

The effectiveness of online and on-to-one tutoring in the writing center on the students' achievement: a multiple case study

Wessam Al Chibani

Notre Dame University – Louaize, Main Road, Zouk Mosbeh, Kesserwan, Lebanon

E-mail address: wchibani@hotmail.com , wchibani@ndu.edu.lb

ABSTRACT

The Writing Center at Notre Dame University-Louaize (NDU) is a place where students can improve and develop their writing skills by working one-on-one with tutors. This study compares between the progress performance of students who come regularly to the Writing Center to work one-to-one with the same tutor and use the online tutorial services to students who don't visit the Writing Center, but only depend on the traditional classroom instructions and direct instructor's comments and feedback on the writing. This study is divided into two parts. As a start, 80 students were asked to write two in-class essays on two different days. Each of these essays was considered as draft one. Then, in the first part of the study, 58 students sat twice per week one-on-one with the same tutor in order to seek help before writing draft two for the two essays. 29 students met face-to-face with the tutors and the other 29 students worked on-line with the tutors. Whereas, the other 22 students were asked to write the second draft of the same two essays without any one-on-one or on-line tutoring sessions. Both qualitative and quantitative data analyses were conducted. Main results showed that the students who worked one-on-one and on-line with the same tutors in the Writing Center exhibited noticeable improvement than the students who relied only on the traditional classroom instruction and direct instructor's feedback on draft one. Moreover, the students who worked on-line with their tutors got the highest scores. The study concluded with recommendations addressed to universities, instructors, and students in order to enhance and motivate students to attend the Writing Center on regular basis.

Keywords: Writing Center; tutor; tutoring; help seeking; performance; feedback

1. DEFINITIONS

Tutoring: “Academic support via instruction or guidance; assistance with course work to help students gain proficiency as appropriate” (Vasquez, 2009). Tutoring may be performed in one-to-one or in tiny groups and may include support from professional, non-professionals or older college students. In this proposed study, all tutoring sessions were conducted by professional tutors who are enrolled in teaching writing skills in Notre Dame University and are free of charge.

Help Seeking: a strategy operated by persons who want to solve a conflict in order to achieve a wanted goal (Vasquez, 2009).

2. OVERVIEW of the NDU WRITING CENTER

The Writing Center at Notre Dame University is a free-of-charge facility where students meet one-on-one with tutors, work on-line with tutors, and have access to internet and other writing related handouts. In the Writing Center also, students can use the computers to type or fix their writing and do on-line grammar exercises related to their writing.

3. PURPOSE of the STUDY

For different purposes, writing has become one of the most important ways of communication people rely. Even though writing requires steps to be followed, writers can always benefit from peer reviewers and other readers who go over the writing, provide constructive and direct feedback, and interact with them while their writing gets to its final shape. Thus, it is an essential nowadays for universities to support their students with Writing Centers where the students can seek help and work one-to-one with tutors. Using technology along with tutoring may help students strengthen their writing performance.

The purpose of the study is to compare students' progress between students attending the Writing Center, working with same tutors one-to-one, and using the online tutorial services to students depending on the traditional classroom instruction.

3. 1. The objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are: (1) To examine the progress of the students' writing skills after seeking help in the Writing Center; (2) to compare students' progress between students attending the Writing Center and working with same tutors one-to-one to students depending on the traditional classroom instruction; (3) to observe the fact that help seeking students score higher in exams; and (4) and to observe the benefits of using the online tutorial services to students' writing.

3. 2. Research Questions

- 1- Do students attending the Writing Center regularly progress their writing skills
- 2- Does working with the same tutor effects the student's writing skills positively?
- 3- Does help seeking lead to higher academic achievement?
- 4- Does an online tutorial service help students improve their writing skills by following tutors' comments online?

4. LITERATURE

Writing has become one of the most important tasks people rely on while communicating for different purposes. Even though writing requires steps to be followed, writers can always benefit from readers who go over their writing and interact with them while their writing gets to its final shape. In particular, English achievement is important to be taken into consideration because research has verified that success in English classes is a

judge of a student's capacity to complete their studies in the future academic life (Dillon, Patthey-Chavez, Thomas-Spiegel, 2000).

