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## A Genre of its Own: Training Tutors for Asynchronous Online Conferencing

### **Introduction**

Face-to-face (f2f) conferences take place in writing centers on a daily basis between students and tutors. Tutors provide students with an audience, readers who respond to and describe what has been communicated in the students' writing, and then tutors help identify ways to communicate in writing more effectively. To do this, tutors offer a wide variety of feedback, knowing that all strategies will not appeal to all students, therefore using presentation methods that will appeal to, and not alienate, a variety of students.

In f2f conferences, tutors use dialogue and conversation with the students sitting in the next seat to determine the direction of the conference, to choose the types of strategies to offer the students, and to assess the students' reactions to the feedback and advice. Using dialogue and conversation, the tutors can "read" the students and adjust the direction of the conference, the type of feedback, or even the manner of presentation based on the students' oral responses or body language. Students can voice the need to adjust a conference through oral or body language, and tutors can offer explanations or change the direction of a f2f conference to meet student needs, while the conference is taking place.

This type of flexibility offered through face-to-face dialogue and conversation with a student is absent in asynchronous online conferences. A relatively new form of conferencing, the online conference allows students to submit their written work for tutor response over email or through web-based technologies, an invaluable opportunity for

students who for many reasons cannot attend a f2f conference. However, the asynchronous nature of the online conference presents new challenges for tutors trained in f2f conferencing. Tutors accustomed to speaking directly with students when providing feedback must diagnose written work, establish conference priorities, and provide feedback—without the students’ physical presence, without the use of face-to-face dialogue and conversation, and without the flexibility to adjust mid-conference. To date, tutors must also accomplish this task without much training directly related to negotiating online spaces (Kastman Breuch and Racine 245).

And to date, tutors have not been particularly successful negotiating those spaces. Online conferencing generates challenges unfamiliar to those trained in f2f conferencing, clearly indicated by the ongoing debate surrounding it; these changes create a genuine need for studies addressing how to rethink online tutoring. The main problem, as I see it, and as Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch and Sam Racine have also identified in other writing centers, is that “training used in f2f centers does not translate easily to online writing centers” (246). Current training for online conferencing is based on f2f practice, which sets up the expectation that the two should function alike in all aspects. However, online and f2f conferences are very different in theory and practice. They do have the same student-centered, process-based pedagogical goals, and they should have these same goals (Kastman Breuch and Racine 246), but they do not and should not look the same in practice. In online conferences, one very important ingredient in the collaborative pedagogy mix is missing: the physical presence of the student. And that calls for a different set of methods and practices than are present in current f2f conference practices in order to meet the needs of technologically capable students. One solution, as I will

argue here, is to assume that online and f2f conferences are different activities involving different skills and practices, and, therefore, necessitate different tutor training techniques for online tutoring.

In this work, I propose a new way to think about online tutoring: as an entity separate from, not an extension of, f2f tutoring. I briefly look at the issues currently debated, offer genre theory as a new lens through which to think about online conferencing, present the findings of a genre theory based study of online conferences conducted at the University of Washington, Bothell Writing Center, and argue that the associated challenges can be diminished when online conferencing is treated as a genre of its own.

### **The Debate over Issues**

The debate over the effectiveness of asynchronous online writing labs (OWLs) continues on into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The overwhelming consensus among most researchers in the field is that while computers have become an integral part of writing centers, online conferencing should not be allowed to replace f2f conferencing, which will always be the superior method for tutoring writing (cf. See the works of Closser, Coogan, Crossland, Johanek and Lowe, Mohr, and Spooner). In March 2002, in an open conversation on a writing center listserv, Muriel Harris voiced her concern that the effectiveness does not outweigh the challenges, and she explains why online tutoring is not a part of Purdue's OWL services:

I can't quite figure out what online tutoring is....[W]e haven't invited students to submit papers because it's not clear that offering comments on papers is different

than the comments writers get from teachers when papers are returned. Part of the generative aspect of one-to-one tutoring is the back and forth conversation, the false starts (both by tutor and student), the half-formed ideas that get tossed back and forth when collaboration is successful, the questions left hanging that help the student form new ideas....Online tutoring may be back and forth interaction (which is harder to generate, it seems to me), but it's different in kind and needs to be defined in the various permutations it can take. (email March 22, 2002)

Interestingly, Harris is not a proponent of online tutoring, yet she does articulate the reason for her resistance: f2f and online tutoring are very different and need to be treated differently.

In the same vein, but from the opposite perspective, Eric Crump recognizes the differences, yet embraces the prospect of meeting the challenges. For Crump, online conferencing offers an opportunity to straddle two cultures and serve those comfortable with print as well as electronic technology. He argues that online tutoring is “conversing as opposed to essaying” (6), and more than an extension of f2f conferencing—it actually fulfills the needs of a new breed of students. He states that “we’re headed for...a world in which writing will tend to take place on computer networks rather than in print, and OWLs are really first steps, baby steps, toward preparing for that eventuality” (8). Representatives from both sides of the debate recognize some differences between f2f and online conferencing, though they do not acknowledge the extent of those differences. Even so, to date, very little has been done to address any differences.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James Inman does offer a four stage strategy in online tutoring that addresses the issues of collaboration, interactivity, and the avoidance of tutors editing student work; however, the strategy calls for extended written dialogue prior to submission of the student paper, then multiple submissions of the paper, which is a

While all of the literature calls for more research on the subject, it also identifies the difficulties in resolving the online response issue, because most of the opportunities offered through the new technologies can be countered with problems.<sup>2</sup> For example, while online response is great for quiet students who do not normally speak up in class, it also allows for an accepted lack of participation on the students' part—they do not have to respond to the response; while it reduces stereotyping, it does nothing to accommodate gender, race, class, and multiple learning styles; while centers become more accessible and convenient for students, the 24-hour availability can become a strain on tutors; while an OWL “locates learning about writing ‘in’ writing” (Spooner 6) and students write more, must look at their own text more, and must interpret responses to writing, others claim that more writing is not better writing and it is not really known what the students are doing with the tutor responses; while tutors have more time to read, diagnose and respond to a student paper, they could fall into the trap of spending too much time, and even “fixing” the student’s paper; while online response eliminates off-task talk, some say the off-task talk is essential to creating a rapport between tutor and student. Moreover, all of the literature agrees about the list of challenges associated with online tutoring that need to be addressed:

- Loss of personal interaction and all that entails, including reading the nuances of body language.
- Loss of immediate response from the student and any chance at immediate clarification of tutor responses.

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highly unlikely scenario. Inman admits that he has never seen this strategy in practice (email March 23, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> The following list is a summation of the issues taken from the works of Closser; Coogan; Cooper, Bui, and Riker; Crossland; Crump; Hewett; Johaneck and Lowe; Mohr; Spooner.

- The increased probability that the tutor will gain too much authority and the student will take responses as commands, changing text without reflection and integrating tutor comments without question.
- The increased probability of ethical problems—the ease of editing will overtake the writing center teaching philosophy.
- The online service can/will be viewed as a “drop-off” service, left, as dirty laundry, to be cleaned up and picked up later.
- Access to technology is problematic and probably discriminatory.
- Administration could cut funding for physical writing centers if the virtual ones prove too effective, both in practice and in cost.

While nothing alone will address all of the challenges of online conferencing, tutor training is the key. However, the training will have to move away from its traditional base in f2f theory and practice towards a new online theory and practice that will accommodate Crump’s new breed of student, because, as James Inman warns potential OWL creators, “face-to-face tutorials clearly have their own set of critical issues [and] problematic realities” (email March 23, 2002), which are different from the problematic realities of online conferencing. In addition, “responding to drafts in writing is more sensitive in some ways than one-to-one tutoring” (Leahy 2). This sensitivity is not currently addressed in the available tutoring handbooks.

