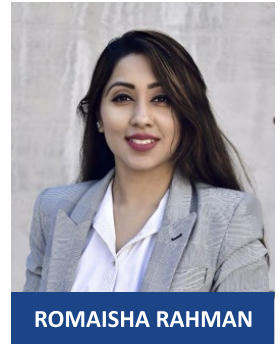


Flexibility in the Writing Center: One Tutor's Suggestions for Synchronous Online Sessions

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In my eight years of working as a writing tutor in four different institutional writing centers, first as a graduate student and now as a professional, I have had multiple occasions where my flexibility as a tutor was tested. While flexibility is perceived differently across disciplines, how I see flexibility in one-to-one teaching or tutoring is the ability to switch from one instruction technique to another, catering to the needs of specific students. My ideology of flexibility in tutoring is similar to what Muriel Harris has described as a grab bag for one-to-one teaching conferences. To Harris, “the notion of a grab bag . . . implies that all of us can select what looks useful for ourselves and switch from one strategy to another when the first one doesn't work” (107).



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Since Harris' first mention of the concept, the field of education has undergone technological evolution and our grab bags have come to include newer technologies and web-based applications. Our conferencing strategies have also extended from just paper consultations to include computers (Holmes) and, currently, fully remote online sessions (Remington; Hamby). Teachers and tutors are now expected to have digital and technological literacies and the expertise to lead sessions fully online. However, despite all the training and preparation we put into tackling technology in our synchronous online sessions, the digital and web-based applications tend to, at times, fail us. I describe one such personal experience below and explain how I utilize flexibility—my grab bag—to salvage my session.

Picture this: It's 2020—our educational institution has gone into lockdown to mitigate the unfortunate spread of the coronavirus. We are still sorting out the virtual tutoring policies. During this period of experimentation, we, as a writing center, have decided to conduct our tutoring sessions temporarily via Google Docs. What our current sessions look like is: 1) our student writers email us an electronic copy of their writing before the appointment time, along with stating their writing concerns in the body of the email, 2) we then turn those attachments into Google Docs and send the links to the Google Docs to our student writers before the appointment time, and 3) we provide synchronous feedback to them in real time using the built-in comment and chat features in Google Docs.

This current format seemed to be working fine until, in one of my sessions, a graduate student complained they could not see any of the comments I was leaving synchronously on the Google Doc. Though the student was able to view all of the markings I was making with the highlighting tool, they were unable to see the comments or chat messages I was posting within the document. To solve the problem, the immediate measures that the student and I took were refreshing the document and then signing out and signing back in again; however, this did not work.

So, I proposed downloading the Google Doc with the comments and sending it back to the student as an MS Word file (a built-in download option in Google Docs) through email; the student, however, seemed hesitant to pursue the asynchronous option and showed interest in continuing a synchronous online conversation. Since the student could not see my chat messages in Google Docs, we were emailing each other, back and forth, to continue our conversation about their writing; this method was becoming too tedious and time-consuming. I had to quickly think of a tool I could use to make the session effective and easy for the student to navigate.

As I already had their phone number from the sign-up sheet, I decided to use Google Voice messaging system to chat with them. I highlighted the sections in different colors in Google Doc and texted them my feedback on their writing using Google Voice messages. In my texts on Google Voice, I referred to each section of the Google Doc by color and put the comments for each corresponding section accordingly so they could understand which comment aligned with each section of the Google Docs document. Using the Google Voice messaging system also meant that the student was able to text me instantaneously and directly to ask for clarification regarding the feedback—just like they would have been able to with the chat feature in Google Docs. The student seemed relieved to have this option and thanked me for my effort. They also left a very positive review in the online feedback form for the session.

In this particular session, I had to exercise flexibility and make an instantaneous decision to utilize two separate apps together in one session. I used Google Voice and Google Docs features, relying heavily on Google Voice for the session's success. Both apps are simple, common, and free-of-charge tools—some things that I have, over time, taught myself and included in my grab bag. When it comes to tutoring sessions, we should be aware of multiple options. Erin Andersen and Sean Molloy highlight the importance of presenting clients with technological choices such as WOnline, Zoom, Skype, and Meet, among others to make tutoring sessions accessible and productive.

Personally, my grab bag is always growing. As both a current writing instructor and a professional writing tutor, I seek out new tools, applications, and formats to enhance my conferencing sessions; some of the tools I teach myself in my downtime through reading, watching video tutorials, and using hands-on navigation, and some other tools I learn as part of my job requirement. In addition to Google Voice, another example of a self-taught tool for me is Microsoft TEAMS. Either way, I do not shy away from experimenting with new tools in case a need arises.

Nonetheless, I am aware that each writing center is unique, and writing tutors—especially new recruits—may not always have the knowledge or the liberty to improvise their sessions and utilize resources and tools available to them. Writing centers can navigate these limitations by encouraging tutors to learn new technological tools that are allowed. During tutor training sessions, center coordinators can emphasize the need for and importance of technological literacy and help tutors create personalized plans for how they can utilize their downtime to learn about new tools. During follow-up training sessions, tutors can share what they've learned with one another and suggest other technological tools that they believe might be helpful.

Because some writing centers may restrict certain tools and applications due to institutional privacy policies, it is important for tutors and coordinators to discuss what can be included in the tutor grab bag. In the example that I shared, I used Google tools because it was easily accessible and I had the liberty and expertise to do so. However, some writing centers prohibit such web applications, requiring tutors to be creative in learning how to use alternative uses of their existing systems, such as Microsoft platforms or WOnline. For instance, if the default campus

platform is Microsoft but all writing center sessions are conducted in WOnline, it may be helpful for the tutors and staff to talk about using Microsoft tools such as TEAMS and Online Microsoft Word as an alternative to WOnline in case the platform malfunctions. Some other, free-of-charge, alternatives are Google tools and conferencing platforms such as ZOOM and Skype.

Web-based applications and tools are ever-evolving and their features ever-changing. Thus, writing center tutors and coordinators should keep conversations regarding flexibility alive and replenish their grab bags often. As I have already mentioned, each writing center is unique in that they have their individual practices and policies based on the community they serve. However, having experimented with different modes and formats of tutoring, I have come to the realization that some service in the writing center is much better than no service. So, approaching tutoring sessions with flexibility can ensure maximum efficiency and productivity. I hope to encourage tutors and coordinators to explore and find available, and allowable, options they can use as alternatives if and when regular applications fail. Our motto as writing center staff should be “service-first,” and the best way of service is through flexibility in our sessions.

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