

## Statistical Data for Asynchronous Study of Online Conferences

Table 1 presents an ANOVA for the HS instructional population, as well as significance levels, means, and standard deviations relative to the linguistic functions: informing, directing, eliciting, and suggesting, as well as phatic language. The statistical post-hoc differences are described in the notes.

**Table 1: Writing- and Phatic-Focused IUs**

**Table 1: ANOVA on HS IDESH**

I		D		E		S		H	
M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
2.42	1.01	.96	.48	.46	.43	.61	.41	.78	1.13

*Note.*  $F(4, 245) = 54.37, p < .001$ . At the  $p = .05$  level:  $I > D, E, S, H$ ;  $D > E$ .

Table 2 presents an ANOVA for the HS instructional population, as well as significance levels, means, and standard deviations relative to the focus of consciousness: content, formal properties, context, process, and reference, as well as phatic language. The statistical post-hoc differences are described in the notes.

**Table 2: Writing- and Phatic-Focused IUs**

**Table 2: ANOVA on HS FXPRH**

C		F		X		P		R		H	
M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
1.49	.82	1.89	1.00	.72	.29	1.21	.43	.26	.27	.78	1.13

*Note.*  $F(5, 294) = 31.60, p < .001$ . At the  $p = .05$  level:  $C > X, R, H$ ;  $F > X, P, R, H$ ;  $P > R$ ;  $H > R$ .

Kentucky high school (secondary) students (2003-2003)

the secondary students were preparing portfolios for their for high-stakes State graduation examination

### **Asynchronous Conferences: Commentary**

In terms of the language used in asynchronous conferences,<sup>1</sup> I studied sixty-three teaching interactions from thirty-three first-year English students, twenty-two from seven developmental students, and fifty-three from thirty-four secondary students.<sup>2</sup> Because the online instructors for the first-year English and developmental students came from the same teaching pool, their commenting patterns were quite similar; for the secondary students, however, the online instructors commented a bit differently, which may be due both to the high school setting and its subsequent desired outcomes, as well as different online instructors. I examined the linguistic functions of the online instructors' commentary and then, using textual analysis, considered whether and how a portion of those conferences were used in the students' writing and revision after the conference. As with the synchronous conferences, I learned a variety of things about the asynchronous conference that can benefit both novice and experienced online instructors. Specifically, these conferences were primarily:

- Conducted by the online instructors as the main speakers in the context of student-initiated requests;
- Focused on informing, asking few questions;
- Both direction- and suggestion-oriented, depending on the students' levels;
- Less phatically-oriented than synchronous conferences;
- Used by students to develop and revise their writing;
- Used for a wide variety of writing concerns,

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<sup>1</sup> See also "Asynchronous" and appendix 3 for results of an unpublished portion of the study, particularly regarding secondary level students.

<sup>2</sup> In chapter 3, I refer to these students as FYE, DEV, and HS respectively.

- Of generally correct and of moderate helpfulness for the writing;
- Not used to effect either positive or negative change where praise was concerned; and
- Potentially more frequently used where local versus global placement was concerned.

Not surprisingly, the major difference between a synchronous and an asynchronous conference becomes immediately clear when one looks at the talk—unlike the dialogue of a synchronous conference, the online instructor does about ninety percent of the talking in an asynchronous conference; the student’s initial talk tends to concern his or her assignment, primary questions, and major concerns about the writing. It is only through looking at subsequent submissions and student revision that one “hears” the student “speak” in a reply that reveals what the student has learned or taken from the initial conference. For that reason, it is most important to focus on what instructors say. How they used the linguistic function categories of informing, directing, eliciting, and suggesting, as well as how they provided phatic connection, show to some degree what they believe should occur in online writing conferences.

By far, the majority of online instructor comments in any one linguistic function category were those that inform about the writing, which in all cases were more common than comments that direct, elicit, and suggest. In other words, the primary instructional response given to all three student populations was declarative in nature, indicating a common communication intention of explaining to the students what they saw in the writing or how to proceed in revision. As with the synchronous conferences, this finding is not surprising, especially in light of the contemporary theory that I discuss shortly. To provide critically reflective feedback in the forms of information and explanation often is the teacher’s job: *“It looks like about here you veer away from talking about social standing and into character relationships”* and *“I’m a little unsure as to the main point of your essay right now.”* Informative comments not only reflected what was in

the writing, but also could offer instruction toward writing improvement: “*A thesis is a one-sentence description of your main idea*” and “*It [the thesis] creates the backbone upon which the rest of the essay rests.*” Finally, such informative statements often conveyed simple words of praise: “*You present yourself as a thoughtful, insightful person.*” Of course, any of these kinds of information potentially is helpful to students by rooting them in what they have written and offering new ways to understand their own writing.

However, beyond comments that inform, the online instructors for different level students wrote commentary with varied frequencies of the linguistic functions. After informative comments, the online instructors for the secondary students used language that more often directed (e.g., “*Focus on picking one particular aspect of the media to discuss*” and “*Check MLA Format for your citations*”) and then language that suggested (e.g., “*You might consider adding some concrete examples or personal stories about getting caught speeding*” “*Could you replace the pronoun “it” with a noun that reflects your meaning more clearly?*”). On the other hand, the online instructors for the post-secondary students wrote suggestions to students more often than they wrote directions. Surprisingly, everyone wrote questions the least often. Questions that genuinely elicited information tended to use wh- words (e.g., which, who, what, when, where, and why) and “how”: “*Why is this information important?*” and “*Which [tense] do you think is better here?*” As discussed below regarding composing and OWI pedagogy, contemporary educators consider questioning techniques to be powerful ways of helping students to discern what they want to convey. Thus, one might naturally wonder why there are so few questions overall in this study, as well as in the synchronous one.

Finally, most likely because of the asynchronous modality, and possibly because of the tutorial context where online instructors did not personally know the students, there were far

fewer phatic-like utterances than in the synchronous study. In the asynchronous setting, phatic-like utterances most often occurred through an emoticon or a student's name in the text to imply affect or facial/body expression. Generally, such utterances served to underscore praise, to make personal contact, or to convey warmth or empathy after a particularly critical comment.

