

Asynchronous Writing Consultations: Incorporating Video Feedback to Improve Writing Support for Graduate Students

Christina Trujillo

California Polytechnic State University

Kelly Bowker

University of Michigan

Lauren Hammond

University of California, Riverside

Social distancing, along with expansions of online class offerings brought about by programs like the California Online Education Initiative, necessitates a reinvestigation of all options for student support. Given students' needs to engage with writing in formats beyond traditional pen and paper assignments, it is important to view literacy as "a multimodal activity in which oral, written, and visual communication intertwine and interact" (Trimbur 88). This further necessitates creative approaches in writing center support. As a result, we at the University of California, Riverside (UCR) Graduate Writing Center (GWC) wondered: How could we better support our diverse student cohorts?

We in the GWC believed that in-person, synchronous consultations were the ideal support modality. It was easier to explain, provide and receive non-verbal cues, and give feedback without veering into editing when working in person. Conversely, due to the lack of real-time interaction, asynchronous writing consultations were considered the "lesser of two evils" when students were faced with the choice between non-real-time support or no support at all. Writing center scholars have noted the fear that working in an email-based format, where students submit their writing and receive a response consisting of tracked changes, text comments, and feedback summary reports, breaks from the traditional ethos of writing center pedagogy, wherein students and writing consultants work collaboratively to build skills rather than fix a single assignment (qtd. in Neaderhiser and Wolfe 61). Stephen Neaderhiser and Joanna Wolfe note, "email consultations more closely mirror the type of interaction we might expect between a student and an in-



CHRISTINA TRUJILLO



KELLY BOWKER



LAUREN HAMMOND

structor than they resemble the dialogic joint inquiry of the ideal writing-tutor relationship” (50). This is a troubling dynamic in a space focused on improving the writer rather than the individual piece of writing, such as the GWC.

Recent scholarship, however, points to the potential benefits of asynchronous tutoring as a way of expanding student support, such as its ability to allow students time to pause and reflect on feedback in ways that are not possible in synchronous sessions (Gallagher and Maxwell). Courtney Buck et al. highlight that despite their differences, the two modalities “share a student-centered model with emphasis on scaffolding, instruction, and a focus on student growth.” With this in mind, in the summer of 2018, Christina, Coordinator of the GWC, sought to address the diverse and increasingly digital needs of graduate students by offering asynchronous tutoring sessions to UCR’s School of Medicine (SoM) students.

At the time, SoM students found it almost impossible to meet with writing consultants during operating hours, even for synchronous online sessions, due to their intensive schedules. Recognizing students’ time constraints, the GWC began developing an asynchronous branch of the Center where SoM students could work with writing consultants. Graduate writing consultants were trained in video/audio recording programs and cloud-based sharing platforms to provide asynchronous consultations. We acknowledged that feedback not provided in real-time had the potential to break down the focus on collaborative skills-building found in synchronous writing consultations. To address this, we inserted a human element in our process by combining text feedback with video responses focused on global skills-building. Consultants make use of asynchronous sessions’ added time to develop intentional, thoughtful feedback in the form of marginal and recorded commentary while students have the opportunity to think through and respond to these changes at their own pace. In what follows, we present approaches for incorporating asynchronous writing consultations with video feedback into writing centers. We highlight the benefits of extended processing time for student writers and peer writing consultants and the added benefits of incorporating video feedback into the response process.

OUR METHOD

Typically, in asynchronous writing sessions, writers provide their manuscripts through email or via an online appointment system and wait for feedback. Students sometimes identify what they hope to receive feedback on, and sometimes the consultant deter-

mines what feedback will benefit the writer. In a synchronous session, this lack of clear direction is often, though not always, resolved through the consultant's use of probing and follow-up questions, leading to the establishment of a goal for the session. In an asynchronous session, however, consultants cannot effectively ask the writer these questions in real time, which is where some of our hesitancy surrounding asynchronous work originated.

The GWC's asynchronous consultations adhere to and break from this model in key ways. Our center has four weekly slots for asynchronous writing consultations. With a relatively small SoM cohort (65 students when this article was written), this number of sessions provides ample consultation opportunities. Due to staffing limitations (graduate student employees only work four hours a week, with a budget for six to eight consultants at any given time), students are advised to expect feedback within seven business days. While this timeline may not work at all centers, we find the need to plan ahead similar for asynchronous and synchronous schedules due to staffing constraints. We do not accept drop-in appointments.

