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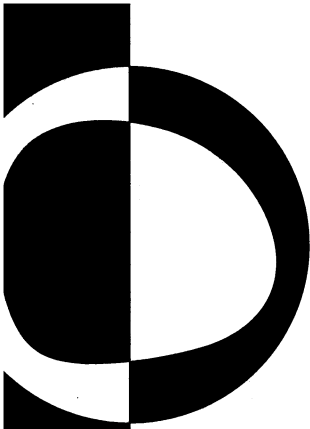
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Kathryn Denton

Beyond the Lore: A Case for Asynchronous Online Tutoring Research

Abstract

In recent years, scholars within the writing center community have urged for improved research practices within the field. Lore and experience have long been the field's guiding influence. In response, many writing center professionals have called for action, rightly suggesting that rigorous research will invigorate the field. Lore has its place in informing scholarship, as others have pointed out (Babcock & Thonus, 2012; Gillam, 2002; Gillespie, 2002; Sosnoski, 1991). But reliance on lore alone leads to missed opportunities and can result in scholarly stagnation (Eodice, Jordan, & Price, 2015; Wcenter threads; calls for action lodged over and over indicating that the call is going largely unanswered). Discussions surrounding the format of asynchronous online tutoring exemplify the shortcomings of relying on lore alone; a format that could have represented an innovation has instead been largely relegated to the sidelines of the field. This article traces the conversation surrounding asynchronous online tutoring in order to demonstrate the divide that occurs when the field relies on lore. Then,

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it will offer a narrative of the potentials afforded when writing center professionals embrace the possibilities that result from interrogation of the field's assumptions through research-based scholarship. The article concludes with one example of a research-based study exploring the format of asynchronous online tutoring, and a discussion of how this research can begin to dispel the lore surrounding it.

I remember the first piece of advice I received when I decided to focus my dissertation on writing center research: "Don't." The advice came from a writing center director, and it was delivered as part of a presentation at the 2008 International Writing Centers Association Conference. This director instead urged session attendees to focus their dissertation work on areas of composition and rhetoric, literature, or any other field, really. To dedicate one's dissertation on writing center studies, this professional argued, was to severely limit one's future employment prospects.

This wry advice touches on a deeper truth in writing center studies: Over 30 years in, we writing center professionals are still struggling to define ourselves and our work in academic terms. In particular, despite an established history, those who work in writing centers continue to grapple with our collective identity as an academic field, with our standing in related fields, and for our status as writing program administrators. In addition, we struggle to create scholarship that takes on significance beyond the moment at which it is published, unless that scholarship is then elevated to anthology status and cited often, largely without critical conversation. As a result, we continue to vie for an identity even as our field's innovations fall by the wayside for lack of vigorous scholarship, and we continue to rely on entrenched ideas of the nature of writing center work. Calls to action, in the form of imperatives to engage in research, abound among writing center practitioners, but to what extent we heed these calls remains to be determined.

This article began with the dissertation I was encouraged not to write. Three years after completing that dissertation and ten years into dedicating my professional life to writing center work, the call to action is all the more exigent. Although some writing center practitioners have begun to answer that call, it is imperative that we engage in scholarship, furthering our understanding of writing center work through research and inquiry.

In this article, I will establish why it is essential that each of us consider the call to join in a community of writing center scholars who engage in scholarly practices. I'll trace the history of canonical writing center scholarship in order to illustrate how adhering to a fixed writing

center narrative holds us back as a field. Drawing on the example of asynchronous online tutoring, I'll highlight conversations and research surrounding this format to establish how potential writing center innovations represent missed opportunities when we adhere to lore and dismiss ideas rather than explore them through research-based inquiry. This article will conclude with a model of the steps I have taken to respond to the call to action, arguing that research-based inquiry can be built into the everyday practices of a writing center professional. My intent is to demonstrate how modest research inroads can pave the way for future opportunities to advance the field of writing center studies, perhaps by learning lessons from data (Kjesrud, 2015).

The Lay of the Land: An Overview of Perspectives on Asynchronous Online Tutoring

In a field so focused on everyday practice, it is no surprise that lore takes on elevated significance, sometimes to the detriment of research practices. Nowhere is this more apparent than on the Wcenter listserv.¹ Take asynchronous online tutoring, a tutoring format that has existed for about three decades.

A search of the Wcenter tells the story: Asynchronous online tutoring appears as a topic of conversation on a nearly annual basis on the listserv. Each year, familiar opinions are reiterated. Those who criticize asynchronous tutoring argue that it is a format akin to a drop-off service, that a student using this service will, without dialogue or interaction, submit their work, expecting to return to a paper with ample comments. Asynchronous tutoring is placed in opposition to synchronous tutoring: Adjectives like “dynamic” and “interactive” are associated with synchronous tutoring, whereas negative descriptors are more often attributed to asynchronous tutoring, such as “ineffective” and “unrewarding” for tutors. Proponents of asynchronous online tutoring argue that tutoring should be available in each format in which instruction is offered. Students choose online instruction for a variety of reasons, from individual preferences to situational constraints. Since the same factors that influence students to opt for online instruction may hinder them from seeking synchronous writing tutoring, these proponents argue that to dismiss asynchronous online support may be to deny students access

1 The Wcenter listserv is utilized by writing center practitioners to ask for advice and to pose questions about writing center work. The Wcenter archives can be accessed at <http://lyris.ttu.edu/read/?forum=wcenter>. Information on joining the listserv can be found at <http://writingcenters.org/resources/join-the-wcenter-listserv/>.

to writing assistance. Of the two stances, cautionary voices are in the majority.

Given the continued, contested presence of asynchronous online tutoring in scholarly discussions of writing center work, its relative absence in scholarship is surprising. Asynchronous online tutoring is dismissed, relegated to the sidelines, or reluctantly accepted by some practitioners. Others embrace the format as one of several options that should be offered to students, and these practitioners weigh in each time the Wcenter conversation reemerges, encouraging others to view it from a critically informed stance. Despite its potential as an innovation for the writing center, asynchronous online tutoring has arguably instead become one of the most contested topics in the area of writing support, with critiques of how it diverges from traditional notions of tutoring outweighing calls to explore the innovation it could represent.

