

The Psychological Disadvantages of Drop-in Online Consultations

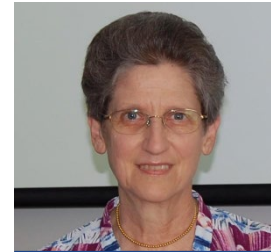
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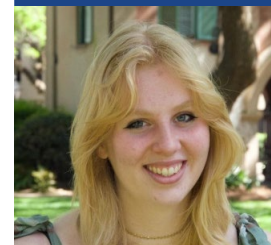
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Prior to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, our writing center, which is part of a learning commons, offered only limited online, synchronous assistance through Zoom. We called it “The Writing Center After Dark.” Consultants, all undergraduate peers, met virtually with clients on a drop-in basis each weeknight after regular writing center hours. We were eager to dip a toe into using Zoom, especially since synchronous sessions offer many advantages. For instance, virtual support fosters inclusion (Westfall), such as accommodating students with off-campus jobs, those with disabilities, or those who might not feel comfortable in a classroom or center because of anxiety (Claman). Consultants can also see on the screen what part of the essay clients are laboring over so that they can zero in on that part (Summers). Clients are also more likely to write during the sessions (Fitzgerald and lanetta 179). Then, too, online sessions help shy consultants. An experienced consultant from our center explains: “If being one-on-one with someone can make you a bit anxious, then I think Zoom can really help with that since you are more separated.” With light usage, we took the first step towards providing full online service, should it ever be needed.

Of course, this service became vital when the pandemic required that writing centers shift to assisting all writers online, in our case using Zoom’s chat feature, breakout rooms, annotation capacity, and whiteboard. Because the physical writing center offered only drop-in service to students before COVID, the learning commons wanted the center to continue providing such assistance as much as possible to maintain usage. Thus, on the learning commons’ website, students would select the writing center link and, next, click on the management tool (TutorTrac) to choose when they would work with consultants. Then, students were automatically assigned a day and time with a specific consultant. Because students were accustomed to merely dropping into the physical writing center (with papers due in just an hour or less!), many sought immediate online help the moment they visited the center’s website to schedule. If consultants were already conducting an online session, they placed newly arrived clients in one of Zoom’s breakout rooms. When a third or fourth writer chose the same time, they, too, were placed in breakout rooms. With three or more clients waiting, consultants moved among the rooms, table-jumping, so to speak, as in our face-to-face consultations. With the website established and Zoom ready to go, our writing center appeared equipped to assist students online.



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Because our center was just venturing into this service when COVID descended, consultants began to express concerns about working online, sending me, the director, comments, such as “My client was playing with her dog the entire session” or “Because of a three-second delay before my client heard me, it was hard to talk without speaking over each other or without generating an echo.” Their noticeable sense of dissatisfaction meant I needed to help them understand the potential psychological impacts of synchronous work (Worm 249). With COVID forcing services to move online (thus ending all in-person socializing in small or large groups), consultants began to experience two psychological factors during consultations: isolation and fatigue. Learning how to address these factors can help centers anticipate possible effects of online sessions and offer strategies to those already online.

ISOLATION: “I FEEL SO ALONE.”

Zoom congratulates itself for its ability to “connect” (with its website using the tagline “Thank you for keeping us together”). Yet, virtual sessions may generate a sense of isolation, which peer consultants experienced during their COVID consultations. This isolation took several forms. Although consultants were accustomed to seeking help from fellow consultants in a face-to-face center, during synchronous sessions, consultants could not physically turn to other workers for assistance. They depended on their Googling abilities to answer clients’ questions or relied on the digital copies of handouts from other online labs, such as the Purdue Owl. As a result, the consultants often felt alone. To cope with such isolation, consultants created a group chat (GroupMe) to use during Zoom sessions so that other consultants could provide advice, if they were available, or consultants met online through Microsoft Teams for what Genie Giaimo, discussing wellness, describes as “discussions about the emotional challenges tutors are currently facing with their work (and in their broader lives)” (6).

