Writer L1/L2 Status and Asynchronous Online Writing Center Feedback: Consultant Response Patterns

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Abstract

This case study examines the differences in comments offered by asynchronous online writing center consultants to L1 and L2 speakers and examines the potential disconnects in consultant perceptions of their practice. The researchers collected and coded sample papers and interviewed participants to contextualize data from the quantitative portion of the study. The researchers found that in addition to differences between comments to L1 and L2 writers in each category of comment, there was a significant difference in the number of comments offered. Participants accounted for some—but not all—of these differences, indicating some implications for training and assessment.

Introduction

As universities develop online programs, online writing centers are becoming more common: in 2014, 420 writing centers in a sample of 610 (nearly 70%) indicated that their writing center offered a form of online tutoring (National Census of Writing, 2014). And like their face-to-face counterparts, online writing centers often maintain an ethos guided by North's (1984) foundational writing center mantra of helping "to produce better writers, not better writing" (p. 37). That is, philosophically, online writing centers are also tasked with "look[ing] beyond or through that particular project, that particular text, and see[ing] it as an occasion for addressing our primary concern, the process by which it is produced" (North, 1984, p. 38). However, this task can often be less straightforward in online (and particularly asynchronous online) milieus. As McKinney (2009) has observed, many of the traditional techniques used in

writing center sessions to facilitate this work—such as talking about the paper and reading through it with the writer, hands-off policies, read-aloud methods, etc.—are often problematic for new media and digital texts (pp. 37-39). These texts, we would assert, include the Microsoft Word documents common in asynchronous online writing centers. To account for the problematic nature of "looking beyond a project," many tutor training manuals and practicums offer methods to counter what could be considered editing or directive methods in these environments. For example, Ryan and Zimmereli (2009) encouraged consultants to "resist the urge to simply edit" and to "use editing tools cautiously and sparingly" while at the same time avoiding evaluative language (pp. 80-81). In short, the medium itself often complicates and influences how collaborative work is facilitated. Consultants working with second language (L2) writers in asynchronous online environments face another layer of complications regarding collaboration and process-orientation. As Babcock and Thonus (2012) have asserted, "Indirectness is highly prized in a Socratic tutoring approach. For L2 writers, however, tutor indirectness often succeeds only in generating frustration" (p. 103). Read together, there can often thus be moments of contradiction wherein consultants attempt to foster collaboration in a medium that complicates it when working with writers who may find those methods doubly frustrating.

How, then, do asynchronous online writing center consultants, as Bell (2006) describes it, "preserve the rhetorical nature of tutoring when going online" (p. 351) and avoid merely editing or telling the writer what to do? Though many tutor training texts (Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2006; Hewett, 2015) address how consultants might approach these situations, and despite recent empirical research on writing feedback in the online classroom (e.g. Samburskiy & Quah, 2014), with computer-mediated asynchronous corrective feedback (e.g. Shintani 2015), and in online learning in general (e.g. Burns, Cunningham, & Foran-Mulcahy, 2014), there has not been a similar examination of feedback in the online writing center. Severino and Prim's (2015) study of Chinese students' word choice errors in English has provided some insight into how consultants respond to L2 writers on surface-level issues online, but little has been done to

extend this sort of examination to L2 writers more generally and to extend it beyond surface-level concerns.

In this article, we share the results of a study that begins to address this gap. We examined asynchronous online writing center consultant comments to determine how they commented in these sessions. In particular, we focused on potential differences in consultant responses to L1 (native English speaking) and L2 writers. And though we built our database accordingly, we attempted to remain sensitive to other differences and patterns that emerged in the data. We also sought to learn how consultants perceive the sorts of feedback they offer and the potential disconnects between their feedback and their perceptions about that feedback, particularly regarding their response to L2 writers. In short, we found that participants did in fact offer different patterns of feedback to L2 writers than they offered to L1 writers, and were only sometimes cognizant of this difference. We share the results of the study, offer an analysis of those results, and suggest implications for both writing center practice and research.

This empirical, qualitative study answers Babcock and Thonus's (2012) and Driscoll and Perdue's (2012) calls to extend RAD research into writing center contexts. Though we do not claim that our findings are generalizable, we assert that the representativeness of the research site, the quantitative analysis of consultant comments, and the thick description provided via the consultant interviews provide a rich site in which to build, extend, and complicate practice and theory on asynchronous online writing center work. We have offered, in the appendices, the codes and interview scripts developed over the course of this study in the hope that other researchers will attempt to replicate and extend our work.

Literature Review

Relayed below is a brief overview of scholarship done on forms of response in asynchronous online writing center sessions and on differences in response between that offered to L1 writers versus that offered to L2 writers (both in face-to-face and in online sessions). Such an examination is important for writing centers given the increasing profile of online programs as well as increasing L2

enrollments in higher education. According to the Department of Homeland Security, the number of people seeking nonimmigrant student visas (F1) has increased significantly over the past decade, from just 613,221 in 2004 to 1,577,509 in 2013 (DHS, 2014). While these numbers do not delineate nationality or L1, it can be reasonably assumed that the number of L2 English speakers increased as well. Consequently, writing center researchers must more carefully study how consultants perceive and respond to the needs of both L1 and L2 writers in online environments.

