Facilitating Secondary-level Online Tutoring
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Abstract

Online instruction via tutoring requires clear language choices that provide information, guide through directions, and ask questions of students while avoiding more indirect suggestive language. This article summarizes and discusses a study of Kentucky secondary students who used online tutorials to revise their writing in preparation for high-stakes graduation portfolios. Online tutors were guided by written directives that influenced their tutorials. This article concludes with implications and actions for an alternative approach to online tutoring in secondary settings.

Introduction

Secondary-level students can benefit from online tutoring to help them develop and revise their writing. Because most online instruction is delivered in primarily textual ways, computer-mediated tutoring requires clear language choices that provide information, guide through directions, and ask direct questions of students while avoiding more indirect suggestive language. Additionally, to the extent that educators value content and development over formal surface properties, such tutoring should focus primarily on global, higher order concerns over local, lower order concerns. In other words, the intention should be to teach students how to revise their drafts with specific advice and strategies. To this end, this article summarizes and discusses a study of Kentucky secondary-level students who used online tutorials to revise their writing in preparation for high-stakes graduation portfolios. Online instructors/tutors (henceforth simply called “tutors”) were guided by Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) written directives that influenced their tutorials. The directives were not written with the nuances of online pedagogy in mind, which led to unclear advice, suggestive language, and a less-than-helpful focus on formal properties over content. This article concludes with implications and actions for an alternative approach to online tutoring in secondary settings.

Study of Online Tutoring

The language that online tutors use in tutorials reveals whether they are providing straightforward information, questions, or directions to students versus potentially confusing, indirect suggestions. Hewett (2006, 2005, 2000, 1998) and Moser (2002) conducted recent studies of such language use in online settings. A 2002-2003 study of Kentucky high school students and graduate-level tutors employed with the University of Kentucky (UK), Lexington online writing center grounds this article (see www.XYZ for the study’s methods, data, and analysis). In this study, I examined fifty-three tutorial conferences from thirty-four secondary students. I considered the linguistic functions and instructional focus of the online tutors’

commentary. Then, using textual analysis of eighteen revised essay drafts from fifteen of the students, I analyzed how those interactions were used in the students' revisions.

Students initiated the asynchronous tutorial conference by completing a submission form about their assignments, goals, and writing concerns. The tutors responded by writing comments and advice to the students through their essays. In subsequent resubmissions of the essays, the students' revision choices revealed what they had learned from the initial tutorial. How tutors used language and addressed particular issues showed to some degree what they thought should occur in online writing conferences. How students revised demonstrated what they thought was important in developing their writing.

The majority of instructional comments informed students about their writing using *declarative* statements like "*your paragraph needs to be expanded*." Statistically, these were followed by *imperative* comments that directed or used commands (e.g., "*expand your paragraph*"), those that *suggested* through indirect language (e.g., *is it possible to expand your paragraph?*" and "y*ou might expand your paragraph*", and those that elicited through *questions* using wh- words and "how" (e.g., "*how can you expand your paragraph?*"). It is important to note that most suggestions conveyed commands for revision hidden in indirect language.

In their instructional focus, tutors most often addressed *formal properties* like structure, length, tone, thesis, organization, transitions, and the surface, or lower order, issues most commonly associated with editing (e.g., run-on sentences, fragments, commas, and punctuation). Statistically, this focus was followed by comments about *essay content*, *writing process*, *assignment context*, and *essay reference* in this order. Viewed as a whole, online tutors most often wrote comments that informed about form and secondarily about content. They wrote imperatives most frequently about form and then process. They wrote suggestions most often about content and form, while they questioned most frequently about content and context.

How did the students use tutorials? I employed Faigley and Witte's (1987) revision change instrument to categorize revision changes as those that:

- addressed simple copyediting issues;
- paraphrased concepts, but did not alter them;
- changed the meaning in minor ways; and
- 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 personal ownership in deciding which advice to take. They made more editing and minor meaning-altering changes related to tutorials than unrelated. They also made significantly more editing changes *unrelated* to tutorials than related. Most revisions were related to declarative language, with imperative and suggestive language following. However, when added together, the number of revisions connected to imperative and suggestive comments equaled the frequency of declarative ones. Students revised least frequently in response to wh-/how (non-rhetorical or yes/no) questions.

