

Video Recording in the Writing Center

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In his recent book, *Around the Texts of Writing Center Work: An Inquiry-Based Approach to Tutor Education*, R. Mark Hall discusses video recording tutors as a professional development exercise. Hall experimented with video recording to address tutors' interest in gaining more control over the observation process and more insight from observations and debriefings. While Hall notes it is premature to draw any conclusions from limited experience, he argues that video recording "seems to open new possibilities for examining and reflecting on tutoring practices, building on an already well-established culture of observation and inquiry-based learning" (41). Writing centers have used footage of scripted and acted tutorials for training purposes for decades. Tim Catalano reviews this history and follows Shelly Samuels in preferring to record real sessions and review them using a questionnaire (Catalano 8-9; Samuels 5). Peter Carino similarly outlines a self-evaluation process for reviewing video- or audio-recorded sessions (13). Tracy Santa has more recently recommended video for capturing visible signs of active listening (8). While tutors' experiences with video recording are frequently discussed, there have been few attempts to systematically gain their perspective, even as the experience of being recorded has changed since the era of the camcorder.

Increasingly accessible and familiar forms of video-recording technology like tablets and phones present new opportunities for observation, reflection, and training. Video recording allows writing center staff and coaches to observe sessions without having to schedule observations at a particular time and place, to strain to hear through cubicle walls and adjacent conversations, or to rely on memory and hastily jotted notes to provide feedback. In our center, video recording enables our writing center coaches to gain perspective on their work with students by reflecting on session videos individually, during staff meetings, or in meetings with supervisors. We also compile footage into training videos that

provide coaching models and discussion material for current and future staff. In this article, we seek to add to the conversation about video recording in writing centers by sharing our writing coaches' reflections on our recording process. We will also describe the procedure we used to systematically record 117 sessions in 2016-17 and 121 in 2017-18. Our research and experience support the idea that video observation, if implemented deliberately and self-critically, offers a productive professional development and self-reflection opportunity for writing coaches and a flexible complement to in-person observation.

By surveying our coaching staff about their attitudes toward regularly recording their sessions, we learned that while some coaches were initially nervous about video recording, they felt increasingly comfortable as it became a regular part of their practice. They saw it as an opportunity to get an objective perspective on their sessions, develop self-awareness, find reassurance in their successes, track their growth over time, and notice and improve upon communication dynamics. A majority preferred video observation to in-person observation and indicated that they would continue the practice of video recording if the decision were left to them.

OUR VIDEO-RECORDING PROCESS

While our center has experimented with video observation in various forms since the early 2000s, since 2016 we have systematically ramped up our efforts. In 2017, we required coaches to record a minimum of any two sessions per month for a goal of eight recordings per semester. We typically begin recording in mid- to late-September. This gives our newly-trained coaches a chance to acclimate, while still introducing recording early enough in the school year that it is normalized as routine. To initiate coaches into video recording, we give an overview of our process and goals in a dedicated staff meeting. We assure the coaches that the staff will not be watching all of their videos; that the main benefits are self-observation, reflection, and growth; and that any video observation from administrative staff is in the spirit of supportive, constructive feedback. We also attempt to invest the coaches in the idea that they are serving our writing center, future coaches, and, by extension, students by collecting footage that can be used for training and improvement. Returning coaches who have gone through the process often testify to these points and help alleviate any apprehension that new coaches may have about the process.

After describing the purpose of video observations and the fate of the recorded footage, we next walk coaches through the process step by step. From the coach's and the student's perspectives, the process is simple. To avoid intimidating first-time visitors to the writing center, we ask coaches to approach only returning students about being recorded. When a student who is a candidate for recording arrives, the coach asks for permission to record the session, indicating that the video footage will be used only for internal training purposes. If the student agrees to be recorded, the coach leads the student to a designated recording cubicle that is outfitted with our primary recording device—an iPad clamped to the cubicle wall and equipped with a USB microphone. Here the coach presents a permission slip for the student to sign. Then the coach checks that the iPad is angled to capture the space where they will be seated before hitting "record." Rather than using the iPad's built-in camera app, the coach uses an app, MoviePro, that has been configured to produce lower-resolution videos with more manageable file sizes. When the student has left, the coach ends the recording and marks its date on a Google Sheet. Designated graduate assistants transfer the videos to a secure university network drive. When coaches are not working with students during their regularly scheduled hours, we ask them to access this video vault to watch their previously recorded sessions.

