

Answer if You Have Callers: Phone Tutoring in the Writing Center

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In discussions of writing center technology, one tool is not much mentioned but is waiting on the desks of all professionals: the telephone. How many specialists remember this old staple in the midst of emerging digital technologies? In 2019, Joseph Cheatle and David Sheridan revisited John Trimbur's work in writing centers, underscoring how the digital age's communication practices "transformed [...] literacy" and stressing the supportive role of writing centers in multiliteracy (3). Writing centers should buttress emerging technologies with sound supports; for example, while some students create slide decks of integrated media (Cheatle and Sheridan 3), others prefer analogue equipment like the telephone, or its contemporary equivalent, voice conversation via cellphone. Such students are often remote learners at regional comprehensive institutions, metropolitan universities, and community colleges.



In writing center scholarship, attention to phone tutoring has been primarily related to grammar hotlines (for example, Devet). More recently, scholars like David Coogan, Barbara Monroe, Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch and Sam J. Racine, Stephen Neaderhiser and Joanna Woolfe, and Joanna Wolfe and Jo Ann Griffin have focused more on videoconferencing, chatrooms, and the online writing review. As these technologies become more common, some writing centers have chosen to eliminate phone tutoring. For example, a writing center professional interviewed in *The Working Lives of New Writing Center Directors* eliminated phone tutoring at her residential institution because she found it "egregious"; instead, the director chose to emphasize her center's online tutoring (Caswell et al. 33). Yet some writing centers do still understand the benefit of tutoring over the phone for particular populations. For example, writing on the WCenter listserv in October 2017, Josh Hutchison admits, "After years of trying to push videoconferencing and/or using chat apps, I have found that most of my distance students

really just want to talk on the phone ... [,] a technology everyone understands and can access.”

Outside of writing center studies, research has been conducted on video conversations and application sharing in information technology and organizational performance. Erin Bradner and Gloria Mark discovered that collaboration improves when using video and application sharing; but as a person feels observed, they become less productive. Productivity suffers from the perceived effects of social presence, whether one is on camera or is simply watching another on camera (para. 7). Conversely, Melanie Yergeau et al. describe how synchronous technologies at times dematerialize when a heated discussion occurs, with reference to these technologies' similarities to the telephone:

The transparency of the [audiovisual technology] interface exists inasmuch as student and tutor become engrossed or heated in the content of their dialogue, much like persons are wont to do while conversing via telephone: moments where one might feel like the other is *really physically there*, moments that, [...] are brief, intervallic, and hallucinatory. (3)

Notwithstanding productivity issues, videoconferencing is designed to overcome the presence of the technology or to work in ways that are similar to the phone when talking to someone synchronously, although few individuals experience telekinesis in a Zoom meeting.

Incidentally, how many of us have ignored phone technology while engaged in numerous audio-visual conversations since the Coronavirus outbreak? Often the speaker's voice stutters, lags, or skips because of higher user activity on a wireless connection. Students at my institution continually have bypassed digital technology, reaching out via the phone. Because more students are selecting this simple tool, more writing centers might make better use of it. Amongst emerging changes amid Covid-19,¹ students are calling in over the phone, particularly when libraries have closed and many are left with poor or nonexistent connectivity or without access altogether.

In what follows, I will show how phone tutoring was adopted in my writing center before the pandemic as an integral way to reach native English speakers (NSEs) and non-native English speakers (NNSEs) who learn at a distance and are also nontraditional students. The data will show why, when paired with other forms of working together online, phone tutoring offers distinct advantages to distance learners and allows remote students to form a writing center connection better than videoconference or asynchronous

tutoring alone.

I will present data from a preliminary 2018-19 study born out of students' preferring phone calls to videoconference at my institution. I noticed that distance-learning students continued to call in via phone despite requests for them to schedule videoconference appointments. Based on my work with students, I sought answers to two questions in the study: 1) which students were choosing to be tutored over the phone; and 2) why were they choosing the phone over videoconferencing?