Until research-based studies can yield insights into asynchronous online tutoring, discussions surrounding this format will remain divided. There have been a few unanswered attempts to understand asynchronous online tutoring through a research-based backing. In fact, in one of the first publications on the format, *Taking Flight with OWLs: Examining Electronic Writing Center Work*, James Inman & Donna N. Sewell (2000) intend to advance our understanding of asynchronous online tutoring beyond anecdote, and this book offers several studies intended to provoke further research on the format. Yet, little research followed, and the format continues to be a topic mostly of anecdotal proportions.

Beth L. Hewett (2010) set the stage for inquiry with her work *The Online Writing Conference*. Few others have followed suit, despite a 2013 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) position statement on online instruction. Among the principles and effective practices included in this statement, the CCCC Committee on Best Practices for Online Writing Instruction (OWI) maintains that online students should receive writing support that parallels the instructional format for that course, including asynchronous tutoring, and that instructors and tutors should be committed to ongoing research related to supporting online writing students (Principles 13 and 15).

Asynchronous online tutoring warrants further examination for several reasons. First and foremost, it is an important format, as the CCCC position statement indicates. Second, discussions surrounding asynchronous online tutoring mirror the trends of the field of writing center studies in general (the need for research, the tendency to default to what we know, and our reliance on lore). Most importantly, quick judgments of asynchronous online tutoring represent a missed opportu-

nity; such a controversial area of writing center work is ripe for research in which we can ground our understanding of writing center work rather than relying on the field's longstanding tradition of depending on lore and experiences. Initial scholarship on this format urged caution and reinforced fears of asynchronous online tutoring grounded in lore and stemming from mistrust that the practices surrounding this format look too different from other tutoring practices.

That asynchronous online tutoring continues to go unexamined parallels the larger context that informs writing center studies. Adhering to traditional notions of tutoring deeply rooted in lore has led us to dismiss practices or ideas that do not fit neatly within our existing conceptions of writing center work. Furthermore, this reliance on lore holds the field back, as evidenced in the repeated calls to action through research that go somewhat unheeded. Instead, we continue to default to tradition and lore.

Checking Our Assumptions: Lore and the Limitations of the Simple Story

Lore, or a reliance on experience-based conceptions of writing center work, has long dominated the field. Foundational texts, such as Stephen M. North's (1984) "The Idea of a Writing Center" and Jeff Brooks's (1991) "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work," began as pieces to open up the conversation about writing center work, but have come to take on field-wide, canonical importance. Over time, tutoring ideas, such as non-directive tutoring strategies, the use of dialectic, and the assumption that tutoring is best performed one-to-one, have become fixed hallmarks of discussions of writing center work. By extension, we have tended to overlook or mistrust ideas that challenge our simplified version of writing center work. As Jackie Grutsch McKinney (2013) succinctly argues in *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*, "writing center work is complex, but the storying of writing center work is not. By and large, the way that writing center scholars, practitioners, and outsiders talk about writing center work fits into a relatively familiar pattern" (p. 3). This simple storying becomes *the* simple story of writing center work when we remain entrenched in discussions, experiences, and observations largely uninformed by research.

Asynchronous online tutoring, falling as it does outside of this familiar pattern, warrants exploration. What makes asynchronous online tutoring such an interesting test case is that conversations surrounding it speak to the deeper consequences of relying on lore as the endpoint of exploration within the field of writing center studies. Roughly speak-

ing, the debate surrounding asynchronous online tutoring can be traced to two contrasting value sets or paradigms. For the sake of discussion, I will label these paradigms as idealist and pragmatic. My intention is not to be reductive or reinforce a binary; instead, my goal is to trace the history of two tendencies in writing center scholarship that over time have shaped the values we assign to tutoring approaches, strategies, and writing center work in differing ways.

Table 1: A comparison of idealist and pragmatist paradigms

	Idealists	Pragmatists
Theoretical grounding	Tutoring orthodoxy	Tutoring orthodoxy
Academic grounding	Emphasis on canonized literature	Pass-through scholarship
Writing center practice	Informed largely by history	Informed largely by the day-to-day
Engagement with research	It's been done	Not enough time

Those who tend more towards an idealist paradigm view the writing center as an idealized space, a space romanticized in writing center literature. From this perspective, the writing center is characterized by engaged, willing, and enthusiastic students who gain insights into their writing through tutor-guided dialogue. Within this paradigm, the ideal tutoring session is one in which the student comes with questions or something they wish to work on. The tutor works with the student to establish some context, and then leads the student to insights through redirected questions, dialectical conversation, and observational comments. Throughout the tutoring interaction, the student remains in control of their own work. Practitioners who lean towards this paradigm tend to be the voices that urge caution regarding asynchronous online tutoring, on the grounds that it does not adhere neatly to traditional conceptions of the ideal writing center. In contrast, those who lean more toward the pragmatist paradigm tend to take a more practical view of writing center work. Pragmatists view the nature of writing center work as tutors coming together with students, identifying the students' needs and the strategies available to meet those needs. Those who operate largely within this paradigm cite the personalized nature of tutoring interactions as the writing center's greatest strength. Tutoring, to those with pragmatist tendencies, is tailored to the student seeking

assistance, and the tutor is responsive to the student's needs. Consequently, pragmatists tend to embrace a variety of tutoring formats and approaches, since more possibilities mean more opportunities to engage students in a way that works for them. Those who fall more within this paradigm tend to be more open to asynchronous online tutoring, but will let experience be their foundation of understanding this format. A research-based understanding is not necessary and will be left for others to perform.

While both perspectives have resonance, and are not necessarily mutually exclusive, over time, the idealist paradigm, with its romanced notions of writing center work, has become a fixed way of viewing the writing center and those who work within it. In contrast, the pragmatist paradigm, with its emphasis on flexibility and inclusive view of possibilities, offers potential new directions for the way we talk about our field. Given the scarcity of research to back up this paradigm, however, it amounts to generalities and word-of-mouth alternatives to traditional notions of tutoring, as opposed to serious discussions of the future directions of the field.

