotic resources, and linking the literacies required in the current project to past and future literacy needs. These activities draw on prior knowledge across media and encourage students to actively reflect on the processes of remediation and composing as they engage in them. While not a multiliteracy center in the usual sense, as students are most often creating and revising alphabetic texts, online writing centers still engage students multimodally, drawing on multiple literacies as they compose, revise, or reflect digitally with writing center tutors. Directing students to consider the mediated session as a resource opens them to the wonder and tools of the new media in use.

Engaging students in new or unfamiliar technology can be both stressful and fascinating for them, as it was for my student from the opening anecdote who was new to using the video and word processing technology. When they brought reading tablets into the writing classroom, Phoebe Acheson, Caroline Cason Barratt, and Ron Balthazor (2013) noticed that the disruption of the new technology could be "both a stumbling block and a possibility" (p. 288), as students missed the affordances of their old technologies but also discovered new things that would never have been possible in print books, like instantly searching for instances of a particular word. My student, confused and struggling to balance the webcam with the shared document, realized new technologies for collaborative writing. Had we stopped to discuss the new resources at hand, we could have talked about her processes for collaborative writing and she may have not only considered new ways of circulating a shared document, but also developed meta-awareness about the implications of this method of circulation for collaborative writing work.

Even when technologies are familiar, we can help students discover new and useful ways of engaging the conferencing medium in their writing processes. Buck (2008) noticed that when the students and tutors in her writing center used MS Word, they used it to remediate the printed text without considering the changes remediation could introduce to the session, such as the ability to easily visually manipulate paragraphs while discussing structure or use of tools, like the search function to highlight language choices. Hewett (2006) noticed similar tendencies in online conferencing using virtual whiteboards: participants tended to use the conversational chat box rather than engaging the unique affordances and spatial dimensions of the whiteboard for new learning strategies. In moving online and asking students to consider the medium's affordances as resources for their work, the crucial step is in the asking. The activities Alexander et al. (2016) present for adaptive remediation require multiliteracy tutors to raise questions and explicitly engage students in conversation about the mediums and modes they use. It is in

the conversation about the session's remediation and its possibilities for students that students and tutors can increase meta-awareness of the medium and its role in their composing. Positioning the remediation of the session as a resource offers one way to engage students in this conversation, but is not the only approach to considering the relationship between writing center support in person and online.

Remediation as Process

Drawing attention to the process of technological remediation involved in an online writing conference is another way to increase metacognition. An online writing conference does not spring into existence fully formed; the tutor and student perform actions and do work throughout the session. However, the activities we do in online or digital work are not the same activities we do in nondigital work, even when we call them by the same name. When looking at the language of the online writing classroom, Stroupe (2003) realized that the words of the onsite classroom—discuss, respond, describe, etc.—do not have special meanings online; instead they are remediations of the print and oral culture of the classroom, metaphors based in face-to-face conversation now used to describe activities that have changed through remediation. To ask students to discuss online, for example, Stroupe argued, means that students must engage the genre of discussion but also "project into the electronic environment a familiar conceptual and social grid that doesn't exist there" (p. 266); they must imagine how these activities can happen in new, different spaces. Based on the experiences of his students and in connection with Bolter and Grusin's theory of remediation, Stroupe concluded that one key to online instruction is recognizing the continuities between the different forms of online learning and the way these older and newer ways of knowing and acting through media can be productively combined. The second strategy for meta-awareness in the synchronous online writing conference draws from this move to seek continuity and multilayered similarities across mediums to ask students to reflect on what activities the online writing conference remediates.

While the tasks and activities that take place in an online session may be similar to those in an onsite, face-to-face session, these tasks make take place differently, offering students new ways to experience and participate in these activities. Reading together online is one such activity. For example, in a face-to-face, onsite session, if a student asks me to read his paper silently rather than aloud, he has little opportunity to observe where I stumble or must reread a sentence to understand. However, in a synchronous online session using shared documents I will inform the student that I will move the cursor along as I read, sentence by sentence so he can follow along with me. When I do this, students tend to pick up on my average reading speed, and when the cursor stops moving or takes too long to skip ahead, often they have already jumped back into the conversation, considering the paper from a reader's point of view to identify what made me stumble. Talking about how the student experienced my reading of the paper can bring him to reflect on how an audience member would read the paper, not only through imagining someone interacting with the ideas, but to see another person materially interacting with the text itself. Students are often used to watching others read, reading aloud, and listening to others speak back to their ideas, but through drawing their attention to the way reading online is both similar and different to reading next to each other, and by discussing how these processes are made visible in these spaces, they can begin to think about a real audience and develop more meta-awareness of their project as a text in the world.

