Tutors' Column: The People Make the Place: Reminding Tutors of Their Value in a World of Artificial Intelligence

Abigail Patchen
Oberlin College and Conservatory
University of North Carolina School of Law

As ChatGPT and other artificial intelligence (AI) tools proliferate, it is natural for many writing tutors to think they may soon be out of a job. Generative AI can produce coherent paragraphs, write strong thesis statements, and brainstorm ideas in a matter of seconds. Most tutors would need an entire session with a writer to produce even one of these results. While that may sound discouraging, I argue that the time spent collaborating to create something during a session makes the accomplishment much more worthwhile. A student may have saved 30 minutes by using an AI tool but missed out on an opportunity to converse with a peer and receive personalized feedback. The value of a writing center is not solely quantified by the writing it produces but by the experiences it provides and the development it fosters (Salazar 76; Tiruchittampalam et al. 1). Tutors are responsible for facilitating that experience (Nathan 11). Therefore, what makes writing centers great are the people who work in them.

Competing with AI is an entirely new landscape for tutors. The first step to support students as they navigate this new reality is to understand the instinct to turn to tools like ChatGPT. When most students are asked about their reason for coming to the writing center, they will say something along the lines of "'My teacher said that I need better transitions,'" "'English isn't my first language, and I need help with grammar,'" or "'I need an 'A'—how can I get an A on this paper?'" (Rafoth 155). AI can easily generate better transitions, correct grammar, and write a decent paper. These services play directly into students' initial motivations for coming to the writing center.

However, what brings students into the writing center is often different from what they end up focusing on (Rafoth 154-55). When students get to the writing center, the tutor helps them see beyond the assignment right in front of them. This allows the tutor to give students the support they did not know they needed to ask for. Take the example of a student who came to a session wanting better transitions in their paper. A tutor would likely ask some follow-up questions before responding to this request related to what the writer knows about the function of transitions or what they want the reader to experience when reading their transition. From this information, the tutor will be able to determine what, if any, gaps there are in the student's knowledge. Armed with this supplemental information, the tutor can approach the session through a personalized lens and leave the student with an even greater understanding of transitions.

Generative AI does not have this same ability to pivot. It can only answer the question a student asks. If a student asks it to help them with their transitions, it will pump out plenty of options. The student may be satisfied with the result, but it may not be what they need. Tutors are trained

to operate differently than large language models, and therefore, a student misses out on an incredible learning opportunity when they choose generative AI over the writing center.

This key difference in our ability as tutors compared to AI is useful in reminding ourselves what the role of a tutor is: to support the long-term development of a writer. As writing centers look for ways to implement ChatGPT and other resources in their work, we must question whether that will further the pursuit of this goal. Writers need to craft their arguments, think through ideas, and synthesize knowledge. These processes are applicable well beyond the assignment at hand (Pfrenger et al. 26). AI does not engage in that kind of work when it answers a prompt. Instead, it mimics patterns in the text it has been exposed to and evaluates options of words that are most likely to come next (Collins). Each word is scored based on the words already in the sentence and the original prompt. It selects the word with the highest score and repeats this process until the response is complete. It does the assignment and nothing more.

While tutors, of course, want to support the student with the assignment at hand, the overarching goal is to provide scaffolding (Fitzgerald and Ianetta 15). Scaffolding is a support system of tools, resources, and tips that eventually allow the student to work through adversity on their own. For example, say a student comes to the writing center with a great outline, but they are struggling to put anything on the page. One solution would be for the tutor to guide them in a freewriting exercise. The next time the student feels stuck, they will have freewriting in their repertoire and be able to make further progress on their own. That is one example of the many skills tutors impart that stay with the student long after the session is over. This helps students find success in future assignments and promote continued growth as a writer.

While well-trained tutors can give students better feedback, this is not to say generative AI cannot play any role in student learning (Steiss et al. 7). One population of students who stand to benefit from these new tools is students whose first language is not English, known as L2 learners. Even before the emergence of generative AI, it was noted that some commonly used approaches in the writing center, like non-directive suggestions, can be very frustrating for L2 students (Fitzgerald and Ianetta 10). AI offers an opportunity to meet the needs of L2 students more effectively by closing access and learning gaps (Warschauer et al. 2). For example, receiving writing feedback through ChatGPT has been shown to increase language acquisition (Athanassopoulos et al. 822). Still, these tools have a time and a place. Tutors can play a key role in promoting language diversity while students use AI tools to learn. All students have valuable perspectives to share, and L2 students should not be pushed to share only in standard academic English, which is currently ChatGPT's default (Goodlad and Baker; Savini). Especially within the writing center, it is important to encourage students to remember their own voice.

A final thing to remember is that, as tutors, we can do everything AI can do, but AI cannot do everything we can. Working with tutors humanizes the writing process, and one of the most effective forms of support we can provide is a good conversation. When students are on their own, they can get stuck thinking about their work in a limited way (Rafoth 147). They are so attached to their writing that they cannot see it from any other perspective. Simply verbalizing ideas to another person can make clear what was previously overwhelming by interrupting the writer's rhythm (North 443). This can spark potential new directions that would be out of reach if the writer was working in solitude. The conversation that happens in the writing center is so productive because tutors have been trained in writing pedagogy. They know the right questions to ask a writer that will spur progress.

Working with a tutor can also increase a writer's confidence (Handford 148). Many students may think needing help means they are a poor writer and that it shows weakness, which means they

may be feeling insecure when they come to the writing center. However, their writing is rarely as bad as they think (Rafoth 150). Regardless, tutors are always able to give some form of positive feedback. This feedback comes from someone the student likely views as an accomplished writer. Validation from someone they respect can make a huge difference in reassuring them that they are on the right track and have created something worth reading (Nathan 7).

Writers can also gain confidence when the tutor helps them overcome an obstacle. They might come in because they are really stuck on something: a topic sentence, a thesis, or even just an idea for their paper. If they work through that initial struggle collaboratively, they will be much more confident in their abilities going forward. It shows them that while writing can be difficult at times, it is rewarding to keep at it and create something. This also allows the student to maintain ownership over their writing. If a student turns to ChatGPT, the line between their voice and ideas becomes blurred with AI (Baron). This can make the feelings of accomplishment so revered in the writing center much harder to come by.

As AI and programs like ChatGPT continue to develop, the dynamics between writers and tutors will evolve. It is crucial for those of us who work in writing centers to remember our value. Our job is not to help students put words on a page but to help them create something that is entirely theirs; something to take pride in. There are few opportunities like this for such personalized learning in a collaborative setting. The time we devote to individuals allows us to impart empathy, kindness, and confidence. These are the intangible qualities all tutors have that AI cannot compete with.

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