The advent of the idealist paradigm, like that of the pragmatist paradigm, can be traced to North's (1984) "The Idea of a Writing Center." In this article, largely cited as a foundational text in writing center scholarship, North (1984) makes a strong argument for what writing center work is and what it is not. His intended audience was the composition community, and his intent was to carve out a space for the writing center as distinct from the composition classroom. Arguing against conceptions of the writing center as "fix-it shop," North (1984) argues for student-centered rather than text-centered tutoring, suggesting that the writing center should focus on the student's process of writing rather than the finished product. North (1984) also emphasizes the importance of dialogue in tutorials: "[the] opportunities to talk with excited writers at the height of their engagement with their work are the lifeblood of a writing center" (p. 443).

The concept of peer tutor was outlined in another foundational text, with Kenneth A. Bruffee's (1984) "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind.'" Bruffee (1984) argues that tutors can play an important collaborative role in inducting new students into the conversation of academia, talk which takes place both verbally and through written language. A peer tutor can relate as an equal to the student, modeling a way in to academic discourse.

Taken together, these two pieces took on canonical significance. Within a short time, North's (1984) "Idea" was cited frequently among writing center practitioners to justify their work, an unintended out-

come of the article (Boquet & Lerner, 2008). Likewise, Bruffee's (1984) work was also cited often. Both were intended to lay out a writing center philosophy for academics outside of the field to understand. Instead, they became the frames through which writing center practitioners viewed and made sense of their own work.

This framing becomes evident in subsequent scholarship. By the 1990s, writing center ideals began to take shape; many anthologized and canonized texts start to appear during this time. Works intended to provoke scholarly exploration instead became the final word on writing center work. Collaboration became a hallmark of tutoring interactions with Andrea Lunsford's (1991) "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center." Lunsford (1991) builds on North's (1984) model of dialogue as the ideal mode of tutoring and contends that the writing centers that have proven most successful are those that place collaboration at the core of tutoring interactions. Minimalist, nondirective tutoring entered writing center scholarship that same year, with Brooks's (1991) "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work." In this piece, Brooks (1991) argues for a minimalist, hands-off approach to tutoring that focuses on higher order (organization, logical progression of ideas) rather than lower order (sentence structure mechanics) concerns. Brooks (1991) invokes North's (1984) idea that writing centers should produce better writers, not better writing.

Referring to Brooks's (1991) approach as "pure tutoring," Linda K. Shamon & Deborah H. Burns (1995) directly challenge this nondirective tutoring approach in "A Critique of Pure Tutoring." Shamon & Burns argue (1995) that there is a place in the tutoring pedagogy canon for directive tutoring and that directive tutoring, when applied ethically, can promote student learning and insight that may not have otherwise happened in a tutoring interaction. Shamon & Burns (1995) advocate for a reexamination of what has run the danger of becoming writing center orthodoxy:

Current writing center and tutoring practices . . . mak[e] an orthodoxy of process-based, Socratic, private, disciplinary tutoring. This orthodoxy situates tutors of writing at the beginning and global stages of writing instruction, it prevents the use of modeling and imitation as a legitimate tutoring technique, and it holds to a minimum the conduct of critical discourse about rhetorical practices in other fields. If writing center practices are broadened to include *both* directive and non-directive tutoring, the result would be an enrichment of tutoring repertoires, stronger connections between the writing center and writers in other disciplines, and increased attention to the cognitive, social, and rhetorical

needs of writers at all stages of development. (p. 148)

While the canonical works of writing center scholarship are undeniably important landmarks in our history, they have taken on a mythical status that seemingly places them above scrutiny when retold out of context. The ideals they offer have an important place in theorizing our work, when appropriately contextualized. Minimalist tutoring, with its emphasis on student-centered collaboration, has an important place in writing center work. Likewise, envisioning tutoring interactions as a place to engage in dialogue and negotiate meaning are key to understanding our work. Even romanticizing the nature of writing center work can be helpful—on those days when writing center administration is isolating, or the workload of the director is overwhelming, holding on to ideals can be useful. It is not beneficial, though, when these notions of the writing center become fixed, elevated to the status of common knowledge and defining features, as they have been within the idealist paradigm. The majority of tutor training manuals are explicitly and tacitly informed by these fixed notions, and early writing center texts have been anthologized, largely without critique or commentary. Uncritical rehashing of early foundational texts keeps us from research, as we continue to tell our “simple story” and defer to these now landmark works. It also decontextualizes the works that have become “orthodoxy,” many of which were intended to increase writing center practitioners’ awareness of the nuanced ways of viewing writing center work, and many authored by practitioners who explicitly claimed the intent of adding to a scholarly debate of theorizing writing center work.

Our field’s adherence to lore is still very much alive, but it is also becoming more common for writing center professionals to question the previously unquestioned citing of foundational texts that has given rise to a tutoring orthodoxy (Clark & Healy, 1996; Lerner, 2014; Shamoan & Burns, 1995). At writing center conferences, as well as in an increasing number of publications, writing center practitioners are acknowledging that nondirective tutoring is not the only way to tutor, nor is it always the most appropriate. More scholarship is being published that suggests, for example, that for English language learners, nondirective tutoring can be frustrating for the student and counterproductive for both student and tutor. Additional discussions that challenge writing center orthodoxy as the epitome of effective tutoring will continue to emerge as previously underrepresented students gain prominence in writing center scholarship.

The scholars, too, who have been elevated to lore status have been pushing back against their status as foundational figures of the

field. North (1994) is a good example, with his “Revisiting ‘The Idea of a Writing Center.’” In this piece, North (1994) backs off from what he argues are some of his overly stated or overly idealized views of the writing center. In contrast to his original article, for example, he allows that while students who visit the writing center are motivated to write, they are motivated by the same constraints and concerns that they have in the classroom: getting the assignment finished and earning a good grade. The reception of these corrective pieces has been mixed; some scholars cite such pieces, while others continue to adhere to the traditionally foundational primary works only.