The current strategies used to train online tutors are planted squarely in the realm of f2f tutoring techniques and written response, or teacher marginalia. Because f2f tutorials and online tutorials have their own sets of unique problems, however, strategies for training in f2f techniques and written response are found to be somewhat lacking

when transferred to the online forum. Despite that, peer tutoring handbooks, when they do offer a section about online tutoring, base their guidance on established f2f techniques.<sup>3</sup> None of the guides offer a step-by-step how-to manual for online tutoring or detailed strategies for responding to student writing online. Typical of the direction in the handbooks, Bedford's guide claims that online tutoring is "just like f2f tutoring" (58) and it offers four basic tips that adhere to their overall goals to "make the students we work with better writers by making changes in the way they produce writing": 1) establish rapport; 2) add encouraging and honest general comments either at the end or the beginning of the paper and offer suggestions for any deficiencies; 3) resist the temptation to edit; 4) don't spend too much time on an online submission (58). Similarly, in the Harcourt Brace handbook, David Coogan<sup>4</sup> suggests that f2f strategies should be used in online conferencing. For instance, he states that "there is no difference between reading a person and reading a text" (qtd. in Capossela 246), in essence asserting that the physical presence of the writer is inconsequential to the outcome of the conference. The

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<sup>3</sup> *The CRLA Tutor Training Handbook* (1996), *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* (1998), *The Harcourt Brace Guide to Peer Tutoring* (1998), and *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring* (2000) each devote a short chapter to online tutoring, except for the *CRLA Guide*, which devotes a short section on how to use computers in a writing center during a f2f conference, an interesting and telling omission considering that the CRLA (College Reading and Learning Association) is one of the few organizations that offers certification to individual tutors as well as to writing centers. Providing some insight, language in the guide divulges the CRLA philosophy regarding computers and writing: 1) "Never forget this important point: a computer is merely a tool that can allow you to do a job more effectively and thoroughly. However, if that tool is used for the wrong job, like trying to use a hammer to screw in a nail, don't be surprised if you end up with a mess on your hands" (129); and 2) "...remember this cardinal rule: a computer should only be used when it can allow you to do your job better. Avoid the pitfall of using a computer because it is new and unusual" (133).

<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Coogan does recognize that email tutoring changes our sense of time and the power dynamics between the student and tutor, allowing the tutor more authority because the suggestions are written down and, therefore, look like commands. Then, in a confusing move, Coogan claims that "without the 'distracting' elements of personality, computer-mediated discourse establishes a more egalitarian atmosphere. No one has to compete for the floor" (qtd. in Capossela 246). In another conflicting move, he does point out differences in online and f2f tutoring, but he does not call for different strategies for online tutoring.

handbooks do not acknowledge that an online conference might actually differ from a f2f conference, employing different strategies, requiring different training techniques.

The abundance of general comments, the lack of specific details, and the dominant discussion of the challenges rather than the opportunities of online conferencing in the handbooks, even the most recent one, reflect the general, accepted assumption that online tutoring is “just like f2f tutoring.” However, while the underlying pedagogical goals may be similar, the theories and practices are very different.

In response to the limited advice in the handbooks, a few articles have appeared offering practical guidance specifically targeting online tutoring, acknowledging that the practice of online tutoring should be conducted differently from the practice of f2f tutoring. Again, however, the strategies informing the new practice are based on f2f conferencing. Barbara Monroe offers guidelines to tutors for responding to student work submitted to asynchronous online writing centers, advocating a three-part response consisting of front notes, intertextual commentary and end notes. In addition to providing a basic framework for online tutor response, Monroe discusses the differences between f2f and online conferencing but leans towards the idea that the theory behind f2f and online tutoring is basically the same: “...our online and f2f tutorials are close kin, borne of the same principles and practices. Our writing conference, both online and off, is based on a one-to-one, rather than a one-to-many, instructional model and a collateral power relationship: peer-to-peer rather than teacher-to-student” (3). She claims that both kinds of conferences undertake the same kinds of activities, diagnosing, prioritizing, and engaging in collaboration. Implicit in Monroe’s work is the idea that online conferencing can be learned based on the same training techniques used for f2f conferencing, because

the underlying theories are the same, only the presentation is different, which can be addressed by using her three-part response method.

Yet, not all online conference theorists and researchers agree that the most effective methods for online conferencing should be based on f2f conferencing standards. Because the student and the concept of dialogue and conversation, both prevalent in f2f conferences, are perceived as absent in online conferences, the relationship between the tutor and student can change to a relationship between the tutor and the student's text. This new relationship between the tutor and the student's text can create a conflict between writing center conferencing pedagogical goals and writing center conferencing theory and practice. As Lee Ryan states, "Looking at isolated papers to discuss how they might be improved can encourage tutors to correct papers in tutoring sessions rather than consider the needs and concerns of individual students" (iv). In other words, during online conferences, tutors can tend towards "fixing" the text rather than "teaching" the student, in opposition with f2f conference philosophy where the focus is on teaching the student, not fixing the text.

In an attempt to counter this tendency, the two researchers Kastman Breuch and Racine endorse and extend Monroe's three-part response method. However, they claim that the differences in online and f2f tutoring are great enough to call for new training methods. While they agree with Monroe that the underlying goals behind f2f and online tutoring should remain the same—student-centered, process-based pedagogy—they argue that "online tutors need training specific to online writing spaces" (246). They call for more tutor development in three areas: 1) appreciating text-only environments; 2) developing procedures for responding online; and 3) creating appropriate roles for online

tutors (245). Kastman Breuch and Racine claim that “tutors trained for face-to-face writing centers are not adequately prepared for the challenges they encounter working with online writing centers....Online tutors need training specific to online writing spaces” (245-6). This suggests that online tutors need to be trained how to negotiate the new roles of tutor and student in online writing spaces. Training should include strategies for ensuring that the tutors address the student as the agent capable of making decisions regarding changes in the text. To address this issue, Beth Hewett argues that “we need to take on a theory-generating stance designed specifically to answer practice-based questions about [online tutoring]” (par. 6).

Thinking about f2f and online practices as different entities with their own sets of problems may help to address David Coogan’s challenge for the 21<sup>st</sup> century: “How can we shape our email [and online] instruction to elicit responses and create a scene of learning?” (246). We can start addressing the issue by recognizing the irreconcilable differences between f2f and online practices and by developing new training strategies for online tutors. An echoing theme in all of the literature is not that online tutoring should be discontinued because of its current challenges, but that we need more research and more studies to encourage the development of new strategies, practices, and theories for online writing center work.<sup>5</sup> If we take Inman’s advice to “imagine...[the] innovation as always in flux, always in revision to make [online tutoring] more and more effective” (email March 23, 2002), then we can be more confident in the small steps Crump deems necessary to accommodate a new breed of students in this current literacy shift. In response to this call, I turn to genre theory as a productive theory-generating tool.

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<sup>5</sup> See Closser; Coogan; Cooper, Bui, and Riker; Crossland; Hewett; Inman; Johaneck and Lowe; Mohr; Spooner.

## **Genre Theory and Online Conferencing**

Genre is a way of knowing, an epistemology of sorts, that helps people understand and make meaning out of social life and its inhabitants and its occurrences and its reoccurrences. Through genre, people can learn the conventions of established social life, and through genre, people can change conventions to re-establish social life. Charles Bazerman states, “a genre exists only in the recognitions and attributions of the users” (81). Therefore, genres are not objective and pre-existing; they are sites of social action, “complex pattern[s] of repeated social activity and rhetorical performance arising in response to a recurrent situation” (Pare and Smart 146). These complex patterns construct and are constructed by society and social behavior. Thus, genres are sites of social actions subject to change, depending on the needs and the actions of the users.

At the same time, genres are more than sites of social actions—they are sites of social interactions in that genres are intertextual; there is always more than one genre at work in a given rhetorical situation. According to Catherine Schryer, “all genres have a complex set of relations with past texts and with other present texts: genres come from somewhere and are transforming into something else” (108). These genre systems are dynamic, pliable, and on an evolutionary journey to whatever place the genres and the users need to be at a given time.

Genres can be changed or even created intentionally based on users’ needs, shared purpose, shared assumptions, and similar effects. According to Todorov, “a new genre is always the transformation of one or several old genres: by inversion, by displacement, by combination” (as cited in Swales 36). Genres and users have motive—a conventionalized social purpose—that stimulates a genre’s use. When that motive is challenged, when

“recurrent problems or exigencies arise, [the situation] calls for a different type of discourse and knowledge” (Pare and Smart 146). The clearly dysfunctional genres are then recognized by users and changed with generic conventions more conducive to the existing situation.