Although there has been work done on responding to writers in online writing center sessions, little of it has been empirical, and much of it has been done in normative terms for training purposes. One of the most comprehensive pieces on the topic, for instance, is Hewett's (2015) *The Online Writing Conference*, a tutor training manual. Accordingly, most of the discussions in writing center literature on online sessions revolve around perceived best practices and thus of a normative rather than descriptive approach. These discussions tend to focus on the dichotomy of directive versus non-directive practices. For example, Honeycutt (2001) claimed "asynchronous media tend to produce more directive comments" while synchronous sessions produce "a greater amount of personal and collaborative involvement between participants" (p. 54). Similarly, Ryan and Zimmerelli (2006) warned tutors that written comments can often be interpreted as more authoritative and directive than intended, and Golden (2005) examined how reflective tools could help consultants be less directive when working online.

Rafoth (2004) found an association between directiveness and an over-focus on surface level issues in asynchronous consulting when he examined the feedback his consultants gave to L2 writers. He described this feedback as "a mix of questions, comments, suggestions, and corrections" (p. 96) and foci, including content, thesis statements, punctuation, and grammar. However, when consultants tried to comment on a high number of individual issues in the same session, many of them ended up focusing almost exclusively on surface level issues; as a result, the session took on more of an editorial tone (Rafoth, 2004). Consequently, Rafoth (2004) asserted that consultants should use a narrow scope when

providing feedback in order to maintain a focus on global concerns, avoid directiveness, and not try to make their tutees' writing native-like.

Thonus (2004) provided what might be the most comprehensive description of interactional differences between L1 tutors and their L2 writers. She examined tutor/tutee interaction in 12 sessions—6 with L1 writers and 6 with L2 writers—and found that there were several differences in the way tutors communicated with L2 writers, including tutors' domination of conversation, longer turn lengths in favor of the tutor, less acknowledgment of the feedback areas the writer requested, more directive tutoring, and less involvement on the part of L2 writers. In short, sessions with L2 writers were more directive, more tutor-centered, and less conversational than sessions with L1 writers. While Thonus (2004) concluded that "significant differences exist" (p. 239) between sessions with L1 and L2 writers, it is unclear if, or to what extent, these differences also exist in an online environment.

Severino, Swenson, and Zhu's (2009) work compared the feedback requests by L1 and L2 writers on submissions to an online writing center service. In a sample of 85 L1 and 85 L2 feedback requests, they found that L2 writers requested grammar help more often than L1 writers, but did not find any other significant differences. And although Severino, Swenson, and Zhu (2009) observed differences in the feedback requested by L1 and L2 writers, differences between comments given by tutors to L1 and L2 writers online have not been analyzed as systematically.

Methods

The university where the study was conducted has roughly 27,000 students enrolled in on campus and Global campus programs which include online courses. The Writing Center has three locations on campus and generally employs 30 to 45 undergraduate and graduate consultants as well as eight to ten graduate assistants. The Center conducts approximately 12,000 to 13,000 total sessions each year. Of those sessions, over a third are conducted via its online service. Off campus students, who are the largest population served by the online Writing Center, number approximately 9,000 students

annually. Those students seeking online writing center support are primarily graduate students of a variety of backgrounds, including English language learners and non-traditional students.

The Writing Center's Online Service

When a document is submitted, students also submit an accompanying form that records basic demographic information. This form provides the consultant working on the submission with information about the student such as level (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, graduate student), the designator for the course they are submitting for (e.g MSA 600), where they believe the paper is in the writing process (e.g. "early draft") and the feedback areas they would like the consultant to focus on (e.g. clarity, grammar, and organization). The writer also has the opportunity to indicate whether or not English is his or her first language. The submission and the submission form are stored in an inbox that all consultants have access to, allowing them flexibility in when and where they conduct online sessions. Submissions are commented on and returned to students within two days, at which time they are expected to revise their paper using the comments left on the portion their consultant responded to. After feedback has been applied, students are encouraged to resubmit their papers to the Writing Center's online service for further review.

Consultants begin an online session by choosing an online submission from the inbox, opening the attached document and viewing the submission form. Consultants then begin reading and commenting on the online submission. Consultants begin with an opening comment introducing themselves and what they expect to comment on. Consultants are then instructed to respond to the online submission until they either: a) spend 50 minutes in the online session (for graduate level submissions; 30 minutes for undergraduate level submissions) b) make 50 comments or c) respond to ten pages of the submission. After one of these benchmarks has been reached, consultants give a closing comment summarizing what types of feedback areas they commented on and encouraging the student to resubmit once changes have been made. Consultants then save the document, attach it to the original submission in the Writing Center inbox, and send it back to the writer. Finally, consultants record

information such as the writer's student ID number and name on an Excel template in order to track which writers consultants work with.

Consultant Training

Consultants at this Writing Center complete a 3 credit, 15 week practicum course during first semester of employment. Consultants learn about working with different types of writing and different types of writers, as well as writing center pedagogy and best practices. Consultants are also given a brief introduction to online consulting and giving feedback in an online environment. Once consultants complete their practicum course and have been working with students in face-to-face sessions for almost a semester, they are given the option to begin full training for work on online submissions (commonly referred to as "onlines").

During training for online consulting, consultants are taught the ideals and best practices for online consulting as outlined by the Writing Center. For example, students are instructed to leave comments that are not overly critical, and include examples, detailed explanation, links to relevant resources, and corrections where appropriate. Consultants are instructed to comment on a mix of global and surface level issues in each submission. The ratio of global to surface comments is determined by the stage of the submission and by the consultant's assessment of the paper's immediate needs. However, consultants are instructed not to edit or use Track Changes; instead, consultants give feedback using Microsoft Word's comment feature. The feedback may point out issues, ask questions, and make suggestions. Consultants are encouraged to only make wholesale corrections when absolutely necessary in an effort to mirror face-to-face sessions and avoid infringing on the writer's autonomy.

