

Peer Tutoring and Relationship Development Online
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This essay delves into the peer tutor/client relationship, and what it means for that relationship if all communication between the tutor and the client takes place through the internet instead of face-to-face. We will begin by highlighting the goals of peer tutors and reviewing the methods they use to reach them. Then, this essay will move into looking at the strengths and weaknesses of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) in relation to its effectiveness within a peer tutor environment. Lastly, we will look at future research that can be done to enhance this area of study.

According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project's May 2010 survey, 79% of adults use the internet. This number of internet users increases to 95% when viewing people between the ages of 18-29 (Pew Research Center, 2011). As this statistic shows, for the average, American college student, internet is a common aspect of their lives. In addition, Parks and Roberts (1998) found that 93.6% of the respondents in their study of internet users had developed relationships online with the majority of those relationships being close friendships, friendships, and romances. Internet is not only a tool for research or business purposes, but it is also a relational tool (Duck & McMahan, 2012, p. 216). With the advent of social networking (such as Facebook and MySpace), MOOs (Multi-User Dimensions, Object Oriented), MUDs (Multi-User Dimensions, or Dungeons), and MMORPGs (Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games), not to mention email and chat, internet has opened new doors for connecting with people and creating relationships.

The question that I am seeking to answer in this essay is if the relationship between a peer tutor and his/her client can be maintained when the tutoring sessions are taking place solely online instead of in person. As internet has become such a common, and integral, part of the

college student's life over the years, it seems almost necessary to add online services to peer tutor environments. University Writing Centers implemented their Online Writing Labs (OWLs) early on, utilizing either synchronous or asynchronous communication to edit their client's papers; however, my question is if a Speaking Center, which deals in communication that normally takes place face-to-face (FtF), can maintain similar relationships with their clients when they never actually see them.

Peer Tutors

What exactly is a peer tutor though? Ender and Newton (2000) describe peer tutors as paraprofessionals. They say that, as a peer tutor, "you have the capacity to be as effective as your professional counterparts – and in some cases more effective" (p. 3). This is to say that peer tutors are trained similarly to a professional in the same field, but as a peer to their clients, they are able to connect to them and build a closer relationship that an older professional may not be able to do. This relationship is very important within the Speaking Center environment in order to create trust and reduce the anxiety related to presenting speeches. Often times a student will come into the Speaking Center and feel more comfortable talking to a fellow student about their presentation than they will their professor or another faculty member. One of the main ways to build this relationship of trust and understanding within Speaking Center consultations is through empathetic listening (Wilde, Cuny, Vizzier, 2006). Empathetic listening is where the peer tutor creates an environment where unconditional positive regard and confirmation exists between the tutor and the client. Buber (1999) also explains empathetic listening as confirming your fellow man [sic] and your fellow man confirming you in your interactions together. By creating this environment of empathy or confirmation, trust and comfort is created between the tutor and the client, or two people in general.

The main thing about empathetic listening is that it requires that “the listener show both verbally and nonverbally that listening is truly taking place” (Wilde et al., 2006, p. 72). Listening empathetically is not just a verbal action, it also requires nonverbal behaviors. Anastasi (1967) reflects this sentiment in his chapter on how to listen better. He gives six areas to work on in order to improve listening. The first area is that emotion is a part of the meaning of the message. It says, “[L]isten to meaning and not just to words” (p. 51). In order to do this, the tutor must work towards empathetic listening and pay close attention to the client’s intent and feelings towards what they are saying. Next, is to work with the client. Ender and Newton (2000) suggest that peer tutors do this by following the structure of *what*, *so what*, and *now what* in their approach to asking questions and leading their session (p. 9). The peer tutor would structure the sessions so that the client could answer these questions from the feedback that they receive. Listening nonevaluatively is another important area of the nonverbal aspects of listening. Having a mindset of hearing the client out before passing any judgement, helps to show the client that they are welcome to express their opinions. The last three areas of looking like you are listening, being patient, and paraphrasing the message show the client that the tutor is making an effort to understand what they are telling them and to further help their client to work through the problem.

