**Writing Center Research Project**

***Understanding the Needs of Student Writers and Why Tutoring Sessions Change Focus: An Analysis of Writing Center Client Reports***

**About the SJSU Writing Center**

The Writing Center at San Jose State University (a large, public, Master’s comprehensive university), provides one-on-one tutoring, workshops, and various writing resources to all students. The Writing Center serves a diverse population, with students of all majors, grade levels, and backgrounds; many of the students who come to the Writing Center are bilingual or multilingual students. Integral to the Writing Center are Writing Specialists, or writing tutors, who conduct all tutoring sessions and are also students at SJSU.

**About Client Report** **Forms**

After every tutoring session, Writing Specialists fill out a client report form where they enter information such as the ideas or concepts that were discussed, concerns or questions the tutees had, and the interaction between the tutee and the Writing Specialist. As client reports provide detailed accounts of what occurred during tutoring sessions, information found in client reports provide valuable information about tutoring sessions not only to the SJSU Writing Center but also to other colleges and Writing Centers.

**About the Study**

For this study, I analyzed a total of 1571 client reports from the fall 2016 semester. The study is divided into two parts. The purpose of the first part of the study is to examine the needs and demands of the students who come to the Writing Center by quantifying the specific concepts that are discussed in the sessions (e.g., articles, subject-verb agreement, if it was a grammar session).; in the second part of the study, I analyze how frequently the focus of a session changes (e.g., a student might indicate he wants to work on grammar, but the client report indicates that it became a content session) and why.

**Purpose**

This research project is intended to be one that will benefit those working at Writing Centers, writing/composition and English language instructors and as a result, our students. By understanding what goes on in tutoring sessions, we will be able to better anticipate and prepare for the needs of our tutees. By examining the shifts in focus, I hope to provide a better understanding to all writing and language instructors and writing program administrators about the significance of one-on-one writing support for developing students’ writing skills.

**Research Questions**

1. What specific concepts are discussed in Writing Center tutoring sessions? What are the needs of the tutees?
2. How often does the focus of a session change? Why does it change?
3. Does the shift in focus have an impact on the quality and outcome of the sessions?

**Hypothesis**

The hypothesis for the change in focus shifts is that they change due to the tutees’ misunderstanding of the expectations and requirements of their writing assignments and/or due to a lack of awareness about their own strengths and weaknesses in writing, and Writing Specialists play a key role in helping tutees become more mindful about their writing skills.

**Findings**

**GRAMMAR**

Table 1

Number of client reports in which the following grammatical concepts are mentioned.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Number of client reports** | **Items (concepts)** |
| 477 | verb (verbs, verb tense) |
| 425 | article (definite article, indefinite article, zero article) |
| 317 | comma (Oxford comma, comma splice, serial comma) |
| 305 | noun (nouns, noun phrase) |
| 293 | subject (subject-verb agreement, subject-antecedent agreement) |
| 214 | plural (plural nouns, pluralization) |
| 165 | preposition |
| 132 | punctuation |
| 122 | parallel (structure & parallelism) |
| 112 | word choice |
| 207 | coordinating conjunction, FANBOYS |
| 99 | transition (transitions, transitional, transitioned) |
| 97 | colon and semicolon |
| 95 | pronoun |
| 73 | independent clause |
| 69 | relative (relative pronouns) |
| 65 | continuity (verb continuity) |
| 57 | active (active voice) |
| 55 | nominalization |
| 53 | run-on |
| 52 | compound (compound sentences) |
| 51 | possessive |
| 50 | wordiness |
| 44 | passive (passive voice) |
| 41 | quotation |
| 40 | fragment (sentence fragment) |
| 37 | capitalization |
| 34 | adjective |
| 34 | phrasal (phrasal verbs) |
| 34 | restrictive (restrictive clauses, non-restrictive clauses) |
| 33 | adverb |
| 22 | antecedent (pronoun-antecedent) |
| 22 | appositive |
| 11 | gerund (gerunds) |
| 17 | subordinate (subordinate clauses, subordinating conjunctions) |
| 7 | contraction |
| 6 | auxiliary (auxiliary verb) |
| 6 | participle (participles, present participle, past participle) |
| 6 | predicate |
| 1 | particle |
| 1 | apostrophe |
| 1 | expletive |

The most frequently occurring topics in grammar sessions were 1. verbs, 2. articles, and 3. commas. Verbs include the use of verbs and verb tenses. Articles include the zero, definite, and indefinite articles. Commas include comma splices and Oxford commas/serial commas. Additionally, tutoring sessions that talked about nouns, including noun phrases, were common as well.

