Appropriating Zoom to host and conduct writing center tutorials

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Abstract

This paper explores the technological affordances of using Zoom for pedagogical purposes in the context of one-to-one writing center tutorials. First, the theoretical pedagogical framework that informs writing center tutorials is explained and the salient mediating affordances of Zoom technology are outlined. Then, tutor and student qualitative feedback from the beta testing of a virtual writing center hosted in Zoom are presented and briefly discussed. The feedback suggests that Zoom has a range of technological affordances that can be employed by educators to host and conduct meaningful writing center tutorials in an undergraduate EMI context.

Keywords*: videoconferencing, pedagogy, mediation, L2 writing, affordances.*

1. Introduction

In the mid-1990s, the advent of the Internet enabled university writing centers to offer asynchronous online services such as email-based tutoring and document exchanges. By the mid-2000s, as the technological revolution advanced, writing centers began to appropriate collaborative file editing applications such as Google Docs to offer synchronous text-based tutorials. In recent years, increases in bandwidth technology and the development of reliable videoconferencing applications such as Zoom have enabled writing centers to offer virtual tutorials with video and document sharing capabilities (Harwood & Koyama, 2021). Considering how the tools and features of Zoom videoconferencing technology can be appropriated for pedagogic purposes is important for engaging English as an additional language students in the writing process and supporting their learning in Virtual Writing Centers (VWCs). Therefore, this paper investigates the technological affordances of Zoom that can be employed by educators to host and conduct VWC tutorials.

Prior to analyzing the technology under focus, it is useful to briefly explain the theoretical framework that informs many writing center tutorial practices. A cornerstone of writing center pedagogy is sociocultural theory (Nordlof, 2014), which asserts that learning is social in nature. According to sociocultural theory, cognitive development is dependent on the interpersonal interactions a person engages in and the cultural tools they appropriate as they learn.

A person's independent capabilities can be enhanced by providing incremental support (or scaffolding) to help them achieve their learning goals. The support should gradually decrease as the learner's competence increases, until they can complete the learning objective(s) independently (Vygotsky, 1978). As Wells (1999) contends, dialogic learning of this kind promotes an interactive learning process, interweaving the individual and their societal context. These theories underpin the dialogic teaching style in writing centers, characterized by ongoing, reciprocal exchange between tutors and students that is intended to foster active engagement and critical thinking.

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2. The Pedagogical Affordances of Zoom

A Zoom meeting room is a virtual space where videoconferencing takes place. It is the virtual equivalent of a physical conference room, where participants can join to engage in a group discussion or presentation via video and audio. Zoom has a feature which allows the host to divide the main meeting room into smaller groups named *breakout rooms* for more focused discussions or group work (see Figure 1).

The host (or VWC administrator) can then bring meeting participants back into the main meeting room when needed. Zoom also has a *waiting room* feature which automatically places participants in a separate virtual space when they join the meeting. This enables VWC administrators to control tutorial entry to the VWC and provides a level security as administrators can monitor who enters the meeting. The feature includes a sound notification, akin to a doorbell, alerting VWC administrators when a participant is waiting to join the meeting.
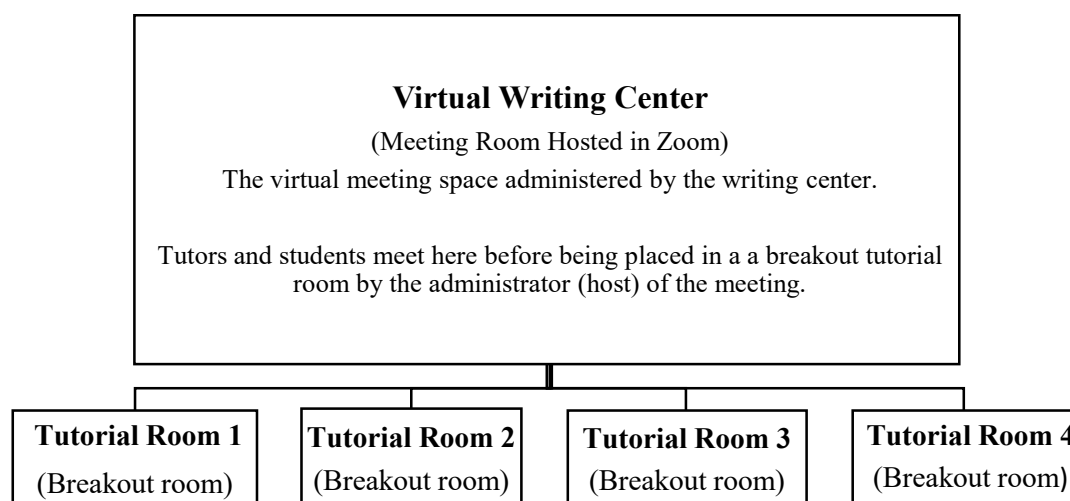