Sometimes, phatic-like language emphasized the online instructor's participation or reader response with a typed "*hmm*," "*well*," or "*okay*"—any of which could be considered contextually unnecessary. Though they were relatively rare in this study, the online instructors seemed to be using phatic-like language to express individualized, human, "real-time" responses to student writers' work like those more often found in synchronous conferences.

In terms of instructional focus in their conferences, the online instructors for the post-secondary students most often targeted the students' writing processes, with focus on formal properties, essay content, and the context for the writing following. Comments that referenced another comment or the student's writing overall were the least frequent for all of the online instructors; they were equally rare in the synchronous conferences. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, the online instructors for the secondary students focused most often on formal properties, with content, writing process, and context following in that order. In other words, while the online instructors for the post-secondary students focused on the writing process most heavily—a common pedagogical concern of contemporary composition pedagogy—the online instructors for the secondary students focused most heavily on formal aspects of writing. In both cases, their choices may have been related to the students' ability levels or to a perception that process is more important to the college student while formal properties like grammar and mechanics are more important to the high school student.

Besides how online instructors might write their comments to students and on what they might focus, I was most interested to understand to what degree students used the feedback they received. In other words, was the conference efficacious for the students? An examination of their revisions against the original writings in the context of the conferences yielded promising results: like the students who used the synchronous conferences, these students also used their asynchronous conferences as a means to prompt revision. Indeed, on average, forty-one percent of their total revision choices originated from the conferences as shown by iteration and presupposition. Unlike the synchronous conferences, though, on average students made nine revisions per essay from the conferences, while the rest of their revisions originated from some other source (e.g., self-generation, teacher, peer groups, friends). It becomes apparent from these findings that students made choices among comments: they used an entitled writer's prerogative to decide what advice to take and what to discard. It also becomes apparent that students can benefit revision-wise at a broader range from asynchronous than from synchronous conferences.

I used Lester Faigley and Stephen P. Witte's revision change taxonomy, which examines writing from expert adult, advanced student, and inexperienced student writers. Their study's most significant result may be the taxonomy the researchers developed for categorizing revision changes. Offering a methodology for "describing through text analysis" (410), their instrument categorizes revision changes as (1) surface formal (i.e., addressed simple copyediting issues), (2) surface meaning preserving (i.e., paraphrased or did not change the text), (3) meaning-altering microstructural (i.e., changed the meaning in minor ways), and (4) meaning-altering macrostructural changes (i.e., changed the meaning in major ways that alter the text's message). And, although the studies that Faigley and Witte report are limited in scope, they provide a basis for characterizing the revision practices of inexperienced students like those in this study. Post-

secondary students more often used suggest- and then direct-based comments while secondary students more often used direct- and then suggest-based comments. Comments that elicited, which were asked the least frequently, also were used in revision the least frequently.

All of the students made more surface formal changes and microstructural meaning altering changes related to the conference than were unrelated to it. They also made significantly more surface meaning preserving changes *unrelated* to instructional commentary than were related. Most changes were related to inform-based comments. Post-secondary students more often used suggest- and then direct-based comments while secondary students more often used direct- and then suggest-based comments. This usage indicates that the high school students were more responsive to comments that either told them directly what to do or that indicated more obliquely what they should revise and how. Comments that elicited, which were asked the least frequently, also were used by all students the least frequently in revision.

As with the synchronous conferences, some kind of qualitative understanding is important to any discussion of revision. The concept of *correctness* suggests that qualitative evidence might help to delineate “successful” instructional commentary, and to understand in what ways it might have been less than helpful to students. Yet correctness also is a subjective and elusive concept, and at best it offers a glimpse of how the revision affected the writing for better or worse. In examining the revision changes qualitatively, I found that the vast majority had taken an incorrect passage and corrected it or had taken a correct passage and retained the correctness in the revision. Therefore, for the most part, the revisions connected to the conferences were correct. Generally, the rhetorical force was moderately helpful to the writing, and so the students’ writing can be said to have improved overall.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the online instructors also wrote comments that elicited the least frequently; however, the reason students did not make frequent use of the questions may have as much to do with the nature of the asynchronous teaching interaction as with how frequently they were offered. By nature, one asks a question with the expectation of an answer; and even though they were responding by virtue of both revision changes and possible essay resubmission, the students were not participating in the more interactive give-and-take of a synchronous or oral conversation. Therefore, they may not have found the questions asked in this modality sufficient to compel a revision response. On the other hand, as noted regarding synchronous conferences, questions tend to prod writers more in their idea development than in expression. And, as this revision study shows, students did make a variety of instruction-related meaning-altering microstructural and macrostructural revisions, which indicates that idea-based comments may have stimulated some of their revision.

One also can learn a lot by what the students did not do in response to revision. For example, educators rightly believe that praise helps writers know what kinds of writing behaviors and skills to repeat in future essays (Straub “The Student; Elbow “Ranking”); however, I could not find any instances of a student using his or her own strong or correct writing—signaled by instructional commentary that praised—as a model to write a similar sentence or thought pattern in another part of that essay draft. While it is possible that students made use of such positive comments in unstudied later writing, it is just as likely that they saw a praise-based comment and simply moved on, satisfied that praise signaled something that did not require revision. And although there was no evidence that praise had any other specific affect on the students as writers, student survey responses in chapter 3 show that they did appreciate knowing what they had done well.



Just as important as revision, though, it seems that the online instructors did not have revision in mind when they praised writing; praise usually affirmed the correctness of a student's word choice, wording, or general approach to the writing. Examples of such praise included: *“Sandi, you have obviously spent some serious time working on this assignment. The complexity of your arguments demonstrates that! In addition, you have cited numerous and relevant sources. I hope you are proud of this draft of your essay. Very impressive!”* and *“Mike, I really enjoyed reading this essay. I got a very good understanding of what it was like to be there. Your tone and descriptions both lent me a greater understanding of this place.”* We can imagine that students appreciated learning what they were doing so well; I know I do when someone sincerely praises something I have written. While these incidental findings support the value of praise as real response, they also verify that its intrinsic value is not to effect revision as much as to support or confirm what is “working” at the point of a particular draft, as well as and to help instructors vary their responses beyond correcting, offering advice, and suggesting change (Zak 51). Therefore, as part 2 takes up, in online conferences, it seems wise to praise only those areas that one can in unconditional and genuine manners, as students appear to take such praise at face value—revising nothing connected to it.

