

# Why Writers Choose Asynchronous Online Tutoring: Issues of Access and Inclusion

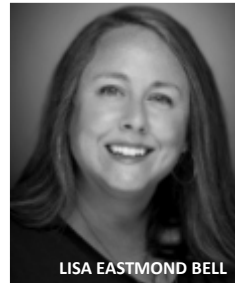
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To effectively support writers, writing centers should know who uses tutoring at their locale and why. As Lori Salem notes, “[T]he decision to use or not use the writing center offers us a unique window into the writing center” (150), and these decisions often encompass “personal preferences” as well as “broader social factors” (149). Questions about who uses tutoring and why are not new, but they have not always included online tutoring. As a writing center administrator and undergraduate writing tutors, we wanted to better understand who used our program’s asynchronous online screencast tutoring and why these writers chose to use online tutoring. To do so, we conducted an IRB-approved study examining the demographic differences between writers participating in online versus in-person tutorials, the primary reasons writers chose online tutoring, and the ways online tutoring met or did not meet writers’ preferences or needs.

Online tutoring takes many forms, and our purposeful use of asynchronous online screencast tutoring was central to this study. Wanting to use the relational characteristics of synchronous tutoring and the flexibility of time and space of asynchronous tutoring, our writing center chose to offer asynchronous screencasting. Essentially, writers scheduled a time for their paper to be reviewed and submitted an assignment description, their work, and an intake form noting their course, major concerns, and the assignment due date. During the appointment, the tutor reviewed uploaded materials, provided a few focused comments in the margins of the paper, and created a personalized video in PowerPoint where they screenshared a copy of the submitted writing while addressing the writer’s concerns and suggesting resources



and revision strategies. Given limited resources and the well-established demand for in-person tutoring at our writing center, we only offered 10-12 online appointments per week, which filled up quickly.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Previous scholarship identifies ways in which online tutoring serves writers with a broad range of learning needs and preferences. In particular, asynchronous online tutoring may be especially important for learners with demanding or non-traditional schedules (Bertucci Hamper). It benefits writers with disabilities, multilingual writers, and writers of color (Dembsey 5) and accommodates writers' social preferences and mental health (Morris and Chikwa 26; Bertucci Hamper; Camarillo). Online asynchronous tutoring can also provide the time some writers need to best react to feedback and engage in tutoring (Morris and Chikwa 26). Additionally, online feedback for writers can blend written and oral communication with audio and visual feedback in ways that increase clarity and communication (Cranny 2914; Madson 222), provide a resource-rich learning environment (Wolfe and Griffin 82), and establish personal connections between writers and tutors (Cranny 2914; Madson 222). However, like in-person tutoring, the success of online tutoring in facilitating learning is linked to targeted tutor education (Angelov and Ganobcsik-Williams 62) and informed design decisions (Burgstahler 71). Understandably, online tutoring is contextual and most effective when shaped by learners and their needs.

## **METHODS**

We conducted our study at Brigham Young University, a large private research university in the western United States. During fall 2019, when this study took place, 33,181 undergraduate students and 2,843 graduate students were enrolled at the university, with 81% of students identifying as White, 50% female, 50% male, and 4.5% international students ("Facts and Figures"). Per university housing requirements, the majority of students lived on campus or in nearby university-approved, off-campus housing, making this a largely residential or local population. The university's large writing center offered drop-in in-person tutoring, scheduled in-person tutoring, and scheduled asynchronous online screencast tutoring.

In this mixed-methods study, we collected quantitative appointment and survey data to identify demographics and usage patterns and qualitative survey responses to explore and explain visible patterns. We examined self-reported registration and session data from 21,943 in-person tutorials and 334 online asynchronous screencast tutorials conducted over fifteen months. We also

emailed the 204 unique writers who had voluntarily participated in online asynchronous tutoring during the research period and invited them to complete a short, anonymous survey about their online tutoring experience. The survey questionnaire and consent were completed via Qualtrics, and collection continued until fifty surveys had been received. The eight-question survey consisted of multiple choice and open-ended questions related to respondents' choice of online vs. in-person tutoring and their perceptions of its helpfulness.

The sample size of fifty unique survey participants allowed for triangulation of data and insights into usage patterns. Triangulating data through multiple researchers, forms of collection, and rounds of open coding and analysis increased reflexivity, convergent validity, and reliability in the research process. Research findings were categorized by demographic data, tutorial participation choices, and satisfaction with asynchronous online screencast tutorials.