A similar, and as important, aspect to the tutor/client relationship as empathetic listening is immediacy. Weiner and Mehrabian (1968) define immediacy as “the relationship between the speaker and the objects he communicates about, the addressee of his communication, or the communication itself” (p. 3). Immediacy is the verbal and nonverbal behaviors that a tutor (speaker, teacher, etc) uses to connect to his/her client. Some immediacy behaviors include

using inclusive language such as “we” and “us,” using the client’s name, using gestures, positive head movements, good eye contact, etc. (Immediacy Behaviors).

As outlined above, the goal of creating an effective relationship between the peer tutor and the client, where both can grow and learn from each other, requires empathetic listening and immediacy behaviors. The problem is that both empathetic listening and immediacy behaviors require verbal and nonverbal elements, and online communication is severely lacking in nonverbal communication because of its reduced cues environment. By not being able to see the person you are talking to, or typing to, nonverbal behaviors are greatly reduced. Through looking at the strengths and weaknesses of online communication, I will seek to understand if empathetic listening and immediacy can still be reached in order to create an effective and mutually beneficial relationship between the peer tutor and his/her client.

The Strengths of Online Communication

The reasons why we should even consider adding online services to a peer tutor environment are twofold and are comprised of the benefits to the tutor and the clients. For peer tutors, one of the main advantages of implementing online communication relates to the technology itself. Santra and Giri (2009) explain this by saying:

Computer-based communication not only facilitates new means of educating students, it also prepares a large segment of the next generation to enter the workplace able to use CMC and, by doing so, serves to increase their value as organizational employees. (p. 104)

By teaching peer tutors how to use CMC and the technology related to it, tutors are able to take that knowledge and use it later, when they enter the workforce. Being able to communicate over

the internet will help them in dealing with employees, teleconferencing, and sending emails to coworkers, among other computer mediated forms of communication used in the workplace.

Another aspect of how communicating online can help tutors was raised by a tutor at a Speaking Center. He said, "I liked that the client was able to see exactly what I was talking about through use of highlighting, and I was also able to see what directions the client was 'adjusting' to when editing." The use of online editing tools when looking at the client's outline together produced a new level of interactivity for the consultants. Generally, in consultations, the client takes notes and then leaves to do any editing on their own. In the online consultation, the client was able to make changes as the consultant highlighted areas of improvement. This helped the consultants to give more in depth advice as they could better see how the client's mind was working. They could see if the client really understood what they were talking about, or if they still needed more explanation. This also helped the peer tutors to reach a new level of self-fulfillment by seeing their work with the clients actually progress and change over the course of their conversation. The tutors felt that they had accomplished something with the clients by seeing the changes to the presentations as they made them.

Finally, peer tutors can also be helped by a reduction of some of the nonverbal aspects of their clients' behaviors. Santra and Giri (2009) say, "[F]actors such as race, gender, and organizational status were not as likely to inhibit CMC communication as much as FtF [face-to-face] communication. The lack of social cues encouraged participation" (p. 105). By removing some of the social cues about both the tutor and the clients, it would be easier to stay away from stereotyping and taking part in power relations. Jordan-Henley and Maid (1995) found in their study of an Online Writing Center that "[tutors] are not affected, for instance, by students with bad breath, or by students who make them uncomfortable in some vague way, or by students

who are angry at a teacher, or by those who cry for the consultation's first ten minutes" (p. 212). This removal of some of the more unpleasant aspects of FtF communication, helped the tutors and their clients focus more on what they were working on instead of the behavior of the other person.

