

High School Student Revision and Online Tutoring
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Abstract: This article reports an empirical investigation of online writing tutoring for secondary level students. The investigation used a linguistic function taxonomy and revision change instrument to study online instructors' comments and how students used the tutoring to revise their writing. The results indicated that instructors most often wrote comments that *inform*, supplemented with language that *directed*, *suggested*, and *elicited* about writing in that order, and they focused their comments primarily on *formal* issues—like grammar and mechanics—and then on *content*, *process*, *context*, and *reference*. Students most often revised in response to declarative statements and then in response to imperatives and suggestions rather than to questions. State guidelines on what are “appropriate” tutorial responses appeared to have stifled online instructors' teaching responses, while students appeared to gravitate to easy, sentence-level solutions in revision. These results indicate that online instructors need freedom to provide better instruction and students need orientation to use that instruction more effectively.

Keywords: online writing instruction, portfolio, online tutoring, asynchronous, response

More so than their teachers, contemporary secondary school students are “digital natives,” members of the first generation to “have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age” (Prensky 2001, 1). Indeed, regarding social interactions, many students are more technologically savvy than their teachers, whom Prensky would call “digital immigrants (2).

Nonetheless, when teaching and learning about writing in online settings, teachers and students must make different adjustments. This article addresses digital technology in terms of online writing instruction (OWI), specifically asynchronous tutoring by skilled third party instructors. Results from a study of online tutoring in a Kentucky high school district suggests that secondary educators and administrators concerned with online writing pedagogy should reconceive straightforward teaching in online settings as a suitable and necessary action when writing is shared between online instructor/tutor and student.

Study of Online Tutoring

To study the language used in online tutorials (Hewett 2005), I examined fifty-three tutorial interactions/conferences from thirty-four secondary students. I considered the linguistic functions and focus of the online instructors' commentary and then, using textual analysis, analyzed how those interactions were used in the students' revision post conference.

In an asynchronous tutorial, online instructors “talk”/write about ninety percent; students' ten percent concerns the assignment, primary questions, and major writing concerns. In subsequent submissions and revision, students “speak,” revealing what they have learned from the initial conference. How instructors used language shows to some degree what they thought should occur in online writing conferences. How students revised demonstrates what they thought was important in developing their writing. The results indicate that regarding OWI, administrators should privilege straightforward teaching over worry about “giving an answer,”

online instructors need freedom to teach straightforwardly, and students need orientation to use online instruction toward deeper revision.

Participants

In academic year 2002-2003, a pilot program was conducted regarding the value of online assistance for students preparing their Kentucky High School Proficiency Portfolios, a statewide gateway proficiency examination for graduating seniors. Students were second-semester juniors or seniors, ages seventeen to eighteen; two were sixteen and one was nineteen. To qualify for the study, students gave informed consent and submitted at least one essay to the online tutoring service.

Students submitted writing from AP and grade-level senior English, anatomy/physiology, advanced biology, and journalism. Projects included personal narrative, description, exposition, and opinion statements. Students had multiple opportunities to revise and resubmit their writing. They asynchronously submitted their essay drafts by uploading them to a Web-based platform; online instructors downloaded them and responded with local embedded comments and global end comments. I obtained both the archived tutorials and the students' digital drafts pre- and post-instruction.

Teachers whose students would be participating in this pilot program were orientated to the online tutoring platform, hosted by Smarthinking, Inc., an Internet-based learning support provider. Teachers familiarized their students with the platform and encouraged them to use the tutorial opportunity. Students accessed the online instruction through a state-funded grant, which paid all costs for this research.

The four online instructors who tutored these students were University of Kentucky (UK), Lexington teaching assistants with the university's writing center, *The WritePlace*. The UK had leased Smarthinking's online platform for their writing center services. Instructors' qualifications included graduate-level coursework, experience in traditional writing instruction, and six months to two years experience in asynchronous OWI. Their orientation included technology platform training, contemporary composition theory and pedagogy as applied to online settings, tutoring pedagogy for traditional settings, and orientation to Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) practices and policies regarding graduation requirement portfolios. The orientation included a holistic portfolio rubric, portions of the guidelines for student portfolios, and an ethics quiz.

