

RELATIONSHIP-DRIVEN PEER TUTORING IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

AN ACS PANDEMIC PEDAGOGY WORKING GROUP



Report Submitted August 31, 2020



WORKING GROUP MISSION:

Our working group will design a training curriculum to help peer tutors develop greater skill in forging relationships with students in the digital ecosystem. We will gather and review current literature on online tutoring to create training resources for peer tutors that will make them crucial resources for faculty and students as they work to prioritize the social emotional needs of students in the event of distance learning.

We believe that now, more than ever, it is imperative that all students feel a deep sense of connection with their campus community. Tutor training must prioritize care and engagement as the building blocks that allow for successful instruction.

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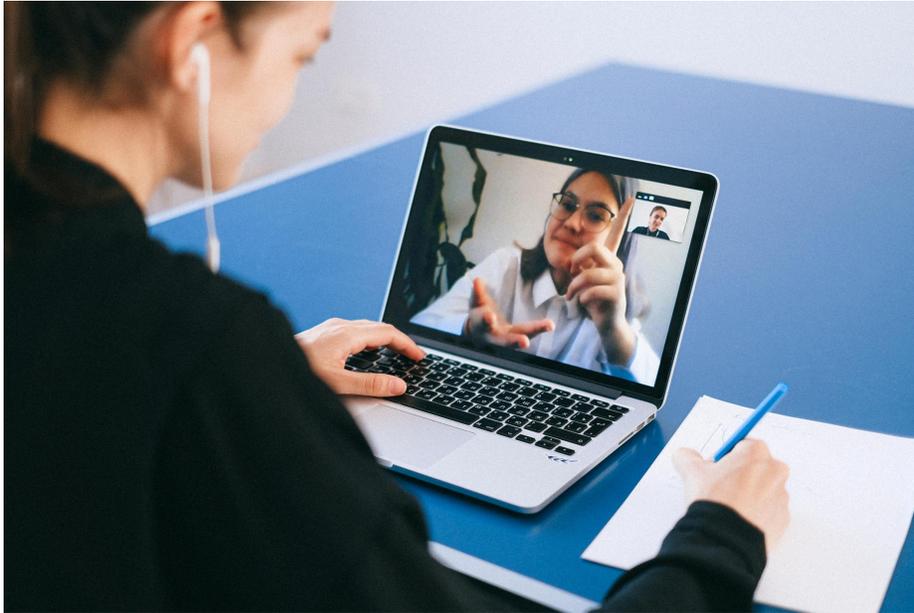
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Strategy 2:

Signal active engagement.



Get in the habit of describing and voicing what you are doing as you navigate around your own screen.

(Ex. "I'm going to minimize this document so that I can compare drafts." Or "I'm going to pull up the digital whiteboard now.") It can be disorienting for a student to wait while you silently click around, opening and closing documents, or minimizing alerts and notification. The student may mentally check out in the process.

Establish the expectation of participation early on in the session to discourage distraction and signal your own engagement.

Engage even reluctant students by asking questions that prompt more than yes or no answers. Ex. What is your understanding of the prompt/assignment? What are your primary concerns about this document?

A note on accessibility:

Some students may feel hesitant to speak or share. They may WANT to participate, but need some time to warm up or get used to the interpersonal dynamic. You can help these students to engage in the types of participation that strengthen the online relationship by providing a slide with "sample language" in your discipline so that the student can use that language to communicate. If you sense a student is reserved, you might say, "Here is a slide of things we might work on. Take a minute to look it over and think about what you'd like us to focus on."

Sample slide for a writing tutoring session:



Global Concerns:

- Brainstorming
- Outlining/Organization
- Thesis statement
- Paragraph Structure
- Introduction/Conclusion
- Developing Evidence
- Academic Honesty and Citation

Local Concerns:

- Sentence Structure Variety
- Word Choice
- Tone
- Proofreading
- Formatting and Finer Points of Citation

STRATEGY 3:

Put the pencil down, virtually.



Establishing co-presence is key to making online sessions work.

Your first instinct may be to start typing or editing or solving a problem before the student has even finished telling you why she is there. Try to avoid this. Giving the students most of the power to make edits or take steps in the solution of a problem will make them feel more confident. In addition, the more you and the student share in the process, the more the session will feel collaborative.