Remediation as Limitation

A third way of breaking with transparency for a new view of the online writing center is by drawing attention to the limitations of the medium. In a reversal of the way writing conferences are usually discussed, Sam Van Horne (2012) made a case for centering the tutor's understanding as the focus of remediation in an online writing conference, with the student helping the tutor to understand, rather than the other way around. He explained that he felt he was seen as a "judge of the text" in his text based synchronous online writing conferences, and he wanted to try to deflect that perception (p. 101). Instead,

he asked students to explain what they wanted help with, then asked them to define those terms, putting the focus of the session on the student's understanding of the terms. For example, if a student came to the session asking for help with a conclusion, he asked the student to explain what she thought a conclusion should do for her essay and would follow up with questions to understand how she conceptualized conclusions. Van Horne used this method to push students just beyond their current understanding, asking questions and planning activities to help the student articulate a slightly more nuanced conception of the rhetorical term or composition process in situations where working with the entire text of the student's document would have been nearly impossible. In his sessions, Van Horne would explain to students that in order to look at a full section of the paper, the instant message program they were using to talk would require students to copy and paste it into the chat window, so it would be difficult to look at the paper all at once. With this appeal to the limitations of the session's remediation, Van Horne not only deflected his authority but also pushed the student to think about the actual processes and goals of writing across situations, engaging them in metacognitive thought about rhetorical concepts and the writing process.

Text based synchronous conferences are well suited to the kind of metacognitive work that Van Horne asks his tutors and students to engage in. Students in a whiteboard session that will not save a record of their chat but will archive their whiteboard drawing space might consider using that limitation to push for a remediation of the project that uses the drawing and spatial resources of the whiteboard instead. Uploading a heavily formatted document to Google Drive can make a mess, which might prompt a discussion about composing in multiple drafts or a conversation about a composer's writing process stages. Raising the remediation of the online session as a limitation may allow tutors to shift the conversation into more metacognitive directions.

Training Tutors to Break Windows

Things change in remediation. Things are lost, things are gained, and some things just change. While transparency may be desirable at times to build a sense of immediacy and presence within the writing conference itself, downplaying the differences between online writing center work and work in the onsite writing center is not an effective administrative or training strategy. Hewett (2015) argued that a major problem for online instruction is the transfer of instructional theories based in traditional experiences and traditional classrooms without acknowledgement of the ways those spaces have fundamentally shifted in their move online (p. 4). Working in the online writing center requires thinking about the online writing center as a remediated space, not just as a version of the onsite writing center. In their explanation of the importance of online writing support for online writing instruction and guidelines for creating a successful online writing center, Diane Martinez and Leslie Olsen (2015) argued that tutors working online should be specifically trained for online instruction, and especially for the specific type of online conference used. In particular, Martinez and Olsen note that tutors must be prepared for the variety of technological competencies students will bring to the online writing center, and Hewett (2006) recommends training tutors to balance helping students with writing while acclimating them to the technology. Including in tutor training strategies for breaking transparency in ways that encourage metacognitive reflection can help tutors with this balance.

Training tutors to use the remediation of the session as a strategy for helping students think about their writing processes requires actively engaging tutors in discussion about the resources, processes, and limitations of remediation. It would require asking and answering the following questions:

- How does our online writing conference remediate the writing center session? What changes when we move online?
- What resources or tools are available in the online writing center? How can we make use of them with students? In what ways might these relate to students' past and future writing needs?
- What activities take place in a writing center session? How do these activities take place differently in the online writing conference?

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- What activities are difficult or not possible online? What conversations can these activities prompt about composing? What can be done instead?

Answering these questions together in tutoring training prepares tutors to raise these conversations with students in the writing center, to encourage students to think about their own composing strategies across writing situations and composing media. Both tutors and students are aware that the online writing center is different from the onsite writing center. Employing these strategies can frame those differences as the opportunity to approach the online writing conference in a way that breaks the transparent immediacy of the online session and instead approaches it from a new window. This engages the online writing center as a remediation, in a relationship to the traditional writing center but still its own entity.

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