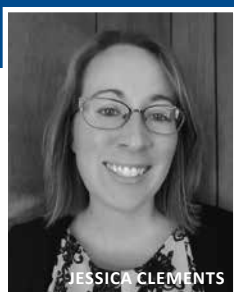# The Role of New Media Expertise in Shaping Consultations

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It is easy to say that digital technologies are changing contemporary communication—less easy to say *how* writing center practitioners should address this change. To explore the latter, I replicated Sue Dinitz and Susanmarie Harrington's study "The Role of Disciplinary Expertise in Shaping Writing Tutorials" to better understand how a tutor's new media expertise might affect a tutorial's overall effectiveness and what implications that might hold for how we best educate our tutors to address technology-rich writing assignments. My findings suggest that tutors' *confidence* may impact effectiveness more than their *expertise* with new media; therefore, this article includes practical suggestions for building new media composing confidence within existing tutor education programs.

CONTEXT: WRITING CENTERS AND "NEW MEDIA" EXPERTISE

Global Response: "New media" can be understood in a variety of ways but largely comprises textual production that transcends traditional word-based, print-based writing forms. When we think of new media, we often think of composing projects that use digital technologies, but new media texts do not have to be digital. Rather, multimodal texts—texts that utilize some combination of linguistic, visual, aural, gestural, and spatial modes of communication (words, photos, color, layout, etc.)—comprise the essence of new media composition. In other words, new media can be defined as interactive forms of communication technologies (Arola, et al. 4; Lee and Carpenter xviii).

Writing centers have tended to respond to new media in one of three ways (Lee and Carpenter xix):

(1) *Hire tutors with little to no pre-existing new media-specific knowledge*. Most writing centers already carry the weight of helping writers across a plethora of disciplines and academic

ranks. Writing center professionals may be reticent to add another dimension of assistance if we are uncertain of our own expertise in that regard (Grutsch McKinney 255).

(2) *Require tutors to have a working knowledge of new media composition.* If writing tutors are already trained to respond to the rhetorical principles underlying a piece of writing, then why can't that knowledge be extended to improve new media compositions as well? "We don't need to be, say, filmmakers to respond to video in new media composition. However, we do need to be able, at a minimum, to respond to how the video relates to the whole of the text" (Grutsch McKinney 251).

(3) *Require tutors to possess (or acquire) expertise in new media technology and software.* We must be careful not to conflate "expertise" with "mastery" and to note that this expertise is often practically enacted by a handful of specialist tutors within larger generalist organizations—much like Writing in the Disciplines tutors facilitate writing tutoring with disciplinary familiarity within larger writing programs.

Local Practice: I educate my small liberal arts college (primarily undergraduate) tutors by targeting the middle ground: cultivating a working knowledge of new media composition. Tutors apply and are interviewed in the fall. Selected tutors take a mandatory writing center theory and practice preparation course in the spring. In the preparation course, I require prospective tutors to complete a "Visual Rhetoric in Practice" assignment that I modified from Tammy Conard-Salvo's. This assignment asks them to "support an argument through advertising" or to craft a message primarily through visual means. To ground the assignment, I invite them to use our center's mission as the subject of their ad. I also ask them to complete a three- to four-page word-based reflection to explain how meaning was built in their visual message. We study contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity (C.R.A.P), color theory, and the essentials of typography, and I introduce Adobe InDesign as a composing option. We spend significant time locating resources and discussing strategies for troubleshooting new media composing challenges.

Students have been both creative and critical of the work they produce for this assignment and excel at identifying individual rhetorical choices at work in their compositions—but *is that enough*? Will this foundational journey into the basic principles of visual rhetoric afford tutors sufficient expertise to help writers

with the disparate multimodal projects that will cross their tutoring tables?

Study Design: In order to test the efficacy of my approach to new media tutor education, I replicated the methods of Dinitz and Harrington's study "The Role of Disciplinary Expertise in Shaping Writing Tutorials," one of the first empirical inquiries into the generalist versus specialist tutor debate. Replicating their methods (videotapes and coded transcripts of tutorial sessions) proved an apropos fit for my study given our shared goals of close and objective analysis of "how tutor expertise actually affects tutoring sessions" (74). I video-recorded writing center sessions involving multimodal projects (defined as any project transcending traditional word-based, print-based media) in Spring 2016, ultimately garnering fifteen willing participant tutor-writer pairs. To understand the role of new media expertise in shaping writing consultations, I considered whether each session was effective, overall, in "its likelihood in resulting in successful revision" (Dinitz and Harrington 79). An effective session was characterized by a tutor's ability to address global issues, to evaluate and—when necessary—challenge a writer's point of view, to ask questions to productively extend conversation, and to afford general lessons for the writer's development (85).