Finally, my observations were that students may revise more readily when the online instructor's comments are placed within the text—in a local, embedded comment. E. Smith's research seems to confirm this possibility. In interviews with students, he found that they preferred and expected marginal comments (255-258), which appear as local embedded commentary in online instructional commentary. The implication that educators should consider in terms of instructional practice is that students may be more likely to apply local online comments found near areas that require revision. Students may comprehend such comments

better, given that embedded commentary is contextually familiar in its likeness to hand-written marginalia found in many teacher-read essays from elementary school forward. Further, local comments are contextually immediate, which may be more helpful for students who are motivated to seek help on a particular piece of writing versus the larger picture of his or her writing process. More simply, local comments tend to make clear correlations between what is written and what needs to be revised—often in directive ways—and thus satisfies student writers who are seeking local solutions that may positively affect grades. Thus, online instructors would do well to use both local and global commentary strategically and to orient their students as to what to expect with either type of comments.

The online instructors for the secondary students, on the other hand, may have been somewhat more constrained by their students' circumstances. They usually worked online with post-secondary or graduate level students. However, the website's submission form made clear that these particular students whose work would be studied were in high school. Thus, the academic level of the students by itself—simply because college-level educators may expect less syntactic maturity and verbal fluency from secondary students—could have influenced these online instructors to be somewhat more directive than suggestive, although they were suggestive, too. Additionally, like the Smarthinking online instructors, the secondary online instructors focused their responses in relation to their students' context. They were guided by an outline of the ways in which they could address the student writing, spelling out the types of comments that online instructors might make: asking clarifying questions, indicating position and type of surface and sentence errors, marking on the essay itself, and providing a key to those markings. They were instructed specifically not to change the student writing, correct the errors, or add/subtract any

details. Following their orientation to the State's Portfolio Guidelines, online instructors took an "ethics" quiz that exemplified possible gray areas. According to informal interviews, the secondary online instructors understood that they could signal problem areas to students, but that they were not to "correct" student writing or to tell a student how to "fix" the writing—typical injunctions of the expressivist epistemology. Thus, they primarily informed students, which reveals that they abided by this injunction; however, the content of inform comments also reveals that these online instructors may have been unsure of how to talk about writing when they were not allowed to give guidance on how to "fix" or develop it. Many of the inform comments comprised simple pointers allowed by the State's Portfolio Guidelines and that kept the comments within the realm of the "ethical": "*misspelled word*" or "*missing comma.*" Other inform comments included such reflective statements as: "*It seems to me that the main point of your story comes in the final paragraph when you talk about a father's love*" and "*I think your conclusion needs to be revised,*" which could arguably be viewed as a suggestion for revision. Typical of the kinds of informative comments that I found, neither comment provided a student with guidance in specific next steps—that is, neither comment taught students how to proceed in a revision.

Finally, I found that suggestions were the only type of commentary in this study that might be problematic regarding the Portfolio Guidelines—even though suggestions are written in a less straightforward manner, they seem to be intended to convey precise ways that students might change their writing. For example, these suggestions included: "*You might consider adding some concrete examples or personal stories about getting caught speeding*" and "*Does it have a place in your paper?*" Such suggestions had the quality of leading the student to a particular action or next step that, generally speaking, the secondary online instructors were

restricted from overtly addressing in their comments. In a way, the suggestive comment allows those specifics to “sneak out” under the guise of conditional statements and rhetorical questions; in other words, it enables a sort of teaching denied especially by the prohibitions of the guidelines for response at the secondary level, indicating a communication intention of indirection in a setting where straightforward instruction was prohibited.

A primary reason for these findings resides again in issues of ownership and authority reside in contemporary interpretations of expressivist and social constructionist practice. For example, in e-mail-based interviews, both the secondary and secondary online instructors expressed specific concerns about taking over student writing and about the ethics of giving them too much information. When asked whether the interaction has taken the direction and/or shape she believed it should take, one instructor for the post-secondary students said about a synchronous interaction:

*Basically, yes. The student wanted confirmation that her thesis and the one point of support she had decided upon were valid. She needed other points of support but had not done enough research to decide on those. Our tutorial time was up, so rather than asking leading questions to get her to think about other points of support, I "gave" her direction in her research. I suggested a couple of avenues she might research. Had the tutorial been longer, I would have preferred to draw the ideas out of her.*

Another online instructor responded to the same question regarding an asynchronous interaction:

*“I think I hit the most important problems without rewriting the paper and without making her feel bad, so yes.”* And when asked whether he believed the interaction was successful and why, this same instructor responded: *“I thought it went well because she was left with a menu of*

*problems to be dealt with but enough reassurance to keep her from feeling bad about herself as a writer.*” Such concerns clearly demonstrate an instructional desire to avoid doing too much for the writer while preserving the writer’s personal sense of authority and self-esteem, a topic that chapter 3 addresses. All in all, one can partially explain—or at least explore—the characteristics of the asynchronous and synchronous conferences found in this study in relation to popular interpretations of contemporary theory as related to practice.

### **Secondary Level Participants**

#### **Students**

Thirty-four secondary school students from a State of Kentucky school district participated in a pilot asynchronous OWI program intended to discern the value of online assistance for students preparing their High School Proficiency Portfolios, a statewide gateway proficiency examination for graduating seniors. The majority of students were second semester juniors or seniors, ages seventeen to eighteen, although two were sixteen and one was nineteen. During data collection, I had no contact with these students, their classroom teachers, or the online instructors. Qualifications for the study included providing informed consent to the teacher, who then gave the forms to the director of *The WritePlace*, and by submitting at least one essay to the online tutoring service.

Students submitted their writing from multiple disciplines: Advanced Placement and grade-level senior English, anatomy/physiology, advanced biology, and journalism. Their writing projects included personal narrative, description, exposition, and opinion statements. The most common element among these students was that they were developing writing for their proficiency examination portfolios, which created a high stakes writing environment: students whose writing did not pass the scrutiny of outside evaluators would not graduate that spring.

Secondary school teachers whose students would be participating in this pilot program were orientated to the online platform; they then were responsible for familiarizing their students with the online instructional platform and for encouraging them to use the online instructional opportunity. Students gained access to the online instruction through a state-funded grant, which paid all student and online instructor costs for this research.

