

Verbal Equinox

Weber State University's Writing Center Journal

Spring 2000

Tutors Present at Berkeley and UVSC Conferences

In February and March, several tutors had the opportunity to attend two writing center conferences: the first at the University of California at Berkeley and the second at Utah Valley State College in Orem. Elisalyn Gardner, Keith Stephenson and I focused on improving interactions between tutors and tutees during online sessions. Since this method of computer tutoring is still rather new and experimental for our writing center, we felt that we would benefit from the workshop as well as our audience. While we were preparing for the conferences, we tried to anticipate what kind of issues the participants would bring up, but we did not realize how much our presentation would differ based on the varying experience of our audience.

To open our workshop at Berkeley, we asked how many were currently using online methods of tutoring in their writing centers. Only three audience members raised their hands. Because we had expected this method to be more widespread, we asked how many were considering the option. Nearly everyone in the room indicated that they were planning on implementing some type of computer tutoring. For this reason, our presentation functioned as more of a question and answer session, but we still found the audience feedback to be very helpful in leading us to think about how we can improve interactions in our own online tutoring sessions.

As newcomers to the field of online tutoring ourselves, we expected to be

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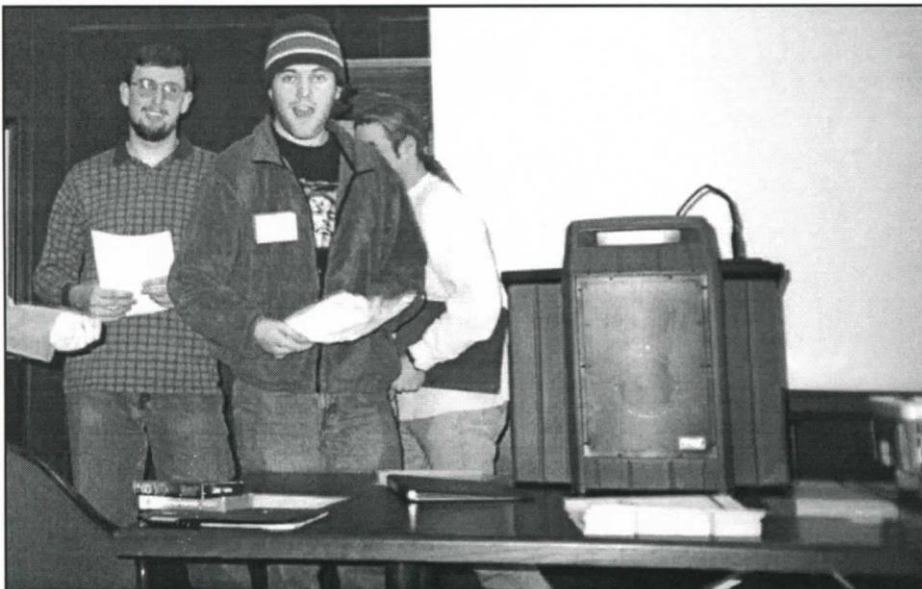
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Sylvia Speaks ...

The spring issue of *Verbal Equinox* lends itself to goodbyes, usually to our graduating tutors. This time I must dedicate this column to Denise Weeks. Denise has been our director for the past two years. I owe Denise a great deal because in this capacity not only did she excel in training our tutors, building bridges between faculty and the Writing Center, and studying and implementing new tutoring techniques, she hired me. I have the best job in the world, and I have her to thank for it. Also in the first months in this position, she wrote a grant and procured four computers for the Writing Center, a move that tossed us permanently into the technological tide. Her goal was to keep tutors up to date on word processing procedures and techniques, and to draw students to the writing center who may not otherwise have

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Ryan Decaria, Andrew Christensen, and Scott Woodham prepare to present at UVSC.

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asking questions more than giving answers, so it was a strange experience to be considered the experts. We began our presentation with a brief overview of online tutoring and its importance in writing centers. We discussed the purposes of using technology to provide the information, support, feedback, and resources that students need to improve their writing skills. We also addressed some other roles of online tutoring, such as providing publicity for the center and experience for the tutors. We talked about the types of students we serve and the kinds of resources we offer.

Participants in our session had plenty of questions concerning how our online writing center operates, how we handle certain problems (such as balancing online and drop-in tutoring), and how we have changed our online system since we started. Sylvia, our coordinator talked a little about the evolution of online tutoring at our campus and the process we went through to adapt our methods. She explained our original

attempt to use modes of synchronous communication such as Microsoft Chat.