Consultants train in a number of stages. They first begin with commenting on several sample online submissions, which are reviewed by the Writing Center Director and Graduate Assistant Online Coordinator. Consultants receive feedback on their comments, specifically on what they commented on (and sometimes what they did not comment on) and how their comment presented feedback. When consultants have demonstrated that they can leave comments that adhere to the best practices of online consulting, they move on to working on undergraduate online submissions. These

submissions are "live" online papers ("onlines") that have been submitted by students, but are still reviewed by the online coordinator before they are returned to the writers. Once students complete this stage, they can begin choosing, responding to, and returning undergraduate submissions on their own. Consultants then begin training to respond to graduate level submissions (while working freely on undergraduate submissions during their scheduled work hours). In this phase of training, consultants begin with live onlines that are typically Master's theses (though other types of graduate writing are also common). Once students complete this stage of the training, they are "fully approved" for onlines and can respond to any of the types of submissions the Writing Center receives.

Participant Selection

Three writing center consultants were selected to participate in this study. Participants were chosen based on their experience with working with L2 writers and conducting online sessions. In essence, the selection was the consequence of convenience sampling. Each of the participants was female which, while an accident of the sampling, was a) fairly representative of the overall demographics of the center and b) enabled researchers to control for gender as a variable in the responses. Participants consented to have their online comments collected and analyzed. Each was given a pseudonym included in the materials below: Ann, Monica, and Olivia.

Paper Selection

To control for variables among the responses, we selected submissions that were similar in writing process stage, student level, length, and type of feedback requested. As a result, only papers that were submitted as completed texts in the final stages of the writing process from graduate students were used. Because consultants may comment on up to ten pages of text, papers needed to be around ten pages long. Among the papers that met these requirements, only a few types of requested feedback presented themselves: clarity, grammar, and APA formatting. Four papers from each consultant were collected, two written by self-reported L1 writers of English and two written by self-reported L2 writers of English, for a total of twelve papers.

Coding Asynchronous Online Consultant Comments

The comments from each submission were converted to plain text, and all identifying markers were removed. Comments were coded based on three categories:

- **Type** (i.e. global, surface, or metatextual)
- **Focus** (what area the comment provided feedback on; e.g. clarity, organization, content etc.)
- **Mode** (how the comment presented feedback; e.g. command, advice, question, recast etc.).

For example, a comment such as, "I like this introduction. It prepares the reader for the rest of the paper" would be coded as g-org-prs for *global-organization-praise*. It addresses the overall concerns of the paper, focuses on the organization and the introduction's role in facilitating the organization, and praises the writing. For a full description of each code, see Appendix A. For the sake of clarity, we have in this article **bolded** category titles and *italicized* the individual codes.

These codes were originally derived from exercises in the training practicum for consultants in the program. For this study, they were applied to an initial data set to test interrater reliability and then further refined and revised in response to the data. Several of the categories were either collapsed, removed, split into more distinct categories, or further refined as the data also defined the code. In short, although our codes were initially prescribed so as to help us observe phenomena in the data, we remained sensitive to that data so that our codes were grounded in and arose from it.

The text of a comment was often given more than one set of codes, as comments frequently had multiple foci or addressed a single point of focus through multiple modes. In these cases, comments were not coded as whole pieces of text, but by smaller units, such as sentences or even clauses. However, because these pieces of feedback could vary in length from a single sentence or clause to multiple sentences, they could not accurately be called 'clauses' or 'sentences.' As a result, these strings of language will be referred to as 'utterances'. Consider the following comments:

[comment]: Again, citations should come at the end of the sentence. If there are multiple sources being used in

one sentence, this format can be used:
(Fredrick, 2008; Sashital, Jassawalla, & Markulis, 1997).
[comment]: Typically in academic writing I try to be as
objective as possible. As a reader, this word struck me
as somewhat subjective. Is there a word or phrase that
could be used here instead?

The first comment contains two sentences but addresses one issue—in this case that the in text citations would fit better at the end of the sentence. Both sentences use the same mode: explanation. Even though this comment consists of multiple sentences, it would receive one set of codes (*surface/format-style/explanation*) and would consist of one coded utterance. The second comment also contains multiple sentences and addresses a single issue (a convention of academic writing, or 'genre-style'), but does so through multiple modes: It begins with advice ("Typically in academic writing I try to be as objective as possible"), then indicates an issue using qualified criticism ("As a reader, this word struck me as somewhat subjective") and finally indicates that a change should be made by asking a question ("Is there a word or phrase that could be used here instead?"). Because this comment is clearly using multiple modes to address the issue, it would receive three sets of codes (*surface/advice/ genre-style*, *surface/qualified criticism/style-genre*, and *surface/closed question/ style-genre*) and would thus contain three coded utterances.

Codes were cross-tabulated to determine the distribution of codes across type, focus, and mode for L1 and L2. A chi-square test was used to determine if statistically significant differences existed between how frequently codes were expected versus how frequently they actually occurred. Each consultant's set of comments were compared to the comments of the other consultants, and comments given to L1 and L2 English writers were compared within each participant's set of comments and across participants. Although we cannot generalize the results of the study due to the small sample size, we felt that the quantitative component enabled us to move away from impressionistic interpretations to demonstrable differences in response.