To aid their reflection and our production of training compilations, we created an online survey form that coaches use to analyze their videos. The form asks coaches for the timestamps of moments that they regard as good training models. The form lists suggested categories such as "Brainstorming," "Asking effective questions," and "Consulting a resource." The form also includes reflection questions about what the coaches felt went well, where they saw a need for improvement, and how they would rate the session relative to their other sessions. The timestamps narrow down what may be worth watching in our many hours of video footage, and the reflections help us continue to mentor and support our coaching team. Through this process, a total of 78 videos were analyzed in 2016-17, and 70 were analyzed in 2017-18. The typical coach spent between five and ten hours per semester watching and processing these videos.

SURVEY

Methods: While we felt that the video recording process was helpful, we wanted to more formally gauge that impression. After obtaining IRB approval, we surveyed our staff of sixteen coaches

in February 2018, by which time new coaches had accumulated months of experience with video recording. The survey asked questions about coaches' likes and dislikes about the process, their attitudes toward video recording, and their preference for video or in-person observation. Thirteen of the sixteen coaches responded to the anonymous survey. Using a descriptive approach, we independently coded their responses, looking for trends in what coaches valued and disliked or wanted to improve about the process. We then negotiated our individual codes and decided on vocabulary that reflected both of our observations.

Results: The coaches felt more positively about the recording process than we expected. When asked to rate their attitude about recording sessions on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the most positive, the average rating was 7.38. Eight of the thirteen coaches preferred video observation over face-to-face observation, and six coaches specifically mentioned feeling more comfortable as they grew accustomed to video recording their sessions. When asked if they would continue recording if it was up to them, nine of the thirteen answered "Yes," four answered "Maybe," and none answered "No." One coach's explanation of the answer "Yes" captured the predominant view: "I believe videotaping, though possibly uncomfortable at first, ultimately creates a strong, concrete means of self-reflection in order to improve one's coaching. Being able to see a recording multiple times allows a coach to look at every detail and see what works and what does not work." We identified six themes in the benefits they described.

BENEFITS OF VIDEO RECORDING

Objectivity: The coaches appreciated that the videos allowed them to revisit their sessions with some distance. "Sometimes I remember things differently or in a skewed way," one coach said, adding, "The videos help me see what actually happened, tune into different things than I did in the session, and assess my coaching from a more removed perspective." Another coach added that video recording was "the only way that a coach can really go back, see what exactly transpired during a session, and reflect on it." Another coach liked having a "concrete way" of looking at how questions and strategies were communicated and of watching the student's reactions to gauge what was effective and ineffective. One coach reevaluated their sessions after watching the videos: "The dissonance between these impressions can be very instructive in that I tend to see more clearly where I need improvement or where I was actually more effective than I

might have thought.” Video offered a more objective supplement to memory that helped coaches self-assess their work with students.

Self-awareness: For some of the coaches, the process of recording videos made them more attuned to their habits and practices in a way they felt was helpful. One coach explained: “I also think that recording myself has made me more self-aware. I find myself being meta-coach after recording my sessions, and while that wears off after a while (and I find myself relaxing a bit more), I think that those small adjustments I make in my coaching after recording my sessions remain with me.” Another coach expanded on the idea that videos were a “helpful source of self-awareness:” adding, “I’m better at managing my posture and body language during the sessions that I know others will see than I am when I’m more relaxed and in the mindset of privacy (notwithstanding the fact that I’m aware sessions are never formally ‘private’).” Knowing that the videos have afterlives and that others might watch later helped this coach self-manage.

Reassurance: While self-awareness turned to self-consciousness for some of the coaches, the videos were also a source of affirmation. One coach observed: “One thing that I’ve appreciated is the ability to see that I’m often helping the student more than I think I am. The voice of my inner critic can be loud, and I always wonder if I did enough when a student leaves. Watching sessions enables me to see that students are generally satisfied.” In another coach’s words: “I felt that watching them also allowed me to see what I was doing right that, perhaps, in the moment, I thought that I was botching in some way.” These coaches gained a renewed sense of confidence from watching their videos.