Keith talked about the importance of submission forms and showed some overheads from our websites and sites from other online writing labs (OWLs). He also presented some examples of student papers and tutor responses, addressing some of the various methods tutors choose to use when responding to an online submission. Some tutors focus on answering the student's questions in a few paragraphs, while others prefer to make comments throughout the text. Keith emphasized adapting the online tutoring to meet the needs of non-traditional students (such as non-native English speakers or older returning students) who make up the group most likely to use those services. He pointed out the importance of making the system easy to understand and use so that everyone can benefit from online tutoring. After explaining a little about OWLs in general, we discussed the similarities

and differences between online tutoring and more traditional face-to-face methods, including goals, ethics, and tutor roles. We explained that, though the main goals of the writing center and the roles of its tutors remain the same—to improve writing skills, online tutoring differs from drop-in tutoring in that it is less visual, direct and immediate. The differences between these two methods

“We explained that...online tutoring differs from drop-in tutoring in that it is less visual, direct, and immediate. The differences between these two methods are the main cause of many of the difficulties...but they are also part of what makes online tutoring effective and beneficial.”

- Suzi Workman

are the main cause of many of the difficulties we have experienced with online tutoring, but they are also part of what makes online tutoring effective and beneficial. Although online tutoring is more time-consuming and challenging for the tutor, it can be less intimidating and more convenient for the tutee.

This led to a discussion of some of the challenges and benefits that online tutoring presents. Keith brought up the problem of priority: deciding whether online students or drop-in students are more important. He also mentioned how time-consuming the process can be for tutors since they can't rely on non-verbal cues/body language to strengthen the explanations. Also, a tutor has no way of knowing if the tutee is understanding the tutor feedback. Elisalyn pointed out that this actually

Firelight in the Sky

I live the fuse,
taking flame from you.

The fabricated world will know
your truth and my guise,
but for now parents will
still sell figments.

And tell children not
to play with fire
or run with sticks.

I held a sparkler and wrote your
name in the sky.

I long to spark
where you will see and applaud.

And I grow, beginning the slow
Quick change down the fuse to
Something new.

I once ran away to watch
the detonation, but no longer
will I flee.

I am your standing ovation.

— Ryan Decaria

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Ideas From the UVSC Conference

One difference between the Berkeley and UVSC conferences was the feedback we received from our audience. At both of our presentations there was a lively discussion and much

"Probably the most valuable thing I learned was the importance of educating tutors so that online tutoring does not become a chore."

-Elisalyn Gardner

participation from the attendees. However, because the UVSC audience was more familiar with online tutoring, our discussion focused more on sharing than giving suggestions.

I asked the audience about the idea that online tutoring was similar to allowing students to simply drop off their papers and have us edit them. A lady in the front row explained that with online tutoring, the tutee is still expected to ask questions and talk about the assignment requirements, and that if a student wanted to drop off a paper, we would still need to talk to them about their assignment and ask questions, and it really would turn into a regular face-to-face session.

An attendee who uses appointments for online tutoring at her school suggested having a day or two set aside during the week where someone is assigned specifically to work on the online submissions. The job could be rotated so that during the semester each person only had to work on online submissions two weeks out of the semester. She thought it might be a good compromise for us between appointments and the "as needed"

method we use now.

Probably the most valuable thing I learned was the importance of educating the tutors so that online tutoring doesn't become a chore. We discussed the idea that our tutors were trying to do too much, spending lots of time trying to address *every* problem in a paper. Some thought that we should specify clearly on our submission form what users can expect. This would help us feel less obligated to deal with so many issues at a time. Someone suggested e-mailing the clients back if their questions were too broad and asking for more direction or having a checklist

of questions to choose from on the website. We decided that a little more work researching the handouts on our and other's websites could lead to less work in the end because we could refer clients to handouts on the web instead of trying to re-explain grammar in our own words.

We came away with greater appreciation for the possibilities for online tutoring and many ideas to improve our service and our handling of online submissions.

-Elisalyn Gardner

To my grandmother

I wrapped myself in a blanket stitched with hope,
embracing the sorrow, joy, toil and tears
pieced in every stitch.