Though it is important that the tutor is helped through an implementation of online communication, the main reason for adding online services is, generally, being able to reach new clients. Durkin, Conti-Ramsden, and Walker (2010) explain that one such set of new clients that could possibly be impacted by an online center is students with communication challenges. They say, "in terms of its less stringent language demands and its reduced-cues environment, [CMC] can provide a medium for positive adaptation of adolescents with communication challenges" (p. 1). These can be students who find it difficult to speak to a tutor, such as students with a stutter, or the hearing impaired. The former group of students would be able to get help with the organization of their presentations without having to worry about their communication challenge. They would have a safe environment to focus entirely on the content of their presentation before they had to work on the delivery of the speech. They could later come in to work on delivery with the knowledge that their organization is strong. The latter would find online services to be logistically more convenient. Instead of having to obtain an interpreter to make an appointment, and then to attend the tutoring session, they could make their appointment online and attend an online session without having to go through an interpreter since all communication could take place in a text-based format.

Another group of students who may be more likely to attend an online tutoring session than one in person, would be those with extreme social or speaking anxiety. When the tutoring session takes place in a text based format, the client is able to have more control over how she

presents herself. This aspect of being able to have more control and to delete and retype text also helps to reduce any fear of sanction from clients with extreme shyness (Amichai-Hamburger and McKenna, 2006; McKenna, Green, and Gleason, 2002). This control also helps to reduce any negative impression about physical characteristics. McKenna, Green, and Gleason (2002) call this “gating features” where the student has some physical attribute of themselves that they believe others see instead of listening to them. By not being able to see each other, online communication relieves this aspect of the client’s anxiety.

A professor, whose students attended an Online Speaking Center, remarked that the students told her that they felt less anxious about the length and content of their outlines when the tutor looked at them online versus in person. Jordan-Henley and Maid (1995) also experienced this in their research into an Online Writing Center. They said, “We found some students responded better to a nonjudgmental stranger--a cybertutor they could not see” (p. 212). This comfort the clients felt in being a step removed from their tutors, speaks to a reduction in power relations with the tutor and the client being on more equal footing. Another study of Online Writing Centers found that this was also the case when moving tutor discussions online so that they were a step removed from their director and other coworkers. They said that “tutors expressed opinions freely, whether or not they were in agreement with colleagues. In this discussion, tutors explored their own identities as individuals and as a group of professionals” (Johanek & Rickly, 1995, p. 240). As with the tutor, when moving the interaction with clients online, they felt freer to express their opinions and discuss their views of the assignment.

Obstacles in Online Communication to Overcome

There are many advantages to adding online services to a peer tutor environment; however, the problem between the lack of nonverbal elements of communication and creating a

relationship with the client has not yet been answered. One peer tutor remarked, “I like being able to have the human interaction with someone and read the nonverbals to make sure the client understands and is also engaged.” This aspect of “reading” someone, which helps in creating empathetic listening and immediacy, is more difficult when nonverbal behaviors are missing from the communication. The use of emoticons to mark illocutionary force and provide some nonverbal markers to an online communication is suggested by Dresner and Herring (2010). They explain that emoticons can add back to a conversation some of the aspect of nonverbals like facial expression and how a statement should be taken. However, emoticons are not a direct substitution for facial expressions as they are limited to keystrokes and the knowledge of the tutor.

Also, emoticons do not completely negate the propensity of online communication to create misunderstandings. Claire Hardaker (2010) explains that two forms of rudeness associated with online communication are “non-malicious impoliteness” and “Rudeness, faux pas, failed politeness” (p. 218). Non-malicious impoliteness occurs when the speaker is not trying to cause harm but recognizes that their statement may anyway, such as a tutor giving feedback on a client’s speech. It is usually easier to avoid this in FtF tutoring sessions by smiling and saying the comment as pleasantly as possible. By framing the constructive criticism in a positive light through facial and vocal expressions, the client is more likely to take the comment in a positively also. In an online conversation, the client does not see the tutor’s smile and can more easily take the remark the wrong way. Rudeness, faux pas, and failed politeness is when the speaker fails to recognize a behavior that they either should or should not do in a situation, or when they misjudge the level of politeness that they should use. For instance, the Dean of Students could attend the Online Speaking Center and the tutor not know who he is

since she cannot see him. The dean could be offended because the tutor does not use the degree of politeness that he normally receives when dealing with students. Sage Lambert Graham (2006) suggests that, in order to avoid impoliteness, the speaker:

[M]ust assign intent without prosodic and non-verbal markers, they must accommodate and anticipate the expectations and face needs of an audience that may be, at least partially, unknown, and they must be versed in the expectations of e-politeness or Netiquette. (p. 744)

For a peer tutor, this suggestion would mean fully explaining the intent of their remarks through language or emoticons, understanding the client's assignment and what the client wants to work on, and staying involved in the conversation by explaining to the client what he is doing and asking open-ended questions to get the client to stay involved also.

Yet another form of impoliteness that online communication can bring about is cultural impoliteness. Tokunaga (2009) says, "In bringing people from across cultures together in a digital domain, the Internet indirectly stimulates greater misunderstandings between individuals who may not understand, or be able to detect, the communicative behaviors of members from other cultures" (p. 134). It is easier to not recognize that something is culturally different and impolite when the nonverbal markers of disapproval are not visible. One instance of this, Tokunaga explains, is the difference of self-disclosure in individualist vs. collectivist countries. Individualist countries (such as the United States) use a high degree of self-disclosure online; whereas collectivist countries (such as Japan) use a lower level of self-disclosure. Not recognizing this can cause misunderstandings and impoliteness through asking too many questions or giving the receiver too much personal information.

Having reviewed these specific forms of impoliteness, looking at impoliteness as a whole may help to illuminate some ways to avoid it. Helen Spencer-Oatey (2005) defines (im)politeness as “an evaluative label that people attach to behavior, as a result of their subjective judgments about social appropriateness” (p. 97). In order to maintain social appropriateness and avoid impoliteness, she explains two principles to follow. Her first principle is the Equity Principle. The Equity Principle states that people have the right to not be “unduly imposed upon, that they are not unfairly ordered about, and that they are not taken advantage of or exploited” (p. 100). A way to use this principle in a tutoring session is to suggest changes or areas to be improved upon, instead of telling a client what to fix. Also, giving preview and review statements at intervals within the session will help to follow this principle so that the client will know where the session is going at all times. Spencer-Oatey’s second principle is the Association Principle. This principle states that people are “entitled to an association with others that is in keeping with the type of relationship that they have with them” (p. 100). This can be implemented by maintaining the paraprofessional status mentioned earlier in this paper. Also, by giving examples and personal stories to illustrate points, the tutor can show that he is involved in the process with the client and not dictating arbitrarily that they must do something about their presentation.

A challenge directly affecting peer tutors was found in the beta test of a new Online Speaking Center, and that challenge was the reduced interaction with their clients. One consultant remarked, “I didn’t like the isolation I felt as a consultant while being in the OSC [Online Speaking Center] area.” The main areas looked for when hiring speech tutors are a willingness to help students and a desire to interact with people. Because of the type of people that we look to hire at our Speaking Center, a reduction in their interaction with people was a

main concern of theirs. When put in a room by themselves with a computer, they did not feel the connection with their clients that they felt in FtF tutoring sessions. They did not feel a relationship develop between themselves and their clients. However, as this was a concern raised early on in the beta test, the staff found that doing consultations together in the same room greatly helped with their own perception of connection. However, the greatest help to the consultants' feelings of a relationship with their clients was when they started using Voice Over IP (VoIP). This allowed the consultants to directly talk to their clients through the internet and hear their voices, even if they could not see their faces.

Finally, in research done on Online Writing Centers, Healy (1995) explains that a danger of online tutoring sessions is that it can produce the effect of "Big Brother" or Foucault's interpretation of Jeremy Bentham's "Panopticon." The nature of having the tutoring sessions online is that they can more easily be recorded and fall under surveillance from directors or administrators. Healy explains that it is not just the actual surveillance of the director, but also the tutor's knowledge that they could fall under surveillance that becomes a problem because the work environment will suffer. If the culture is to produce tutors who feel free to make their own decisions and rely on their own intuition, as most Writing and Speaking Centers train their tutors to do, creating a culture of surveillance will work directly against this goal of individual responsibility.