#### **Online instructors**

The four online instructors for the secondary students were graduate teaching assistants at the University of Kentucky (UK), Lexington’s writing center, *The WritePlace*. The UK had leased Smarthinking, Inc.’s asynchronous online instructional platform as part of their online

writing center services, which enabled the writing center to use the platform that Smarthinking had developed, but under the auspices of the writing center's own name and management. The online instructors' qualifications ranged from MA to PhD coursework, experience in traditional writing instruction, and six months to two years experience in asynchronous OWI working for *The WritePlace*. Smarthinking trained them to use the technology platform and provided documents regarding applying contemporary composition theory and pedagogy to online settings, while their writing program administrator educated them in tutoring pedagogy for traditional settings and orientated them to the State Department of Education practices and policies regarding graduation requirement portfolios. The orientation included a holistic portfolio rubric, an ethics quiz for assisting students in portfolio writing, guidelines for student portfolios, and requirements/guidelines for portfolio pieces. Theoretically all the secondary students were eligible for the study, so these professional tutors were aware of student participants.

### Linguistic Taxonomy

Prior to identifying functional linguistic characteristics of the interactions, it was necessary to separate participant talk into idea units (IUs). Gere used Wallace Chafe's definition of IUs as "brief spurts" that reveal one's focus of consciousness or attention, and she selected the IU as a measure for dividing the transcripts and a way to examine an interaction's "meaning and function since idea units are units of meaning for the speaker" (5; see also Gere and Abbott 367). Citing Chafe, Gere found the boundaries of the IU through oral intonation (pitch), pauses, and syntax ("an idea unit is usually a single clause") (6); body and facial language also can signify such boundaries. In written conversation—synchronous chat or asynchronous instructional commentary—where intonation and pauses must be conveyed textually, IUs are revealed by syntax, grammatical boundaries, punctuation (such as hyphens or ellipses), and obvious shifts in subject. IUs can be as short as one word (e.g., "yes," "done," "Hello!") or as long as a full sentence (e.g., "*It looks like about here you veer away from talking about social standing and into character relationships*" and "*A comma after 'stubborn' would have helped me avoid that momentary confusion*"). Or IUs can be clauses that reveal a different linguistic functions, areas of attention, or foci of consciousness (e.g., two IUs: "*I'm missing the first sentences you included*

*in the other argument -- // the sentences that let me know what point of view I'm in...").*

Appendix 4 provides suggested separation guidelines for identifying IUs.

The Gere taxonomy is ideal for helping to describe some of the functional linguistic characteristics of student and online instructor commentary. It enables analysis of both student and online instructor talk in terms of the primary linguistic function that they served and subsequent focus of the comments, among other things. To the three categories that Gere used—language that *informs*, *directs*, and *elicits*—I added a fourth that emerged iteratively from the study: *suggest*. Table 3.1 shows the four primary linguistic types that I looked for in the online conference comments and response.

Table 3.1: Linguistic Categories

Linguistic Category	Form	Function	Example
Inform	declarative (subject + verb order)	to describe, assert, tell, state, explain, restate, evaluate, and/or judge something	<i>Your paragraph needs to be expanded.</i>
Direct	imperative (no overt subject, or with a stated second person subject)	to order, command, or request	<i>Expand your paragraph.</i>
Elicit	interrogative (verb + subject order, with some exceptions)	to ask a question	<i>How can you expand your paragraph?</i>
Suggest	varied (declarative, imperative, interrogative, or mixed)	variably to inform, question, or direct by mentioning, introducing, prompting, or proposing an idea or thought	<i>Is it possible to expand your paragraph? Or, You might expand your paragraph.</i>

In addition to these four linguistic categories, one also could write a comment that more often is found in spoken language—phatic-like utterances or backchannel cues that indicate or encourage ongoing connection—like “*ummm*” or “*thinking*” or “☺.” One hundred percent of the language used in the online conferences falls into one of these categories. What one can learn from such categorical distinctions is the degree to which an online instructor (or student) tends to explain versus to command regarding the writing and whether questions or suggestions are a substantial part of that person’s pedagogical or learning strategy. These categories also have a clear pragmatic relationship between form and function, as chapter 4 will describe more fully. For example, language that informs has the form of a declarative statement and the function to describe or explain something; as such, it is called a “direct” speech act. Likewise, language that either directs or elicits has a matching form and function. Only the suggestion is an “indirect” speech act, as it can have one form and a different function altogether. Hence, one also can learn to what degree one’s conferencing language is predictably clear, as with direct speech acts,



versus being unclear with the mixed form and function of indirect speech acts—which is an issue that chapter 4 takes up in depth.

Finally, to be still more discriminating about the online conference language, the taxonomy also identifies the focus of a particular comment. Focus involves the subject of the statement, command, question, or suggestion. For example, one could focus on (1) the writing's *content* and its development; (2) the writing's *formal* properties such as organization, style, and grammar; (3) the writing *process*, such as research, drafting, and proofing; (4) the writing's *context*, which includes the assignment, audience, purpose, and resources used to develop the writing; and (5) writing *reference*, which repeats or echoes a part of the actual writing or another written comment.

#### KDE Guidelines [include types of writing]

The KDE pilot project specifically outlined the ways in which the online instructors could address the student writing. For example, the “Guidelines for the Generation of Student Work for Writing Portfolios,” provided to the online instructors by the KDE, states that, “Parents, friends, and other students assume roles of listeners, responders, and encouragers” (Section 2, Chapter 7, p. 24); the online instructors reasonably extend this list of participants and responders. This same document spells out the types of comments that online instructors, as assistants to the teacher (see p. 28, point 10), might make. These comments included asking clarifying questions, indicating position and type of surface and sentence errors, marking on the essay itself, and providing a key to those markings. Such assistance is consonant with the Expressivist theoretical construct, as well as with what commonly is called the Current-Traditional construct, one that focuses on formal concerns such as correctness and mechanics.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, online instructors were instructed not to change the student writing, correct the errors, or add/subtract any details. Following their orientation to the portfolio development guidelines, online instructors took an “ethics” quiz that exemplified possible gray areas. According to their surveys, online instructors understood that they could signal problem areas to students, but that they were not to “correct” student writing or to tell a student how to “fix” the writing. That the major category of IU function was to inform reveals that they practiced this injunction fairly regularly. Many of the inform IUs comprised simple pointers allowed by the KDE Portfolio Guidelines and that kept the comments within the realm of the “ethical”: “*misspelled word*” or “*missing comma*.” Other *inform* IUs include such statements as: “*It seems to me that the main point of your story comes in the final paragraph when you talk about a father’s love*” and “*I think your conclusion needs to be revised.*”