Gunther Kress and Terry Threadgold allow that the change can be forced on the genre from within by a subject familiar with the genre who can identify the dysfunction, recommend changes, and in the process “accommodate the conflicting demands of this situation” (240). Berkenkotter found that professions carry on their work in genre systems and that changes at the micro levels of the genre system can bring about macro level changes in that system (328). Schryer argues that the forms in the genre help to create the roles of the players within the genre; therefore, a change in the generic form could cause a change in the perceptions of the identities/roles of the participants in the genre (121-2). Thus, a forced change in a genre can bring about changes for the genre system as a whole. A genre need not remain dysfunctional, if the dysfunction is recognized and accommodated by a subject familiar with the genre and the genre system within which it functions.

Genre theory can be used to rethink online conference tutor training because online conferencing is a social interaction, a genre system, deemed dysfunctional by a large body of its users. Training based on f2f conferencing is ineffective for online conferencing because the two types of conferencing are different genre systems altogether, and the conventions and guidelines imposed on one do not create the same end result as the other. Recognizing this difference, therefore, calls for a user to resist,

make changes, and overcome the dysfunction by developing a new set of conventions for this separate, and viable, genre: online conferencing.

An online conference is “a written artifact with its own look-and-feel, [which] can be productively described and analyzed as a genre unto itself” (Monroe 3). An online conference is also a unique speech genre, fitting Bakhtin’s definition: “each speech genre in each area of speech communication has its own typical conception of the addressee, and this defines it as a genre” (95). If the addressee is considered as criteria for defining a genre, then it follows that f2f and online conferences are two different genres with two different addressees—one present and capable of immediate reaction, and one virtual, capable of delayed reaction—and tutors should be trained with that knowledge in mind. It is conceivable that using the guidelines for one genre to shape a second genre could represent the second genre as dysfunctional, when, in fact, that may not be the case at all.

Freedman and Medway state that “genres can be defined not only by their distinctive actions, but also according to the specialized and distinctive composing processes and reading processes entailed” (16). Both f2f and online conferences involve reading the student’s paper and composing a response, but the processes for reading and composing contain stark differences. In a f2f conference, the tutor reads and marks on the student paper with the student physically present, which creates a dynamic that calls for the tutor to explain his or her reactions and enigmatic marks made on the student’s paper while the reading process is taking place.<sup>6</sup> The conversation starts during the reading process, as does the collaboration. The student can offer clarifications for the tutor as the

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<sup>6</sup> Any tutor with a nervous student in the next seat understands the importance of putting the student at ease by illuminating the tutor’s reactions, identifying and explaining both strengths and weaknesses in the paper as they read, rather than waiting until the end and possibly allowing the student’s anxiety to build to a point where the student becomes defensive, not receptive to feedback.

tutor reads that in turn can help the tutor compose a response. The composing process of the tutor response goes hand in hand with the reading process. The tutor composes an oral response as the reading takes place. More often than not, the entire response composed by the tutor is delivered orally, and the response is complete by the time the reading is completed. If the response is written down, it is usually the student who writes down his or her interpretation of the tutor's words, which the tutor can then elaborate on and clarify. The entire process of reading the paper and composing a response is conversational and collaborative.

In an online conference, on the other hand, both the reading and composing processes are typically solitary and silent. They are also distinctly separate acts conducted by the tutor alone.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the tutor reads and marks on the student paper in silence, without the benefit of student input or collaborative clarifications. When the reading process is complete, the composing process begins. The tutor, again without the benefit of student questions or clarifications, must craft a response in writing that captures the tutor's priorities, while addressing the student's concerns as well—quite a balancing act, to say the least, particularly when using only the student's initial input provided in a separate submission text. The entire process of reading the paper and composing a response in the online format is solitary, silent and separate, which perpetuates the perception that the student and the conversation do not exist.

This perception leads to another key issue: the misinterpretation that the dialogue, the conversation, with the student must be nonexistent because the student is not physically present. Many writers envision an audience with which they converse as they

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<sup>7</sup> Without a nervous student in the next seat, the tutor has no immediate reason to stop reading midstream and explain a reaction or compose an oral response.

write. It is standard practice in composition instruction to consider the audience during the process of writing. According to Widdowson, “as I write, I make judgments about the reader’s possible actions, anticipate any difficulties that I think he (sic) might have in understanding and following my direction, and conduct, in short, covert dialogue with my supposed interlocutor” (as cited in Swales 62). This covert dialogue should be a familiar dialogue to writing tutors who constantly remind students as writers to consider their audience.

Bakhtin distinguishes between the physical presence of an audience and a virtual presence of an audience, validating both as legitimate ways to carry on a conversation: “an essential (constitutive) marker of the utterance is its quality of being directed to someone, its addressivity....This addressee can be an immediate participant-interlocutor in an every day dialogue, or a differentiated collective of specialists in some particular area of cultural communication” (95). A dialogue can take place; the tutors do not have to be in a f2f conference to carry on a conversation with the student about the student’s work. Tutors easily visualize themselves as immediate participants in f2f conferences; training is necessary to help tutors visualize themselves as a differentiated collective of specialists in the education area of cultural communication who can carry on a conversation in cyberspace.

Assuming that the current dysfunction in online conferencing—the conflict between writing center philosophy of student-centered collaboration and the online response practice of top-down, command-like instruction—is a result of imposing the conventions of a f2f conference genre onto an online response genre, it follows that forcing some changes more conducive to the online response system could effect positive

changes. For instance, implementing changes within one particular genre in the genre system could change the way the tutors perceive the role of the student as well as their own role, resulting in a more collaborative, student-centered approach to online responses.

### **The UWB Online Conference Genre System**

The online conference system at the University of Washington, Bothell (UWB) is a genre system in need of change. In an attempt to determine the extent of the conflict between pedagogical theory and practice—the dysfunction of the genre system—in our own writing center at UWB, I conducted a study of online tutor responses during fall quarter 2001.<sup>8</sup> Our tutors were trained to use Monroe’s three-part model in conjunction with their own skills in f2f conferencing; that is, all of our training was grounded in f2f tradition.

During the fall of 2001, the online conference system at the UWB Writing Center consisted of several texts, genres in their own right, interacting together to create a genre system. The first text that a student encountered was the online registration page. New users followed the directions, posed as “frequently asked questions,” to create a user name and password in order to gain access to the system. Once the student gained access, the second text appeared as a list of papers already submitted by students along with a row of buttons that represented choices for the student, including the “submit a paper” button. When the student clicked on “submit a paper,” the third text appeared as a series of questions and blank fields for the student to fill in regarding information about the student and the paper being submitted. The fields asked for personal information about

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<sup>8</sup> Fall quarter 2001 began October 1<sup>st</sup> and ended December 21<sup>st</sup>.

the student, e.g., class standing and native language, as well as information about the course, the paper assignment, the paper title, the due date of the final draft, and the student's concerns about the paper itself. The final field asked the student to copy and paste the paper into the screen. Once the student submitted the answers to each field and the paper, the information was magically transformed by the technology, recontextualized, and posted to the "papers" list, awaiting tutor response.

When the tutor clicked on the paper title in the "papers" list, the recontextualized student information and paper appeared on the screen. The student information appeared first, the paper second. The technology and the small, single-spaced print, difficult to read on-screen, prompted the tutor to print a paper copy of the online submission. The tutor then took the paper to a tutoring table and proceeded to read the work, without the usual student audience in the next seat.<sup>9</sup> All oral activity was absent. The tutor conducted a solitary and silent act when creating a new text consisting of the student's paper and the tutor's pen marks, which is completely contrary to the collaborative and oral activity that takes place during a f2f conference. When this phase of the response was complete, the tutor took the response and recreated it online. The tutor had to reaccess the student paper online, then click on the "respond to this request" button. A new screen, another text, appeared that exhibited the student's paper, where the tutor could enter intertextual comments, and a field below the student's paper, where the tutor could enter general

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<sup>9</sup> This set-up encourages the tutor to take pen to paper in an effort to construct a response to the student, which also encourages a tutor to make more marks than usual on the paper itself. These extra marks, usually lower order grammar and mechanics errors, have a tendency to show up in the tutor's online response.

comments.<sup>10</sup> When the tutor completed the response input, the tutor clicked on the “submit” button, and the text was again recontextualized, placing the general comments above the student paper, and was posted to the “papers” list, this time awaiting the student.<sup>11</sup>

When I analyzed the tutor responses resulting from this procedure, I found some characteristics of good collaborative work: tutors did identify patterns for both strengths and weaknesses; they asked pertinent questions; and they offered strategies, choices, and good, in depth explanations for both global and local<sup>12</sup> concerns in student papers. Sometimes. Overwhelmingly, however, I found that tutors commented on more weaknesses than strengths in student papers; they addressed more local, sentence level issues involving grammar and mechanics rather than the global, content, organization, or structure issues; they offered comments most often in command-like statements rather than question form; and they provided little or no explanations for their suggestions most of the time (Olsen 16). I found the one-sided, top-down, directive approach to online conference practice illustrated in the study inconsistent with f2f conference pedagogy, the foundation of which rests on reader-based feedback, questions, suggestions, strategies, and alternatives offered for student consideration.