THE TECHNOLOGY

Alternatives to the in-person approach are adopted according to what is suitable for each institution. In asynchronous sessions, one person provides comments to another offline and sends the feedback through an application or email. In contrast, synchronous sessions require both student and consultant to be present for the appointment. Videoconferencing uses audiovisual technology to host a virtual conference. Applications have options for a chatbox when a computer microphone is unavailable, or for one-way video, one-way audio, or two-way audio as substitutions when a computer camera is absent. When students do not use the camera, tutors do not know if it is because the student lacks the application on their smartphone or computer, if their internet is unstable, or if they don't want to be seen.

Another synchronous method, the phone format, allows students to easily call in and ask for help. At my institution, students can choose "telephone" on the appointment form, and WCONLINE settings display a separate color on the schedule. They can opt for a videoconference on the same schedule, but the phone often becomes the default format when technology fails during a videoconference or when students are uncomfortable with the video platform. Students attach their papers to the appointment in advance, send their papers to the center email account at the start, or work on the fly while brainstorming ideas for an assignment. With the document on their devices, students follow along while a consultant reads, freeing the student to make changes. We accept multiple file types (Word, Google Drive, PowerPoint) to remain flexible for students and maximize their learning.

METHODS

The study took place at Bellevue University, which offers writing assistance in person, asynchronously, and synchronously to undergraduate and graduate students in a variety of disciplines. Students can earn their degrees in person residentially or online; they are located in the Omaha metropolitan area, in all fifty states,

and internationally. In 2018-19, 530 in-person, 236 telephone, 217 videoconference, and 1,232 asynchronous online appointments were scheduled with three part-time consultants who tutored across the four formats. Before data analysis, duplicate names from 236 telephone appointments were removed, and ninety-six students were recruited for the IRB-approved study. Candidates qualified if 1) they had scheduled a telephone appointment between 2018-19, and 2) they had not consulted formally with me on the phone.

Fifteen candidates responded to my recruitment email that requested participation, twelve individuals qualified, and nine participants who completed the survey were each interviewed for an hour. All students identified as nontraditional students seeking online education at the university. Two were NNSEs and seven were NSEs. Six identified as Caucasian, two as African American, and one as South American-Canadian. All were aged thirty-five or older: two were in their thirties, three were in their forties, two were in their fifties, one was in his sixties, and one individual did not comment. Three were graduate students and six were undergraduate students. Participants resided on both U.S. coasts, in the Midwest, and in Toronto, Canada. They self-identified as representing several economic groups, including the lowest income poverty level (\$31,000 or less) and higher income (\$188,000 or more).

To generate the interview questions, I thought of possible reasons why students use the phone. These comprised sets, including motivations for pursuing an online education and parents' education levels. An additional set was based on the ways that students come to the writing center and their knowledge and use of technology formats. Geography and demographics made up a number of questions as well as schedules and workplace dynamics. Finally, I asked questions pertaining to parenthood and internet reliability.

I analyzed all interview notes through *in vivo* coding methods, allowing patterns to emerge from the participants' quoted words (Auerbach and Silverstein 31-66). I had no preconceived theory for the data, which is consistent with open coding, and I identified repeating patterns in each interview text before creating a master list of consistent ideas. As themes emerged, I subsumed the selected codes into broader themes until core categories of repeat findings appeared.

RESULTS

Participants shared common attributes, including coming to college from unconventional paths, choosing online class offerings

out of necessity, and desiring a college degree to be promoted or to help their career paths. Unlike residential 18-21 year olds, these phone users arrived at college while engaged in other pursuits, hence being described as nontraditional students. For them, “college was a sideshow” at times due to “unpredictable, ridiculous work schedules.” Many participants came from families where either parent had some or little education. Many reported “updating skillsets” to remain “relevant to the modern professional environment,” “to advance with the company,” or “to provide more for [...] family.”

Finding One: Phone tutoring allows for mobility and cuts down on misunderstanding. Students’ perception was that the phone allows for interaction and “lead[s] to more collaboration than the online review.” The phone “was the simplest” format; “it was easy to follow along.” Strong agreement existed regarding the ability to ask questions: “You might walk through the document, and [...] drill down on it and find out what is good or bad about the specific [...] writing.”

For one NNSE learning at a distance, the phone did not “require any of the rules with writing:” “you just can explain what your point is.” When writing via asynchronous review, one had “to take [their] time to finish writing,” and there was “a lot less opportunity for misunderstanding when [...] talking to someone verbally.”