Consultants experienced another more complex form of isolation. When conducting face-to-face sessions, consultants and clients engage in a natural flow of conversation called “synchrony” or “the rhythmic coordination of speech and movement that occurs unconsciously both in and between individuals during communication” (“Synchrony”). Typically, one speaker nods, and so does the other; one speaker hesitates while the other sweeps in to fill the silence so listeners and speakers coordinate their speech and movements. In fact, “[h]umans use a range of precisely timed vocalizations, gestures, and movements to communicate, and they rely on precise responses from others to determine if they are being understood,” explains psychologist Brenda Wiederhold (437). Unfortunately, the limitations of online sessions affected this communication. When working in person, consultants employ silence, waiting for students to process a question and apply it to their writings. Online, however, consultants’ silences might appear as if consultants are uninterested or detached. Then, too, “synchronous” is not truly synchronous because of a mechanical issue. Inherent to all online sessions is a brief technological lag of only a few milliseconds, a lag interfering with the natural flow of human communication (Feibush 35; Wiederhold). That all-so-brief but subtle lag may portray consultants as aloof or uncaring. So, at the start of the session, consultants explained they would be asking questions and then waiting (Feibush 42), or if using silence did not work for students, consultants described how they would be typing responses, utilizing Zoom’s chat feature (Feibush 40).

Using Zoom’s breakout rooms affected how consultants began their sessions, emphasizing, again, the potential sense of isolation inherent in online consultations. Unlike in-person sessions, there was no sitting down at a table, no opportunity for consultants to watch clients fire up laptops, no adapting to the other person sitting next to them. These small acts used in face-to-face rituals establish that two humans will be working together (Devet). Being online and placing clients in

breakout rooms eliminated this ritual. When consultants popped up on the screen, clients thought it was the signal to move to their texts immediately. As a consultant told me, “It is hard to make introductions.” Without the initial in-person rituals, consultants and clients alike often felt separated and isolated. Consultants needed to take time to establish the first contact ritual by saying, “Hello. I am so and so, and I’m happy to work with you today! Is this your first time using Zoom for help with your writing? Let’s talk about how you and I will work together.” Using a few such sentences helped create the necessary rapport and minimized the “need for speed” where clients believed they should dash ahead to work on their texts.

The physical screen itself also created isolation. A consultant reported, “I never had too much of a hard time connecting with my clients when we were face-to-face, but connecting with people through a screen is much harder.” Although the screen displays a client, it presents only a frame of a face so that consultants were less able to read a student’s incline of the head, a shrug of a shoulder (Feibush), actions central for helping consultants adjust to students’ needs. When seeing a client’s face—if it was shown at all—consultants received limited signals about the student’s emotions and attitudes, vital concerns that helped determine whether a client was absorbing information (Feibush 37). A consultant reported: “Zoom eliminates the ability to read body language and adjust accordingly to make the client more comfortable.” To handle this inability to see the entire body, consultants sat back from the camera to reveal hands and face, engaging in Laura Feibush’s “gestural listening” (35), where listening reveals itself through bodily movements. In this way, consultants showed their clients they were truly engaged in listening.

Zoom’s breakout rooms also fostered isolation. In our physical center, while working with multiple writers, consultants could always give a quick, searching glance to see if a client was ready for assistance and then move over to the student’s table. To replicate this in-person experience online, consultants would drop into a Zoom room and ask the client to complete some writing for ten minutes or so while the consultant jumped into another breakout room to help a second student; then, the consultant moved back to the first writer so all students had received some assistance. This method was not always satisfactory, with clients frequently feeling stressed or just exiting Zoom before receiving help. One consultant described such a session: “The client was so stressed it was difficult for her to focus on her paper. Yet, I had to leave her in a breakout room to assist two other clients. I have always felt leaving her alone only made her more stressed out.” To minimize clients feeling stressed or departing breakout rooms, consultants tried to check in with waiting clients more regularly. I also asked computer support to limit the number of clients allowed into any Zoom session and to space them out at 15-minute intervals. While not necessarily ideal, these methods meant clients in breakout rooms felt less abandoned.

FATIGUE: “AFTER MY ONLINE SESSIONS, I FEEL SO TIRED.”

Isolation was not the only potential complication. Emotional fatigue, a key component of burnout, also arose. According to Christina Maslach, founder of the field of study on burnout, “[T]he emotional demands of the work can exhaust a service provider’s capacity to be invested with, and responsive to, the needs of the recipients” (403). As a result, service providers may distance themselves “emotionally and cognitively from [their] work” (403). They can even display other key factors of burnout, namely, cynicism and a lack of self-efficacy (feeling effective in their work) (Sanchez-Reilly et al.). In fact, a consultant told me, “I don’t feel like I’m able to help clients.” To counter this feeling, consultants asked online clients what they believed was helpful during the session or said, “Is there anything else I can help with?” Consultants also encouraged transfer of learning by ending consultations with “What did you learn about your writing that you could apply

to your next assignments?” In this way, both clients and consultants tried to see the efficacy of their work in order to avoid emotional burnout.