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<sup>10</sup> The student’s initial information is absent from this new text. Also absent are any fields that might request information about the tutor for the student. If the tutor does not choose to include a greeting, an introduction, or a name in the general comments, then nothing in the text personalizes the tutor’s response for the student.

<sup>11</sup> No notification that the response awaits is sent to the student. It is the student’s responsibility to check and recheck the list for a response. The only information that students are given comes from the “frequently asked questions,” directions that guarantee a response will appear sometime within 24 hours (which has since been changed to 48 hours). Given this scenario, it is not hard to imagine how the tutors fail to recognize a student, or a conversation, as part of this online response process.

<sup>12</sup> For purposes of this study, “global” is broadly defined as issues regarding content, argument, and structure, whereas “local” is broadly defined as issues regarding form, style, grammar, and mechanics.

One key issue in this scenario is the assumption that the f2f conference genre and the online conference genre are the same genre. They are not. As established previously, the addressees are different, and although the ultimate purpose of both genres are the same—to provide feedback and strategies to encourage and empower the students to revise their own work—the processes through which participants arrive at that purpose is very different. Therefore, in an effort to bring the student and the conversation back into the conference picture, I conducted an experimental study in which I revised the online training at UWB by changing one genre, the tutor’s response, in the online conference genre system. I changed the actions of the tutors from solitary actions to collaborative actions—the ways in which they think about responding and the ways they actually respond—in an attempt to help the tutors visualize a dialogue with an audience capable of making decisions based on the tutors’ feedback. I intended for the change in the actions within the genre also to change how the tutors view the role of the student, which then, in turn, would ultimately cause the tutors’ responses to be less directive, addressing the text, and more teaching-centered, addressing the student, more in line with the pedagogical practices in f2f conferences, still in concert with writing center philosophy.

## **Methodology**

For the purposes of this study, I implemented changes in two phases, using the original fall 2001 study as a baseline. Each phase built on previous practice. The first phase, “Collaborative Online Response: The Three-Pronged Method” (see Appendix A), took place between January 16, 2002 and February 26, 2002. Building on Monroe’s three-part method, it called for two consultants to collaborate on each online response

using a think-aloud protocol.<sup>13</sup> The primary consultant read the essay and made any comments out loud while the collaborating consultant took notes. At the end of the reading, both consultants would collaboratively craft a response that included front notes, intertextual commentary, and end notes. The primary consultant was responsible for typing and submitting the response to the student. The second phase, “Collaborative Online Response Revised: The Response Summary, SNO Analysis Method, and Table of Responses” (see Appendix B), took place between February 27, 2002 and March 22, 2002. Building on phase one, it kept the two tutor collaboration and three-pronged response style, but dropped the think-aloud protocol and introduced a new method of analysis and response based on and adapted from familiar genres: the executive summary and the SWOT analysis, both used in business writing. The executive summary highlights the main points of a longer report and includes recommendations for improving some aspect of a business, directed at a management level audience capable of making decisions regarding change. The SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis provides a framework for the analyst to present recommendations. Adaptations included recognizing the student’s essay as the “business,” the student as the decision-maker, and the SNO (strengths, needs, opportunities) framework as a way to look at strengths and needs in order to recommend opportunities. At the conclusion of the study, I surveyed the tutors for their reactions to the different phases (see Appendix C).

Next, I systematically selected a random sample of 16 tutor responses out of 87 conferences carried out between January 16 and March 22, 2002.<sup>14</sup> A total of 8 tutors

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<sup>13</sup> The think-aloud protocol was adapted and developed from work by van Someren, Barnard, and Sandberg.

<sup>14</sup> A systematic random sample does sound like an oxymoron, which requires an explanation. First, I divided all 87 samples by tutor, which resulted in five piles of experienced tutor responses and five piles of

conducted the 16 sample conferences.<sup>15</sup> Of the 8 tutors, 4 have over one year experience tutoring online, whereas 4 new tutors have less than six months experience each. For this sample analysis, I decided to use both a quantitative approach, counting the frequency of occurrence of types of feedback (categories explained below), and a qualitative approach, measuring the clarity of the comments based on the quality of the explanations supporting the comments. I then separated the samples into two main categories, 8 samples each: the first phase and the second phase. Each category was broken down into experienced and new tutors, 4 samples each. I broke down each subcategory further into the three response modes based on Monroe's model: the front notes, the intertextual comments, and the end notes. Each mode was analyzed in terms of subcategories based on the type of response, for example, global or local, strength or weakness, and the level of explanation included with the comment, none, some, or good. The intertextual comment mode includes an additional subcategory that measures the ease of locating the tutor's comments. Finally, I looked for continuity between the front notes and the intertextual comments.

## **Data/Findings**

Quantitative analysis of types of comments does not tell the complete story of the

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new tutor responses for each phase (total 20 piles). Then I selected the most recent sample from each pile, which left me with 10 samples from each phase. To narrow down to 8 samples from each phase (16 samples for the entire study), I turned each sample over and randomly selected 4 from the first phase experienced tutors and 4 from the first phase new tutors. I matched those with the 8 samples from the same tutors in the second phase and threw out the rest.

<sup>15</sup> Although each phase called for two tutors to collaborate on each online response, the primary tutor held the responsibility for typing the response to the student. The 8 tutors selected for this study acted as the primary tutor in their respective conferences.

value of tutor online responses to student texts; qualitative analysis and examples of comments are necessary to fill in the gaps. Each section, Phase One and Phase Two, contains both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the results.

*Phase One: Collaborative Online Response, The Three-Pronged Method*

Table 1

Phase One Quantitative Results

	New Tutors			Experienced Tutors		
	Front	Intertextual	End	Front	Intertextual	End
<b>Occurrence<sup>16</sup></b>	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	3/4	3/4
<b>Global comment</b>	12/17 <sup>17</sup>	22/38	3/5	10/17	7/22	1/1
<b>Local comment</b>	5/17	16/38	2/5	7/17	15/22	0/1
<b>Statement or Imperative</b>	16/17	25/38	5/5	16/17	18/22	1/1
<b>Question</b>	1/17	13/38	0/5	1/17	4/22	0/1
<b>Identifies strength</b>	6/17	4/38	3/5	5/17	0/22	1/1
<b>Identifies weakness</b>	11/17	34/38	2/5	12/17	22/22	0/1
<b>No explanation</b>	7/17	14/38	4/5	2/17	13/22	1/1
<b>Some explanation</b>	7/17	14/38	1/5	6/17	7/22	0/1
<b>Good explanation</b>	3/17	10/38	0/5	9/17	2/22	0/1
<b>IC easily identifiable</b>	N/A	4/4	N/A	N/A	2/4	N/A
<b>IC not easily identifiable</b>	N/A	0	N/A	N/A	1/4	N/A
<b>Yes/comment continuity</b>	N/A	4/4	N/A	N/A	3/4	N/A
<b>No/comment continuity</b>	N/A	0	N/A	N/A	0/4	N/A

<sup>16</sup> Occurrence indicates the number of samples in which the tutors used front notes, intertextual commentary and end notes.

<sup>17</sup> The second number represents the total number of comments made by the tutors in the sample set; the first number represents how many times the comment fell into each category. For example, out of 17 total comments made by the tutors in the phase one, new tutor sample set, 12 of the comments focused on global issues, whereas 5 focused on local issues; 16 out of 17 comments were made as statements or imperatives and 1 out of 17 was in question form, and so on.