Figure 1. A visual representation of a Zoom VWC

Zoom offers various other audio-visual features that are potentially useful for pedagogical purposes and writing center administration. The key tools and features of Zoom that can be appropriated for pedagogical purposes are described below.

- *Screensharing* facilitates real-time collaboration and feedback while preserving students' digital ownership of their work as they do not need to send a copy to the tutor.
- *Virtual whiteboards* serve as a creative space for brainstorming, breaking down complex concepts, organizing ideas, and facilitating group problem-solving.
- *The chat function* enables tutors to record points of feedback and advice for future reference, as well as share links to additional resources for students. It is also a useful feature for language students, neurodivergent students, and students that are hard of hearing as they do not have to rely on audio clarity.
- *Automated captioning* can enhance understanding for language students and students that are hard of hearing by providing text subtitles.
- *The pinning feature* can highlight visual cues from the speaker, reducing distractions and aiding comprehension.
- *Virtual backgrounds* provide privacy for participants, minimize background distractions, and can promote professionalism e.g. VWC administrators and tutors can have the same writing center branded background.

According to Greer and Harris (2018), online writing instruction should adopt a user-centered design model that emphasizes student engagement. Indeed, much of the research on Zoom for teaching considers the pedagogical utility of its key features. Studies have found that students perceive breakout rooms as a beneficial learning space as they enable increased social interaction and teacher engagement, and that video, screen sharing, and annotations can promote interactive synchronous learning (Berges et al., 2021).

Furthermore, features such as chat, emojis, and whiteboards are reported as effective for increasing student engagement (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2022). Studies have also reported that teachers find screen sharing to be especially useful for direct instruction and real-time resource sharing (Stevenson et al., 2022), and that Zoom can facilitate the learning of writing in EFL courses (Huong, 2023).

Despite these reported benefits, Zoom presents technological limitations and issues related to camera use. For instance, the lack of social context cues in Zoom can increase cognitive workload and lead to Zoom fatigue (Bailenson, 2021). Additionally, the constant use of video cameras can cause anxiety and fatigue among students (Ngien & Hogan, 2022). Thus, educators should be aware of these issues and adjust their practices accordingly.

3. Method

The current study is based on tutor and student feedback from the beta testing of a VWC introduced at Sophia University's Faculty of Liberal Arts (FLA) Writing Center in Tokyo, Japan. The center provides English writing support primarily for Japanese students with high English proficiency. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2020 the center moved its services online and used Zoom as a VWC.

3.1 Participants and procedure

17 FLA undergraduate students (English proficiency TOEFL 105+), who were members of the same university club, tested the VWC by connecting to it via Zoom and engaging with tutors in breakout rooms. The students then collectively evaluated their experiences and documented them in a report. The students also completed post-tutorial reflection forms in which they individually responded to the question: *Reflect on your tutorial and the advice you were given. How will you integrate your thoughts and the tutor feedback in your writing?* Five writing center tutors also provided feedback through a 45-minute focus group conducted on Zoom. The tutors were asked to reflect on their experiences of using the VWC and share how they used the technology. The tutor and student names in the feedback below are pseudonyms.

The VWC was considered beneficial and efficient for tutorials by both tutors and students. It is also noteworthy that the VWC staff successfully scheduled, coordinated, and administered the Zoom breakout room writing center tutorials. They reported that the waiting room feature helped them manage the flow of students and tutors entering the VWC, especially during the changeover times between tutorial sessions. No substantial issues related to the affordances of the Zoom technology were reported by the VWC staff.

3.2 Tutors' feedback on the VWC

Tutors reported that they appropriated several features of Zoom breakout rooms to enhance their interactions with students and provide feedback. All five tutors noted how useful the screen sharing function was for focussing on the student's writing and for facilitating the understanding of paragraph organization and coherence, paraphrasing, and in-text citations.