STRATEGY 4:

Use a few select screen-sharing and annotation tools you know well.

Although you're not able to spread essay drafts, notes, and assignment sheets out on the table in front of both you and the student, you can

- Share your screen to "point" to various items in an essay or a text.
- Allow students the ability to share their screens as well.
- Use Zoom to "talk," but work directly in a Google doc window so that both you and the student can easily navigate the essay.

Strategy 5:

Minimize technology

Though it may sound counterintuitive, overusing technology (apps, sharing software, etc.) can create confusion and actually be a barrier to communication.

One consistent refrain of our working group has been, "minimize technology to the extent that you can." Yes, we are tutoring digital natives, but even digital natives tire of creating new passwords for new apps and learning to use new toolbars. New tech is exciting and potentially game-changing, but don't use the "newest, next-best thing" with students until you know it well and--even then-- only use it if it's one of the mainstays of your individual toolbox. As we said in Strategy 4, establish your "go-to" tools and become proficient in those first. Your students will appreciate the regularity, the predictability, and the ease at which you can troubleshoot tech glitches.



A note on accessibility:

An additional reason for minimizing technology is that all students have different ways of processing text on the screen, colors in the background, flashing lights, and moving images. Digital tools may not be calibrated to the individual student's needs. For example, students with dyslexia often prefer certain fonts (Helvetica, Courier, Ariel, Verdana, etc.), and students with attention or sensory issues may be distracted or overwhelmed by the features of new technology.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING IN SYNCHRONOUS AND ASYNCHRONOUS PEER TUTORING

1. Definitions/Terminology:

Tutor: One who provides additional instruction and learning support to students. Many writing centers use terms such as “consultant,” “associate,” or “fellow” to describe their tutors. We have chosen to use the term “tutor” in order to write this guide in a way that is hopefully applicable for those who provide subject-based tutoring in addition to writing center tutors. a little bit of body text

Student: We are using the term “student” to refer to those who receive tutoring services, whether on writing or subject-based tutoring.

Synchronous: Occurring at the same time. We refer to a tutoring session as synchronous when the tutor and student are engaged in the tutoring session simultaneously. Synchronous tutoring sessions might occur in the following conditions:

- in-person and face-to-face;
- virtual/remote and face-to-face via video conference software such as Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, etc.;
- audio-only via a phone call or Zoom/Skype/etc;
- text-based in a live, online chat session;
- through social media.

Asynchronous: Occurring at different times. We refer to a tutoring session as asynchronous when the tutor and student are engaged in the tutoring session at different points in time, e.g., when a tutor sends written comments on an assignment or paper and the student reads and responds at a later time. Asynchronous tutoring sessions might occur in the following conditions:

- text-based through an email exchange;
- audio-only via pre-recorded comments from either the tutor or student;
- video via pre-recorded comments from either the tutor or student;
- text-based through online chat sessions;
- through social media.

Note on relationship- or community-building: Relationship-building for writing and tutoring centers happens in multiple contexts, from small 1-on-1 interactions to offering class tours or information sessions to general outreach to the campus community. We have tried to provide some training and outreach suggestions to help with each of these contexts in our new, socially-distant teaching and learning environment.

2. Relationship-building implications of each option

Note: For relationship-based tutoring to work to its fullest potential, it will involve synchronous and asynchronous elements. It is useful to think that there are times to choose between them, and times when both would be useful in tandem.



Synchronous

- Still assumed to be the most immediate way for establishing relationships, synchronicity allows experiential mutual knowledge between tutor and student.
- Greater intimacy can help stronger ties between tutor and student.
- Tutors and students can ask questions and give answers more quickly. Working on relationships synchronously requires more energy in a shorter span of time.
- In the case of face-to-face and phone meetings, privacy is easier to maintain and guarantee.



Asynchronous

- Without the necessity to think in the moment for a synchronous meeting, asynchronous tutoring allows for a reflective mutual knowledge between tutor and student.
- Greater distance and time between tutor and student permits more tentative and careful approaches.
- Tutors and students have more time to articulate their questions and answers. These relationships can be more time-consuming.
- Enables more comprehensive and easier record-keeping to see where a relationship has been.