In keeping with the KDE Portfolio Guidelines, there also is no potential ethical problem with the relatively few questions (8.88%) in the instructional interactions. Such questions included “*How did this make you feel?*” and “*Did you need to include a thesis in this*

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<sup>3</sup> For one discussion about how contemporary tutoring programs engage Current-Traditional theory, see Hewett 2002.

report?” Indeed, one might wonder why there were not more questions given that questions, particularly those that are contextually-focused, can open up potential thinking about a subject (Hewett, 1998, 154; 2000). [huge issue, says Gail] [genre limits types of questions one can ask; but also type of schooling seems to have limited the teachers]

It is reasonable to consider why 17.76% of the IUs were *direct*-focused, with the imperative function to order, command, or request. At first blush, the *direct* IU has an ominous sound, one that could take from a student the ownership of revision change. However, as the final section of this report will discuss, in practice students did not always follow such *direct* IUs with a revision change, which suggests that students may not have considered themselves bound to revise even in response to a direction for a necessary change in the writing. [big that tutors are giving out lots of direction, but students are not using even them; part of what one does in an instructional environment is “instruct”; is the lack of understanding about rhetorical questions at issue here? Revise: written with KDE as the audience; for broader audience, the direction not always bad; difference between taking over somebody’s work and providing choice; by assuming that direction is bad and it takes over the work, then closing down the essential relationship of a writer to a teacher or a coach—which is to support change] Furthermore, *direct* IUs typically did not specifically indicate how a change should look. For example, an IU that directs the writing process could be, “Ask yourself this.” The IU immediately following that direction generally would be a question like: “What would a person do in this situation?” or “How would you rewrite this paragraph?” Another direction about the writing process would be “Consider revising,” a command often followed by an informative IU: “This is a run on sentence.” These directions tend to function most fully in the context of other IUs that give the student more information about why a change is necessary. Other directions include such comments as, “check your use of semi-colons” and “don’t overuse similes.” Such directions appear to fall completely within the Portfolio Guidelines and, consequently, posed no ethical problems for the online instructors.

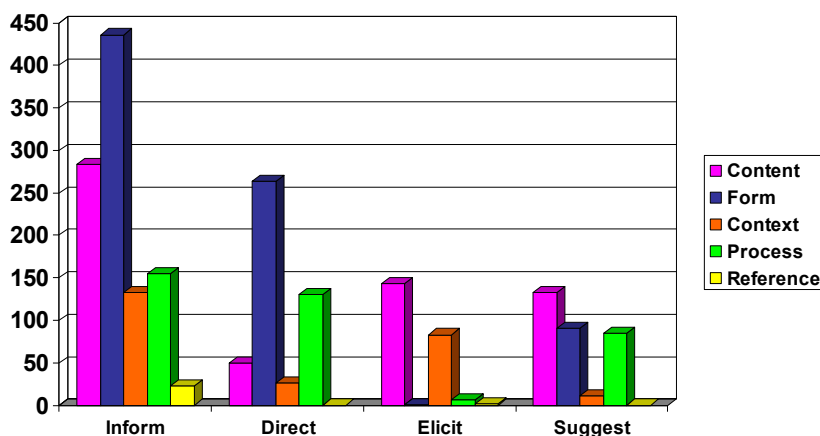
In this study, the only IU type that may be problematic regarding the KDE Portfolio Guidelines and, more importantly, in terms of student comprehension, is that which offers a suggestion (13.68%) and which tends to convey to students precise ways that they might change their writing. The *suggest* IU was not a part of the original Gere and Abbott (1985) taxonomy nor was it part of the modified rubric that Hewett (1998) developed for use in CMC environments. The tutorial transcripts of asynchronous and synchronous online teacher-writer language for this study (as well as for a related extended study of college-level online teaching interactions) revealed a need to account for a different type of IU. This type of IU was evident to Hewett in her original coding, but seemed at that time appropriate to place them in the *direct* category. However, in analyzing the current data, the relationship between online instructor (tutor) and writer (tutee)—as opposed to the peer-to-peer relationship of previously coded language—is sufficiently different as to require a new category for this type of instructional situation. Therefore, in addition to *inform*, *direct*, and *elicit*, the original IUs that account for the declarative, imperative, and interrogative forms of English and that are called “direct

speech acts” in that their grammatical form matches their functions, I added the category *suggest* as an “indirect speech act” where the IU form (that of a question or statement variably) does not match its function (most commonly to direct the interlocutor in an indirect manner).

### Teaching Interaction Analysis by Idea Unit (IU) Focus of Consciousness

Using Figure 2, the following analysis of teaching interactions compares the focus of consciousness of writing-based IUs.

Figure 2:  
Comparison of Writing-Based Idea Units by  
Focus of Consciousness



In this study of high school student asynchronous teaching interactions with online instructors, IUs that focused on *form*, or formal writing issues, occurred the most frequently. Particularly in IUs that either informed or directed students about their writing, the primary focus was on the form of the writing. *Form* includes such issues as style, sentence structure, verb structure and form, paragraphing, punctuation, word choice, spelling, and capitalization. The secondary focus for *inform* IUs was *content* (what actually appeared in the writing at the time of submission). For *direct* IUs, the secondary focus was on writing *process* (the operations or procedures that one undertakes when writing). For *elicit* and *suggest* IUs, the primary focus also was on *content*, although the *context* of the writing was the second most frequent focus for *elicit* IUs. *Form* was the second most frequent focus for *suggest* IUs.

With the exception of *elicit* IUs, therefore, *form* was the overall most frequent focus for all of the instructional language. *Content*-focused IUs, which by nature are more idea-based IUs, comprised 610 of the total IUs (29.66%). *Process*-focused IUs, which could be focused on a reader’s response to idea or on the actual composing processes that

writers used, occurred third most frequently at 376 instances (18.28%). *Context*-focused IUs, ones that potentially holds the key to generating and developing ideas among writers in peer response groups (Hewett, 1998, 154), occurred fourth most frequently at 253 (12.3%). *Reference*-focused IUs, as representative of the interactive nature of talk about writing, occurred the least often at 25 IUs total (1.21%), thus revealing the apparently non-interactive nature of asynchronous tutorials.