The divided way in which North’s (1994) follow-up piece is acknowledged and cited underscores our field’s difficulties in relying on a simplified story of writing center work. Our field’s reliance on lore stands in the way of a nuanced view of scholarship. Although many writing center scholars engage with research in their professional practice, they do so in limited and limiting ways. In reducing to catch-phrases and quick how-tos the very scholarly works intended to open up dialogue, we inadvertently have sent a message to our tutors and to our campus communities that there are tutoring mandates that tutors are trained to follow.

The consequences of collapsing a nuanced history into quick catch phrases has far-reaching implications. Elizabeth Boquet & Neal Lerner (2008) in “After ‘The Idea of a Writing Center’” argue that the status of writing center’s positionality, within the institutional context, “cannot be grounded in the words of one theorist, from one article, from one line; instead, it is represented in richly textured accounts that are concerned with the full scope of literacy studies, as befits the complexity and richness of writing center sites and the people who populate them” (p. 185). In a similar vein, Brooks (2015) responded to the landmark status his “Minimalist Tutoring” achieved in a *Writing Lab Newsletter* reflection:

I’ve wondered why such a wispy piece of advice for tutors has had such a shelf-life. It didn’t offer anything new; in the writing center where I worked at the time, we talked about that stuff constantly. I offered no research—just experiential advice. (p. 10)

Brooks’s (2015) reaction is telling. He acknowledges the nature of his initial piece—that it is a “wispy piece of advice” shaped by his own experiences (as a graduate student) in the writing center. That it has since taken on elevated significance speaks volumes about the state of our field.

Nancy Grimm (2011) similarly traces how our reliance on lore has led to the impression that there are “good” ways to tutor and there are

“bad” ways to tutor. In calling for writing center professionals to check their assumptions about race in the writing center (*Writing Centers and the New Racism*, 2011), Grimm (2011) makes the case for retheorizing writing center work:

Theories, especially tacit inherited theories, guide our decisions, support our assumptions, and inform our judgments. These tacit theories tell us what’s ‘normal’ or what’s ‘right’; thus, they have real consequences for people who are subject to our decisions, assumptions, and judgments. (p. 78)

In the service of calling for a retheorizing of writing center work, Grimm (2011) examines several of “ubiquitous writing center mottoes that ‘carry’ [writing center] theory” (p. 81), emphasizing in the process just how many of these inform our everyday values in the writing center. Grimm (2011) synthesizes:

1. A good tutor makes the student do all the work.
2. The ultimate aim of a tutorial is an independent writer.
3. Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing. (p. 81)

These mottoes, Grimm (2011) argues, form the ideologies that surround writing center work, ideologies intended to maintain the status quo. Grimm (2011) further argues,

These mottoes may have originally appeared in an early piece of writing center scholarship, such as Stephen North’s “The Idea of a Writing Center” (1984) or Jeff Brooks’s “Minimalist Tutoring” (1991), yet as a field we invoke them without attribution in workshops and presentations and in tutor education materials and publicity materials. They have become our common sense, and they illustrate our familiar, unexamined, and sedimented tacit theories. (p. 81)

These theories, then, are problematic precisely because they are tacit and because they are so ubiquitously cited without context, going largely unexamined.

Even beyond creating a one-dimensional foundation out of nuanced scholarship, writing center lore actively excludes students from writing center theory who don’t fit the mold of the hypothetical, idealized student around whom the orthodox scholarship has grown. Grimm (2011) argues for race to be a consideration in writing center scholarship; also absent from lore are acknowledgements and ties to queer studies, disability studies, studies that discuss English language learners, and

other groups traditionally underrepresented both in scholarship and the academy, who are at increased risk of marginalization within the academy.

So far, I have offered an overview of the ways idealists and pragmatists have diverged, even as both groups have relied on lore as the foundation of understanding writing center work. The practitioners that fall within these two tendencies diverge in other important ways as well. For example, when faced with a situation that calls for research, many practitioners do not deliver. Those with idealist tendencies would argue that the canon contains many of the insights we need to explain our work, while those with pragmatic leanings focus on the day-to-day work of writing center interactions as the starting point for discussion. When pressed for a context for new questions or innovations, the idealist is more likely to dismiss the situation in question if it does not fall neatly into writing center lore. The pragmatist will attempt to explore possibilities, but will do so through a quick pass through existing scholarship and a question thrown to Wcenter listserv. Both would acknowledge, with a note of apology, that inquiry is important, but will settle for established scholarship or parroting lore or will claim to be too busy to engage in a full course of research.

There are fieldwide implications to falling into these familiar patterns. Our identity as a viable and credible field of study is at stake. I don't say this without empathy for my fellow writing center directors. Working as a writing center director is demanding, time-consuming, and intense. But as Michele Eodice, Kerri Jordan, & Steve Price (2015) aptly point out,

Our writing center community is quick to point out that we're busy, too much is expected of us, that we face pressures from faculty and students and administrators. We embrace the ethos of being stretched thin. While we don't deny the significant workloads of our colleagues, we're skeptical that the material conditions of our jobs make us too busy to read. We argue instead that we're choosing not to read. We do set our own personal priorities. We should be reading. We need to be reading. The cost of not engaging our scholarship is simply too high. (pp. 11–12)

The cost includes perpetuating the challenging status of practitioners in our profession. Anne Ellen Geller & Harry Denny (2013) make this point in "Of Ladybugs, Low Status, and Loving the Job: Writing Center Professionals Navigating Their Careers." They argue that although the positionality of a writing center professional can be tenuous, practitioners are all too willing to carve out a space for their

own career at the local level while neglecting scholarship at the national level:

So, still lurking unchallenged is the protocol for becoming a part of and growing a discipline: if advancing a field and oneself within it involves the consumption, production, and dissemination of new knowledge, whether through conference proposals and presentations, or, more importantly, vetted publication, what might it mean to exempt oneself or for significant parts of a community of professionals not to participate in its own collective/social construction of knowledge? (p. 118)

The cost also includes uncertainty about how we can sustain our identity as a field. The extent to which lore has replaced vigorous and invigorated scholarship is underscored in Neal Lerner's (2014) "The Unpromising Present of Writing Center Studies: Author and Citation Patterns in *The Writing Center Journal*, 1980 to 2009." Tracing 29 years of authorship patterns, Lerner (2014) concludes that our scholarship is dominated by one-time citations, unless the author is North (1984), which appears in nearly every third article published during that time period. The result is an "inward gaze" (p. 67) indicative of a lack of critical engagement with existing scholarship and a wakeup call for future scholarship. Although looking at citation patterns alone only reveals part of the picture, Lerner (2014) contends, this study does indicate that we have a long way to go in establishing writing center studies as a recognized and interconnected field.