3. Suggested Acknowledgement Practices

The steps below would begin after a student patron has made an appointment with a tutor.

First communication, before the meeting (asynchronous, most likely an email)

1. Inquire about the patron's well-being. Nothing too personal or sensitive, but see how they are holding up.
2. Acknowledge that, ideally, you would meet in person, but that our first commitment is to health and safety and therefore we need to turn to the remote option.
3. Discuss the details of the meeting. Briefly explain they have the option of synchronous and asynchronous assistance, and what each entails.
4. Depending on the application you use, the patron might get an automatic reminder. Sending a note expressing that you look forward to speaking with them would be extremely helpful, and would make up a bit for the loss of face-to-face interactions.

During the appointment (synchronous) or in the feedback message (asynchronous)

1. Once again, inquire about well-being, and acknowledge the situation that demanded appointments go remote. Interactions are not going to be the same, but we'll do our best to get you the assistance you need." Do this even in an email message that you send with your feedback or answers to questions.
2. Feel free to spend a couple of minutes discussing the pandemic, and the changes it has caused, if patrons go into more detail after you ask about their well-being. Do keep track of time so you can direct attention to the work at hand (if you are in a synchronous appointment), but connect with the patron's concerns.
3. Suggest a plan for how the tutoring session will unfold (e.g., "Since we're emailing back and forth, I'm going to send some feedback and follow-up questions as I read each paragraph. Then we can take a step back and discuss the bigger picture. Does that sound good to you?" or "Let's focus on these Spanish verb forms in isolation first, and then we can start practicing using them in some more complex phrases and sentences next. Is there anything else you want to make sure we work on today?" Take some time to negotiate shared goals with the student.

4. Use motivational scaffolding techniques and positive politeness to build rapport. Some examples and details can be found in this article:

Mackiewicz, Jo, and Isabelle Thompson. "Instruction, Cognitive Scaffolding, and Motivational Scaffolding in Writing Center Tutoring." *Composition Studies*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2014, pp. 54–78.

Examples would include: using praise; joking or connecting through humor; showing empathy and solidarity with the student; showing concern.

After the appointment or after the feedback message has been sent (asynchronous)

1. Send follow-up message. Something simple, brief, and friendly: something that would invite patrons to reach out again (should they wish to do so), but also that you hope the experience was productive. Add some final, summarized notes on what you discussed at the meeting or in your feedback comments.

4. TUTOR TRAINING ACTIVITIES:



Learning Goal 1

Recognize poorly-worded written feedback on a student's work and rewrite to improve the tone of the written feedback to enhance relationship-building with the student.

Activity:

Tutors should read three examples of feedback or opening messages that are poorly-worded; better; and best. Ask tutors to categorize each based on guidelines and a rubric. Tutors can discuss and justify their choices. Debrief with them about any disagreements.

Could be done in a group meeting (via Zoom) or on a discussion board on an LMS such as Blackboard, Canvas, Moodle, etc.

Assessment:

Provide a new poorly-worded example. Ask tutors to rewrite the example to improve the tone.

Applicable Tutoring Mode(s):

Written modes, either Asynchronous (ex: email) or Synchronous (ex: chat)



Learning Goal 2

Assess the delivery mode, audience, and context for the tutoring session and describe appropriate code switching that may be necessary

Activity:

Ask tutors to read:

- Clara Miller-Broomfield, "Punctuation in the Digital Age." (2016)
<https://unravellingmag.com/articles/punctuation-in-the-digital-age/>
- How Can I Write Warmer Emails without Resorting to Emoji:
<https://www.askamanager.org/2018/08/how-can-i-write-warmer-emails-without-resorting-to-emojis.html>
- The list of suggested practices in this document.

Assessment:

Tell tutors the different delivery modes that your center will be using. Ask them to discuss each mode and create a set of ground rules/guidelines for their fellow tutors regarding communicating in a warm and welcoming way with students.

Collect the agreed upon guidelines into a shared document that all tutors have access to refer back to during the semester.