Three of the five tutors mentioned that they had to explain to several students about modifying the permissions settings in Zoom. This was because tutors need students to give them permission to 'control the screen' and scroll through the students' writing so they can provide feedback through track-changes. The whiteboard feature was used by three tutors to visually explain ideas and concepts linked to students' writing and research. The chat feature was employed by all five tutors to share notes about student writing and hyperlinks to writing resources. Chat was also used to troubleshoot technical issues when audio and camera issues occurred as students worked out how to navigate the platform. Although tutors had to initially assist students navigate the VWC, they perceived Zoom as very useful for conducting writing tutorials, noting that it was not a cause of struggle during sessions. As Shunsuke, a writing center tutor in the focus group, explained:

> "The Zoom tutorials were fairly similar to face-to-face tutorials in terms of outcomes…I had good sessions face-to-face and had some bad session face-to-face, and I had good sessions online and problematic sessions online. I don't think that was related to the technology but more the student themselves… whether they are passive or disengaged and so on…"

Although the VWC offers a tutorial experience different from face-to-face tutorials for tutors, the technological affordances of Zoom clearly provide a virtual space that facilitates purposeful tutorial interactions with students.

3.3 Student feedback on the VWC

Student feedback from the post-tutorial reflection forms indicates that the students were actively engaged in improving their writing skills in the VWC. Table 1 below shows the number of student participants that made references to various aspects of their writing during the beta testing of the VWC.

Table 1. Aspects of the writing process students mentioned they engaged in the VWC tutorials

Aspect of writing	Number of students
Recording notes	12
Clarifying vocabulary	10
Recognizing objectivity	7
Revising to enhance clarity	5
Revising to enhance organization	8
Citation	11
Paragraph structure	10
Coherence	10
Categorization	4
Logical thinking	6

Students noted that they used chat to record notes and clarify the meaning of vocabulary. They also noted that they had begun to recognize the significance of objectivity in academic writing and the necessity of revising to enhance clarity and organization. Furthermore, students reported that they addressed a variety of topics in the tutorials, including citations, paragraph structure, logical thinking, coherence, and categorization. A salient observation regarding the student's post-tutorial reflections is that no technology issues were mentioned. Moreover, all students provided details of writing issues discussed during the VWC tutorials and mentioned how they were planning to revise their writing (Harwood, 2023). Three examples of student post-tutorial reflections are given below in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Examples of students post-tutorial reflection comments

Name	L1	Post-tutorial reflection
Hana	Japanese	The tutor advised me to include more outside sources to make my statements more reliable and accurate. I will also change some of the sources I used since it is a little bit outdated for the topic I am writing about. I will keep in mind to use more recent sources. My essay was neither a block pattern nor a point-by-point pattern so I will change that and put the counterargument and rebuttal only in the third paragraph. As I am going to change my last paragraph, I will also have to change part of my thesis statement.
Yuki	Japanese	I was able to go over the overall structure and content of the essay that I initially wanted to cover. I also went over some referencing issues. I will integrate the feedback that I got into my writing by focusing on the introduction and conclusion sentences.
Cao	Chinese	I had problems with my writing regarding structure, relevance, and clarity were solved. The advice I got from the tutor regarding approaches to my topics were helpful. I will be making changes to my draft based on the feedback I got.

The student feedback illustrates that the VWC tutors were able to successfully leverage ZOOM functionalities to deliver engaging and interactive tutorial sessions to provide precise and actionable feedback.

4. Summary and Conclusion

This paper has provided a rationale for how the technological affordances of Zoom can be appropriated by university writing centers to offer one-to-one writing tutorials. Preliminary findings from the beta testing of a VWC along with tutor and student feedback show how Zoom can function as an instrumental tool in facilitating university writing center tutorials. The technology allowed tutors and students to engage in purposeful dialogues about the writing process in the VWC. Moreover, the student reflections of VWC tutorials suggest that Zoom provides a space to reflect on and evaluate their work, which also aids in recognizing aspects of their writing that require revision. As VWCs continue to be opened by university writing centers, research is necessary to evaluate how videoconferencing applications such as Zoom, and its evolving technological features, can be appropriated for pedagogical purposes. Accordingly, as technological advancements persist in shaping VWCs, tutors should regularly review and revise their VWC tutorial practices to ensure they fully exploit the technology for pedagogical purposes.

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