

Embedded Tutoring to Enhance Dialogic Feedback and Improve Student Self-Regulation

Heidi Marshall
Gabrielle Valentic
Samara Rasmussen

The Chicago School of Professional Psychology Online Campus

Abstract

Online higher education writing centers are often viewed as a space separate from students' learning environment; a landscape of assistance rather than true education. The goal of this pilot program was to create a geography of shared experience between students, faculty, and writing specialists to facilitate the process of enhancing student self-regulation of and self-efficacy for writing. This was accomplished through an embedded tutor pilot in which professional online writing center staff members engaged in early capstone courses for fully-online doctoral programs. The pilot also aimed to enhance faculty efficacy for supporting student writing.

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The goal of this project was to facilitate the process of enhancing dialogic feedback and student self-regulation through an embedded tutor model in which professional Online Campus Writing Center (OCWC) staff members were embedded in early dissertation courses for fully-online psychology doctoral programs, including international psychology, applied behavior analysis, and organizational leadership, to provide academic writing feedback on major written assignments that serve as the precursor to the traditional five-chapter dissertation or master's thesis. Students in these programs are 80% female with a mean age of 33.5. More than 24% of students identify as Black/African American, 16.3% as Latina(a)/Hispanic, and 40.8% as White/Caucasian. Approximately

3% of students identify as International.

Quality written feedback, particularly when it is timely and proximal (Gredler, 2018), can develop strong relationships between students, faculty, and support staff—those who make up the dialogic triad—and can clarify confusion and enhance engagement regarding the academic content and academic expectations of graduate students' writing. To promote feedback improvement, the embedded tutor model aimed (a) to enhance faculty competence in identifying student writing deficiencies and enhance faculty self-efficacy for referring students to appropriate writing support resources by modelling effective in-line, proximal feedback using MS Word and modeling effective technology-enhanced feedback for specific learning, such as screen-casting and images, and personalized summative feedback and (b) to allow online writing center staff members to work alongside faculty, increasing students' understanding of writing-related feedback, self-regulation, and motivation for improving their academic writing at an early point in their dissertation or thesis journey.

Early intervention that applies Gredler's (2018) recommendations for proximal, customized, and personalized writing feedback helps students self-regulate the writing process and better understand how to improve their skills and leverage services available to them. In this context, self-regulation refers to the student's ability to self-initiate the writing process, including writing, revising, and seeking support. Supporting students in the thesis or dissertation process, in turn, requires that writing support professionals be mindful of timing, negotiation with committee members, and other impacts on the student writing process. Modeling this to faculty can provide a new set of parameters for how to manage their and their students' expectations of and regulation for academic writing. However, Morris (2017) warns:

The worst best practice is to adhere to, or go searching for, best practices. I have been in countless rooms with teachers, technologists, instructional designers, and administrators calling for recommendations or a list of tools they should use, strategies that work, practices

that cannot fail to produce results in the classroom. But digital tools, strategies, and best practices are a red herring in digital learning. Learning always starts with people. Instead of asking ‘What tool will we need?’ ask ‘What behaviors will need to be in place?’ (para. 34)

The dialogic feedback process does just that: establishes what behaviors need to be in place to foster effective learning, particularly in the digital realm. The embedded tutor pilot program was launched in order to bring the writing center into the online classroom. Embedded tutors integrate required and student-initiated feedback, emphasizing dialogic tutoring as a behavior, not a best practice, critical to digital pedagogy. In other words, embedded tutoring brings writing support both to audiences that would have sought it out and to audiences that would not have otherwise known its benefits. Feedback is provided to students via asynchronous reviews leveraging MS Word track changes and comments as well as screen capture and audio feedback using platforms such as Screencast-o-Matic. Embedded tutors also offer live sessions to both the faculty and students via GoToMeeting during which they model the revision process.

By leaving the writing center space and entering into a space normally reserved for student-faculty interaction, online writing center staff are able to enhance not only the appreciation for writing center work but also the dialogue surrounding it. In addition, working within a course allows writing centers to engage more actively not only with students and faculty but also with curricular outcomes. Moving away from independent, isolated programming into the classroom challenges the very nature of the writing center paradigm, yet early research shows that significant impacts can be made on student success and retention when such integration occurs (e.g., Carpenter, Whiddon, & Dvorak, 2014).