Although it is of limited value, Hewett's (1998) study partially confirms the results of this analysis. In the CMC environment, when students talked to each other about their writing using an asynchronous bulletin board-style platform, they used less context-focused language than they did when in the oral environment. The results suggested that abstractive language that focuses more generally on ideas and global thinking might be more challenging to engage in the asynchronous CMC environment of that study (154). Replication of the results in this KDE portion of the OWI study might reveal whether there is a pattern worth noting here; however, study of synchronous teaching interactions that by nature will be more interactive may also help to understand such findings.

There exist at least three other likely explanations for the less intense focus on content and context in this study's teaching interactions (and the concurrent more intense focus on form and process).

The first explanation is that the asynchronous teaching interaction in this study, which was a tutorial performed by teachers unknown to these students, did not encourage content-development on a high level. Students were responsible for describing their assignments and what they wanted from the interaction. Few students explained their assignments beyond naming a genre, which might inhibit an outside instructor/tutor from venturing too deeply into idea-constructive waters. Students presented their drafts as drafts, but they tended not to ask for comments about improving, changing, or deepening the ideas in the drafts. Instead, they asked about formal concerns sentence faults and proofreading. Given this request-based scenario, the types of responses that online instructors likely believed would address student requests would more frequently be formal in nature. Further, such responses would engage the online instructors in areas where they were certain they could be of some assistance, given their lack of direct knowledge of a classroom teacher's expectations for an essay. In this case, the fact that content-based IUs were the second most frequently occurring focus of consciousness could be construed as remarkable. [Gail says these conclusions may be right, just are depressing; do we want an "idea" center and a "finished writing" center; remember Russ' comment about mowing grass with the hired lawn mower—does deep cognitive work need some kind of prodding? Does how one responds to email as an 18 year old guide the response to asynch teaching? Access to info 24/7 and less expectation of having to take time to think.]

The second explanation, which seems to be strongly supported by outside data, is that the online instructors were guided toward formal issues in their training about Portfolio Guidelines. For example, the online instructors received photocopied portions of the

Kentucky Writing Development Teacher's Handbook. Section 2, Chapter 8, which discussed the "ethics in marking student papers," included eight questions that teachers might ask about evaluating student papers (30-31). Of these eight questions, four deal specifically with formal issues:

- How can I help my students be better writers and not diminish student ownership?
- What can I not do?
- May teachers or responders circle spelling errors or write "sp" next to spelling errors?
- May responders identify run-ons and fragments for students?
- May responders point out subject-verb agreement errors, pronoun-antecedent errors, overuse of passive verbs, or verb tense problems?
- May responders delete unrelated information from student papers?
- May responders substitute more effective words for weak word choice on the part of the students?

While the answers to these questions delimited both the classroom teacher's and online instructor's boundaries in response to student writing, both the questions and answers forced a focus on the formal issues inherent in producing a strong (or visually strong) piece of writing. [importance of formal level; tutors and teachers are really doing what they were trained to do] The focus on formal issues that the KDE itself holds is made clear for respondents through these questions, and it likely would encourage the online instructor's to focus similarly on formal issues.

A third possible explanation is similar to the second. The online instructors received copies of the KDE holistic scoring guides during their training. These scoring guides are those used to evaluate final student portfolios by designation as novice, apprentice, proficient, and distinguished. The scoring criteria are divided into six areas:

- (1) Purpose/Audience,
- (2) Idea Development/Support
- (3) Organization
- (4) Sentences
- (5) Language
- (6) Correctness

There is nothing unusual about these six areas of instructional attention. Indeed, the first two of the areas are idea-oriented, in keeping with the online instructors' secondary focus of consciousness. The third area, organization, is a common focal point for writing instruction. The final three areas, all formal concerns, also are not unusual in and of themselves. Indeed, if one examines the rubric for examiner prioritization, the position of these formal concerns would be appropriate to contemporary writing pedagogy, which generally privileges fluency of ideas and organization over correctness, or formal issues (Shaughnesey 19XX). However, the final three areas do comprise one half of the rubric's total focus, and they reveal that one half of the outcomes for students are based

in formal issues. As such, particularly when combined with the students' own stated instructional desires, these formal concerns necessarily would have required the online instructors' attention.<sup>4</sup>

### **Summary of Idea Unit (IU) Findings**

This study of the linguistic focus of online teaching interactions for the KDE pilot program reveals that the online instructors primarily informed the students about their writing. They also directed, suggested, and questioned the writing in that order. The instructional language focused primarily on formal issues, and then on content, process, context, and reference in that order. These data are consonant with a previous study of CMC-based writing-focused peer response groups where IUs were the unit of measure. Further, they are consonant with tutor-training both in contemporary writing pedagogy and for the KDE's pilot program for online assistance to students developing their graduation certification portfolios. Finally, this report suggests that researchers should consider further the reasons that online instructors commented using *suggest* IUs, and the preponderance of *form*-focused IUs in this study. This study offers at minimum a base-line understanding of the nature of online instructional language when the teaching interaction is an asynchronous, individualized (e.g., tutorial) interaction between a secondary school student and a professional online instructor trained in contemporary writing pedagogy and experienced in traditional, as well as online, tutoring.

### **The Data**

The researcher coded the revised drafts using the revision coding instrument described above. She coded a total of 18 revised essay drafts (taken from the original 53 teaching interactions) from 15 different high school students (taken from the original 34 high school students) and all four online instructors. Revised drafts were selected because at least one revision change existed on that draft. Since the existence of a teaching interaction did not guarantee a submitted revision, more teaching interactions than revisions could be coded. The drafts that are coded represent a random sampling of the available drafts, which are approximately 1/3 of the total teaching interactions and approximately 1/2 of the total available revised drafts.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note here that there it is neither unusual nor theoretically inappropriate to develop and use such a scoring guide or rubric. Many state secondary school systems and post-secondary institutions use them to define outcomes for teachers and to assess student progress. The purpose of such a scoring guide is to focus first the classroom teacher's attention on expected outcomes for her students; then it focuses the evaluator's attention on the expected outcomes for graduation candidates. Similarly, in this case, the scoring guide likely focused the online instructors' attentions on the students' ultimate outcomes requirements, and it appears likely that this guide's construction partially explains the results of this study's examination of IU focus of consciousness.