The findings show that Writing Specialists need to be able to clearly explain a variety of grammar concepts, particularly regarding verb tenses, articles, and commas. For frequently occurring grammar concepts such as these, Writing Specialists may need to go beyond providing basic definitions. For example, when explaining the differences among the zero, definite, and indefinite articles, simply talking about general vs. specific may not be helpful for tutees, especially for multilingual learners since they may already know a great deal about grammar concepts. Instead, it would be more useful for Writing Specialists to provide explanations as to why a particular article works in the given context. Specific to verb tenses was the tutees’ confusion as to when they should use the present tense or past tense when writing research papers, as well as confusion between the simple past tense and present perfect tense. Punctuation also seems to be another prominent issue among tutees of all backgrounds. Many tutees seem to have a weak understanding of sentence structures, resulting in misusage of punctuation. Not having a proper understanding of parts of speech also seems to be another issue that can affect the overall quality of tutees’ writing.

**FORMATTING**

Table 2

Number of client reports in which the following formatting concepts are mentioned.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Number of client reports** | **Items (concepts)** |
| 157 | APA |
| 134 | citation (in-text citation) |
| 107 | reference (reference page) |
| 30 | MLA |
| 6 | Chicago/Turabian |

In regard to formatting, the majority of sessions focused on APA formatting, which is reflective of the majors and courses of the tutees. This signifies that to give proper support to tutees, Writing Specialists must be well-versed in APA formatting. Particularly, Writing Specialists need to know how to write in-text citations and reference pages. Although Chicago/Turabian style formatting was not very common, there were six tutoring sessions where the focus was on Chicago/Turabian, so Writing Specialists need to be at least aware of the style and know basic guidelines.

**CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION**

Table 3

Number of client reports in which the following content and organizational concepts were mentioned.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Number of client reports** | **Items (concepts)** |
| 240 | thesis (thesis statement) |
| 204 | prompt |
| 153 | introduction |
| 145 | body (body paragraphs) |
| 143 | conclusion |
| 137 | topic |
| 112 | word choice |
| 106 | argument |
| 99 | transition (transitions, transitional, transitioned) |
| 87 | PIE |
| 68 | topic sentence |
| 55 | summary and summarize |
| 53 | redundancy |
| 51 | funnel (funnel method) |
| 51 | claim |
| 50 | wordiness |
| 24 | evidence |
| 22 | triangle (inverted triangle, reverse triangle) |
| 18 | coherence |
| 12 | paraphrase |
| 12 | hook |
| 12 | consistency |
| 10 | proofread |
| 9 | formality |
| 7 | tone (formal tone, polite tone) |
| 6 | counterargument |
| 4 | plagiarism |

The overall trend with content and organization seems to be that tutees come to the Writing Center to talk about their writing assignments with Writing Specialists. Tutees needed the most help with their thesis, specifically their thesis statements. This suggests that perhaps students do not know what a thesis is or how to write one. Since coming up with a thesis/thesis statement involves brainstorming, the findings show that Writing Specialists play a significant role in helping tutees discuss their ideas—something that could be harder to do in classrooms and teacher-student conferences where teachers are limited in their availability. Discussion of the prompt was also another frequently occurring topic. This shows that much time is spent on addressing the requirements of the prompt as well as trying to understand it. Although Writing Specialists cannot interpret professors’ comments and instructions, they play a vital role in helping tutees understand the expectations of the assignment. This could be a reflection of the students’ hesitance in approaching their professors for help, which could be an indicator that students feel more comfortable and less intimidated talking to peers (Writing Specialists) than faculty. If this is the case, Writing Specialists play a significant role in acting as a bridge between students and their courses/professors.

**FOCUS SHIFTS**

Out of 1571 client reports, there were 472 focus shifts (30% of sessions/client reports). The table below shows the total number of tutoring sessions in relation to the initial focus and focus after shifts were made.

Table 4

Initial Focus vs. Focus After Tutoring Sessions

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Initial Focus (%)** | **Focus After Tutoring Sessions (%)** |
| **Grammar** | **941 (60%)** | **895 (52%)** |
| **Content/organization** | **491 (31%)** | **648 (38%)** |
| **Formatting** | **124 (8%)** | **150 (9%)** |
| **Unspecified** | **15 (0.9%)** | **12 (0.7%)** |
| **Total** | **1571** | **1705\*\*** |

\*\*The reason why the total number after analysis is higher than the total before analysis is because some sessions had more than one focus.

Table 5 shows what the shifts were made from and what the shifts were made to. *Shifting from* indicates the number of times tutoring sessions shifted away from the initial focus while *shifting to* indicates the number of times tutoring sessions shifted their focus to a different focus.