## Front Notes

Front notes appear in a separate paragraph before the student text. All of the tutors opted to use them. The front notes of each sample contained some kind of tutor introduction, whereby the tutor identified him or herself and the collaborating tutor, and each tutor who provided intertextual comments also explained the presentation of the upcoming intertextual comments, whether set off by asterisks, line breaks, capital letters, or some combination of the three. In addition, the front notes were consistently used to provide a global overview of the strengths and weaknesses of the paper, more often beginning and ending with strengths, sandwiching weaknesses in between or pairing global strengths with local weaknesses. All of the tutors used more statements and imperatives than questions; tutors posed questions in the front notes only 6% of the time (2 out of 34 times). They raised issues about global comments 65% of the time (22 out of 34 times), leaving the majority of the local comments for the intertextual commentary. They identified more weaknesses than strengths, mentioning the strengths of the work only 32% of the time (11 out of 34 times). The differences occurred in the amount and quality of the explanations. New tutors provided fewer explanations than did experienced tutors, most of them attempting “some” kind of explanation. On the other hand, experienced tutors offered more explanations, rarely leaving a comment unexplained, the majority of the explanations “good.” Overall, however, the tutors offered explanations for their comments 74% of the time (25 out of 34 times).

New tutor front notes most often appeared offering both strengths and weaknesses expressed in statements with little or no explanation:<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Tutor comments remain anonymous and will be indicated by bullets and italics. I have edited them for typos and misspellings to enhance the clarity and ease the reading for this project.

- *We agree that you generally address the assignment questions. There are, however, a few things we will be addressing. Some of your sentences/ideas need clarification and I will indicate them by writing in all caps in the text of your paper.*

Here the tutor begins by mentioning a strength in that the student addressed the assignment appropriately, but the tutor does not explain how the student addressed the assignment. Then the tutor moves directly to a weakness in sentences and ideas, but does not explain what kinds of clarifications are needed.

Experienced tutor front notes most often appeared in sandwich style statements with explanations, wedging weaknesses in between strengths:

- *We believe you've done a good job presenting a difficult subject—making sense of the utility of the IAS degree. We feel, however, that the article might be better integrated as a message if you would functionally cluster your topics in a different manner. For example, the first 2 paragraphs combine both definitional information along with quotes about the complexity of the program. We thought that these areas should be treated in separate paragraphs to ensure they remain distinct from each other.... You express yourself persuasively and leave the reader wanting more at the end.*

Here the tutor begins and ends with strengths, paraphrasing details from the student's work to help explain why the student presents the subject well. The weakness is sandwiched in between the encouraging remarks, with both the issue and the suggestion effectively explained.

#### Intertextual Commentary

Intertextual comments appear in the body of the student text and tend to be shorter and more specific than front notes. The new tutors always used intertextual comments, and the experienced tutors used intertextual comments 3 out of 4 times. Generally, the comments for both new and experienced tutors appeared as statements or imperatives; questions were used 28% of the time (17 out of 60 times). Tutors almost always

addressed weaknesses, offering comments on strengths only 7% of the time (4 out of 60 times). However, of the 56 comments or questions about weaknesses, 33 had some kind of accompanying explanation, which means that tutors offered explanations 59% of the time. The difference in this area emerged in the area of global and local comments. New tutors tended to comment on more global issues, 58% of the time (22 out of 38 times), whereas experienced tutors tended to comment on more local issues, 68% of the time (15 out of 22 times). New tutors phrased more comments as questions than did the experienced tutors. In addition, all of the new tutors' comments were easily identifiable, either set off with asterisks, capitals, and/or line breaks, and linked back to the front notes. The comments of one experienced tutor were spliced into the student text, thereby making them difficult to read, but all of the comments did link back to the front notes.

New tutors offered intertextual commentary in both global and local areas, usually as statements of weakness, but with varying degrees of explanation (none, some or good):

- *Insert comma*
- *This transition, while not a problem, seems a bit forced—like your mind is wandering because you don't know what to say next.*
- *You start out in present tense, and with “struck,” you move to past tense. Did these events already happen, or are they continually happening? If some have happened and some are still happening, consider a separate sentence for each group of events.*
- *This sentence is confusing. What device is it that is good? Try re-building this sentence. First, pick a subject, someone or something to act on something else. Then, decide what that person or thing is doing, and then decide who or what the person is acting on.*

The group of comments above displays the range of explanations from “none” with “insert comma” to a “good” explanation in the final example that identifies a weakness, then supplies steps for the student to follow for revision.

New tutors also commented on the strengths, showing students what they do well, and all of the comments offered some kind of explanation for their identification as a strength:

- *The paragraph after this note is a good example of what would work for all the questions. You answered the question briefly, and provided examples after the brief answer.*
- *This is highly entertaining stuff. When I started reading it I thought, “Alright, this story’s really cooking now!”*
- *These two opening paragraphs offer nice historical and cultural context for your subject.*

Experienced tutors offered more commentary in local rather than global areas, always as statements of weakness, usually with no explanations:

- *Put a comma here*
- *Here is a “that” that can be removed*

However, they did offer some global questions and statements with good explanations:

- *Did she have a sense of belonging or did she feel a need to belong? There is a difference here. A sense of belonging makes me think of satisfaction, of comfortability, whereas a need to belong suggests that someone lacks the elements of belonging.*
- *The next few sentences of your intro seem to be mostly summary. Consider eliminating this sort of discussion here since you go in depth later in your paper.*
- *It seems like this is a different paragraph and you are now relating your discussion of her quality of life to your argument regarding the conflict between malificence and autonomy. This might be a good place to introduce those concepts.*

## End Notes

End notes appear after the student text. All of the new tutor samples contained end notes, and 3 out of 4 experienced tutors used end notes. End notes signaled the end of the tutor’s comments, generally invited student questions and evaluations, and offered final encouraging words. New tutors also tended to use end notes to summarize previous comments, using statements to reiterate the strengths and weaknesses of the student text.

- *Again, [we] feel you generally addressed the assignment questions. With the suggested changes, we feel your paper might be easier to “read” and follow a more logical, clear order.*
- *Once again, thank you for submitting your paper. [We] suggest that to take care of some verb tense problems you read your papers out loud, or have a person read your papers out loud to you. [We] both hope you come in for a face-to-face conference the next time you have a paper due. Remember the question we cited as successful (the last part of #2) when you revise your work. Thanks again!*

Experienced tutors most often used end notes to offer encouragement and signal the end of the conference:

- *I think that does it for now.*
- *As I said, I really enjoyed reading your paper. If you have any other questions or need more help, please feel free to either online us again or come into the Writing Center to see me or any other member of our staff.*
- *I hope these suggestions are helpful. You have a nice structure to your paper and a good argument to bring out. Thanks for using us here at the Writing Center.*

*Phase Two: Collaborative Online Response Revised, The Response Summary, SNO Analysis Method, and Table of Responses*

Table 2

Phase Two Quantitative Results

	New Tutors			Experienced Tutors		
	Front	Intertextual	End	Front	Intertextual	End
<b>Occurrence<sup>19</sup></b>	4/4	4/4	4/4	4/4	3/4	2/4
<b>Global comment</b>	11/17	17/44	1/1	20/24	8/18	0
<b>Local comment</b>	6/17	27/44	0/1	4/24	10/18	0
<b>Statement</b>	16/17	38/44	1/1	23/24	16/18	0
<b>Question</b>	1/17	6/44	0/1	1/24	2/18	0
<b>Identifies strength</b>	6/17	2/44	1/1	9/24	0/18	0
<b>Identifies weakness</b>	11/17	42/44	0/1	15/24	18/18	0
<b>No explanation</b>	4/17	13/44	0/1	2/24	7/18	0

<sup>19</sup> Occurrence indicates the number of samples in which the tutors used front notes, intertextual commentary and end notes.

<b>Some explanation</b>	8/17	12/44	0/1	6/24	6/18	0
<b>Good explanation</b>	5/17	19/44	1/1	16/24	5/18	0
<b>IC easily identifiable</b>	N/A	4/4	N/A	N/A	2/3	N/A
<b>IC not easily identifiable</b>	N/A	0/4	N/A	N/A	1/3	N/A
<b>Yes/comment continuity</b>	N/A	4/4	N/A	N/A	3/3	N/A
<b>No/comment continuity</b>	N/A	0/4	N/A	N/A	0/3	N/A

### Front Notes

All of the tutors opted to use front notes, which again contained some kind of tutor introduction, whereby the tutor identified him or herself and the collaborating tutor, and each tutor who provided intertextual comments also provided a guide for the student to identify the comments in the text. Again, the front notes were consistently used to provide a global overview of the strengths and weaknesses of the paper. However, the comments tended to begin with a strength, then move to a corresponding weakness, then offer a suggestion to strengthen the work in that particular area. All of the tutors used statements or imperatives 95% of the time (39 out of 41) times, rather than questions, which were used only twice. They commented on global issues 76% of the time (31 out of 41 times), rather than local issues, and identified weaknesses rather than strengths about 60% of the time (26 out of 41). The real differences occurred in the amount and quality of the explanations. New tutors offered fewer explanations than did experienced tutors, most of them in the “some” category. On the other hand, experienced tutors offered more explanations, rarely leaving a comment unexplained, and the majority of the explanations appeared in the “good” category. Overall, the tutors explained the comments and suggestions 85% of the time (35 out of 41 times).