Coding Tutoring Interactions

Gere (1982) and Gere and Abbott's (1985) taxonomy, adjusted by Hewett (1998, 2000, 2006), enabled consideration of linguistic function and instructional focus; it provided a unit of measure for understanding student revision (Hewett 2005). In particular, the taxonomy addressed the type and frequency of linguistic units and an interaction's the major focus. The original linguistic function category included language that *informs*, *directs*, *elicits*, and seeks *phatic* contact, to which I added a fourth category "*suggest*." Suggestions function as indirect speech acts with the intention of providing guidance that does not inform, direct, or elicit, yet indirectly does all three. Specifically, suggestions are indirect speech acts where form and function do not match, while informing, directing, and eliciting are direct speech acts where form and function match. Per figure 1, this taxonomy revealed to what degree the conferencing language was predictably clear, (direct speech acts) versus being unclear (mixed form and function of indirect speech acts). In addition one of these functions, instructors also wrote comments that more often

are found in spoken language—phatic-like utterances or backchannel cues that indicate or encourage ongoing connection—like “*ummm*,” “*thinking*” or “☺,” thus accounting for one hundred percent of language used.

Figure 1: Hewett (2005) 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>

The taxonomy also identified the focus of comments. For example, per figure 2, instructors focused on writing *content* and idea development; *formal* properties like organization, style, and grammar; *process*, like research, drafting, and proofing; *context*, which includes the assignment, audience, purpose, and resources used to develop the writing; and *reference*, which repeats or echoes a part of the actual writing or another written comment.

Figure 2: Research Taxonomy

Category I Linguistic Function +	Category 2 Area of Attention +	Category 3 Focus of Consciousness	OR Category 4 Phatic Language
Inform (I)	Writing (W)	Content (C)	Phatic (H)
Direct (D)	Tutorial (T)	Form (F)	
Elicit (E)		Context (X)	
Suggest (S)		Process (P)	
		Reference (R)	

Results

Table 1 presents ANOVA, significance levels, means, and standard deviations relative to the linguistic functions: informing, directing, eliciting, and suggesting, which were primarily writing focused (as opposed to focusing on the tutorial itself) as well as phatic language. The notes describe statistical post-hoc differences.

Table 1: ANOVA on 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: $I > D, E, S, H$; $D > E$.

The majority of instructional comments informed about the writing, followed by those that directed, suggested, and elicited. In other words, the primary instructional response was declarative, explaining to students what instructors saw in the writing or how to proceed in revision. Arguably, teachers should provide critically reflective feedback as information and explanation: “*It looks like about here you veer away from talking about social standing and into character relationships.*” Informative comments not only reflected what was in the writing, but also offered instruction toward writing improvement: “*A thesis is a one-sentence description of your main idea.*” Information helps students by rooting them in their writing and offering new ways to understand it. After informative comments, instructors most used language that directed (e.g., “*Focus on picking one particular aspect of the media to discuss*”) and suggested (e.g., “*You might consider adding some concrete examples or personal stories about getting caught speeding*”). Surprisingly, few comments were questions that genuinely elicited information, which tended to use wh- words and “how”: “*Why is this information important?*” Contemporary educators believe questioning techniques are powerful for helping students discern their ideas, which makes questions’ scarcity in this study curious. Finally, there were few phatic-like utterances.

Table 2 presents ANOVAs, significance levels, means, and standard deviations relative to the instructors’ focus of instruction (content, form, process, context, and reference), which were primarily writing-focused, and phatic language.

Table 2: ANOVA on CFXPRH

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: $C > X, R, H$; $F > X, P, R, H$; $P > R$; $H > R$.

In their instructional focus, instructors focused most often on formal properties, with content, process, context, and reference following in that order. Form involved structure, length, tone, thesis/assertion, organization, and transitions, as well as the surface issues most commonly associated with editing writing (e.g., run-on sentences, fragments, commas, and punctuation). Content was the second most frequent focus and concerned what was in the text at the time of instruction, what could be in the text in its future, and what should not be in the text at all. Process, the third most frequent focus, addressed how the writing moved readers from point to point and methods for revising. Context occurred fourth most frequently; it included the less

specific nature of *ideas*, like what one thinks about issues or what one had *in mind* when writing and definitions of general ideas, like “common knowledge,” as well as the assignment itself. Reference was the least frequent focus in this study. Such comments reflected interaction between participants or with the text, conveyed by straightforward and personal address to the writer’s text or previously archived interactions.