According to Vasquez (2009), "almost all community colleges offer remedial courses. Tutoring becomes a way for improving students' achievement." In fact, according to Hendriksen, Yang, Love, and Hall (2005) and Gribbons and Dixon (2001), research displays that students who help seek and are part of tutoring sessions perform better than students who do not. As cited in Vasquez (2009), Hendriksen et al. (2005) for example, "found that 75% of tutored students passed their courses as compared to 71% of non-tutored students. Additionally, this same study found that tutored."

From here, the development of writing centers was introduced and universities started opening writing centers and insisting on providing the students with good services, efficient facilities, and well trained tutors. In addition to improving academic achievement and performance, studies show that students, who help seek and join tutoring, reveal better attitude performance (Gribbons & Dixon, 2001). Thus, it is logic to conclude that students who seek help from the Writing centers perform better in their academic life.

Besides tutoring face-to-face, technology has become a very important issue both to students and to teachers. It simplifies the process of tutoring and motivates the students since technology is a main part of their life nowadays. According to Artz, Barnett, and Scopetta (2009), online tutoring began in 2001 as a way to increase outreach and enhance the face-to-face tutoring program. And for students, Artz, et al. (2009) exclaim that "online tutoring was a natural outgrowth of the tools they were already using." In addition to technology, computers are being used in daily life, thus Artz, et al. (2009) documented that computers were being used productively for modern teaching of composition, counting online peer exchanges. "These works envisioned electronic networks, web authoring tools, and intranet and internet connections engendering collaborative learning environments" (Artz, et al., 2009).

Tutoring is one of the major tasks in the writing center that should be accomplished in an excellent and efficient way. Performance and work quality of tutors differ from one teacher to another. However, there are some basic standards the tutor should have such as offering efficient instructions needed for effective writing in an academic environment, providing a pleasant environment in which students can gain confidence in their ability to write in English, ensuring opportunities for students to practice writing in English across the entire curriculum, sharing the writing with another qualified tutor, and editing with the student according to the given suggestions.

In addition, tutors at the writing center are trained to serve students of all majors, respect any student writing capability, and ensure using effective strategies for making students understand the correct writing concepts. Harris (1992) states, "Tutors propose to the writers the opportunity to write, think, and talk with someone who through mutual talk and questioning helps the writer to develop his ideas, to test potential, to re-see and re-think in the light of feedback from tutors.

There are several benefits of tutoring over traditional instruction." Tutoring is different than traditional classroom instruction because the tutor is closer to the student and can give direct feedback related on the teacher's feedback on the student's writing (Harris, 1995). To begin with, "tutoring is operating on the principle of shared authority which offers a process of conversation and support" (Harris, 1995). On the other hand, the traditional instruction is operating on group teaching.

In a traditional instruction, the student sits with a group of students where the teachers explain for everyone involving collaborative learning. In a tutoring session the student develops independence and works one-to-one with the tutor where he/she can point on the

student's weaknesses in writing and try to work on a major goal which is improving the student's writing skills stressing on his weak points. It is important for students to develop independence while writing and to ask tutors to be honest and give them feedback (Harris, 1995).

5. RESEARCH TOOLS OF THE STUDY

This study used both quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis. As for the quantitative part, correlation was used. As for the qualitative part, interviews were conducted with students after each one-to-one tutoring session at NDU.

6. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The study was limited to 80 students. 58 students attended the Writing Center regularly and 22 others relied on the traditional classroom instruction and teacher's remarks on the essays. The results of the students showed that 85% of the students who attended the Writing Center in order to write the second draft of each of the essays have scored higher on their second drafts than those who did not seek help. Even though the results show that both students scored higher on their second drafts, yet the group that sat one-to-one with tutors has progressed more and even scored higher on their first draft of their second essay.

In addition to that, 29 students took appointments from the same tutors in the Writing Center; however, the other 29 students took random appointments. The results showed that the students who sat with the same tutors benefited more than those who sat with different ones. While interviewing the students, they justified that by saying the tutors they worked with several times started to know their weaknesses and started stressing on their writing needs more than just explaining the errors in the writing.