New tutors provided a global overview of the strengths and weaknesses of the paper, beginning with a strength, then moving to a corresponding weakness, then offering a suggestion to strengthen the work. New tutors offered explanations 76% of the time (13 out of 17 times), most of them in the “some” category, but others in the “good” category:

- *There are a few small grammatical concerns that [we] found examples of. Particularly, the possessive case of some nouns came to our attention, and number agreement of compound subjects with verbs. Please note that we didn't correct every instance of a grammatical error; if it occurred more than once, we likely found the first one or two instances and corrected only those.*
- *It appears that you understand many viewpoints on organizational culture well. Additionally, the information appears to be logically organized. One thing that might assist the reader in seeing your information and its structure is the use of transition statements. Transition statements show the relationship of one piece (usually a paragraph or sentence) to another piece of a paper. Words like “conversely,” “however,” and “on the other hand” denote two items that are different from/disagree with one another. “In addition” and “also” are words that show that two items are related to each other. Other transitions include “first,” which shows where something is oriented in order to something else....*
- *While you do a good job of summarizing key passages from the article, it seemed to me like you could be offering more critique than summary in some places. The reason I say this is that you present very few quotes in your paper. The quotes you do present summarize concepts for the reader, but often don't lead you into a critique of the article itself. It might be helpful to think of quotes as opportunities to delve further into your critique. Look for more discussion of this in the intertextual comments.*

In the first example, the tutor identified the weaknesses, but did not explain how the student could identify and correct the same weakness on his or her own. In the second and third statements, the tutors do identify the weaknesses and explain their suggestions for revision work, which should aid the student's own revision.

Experienced tutors used the same format, and offered explanations 92% of the time (22 out of 24 times), rarely leaving a comment unexplained, and the majority of the explanations appeared in the “good” category:

- *You have a good thesis that is nicely re-stated in your conclusion, which is that the mission of the two systems should be redefined. What would help strengthen*

*your paper would be to use the thesis to connect the content of your paper, which is the history of the problem to your solution, the redefinition of civil service. Try to bring this solution out in your paper some more, show how this definition has evolved over time and why it is a problem with each piece of evidence you introduce. This will tie your paper together by being the structure or skeleton of your paper.*

- *This seems to work as a nice thesis, since it conveys an overlying idea that directly relates to the specifics of your paper. The problem is it comes a little too late. By the time your reader gets to this point in your paper, they have been presented with so much of your personal insight that this may come as a surprise. And the last thing you want to do is confuse your reader. So here's what we suggest. Shift some stuff around. Play the ol' cut and paste game. If you move some of the introductory stuff about CM to the front section of your paper, your reader will have a clearer set up for your discussion....*

Here the tutors have identified the issues, integrated the student's ideas into their comments, and explained the suggestions for revision. The tone of the comments are also becoming more conversational.

#### Intertextual Commentary

The new tutors always used intertextual comments, and the experienced tutors used intertextual comments 3 out of 4 times. The comments for both new and experienced tutors appeared as statements or imperatives rather than questions 87% of the time (54 out of 62 times). Tutors addressed weaknesses rather than strengths 97% of the time (60 out of 62 times), and addressed local rather than global comments 60% of the time (37 out of 62 times). In addition, all of the new tutors' comments were easily identifiable, either set off with asterisks, capitals, and/or line breaks, and linked back to the front notes. One of the experienced tutors' comments were spliced into the student text, making them difficult to read, but the comments did link back to the front notes where they were explained. Worthy of note is the area of explanations. Tutors offered explanations 68% of the time (42 out of 62 times), and the explanations were overwhelmingly in the "good" category:

- *Although it expresses a complete thought, this last sentence cannot stand on its own. The word “and” implies that the idea is related to another idea as in “I like green eggs and I like blue eggs too.” You may choose to combine the sentence to another that relates to it, delete it, or remove the word “and.”*
- *All four authors to the left are the one subject of this sentence, making it a plural subject. The verb should be “identify.” Watch for this, as it occurs a few more times in the paper—compound subjects are sometimes hard to detect without reading out loud.*
- *I’m assuming that by “it” you are referring to the article you read, but I’m not sure. To be more clear, introduce the article by name before you use a pronoun like “it” to refer to the article.*
- *You’re right, you do need a transition here. If you continue to allow these paragraphs to come in this order, you might want to think of something that moves the reader from this powerful impact to the unfortunate side of things. IF you choose to incorporate a quote—and we think you should—you might find some language that helps you with this transition.*

In addition, as shown in the examples above, the comments continue to take on a conversational tone, as if the tutors were “speaking” directly to the students. The final example clearly indicates that the tutor visualizes the student as the decision-maker.

#### End Notes

All of the new tutor samples contained end notes, and 2 out of 4 experienced tutors used end notes. End notes signaled the end of the tutor’s comments, generally invited student questions and evaluations, and offered final encouraging words. In phase two, new tutors stopped using end notes to summarize previous comments or to reiterate the strengths and weaknesses of the student text, only once reiterating a global strength with a good explanation:

- *Thanks a lot for sending us your paper.... Feel free to make an appointment for a face-to-face conference with one of our writing consultants.... In any case, good luck with finishing up the paper.*
- *This is the end of my in-text comments. I hope this feedback has been helpful.*
- *Thanks one more time for submitting your paper! We look forward to seeing you in person with the next writing assignment you need help with, or we’ll look for them online. Take care!*
- *I want to again comment that your writing content is thorough and interesting. You write a well-organized essay and it is easy to read. Once the suggested*

*issues are addressed, I think the paper will be more concise and succinct. I would like to suggest a face-to-face conference at the writing center. You are a good writer, and I think that with a few tools taught to you by a writing consultant, you can become an even better writer and bring your essays up to an even higher level.*

Experienced tutors continued to use end notes to signal the end of the conference:

- *Thanks for using our online system. Please let us know how this response worked for you by completing our evaluation form. You can link to it by clicking “evaluate this response” at the bottom of the page.*
- *We thank you for using the Writing Center and encourage you to continue to do so in the future. If you have any questions feel free to come in and see me...and we shall gladly help you.*

### *Survey of Tutor Reactions to Phase Changes*

After taking part in the three phases of this study—pre-change, phase one, and phase two—the tutors completed a survey (see Appendix C) that asked them to describe their reactions to the phase changes, paying particular attention to their perceptions, in each phase, of the differences between f2f and online tutoring, their roles as tutors interacting or not interacting with students, and the types of issues they focused on when commenting (i.e. global or local, strengths or weaknesses).

In the pre-change phase, using training based on traditional f2f practices and Monroe’s three-part response, the tutors, in general, responded that online tutoring felt “cold and one-sided,” because the action was solitary, not collaborative. Tutors believed that the principal difference between f2f and online tutoring was the lack of the physical presence of the student, which limited the ability to dialogue with the student, which in turn increased the time needed to craft a response and decreased their ability to explain a response. As one tutor so aptly stated, “because there is no real-time interaction in online conferencing, the tutor is forced to keep a dialogue going without the benefit of back-

and-forth informal conversation, the process where the best teaching occurs. Since the burden of the feedback is therefore entirely on the tutor, problems can arise in prioritizing what issues need to be addressed in the response and how to phrase the response precisely enough so as to not confuse the student.” In essence, they found it difficult to offer feedback to students when not receiving feedback from students. As a result, online tutoring felt more like fixing papers rather than tutoring students, and 5 out of the 8 tutors found themselves “distracted by local issues,” with the majority of their responses pointed towards grammar and mechanics and few explanations for their suggestions.