The same quilt that warmed my mother,
and her mother,
and her mother before,
now faded and worn

but with an hundred and more
stories
to tell--

if it could only speak
of the sorrow, joy, toil and tears
it has witnessed,
and tell of the comfort it gave
on a quiet December night.

-Robyn Young

Scott Woodham Shares His Thoughts

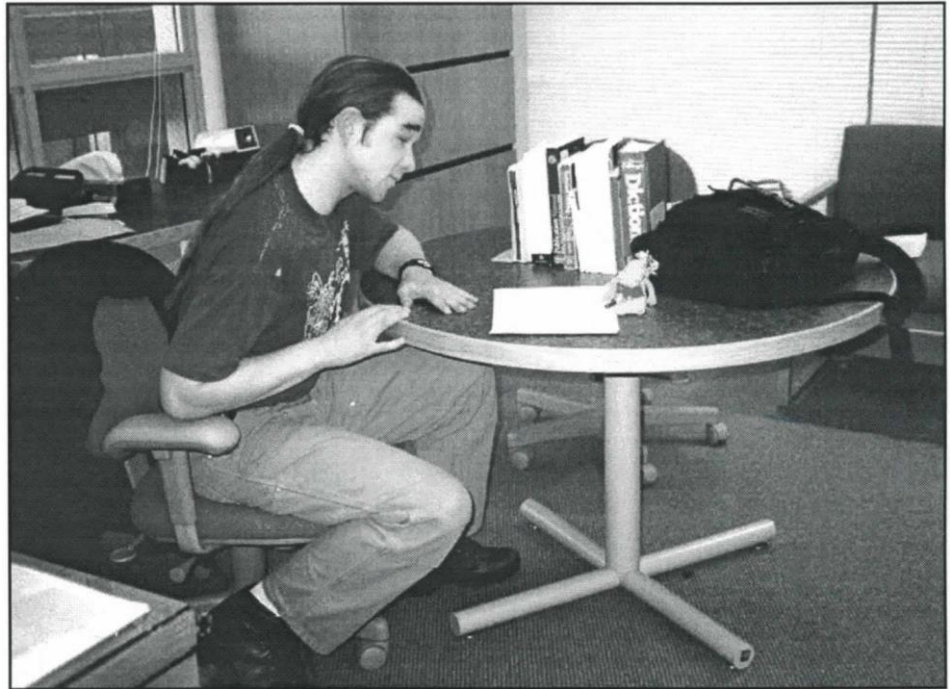
Dear Readers,

I thought you'd like to know that I went to a Writing Center conference in Berkeley, California. The people were so nice there. Someone asked me if I would like to participate in a lucrative business venture. I believe his exact words were "Hey, man, you wanna make fifty-bucks?" I politely told him that under my current contract, I cannot moonlight. I am deeply sorry that I didn't take his offer; it would have been neat to see Carl explain to Cheryl why he charged my thousand-dollar bail and/or hospital expenses on the Weber State credit card.

So, two groups presented at the conference. One group presented on the relative goodness of online tutoring. I regret to inform you that I did not see their presentation at UC Berkeley, but I saw it at the UVSC conference, a week or so later, and I imagine that the first time it was as equally well thought-out, insightful, and presented with the same inspiring flair as the second.

The other group, of which I was but a fifth, presented our looney, fun-filled ways of constantly training our tutors. The title of our little round-table discussion was "Humor and Collaboration in Tutor Training." Despite Sylvia's irrational, latent fears, we presented without flaw at both conferences.

The most important aspect of both conferences for me was interacting with peers and colleagues from other campuses and hearing their ideas. At UC Berkeley, I heard a thought-provoking presentation on the effects of teaching the five-paragraph essay. The



Tutor Scott Woodham practices his newly acquired tutoring skills on Winnie the Pooh and Kermit the Frog.

presenter advocated this style because his students improved their papers when they used it. It seems that their arguments were easier to understand and follow when they were guided to use such a closed-form essay style. I appreciate the style—don't get me wrong—it got me through high school, but I wonder how much of the success of the program was based on the students' adaptation to a particular professor's expectations, and how much the essay style helped their critical thinking skills, which was his main point. The best thing he said was that, in our increasingly interdisciplinary world, we should adopt a paper format that is standardized and lends itself readily to translation between departments. Can you imagine the day when an English student can write a paper that a philosophy professor will be able to understand? Lions laying down with lambs? Isn't that one of the signs that the end is near? Seriously though, I agree with this part of his

presentation. For the last few thousand years or so, we have been specializing our fields of inquiry so much that sometimes we can barely argue. I think this idea of a standard academic paper format would go over well if it were widely and formally adopted. But, at the same time, the five-paragraph essay has serious limitations; things exist that can't be said with it. The five paragraphs could be thought of as fingers, and, in an argumentative, or otherwise declarative essay, they turn into a fist that forcefully and clearly presents a well-reasoned opinion, but for other purposes, such as a leading question with a word like "discuss" in it, they throw a punch when none is required.