Writing center scholars and practitioners have a number of resources that can foster our expansion into a more vigorous framing of our work: *Writing Center Journal (WCJ)*, *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*, WcORD: The Writing Center Online Resource Database, the CompPile searchable repository, and publications within related fields as well as within the main field of composition studies. Yet, we continue to rely on the simple story, often resorting to repeated questions on the Wcenter listserv in lieu of consulting existing resources first. In other words, the simple story holds us back (Eodice as cited in Denny, 2010, p. 146; Grutsch McKinney, 2013; Eodice, Jordan, & Price, 2015).

Field Limitations, Illustrated: Asynchronous Online Tutoring

Until research enters the conversation with regularity, the field of writing center studies is bound to continue to rely on and be constrained by the simple story. The extent to which the field has become fixed is evidenced in the assumptions surrounding discussions of asynchronous

online tutoring. This format represents the missed opportunities resulting from our unchecked assumptions: what could have been an innovation has instead largely been treated as problematic. Some writing center practitioners object to asynchronous online tutoring on the grounds that it is ineffective, running contrary to “tutoring orthodoxy” and best practices, and that it is furthermore unrewarding for tutors who are asked to function within an asynchronous environment. Raising a few questions to interrogate those beliefs illustrates the possibilities research could open. How, for example, can asynchronous online tutoring be deemed ineffective based on a fixed ideology, when tutoring approaches themselves are dynamic and resist definitive judgments? If the conversation about the nature of writing center work is live, multifaceted, and changing, shouldn’t we engage in active research that can inform our understanding of the current state of tutoring approaches?

Increasingly, writing center professionals challenge the underlying assumptions that shape our discussions surrounding online interactions, arguing that distinctions between asynchronous and synchronous tutoring interactions may not be as stark as they are sometimes believed to be. They argue that asynchronous tutoring interactions are dynamic and can be just as engaging as face-to-face and synchronous online tutorials. If there are asynchronous interactions marked by disengagement, these professionals argue, the cause is most likely the pedagogy employed, rather than the tutoring format. After all, there are synchronous tutoring interactions in which students are likewise disengaged, and there are discussions of pedagogy that center around working with disengaged students. And authors working within the pragmatist paradigm argue that this dynamic view of tutoring is an asset, highlighting that one of the fundamentals of writing center ideology should be tutors’ ability to respond, in the moment and in a personalized approach, to students’ particular needs.

Furthermore, even if face-to-face interactions succeed because they are interactive, student-centered, and tutor-facilitated, marked by guiding questions and focused dialogue, the fact that asynchronous online tutoring interactions encompass a different set of strategies does not necessarily mean that these tutorials are not also student-centered and interactive. Some of the tenets we hold to be tried and true do not hold up to interrogation. For example, the tradition of tutoring orthodoxy traced in the previous section holds as generally true that the tutor’s role in a face-to-face interaction is to come together with a student to discuss a piece of writing. The tutor engages the student in discussion, using the paper to help the student reflect on writing-related issues that are applicable beyond the paper. The tutor’s objective, in essence, is

to shape a tutoring interaction that responds to North's call for better writers, writers that walk away with strategies and insights that they can apply beyond their current piece of writing. In a sense, the piece of writing is a vehicle, a means to an end (better writer) rather than an end in itself. Within the framework of tutoring orthodoxy, this is the ideal tutoring interaction; since asynchronous online tutoring interactions lack traditional dialogue and real-time interaction that represent the opportunity to unfold an interaction that results in writerly insights, it is deemed ineffective.

Leaving aside the "better writers" orthodoxy, asynchronous tutoring interactions can be viewed in a way that challenges these notions. The most predominant form of asynchronous tutoring is an email-based system of submitting and responding to writing. Most likely, the tutor will have some student-provided context: Most online writing lab submission pages ask a student to provide a description of the assignment and specify their concerns in addition to attaching the paper itself. The end goal remains the same: the tutor wants to help the student beyond the paper in front of them, and so their challenge is to both engage the student within the asynchronous tutoring format and to concurrently help the student to arrive at insights applicable beyond the given writing situation. Even though communication is asynchronous in nature, this change in context does not have to preclude or exclude interaction. Writing center practitioners can make the argument that asynchronous online tutoring is problematic and contrary to the values that are so important to face-to-face interactions, or they can make the case instead that the nature of tutoring changes online, not necessarily in a negative way, and that these asynchronous tutoring interactions warrant further study that will result in a greater understanding of asynchronous online tutoring pedagogy.

It is also important to acknowledge that advocates for online tutoring in general and asynchronous online tutoring in particular are not suggesting that these interactions completely replace face-to-face tutoring interactions. To a person, these proponents are arguing for a multiplicity of tutoring approaches that are grounded in what students need, how these students do work, and how they can best receive feedback, with asynchronous tutoring serving as one of several options available to students.

Synchronous online tutoring is an appealing option, and the impulse to move online tutoring services entirely to this format is understandably appealing. As Grutsch McKinney (2013) argues, notions that challenge our traditional ideals of writing center work as one-with-one, dialogic, and face-to-face often become accepted only when they fit or

mirror this comfortable version of writing center work. However, this debate over how online tutoring should be made available to learners is part of the larger debate of online instruction and questions of how knowledge should be made accessible and delivered to learners online. As technology continues to change, it is tempting to see new offerings as a linear evolution, changing modes of instruction to fit with the latest technology available. Rather than assuming that each new technology is useful, value-neutral, and will work for each learner, we need to consider that the multiplicity of technologies means that different online learners have varied levels of background knowledge and different specialized understandings of technology and that synchronous online activities may not even be ideal for some online learners. We need to carefully consider who is excluded by each technological innovation just as carefully as we consider who it welcomes in. Multiple technologies mean a multitude of possibilities for online learning, and those who advocate for asynchronous offerings are doing so not from an adversarial position, or a refusal to change with new technologies, but from a stance that asynchronous instruction and support should be one of a number of options available to online learners. Furthermore, these proponents are searching for ways to incorporate new technologies into asynchronous formats in a way that will enhance these interactions while still reaching those who benefit the most from asynchronous online learning experiences.