Case Study Interviews

In addition to the quantitative component of the study,

researchers also interviewed consultant participants. These interviews also provided an opportunity to member check; that is, researchers shared the results of the quantitative analysis of the consultant comments and gave the respondents an opportunity to intervene in researcher interpretations. This process not only added an opportunity for respondent agency and reflexive research practice but also enabled researchers to contextualize and triangulate data from the quantitative portion of the study. Interviews were 30 minutes to one hour in length, and addressed the following areas:

1. Participant's academic background
2. Experience and preferences with online submissions
3. Online writing center pedagogy
4. Issues commonly addressed in papers
5. Strategies for writing comments on various issues
6. Differences between sessions with L1 and L2 English writers

For full interview transcripts, please see Appendix B. After coding was completed, participants were informed via email of both the overall trends in the quantitative data and the trends in their comments. Participants were then asked a series of follow up questions addressing the following:

1. Which trends surprised them
2. How the trends compared to their perceptions of their comments
3. Possible explanations for trends observed in the data
4. The perceived accuracy of the coding

Results

There were statistically significant differences in the patterns of consultant response to L1 and L2 writers. According to the consultant interviews, participants were aware of some, but not all, of these differences. In particular, there were differences in the number of comments offered, in the **type** of comments, in the **focus** of the comments, and most especially in the **mode** of the comments. Despite some of these difference, however, there were patterns that were consistent among responses to L1 and L2 writers, and there was no discernible difference in terms of what might be considered directive or nondirective feedback.

Differences in Number of Comments

First, despite an equal number of papers for L1 and L2 writers and the same parameters for commenting on these papers, consultants wrote far more comments for L1 writers (286 comments, resulting in 347 coded utterances) than for L2 writers (210 comments, resulting in 250 coded utterances). The average length of these comments were similar (L1 = 19.5 words, L2 = 20.1), thus consultants were generally writing more for L1 writers than L2 writers.

In the follow up interviews, participants generally expressed surprise at the trend. For example, according to Monica: "I think the main thing that surprised me here was the fact that native speakers did receive more comments, as I would think that it would be other the way around." In short, the difference in the number of comments offered was unintentional.

Differences in Type of Comments

Overall, consultants preferred *surface* comments (333) to *global* comments (236), but not significantly so. The three consultants not only varied widely in their attention to global and surface comments, but also their intuitions about them. For instance, Olivia admitted that she focuses "probably more [on] surface issues because so many people need help with things like grammar and APA." Her numbers indicate the accuracy of her statement as only 29% of her total comments focus on global issues. Conversely, Monica tries, in her words, "to focus more on global, just because I feel it will help the students more in the future." Accordingly, 55% of her comments focus on global issues. Ann, on the other hand, when asked if she tended to focus more on global or surface issues, replied, "Definitely more on global issues, 'cause I feel like that's more, um, where my strong suit is." Yet, only 31% of her total comments were on global issues. In short, the participants seemed to favor surface-level comments, but not enough to suggest significance.

When comparing responses to L1 and L2 writers, however, significant differences emerged. Global comments were used significantly more (p ≤ .05) with L1 writers than with L2 writers. While *global* comments were used across every **focus** except *correctness* and almost every **mode** except *miscellaneous* (which may be expected,

given the category), only *explanation* and *qualified criticism* saw statistically significant variation between the groups. *Global explanation* comments were used more than expected with L2 writers, whereas *global qualified criticism* comments were used more with L1 writers (p ≤ .05). These results mirror what consultants intuitively felt about their comments. Olivia, for example, noted, "with ESL papers I find it kind of harder to talk about the global issues because I don't know the English proficiency of the student."

To summarize, though there were some disconnects between the **types** of response the participants thought they offered and what they offered, that difference was not necessarily significant. There was some difference, however, between the sorts of *global* comments offered to L1 versus L2 writers, and these seem to be the product of deliberate rhetorical decisions on the part of the consultants. In interviews, consultants indicated that they tended to feel more obligated to offer *explanation* to L2 writers (regardless of **type**) and felt more comfortable offering *qualified criticism* regarding global issues.

Differences in Focus of Comments

Given that the students submitting these papers requested assistance with some combination of grammar, clarity, and APA, an analysis of **focus** elicited some interesting results and demonstrated some deviation between the writers' requests and the consultants' responses. For example, *content* (L1 = 125, L2 = 58) and *format-style* (L1 = 75, L2 = 28) were addressed significantly (p ≤ .05) more with L1 writers than with L2 writers, while *correctness* (L1 = 57, L2 = 83) was addressed significantly more with L2 writers (p ≤ .01).

Although the prevalence of *correctness* and *style-format* comments correspond with requests for assistance with grammar and APA, *style-clarity* was addressed to a much lesser degree and evenly between the two groups of writers (L1 = 40, L2 = 35). *Style-genre* (L1 = 23, L2 = 20) and *organization* (L1 = 15, L2 = 11) showed a similar pattern of equal attention between L1 and L2 writers. While the prevalence of *correctness* and *style-format* is to be expected per the writer requests, *content* was the most frequently appearing **focus**. Similarly, *clarity-style* was clearly addressed far less frequently than might be expected given that it was a request of the writers.

However, in the interviews, participants acknowledged—and justified—occasional deviations from the requests. One consultant, Monica, noted in her interview that she tries to prioritize writer requests "unless there is … a more glaring issue that needs to be addressed." Another consultant, Olivia, goes into more detail:

> Olivia: I guess I comment on what I feel the student needs the most help with. So, I will still look for the things. Like if they wanted help with APA, I will still give them comments on the APA. I'm not just going to ignore[it] and be like "no you don't really need to worry about APA right now." But I'm still going to give them comments about those [other] things.

Later in the interview she argues for providing feedback beyond the requests made by the writer:

> Olivia: Because if I was that student and I just got help on APA but someone just skimmed it [...] and I [thought I] had perfect APA, and then I turned it in and the professor found this like [other] huge thing wrong with it... or like my grammar was really messed up... or like my organization was totally off... and I turned it into the writing center and no one said anything to me, I'd be like "well, what the hell did I send it to the writing center for?"