Correctness—a subjective and elusive concept—offered a glimpse into writing improvement. In qualitative revision analysis, the 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

Various reasons exist for these results. For example, the tutors may have been influenced by their students' secondary level and anticipated a lack of syntactic maturity and verbal fluency, which possibly made them more directive than inquisitive in commenting. Of potentially greater influence, however, the tutors developed their tutorials according to their KDE training. In "Guidelines for the Generation of Student Work for Writing Portfolios," the KDE specifically outlined how tutors 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, providing a key to those markings, and mini-lessons, among others. Tutors were forbidden from changing the student writing in any way, correcting errors, or adding/subtracting any details. A required "ethics" quiz exemplified possible gray areas.

According to informal post-study interviews, tutors understood that they could signal problem areas, but that they were not to "correct" student writing or tell a student how to "fix" it. They expressed frustration that they were not allowed to tutor as they would for their post-secondary tutees. In a textual setting like these asynchronous tutorials, they wondered how to tutor without writing—teaching—*how* to address writing weaknesses. The content of their declarative comments indicated uncertainty regarding how to talk about or teach writing when they were not allowed to provide guidance on how to "fix" or develop it. Thus, many of the informative comments comprised "ethically" allowed pointers: *"misspelled word"* or *"missing comma."* Note, however, that while these comments are straightforward in that they use declarative language, their instructional message is not necessarily straightforward in that they do not teach the student anything about where, for example, a missing comma was and why it was considered missing. Tutors 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, although the KDE encouraged questions, few were asked.

Addressing formal properties would seem 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 essay content and writing process. Thus, it is very interesting given their explicit prohibition against "fixing" surface features or giving students too much information about editing that the online tutors offered many comments regarding form, and that they used imperative language about form frequently. (Indeed, "*misspelled word*," from above could be considered an end-run around the "fixing" constraint because it indicates an easy "fix" for students; left unattended, portfolio readers would view it negatively.) Removing process, context, and reference from the picture, we must wonder why there was intense focus on form in these tutorials and, concurrently, less intense focus on content.

First, these tutorials did not lead to 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 the essay's genre; their minimal explanations might have inhibited the tutors from venturing too deeply into idea-constructive waters. Students presented drafts of their writing, but they tended not to ask for help with improving, changing, or deepening their ideas. Instead, they asked about formal properties like sentence faults and proofreading. This request-based scenario may have led tutors to offer form-based feedback more frequently than they otherwise might have. Further, form-based responses engaged the online tutors in areas where they knew they could assist, given that they may have lacked intimate knowledge of secondary-level expectations for these essays. Therefore, the fact that content-based comments occurred second most frequently seemed remarkable.

Second, the instructional setting led the tutors 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 portfolio guidelines stated: "Parents, friends, and other students assume roles of listeners, responders, and encouragers" (24), which presumably included the online tutors. This document outlined the types of comments that online tutors, as assistants to the teacher (28) [1] might make. The section that discussed the "ethics in marking student papers" included seven questions that teachers might ask about evaluating student writing. Of these, *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 classroom teachers' and online tutors' boundaries, both the questions and answers forced a focus on the formal properties inherent in producing a visually strong, but potentially content-weak, piece of writing. The KDE's own focus on formal properties made clear that tutors should attend similarly. In other words, the tutors were responding as they had been trained to do.

A third possible explanation is similar. The tutors 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 content-oriented, in keeping with the tutors' secondary focus of instruction. The third area, organization, is a common instructional focal point regarding formal

properties. The final three areas, also formal concerns, are typical in that they are foremost in both educators' and the public's minds. Indeed, the scoring guide's priorities are generally consonant with contemporary writing pedagogy, which privileges higher order concerns like audience and idea fluency over lower order concerns like sentences and correctness. However, formal properties comprised two-thirds of the rubric's total focus, revealing that more than half of the student outcomes were form-based. As such, particularly when combined with the students' own stated instructional desires, these formal properties necessarily prompted the tutors' attention.