The pilot program has refined the traditional canvas of tutored writing feedback, teaching appreciation for the craft to faculty by modeling online writing feedback best practices and the art of dialogue. Such feedback “contributes to student self-regulation: the planning, monitoring and evaluation of learning, and the adaption

of learning strategies to task demands and progress” (Pekrun et al., as cited by Yang & Carless, 2013). In particular, dialogic feedback contributes to students’ ability to complete iterative writing projects, such as dissertations and theses, that rely on students’ abilities to self-regulate their learning.

Background & Theoretical and Empirical Framework

Primary to the growing imperative to better serve online graduate students is what Yang and Carless (2013) referred to as a dialogic feedback process, which most effectively fosters student self-regulation and learning in higher education contexts. Online graduate education is driven by accountability and assessment, integral to which is the feedback process: the manner in which instructors are providing and students are receiving feedback on their work and their learning. Feedback “contributes to student self-regulation: the planning, monitoring and evaluation of learning, and the adaption of learning strategies to task demands and progress” (Pekrun et al., as cited by Yang & Carless, 2013). Feedback must go beyond fostering students’ skills and content knowledge to help them develop critical judgment, problem-solving, self-reflection, and appraisal (Yang & Carless, 2013). Yet, “students find the effectiveness of feedback one of the least satisfactory aspects of their university experience” (Yang & Carless, 2013, p. 285). A dialogic style of feedback, however, contributes to students’ abilities to regulate their desired level of understanding and their current actual level of understanding, and includes three dimensions: “cognitive, social-affective and structural” (Yang & Carless, 2013, p. 287).

The cognitive dimension of dialogic feedback is primarily the domain of the faculty member of the particular course/discipline in that it involves providing feedback on the content technique, strategy, and overall quality of student work as it relates to the specific field. The social-affective domain is where a specific management is required of the relationship and balance of power between the instructor and the student. For example, if a student has a low level of experience with and knowledge of the field and is being assessed at a higher level of understanding, then their social-affective dimension of feedback might be negatively affected. This, in turn,

prevents the faculty member from helping the student to achieve increasing self-efficacy for learning as their sense of belonging to and having an identity within the discipline is limited (Yang & Carless, 2013).

This is particularly problematic when the student experiences a perceived imbalance of power between themselves and the instructor. However, as Yang and Carless (2013) indicated, a tutor relationship can help to enhance student performance by bringing balance to the student relationship with the institution (Yang & Carless, 2013). The structural dimension of dialogic feedback is the timing, methods, modes, and physical platforms in which feedback takes place and offers the most opportunity for support staff to collaborate with faculty to enhance the other two dimensions. By partnering in the online learning platform, writing center staff members and faculty can together offer enhanced cognitive and social-affective feedback to students, creating a dialogic triad between faculty, student, and support staff.

Significance

An embedded model within online writing centers can promote dialogic feedback, level the balance of power, leverage technology for more efficient and open communication, and model to faculty how to navigate the grounds of both discipline-specific and academic-specific writing expectations. In essence, expanding the scope of instruction early, alerting the faculty member of how dialogic feedback can translate across institution platforms and departments, will strengthen both faculty and student confidence and, ultimately, the students' ability to self-regulate as they progress to higher levels of capstone writing.

Methods

This project was not intended as a formal empirical research study, but rather as a precursor to such. The embedded tutor pilot launched with the Spring II term start, with three writing specialists (tutors) embedded across six doctoral-level capstone online course sections (See Table 1). Specialists included one master's-prepared writing and ESL specialist, one EdD-prepared higher education

writing and dissertation specialist, and one PhD-prepared writing and dissertation specialist. The master's-level specialist was embedded in the master's-level courses and the EdD and PhD-prepared specialists were embedded in the doctoral-level courses.

During the term, embedded tutors/specialists:

- Posted weekly announcements and writing tips using a combination of text, image, and video.
- Selected 1-2 assignment(s) on which to provide 1:1 writing feedback (most were scheduled during Week 4 of the 8-week courses).
- Delivered one real-time Manuscript Review webinar to demonstrate the processes of feedback and revision and/or provided 1:1 live sessions to students and faculty. In some sections, the live session was offered once to all students and the faculty member. In other sections, each live session was offered separately to each student. This was determined on faculty preference as faculty attendance was strongly encouraged.