In brief, consultants tended to **focus** on different areas than requested by the writer if they felt like the particular circumstances of the submission warranted it, and for the most part, these deviations were deliberate. However, there were significant differences in the **focus** of the feedback offered to L1 and L2 (*content* and *style-clarity* versus *correctness*, respectively) that were unaccounted for in the interviews.

Differences in Mode of Comments

Overall, each of the **modes** was used with both L1 and L2 writers, although they were not used in every paper or in the same ways. *Explanation* was by far the most common **mode**, accounting for almost 30% (174 of 597) of the total coded utterances. *Explanation's* frequency was followed by, in order of overall frequency, *questions* (157 total coded utterances, consisting of 93 *closed questions* and 64

open questions), *advice* (139 coded utterances), *qualified criticism* (41 coded utterances), and *recasts* (31 coded instances). The least frequently appearing **modes** included *criticism* (12 coded utterances, L1 = 8, L2 = 4), *commands* (13 coded utterances, L1 = 6, L2 = 7), and *praise* (20 coded utterances, L1 = 11, L2 = 9), none of which were used significantly differently between L1 and L2 writers.

A comparison of how these **modes** were used with L1 and L2 writers reveals that *recasts* were used significantly ($p \leq .05$) more with L1 writers than with L2 writers, and used almost exclusively for addressing the **focus** of *correctness* (22 of 31 coded utterances). The other 9 utterances were used once or twice in each of the other **foci** with the exception of *content*, where *recasts* were never used. While the use of *recasts* with *correction* is expected, that they are used more with L1 writers than L2 writers is worth noting.

Qualified criticism was also used significantly ($p \leq .01$) more with L1 writers than with L2 writers. However, how *qualified criticism* in regard to **focus** was used is almost as significant. L1 writers received *qualified criticism* significantly more ($p \leq .05$) in comments related to *content*, whereas L2 writers received it significantly more ($p \leq .05$) in comments related to *style-clarity*.

Questions in general (and both *closed* and *open questions*), were also used significantly ($p \leq .01$) more with L1 writers than L2 writers. Indeed, *questions* were the most frequent **mode** for comments to L1 writers (L1 = 103 or 30% of total utterances, L2 = 54). Despite that disparity, *questions* were generally used in similar ways with both groups. Most *questions* (101 of 156) focused on content and the only significant ($p \leq .05$) difference in use of *questions* with respect to **focus** was with *correctness*, when L2 writers were more likely to be asked a *question*.

Interviews with the consultants revealed that, at least with respect to questions, some of the choices were conscious ones. Both Ann and Monica directly stated that they commonly asked a lot of *questions* in online sessions, and Ann asserted that good online comments needed to have a balance of *open* and *closed questions*. Monica explained that asking *questions* was a way to work with papers on unfamiliar topics, or with papers that she had difficulty understanding. Consultants also appeared to agree on how they used

questions. Monica indicated that she tended to ask *questions* about *content* (e.g. "I don't really understand this as a reader. Could you explain this more?"), matching the pattern in the quantitative data. When asked what a comment about *content* would look like, Ann immediately went to *questions*: "I might ask a question. Start off with something like 'Oh this is an interesting idea… I wonder if it might be better suited for the first paragraph of the paper...'"

While *organization* was the **focus** that received the fewest number of comments (26) in the sessions overall, in the interviews participants indicated that it was something they emphasized and claimed that they used *questions* to facilitate those comments. For instance, Olivia noted that next to *content*, she was most likely to ask *questions* about *organization*. According to the quantitative data, however, this was not the case; the only *focus* to be addressed with *questions* fewer times than *organization* (6) was *style-genre* (5). That said, it is possible that a wider set of samples would provide different results.

With respect to using questions differently with L1 and L2 writers, Monica said she purposefully avoided asking L2 writers too many questions, fearing those questions might be unclear. She reported instead that she would make suggestions. In a follow-up interview she added that with L1 writers, a consultant can assume the writer will understand what she is asking; the same might not be the case with L2 writers. She also indicated that sometimes L2 writers specifically requested not to be asked questions.

> Monica: …we try to refrain from asking questions that might confuse non-native speakers. Sometimes we get suggestions from **non-native speakers that ask us to not ask them questions, as they're not sure what to do with them**… When I'm doing onlines for non-native speakers, I try to be more aware that they may not know the conventions of the English language like we do.

Explanation the most frequently used **mode** overall and the most frequent for L2 writers (L1 = 88 or 25% of total coded utterances, L2 = 86, or 35% of total coded utterances). While the difference in use between the groups was only marginally significant (p ≤ .05) , the **foci** of the explanatory comments offer a more interesting picture. *Explanations* were primarily used to address *correctness* in L2 papers, accounting for 57% of the total explanatory

comments and just 23% in L1 papers; in L1 papers, *explanation* was primarily used to address *style-format*, accounting for 55% of total explanatory comments (as opposed to only 26% in L2 papers). The difference in **focus** is significant (p ≤ .01) for both cases.

 Explanation was also the most frequent **mode** discussed in the interviews. Olivia stated that a "lack of explanation is something that would qualify [as] bad online comments," while Monica tied explanation more overtly to tutor training, saying that "one of the things we try to focus on… is to make sure that whenever we provide any suggestions… we try to give reasoning as to why that change should be made." Statements like these seem to indicate that consultants feel including *explanatio*n is important because it is emphasized in consultant training, but also because they feel it is an element of effective online commentary. Ann even went as far as to say that it is "her fault" if a student does not understand why she is commenting on an issue, resulting in her attempting to explain things multiple times and in different ways.