Prohibited against overtly teaching and steered toward surface concerns, the tutors' language became less straightforward. 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 to me problematic regarding the guidelines. Suggestions had the quality of covertly leading the student to a particular action or next step that tutors believed they were restricted from addressing overtly in their comments. For example, in the suggestion "*You might consider adding some concrete examples or personal stories about getting caught speeding,*" the tutor led the student to specific material for an anecdote. The suggestive language (e.g., "*you might consider*") absolved the tutor from having given the student too much of a "hint" under the stated rules for instruction. Yet, such suggestions allowed 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 requiring indirection in a setting where straightforward teaching seemed to be prohibited.

Implications and actions

This study indicated that the KDE's apparent primary focus for instruction was on the surface of student writing even though it prohibited "fixing" or "correcting" it. The tutors perceived that providing instructional commentary would "give students the answer" and, therefore, nullify the writing as the student's own. Whether these guidelines were the most appropriate in a traditional face-to-face setting is debatable; however, they were especially unhelpful in an online tutorial setting because they did not address *how to teach online when prohibited from straightforwardly addressing ways to improve the writing*. The KDE training focus implied that it was cheating to teach students about the specifics of their writing and how to improve it in this portfolio development scenario; yet, when teaching writing online, such specifics are particularly necessary. This case of the KDE illustrates how tutoring or other instructional guidelines that are written without accounting for the online setting may provide insufficient guidance when applied to those settings. Suggestions for an alternative approach to online tutoring follow.

First, when developing guidelines, secondary educators need to address online pedagogies explicitly. Although in this case, the KDE was testing the benefits of online tutoring for their students, their documents prevented the tutors from teaching; the tutorials reflected the documents' stated concern over the ethics of instructing students without providing too much information. In an online setting, instruction occurs textually—one must be able to write about what is happening in the writing in order to help students revise. Therefore, guidance that prohibits certain kinds of instructional methods may lead educators to the end-run of suggestive language rather than the helpfulness of straightforward language.

Second, students need orientation for anticipating and using online tutorials to improve their writing beyond surface issues. As noted above, the students in this study did not provide complete and descriptive explanations of their assignments, desired outcomes, writing challenges, and/or goals. Because the tutorial submission form may have been partially at fault, it should be studied for strengths and weaknesses. However, students also had responsibility for providing tutors with complete information about their writing. Additionally, they needed to think about their writing beyond lower-order surface concerns, although admittedly, their own concerns mirrored the KDE's documented requirements. Educators should work through a model submission form and tutorial with students in their face-to-face classrooms to help them use the tutorials more proactively.

Finally, 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 as tutor (or teacher) and student. They need to cultivate instructional methods that move beyond surface correctness and into developing strong ideas, strategies, expression, and sentences. Such strategies include, but are not limited to the following:

- Think through the lesson the student needs to learn before commenting, particularly considering the lessons that apply more globally than locally.
- In addition to critical feedback, write mini-lessons that clearly address at least one core issue in the student's writing. Be sure to explain the problem, teach one or more ways to fix it, use your own and the student's writing as models, and give students do-able tasks as follow-up revision steps. Expect to write several sentences to two paragraphs with bullets or numbers for outlining next steps.
- When composing comments and mini-lessons:
    - Use comments that inform often and freely;
    - Write straightforward directions, and include examples and/or choices;
    - Write open-ended questions that use "how" and wh-words; and
    - Avoid suggestions or present them straightforwardly (e.g., "*I suggest that…"* or *"I think you should do XYZ because…*").
- Seek guided practice in reading others' online tutorials/teaching and in revising your own online conferences to practice a mix of commenting styles. Make opportunities to critique each other in non-threatening but specific ways that support online instructional goals.

Endnotes

[1] 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.

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