Creating an Online Relationship

In order to create a relationship through online communication and avoid these challenges of mediated communication, the literature surrounding CMC was consulted. Conaway, Easton, and Schmidt (2005) speak directly to my earlier question of immediacy behaviors. They say, "Strategies for increasing immediacy online include writing in a

conversational tone, using students' names in the postings, and including personal notes in the group feedback" (p. 32). Using these online immediacy techniques to establish a connection with the client can help to foster more engagement because "creating a safe psychological environment for student participation can provide the needed social presence that encourages students to engage" which is what peer tutors need in order to help their clients to progress in their projects (p. 25). Conaway et al.'s advice focuses heavily on stories. Having the tutor tell personal stories to illustrate points and having the clients respond with their own stories, they claim, helps to establish immediacy without the use of nonverbal behaviors. Personal stories are a form of self-disclosure that show involvement on the part of the tutor in the project of their client.

One of the characteristics of online communication that is both an advantage and a disadvantage is what Walther (1996) calls "hyperpersonal" communication, "CMC that is more socially desirable than we tend to experience in parallel FtF interaction" (p. 17). Hyperpersonal communication can be a good thing as it is when a stronger connection is formed over the internet than in FtF communication because of a greater amount of self-disclosure. However, as peer tutors are college students themselves, sometimes a greater amount of disclosure can produce uncomfortable situations, through finding out information about students that they are acquainted with, or finding themselves in situations where the client needs more help than they are qualified to give them. This high level of self-disclosure comes about as a manifestation of the Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger and Calabrese, 1975). This theory proposes that people actively seek to understand others and seek to be able to predict their responses in situations. Usually, uncertainty is reduced greatly by nonverbal behaviors; however, these are not present in online communication. Therefore, Collins and Walther (2002) argue that people in

communication with each other over the internet will engage in more self-disclosure and verbal interrogation than in a normal FtF conversation.

Hyperpersonal communication arises when the members in an online conversation engage in an extensive amount of self-disclosure. Walther (1996) explains that this can either be good or bad. He says that, without FtF contact, the sender of the messages can deindividualize the receiver. The sender would then base his perception of the receiver on a stereotyped notion with little to no empirical evidence. This type of contact can either create an uncomfortable situation or can go into hyperpersonal communication. Hyperpersonal communication arises when the participants can connect with each other through some commonality such as membership in an organization, common interests, socio-economic status, etc. For the purposes of an online tutoring session, a middle ground between these two areas would be most desirable. The tutor wants to create a relationship with their client and avoid the uncomfortable situation mentioned earlier, but hyperpersonal communication would also be detrimental to the session. Tutors have limited amounts of time to spend with each of their clients in order to help them with their presentations. Engaging in hyperpersonal communication would take away from this time and tutors could not as efficiently help their clients, which is the main reason to create a relationship.

Another aspect of online communication that can be both good and bad is privacy. In relation to how it can be good, Ben-Ze'ev (2003) explains, "In cyberspace, the agent can choose which personal details to reveal and consequently privacy is largely under the agent's control" (p. 458). This aspect of the agent being more in control helps in what Goffman (1967) calls "face-work." He says:

The term *face* may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes – albeit an image that others may share. (p. 5)

In online communication, a person can reveal as much or as little as they want about themselves and their views of the world. Also, in an online conversation, a person can lie or stretch the truth as much as they want to portray themselves in a better face. A participant in one of these conversations can present whatever face they want to the world.