Students complete an intake form and submit their writing through WCOOnline. Given the potential for confusion inherent in any new format, we kept our sign-up process for synchronous and asynchronous sessions similar. Students note the type of document being submitted (CV, personal statement, fellowship statement, etc.) and answer the following question: "What would you like to focus on in your consultation?" While open-ended, the question has generated detailed responses such as:

I would like to focus this review on whether or not I am effectively answering the prompts and how I can improve on this. Also, I would like to know if any topics within the essays do not necessarily fit/flow well. Lastly I need to shed approximately 200-300 words from each of the two essays and would like feedback on what can be sacrificed within the essays. There are also some comments I've added within the text that specify questions I have.

This comment is representative of our asynchronous feedback requests in terms of both quantity and depth of response. We suspect this question was adequate for graduate medical students experienced with self-advocating; those implementing our approach in undergraduate centers may want to experiment with the specificity and number of intake questions.

Consultants comment in the margins of the text using Microsoft Word comment and track changes features. Track changes illus-

trates feedback when a point is clarified through an explanation. The GWC breaks from the one-to-one feedback structure, however, in that two different writing consultants typically review a single document, which students are advised of in advance. Our consultants provide asynchronous feedback between synchronous sessions due to our limited staffing, so a single consultant is often not able to review a full document in the time they have available between sessions. We find that feedback provided by the two consultants demonstrates both collaboration and a help-seeking mindset to writers.

When two consultants review a single document, students are given a glimpse of consultants “speaking” to one another on the page. For example, in a personal statement, Consultant A indicated they felt that a stronger connection between two ideas would clarify the writer’s point but questioned if their lack of understanding stemmed from a lack of content-level expertise. Consultant B followed this comment by agreeing with Consultant A but then went further to articulate what they understood as the student’s point based on the current sentence. Being provided both Consultant A and Consultant B’s feedback, the student author is given “multiple perspectives from a variety of readers” (Gallagher and Maxwell). Moreover, by having consultants communicate and check their understanding with one another, the session demonstrates to the writer how collaborative support can clarify their writing.

Our final feedback component is a video-recorded screen capture. Once consultants provide their comments on a manuscript, the GWC coordinator creates a brief five to ten minute video. Prior to remote learning brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, consultants used any down time in the center to record these videos, with the last consultant reviewing the document taking this final step to complete the process. Graduate consultants work only four hours a week, and as usage of the asynchronous schedule increased while usage of the synchronous schedule remained consistently high, shifting the task of recording to the coordinator became necessary to maintain the seven business day timeframe to return feedback.

Video recordings synthesized in-text feedback and any notes Consultants A and B felt were better explained verbally. Specific feedback intended to be shared verbally is deleted before the video feedback is recorded. Often, this feedback addresses complicated formatting issues in CVs or structural issues in personal statements. Thinking through which feedback to offer orally versus in writing helps the consultants to center global concerns, mitigating the fear that asynchronous feedback may focus strictly on the writing rather

than on building the writer's skills (Wolfe and Neaderhiser 50). Previous studies on the success of screen captured video feedback in instructional settings revealed that students were more receptive to video-captured feedback than written feedback alone. Both students and instructors expressed the importance of discerning tone in personalizing the feedback; students receiving recorded feedback felt that their instructor cared more about their success when they heard the tone in which feedback was provided (Jones et al. 601).

With the screen share of the student's work paired with audio feedback, students are able to connect their written work with the feedback in real-time, similar to a synchronous session. In videos, next steps are discussed and students are verbally encouraged to return to the center. This video is then uploaded to our office Google Drive. A shareable link is created and embedded in the document, giving the writer oral and visual feedback. Gallagher and Maxwell note that such a link demonstrates to the writer "a human being has invested time and energy in the students' success." The positive impact of video commentary is reinforced by multiple students citing the inclusion of video-recorded responses as helpful. One student wrote, "Thank you so much for the incredible MSWord and video feedback. ... I would not have gotten this far without your input." Finally, the document is returned to the student via the online appointment system, which utilizes the student's Google-based university email account. At the end of asynchronous sessions, students receive written feedback from two consultants, as well as a short video synthesizing that feedback.

RESULTS

When assessing the results of our method, we consider two main areas: 1) student usage, specifically how often students schedule appointments; 2) student engagement, specifically the level of intake form response students provide when/if they return for a follow-up consultation.

The GWC has offered asynchronous writing support for two full academic years, including the summer of 2019 and 2020. From Fall 2019 to Summer 2020, twenty-three unique users out of sixty-five registered in the 2019-2020 SoM cohort utilized the system. This represents 35% of the total cohort. Most students registered for two sessions—one for a personal statement and one for a CV—both documents medical students provide for their residency match. Seven students made more than two appointments, with five returning four or more times (one student returned seven times) across Spring 2020 and Summer 2020.