Given the compelling reasons for reconsidering asynchronous online tutoring, the problem is not the existence of asynchronous online tutoring. The problem is the lack of research-based inquiries into asynchronous online tutoring interactions. Hewett (2010) set the precedent with her work, but there is still much to learn about the possibilities afforded by examining what online tutoring looks like in practice. Each objection or concern raised regarding asynchronous online tutoring should not be sent forth into a vacuum; instead, these objections can form the basis for research-based inquiry. If we are to argue that asynchronous online tutoring is contrary to best practices, but there is no research on what practices tutors currently employ in asynchronous online tutoring interactions, what grounds do we have to stand on? If we argue that asynchronous online tutoring interactions preclude interaction and student engagement, but we have not explored asynchronous tutoring interactions from the perspective of the student, how far can we get? The concerns raised regarding asynchronous online tutoring are valid and deserving of consideration. But these concerns are an opportunity for growth; first, growth in the form of research that interrogates the nature of asynchronous online tutoring as it currently

exists, and then, growth in the form of a discussion of the possibilities for improving asynchronous online tutoring interactions.

Researching the Center

The need for research of asynchronous online tutoring parallels the field's overarching need for research in all areas of writing center work. Practitioners of writing center studies, and by extension composition studies, have in recent years recognized that it is essential for scholars to produce more rigorous research to move the field forward. Despite repeated calls for research through the past several decades, writing center research remains a troubled area, as writing center professionals continue to negotiate what counts as research. As Alice Gillam (2002) points out in her introduction to *Writing Center Research: Extending the Conversation*,

Since the inception of a professional discourse about writing centers, the center has been imagined as a kind of “natural laboratory,” a research site that would yield unique insights into students’ writing development and the pedagogies that assist such development. In the inaugural issue of *Writing Center Journal* (1980), for example, editors Lil Brannon and Stephen North express high hopes for the “great new discoveries” about the learning and teaching of writing to be discovered through writing center research. Some 20 years later, opinion varies over the current state of writing center research although most agree that this great promise remains as yet unfulfilled and probably unable to be fulfilled in the ebullient terms originally imagined. Such decidedly mixed opinion about the current state and future direction of writing center research suggests a need for more explicit talk about what we mean by research, what should count as research, and how to conduct research. (p. xv)

As the title of that anthology suggests, there is no consensus on what counts as research in the writing center, and in fact, what we currently call research is based largely on lore and observable situations and trends. While there is much value in this type of knowledge, there seems to be a consensus among writing center scholars that we need to move beyond our current understanding of what constitutes research. Doing so will require much work, from defining writing center research to creating and enacting new models of inquiry. The time and effort it will take to reinvigorate writing center research can lead to invaluable payoffs, as creating a body of research that moves beyond lore and observation can help writing center work to gain credibility as an area of

study as well as yielding important insights into student writers and the ways to most effectively support them.

In *Researching the Writing Center: Towards an Evidence-Based Practice* (2012), Rebecca Day Babcock & Terese Thonus (2012) weigh in on what research could look like in the writing center context. They also offer an important distinction on the role of lore in writing center work. They provide an important assertion from James Sosnoski: “[Lore] count[s] as understanding for teachers of writing. It is not, however, formed in the way that disciplines paradigmatically produce knowledge. It is contradictory. It is eclectic. It takes feeling into account. It is subjective and nonreplicable” (as cited in Babcock & Thonus, 2012, pp. 17–18). The authors then point out that while lore is valued in writing center scholarship, it is also limiting: “Scholars need to talk about what they know, what they have experienced (locally produced knowledge), but they also need to move beyond that step and problematize writing center issues more broadly” (p. 18). Within this perspective, lore can be viewed as a guiding factor in informing local research, which in turn can have implications on a more global level. Lore can be a starting point for conversation, but as the debate on the Wcenter listserv illustrates, conversations based only on lore will at best be circular, debating the same points repeatedly, never approaching a consensus. Research helps us to hold our ideas up to the light, to examine the bases for our beliefs, and offers us the opportunity, even when we are unable to reach a consensus, to establish some common grounds on a given issue.

Despite Gillam’s (2002) call for research and Babcock & Thonus’s (2012) discussion of the problems that arise when we rely on lore, there persists in writing center work a lack of a body of scholarship informed by academic research. This lack of scholarly work extends beyond the scope of online writing center work: Gillam (2002) argues that as a whole, all aspects of writing center work are stunted by a lack of vigorous research. Given the repeated call for action through the decades, writing center professionals have an obligation to design scholarship grounded in research, yielding insights into the field and related disciplines. If we are to understand what happens when tutoring moves online, in both synchronous and asynchronous formats, we should consider how to create research that explores, challenges, and questions the as of yet lore- and observation-based ideas and assumptions that shape our understanding of writing tutoring pedagogy across tutoring formats.

Strides have been made within the field of composition studies in discussing what constitutes research within that field, and some of the principles can and should be applied to writing center research. In the article “NCTE/CCCC’s Recent War on Scholarship,” for example,

Richard Haswell (2005) argues that research within the field should be replicable, aggregable, and data-supported (RAD). Haswell (2005) avoids the term “empirical” and “theory” in favor of the RAD model because, as he argues, “this provisional category of scholarship has the advantage of cutting across polemical trenches that have stalemated profitable talk about research in the teaching of composition” (p. 202), a statement that could be applied as well to writing center research, which has likewise been stalemated by such debates. Chris M. Anson (2008) makes a similar call for “a more robust, evidence-based view of teaching writing and learning to write” (p. 24). These mid-2000s calls for a re-envisioning of the nature of writing research have ushered in a wave of research in published scholarship in composition studies. This increased scholarship in the field of writing instruction, however, has not yet translated into increased rigorous scholarship in writing center studies.