## RESULTS

*Demographics of Learners Using Online and In-person Tutoring.* Results from comparing user demographics from 21,934 tutoring sessions revealed notable differences related to self-identified gender, English Language Learner (ELL) status, and class standing (Table 1).

	Pre-scheduled Online (n=334)	Pre-scheduled In-person (n=3,123)	Drop-in In-person (n=18,486)
<b>Unique Participants</b>	204	1,940	7,913
<b>Tutorials by Gender</b>			
Male	67%	63%	50%
Female	31%	36%	45%
Prefer not to answer	2%	1%	5%
<b>Tutorials by Linguistic Identity</b>			
English Language Learners	23%	11%	15%
<b>Tutorials by Class Standing</b>			
First-year	17%	48%	48%
Senior	30%	15%	12%
Graduate Student	11%	3%	3%

**Table 1:** Demographics for Writing Center Tutorials Sept. 2018 - Nov. 2019

As noted in Table 1, more learners identifying as female participated in pre-scheduled online and in-person tutoring, while writers identifying as male preferred drop-in, in-person tutoring. Results also revealed a higher percentage of writers identifying as ELL used online tutoring. Additionally, more first-year writers opted for in-

person sessions while more upper-class and graduate students chose online tutorials.

*Writers' Primary Reasons for Participating in Online Tutorials.* Survey respondents were asked to explain their main reasons for choosing asynchronous online tutoring. Of the fifty participants, only four identified as being enrolled in an online course. Rather than online courses being the catalyst for participating in online tutoring, participants identified issues of time, physical space, and feedback as their primary reason for choosing asynchronous online tutoring.

*Time.* In multiple-choice responses, participants noted how access and time efficiency influenced their use of asynchronous online tutoring. Of the fifty responses, 74% related to time, including having a "busy class schedule" (30%), "schedule with work and/or family" (22%), or the lack of in-person appointments (22%), which means being left with a drop-in appointment that often requires wait time. Qualitative responses also indicated how time mediated preferences for asynchronous tutoring with participant responses such as "I didn't have time to physically come in," "I am very busy and it was very convenient," and "In my busy schedule it is hard for me to fit a time between work and classes when I can meet and having the online session still allows me to get the help I need." Another writer wrote that using online tutoring was "easier than having to work around the writing center's schedule." Overall, survey results suggested asynchronous online tutoring made best use of what little time some writers had for academic assistance by offering access to those who lacked time for in-person tutoring.

*Physical Space.* Writers' responses also noted how physical space and distance often aligned with writers' use of and access to tutoring. In addition to the 22% of respondents who noted the lack of available pre-scheduled in-person appointments, participants identified living far from campus (6%), being "more comfortable with online interaction than face-to-face interaction" (4%), studying abroad (2%), and finding the physical writing center space not "accessible or accommodating" to their needs (2%) as other space-related factors. Open-text responses reinforced the relationship between space and access via asynchronous online tutoring with responses such as "I was on an internship out of state, once I was really sick, and another time I was in California." Some noted physical space in relation to social preferences, explaining "I feel like it's easier to give more critical feedback when not face to face with someone and I think I got better feedback from my online consultation than my in person consultation." Others noted the overlap of

time and space affecting access to tutoring: “I was able to send it in and get feedback without having to be there in person on a busy day.” This confluence of mediating factors revealed ways in which issues of access to tutoring were often compounded.

*Forms of Feedback.* In addition to time and physical space, writers noted the form of feedback as a factor when deciding to use asynchronous online tutoring. Given their experience with asynchronous screencast tutorials, 70% of writers identified the combination of audio-visual video feedback and written comments as very helpful, noting how the two forms of feedback worked in tandem. They appreciated “the video explaining comments made” and “video feedback that walks . . . through [the tutor’s] thoughts and reasoning.” The combination of video and written feedback provided access to the quantity and quality of feedback many writers desired. One writer explained, “It was still in-depth and personal and I got feedback that was helpful,” suggesting asynchronous screencast feedback balanced attention to the writer and the writing.

In survey responses, writers also noted the importance of being able to return to feedback and access it based on their own timeline and needs. One writer noted, “I could re-watch the advice and see edits at my pace.” Another said, “It was all written down so I could go back and address every point.” Others responded that they valued the “replayableness” of the feedback or being able to “read again the consultation” suggesting the form of feedback was an important factor in terms of tutoring options and access.