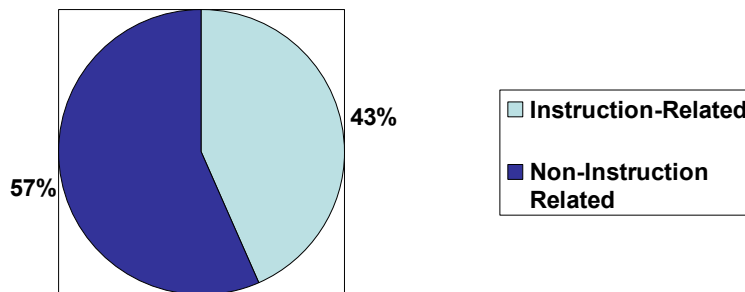
<sup>5</sup> All of the teaching interactions were available to the coders through the archives of the Smarthinking, Inc. instructional platform. However, student revisions were available in the archives only when students submitted an essay more than once (e.g., the first submission of an essay became the study's first draft; the second submission, if the draft changed in any way, could be counted as a second or final draft). Upon Dr. Summerskill's request, some teachers asked their students to submit their most polished drafts to the researcher at the end of the term; however, that method often yielded essay drafts that were

### Revision Changes Related to Online Instruction

Analysis of 18 revised essay drafts in comparison to the instructional interactions reveals with certainty that students revised their writing in direct relationship to the online instruction.

Figure 4 (below) illustrates that of 435 total revision changes in these 18 essay drafts, 189 revisions (43%) were related to the online instruction, while 246 revisions (57%) apparently were unrelated to the online instruction. Those unrelated changes could have many different points of origin, to include self-generated revision, classroom teacher, peer response group participants, and comments from or discussion with other readers like parents or friends.

Figure 4:  
Online Instruction Influence  
on Revision Changes

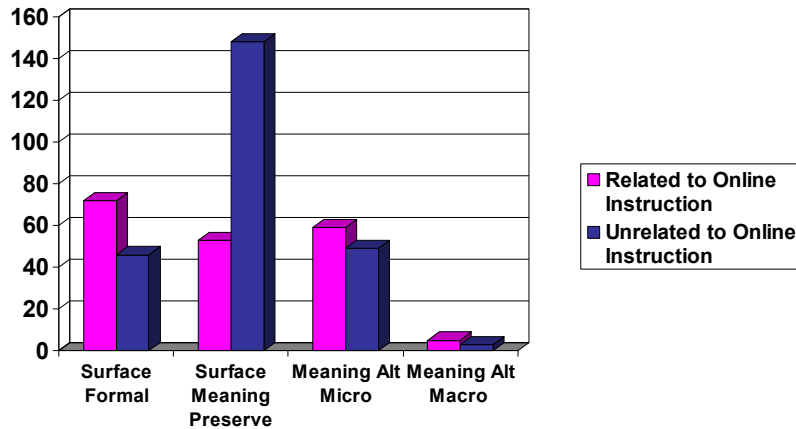


The revision changes related to the online instruction differed in type from those that are unrelated. Figure 5 illustrates these differences.

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identical to those submitted for online instruction. The researcher did not code any of these unchanged drafts.

Figure 5:  
Comparison of Revision Changes  
by Relationship to Online Instruction



More Surface Formal (72), Meaning-Altering Microstructural (59), and Meaning-Altering Macrostructural (5) changes were related to the online instruction than were unrelated (46, 49, and 3 revision changes respectively). These numbers suggest that the online instruction may have encouraged more of these types of revision changes than students otherwise would have made. However, students clearly retained their authorial ownership, a priority for the KDE portfolio assessment program, and made almost three times more Surface Meaning-Preserving changes unrelated to the online instruction (148, or 60.16% of all unrelated changes) than were related (53, or 28.04% of all related changes). [What caused the changes even when advice not taken? Gail thinks this is very important to address and discuss somewhere] These numbers raise the question of whether there is a discernable, repeatable pattern to the kinds of revision changes that students make whether on their own or in connection to their online instruction.

In this case, a comparison with Faigley and Witte's (1981) study of inexperienced student, advanced student, and expert adult writers appears to shed some light on revision changes that are unrelated to direct instruction. In their study, all three types of writers made proportionately more Meaning-Preserving Microstructural revision changes, although the advanced student writers were the most frequent revisers. [Why? Go to original study again: see pp. 410-11 re situational variables that account for differences between any writers' revision including reason for the writing and genre, as well as familiarity with the audience. In this study, the students really were quite familiar with the audience of portfolio graders because their teachers were constrained by the rubric. So, too, the online instructors had some familiarity with the intended audience; yet they seem to have had some difficulty in projecting themselves as that audience] Because the students in this study were high school and not college students, they can be classified as inexperienced writers. Their revision changes reasonably can be



compared to the inexperienced student writers of Faigley and Witte's study. In particular, as Figure 6 shows, the KDE student writer revision changes that were unrelated to the online instruction are similar percentage-wise to those of the Faigley and Witte study (see especially 406-7).<sup>6</sup>

Figure 6:  
Comparison of Inexperienced  
Writer Revision Changes  
by Percentage