Viewed as a whole, online instructors most often wrote comments that informed about form and secondarily about content. They wrote directions most frequently about formal issues and then process. They suggested most often about content and then form, while they questioned most frequently about content and context. The low frequency of phatic- and reference-based comments likely was due to the interactions’ asynchronous nature.

Revision

How did the students use tutorial feedback? Using Faigley and Witte’s (1987) revision change instrument, I coded eighteen revised essay drafts (from the original fifty-three conferences) from fifteen students (of the original thirty-four). The instrument categorized revision changes as:

- surface formal (i.e., addressed simple copyediting issues),
- surface meaning preserving (i.e., paraphrased concepts, but did not alter them),
- meaning-altering microstructural (i.e., changed the meaning in minor ways), and
- meaning-altering macrostructural changes (i.e., changed the meaning in major ways, altering the text’s message).

On average, students made nine tutorial-related revisions per essay, while the rest of their revisions originated from self-generation, teachers, peer groups, and friends. Students clearly chose among comments, showing authority to decide which advice to take. They made more surface-formal changes and microstructural meaning-altering changes related to conferences than unrelated. They also made significantly more surface meaning-preserving changes *unrelated* to instructional commentary than related. Most revisions were related to inform-based comments, with direct- and suggest-based comments following. Students revised least frequently using questions.

Correctness—a subjective and elusive concept—offered a glimpse into writing improvement. In qualitative revision analysis, the vast majority of students had taken an incorrect passage and corrected it or had taken a correct passage and retained correctness in revision. Generally, the rhetorical force in terms of impact on reader comprehension was moderately helpful, and so the students’ writing improved, albeit little in meaning-altering ways.

Discussion

The context of these tutorial conferences is important for determining their overall instructional value. Most often, the online instructors commented in declarative statements about formal properties. Students, not surprisingly, most often revised sentence-level concerns and responded to declarative statements, but also responded to imperatives and suggestions, which often are indirectly stated imperatives using question forms. When added together, revision uses of directive and suggestive comments equaled the frequency of informative comments. Genuine instructional questions were rare and students rarely addressed them in revision.

Several reasons for these results emerged. For example, the instructors may have been constrained by their students’ circumstances as high school students. The students’ level and an anticipated lack of syntactic maturity and verbal fluency may have influenced these post-

secondary instructors to be somewhat more directive than inquisitive. Additionally, the instructors developed their responses according to their students' context. In "Guidelines for the Generation of Student Work for Writing Portfolios," the KDE specifically outlined how instructors could address student writing and indicated the types of comments that they 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. Conversely, they were instructed specifically not to change the student writing, correct errors, or add/subtract any details. Instructors took a required "ethics" quiz that exemplified possible gray areas.

According to informal post-study interviews, instructors understood that they could signal problem areas, but that they were not to "correct" student writing or to tell a student how to "fix" the writing. Since they most often informed students via their comments, they abided by this injunction; however, the content of informative comments also revealed that they seemed unsure of how to talk about or teach writing when they were not allowed to provide guidance on how to "fix" or develop it. In other words, their online teaching strategies may have been too undeveloped to provide necessary flexibility. Thus, many of the informative comments comprised simple pointers allowed by the guidelines and that kept the comments within the realm of the "ethical": "*misspelled word*" or "*missing comma*." They also wrote such reader-responsive 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.*" Typical in this study, neither type of comment taught a lesson or provided a student with specific next steps—that is, neither taught students how to proceed in revision. Additionally, instructors asked few genuine questions, although these were encouraged.

Addressing form-based issues seemed to be an ethically dicey proposition, at least by the defined boundaries of the guidelines. Generally acknowledged contemporary theory and pedagogy eschews a focus on form over content and process. Thus, it is very interesting that overall the online instructors offered so many comments regarding form, and that they provided directions about form as frequently as they did—given their explicit prohibition against "fixing" surface features or giving the student too much information about editing. Why was there an intense focus on form and process in these tutorials and, concurrently, less intense focus on content and context?