Multitasking, central to synchronous work, drained energy, too. While analyzing their clients’ needs, consultants were constantly switching among chat, screen share, breakout rooms, and other Zoom functions. As they shifted, consultants worked hard to turn off one part of their brains (Fosslien and Duffy) to use another Zoom tool. Because the brain is not designed to multitask efficiently, this work depleted their attention spans (Lee), costing the consultants productive time and making them feel exhausted. To minimize the effect of multitasking, consultants needed familiarity with Zoom’s functions. So that they could move fluidly through chat, annotation, et al., they practiced with each other or with friends, using the various items in Zoom’s toolbox.

Another prime cause of fatigue was the video itself. In face-to-face sessions, consultants can look away from clients, glancing over the clients’ heads to see another student coming through the center’s doors or scanning the room while clients write. Online, however, consultants’ and clients’ faces were riveted together, making the synchronous experience more intense and fatiguing than texting or using social media (Denworth). The screen, completely filled with the speaker’s face, triggered, at some level, exhaustion. “Even though we know we are safe, subconsciously, this large appearance and prolonged eye contact can register as intimidation, flooding our bodies with stress hormones,” Wiederhold reports (437). If it wasn’t the speaker’s view that tired the consultants, it could be the constant viewing of one’s self on the screen, an effect now commonly called “constant gaze” (Fosslien and Duffy). Feeling they are continuously being viewed, consultants and clients did not always relax. In an all-too-human way, they were thinking about how they appeared to their fellow video conferencers. Because this self-consciousness is “arousing and disconcerting” (Denworth), it drained focus and energy. A consultant explained how she handled this exhausting experience. “Look at me through the camera,” she told the client, “so you are not always looking at yourself.” She also shifted the focus from the riveted faces by using Zoom’s chat feature. The client shared her screen, highlighting the places in the paper the client was worried about. The consultant, then, typed in comments via chat (Devet). The chat comments were saved and sent to the client for review. Using Google Docs was useful, too. Both consultants and clients looked at the paper, typing comments that clients saw instantly. To avoid feeling fatigued, consultants also moved their own video to the side to be less direct, switched to a phone or email to break the view mode (Fosslien and Duffy), or just eliminated self-view.

Adjusting to an online workplace environment also drained energy. In the physical center, clients were entering a space of desks and books and fellow writers, sensing this area was devoted to scholarly work. In fact, clients often came to the in-person center just to write because they “liked the atmosphere.” In such an environment, it was easy to create rapport, sometimes simply by complimenting clients on the stickers on their laptops before getting to work with the writers. In online sessions, though, consultants and clients were not necessarily sharing a space associated with writing. Both consultants and clients could be Zooming from home (with a beloved pet in the room), from a coffee shop (with a customer ordering a latte), or from a dorm room (with posters on the walls and lights strung over a bed). Such elements may be “unwanted” and may “degrade the intimacy of the session” (Nadler 10) that is intended to be scholarly. Without this scholarly environment, consultants labored to help writers concentrate on the writing process. Working hard to establish rapport, consultants asked about the client’s dog barking in the background or about a Beyoncé poster adorning a dorm room. Once they set up a bond with clients, consultants advised them to designate, if possible, one area as “Zoom central,” a place to

do work only. In this way, consultants and clients found a way to charge a space for writing, thus minimizing the impact of the space on their synchronous sessions.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt Zoom allowed our writing center to assist student writers under trying COVID conditions. Using synchronous sessions even helped to underscore what it meant to work in a writing center: “I liked to do the screen sharing on Zoom so I could see the student’s work without actually being able to change it, and that helps to maintain the role of consultant and client,” a consultant told me. Also, unlike in a face-to-face center where new clients keep coming in the door, the online space meant consultants could focus on just one client on the Zoom screen: “I found it quite nice to have that genuine one-on-one time with the client,” stated a consultant. Although there were frustrating and isolating moments, consultants decreased the potential psychological failings of feeling alone and being tired by using various coping strategies. Even though online writing centers cannot, as Lisa Bell argues, replicate the “look and feel” of face-to-face sessions, centers can preserve “the way we value and support learners through tutoring.”

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