For example, Dana Lynn Driscoll & Sherry Wynn Perdue (2012) have surveyed the articles published in *WCJ* to quantify how many research-based works were published during the period of 1980–2009. Driscoll & Wynn Perdue (2012) have found that although 91 of 270 articles drew on some form of research, very few articles include RAD research conducted with any level of rigor. (The authors created a rubric to rate the level of engagement with the research process and presentation of findings.) Although Driscoll & Wynn Perdue’s (2012) analysis indicates RAD research in the field has increased over time, there is still much work to be done. As Driscoll & Wynn Perdue (2012) articulate in “Theory, Lore, and More,” writing center practitioners must transform the way we approach our work. Not only do we need to produce more research-based scholarship, but we also need to “envision broadly and make connections—through RAD research—among issues of importance to the field” (p. 32). In order to advance our field, “more work is needed to understand the complex relationships between writing center practitioners and how we produce and discuss our research” (p. 35), creating scholarship that adds to and advances the conversation through research-based insights. Until we engage in discussions informed by research, we will continue our current trajectory of lore and implicit buy-in to the writing center grand narrative (Grutsch McKinney, 2013; Kjesrud, 2015).

Taxonomies and Models in Advancing the Research Agenda

Defying as it does our tradition of telling the simple stories, undergoing a new course of action through research can be daunting. The existence

of so many calls for research in writing center venues underscores the extent to which the calls have gone unheeded. While composition studies has moved to conducting research, writing center studies has only started to move toward research with recent discussions of what counts as research in the field. These discussions about the nature of research have formed a helpful starting point for answering the call. Sarah Liggett, Kerri Jordan, & Steve Price (2011) set forth the paths writing center researchers can pursue in “Mapping Knowledge-Making in Writing Center Research: A Taxonomy of Methodologies.” Pursuing the guiding question, “what methodologies does the writing center community employ to make knowledge about writing, writers, and learning to write?” (p. 51), the authors present a taxonomy comprised of three categories of research: practitioner inquiry, conceptual inquiry, and empirical inquiry. These categories offer practitioners a range of options in pursuing research, depending on the researcher’s goals, the nature of the area to be investigated, and the available means for gathering and analyzing data. The authors’ taxonomy is meant to serve as a survey of possibilities, and practitioners are encouraged to consider methodological pluralism.

Models of research that practitioners can adapt are just as important as taxonomies as a starting point for writing center professionals to consider as they begin to design courses of research. In her recent article illustrating one particular methodology, Georganne Nordstrom (2015) asserts, “If we are looking to answer these calls for more RAD research, clearly we need models” (p. 94). Babcock & Thonus (2012) mirror this sentiment in *Researching the Writing Center*. After laying out their argument for evidence-based practices and their role in extending writing center research, Babcock & Thonus (2012) devote an entire chapter to modeling how researchers can refine a broad topic of inquiry into a research question and mapping out methodologies for the researcher to adapt in pursuit of that question. In the next section, I will follow in this tradition, connecting back to asynchronous online tutoring to illustrate the insights that can be gained when we check our assumptions and start to ask questions through research rather than drawing conclusions through reliance on the predominant writing center narrative.

Mapping a Course of Research for Asynchronous Online Tutoring

Following in the tradition of writing center scholars who have made explicit the assumptions that underlie our values in writing center work, I examined the critiques professionals have lodged in ongoing Wcenter

discussions centered on the topic of asynchronous online tutoring. Treating Wcenter posts as texts, I conducted a textual analysis of posts to the listserv between 2010 and 2013 to identify the themes that emerged in critiques of asynchronous online tutoring. These critiques can be grouped into three main categories:

1. Tutors are forced to do most of the work, contrary to the ideology of non-directive tutoring so valued in writing center literature.
2. Asynchronous online writing tutors are forced to deal with the text only, leaving aside the writer, which is contrary to North's (1984) tenet that "[O]ur job is to produce *better writers*, not *better writing*" (p. 438).
3. Asynchronous online writing tutoring is akin to a drop-off service, failing to engage the student, and is a stretch on tutors' time, and the students who submit papers asynchronously don't benefit from this form of tutoring.

As a writing center practitioner, these critiques did not resonate with me. I suspected that tutors and students are much more intentional in their approach to asynchronous online tutoring than the critiques allow for. I took this opportunity as a chance to refute the lore through research, to demonstrate the value of research and the ways insights gained through research can advance conversations within the writing center field.

Equipped with a sense of the assumptions underlying asynchronous online tutoring, my goal was to design a course of research to examine how tutors and students come together to create a tutoring experience in the asynchronous online format. Ultimately, I wanted to compare my findings to the assumptions surrounding asynchronous online tutoring to see if the critiques held up to research. I will discuss my entire study in more detail in a future article, but I will provide a broad overview here in order to highlight some of the insights that the process can yield.

To begin my study, I identified the components that create an online tutoring interaction: the submission process that students follow, including their description of the assignment and their concerns, the tutor and the responses they craft, and the student's reception of the feedback. I designed a mixed methods study. For the tutors, I wanted to interrogate whether they are disengaged, feel ineffective, or are overly directive, as the critiques suggest. I chose the two most active

asynchronous tutors within my local writing center. Once the tutors agreed to participate, they had two roles: At the beginning of the study, they responded to some contextual questions about their experiences and feelings regarding asynchronous online tutoring. Then, for each tutoring interaction that occurred during my six-month study period, the tutor who facilitated that interaction was asked a series of reflection questions, through which they offered their observations, intentions, and the strategies they employed.

I also wanted to understand how students interact with the asynchronous tutoring format. One of the critiques of this format is the tendency to accuse students of seeking an “easy way out,” the drop-off service critique. Each student who submitted a paper through the asynchronous online tutoring service during the course of my study was sent a follow-up survey in which they were asked to reflect on the feedback that they received.

The “artifacts” of the tutoring interaction were also a subject of this study. One of the benefits to studying asynchronous interactions is that there are texts left behind—the student’s initial submission message, the paper the student submitted, tutors’ in-paper comments, and the comments tutors offered in their reply to students. These texts provide a lot of material for textual analysis.