In phase one, using the three-part response and the think-aloud protocol collaboration, tutors reacted with mixed reviews. The protocol added a logical, “linear to a fault” approach to the presentation of comments that helped to bring the student back into the conference. As one tutor commented, “talking through the response with another tutor in some ways stands in for the face-to-face conversation with the student.” However, this multi-voiced approach to response was also seen as disruptive. It was more time consuming because of attempts to reach a consensus between tutors—the record for one conference was four hours. Yet the increase in time spent also contributed to the perception of the student’s virtual presence. One tutor commented that “when I can spend an hour or so writing an online response, I feel like I engage with the paper enough that the student’s presence is actually something that I have responded to.” In addition to taking more time, the think-aloud protocol precluded the tutors from perceiving themselves as equal partners in the collaboration. The collaborating tutor oftentimes felt more like a “secretary” rather than a contributing partner. However, with the collaboration, the distraction with local issues ameliorated. Global comments began to

take precedence because tutors realized, through their own discussions, the time spent explaining grammar was better spent discussing contradictions in argument. Local issues still received attention, but it was easier to locate global issues when discussing the text with another tutor. Although this approach began moving in the right direction, the new associated challenges called for another phase change.

In phase two, after dropping the think-aloud protocol, but maintaining the two tutor collaboration and combining it with the response summary and the SNO analysis,<sup>20</sup> tutors reacted positively, commenting that this approach allowed for a more thorough, multi-dimensional response and that the time spent responding shortened dramatically after dropping the protocol. One tutor commented, “defining our strengths moves our reading of the paper outward and allows us to view it as a whole entity. When we move from this step, our view is the same, but our focus is different.” The SNO analysis approach helped shift the focus from local issues to global issues, because the tutors were “forced” to look for and comment on strengths in the paper. One tutor stated that her focus changed because now as she reads through the text, she looks for “positives in an essay, positives with the writer’s attempt, positives of a writer’s ability.” Another tutor asserted that “the SNO analysis made me actually start to like doing onlines. It really helped me to make links between the needs of the paper with my suggestions. I also think that by focusing on only three aspects of the paper, it is easier to prioritize the global issues and let go of some of the little stuff...[and] I have stopped making many intertextual comments,” beefing up the front and end notes instead. The SNO analysis

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<sup>20</sup> Because of difficulties with technology that we were in the process of correcting while this study was taking place, the tutors were never able to consistently access the Table of Responses, so they never used it. The table had no bearing at all on this study and the tutors did not comment on it. It will be a part of the next set of changes we implement.

also improves the ability to add comments about strengths, rather than commenting solely on weaknesses.

### **Summary and Implications**

The combination of the quantitative data, the qualitative data, and the survey responses indicate a decrease in the editing function of our online tutors and an increase in the amount and the quality of explanations offered with comments and suggestions. This change becomes obvious through the tutor survey: the phase one changes helped the tutors to visualize a student actively participating in the conference, not just a student text passively awaiting corrections; and the phase two changes promoted a search for student strengths, which, in turn, helped to transfer the focus of the conference to global issues rather than local. Some differences between new tutor and experienced tutor responses were indicated in both phases, which could be due to various causes, including the difficulty of replacing old habits with new training techniques. However, when viewed on the whole, both of these phase changes served to improve both new and experienced tutors' online responses, reducing the editing of the texts and increasing the collaborative nature of the conferences as evidenced through the more conversational tone of the responses in phase two.

In the pre-change phase,<sup>21</sup> tutors overwhelmingly took a top-down, directive approach to instruction that bordered dangerously on “fixing” student papers through copy editing and proofreading. The numbers showed that the intertextual comments of both experienced and new tutors focused on local grammatical and mechanical

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<sup>21</sup> See Olsen “A Look at Current Practice” for results. The raw data in the pre-change phase is included in this previous study conducted during fall quarter 2001. I can supply the raw data upon request.

weaknesses rather than global content and structural issues. The comments leaned towards command-like statements devoid of any rational explanation, rather than inquisitive proddings or invitations for collaboration. For example, in the pre-change phase, tutors offered statements or imperatives over questions 85% of the time; they offered comments on local issues 69% of the time; they identified weaknesses 89% of the time; and they offered no explanation for their comments 73% of the time. Edits were spliced directly into the student text, with little indication of the rationale behind them.

With the implementation of the phase one, changes in responses became evident. Tutors still offered more statements and imperatives than questions, but the comments focused more on global issues than on local, identified strengths in the work as well as weaknesses, and offered explanations for the intertextual comments that pointed to local issues. For example, in the phase one change, tutors offered statements or imperatives over questions 80% of the time, a slight decrease from the previous phase; they offered comments on local issues 43% of the time, a significant decrease; they identified weaknesses 84% of the time, another slight decrease; but, they offered explanations for their comments 62% of the time, a significant and welcome improvement. In addition, the practice of splicing edits into the student text began to diminish, and the comments began to take on a more conversational tone.

When compared to the pre-change and phase one statistics, phase two changes show even more significant improvements. The tutors still used more statements and imperatives than questions, yet they spent more time explaining their suggestions in the front notes, then pointing to the specific places where they suggested changes could occur in the intertextual comments. The focus of their comments also moved from local to

global issues. For example, in the phase two change, tutors offered statements or imperatives over questions 90% of the time, an increase overall; they offered comments on local issues 46% of the time, a decrease from the pre-change phase, located in the same range as the phase one changes; and they identified weaknesses 83% of the time, a slight decrease from phase one. However, and most significant, they offered explanations for their comments 75% of the time. The practice of splicing edits into the student's text became virtually nonexistent as the conversational tone of their comments began to take over. The time frame for responding to online submissions also decreased as the tutors became more comfortable with the protocol changes. The four-hour record for response in phase one shifted to an average one hour response time in phase two, which included the collaboration between tutors as well as the time spent typing a response to the student.

The results of this study are by no means generalized outside of the UWB Writing Center, and they do not profess to solve all of the challenges presented by asynchronous online tutoring—we still have some work ahead of us. However, the results do show that incremental changes in practice have improved our tutor responses. UWB tutors are moving away from fixing student papers and moving towards teaching students because they can now visualize and converse with a student who was considered missing in action prior to the phase changes. Genre theory informed these phase changes, opening up the possibility of negotiating online spaces *as online spaces*. Genre theory offered the permission to imagine online conferencing as a genre of its own, not as a poor relation to f2f conferences. The concept of Crump's baby steps and Inman's innovations challenge writing center staff to keep looking for ways to improve online tutoring on its own terms, with its own list of conventions that make it a viable tutoring tool.

At UWB, our next step is to overcome technical difficulties in order to use the response table and to integrate the MSWord comment feature to help further decrease the time spent crafting responses. We are also looking for ways to train tutors to offer more questions that will encourage the students' participation in revision work. Other areas that should be studied include a comprehensive qualitative study of the verbiage used by tutors and a study that looks at how students receive and integrate tutor responses into their own revision work. The results of future studies could provide insights into more innovations for improvements, which are crucial to the future of writing center work, because although online tutoring may never replace f2f tutoring, neither will it fade away.

## APPENDIX A

Collaborative Online Response: The Three-Pronged Method<sup>22</sup>**Collaborative Online Response**

In keeping with our philosophy that a writing center is a teaching facility and not an editing service, offering reader-based feedback, questions, suggestions, and strategies, not unexplained directives, we are implementing a new collaborative online response system. The new system calls for two consultants to work together on each online response: the primary consultant and the collaborating consultant.

We will assign a primary consultant and a collaborating consultant to each online submission. They will work together, using a think-aloud protocol. The primary consultant will read the essay and make any comments regarding the essay out loud (it may help to read the essay aloud also); the collaborating consultant will take notes on or tape record the primary consultant's comments (notes on tape recorded sessions can be drawn up later). Both the primary consultant and the collaborating consultant will then work together to craft a response that includes front notes, intertextual comments, and endnotes, which prioritizes issues and offers feedback, questions, suggestions, and strategies to the student (see below for more information on the three-pronged method).

After making decisions regarding the response together, the primary consultant is responsible for entering the response into the online system. If possible, the collaborating consultant should read the response before it is sent to the student. The primary consultant is also responsible for creating the green sheet and logging the online conference into the vmon database.