Rather than having a specific formula by which consultation intake form responses are compared, we compare the depth and breadth of engagement students display when filling out the form. In synchronous sessions, where students can verbally communicate concerns to a consultant, intake forms are filled out with short answers, like “grammar” or “feedback on conference paper.” In contrast, students using the asynchronous schedule tend to detail their concerns and, in follow-up sessions, even indicate which of the previous points of feedback they used and which they did not, and their reasoning behind these choices. Gallagher and Maxwell note that students at their institution utilizing asynchronous sessions were “enthusiastic about it, frequently becoming repeat users” (7). We found a similar pattern. When students resubmit for additional feedback, intake question responses tend to become more detailed, creating a conversation by directly addressing the consultant(s) who reviewed past versions.

Some documents shared for asynchronous consultations, like personal statements, are inherently reflective, which may impact the level of self-reflection writers display when re-submitting documents. However, the asynchronous consultations are also utilized for less personal documents, namely research statements. At least one student returned twice for feedback on their research statement. Students self-selecting asynchronous sessions for support beyond personal statements and CVs would seem to indicate that asynchronous feedback is viewed as an acceptable and accessible form of support. A representative example of response level in returning intake forms is illustrated below:

[Y]ou had mentioned that the introduction might be a good place to include a couple lines about this [point]. I thought about this but ultimately, I felt that the story about [this person] was a stronger introduction so I was hesitant to take that away. Instead, I included a quick line about when my interest [in the subject] began in a separate part of my personal statement. Please let me know what you think.

Before seeking additional support, the student thought through consultant feedback, chose what to incorporate and what to leave out, and articulated their reasoning for those choices to identify what they wished to receive further feedback on. This mirrors the structure of a synchronous session, but with the added step of the student expressing their thoughts on their revision process in writing in advance of a follow-up session. With asynchronous sessions, students have added time to process feedback, as well as the opportunity to return to the video recorded feedback, allowing students to “consider the advice at their own pace” with resources

that remain accessible to them for an extended time (Gallagher and Maxwell).

CONSULTANT BENEFITS

There are also added benefits to this model for consultants. The asynchronous format's delayed response offers an opportunity to think about the text more deeply, gather resources like links to citation style guides (Gallagher and Maxwell), and collaborate with fellow consultants when providing feedback. The GWC repeats the mantra "writing is a communal activity" to encourage graduate writers to seek support. In synchronous sessions, consultants model a help-seeking mentality by asking the student, fellow consultants, or the coordinator questions during a consultation. While not the same as a conversation between student and consultant, having consultants ask questions of one another in the text helps illustrate to uncertain writers that even consultants, an assumed authority, do not have all the answers (Buck et al.).

STEPS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

For anyone considering asynchronous sessions, the model above is relatively simple to implement. An inexpensive headphone set with a microphone is recommended to maintain sound quality. Beyond that, the most complicated components of incorporating this feedback structure are screen recording software and time. Many computers have QuickTime preloaded, which allows for screen and audio capture. Other screen capturing software, such as Camtasia and Yuja, have a cost associated with them. Given past remote instruction, Zoom's "share screen" and "recording" functions are likely more cost-effective and user-friendly.

Creating shareable links can be done through cloud-based apps like Dropbox, OneDrive, and Google Drive. UCR utilizes Google for student emails, so we chose Google Drive as the platform to create shareable links. This choice integrated with the cloud-based system students are familiar with and required no software for video viewing. Google Drive also allows students to save copied versions of their video feedback to their private drives. Recorded videos are saved for a year before students are advised to copy videos for future reference. This yearly cleanup has kept us from exceeding Google Drive's data limits.

This structure can be scaled up or down based on center needs and staffing. The GWC's small student staff made having the coordinator complete the video recording necessary; however, consultants could take on this final step for centers without these time and staff limitations.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT SUPPORT

Our current moment forces us to grapple with long-established, deeply entrenched notions of education. With universities rethinking how courses are taught as a result of the pandemic, we must ask ourselves how to ensure students maintain access to our centers. While our asynchronous consultations support a very specific student population, the model itself could serve as a means of support to wider, more varied student demographics. We know students do not all have access to reliable internet connections and may struggle to balance competing obligations while also pursuing their education. We can also surmise that online education will continue to expand. Asynchronous sessions allow students to choose when and where they connect to writing centers, empowering them to seek support at a time most conducive to their needs, making asynchronous sessions an additional support structure in the ever-expanding writing center toolbox.

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