 Each of the consultants also distinguished between how they use *explanation* differently for L1 and L2 writers, but only if they are certain of the writer's language status. Ann, for instance, pointed out that she might repeat a comment throughout the paper, but vary her own language or **modes**. Indeed, the consultants were clear that the writer's language status was a factor in their comments:

> Olivia: (after being asked why L2 writer's papers take longer) ... I think that **explaining the grammar rules** using the language that's more appropriate for ESL, like, sometimes, things like introductory elements or whatever … With native speakers you can say, like, 'You need a comma here because what comes after it is a complete sentence' … Where, I feel like **I have to explain an introductory clause more to a non-native speaker.**
>
> Monica: (after being asked how to address working with an L2 writer who happens to struggle with grammar) … I try to think "well if I didn't know anything about English grammar, how would I want this explained to me" so it's kind of how I try to approach [it]… **more so than I would with a native English speaker.**

To summarize, *explanation* was the most frequently occurring mode. *Recast*, though used sparingly, was offered only to L1 writers. Questions and qualified criticism were used significantly more with L1 writers, and qualified criticism tended to focus more on content with L1 writers as opposed to style-clarity with L2 writers. Interviews indicated that participants were aware of the differences and that the differences occurred because of conscious rhetorical decisions.

Discussion

Overall, our findings confirm and extend those of Rafoth (2004) and Thonus (2004). The quantitative results show that consultants focused on many of the same areas observed by Rafoth (2004): grammar and punctuation (*correctness*), *content*, and *organization*. Other frequently addressed areas included *style-format*, *style-genre*, and *style-clarity*. Many of the same **modes** observed by Rafoth were also observed here, including *questions*, comments (*explanation*), suggestions (*advice*), and *corrections* (*recasts*), in addition to *qualified criticism*.

Of the **foci**, *content* and *correctness* were the most frequently addressed. This might be expected, since these two **foci** match up well with the division between surface issues and global issues that we found. *Correctness* was also a more common focus in L2 papers, whereas *content* was more common in L1 papers. However, as our results demonstrate, while *correctness* was addressed in both L1 and L2 papers, *explanation* was more frequently used as a **mode** to address *correctness* in L2 papers than L1 papers. *Recasts* were rarely used to address correctness in L2 papers, but were common in L1 papers. Regarding *content*, *qualified criticism* was used in comments to L1 but rarely used in comments to L2. Other combinations of mode/focus proved to be different between L1 and L2 papers, as described above.

These results echo the interactional differences between L1 and L2 sessions observed by Thonus (2004) in face-to-face sessions. Consultants used a different set of response strategies when working with L2 writers. Many of these seem to be conscious, rhetorical choices. For instance, the consultants in our study indicated that they clearly felt *explanation* was vital as a mode in working with L2 writers. Conversely, they felt that L1 writers do not need as much *explanation* about grammar mistakes, possibly explaining why *recast* appeared

only in responses to L1. However, many of the differences may not have been deliberate. To return to the example regarding *recasts*, none of the consultants endorsed recast, or indicated consciously using it with L1 writers exclusively as a strategy. Other differences emerging in the data were not ascribed to an articulated pedagogical approach. These unaccounted for differences include practices such as favoring *content* and *style-clarity* with L1 speakers as opposed to *correctness* with L2 speakers, and—perhaps more troubling—simply offering fewer comments to L2 writers. It may be the case that because the papers from L2 writers required more time, the consultants were unable to offer a fuller range of comments before the hour elapsed. That said, although Olivia hypothesized that that might be the reason why, the participants were surprised by the difference. Whatever the case may be, these results indicate that consultants are using one pattern of response when working with L2 writers and another when working with L1 writers, even if they are commenting on the same issues— sometimes purposively, and sometimes not.

It is possible that, given the small sample size of papers and consultants studied, that the differences in the sorts of feedback offered are due merely to the contingencies and needs of those particular papers. That said, the papers were a representative sample of online submissions chosen as randomly as our selection process would allow given our attempts to control for variation. Moreover, the sample of comments was large enough to yield statistically significant results when looking at expected outcomes. Thus, if the differences are not the result of particularities of a given paper, other explanations are needed.

Another potential explanation for the discrepancy between purposive strategies and unreflexive differences could be that the participants lacked clearly articulated approaches to working with L2 writers specifically online. These participants had received thorough training in each area, but these areas were not synthesized in training. The consultants' chief frame of reference for their online sessions was therefore either their face-to-face experiences with L2 writers or their more general online experiences. Accordingly, they then adapted approaches to each for this milieu. In instances where these are at odds, practice may be similarly confused. For example,

most of the literature for online tutoring stresses the importance employing nondirective strategies, but much of the recent literature on working with L2 writers indicates that such strategies may actually impede L2 writers' efficacy. As Thonus (2004) noted, the indirect methods of soliciting information preferred by writing center tutors (and generally used effectively in L1 sessions) were often confusing for L2 writers. Tutors in Thonus' (2004) study reported having to resort to more direct methods of feedback to ensure that they were understood, resulting in feelings of guilt stemming from an inability to use the indirect, Socratic methods prized by writing center pedagogy. This observation led Thonus (2004) to conclude that writing center tutors may require more fluid frames and a more flexible approach to giving feedback in L2 sessions. Accordingly, these frames need to be extended further—but made specific to—the needs of L2 writers in online milieus.