**The Three-Pronged Method**

Each online response should be divided into three parts: the front notes, the intertextual comments, and the endnotes. Each of the sections should relate to the other. (Think of this as a combination between a letter to the student and a thesis driven essay, a new genre, perhaps.) For example, if the consultants identify an issue for the student, the issue should be explained in the front notes, pointed to in the intertextual comments, and summed up in the endnotes.

**Front Notes**

In the opening front notes, the consultants should:

- ✓ Introduce themselves
- ✓ Offer overall feedback on the prioritized issues in a sandwich style (something positive, something to work on, encouragement)
- ✓ Link overall comments to types of comments that will appear intertextually (for example, if the student has issues with comma splices, then provide a mini-lesson on comma splices in the front notes—how to identify and choices for revising—

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<sup>22</sup> Adapted from Barbara Monroe's "The Look and Feel of the OWL Conference" in *Wiring the Writing Center*, Eric H. Hobson, ed. and *The Think Aloud Method* by van Someren, Barnard, and Sandberg.

then explain that the intertextual comments will identify the first one or two and the student should look for more on their own).

- ✓ Tell students how to identify consultant comments in the intertextual comments.

#### Intertextual Comments

In the body of the text, the consultants should address only those priorities and concerns identified in the front notes:

- ✓ Link comments to the front notes (for example, if the front notes describe some confusion with content, paragraphing, or transitions, the intertextual comment is the place to point directly to the confusion and ask the detailed question).
- ✓ Ask questions and provide detailed explanations for suggestions.
- ✓ Point out places that work! Show the students what they are doing well.
- ✓ Set off consultant comments so that they are easily distinguishable from the student text. Consultants can use asterisks, all capital letters, brackets and line breaks.

#### Endnotes

In the closing section, the consultants should:

- ✓ Wrap up the commentary with a short summary of the prioritized issues. Remind the student what they should work on.
- ✓ Invite the student to continue the conference by asking any questions they may have regarding the response.
- ✓ Ask students to evaluate our service using the “Evaluate this response” button.
- ✓ In some cases, invite the student to try our f2f service.
- ✓ Sign off

## APPENDIX B

Collaborative Online Response Revised:<sup>23</sup>  
The Response Summary, SNO Analysis Method, and Table of Responses

**Collaborative Online Response**

In keeping with our philosophy that a writing center is a teaching facility and not an editing service, offering reader-based feedback, questions, suggestions, and strategies, not unexplained directives, we implemented a new collaborative online response system on January 16, 2002. The new system calls for two consultants to work together on each online response: the primary consultant and the collaborating consultant.

We assigned a primary consultant and a collaborating consultant to each online submission. They worked together, using a think-aloud protocol. The primary consultant read the essay and made any comments regarding the essay out loud; the collaborating consultant took notes on or tape-recorded the primary consultant's comments (notes on tape recorded sessions could be drawn up later). Both the primary consultant and the collaborating consultant then worked together to craft a response that included front notes, intertextual comments, and endnotes, which prioritized issues and offered feedback, questions, suggestions, and strategies to the student.

After making decisions regarding the response together, the primary consultant was responsible for entering the response into the online system. If possible, the collaborating consultant read the response before sending it to the student. The primary consultant held the responsibility for creating the green sheet and logging the online conference into the vmon database.

Initial responses by the consultants to the new system were positive; everyone found value in the collaborative process. Yet it soon became apparent that the cost of implementing the collaboration and the think-aloud protocol was a large consumption of time. Half-hour to one-hour online responses grew to two, three, even four hours each. On February 13<sup>th</sup>, in an effort to reduce the time commitment, we ended the think-aloud protocol portion of the online response system. Although this did reduce the time commitment for the collaboration portion of crafting the response, it did not help the primary consultant when it came time to type the response into the online system. The time commitment for responding to online submissions still remains over one hour.

In an effort to reduce the time commitment even more, we are implementing, effective today, a new system based on and adapted from familiar genres: the executive summary and the SWOT analysis, both used in the business program. The executive summary highlights the main points of a longer, more detailed, attached report and includes recommendations for improving some aspect of a business. The audience of the executive summary is someone at the management level capable of making decisions regarding

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<sup>23</sup> Adapted from Barbara Monroe's "The Look and Feel of the OWL Conference" in *Wiring the Writing Center*, Eric H. Hobson, ed. and *The Think Aloud Method* by van Someren, Barnard, and Sandberg. Original version: January 16, 2002. Revised: February 27, 2002.

change. The SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) is a method for reviewing the internal and external forces at work on an aspect of the business, and aids the analyst in coming up with recommendations. Adaptations are needed for our purposes, the main differences residing in the initial process for collaboration and the format of the typed response. For our purposes, we will not consider internal and external forces at work on an aspect of the business; we will instead look for strengths and needs in the paper and offer suggestions and recommendations as opportunities for strengthening the work.

To further reduce the time involved in typing out an online response, we have developed a table of common responses, which will reside on the desktop of each computer in the Writing Center. Consultants can use the language from the table in their own responses, and can use the cut and paste features in MSWord to use chunks of text, which should substantially cut down on the time needed to craft and type a similar response. We will continue to add responses to this table.

### **The Response Summary and SNO Analysis Method**

Each online response should still be divided into three parts: the front notes, the intertextual comments, and the endnotes. Each of the sections should still relate to the other. For example, if the consultants identify an issue for the student, the issue should be explained in the front notes, pointed to in the intertextual comments, and summed up in the endnotes. The format of intertextual comments and the endnotes will remain relatively unchanged; however, the format of the front notes will most likely change to incorporate the findings of the SNO analysis.

The “business” to be considered for the response summary is the student’s essay submitted for feedback on the online system. The “audience” for the response summary will be the student, someone capable of making decisions regarding change to the “business,” also known as the essay.

The consultants should begin with the SNO analysis of the paper: read for the Strengths and Needs, and strategize Opportunities for improving the paper. They should collaborate on all three, continuing to prioritize issues and remembering to address the student’s concerns. When crafting a response together, they should think of these same three categories, using the first two to create the third. When typing up the response, the primary consultant should use the same format, considering the audience, the student, as the agent capable of implementing change.

The consultants should begin the front notes with an introduction and include some indication of how to identify the intertextual comments. When constructing the response, they should identify the strengths of the work, then move to the needs, prioritizing issues. Finally, they should offer the students strategies and suggestions for the prioritized issues, which are the opportunities for improving the work. The intertextual comments remain the place where the issues prioritized in the front notes can be pointed to directly and explained more fully. The endnotes remain a summary, a signoff, and an invitation to return. The table of template responses can be used in any of the three sections.

## APPENDIX C

## Online Response System: Consultant Survey

1. Before we instituted any changes to how we respond to online paper submissions, how would you describe the difference between face-to-face conferencing and online conferencing when it comes to the interaction with the student? How would you describe the presence of the student?
2. Before we instituted any changes, how would you describe your focus as a tutor? What kinds of issues did you comment on? Global issues, i.e. content, structure, organization? Local issues, i.e. grammar, mechanics? How would you describe the nature of your comments?
3. Before we instituted any changes, what did you feel most comfortable with when responding online?
4. Before we instituted any changes, what did you feel the least comfortable with when responding online?
5. After we changed to the three-pronged, collaborative, think-aloud protocol, how would you describe the difference between face-to-face conferencing and online conferencing when it comes to the interaction with the student? How would you describe the presence of the student?
6. After we changed to the three-pronged, collaborative, think-aloud protocol, how would you describe your focus as a tutor? What kinds of issues did you comment on? Global issues, i.e. content, structure, organization? Local issues, i.e. grammar, mechanics? How would you describe the nature of your comments?
7. After we changed to the three-pronged, collaborative, think-aloud protocol, what did you feel most comfortable with when responding online?
8. After we changed to the three-pronged, collaborative, think-aloud protocol, what did you feel least comfortable with when responding online?
9. After we changed to the SNO analysis response method, how would you describe the difference between face-to-face conferencing and online conferencing when it comes to the interaction with the student? How would you describe the presence of the student?
10. After we changed to the SNO analysis response method, how would you describe your focus as a tutor? What kinds of issues did you comment on? Global issues, i.e. content, structure, organization? Local issues, i.e. grammar, mechanics? How would you describe the nature of your comments?

11. After we changed to the SNO analysis response method, what did you feel most comfortable with when responding online?

12. After we changed to the SNO analysis response method, what did you feel least comfortable with when responding online?

13. What would you change in the process in the next stage?

14. Any other comments?

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