In addition, prior to the start of the Spring II term, the OCWC:

- Created of a suite of over 25 writing tips (text, image, and video-based) to enhance dialogic feedback from tutors and faculty to students. Embedded tutors/specialists posted these as “Weekly Tips” in their assigned classrooms, selecting those most relevant based on course description, assignments, and course outcomes, and faculty were encouraged to use them in their feedback as well.
- Developed and launched to faculty in the pilot the Feedback Repository with writing tips organized by writing pathway, category, and topic, providing faculty a user-friendly, centralized method for learning about how to provide writing feedback as well providing faculty with a set of accurate, standardized tips they can use in their feedback to students.

During the Spring II term, the OCWC:

- Delivered real-time Manuscript Review webinars and sessions to students during which faculty were able to observe the processes of feedback and revision.
- Provided 1:1 feedback to students, thus, also providing best practices models for faculty for providing writing feedback.
- Students and faculty in the nonpilot sections did not receive any specific interventions; however, the course syllabi listed methods for seeking writing support through the Online Campus Writing Center and students in all sections continued to have access to the writing center schedule for paper reviews, writing center webinars, and writing center web-based resources and tutorials.

Table 1

Course Sections with Pilot

Course Name	Pilot Section	# students	Nonpilot Section	# students
Dissertation Proposal Preparation	A & E	7	B, C, D, F, G, H, I, J	16
Advanced Applied Project III	A	3	D	2
Advanced Research Project II	A	6	C	3
Research Experience II	B	9	A	7
Qualitative Research Methods	B	9	A	8

Findings

Following the completion of the Spring II term, the writing center collected completed final assignments (or equivalent) from each course, including both the pilot and nonpilot sections. Nonpilot sections were those sections without an embedded tutor. Samples from each set of written assignments were randomized and coded and then blind scored by reviewers using a writing rubric and standardized writing error inventory to determine if a relationship exists between students who experienced an embedded tutor and writing skills. Three paper samples from each section were selected, and each was blind scored by two reviewers. Rubric scores reveal that, overall, students in courses with an embedded tutor produced writing with fewer errors across four categories: APA, Higher Order Concerns, Syntax, and Grammar and Mechanics. Each category was scored 1-4, for a total of 16 possible rubric points. The score

difference between pilot and nonpilot sections was most prominent in Research Experience II, during which students are tasked with drafting a dissertation literature review (See Figure 1).

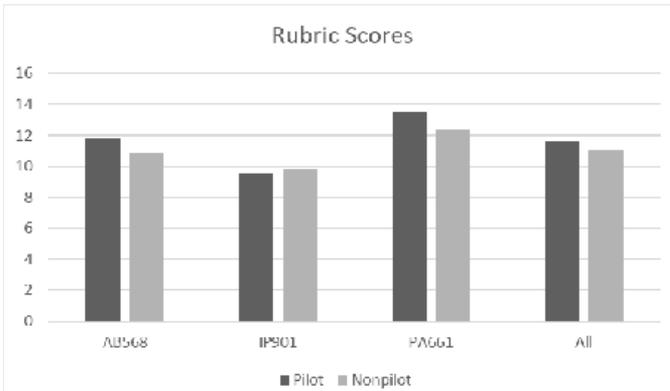


Figure 1. Rubric scores for paper samples across all pilot and nonpilot sections. AB/PA—Applied Behavior Analysis; IP—International Psychology.

In addition to rubric scoring on major assignments, during the final week of the Spring II term, the writing center administered a 10-item Writing Self-Regulation Inventory to students in each course, including both the pilot and nonpilot sections. Scores were analyzed to determine if having an embedded tutor affected students' perceptions of writing skills and self-regulation. In addition, all results helped to further understand the broader population's writing self-regulation and served as an additional validity measure of the tool. Students in the pilot sections were informed that their course was participating in the OCWC pilot program, and students in both the pilot and nonpilot sections were asked to complete the inventory to help inform OCWC service and resource development.

Areas of self-efficacy for and self-regulation of writing that scored higher among pilot students than nonpilot students included:

- I am able to learn from my mistakes with clear feedback,
- I seek out resources for improvement, and
- I learn from my mistakes from one draft to the next.

