Overcoming Challenges in Online Peer Tutoring

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Abstract
This project examines types of comments which tutees using the Trumbull Online Writing Lab (OWL) are receiving from tutors and why tutors are providing these types of comments. Two tutors analyzed 10 submissions to create an instrument which is used to examine the entire data set consisting of 20 OWL submissions. The majority of comments focus on mechanical errors. This finding suggests two things: Firstly, tutors frequently focus on mechanical mistakes; and secondly, tutors are failing to provide comments regarding content. This second finding is problematic because content is critical to the production of an effective paper. This project postulates that the lack of content-related comments is due to the fact that providing such feedback via email does not enable the type of direct and instantaneous communication which occurs during face-to-face tutoring. This project not only highlights a deficiency in email-facilitated tutor feedback but also suggests a possible solution to this issue: the use of collaborative, real-time software which would provide an opportunity to communicate instantly and directly with students.

Materials & Methods
Data Set
• 440 comments from 20 OWL submissions collected during the Fall 2015 semester

Instrument
• Created by one female and one male tutor who counted each type of comment to create the following categories:
  • APA/MLA
  • Essay Structure
  • Grammar/Punctuation/Spelling
  • Plagiarism
  • Clarity
  • Miscellaneous

Results

Discussion
Trumbull OWL Online Tutoring
• Limits use of Socratic method
• Does not allow for synchronous communication

Grammar/Punctuation/Spelling
• The majority of comments focus on mechanics
• Likely due to the email-facilitated tutoring

Content
• Content is a critical part of all academic papers
• Few, if any, comments provided by tutors regarded content
• Possible solution: incorporate synchronous chats

Conclusion
The lack of content-related comments is likely due to the format available for online tutoring. A possible solution to this issue is to offer synchronous chats which would allow tutors and tutees to interact instantaneously. This type of communication may encourage tutors to take on the task of explaining content via online tutoring.

Limitations
Of the seven English tutors who work at the Learning Center, only two contributed OWL submissions; therefore, our knowledge of the exact type and number of comments for all submissions during the Fall 2015 semester was limited. Further studies of all submissions in future semesters could be conducted to determine exact percentages.

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