Applicable Tutoring Mode(s):

Synchronous / Asynchronous



Learning Goal 3

Feel comfortable conducting a tutoring session using remote tools and authentically connecting to students

Activity:

Have tutors complete normal mock-tutoring sessions that would normally be part of F2F training, but using the remote tools that your center will use. Emphasize the opening/goal-setting and closing parts of the session in terms of being good moments to build connections with students.

In particular, have students engage in checking in on how students are faring and how their coursework is going given the circumstances; students should explicitly look for opportunities to express empathy.

Assessment:

Ask tutors to reflect on the process, both in terms of the session itself and their use of the remote tools. What did they expect? What surprised them?

Possible variation: ask tutors to reflect on their own preferred ways of communicating and connecting with others. How can they use their strengths to create authentic connections with the students they are tutoring? What will be challenging for them? How can they address and overcome those challenges? [Adapt for your own normal training, i.e., if you talk about StrengthsQuest, use Myers-Briggs, differences between introverts & extroverts, or other personality tests in your training or at your institution.]

Applicable tutoring mode(s):

Synchronous / Asynchronous



Learning Goal 4

Learn from the experiences of other tutors.

Activity:

Set up a panel of experienced tutors who used remote tools during Spring semester. Ask them to describe challenges and successes for new, incoming tutors. What strategies did they use? What worked and what did not? Allow incoming tutors to ask questions.

Assessment:

Ask incoming tutors to reflect on the panel discussion. What can they bring from that discussion and apply to their own tutoring sessions? What moments resonated the most?

Applicable tutoring mode(s):

Synchronous / Asynchronous



Learning Goal 5

Exercise critical empathy.

Activity:

Ask tutors to read:

"Neither Brave nor Safe: Interventions in Empathy for Tutor Training" (Writing Center-focused)

<http://thepeerreview-iwca.org/issues/braver-spaces/neither-brave-nor-safe-interventions-in-empathy-for-tutor-training/>

Write a reflection on scenarios where approaches and attitudes would contribute or obstruct the work at hand. Talk about whether they believe if there is a difference in this framework between synchronous and asynchronous situations

Assessment:

Write reflections on exit surveys about what worked and what didn't, paying attention to the affective aspects of the meetings.

Applicable tutoring mode(s):

Asynchronous / Synchronous



Learning Goal 6

Effectively utilize whiteboards with students while maintaining a sense of connection with them.

Activity:

Engage students in mock sessions centered on a content-specific problem using the whiteboard platform (e.g., Zoom's whiteboard, GoBoard, Google's Jamboard, etc.) they will be using in the fall, then afterwards discuss ways in which they are able to maintain a connection with the student while working on the whiteboard.

Assessment:

Tutors can form a list of affordances and limitations of synchronous whiteboards in maintaining a sense of connection with students, coupled with concrete strategies for promoting clarity in communication and relationship building while tutoring.

Applicable tutoring mode(s):

Synchronous

5. Additional Suggested Activities:

For tutors:

- Provide examples of opening messages—that is, first contact emails or words of introduction.
- Provide a module focusing on how to acknowledge the situation the pandemic has created. In other words, it might be a good idea to train tutors to begin the conversation by inquiring how the students are doing, and connect on our shared coping with the era of Covid-19 (I've started sketching some suggested practices below).
- When getting to know the student, take time to ask about their other courses and to ensure that the student is aware of the community of tutors available on campus that are eager to work with them.
- For content-area tutors using a whiteboard: Take time to practice engaging with a student, rather than for a student, in the virtual environment. Use different-colored pens (depending on the platform) to ensure all students are participating.

For administrators:

- Get in touch with faculty for embedding of peer tutors in specific courses.
- Make online links/resources easily available to tutors so that they can link out to additional resources in their written comments to students.
- Create an online hub where tutors can access all information, communicate with each other, and build their internal community. (Possible platforms: Slack, Microsoft Teams, university LMS like Blackboard/Canvas/Moodle)

For the community:

- Socially distant “meet the tutors” held outside at the start of the semester
- Online discussion boards on writing topics moderated by student tutors or center staff/administrators
- Active social media accounts, run by student tutors if possible for authentic connections to their peers

Sources and selected readings:

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