The ideas presented in both conferences made me evaluate all facets of the tutoring process, and I am extremely glad I was exposed to the opportunity to improve my understanding of what it is I do here at Weber's Writing Center.

Sincerely,
Scott L. Woodham

Tutors say Goodbye

Reflections of a Tutor Upon Graduation

Ends and beginnings. They usually come in pairs. The end of something is also the beginning of something else. Take graduation for example. It's the end of papers, exams, textbook readings, droning lectures, exciting lectures, papers, exams, and papers (did I mention that I'm an English major?). It's also the end of a security of sorts - now that I have a degree and can get a job that pays a decent wage, am I really prepared to forge my way in post-graduation life? Essentially, graduation is not just the end of college; it is the beginning of something new: the "real world."

As I prepare for the "real world," I'm also preparing to leave associations and learning experiences from outside the classroom. For me, this means the Writing Center. As I consider the many hours I've spent in this room, I think of all the time I spent doing homework (or avoiding it, as was more often the case), all the time I spent conversing with other tutors on topics of interest (or other topics), and even all the time I spent tutoring students and helping them with their papers. As I learned new information from my various writing and education classes, the Writing Center became my "laboratory." I could test out theories or pass on information, which helped me to solidify this new stuff in my mind. I also learned about the importance of asking questions, whether I'm seeking feedback on a paper or tutoring writers - the only way to find out what someone else is thinking is to ask.

The Writing Center has become a home away from home for me. It is yet

another place where there is always something more enjoyable to do than homework (on the off chance that I'm not there to work), and always someone to help, teach, or respectfully enlighten. It's a place where creative minds converge and humor abounds (on the right days, of course), and where there is always another writer to give an opinion on your work of art or your research paper.

Tutoring in the Writing Center has been more than a job for me. It has been - and is - an extension of the classroom for everyone involved. It helps those who tutor to become more skilled and knowledgeable in their craft. It helps those who are tutored to improve their skills and grades through a feedback system. It's a place of creative juices flowing and a place where someone (if not myself) will be able to come up with a great concluding line for this article.

-Robyn Young

What a Long, Strange Trip It's Been

What can I say after four years? I've had five tutoring jobs, and I can honestly say that the Writing Center was one of them. Really, though, working in the Writing Center has been enriching, interesting, fulfilling-ish, and any other copular compliment you'd like to tack on. I've made some good friends, some good enemies. I've seen three directors, two coordinators, two centers, and too many tutors pass through. But the most rewarding thing remains the same - the students.

Sure, we get the odd cowboy lawyer or flower-sending, non-ring-wearin'

Farewell

The Writing Center would like to acknowledge the service of

Holly Baker

Terah Brudvik-Partridge

Andrew Christensen

Ashley Talbot West

Robyn Young

These tutors will be leaving the Writing Center at the end of the 1999-2000 school year. We wish them luck and hope that what they have learned from the Writing Center will stay with them throughout their lives.

heartbreaker, but our patrons have so much to offer us. And though I've come to appreciate the standard homegrown Wildcat, I have particularly enjoyed working with the international students, and perhaps my biggest piece of advice for tutors is to get to know them. They have such interesting perspectives that can enrich or complicate your own and, more often than not, they're smarter than you (keep in mind that they're doing everything in second or third language). I've noticed a general hesitancy in

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tutors to work with international students, but it is usually a lot more fun than working with some boring

"On two occasions I've had girls come into the Center in tears, distraught over their papers, and the satisfaction I got from seeing them smiling in confidence at the end of our session was greater than any personal academic victory I've enjoyed."

- Andrew Christensen

American. And they know grammar, so by all means get technical with them. My next bit of wisdom involves the proper attire for writing center conferences. If you show up to your session looking like a dirty hippy, then Sylvia will subject you to some pretty shocking pajamas later that night, all barefoot and no makeup. But digress.

