

# A space odyssey: the implications of moving the writing center into the virtual world

Barbara Ramirez  
Clemson University, USA

**Abstract** For decades, traditional writing centers have offered tutoring services in face-to-face environments, but with the growing popularity of distance education, many students now need online access to tutoring. To meet this need, some writing centers are exploring the idea of “virtual” tutoring. As we explore options using virtual environments such as Second Life for this purpose, we are confronted with a range of questions about changes in the dynamics of the tutoring process, many of which concern academic integrity.

## Key Ideas

- Strategies are needed to maintain the boundary between legitimate, effective tutoring and proofreading, rewriting, and prohibited collaboration.
- Methods are needed to train tutors to be effective in virtual environments.
- Safeguards are needed to ensure student academic integrity and ownership.

**Discussion Question 1** For moving to a virtual writing center, what modifications need to be made to tutor training?

**Discussion Question 2** What technical safeguards need to be in place to ensure student confidentiality and ownership?

For decades writing centers on college and university campuses have offered tutoring services to students in face-to-face environments. Typically, those needing help meet one-on-one with an “expert,” a mentor, many times a peer, who by creating a dialogue helps the student recognize both the strengths and weaknesses of the paper. The mechanical and the developmental weaknesses are then addressed through a discussion between the tutor and the student, the goal being to lead the tutee to an increased understanding of the qualities of good writing and the revision process for achieving it. As this description suggests, the key to an effective tutoring session is the collaboration between the mentor and the student. Otherwise, the writing center becomes merely a “fix-it shop.”

In addition, an inappropriate focus on proofreading and editing calls into question the ultimate ownership of the paper, an academic integrity issue that writing centers have traditionally addressed in the training of their tutors. Most help their mentors develop strategies for ensuring their tutoring relationships are dialogues or collaborations by helping them develop an appropriate voice, one that is confident but not excessively authoritarian. Key is keeping the student involved, meaning the tutor must engage the tutee in a conversation about the paper right from the beginning of the session. One strategy for doing this is to have the students explain the assignments and their development of them, including the strengths and weaknesses of their papers. The tutor can then focus on what the students wish to work on, using the strengths as a basis for the discussion. Often students read sections or, if time permits, the entire paper aloud as they then

frequently discover their own errors and can offer suggestions for revision and clarification. If students are unaware of significant errors or issues with their papers, the tutor may direct their attention to these problems by asking pertinent questions. As you can see, an effective session is primarily driven by the students, and since they take responsibility for the conversation, they maintain ownership of the paper.

While on the surface these approaches may appear logical and fairly simple to implement, real sessions with real students interested in real grades are an entirely different matter, making tutor training important. Tutors are taught effective methods through role playing and discussions of various issues that can come up in a session. This practical approach seeks to provide them with the tools they need for maintaining the boundary between legitimate, effective tutoring and proofreading, rewriting and prohibited collaboration. In addition, a traditional face-to-face environment offers the opportunity for the director of the writing center to watch and listen to sessions in real time as a way to provide guidance if needed.

However, with the growing popularity of distance education, students needing tutoring may not be on campus to avail themselves of the traditional face-to-face writing center. A quick survey of the writing classes taught at Clemson University this past summer finds that of the 43 courses, more than 75% were online sections. This means that three-fourths of the students did not have access to our writing center even though it was open. Given the current economic situation, the number of online classes will probably increase as will the number of nontraditional students. These students, who may well need tutoring services, if only to give them the confidence needed to be successful, may have limited time for on-campus services given their home and other commitments. Online tutoring may provide a way to meet the needs of these two populations, but only if this method of mentoring is effective. According to Bierema and Merriam (2002), e-mentoring is versatile and can be adapted to suit a variety of settings but, more important in the context of education, it is mutually beneficial for both the tutor and the student and has the potential to redefine the mentor/mentee relationship. Clemson University has incorporated a form of virtual electronic mentoring, primarily through email, in its ePortfolio Program to provide formative feedback to students as they review, reflect, and revise their work. However, based on initial surveys and interviews, students prefer a more immediate form of mentoring. These comments support Headlam-Wells, Gosland and Craig (2006), who argue for an approach incorporating real-time tutoring conversations, for example through telephone contact, with email.

A second potential method for integrating real-time with distance tutoring may be to create a writing center in one of the virtual world environments currently available. Such a change, however, would open the door to several academic integrity issues, including

- Safeguards for ensuring student academic integrity and ownership
- Strategies for maintaining the boundary between legitimate tutoring and prohibited collaboration
- Methods for training tutors to be effective in virtual environments.

The first of these concerns is largely a technological issue, one that involves taking the necessary steps to verify the identity of the student and to delete the

paper discussed from the internet. While Second Life, a popular virtual world, is easy to work with and free for educators, it is limited in its ability to identify the user and to delete the documents discussed; in addition, there is little, if any, control over the appropriateness of the avatar. Other virtual worlds use local servers, meaning the university would have full control and only its faculty, staff, and students could use it, but there is still the issue of being able to verify the identity of the tutee. Webcams offer real-time chats, but again verifying the identity of the student and deleting the material are problems. Another option is for the university to create its own virtual world; while this process is time-consuming, it does allow for the institution to have full control and to include all the necessary safeguards.

On one level, the last two concerns are even more complex than the first. They involve rethinking the role of the tutor and his/her relationship with the tutee. Addressing them requires developing new mentoring strategies and training methods. However, there is very little research on e-mentoring. This paper would like to expand the conversation on the use of virtual worlds and distance tutoring first by more fully identifying the issues involved, specifically academic integrity concerns and then considering potential ways to address them. Such an investigation is important as colleges and universities attempt to address the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century students.

## References

- Bierema, L. L., & Merriam, S. B. (2002). E-mentoring: Using Computer Mediated Communication to Enhance the Mentoring Process. *Innovative Higher Education*, 26(3), 211-227.
- Headlam-Wells, J., Gosland, J. & Craig, J. (2006). Beyond the organisation: The design and management of E-mentoring systems. *International Journal of Information Management*, 26 (5), 372-385.