Moreover, 29 students (50 %) of those who worked with the same tutor, worked on the second draft of the second essay online. In the Writing Center, the students who worked one-to-one with tutors were asked to follow the teacher's comments online and correct their errors based on the tutors comments which were recorded and sent to the students as emails. The results showed that those students who worked online to write their second draft of the second essay scored even more than the other students who worked one-to-one with their tutors. Integrating technology to the Writing Center, especially in the form of online tutoring, has encouraged the students and made them follow the instructions and the tutors' comments seriously. This program provided both the tutors' and the students with a way to mix face-to-face and online tutoring, creating a mixture tutoring format that combines the benefits of both traditional face-to-face tutoring and emerging online tutoring technologies.

As a conclusion, the results of the data collected show that the students who attend the Writing Center regularly progress faster than those who don't which eventually leads to higher academic achievement. In addition, the results show that the students who work with the same tutor also benefit more than those who work with different tutors every time. Moreover, the results show that integrating technology to the Writing Center tutoring sessions improve the students writing skills and motivates them too.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

After obtaining the results of the study and seeing that students have shown progress after attending tutoring sessions before writing their second drafts, several recommendations can be given to universities, instructors, and students. First, Finkelstein (2002) and Hendriksen, et al. (2005) found that it is of high importance for universities to always evaluate their program's impact and always ask themselves how students seeking help identify their services. As a result, the evaluation of the writing center becomes important in order for the institution to know whether the center serves the needs of the students or not. Second, teachers should be encouraged to motivate their students to help seek and attend the writing center constantly in order to improve their writing skills. As a matter of fact, all teachers should coordinate with the writing center team and work on unified documents and writing styles. Moreover, teachers of other faculties should be educated about the writing center and its services. North (1984) says that "The non-English faculty, the students, the administrators—they may not understand what a writing center is or does, but they have no investment in their ignorance, and can often be educated" (p. 433). Third, students must understand that the writing center is not only for weak students. It is for all students who seek one-to-one assistance. Thus, seminars should be conducted in order for all instructors and all students to understand the objectives of the writing center and to motivate both the instructors and the students to work more in tutoring sessions. Finally, the universities should introduce the online tutoring sessions into the writing center and make it an available service, which encourages the students to seek help more from the centers and improve their writing skills.

References

- [1] Arzt, J., Barnett, K. E., & Scopetta, J. (2009). Online tutoring: A symbiotic relationship with writing across the curriculum initiatives. [Special issue on Writing Technologies and Writing Across the Curriculum] *Across the Disciplines*, 6. Retrieved June 13, 2013, from <http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/technologies/arztetal.cfm>
- [2] Dillon, P., Patthey-Chavez, G., & Thomas-Spiegel, J. (2000). *Instructor Attitudes, Curriculum Content and Student Success: A Multi-Layered, Multi-Method Exploration of Developmental Instruction*. ERIC Clearinghouse.
- [3] Finkelstein, J. A. (2002). Maximizing retention for at-risk freshman: The Bronx community college model. *Institutional Development and Technology*. Retrieved on April 18th, 2013 from URL: <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED469657.pdf>
- [4] Harris, M. (1995). Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Writing Tutors. *College English*, 57(1); 27-42. Retrieved on April 22nd, 2013 from URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/378348>
- [5] Harris, M. (1992). The writing center and tutoring in WAC programs. *Writing across the curriculum: A guide to developing programs*, 154-74. Retrieved on August 11th, 2012 from URL: http://wac.colostate.edu/books/mcleod_soven/chapter10.pdf
- [6] Hendriksen, S.I., Yang, L. Love, B., & Hall, M.C. (2005). Assessing academic support: The effects of tutoring on student learning outcomes. *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 35(2). Retrieved on April 18th, 2013 from URL: <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/EJ689654.pdf>

- [7] Gibbons, B.C., & Dixon, P.S. (2001). College of the Canyons tutoring/learning/computer center retention and success. *Eric Digest*. Retrieved on April 18th, 2013 from URL: www.eric.ed.gov.
- [8] North, S. M. (1984). The idea of a writing center. *College English*. 46(5); 433-446. Retrieved on April 22nd, 2013 from URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/377047> .
- [9] Vazquez, L. (2009). What motivational factors influence community college students' tendency to seek help from the writing center? *ProQuest*. Retrieved on April 18, 2013 from URL: <http://search.proquest.com/pqdtft/docview/304461388/abstract/13D8172322A7184308E/1?accountid=28281>

(Received 21 September 2014; accepted 30 September 2014)