First, the type of interaction—a tutorial written by unknown online instructors—did not encourage high-level content development. Students were responsible for describing their assignments and what they wanted from the interaction, yet few explained their assignments beyond naming a genre; their minimal response might have inhibited the instructors from venturing too deeply into idea-constructive waters. Students presented their writing as drafts, but they tended not to ask for help with improving, changing, or deepening their ideas. Instead, they asked about formal concerns like sentence faults and proofreading. This request-based scenario may have led instructors to offer form-based feedback more frequently than they otherwise might have. Further, form-based responses engaged the online instructors in areas where they were certain they could assist, given that they lacked close knowledge of a classroom teacher's expectations for the essays. Therefore, the fact that content-based comments occurred second most frequently seems remarkable.

Second, the instructional setting led those instructors just as surely *toward* formal issues as it steered them *away* from directing students. This deep inconsistency created a tension that was difficult to surmount. The guidelines stated: "Parents, friends, and other students assume

roles of listeners, responders, and encouragers” (24); the online instructors reasonably extended this list of participants and responders. This document outlined the types of comments that online instructors, as assistants to the teacher (28)ⁱ, might make. The section that discussed the “ethics in marking student papers” included eight questions that teachers might ask about evaluating student papers. Of the eight, four addressed 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 teachers’ and online instructors’ boundaries, both the questions and answers forced a focus on the formal issues inherent in producing a strong (or visually strong) piece of writing. The KDE focus on formal issues made clear that instructors should attend similarly. In other words, the instructors were to some extent doing what they were trained to do.

A third possible explanation is similar. The instructors received copies of the KDE’s holistic scoring guides during their training. These scoring rubrics were used to evaluate final student portfolios as novice, apprentice, proficient, or distinguished. The scoring criteria were divided into six common areas:

- purpose/audience,
- idea development/support,
- organization,
- sentences,
- language, and
- correctness.

The first two areas were idea-oriented, in keeping with the instructors’ secondary focus of instruction. The third area, organization, certainly is a common instructional focal point. The final three areas, all formal concerns, also are not unusual. Indeed, the examiner prioritization of formal concerns is consonant with contemporary writing pedagogy, which generally privileges idea fluency and organization over correctness, or formal issues. However, the final three areas comprised one-half of the rubric’s total focus, revealing that fully half of the student outcomes were form-based. As such, particularly when combined with the students’ own stated instructional desires, these formal concerns necessarily would have prompted the instructors’ attention.

Because suggestions tend to be indirectly stated imperatives (non-straightforward and infused with overt politeness) and may give hints and clues for revision, they seemed problematic regarding the guidelines. Suggestions had the quality of leading the student to a particular action or next step that, generally speaking, the instructors were restricted from addressing in their comments overall. In a way, suggestions allowed those instructional specifics to “sneak out” under the guise of conditional statements and rhetorical questions, enabling a sort of teaching that the KDE prohibitions especially denied and indicating a communication intention of indirection in a setting where straightforward teaching was prohibited.

Implications

This study indicates that the KDE's apparent primary focus on "fixing" or "correcting" secondary student writing, as outlined in training provided to the online instructors/tutors, was unhelpful because it did not address how to teach online when prohibited from straightforwardly addressing ways to improve the writing. This focus indicated that teaching students about the specifics of their writing was considered cheating. Moreover, training that included complete KDE documentation and classroom teacher response to at least one tutorial would have helped online instructors hone their approaches within the boundaries of portfolio development.

More broadly, secondary educators concerned with online writing pedagogy should reconceive straightforward teaching in online settings as a suitable and necessary action when writing is shared between online instructor/tutor and student. Administrators need to be convinced that such teaching in online settings is both valuable and indispensable. Classroom teachers and online instructors need to allow themselves to develop instructional methods that move beyond surface correctness and into developing strong ideas, strategies, expression, and sentences. Finally, students need orientation for anticipating and using online instructional commentary to improve their writing beyond surface issues.

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ⁱ The 2003 update is available online at <http://www.kde.state.ky.us/NR/rdonlyres/216E259A-8B6D-4810-9DA4-66BF7280DD78/0/WritingTeachersHandbook2003rev.pdf>; see chapter 8, pages 30-31. These guidelines state that draft responders were allowed to write mini-lessons, use minimal marking, or model correctness through their own writing (34), but the online instructors apparently did not receive this portion of the guidelines.