Table 5

Focus shifts

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Number of tutoring sessions shifting focus FROM (%)** | **Number of tutoring sessions shifting focus TO (%)** |
| **Grammar** | **248 (52%)** | **205 (34%)** |
| **Content/organization** | **143 (30%)** | **296 (49%)** |
| **Formatting** | **81 (17%)** | **106 (17%)** |
| **Total** | **472** | **607** |

The results show that a little over half of all tutoring sessions with focus shifts made shifts away from grammar, while the most number of shifts were made to content/organization. Shifting from something does not necessarily mean that the focus completely shifted away from it. In many cases, the session still touched upon the initial focus in some way while also focusing on another focus. Although all tutoring sessions start with only one focus, many ended up with more than one focus. This explains why the total number of tutoring sessions shifting to a particular focus is higher than the original.

Although tutees come to the Writing Center for help with grammar most often, it was also mostly from grammar where focus shifts occurred. Instead of focusing on grammar, shifts were made to another focus, with the most being to content/organization. In the end, the difference between the total number of tutoring sessions that focused on grammar and content/organization is only 247, compared with the original 450. Although this does not change the fact that more students come for help with grammar than any other focus, content/organization is also an area that many students need help with. The numbers indicate that for reasons we will see next, content/organization is not the most common initial focus but increased in importance during and after the tutees’ visit to the Writing Center. This focus shift trend also demonstrates how Writing Specialists are trained to address higher-order concerns (content and organization) before lower-order concerns (grammar and formatting).

To understand why focus shifts occur in the first place, I analyzed client reports and found the below reasons to be the most common causes.

**Reasons for the shifting of focus:**

* Students wanted to switch.
* There was time left over in the session to talk about another focus.
* Some students wanted help with more than one focus.
* During the session, students and Writing Specialists realized that the focus should be on something else.
* The focus shifted naturally as the session progressed while students and Writing Specialists focused on what they perceived to be of most significance.
* Students did not really know what to work on, so Writing Specialists advised students to focus on what they perceived to be most important.
* Students did not understand the difference between grammar, content/organization, and formatting when filling out their appointment forms, so they selected a focus by guessing or at random.
* Students wanted to start where they left off in the previous session. After the Writing Specialists explained that they need to work on something else as to avoid editing, they shifted their focus onto something else.

**Conclusion**

The study shows that tutees come to the Writing Center seeking help most often with grammar. Particularly, verb tenses, articles, and commas were the top three most frequently talked about concepts during grammar-oriented tutoring sessions. However, most focus shifts occurred to content/organization, which indicates that Writing Specialists play a significant role in guiding tutees to see the overall picture of their papers instead of focusing only on sentence-level concerns. In terms of content/organization, discussion about the thesis/thesis statement and the assignment prompt were two of the most frequently occurring topics.

Although 30% of all client reports had focus shifts, many tutoring sessions focused on more than one focus throughout the entire session (e.g., grammar and formatting). These sessions seem to focus on the specific needs and questions that tutees bring with them, rather than on a general focus such as grammar. Perhaps for tutees who are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses in writing, it may be more productive if Writing Specialists addressed the specific concerns and questions of tutees rather than on trying to adhere to one focus. Finally, the findings show that although content/organization is a significant focus, there is also a great demand for grammar. This suggests that more resources could be created for grammar-related concepts such as verb tenses, articles, and commas. Moreover, when tutors working at writing centers are being trained, they should practice explaining such concepts.

While conducting the study, several questions arose, which require further investigation. It is my hope that this study opens doors for discussion and encourages other Writing Specialists and WC Directors to come up with ideas and pursue projects of their own.

* There seems to be difficulty in defining the focus of a session as some concepts overlap. Are grammar, formatting, and content/organization clearly defined and understood by Writing Specialists? For example, where do style, clarity, diction, cohesion, wordiness, and vocabulary fit in? (Note that “wordiness” occurs with some frequency in both grammar and content/organization client reports. Does this indicate that “wordiness” can be a sentence-level issue OR it can be an issue that affects content and organization more than sentence-level clarity?)
* Does the focus change when the assignment changes?
* Should tutoring sessions be primarily content/focused-based or needs-based where tutors use a more holistic approach to tutoring?

The purpose of this project was to examine our client reports so that we can better serve all students who come to the Writing Center and find out the general needs of tutees who utilize writing centers at colleges and universities. Although further research can be done to improve the quality and quantity of the study, I hope this project provides some insights as to what writing centers can do to improve their services.

I would like to close by expressing my gratitude to the WC Director Michelle, Faculty-in-Residence Maria, and Office Manager Pat, as I would not have been able to freely pursue and carry out this research project without their guidance. Conducting this research has helped me gain research experience, encouraged me to think deeper about tutoring, and reaffirmed the significance of Writing Centers. The Writing Center is a valuable resource for all students at SJSU, and I am grateful that I could be a part of it.