Growth: Because they recorded and watched videos at regular intervals, many of the coaches appreciated being able to see their growth over time. Many comments in this area reflected the tradeoff between growing pains and progress. “While some may dread it,” one coach said, “the overall benefits you receive from viewing do inform real adjustments that one can make to improve their performance.” Another added, “although I really didn’t love watching my own videos, I’ve certainly seen at least one way that I wanted to improve, which I wouldn’t have noticed had I not had a chance to review the session.” While the coaches did not generally review their videos with enthusiasm, they almost all found opportunities for growth and progress in what they watched.

Communication dynamics: Video reflection also provided a helpful means of examining non-verbal communication and its role in a session. One coach's comment captured two recurring themes of pace and body language: "I like keeping track of the time, so I can see how much time I spend talking or how much time I give a pause. It's also been helpful to watch my facial expressions and consider how students might interpret them." Another coach identified a particular habit to change: "It's minor, but the main thing I noticed was how much I touch my hair! I know how important body language is (particularly in these situations), so it was helpful to see that. I've since made an effort to remedy this habit." By watching their videos, coaches noticed the non-verbal dynamics that shape their interactions with students. As one coach put it, there were "things that can [be] revealed through video recording that I think cannot really be revealed through any other method of observation."

Training models: While self-reflection and improvement were the most common benefits that coaches cited, a few also felt invested in our goal of using the footage to improve our training. One coach explained: "I like the whole process, and I see the importance of recording our sessions as the footage could help train future coaches, which then has an impact on the student body we serve." This coach saw value in our effort to provide the exemplary, non-theoretical models of coaching that trainee coaches have often requested.

THE VIDEO RECORDING EXPERIENCE

Coaches did criticize aspects of our process of recording and reviewing videos. Three of the sixteen coaches noted that it can be awkward to ask for written permission to record at the start of the session. There were also some easily addressed complaints about logistical issues such as draining the battery, aiming the camera successfully, or wanting to record when another coach was using the equipment. Some coaches felt it was tedious and isolating to watch as many as sixteen of their own videos in a year, and a few found recording two videos per month excessive. Proponents of in-person observation cited the value of immediate feedback compared to the delay made possible by recording, and three coaches hoped for more external feedback opportunities from staff and peers.

While most coaches acknowledged some degree of anxiety as another cost of video recording, two coaches felt especially self-aware. One coach was concerned about a potential observer effect: "I worry that students or I might act differently with the

knowledge that we're being recorded, which in turn obviously impacts the vibe of the session and our ability to truly assess what a 'normal' session is like." Another coach felt that the permanence of video recording added another layer of anxiety: "A video is long-lasting and can be played for people who don't know me. There is more distance with a video, and I worry that it is easier to be critical and judgmental in that context." This coach felt more comfortable being observed by colleagues and wondered how sympathetically unknown future coaches would look upon sessions recorded in a long-lost context.

Despite these concerns, the majority of coaches (eight out of thirteen as reported above) expressed a preference for video observation over face-to-face. One coach, arguing that video observation was less of a hindrance to the session dynamics than face-to-face observation, described tradeoffs between the two formats: "I find it much easier to keep my focus on a session instead of the observation when it's just a non-living, non-breathing camera hanging out in the vicinity." Another coach echoed this sense that video observation felt less anxiety-provoking: "I think perhaps the video is a little bit less intrusive, which is why I think I would prefer this method. I would feel a little bit more nervous having someone watch me in-person than through video, and this nervousness might affect the quality of my session." While coaches voiced a range of experiences, all acknowledged a role for video recording at our Writing Center.

CONCLUSION

For our part, we continue to experiment with how to present the process in a way that conveys our goals for video recording, persuades coaches of its benefits, indicates the staff's supportive intentions, and minimizes fears about surveillance. We have already begun to act on our coaches' suggestions for improving the process. In the rare case that a coach has come to us with concerns about a particular video, we have removed it from our collection, but we have now added a checkbox on the online survey form for coaches to flag videos for exclusion from training materials. In response to coaches' requests to record less frequently, we have lowered the minimum requirement to one video per month. Finally, to create more and timelier opportunities for feedback, in April 2018, we instituted a round-robin style peer feedback activity suggested by a coach. As we continue to streamline our process and make video recording more enjoyable and productive for our staff, we encourage other writing centers to experiment with video recording for training and professional development.



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