Privacy can be detrimental to a tutoring session when it falls into the situation Ben-Ze'ev (2003) explains when he says:

It is reasonable to assume that in online relationships, people typically share personal information that they do not share with their intimate offline partners. The opposite claim is true as well: people share with their intimate offline partners other information they hide from their online partners. (p. 457)

This could create a situation of over-sharing. Since the tutor is removed from the client and easier to dehumanize, it is a possibility that they could share more information with the tutor than the tutor wants to know, and vice versa. When you believe that you will never see someone in real life, it is easier to share things with them that you normally would not share FtF.

Discussion

It is not my goal to say definitively that online communication is detrimental to peer tutor environments or that FtF sessions should be replaced with it because it is the ideal form of communication. My goal in writing this essay is to see if relationships can be developed online similar to those in FtF tutor sessions. I have come to a dual answer of yes and no. Walther

(1996) warns that CMC may become impersonal when the time frame is restricted because it takes longer to type a conversation than to say it. In tutoring sessions, time is limited in order to schedule appointments. We found in our Online Speaking Center that it takes twice as long to do a tutoring session through chat as it does FtF. Therefore, I agree with Walther that the time limitations in a tutoring session may increase its chances of becoming impersonal and a relationship not forming. However, through our experiences with using VoIP when the tutors were feeling disconnected, we learned that it takes the same amount of time to do a conversation through VoIP as it does FtF. Also, the tutors and the clients felt more connected, and they felt a relationship had developed similar to the ones in FtF conversation. Even with VoIP, the tutors use editing tools and chat to help their clients with their outlines, so most of the disadvantages of online conversations still exist, especially the lack of nonverbal communication. However, with extra training and care when speaking, I believe that meaningful relationships can still be developed through this medium.

The advantages of online communication, such as attracting new clients and making tutors more prepared for the workforce, are too tempting to neglect. One peer tutor said, “I prefer online appointments because I feel they are more convenient for students. I myself have a busy schedule and prefer to do things online. That way I can still wind down and relax but still complete my work.” The convenience was also mentioned by a client who said, “It saves a lot of time to do it over the internet than having to come in for some people. I received the same assistance that I would have if I came in. This helped a lot with my organization of the speech.” Even with using chat and the tutoring sessions taking twice as long, it was still more convenient for some students who were commuters or distance learning students. Since we have cut back the time with VoIP, it is more convenient for even greater numbers of people. Tutors and clients

alike seem to be onboard with the Online Speaking Center. Now we just have to work to establish and maintain these relationships through online communication, and try to get the clients to also come in for FtF practice sessions.

Future Research

There is much research that can still be done in this fairly uncharted area of study. There is one area that I feel would be important and practical to research. De Smet, Van Keer, and Valcke (2008) studied asynchronous discussion groups and peer tutoring. Specifically, the authors addressed how much of a part the tutor played in facilitating the discussion. For instance, Mazzolini and Maddison (2002) used the terms: “sage on the stage,” “guide on the side,” and “ghost in the wings” to describe how active of a role that the facilitator plays in a discussion. Most FtF speech tutoring sessions are one-on-one with a tutor and a client where the tutor plays more of the part of a “guide on the side.” The goal is to lead the client to understand and to figure out for themselves what they want to work on. However, it is easy to get caught up as the “sage on the stage” in an online session as time is limited and you are not seeing the client’s nonverbal communication to see if they understand. Therefore, I think that it would be infinitely useful for a study to research the most effective role for the peer tutor in an online tutoring session.

The relationship between a peer tutor and their client is vital for trust and understanding to take place, so more research in general into relationship development and maintenance in person and online would be welcomed and useful. Learning by doing is what we have mostly experienced at our Online Speaking Center, and comparing notes with other Online Speaking Centers would also be a great area to extend research on what is actually going on in these situations. Additionally, technology such as webcams should be studied to see how the relational

aspect is affected through adding in more nonverbal cues to an online environment. Overall, working to extend the research on the growing field of online communication seems necessary in a world where 95% of people between the ages of 18 and 29 use the internet (Pew Research Center).

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