Results: Having Confidence Matters: Three patterns emerged from the videotaped and transcribed new media tutorials.

First, each tutorial presented a strikingly similar session structure—similar to one another and similar to what one might expect of a traditional word-based, print-based text tutoring session: agenda-setting and early session consulting focused on global issues, mid-session consulting focused on investment in more specific local issues, and end-of-session consulting that revisited global issues. Some sessions were more productively iterative than others, but tutors were clearly confident in opening sessions focused on global issues. Tutors asked adept questions about audience, purpose, and context when situating the work that needed to be done on their writers' new media compositions, primarily comprising whether the chosen media was appropriate for the communicative task at hand.

Second, in discussing local issues—such as particular font or color choices—most tutors were able to articulate the effectiveness of local media-specific choices related to audience and purpose. A few tutors devolved into less-than-productive like/dislike responses, which often tell us more about the unique and

sometimes quirky predilections of an individual reader and less about the rhetorical response the author will likely garner from the target audience. However, this problematic response was offered less prevalently than tutors recalling and applying productive multimodal composing language, such as discussing the basic design principle of alignment and how alignment choices would impact what the author wants to "tell" their audience. Surprisingly, those same tutors opted to subsequently undercut their authority with phrases like "I'm not an expert in design . . . ." While it can be helpful for a tutor to qualify their response "as a reader" (suggesting there are other viable composing choices available and that the author is ultimately responsible for making that choice), leaving a statement such as "I'm not an expert in design" without qualification—without pointing the writer to additional resources that could confirm or challenge the tutor's reading—might leave the writer questioning the effectiveness of the advice that was offered. This type of move is likely to undercut the success of the tutor's evaluation and credibility in challenging writers' points of view when necessary.

Third, when writers offered a working knowledge of new media composing, tutors felt confident in extending the writer's knowledge with their own working knowledge; however, when working with writers new to new media composition, only tutors with more "expert" knowledge of new media composing (or at least *more regular practice*) were able to project confidence. I determined sessions as more successful when (A) the *writer* already had strong ideas regarding the nature of what they wanted to compose, in what media, and through which software, and/or (B) when the *tutor* expressed additional confidence garnered through regular engagement with multimodal projects and software outside of tutor education and regularly scheduled tutoring hours (a confidence they may or may not have garnered through their disciplinary coursework).

In general, the study results speak to a productive level of engagement and improvement in each of the multimodal composing tutorials; writers were afforded sound advice that could improve the quality of the new media project at hand from tutors with working knowledge of new media composing strategies. Yet two prevalent patterns emerged from the transcript data that suggest generalist tutors' new media composing advice was clouded by a lack of confidence in that working knowledge, which has the potential to undermine or otherwise negatively impact the overall effectiveness of individual tutoring sessions.

Even when tutors structure sessions productively, those sessions may be adversely affected if they feel compelled to (1) undercut the credibility of their new media composing advice or (2) wait for the writer to forward new media composing ideas if the tutor has no disciplinary resources or recent practice of their own from which to draw. While working knowledge may afford potential or temporary successes, tutors may need more than "working confidence" to create and *sustain* a tutoring environment in which new media composing strategies can be productively imparted and effectively retained to make writers better writers.

SUGGESTIONS AND RESOURCES FOR NEW MEDIA TUTOR EDUCATION

What can writing center practitioners do to build tutors' new media composing confidence? In this section, I offer practical suggestions for implementing new media education into existing writing tutoring programs—resources I have turned to in the past as well as strategies I intend to employ in the future based on the results of this study and on my continued scholarly engagement with the larger field of rhetoric, technology, and digital writing. I offer both small-scale and larger time- and money-intensive investments to support writing centers in a variety of institutional contexts. Suggestions and resources span the following five areas: promotion, formal education, individualized learning, tutors helping tutors, and hiring. Extended discussion of these pedagogical possibilities can be accessed in my chapter in the digital collection, *How We Teach Writing Tutors*.

Promotion: An intuitive way to get tutors more practice with new media composing is to funnel more multimodal project traffic into the writing center. I recently asked my tutors to serve as "Department Ambassadors," sitting in on department meetings to inquire about each department's relationship with the writing center. When it came time to pitch writing center services, we found that most weren't cognizant of the multimodal services we offered but that they would be enthused to assign more multimodal composing projects knowing this support was in place.