Coming back to my theme of keeping students at the center of our experience, I have a few more tips on how best to serve the tutee. First off, put your pencil down and get them involved as much as possible. Always question, never answer. If we simply fix mistakes and hand out answers, we are doing the tutee a disservice. Constant questioning is the key to effective tutoring.

You have to make them work, and you have to work, but my second suggestion is to remember to have fun. We have plenty of creative, and therefore useless, distractions in the Center, but working with students will ultimately prove more fun than sitting in the corner, fostering monkey folklore, writing polemic quotes on the board (yes, I'm implicating myself here), or playing computer games. Enjoy the rewards of seeing students excited about writing. On two occasions I've

had girls come into the Center in tears, distraught over their papers, and the satisfaction! got seeing them smiling in confidence at the end of our session was greater than any personal academic victory I've enjoyed.

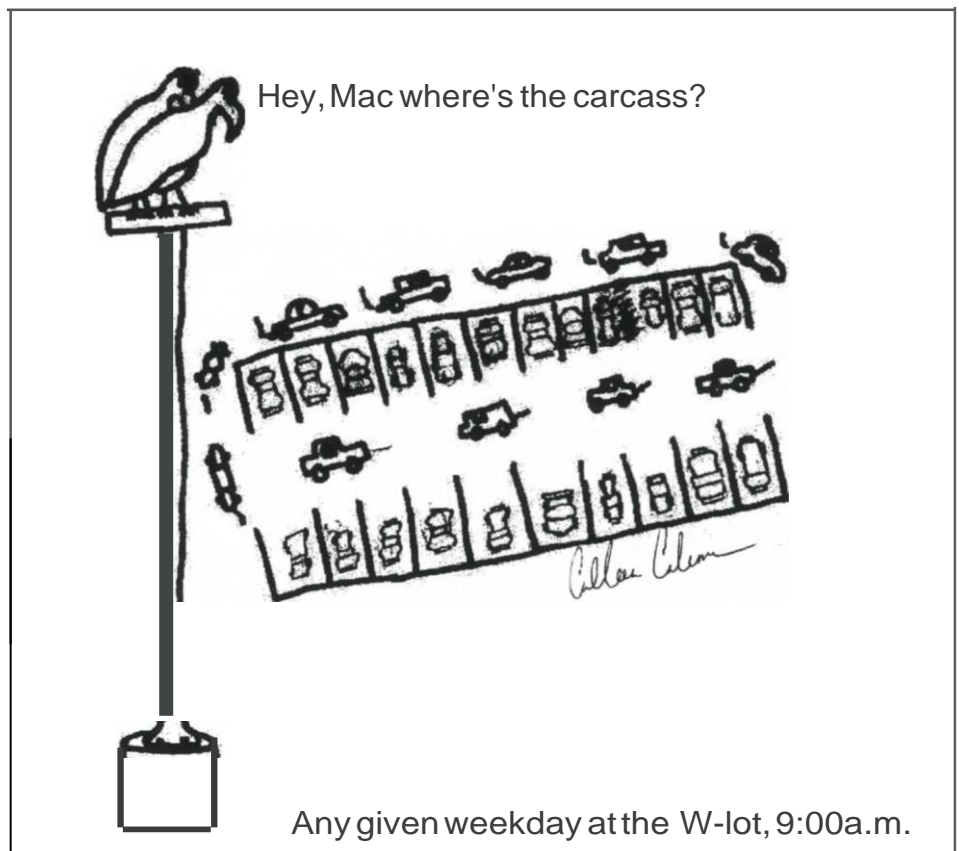
My final suggestion, though prerequisite to the others, is always to strive to get better. The Methods and Practices class is only an introduction to your job and a starting point in your training. Tutoring is an interdisciplinary endeavor, and it is good to keep in mind that everything you do academically and intellectually will have bearing on your ability. The more general your background, the more you can help a wide range of students. But specialization is also important in tutoring, so take a grammar class. You may write well,

but you cannot teach grammar on intuition. There is no substitute for knowing the rules and the technical terms, so learn them well and constantly refresh yourself.

When you feel like you are becoming a competent tutor, don't plateau. Keep reading and writing on the subject, and talk about tutoring with your colleagues. We owe it to our patrons to stay sharp, and we have an ideal venue to do so. Our biweekly meetings are continued training sessions, so show up and participate. If for nothing else, show up for the Girl Scout cookies or the kind veggies. And you never know—maybe Sylvie will wear her pajamas!