These three areas are critical to sustained writing (and overall academic) success of students and are a promising demonstration of how having a tutor to complete the dialogic triad can positively impact student experience and success. Students in the nonpilot sections of the International Psychology (IP) courses reflected stronger self-regulation scores. Follow up is needed to determine specific reasons for this.

In addition to evaluation of the pilot program's impact on students, we administered a final faculty self-efficacy assessment to both pilot and nonpilot faculty (see Figure 2).

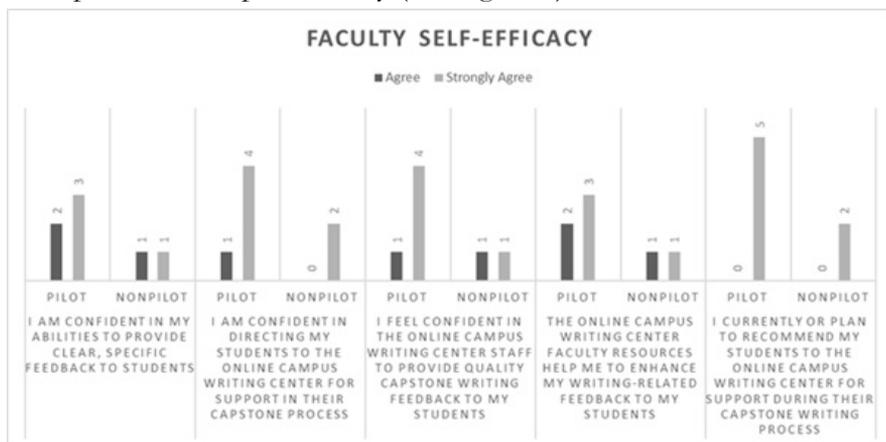


Figure 2. Faculty Self-Efficacy Assessment scores.

Faculty in the pilot scored higher in all areas of self-efficacy for writing support over faculty in nonpilot sections, showing that having a writing professional in the course can enhance faculty's own self-efficacy for writing and improve understanding for how to better support and dialogue with students about writing.

Discussion

This was a small pilot study with a group of prepped instructors and program directors willing to engage with the online writing center. Although we identified possible positive outcomes, there is a need for continued data collection to more thoroughly analyze the impact(s) of having embedded tutors within courses. For example, it appears from this initial pilot that embedded writing specialists in graduate courses has some positive effect on academic

writing efficacy among students. When feedback is provided in a safe learning environment, students are able to receive and utilize the feedback more efficiently and effectively. Instructors are also able to focus on content and allow the writing specialists to address the writing so students can more fully convey and apply their growing content knowledge. In this manner, students are able to simultaneously receive more content-focused feedback from faculty and more writing-specific feedback from writing specialists. In addition, the program directors made the initial decision to participate in the pilot and instructed their faculty members on what to expect and what was expected of them. We acknowledge that faculty participation might not be so readily obtained in the future as the program grows.

Carpenter, Whiddon, and Dvorak (2014) noted, “classroom and writing center geographies are seen as distinct, situating teaching and tutoring within different pedagogical landscapes” (p. 3). As Carpenter et al. recommended, our embedded tutoring pilot laid the initial structure needed to bridge this pedagogical divide. The next steps will be to extend and formalize our pilot to a new set of courses, focusing on classes that students take at the outset of their program and, more specifically, on developing writing self-regulation, self-efficacy for writing, and writing skill sets early on in students’ graduate writing journey. As DeLoach, Angel, Breaux, Keebler, and Klompien (2014) emphasized, during students’ initial exposure to higher-level writing, having a tutor present can provide a “communicative bridge between the instructor and the student” (p. 10). Such a bridge assist both the faculty member and the student by enhancing the learning dialogue, leveling and aligning expectations, and contributing to student self-regulation of and self-efficacy for the writing process.

In addition, future iterations of the pilot will need to include more intentional data collection processes, ensuring the ability to collect longitudinal data for students who experience an embedded tutor early on in their program. Future pilot models should also include tracking writing rubric scores by individual category to gain a better understanding of what specific writing skills embedded tutors are and are not able to improve.

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