I then created a snapshot of the interactions that occurred during my study, combining the tutor insights, student insights, and tutoring texts to gain an understanding of the asynchronous online tutoring interaction experience. In my data analysis, I organized my data by tutor. I compiled the data sets for each tutoring interaction and explored each interaction to categorize the moves the tutors made in response to the interaction they were working within. I then mapped my findings onto Hewett’s (2010) discussion in Chapter 7 of *The Online Writing Conference*, a chapter entitled “Using What Works.” Since Hewett (2010) offers the most definitive exploration of online tutoring to date, her framework is a first published attempt to codify best practices. Once I completed these steps, I revisited the initial critiques of asynchronous online tutoring to see how my findings add to the existing conversation on this format. The broad strategies outlined by Hewett (2010) include facilitating engagement, choosing where to comment, too much and too little commenting, and modeling by proofing and editing. My analysis of the tutoring interactions in this study suggest that the tutors routinely employed these strategies within asynchronous tutoring interactions.

I intend to publish a more thorough analysis of my findings in a future work. Here, I will offer a discussion of the results that illustrate

the possibilities that can arise from a research-based inquiry into asynchronous online tutoring.

My data indicates that critiques of asynchronous online tutoring are not reflected in actual asynchronous tutoring interactions. Through my research on the two tutors and the students they worked with, I have found that, contrary to the three main critiques of asynchronous online tutoring,

1. Asynchronous tutoring is labor-intensive, but no more so than face-to-face or synchronous tutoring interactions.
2. Although the cues that the tutors work with are textual only, they use those cues to construct an idea of the student they are working with. The tutors emphasized that it is important that their interactions do not feel impersonal, depersonalized, or anonymous, because they acknowledge that is the point at which the interaction would feel pointlessly time- and energy-intensive.
3. Each student participant indicated that their respective tutoring interaction was beneficial. This study relies on self-reporting, so it is unclear how the tutoring interaction influenced the student's revision process, but self-efficacy is crucial to a student's success, and if the tutoring interaction reinforces the student's sense of ownership and authorship, I consider that a success regardless of the student's actual revisions.

These insights represent a starting point for discussions of asynchronous online tutoring informed by research. I mean to offer my work here as groundwork for future research studies. Revisiting my research design, this work could be extended to examine the student's revision process. My study counted on the student participants to self-report on how effective they found the feedback, and I believe this is a valid start. In any tutoring interaction, the first measure of success is whether the student feels they have had their needs addressed and have received helpful feedback. Further insights could come from examining the revision process of students. In essence, such research could address the following questions: How does the student incorporate the tutor's feedback into their revision process? How accurately is the student interpreting the tutor's feedback, and how effectively is the student applying this feedback to the piece of writing? Does the student create substantial positive changes to their paper based on the feedback?

If this research was extended to explore the revision process, tutor feedback could be examined in situations in which the student misinterprets feedback or does not effectively apply the feedback to the piece of writing. Comparing and contrasting accurate and inaccurate interpretations of feedback could lead to the beginning discussions of what might constitute best practices when it comes to offering feedback in an asynchronous online tutoring environment.

Once a discussion of best practices is underway, there are direct implications for tutor preparation. If a set of best practices exists, how can we design a course of training for asynchronous online tutoring that connects tutors to these practices? What other possibilities exist beyond the identified best practices, and is it appropriate to go beyond these best practices? Under what circumstances?

This and related studies also have implications for the field of composition and rhetoric. Future work could focus on how students identify the concerns they specify when they request tutor feedback a comparison of student-identified and tutor-identified concerns, and a comparison of how the student's stated concerns align with instructor-identified priorities within the student's draft. The field of composition studies rightly emphasizes the importance of student's reflection abilities as they relate to the student's identity as a writer and the student's writing process. A setting like the asynchronous online tutoring setting, where students are called on to specify their concerns, is a good place to gather data that could yield further insights into the reflection processes of developing student writers.

Concluding Remarks

Most of the objections raised by critics of asynchronous online tutoring are valid and worth considering. Asynchronous online tutoring is effective in some circumstances and for some students, but it is by no means a one-size-fits-all format ideal for everyone. I would argue that no one tutoring format fulfills that role, and asynchronous online tutoring is no exception. Asynchronous online tutoring can be an effective mode for working with students, as is evidenced in my findings, but because of its asynchronicity, lack of nonverbal cues, and lack of true dialogue, this format can also be challenging.

For years, writing center studies has been grounded in the unspoken assumption that writing center administrators know what works best for students, but these notions often lack a foundation of rigorous research. These assumptions are epitomized in the grand narrative of writing center studies (Grutsch McKinney, 2013). Much foundational

writing center literature tells us that tutoring is best in a one-on-one setting, with an engaged student participating in lively dialogue with an interested tutor who knows how to ask the right questions to spark student insights. In practice, tutoring is more flexible and responsive to the moment and to student needs and has a practical basis not often reflected in the literature. We should acknowledge that what the literature says writing center work looks like and the way it actually looks vary greatly, and we should see the variety of approaches and formats as a strength worthy of a place in the literature. The time seems right to offer counter-narratives, narratives grounded firmly in research that interrogates and challenges the way we view the nature of writing center work.

In his NCTE/CCCC statement, Haswell (2005) points out, “Scholarship grows or it does not grow” (p. 204), and it is up to us to decide how we want the field to move forward. Revisiting “Taxonomy,” Liggett, Jordan, & Price (2011) encourage us to view their taxonomy through the lens of a visual metaphor of the terrain of writing center work (p. 81). They invite readers to consider this visual representation of methodologies as a GPS for research (p. 80), adding, “We have traced some key thoroughfares connecting already-recognized and well-populated locations. We leave our readers to explore and mark the alternate routes from one point to another—and the yet unmapped locations where routes, both old and new, might intersect” (p. 80). Each new model that writing center practitioners offer help us to map the existing terrain. When we begin to build on existing research and extend the conversation in this way, we will move into new terrain and advance our field. Through this process, we open ourselves to imagine possibilities, to shape the future directions of the field of writing center studies, and to ensure that we are doing all we can to promote the growth of tutors as they support the students we serve.

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