Formal Education: To support a culture of sustained, critical engagement with multimodal composing, in the Fall of 2018 I implemented a one-credit practicum that all employed tutors were required to take. Increasing tutors' confidence in consulting technology-rich assignments requires narrowing the scope of such a follow-up practicum to suit new media-specific needs: offering a curriculum scaffolded to address making invisible modal

choices visible, facilitating meaningful access (see Banks), and, most importantly, engaging in a *series* of multimodal composing assignments. Ultimately, I advocate the need for follow-up reflection, a concerted effort on the part of participating tutors to actively and explicitly process and build upon their growing multimodal composing expertise.

Individualized Learning: At institutions where time and money are scarce, practitioners can point their tutors to multimodal composing resources freely available on the web, such as the Adobe Education Exchange, where you can "download free tutorials, projects, and lessons to teach digital media." These self-paced and online community-supported tutorials can be undertaken by tutors or practitioners as a part of required or voluntary professionalization. Some other multimodal composing resources I continue to utilize to productive ends in that regard include the following:

- **C.R.A.P.** *The Non-Designer's Design Book* (now in its fourth edition) has long been praised for its clear and careful explication of the four basic principles of design: contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity (Chapters 2-6).

- **Typography**. The Purdue Online Writing Lab is a helpful starting point for discussing "Using Fonts with Purpose." Font personality, or why we wouldn't compose a professional email in Curlz MT, for example, is well illustrated in College Humor's "Font Conference" video. I would also recommend *The Non-Designer's Design Book*'s "The Essentials of Typography" for a more advanced understanding of things like sans/serif fonts, kerning, leading, etc. Finally, "WhattheFont" is a helpful tool that writers at any stage of multimodal expertise can use to identify fonts instantly.

- **Color**. There are many resources that introduce color theory, including the Purdue OWL and *The Non-Designer's Design Book*. Lesser-known and equally compelling resources include Claudia Cortés's *Color in Motion*, described as "an animated and interactive experience of color communication and color symbolism." There is also Adobe Color CC where writers can "Create" color schemes according to various color "rules."

- **Copyright and Creative Commons**. "A Fair(y) Use Tale" is an accessible Disney-parody explanation of copyright law and fair use. I would also suggest that tutors and the writers they work with be introduced to Creative Commons, a site that offers composers alternative licensing to copyright so that works may be circulated under "generous, standardized terms."

- **Software**. Not all writers will have privileged access to industry-leading composing software such as Adobe InDesign. That is why I make a point to introduce my tutors to open-source alternatives (Lynch), such as Canva or Scribus.

Tutors Helping Tutors: Concern about practitioner new media expertise is valid and can be ameliorated by taking advantage of what writing centers are best known for: peer-led learning. I implemented a task force model in my writing center to organize research and development among tutors. Tutors pursue task force work during downtime and have been required to engage their peers in directed education at staff meetings. Practitioners might also consider facilitating formalized peer mentor relationships—pairing tutors with contrasting levels of new media composing expertise—with the goal of jointly increasing tutor mentors' and mentees' new media composing confidence.

Hiring: Whether you operate a generalist, specialist, or hybrid generalist/specialist writing center, you have the opportunity to inventory and assess your potential tutors' new media proficiencies through recruitment, application, and/or interview processes. My center's writing tutor application, for example, asks applicants to speak to the following question: "Any specialized areas of expertise (i.e., ELL, business/technical writing, creative writing, multimodal writing, etc.)?" Such an inventory allows tutors to take ownership of existing new media expertise as well as identify areas for growth and development.

CONCLUSION

What I have learned from this study is that a working knowledge of new media composing is productive—desirable, even. And a single tutor education course assignment such as Visual Rhetoric in Practice can successfully foster that working knowledge; however, if we are looking for our tutors to consistently use that working knowledge with optimum effectiveness in a variety of multimodal composing situations, then we must also attend to *confidence.* That is, heeding Grutsch McKinney's and others' calls to embrace the evolution of technology-rich twenty-first century writing and to attend to new media composition as a significant—if not inherent—component of our contemporary writing center support praxis requires fashioning tutor education that does not prompt generalist tutors to consistently hedge their multimodal composing advice. We need to better support writing tutors who are not already embedded in disciplines invested in multimodal composing practices, tutors who may feel at a loss for ideas when it comes to working with writers on projects like infographics,

research posters, or scholarly web texts. The results of this study suggest that tutors with working knowledge of new media composing have valuable advice to offer the writers they consult with; they just don't always feel confident in delivering that advice. So, if we want to decrease opportunities for writers to doubt the authority of tutors' (constructive!) new media composing advice, and if we want tutors to feel as confident in the resources they have for tutoring white paper design as they are confident in tutoring first-year composition rhetorical analyses, then we must provide *sustained engagement* with new media composing in our tutor education practices.

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