-Andrew Christensen

A Cartoon by Colleen Coleman



But I Used Spellcheck!

The computer is a wonderful writing tool. Word processing programs make it easy to type, revise, and edit a paper. One of the features on word processing programs that can be a great help to writers is spellcheck. However, ~~may~~ students have a false sense of security when using this feature.

Many students carry the assumption that if they run their paper through spellcheck, it will correct all of the misspelled words in their paper. This is not necessarily true. While spellcheck does correct many spelling errors, it does not catch words used out of context. Words that sound the same but are spelled differently, like *their* and *there*, are not caught when used incorrectly in a sentence. Sometimes when one word is spelled wrong, another is spelled correctly. For example, someone might hit an "h" instead of an "l" in the word *sleep*, misspelling *sleep*, but spelling *sheep*. Another problem is that some students select the wrong word from the list spellcheck gives them.

To illustrate more fully what can happen when appropriate caution is not used when using this feature, here are some examples of errors that Sylvia found in her classes' papers after they had used spellcheck:

- Then we both took a minute and got our *composer* back.
- With the help of his *genital* wife...
- Missionaries have an important *massage* to share.
- I was on the path of destruction and was determined to drink myself *into bolivia*.

I ran into his arms and started to *Saab*.

- I heard from the *fiend* of a friend that he liked me.
- In Seattle, you can enjoy a nice, relaxing, *fairy* ride.
- [He] had a reputation of being *violet* and also insane...

So the next time you write a paper, carefully proofread it before you turn it in. Make spellcheck your friend - not a fiend.

-Karrie Mitchell

I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me.

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

Sylvia continued from page 1

darkened our door. She rationalized that if students came to work on a paper on the computer, working on a paper with a tutor might naturally follow.

Her goals, and more, have been realized. Our tutors use the computers daily for their own school and personal projects *and*, most important, to update and add to our web page, put together the *Verbal Equinox*, write meeting and conference presentations, and make handouts/flyers for such presentations and other publicity needs. Many students who are just looking for a computer lab end up here. While they're here, they see what we do and often take advantage of our services. More often they ask an incidental

question and end up getting some valuable assistance.

Much has been said and written about one of the most significant changes the computers have brought to the Writing Center: online submissions (OS). Our web page, with links to the Weber State University and Weber State Online home pages, allows students to submit their papers online and have a tutor send them a response.

Online submissions have been the fodder for conference presentations. When we presented the topic at the Northern California Writing Center Association Conference in Berkeley, our audience had little experience with the issue and grilled us about everything from our hardware to our hard answers. When we gave the same presentation at Utah Valley State College, our audience had much experience; ~~indeed~~, several of their online centers worked with hundreds and even thousands of students through various types of online tutoring, so we were the ones asking questions.

This service, although controversial, has broadened our reach. We now can help students who would not otherwise be able or likely to come to the Writing Center. The number of OS we have received has increased from three in spring semester 1999 and 30 in fall semester 1999 to 70 in spring semester 2000. Our numbers are not phenomenal, but they are something and reflect, again, an increased presence and availability of the Writing Center. And this is what Denise wanted in the first place. Thank you, Denise.

-Sylvia Newman Pack
Writing Center Coordinator

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strengthens tutors' skills as they strive to communicate effectively in a strictly verbal format. She emphasized how online experience helps tutors better deal with face-to-face tutoring as well by forcing them to learn how to articulate their ideas in a clear and concise way. Online tutoring also helps expand the clientele of the Writing Center by providing opportunities for those who cannot come in during our regular hours. Keith explained how the asynchronous nature of online tutoring places another barrier on communication, but Elisalyn countered that this delayed, non-direct format may be less intimidating for an apprehensive client.

After discussing these various aspects, we talked about a few strategies for overcoming the difficulties with

online tutoring, and we answered more questions. Looking at the comparisons, benefits, challenges, and solutions allowed our audience to really weigh the possibility of starting an OWL for their schools. By seeing the way we do things, they were able to think about what they would implement and what they would do differently. At the same time, the tutors from our center were able to gain from the presentation as well. Researching other OWLs gave us some ideas for improvements in our writing center, and presenting at the conference helped us share our ideas and learn from others.

-Suzanne Workman

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