As asynchronous online writing center comments constitute a written genre, a genre-based approach may assist these consultants. That is, as a genre, online writing center comments are "centered not on the substance or form of discourse but on the action it is intended to accomplish" (Miller, 1984, p. 51). Overall, the consultant's purpose in working with L1 and L2 writers—both face-to-face and online—may be the same: to meaningfully intervene in the writer's process to alert them to potential audience reactions and ways to anticipate them. That said, the particular rhetorical exigencies of the L1 and L2 demographics (and, indeed, the individual writers within those demographics) may require different social action on the part of the consultants, and the different medium of delivery in online sessions requires a different approach than in face-to-face sessions. Unfortunately, as Devitt (2007) demonstrated, "writers use the genres they know when faced with a genre they do not know. These genres are not, in fact, transferable; they do not meet the needs of the situation fully" (p. 222). Accordingly, the discrepancy between practice and assumptions may be the result of drawing on genre repertoires that were insufficient to consistently address the social action required of the online sessions with L2 writers. As we will discuss in the conclusion, the study thus raises several implications for tutor training and approaches.

Although the data revealed significant differences between responses to L1 and L2 writers, those differences did not necessarily demonstrate a difference in terms of directiveness. In fact, although utterances were not specifically coded as directive or nondirective, **modes** that could be considered overtly directive such as *recasts* (31 total utterances, 22 on L1 papers, 9 on L2 papers) and *commands* (13 total utterances, 6 on L1 papers, 7 on L2 papers) were used infrequently compared to other **modes**. Only *criticism* (12 total utterances) and *praise* (20 total utterances) appeared with comparable frequency. Of these, only *recasts* were used demonstrably differently, with far more used with L1 speakers. In short, our study seems to refute Honeycutt's (2001) claim that "asynchronous media tend to produce more directive comments" while synchronous sessions produce "a greater amount of personal and collaborative involvement between participants" (p. 54). In the interviews, participants expressed concern with fostering collaboration in the sessions and pointed to specific practices for facilitating it, despite the chronal limitations of the asynchronous medium. Granted, some of Honeycutt's (2001) claim is likely bound up in the limitations of the technology of the time as well as the then-novelty of the subject. Though practitioners may intuit the back-and-forth real-time affordances of face-to-face sessions as lending themselves more naturally to global concerns, asynchronous sessions are not necessarily limited to directive comments or surface issues—nor are these sessions defined by these concerns or approaches.

Conclusion

These data raise several questions about training for asynchronous online consulting at this writing center. For instance, if consultants use different patterns of response for sessions with L2 writers, should this be accounted for in online training? A better-defined set of strategies and expectations for working with L2 writers online may help consultants to feel less pressure to provide frequent explanations. However, as Thonus (2004) suggests, better-defined strategies for working with L2 writers online could turn into "another orthodox set of frames" (p. 240) to which consultants feel they must adhere.

Alternatively, Thonus (2004) stated that she used information about the interactional differences she observed to show consultants "what is"—that is, what happens in sessions with L2 and L1 writers and what the differences are. After being informed of the results of this study, Monica reported that what surprised her about her comments prompted her to reflect on why she commented the way she did:

> Monica: I think the main thing that surprised me here was the fact that native speakers did receive more comments, as I would think that it would be other the way around. However, thinking about it, it might be because we try to refrain from asking questions that might confuse the non-native speakers.

Perhaps these data can also be used in online training to show consultants "what is" with the hope that doing so will help them to become more reflective practitioners. In this case, knowing what patterns of response have been observed may help them adapt their response strategies more effectively. Such an approach mirrors Devitt's (2014) description of genre awareness pedagogy, which "treats genres as meaningful social actions, with formal features as the visible traces of shared perceptions. Analyzing the contexts and features of a new genre provides an inroad to understanding all genres" (p. 152). In other words, rather than prescribing the sorts of generic features that often appear in a given online session with L2 writers, online training programs should encourage consultants to consider the contexts and perceptions that lead to those features, noting patterns and theorizing on what those patterns indicate about the situations. Such an approach, as Devitt asserts, "teaches metacognitive reflection and explicitly discourages formulaic writing." (2014, p. 153). In short, a genre awareness approach to tutor training emphasizing the social action accomplished in online sessions in general, with L2 writers in face-to-face sessions, and in sessions online with L2 writers may help consultants to see "what is."

Finally, although this study has some implications for online training, we acknowledge that different patterns of response may be observed at writing centers that use a different approach to asynchronous online consulting or subscribe to different pedagogical

values in their training program. We also concede that this study was exploratory: while statistical differences appeared in the sheer number of discrete comments and utterances, there was not a large enough sample to produce generalizable results. A larger study using these methods might produce generalizations with a broader scope. Still, we assert that this study has considerable implications for both tutor training and future research.

Future research in this area could seek to further investigate some of the complexities in online commentary described here. Discussion on indirective and directive modes in online sessions will undoubtedly continue, but it may be more useful for researchers and practitioners to focus more on the actual patterns of response than on perceptions or normative definitions of directiveness. If general patterns of response for L1 writers and L2 writers are different, as suggested here, encouraging consultants to avoid being direct in all online sessions may not be completely beneficial for either the consultants or for the L2 writers in these sessions. As shown above, consultants in this study had a tendency to use the most directive modes (recasts) with L1 writers, who may—compared to L2 writers—have an easier time applying indirect comments. It may be constructive, then, to further consider what differences in response may exist in L2 and L1 online sessions, and systematically investigate how L2 writers apply online feedback to see if non-directive modes such as explanation produce effective, helpful comments.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Online comment codes
TYPE of comment
Global (g): Is the comment addressing major issues with "content, focus, organization, point of view [or] tone?" (Ryan & Zimmerelli 2010 p. 9)

> *"I might include a bit more information here."*
> *"I feel that this paragraph addresses several subjects. Could this be made into separate paragraphs?"*
> *"I add a bit more to this thesis so it reflects what the rest of the paper is about."*

Surface (s): Is this comment addressing issues in an individual sentence? Does it cover things such as clarity, sentence structure, word choice, punctuation, or citation?