Four participants reported that the phone was preferable to asynchronous and other forms of synchronous tutoring, that “the ease of it even compared to the in-person format.” The videoconference posed problems when students were unfamiliar with the camera or became sidetracked by the video. Other reported advantages of the phone were its freedom and mobility; the phone call “would be better than the video and you can move around with the phone.”

Finding Two: A combination of the phone format with the asynchronous review is useful. The phone helped two participants to understand asynchronous comments. For example, one stated, “There are times when there are 92 comments, and I am like, ‘Oh my God!’ One would want to check in on the phone.” Admittedly, the asynchronous review provided good written feedback, “but it is no substitute for the phone call from time to time, especially when [one is] uncertain on a paper.” A review may have left things open to interpretation; “you may not get your questions addressed [...]. You can move fast with a telephone appointment.”

Finding Three: The phone works as well as videoconferencing. For three of the nine participants, there were no clear benefits to

videoconferencing: “I am not really sure [what the difference is] other than you can see each other.” In a videoconference, one “can use the [white]board” and “message text” (chatbox). As participants felt more capable, they were open to the videoconference as well as the phone: “As the weeks went on in the class, it didn’t matter which one [was used].” The consultant mattered more than the technology: “At one point, it no longer mattered which format because [one] was able to work with the same person.” Two even emphasized that preference was based on context: “it depends on what you are asking for help with.”

DISCUSSION

An important discovery from this study is that the backgrounds of students who use the phone are as important as their insights and preferences. Participants’ work schedules are often responsible for them preferring the phone. Consultant availability is another factor; one’s schedule largely determines when one makes an appointment, with whom, and in what format.

Nevertheless, three observations result from this study. The older technology of the phone is preferred: students selected it as an appointment option more often than newer tutoring methods like videoconference. Second, phone conversations can be used in tandem with other tutoring methods. Some participants’ limited access to strong Internet connection, whether because of lower income, disenfranchisement, or rural geography, resulted in their phone preference. Many participants hedged when I asked about their comfort level with technology, but they eventually stated that technology had no bearing on their tutoring preferences. They chose the phone although video also offers two-way audio, suggesting to me that unfamiliar technology is a likely factor. This is particularly true when one weighs unfamiliar technology with busy work schedules; there is less time to learn the new technology in addition to managing coursework.

Third, video technology can be inconsistent, but LAN-based or VoIP technology is less so. When time or resources are precious, it may be more efficient to tutor via phone. Given this third finding, the mode of technology matters while students become confident writers, particularly when the phone is more mobile and reliable. It allows the consultant and student to get work done.

LIMITATIONS

The differences between videoconference and phone did not emerge until after I interviewed five participants. I added three questions for the next four participants to help clarify what students thought of the phone and the videoconference technologies, and

this may limit these findings. Observer bias may have played a small role in this study because the writing center consists entirely of three part-time professional consultants and one full-time coordinator. When students call the writing center on the fly, it is expected that some might have asked me informal questions given that I answer the phone during business hours. Some of the interviewees had informally chatted with me on the phone before, during, or after the recruitment process.

CONCLUSION

Writing centers must entertain other forms of synchronous tutoring, particularly when distance-learning students are requesting a simple tool. Younger students from rural regions or of lower incomes may be as receptive to phone tutoring as the older adults in this study because of the challenges of newer technology and Internet connectivity. We may think older students (30+) have established patterns with the familiar technology of the telephone, making it easy to bring the tool on board, yet cell phones are ubiquitous and convenient to use. Younger students live with their cell phones at hand and could especially benefit from phone tutoring. Having completed this small study, I invite additional discussion on its results and on the subject of whether tutoring by phone is a viable form of synchronous tutoring. What does training look like for traditional-age populations (18-29) who may be less used to or comfortable with phone conversations? Will younger students default to texting? How will trained consultants negotiate the habit? Is texting suitable for immediate, uncomplicated, and on-call writing assistance? What other training is needed once the initial read-and-respond approach has been adopted? Phone tutoring is not a cure-all but an effective format in situations (like the pandemic) when students are not located on campus. I invite others to try it too.

NOTE

1. To see how writing centers are responding to the challenges of Covid-19, view the collection of posts on the *WLN* Blog: www.wlnjournal.org/blog/covid-19/.



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