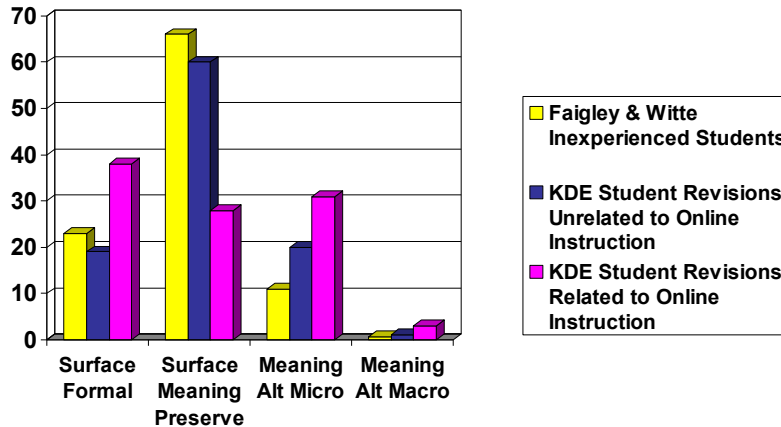


Figure 6 shows a proportional similarity between revision changes made by the inexperienced student writers in Faigley and Witte's (1981) study and those revision changes unrelated to the online instruction made by the KDE student writers: for each, students made more Surface Meaning-Preserving changes (66% and 60% respectively) than other changes. Surface Formal changes (at 24% and 19% respectively) occurred more frequently than Meaning Altering Microstructural changes (11% and 20%) and Meaning Altering Macrostructural changes (0.75% and 1% respectively). The Macrostructural revision changes were even rarer than these numbers suggest; only three high school students out of 18 made such changes, and of them, one student made three of the five total revision changes. These data replicate and confirm the results that Faigley and Witte's study showed for inexperienced student writers. Further, they suggest that when not guided by outside instruction, inexperienced student writers may tend toward making more Meaning-Preserving than Meaning-Altering revision changes. [how do we effect more of these M-Altering changes?]

However, when the KDE student writers made revision changes related to the online instruction, these changes were more evenly distributed between Surface and Meaning

<sup>6</sup> These percentages are approximate because Faigley and Witte (1981) counted frequency of revision changes per 1000 words, as opposed to total number of revision changes per essay draft, as I have done. I added the total frequencies for each writer category and then divided each type of revision change by the total frequency to reach a percentage that would be useful in comparing with the percentages of total revision changes in this study.

Altering changes. They included more Surface Formal changes (38%), fewer Surface Meaning-Preserving changes (28%), and more Meaning Altering Microstructural (31%) and Meaning Altering Macrostructural changes (3%) overall. It is possible that the online instruction may have guided students toward more Meaning Altering changes than they made unrelated to the online instruction. Thus, even though students made many Surface level changes that affected either formal elements or that simply preserved the meaning in an original draft, these data suggest that the online instruction may have supported the students in developing their writing at the level of idea development. Since idea development was one of the top three elements in the KDE holistic scoring guide for portfolio assessment, the online instruction seems to have effected the kinds of idea-level changes that the KDE desired for their student writers. Furthermore, since fully 64% of the revision changes were Surface-level changes, and since the KDE holistic scoring guide emphasized three types of formal changes (sentences, language, and correctness), it appears that the online instruction supported the students in these areas as well.

Overall, the types of revision changes that KDE students made in relation to the online instruction seem consonant with the KDE goals for student portfolio development. [Gail: that's the problem]

In this study, two explanations for these data seem likely: (1) that student writers tended to make only the recommended revision change at its basic level, going no further than needed to respond to the online instructor's comments and (2) that online instructors may have been unclear in their comments and questions (so many questions really are comments) or that they may have commented on less significant issues in the writing. [Place to bring in the "suggest" category and issue] [Can I respond to why so many students revised w/o using the OWI; connects to (2); sort this out] Further study is needed to understand better why so many revision changes are insignificant to moderate in terms of rhetorical impact.

#### Linguistic Function and Area of Attention

Figure 7 (below) shows that the most frequently occurring IUs related to revision changes were those that informed about the writing (IW): 163 IUs out of a total of 402, or 41%. The second most frequently occurring were those IUs that directed about the writing (DW): 93, or 23%. IUs that suggest about the writing (SW) occurred third most frequently (70 instances, or 17%), and IUs that elicited about the writing were the fourth most frequent (43, or 11%). IUs that concerned the tutorial itself (\_T) comprised 32, or 8%, while there was only 1 phatic (H) IU.

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#### Commentary Unrelated to Revision Changes

Online instructors did make comments that were not related to revision changes. Of a total of 845 IUs spoken by online instructors in the KDE instructional interactions, 443 had no apparent influence on the essay drafts. 136 of the IUs offered either praise or general tutorial directions, and therefore had no intended revision effect. 305 IUs were intended to influence the student writing, but did not accomplish this goal for various unknown reasons. Of these IUs, 124 IUs were embedded, or local, comments, while 181 IUs were global comments. These data demonstrate again that students retained their senses of authorial ownership and did not give undue authority to the online instructors. They further suggest that students believed themselves to be capable of making revision choices rather than being subject to requirements to revise. [Return to the survey: 7 categories of reasons for revision; why are they making a choice not to revise if they are capable of it?] These data, therefore, support the anecdotal evidence provided by KDE student surveys regarding their authorial ownership of their writing.

#### **Summary of Effects of Online Instruction on Revision**

Unquestionably, student writers in this study did make use of the online instruction when revising their writing. They also made revision changes that were unrelated to the instruction, which indicates that the student writers had sources, to include their own thinking and writing backgrounds, other than the online instructors for assistance in their portfolio development. The types of revision changes that students made differed in response to the online instruction. Students made more Surface Formal and Meaning-Altering Microstructural and Macrostructural revision changes related to the online instruction than the changes unrelated to the online instruction. Revision changes not connected to the online instruction tended to reflect a pattern like that of the inexperienced student writers in Faigley and Witte's (1981) study, suggesting that the online instruction added to the writers' experiential levels, as might be expected when instruction is offered to student writers. **Qualitatively, the revision changes tended to be correct more often than not, which suggests that the online instruction was helpful in improving student writing. However, the revision changes also tended to have moderate to insignificant rhetorical impact, suggesting that the instruction and/or the student response to the instruction could be improved.** [Faigley and Witte say: "Successful revision results not from the number of changes a writer makes but from the degree to which revision changes bring a text closer to fitting the demands of a situation." (411) They note that Sondra Perl mentioned that the revisions inexperienced writers make "often had a negative effect on quality" (411; see Perl & footnoted citation). The instructional IUs that influenced revision changes corresponded in proportion and type to the IUs that instructors spoke overall. In terms of placement, the local IUs that online instructors embedded in the student essays seem to have had a stronger influence on revision changes than the global IUs. Finally, students did not use all of the IUs to make changes to their writing, which suggests that they weighed the commentary and made choices as to what they wanted to change in their writing. Authorial ownership, a

particular concern of the KDE portfolio assessment program, does not appear to have been affected adversely by the online instruction.