> *"I'm not sure if this word would be needed here."*
> *"When connecting two complete sentences with a coordinating conjunction, a comma must be used."*

Meta-textual (met-txt): Is the comment referring to a non-rhetorical aspect of the session or text, or offering a description of what a consultant will do during the session (e.g. opening and closing comments)?

> *"This document seems like it isn't appearing correctly on my computer. Is this a formatting issue?"*
> *"I'll comment on things like organization, clarity, and APA style."*

FOCUS: What is the comment about?
Correctness (cor): Is the comment correcting an <u>error</u>, such as those that could be found in grammar, punctuation, spelling, or writing mechanics?

> *"Since this is a proper noun, it should be capitalized."*
> *"The period should come after the parentheses in this in text citation."*
> *"This should be 'their' instead of 'there.'"*

Organization (org): Is the comment making a suggestion that results in changing the organization of the paper?

"I think this sentence could be moved to the beginning of the paragraph."
"This information might fit better in the previous section."
"I like this introduction. It prepares the reader for the rest of the paper."

Content (cnt): Does the comment suggest adding content, point out a lack of content, or interact with the content?

"Could a bit more explanation be given here?"
"I might also add a bit more about this subject, so readers understand what it is."
"This is so true, isn't it? :)"

Style: Does the comment fit one of these uses of "style?"

- **style-clarity:** Is the comment on an issue with clarity, such as sentence structure or word choice?
  "I feel like the word 'issue' doesn't really accurately capture the meaning. What about 'altercation?'"
- **style-format:** Is the comment on an issue that is a matter of formatting style, such as APA or MLA?
  "In APA, page numbers are also required after direct quotations."
- **style-genre:** Does the comment address an issue related to the conventions of the written genre, such as informal speech or contractions?
  "Generally 'you' is not used in academic writing as it can be seen as informal."

MODE: *How* does the comment communicate the focus?

Advice (ad): Is the comment phrased as advice from the perspective of the consultant?

"<u>I might</u> add a bit about this subject."
"<u>I would probably</u> move this sentence to the start of the paragraph."
"<u>I don't think</u> this would need to be capitalized."

Questions: Is the comment addressing the focus by asking a question?

- **Closed Question (qst-clsd):** Can the question be answered with "yes" or "no"?
  "Is this the right word here?"

> *"Could more detail be added to this section?"*

- **Open Question (qst-op):** Does the question ask for a more detailed response?

> *"Is there anything else readers need to know about sociocultural theory?"*
>
> *"I might change this wording a bit to make this more clear. How else could this be worded?"*

Explanation (exp): Does the comment explain why something should be included, but does not make a direct suggestion to include it?

> *"Usually the year is also included in APA in text citations."*
>
> *"Contractions are not used in academic writing."*
>
> *"Usually a comma would be used after the third item in a list."*

Praise (prs): Does the comment praise the student or the content of the paper?

> *"I like that this transition refers back to the content in the last paragraph."*
>
> *"This is a convincing statistic."*

Command (cmnd): Does the comment make a specific suggestion, but phrases it as an imperative?

> *"Put a comma here."*
>
> *"Add more detail."*

Criticism (crit): Does the comment point out an issue, but offers no specific suggestion?

> *"Awkward."*
>
> *"This is a comma splice."*

Qualified Criticism (q-crit): Does the comment point out an issue without offering a specific suggestion, but uses qualifiers (i.e. 'softens the blow' of the criticism)?

> *"As a reader, I'm not following this point."*
>
> *"This paragraph seems a bit out of place."*

Recast (rcst): Does the comment offer no explanation, suggestion, or acknowledgment of the specific issue, but simply offers a corrected version of the text?

> *[From "these is an important point to consider"] "this is'"*
>
> *[From "I had know about this issue"] "I had known"*

Miscellaneous (misc): Does the comment contain a feature that is not covered by any of the above codes? If the miscellaneous code is used, the comment feature classified as miscellaneous must be analyzed separately to determine its role in the comment and why it does not fit with any of the other codes.

Appendix B: Interview Script

- How often would you say you work on online submissions? Do you enjoy doing online submissions? Why or why not? What types of onlines (graduate level vs. undergraduate level) do you typically work with? What type is your favorite? Why do you enjoy this type?

- In your opinion, what distinguishes 'good' online commentary from 'bad' online commentary? What would you say are the most common issues that you address in online submissions? What are your common strategies for correcting these issues or offering suggestions? Can you describe an example?

- On the submission form that is attached to every online submission, what is the most important information you use in an online session and why? Can you describe in detail how you used this information?

- In your opinion, do you focus more on global issues, or surface issues? Are there any cases where your focus is different? What types of things do you usually say to address these issues? Do you address the other type of issue differently? How so? Can you describe an example of an instance when you did not use this approach? How did you decide which approach to use?

- When working on a submission, can you tell if you're working with a non-native English speaker? How? Do you comment differently while working with non-native English speakers? Why? If so, can you describe a time when you did this? What are the differences?

- If writers request several areas for feedback, how do you decide which to comment on? Do you comment differently on the different areas writers request? For example, are comments for grammar vs. content different? What would you say the differences are? How do you decide how to comment?