Additionally, writers described their satisfaction with the asynchronous feedback, particularly how the feedback was tailored, prioritized, specific, and limited. As one writer noted, the tutor “broke down all my questions really nicely and even took the time to give suggestions to a few other areas.” Other writers appreciated “specific” and “clear” feedback from tutors, as well as feedback that was “[n]ot too much, but just the right amount.” In fact, several writers compared the feedback from asynchronous online tutoring with in-person tutoring and described the online feedback as “more concise,” “more critical,” and more focused on the questions and concerns of the writer.

*Writers’ Satisfaction with Online Tutoring.* In addition to examining writers’ use of asynchronous online tutoring, our research sought to better understand how and to what extent such tutoring satisfied writers’ tutoring preferences or needs. In survey responses, writers noted that the asynchronous online tutoring was “solid” and “really helpful” and that “the consultants were very skilled.”

Survey data revealed 92% of writers were likely to use our program's online tutoring again, aligning with the program's general participant satisfaction survey results that semester (92% likely to refer a friend to the Writing Center and 78% identifying writing tutorials very or extremely useful). Overall, the qualitative and quantitative survey data indicated that those who had participated in online tutoring were inclined to use online tutoring for future writing projects.

However, writers' satisfaction with asynchronous online screen-casting tutoring did not demonstrate a sole preference for asynchronous tutoring. Data revealed that 58% of surveyed writers made use of both online and in-person tutoring. Surveyed writers also noted their interest in different forms of online tutoring, with 38% of writers expressing interest in synchronous tutoring options in addition to asynchronous offerings. Given the needs and preferences of writers in terms of time, space, forms of feedback, and demographics, satisfaction with online asynchronous screencast tutoring was readily visible throughout the data, but the importance of offering other tutoring options was also clear.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Our findings suggest that those using online tutoring services may do so because in-person writing center programming is not always easy to access and not always designed to be inclusive. As we began to learn more about the writers using our asynchronous online screencast tutoring, it was clear that offering online options helps fit tutoring into writers' schedules rather than fitting writers into tutoring schedules. Like many writing centers, our usage numbers have always been high, and we felt we were meeting the needs of writers with our long hours, comfortable waiting room, and strong staff of tutors. However, we had not considered which writers we served most effectively and why. As Harry Denny et al. note, "writing centers are places where inequality--unequal access to educational resources--is made manifest" (69). Clearly, writing centers are not inherently neutral spaces and are not always designed with inclusivity and access in mind (Burgstahler 71). While our program offered extensive access to writers willing or able to spend additional time on campus receiving academic support and to writers who possessed the emotional, mental, and linguistic capital to engage with the demands of real-time learning exchanges, we had not fully considered writers without such luxuries or learning preferences. By primarily offering in-person synchronous tutoring, our programming may not have been accessible or equitable for many writers, including working students, ELL writers, caregivers, and writers with disabilities.

The implications of this study strongly suggested we revise our programming and practice to better meet the needs of the writers we work with. As several scholars have noted, writing center programming, whether online or in-person, should be informed by the varied and diverse needs of local learners and provide options for a range of writers (Denton 189; Prince et al. 12; Martinez and Olsen 193). If certain writers can only access tutoring online, then our online programming is vital work and should be expanded beyond the minimal hours previously offered. Additionally, given the demographic differences in writers using our online and in-person services, our training for online tutors should not be limited to introducing new technology and online platforms. Instead, our training should address helping students navigate new genres, addressing language options with ELL writers, and scaffolding revision suggestions for writers with busy work schedules. While our research may provide insights for the larger field of writing center studies, it is most valuable on the local level where our programming and practice now have new possibilities for addressing the needs of the writers we work with.

Completing this study at the end of 2019 provided us with an important understanding of the writers using our online tutoring and their reasons for doing so. However, writing centers are not static silos, and the need to learn about and listen to stakeholders is ongoing and necessary work. Soon after we completed this study, the pandemic of 2020 moved learners online in unprecedented numbers. Consequently, more writers and writing centers are making use of online tutoring, and the shift to online tutoring will have lasting repercussions in the field and shape a new era of writing centers. As writing centers rethink and revise tutoring and support services in the wake of a global shift towards online learning, they must move from an examination of larger trends to closely study issues of access and inclusion for those they serve locally. As they do so, those in writing centers may find and finally acknowledge that online tutoring, in its many forms, is not ancillary but essential writing center work.

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