# “Inspiring Writing Tutors to Move beyond Competence and Courtesy to Compassion Online”

OWCA 2021 Presentation by Katherine Schmidt and Sean Tellvik

## ABSTRACT

Interdependence can help Writing Center administrators shift their focus from the writer-as-client to the tutor-as-client because, technically speaking, Writing Centers don’t work with writers--our tutors do. It’s about culture, not service, and it’s about investing in our employees. In “Naming and Negotiating the Emotional Labors of Writing Centers,” Costello urges us to expand our focus from sessions and campus-support services to “[prioritizing] care for tutors and [fostering] emotional health alongside intellectual gains” (2020). When the pandemic forced us to move all services (and community-building events) online, we were panicked. We had worked so hard to create a culture that we didn’t believe could transfer online. It was about being in person . . . or so we thought.

We have found that even in the midst of a pandemic, we can continue to find ways to build a culture that inspires tutors to move beyond competence and courtesy to compassion.

This presentation describes how culture remained at the center as our university writing center moved online, and we discovered that many of the things we were doing for and with tutors were made better in a virtual environment, which surprised us. Examples of practical topics that are covered include scripts, session observations, and live tutor-to-tutor chat support. Ultimately, the pandemic has challenged our notions of what is possible in maintaining and even improving a healthy and compassionate work environment virtually for our tutors, and now that we have the option to return to in-person tutoring, we won’t settle for returning to “normal,” because we don’t want to lose everything we have gained from being online.

## TRANSCRIPT

Hello and welcome! This presentation is entitled, "Inspiring Tutors to Move Beyond Competence and Courtesy to Compassion Online." My name is Katherine Schmidt, and I have served as the Writing Center Director at Western Oregon University since 2003. During that time, I, along with my staff, have developed a comprehensive tutor training program that spans 10 weeks and then punctuates the remainder of the year. My name is Sean Tellvik, and I served as lead tutor of the WOU Writing Center before and throughout the pandemic. This critical time required that I use my support role to help implement an entirely online training program alongside Dr. Schmidt.

When we first considered the theme for this conference, which is interdependence, we discussed how the pandemic had helped us to come to understand what it truly means to be reliant on each other. To explain what we mean, we have to begin by telling you a bit about

what the culture of our writing center was like prior to the pandemic. Years ago, after engaging in quantitative research on writing self-efficacy, we changed our mission: “As an academic support service that promotes the educational mission of Western Oregon University, the Writing Center advances the writerly self-efficacy of every writer who uses the Writing Center strategically, repeatedly, and over time.”

And what we soon learned was that the key to leading a writer to use our services strategically, repeatedly, and over time was our tutor team. In other words, we made a point years ago to shift our focus from the writer-as-client to the tutor-as-client because, technically speaking, Writing Centers don’t work with writers--our tutors do. We realized that our mission was about

culture, not service, and it was about investing in our employees. In “Naming and Negotiating the Emotional Labors of Writing Centers,” Costello urges Writing Centers to expand our focus from sessions and campus-support services to “[prioritizing] care for tutors and [fostering] emotional health alongside intellectual gains” (2020). And that’s exactly what we did.

In Oregon, we have two regional businesses that embody what we learned to embody as a team. For those of you familiar with the business in this image, you’ll be quick to describe your experience there as extraordinary. Les Schwab is an Oregon-based tire company, and they are known for their excellence in service from the moment you pull into the lot. Employees bound out with great enthusiasm, greeting you before you’re able to exit your car. And they promise accuracy and expertise in what they do. For your entire time at their location, they make a point to treat you as if you’re the most important customer in the world. And this is the second business: Dutch Brothers of Oregon. The baristas are the coffee-world’s equivalent of Les Schwab. They not only make outstanding drinks; more importantly, they make you feel seen and valued as soon as your car pulls up to their kiosk window.

Our Writing Center’s goal has been to be the Les Schwab and Dutch Brothers of our university.

Thus, the foundation of our training, professional development, and community building evolved into this: we wanted our tutors to believe that they are judged not so much against the standard of other writing tutors in similar settings, but against the standards set by the nicest people giving services anywhere.

And we simply didn’t believe this could transfer online.

Now fast forward to March 2020 and the forced move across the nation to online spaces in a moment’s notice. With great effort and intentionality, however, we discovered that we could continue to find ways to build a culture that inspires tutors to move beyond competence and courtesy to compassion in digital spaces.

This brief presentation will describe how we were able to keep culture at the center of our transition, and we were incredibly surprised to learn that many of the things we were doing for and with tutors were made better in a virtual environment! For the sake of this presentation’s time limit, we are limiting our focus to three that are both practical and profound: scripts, session observations, and live tutor-to-tutor chat support. Before we dive into the details of the three activities, we’d like to provide a bit more about the culture of our center regardless of being in-person or online.

We see that there are three levels of caring that go into our work at the Writing Center.

The first is competence, which is something we look for when we are hiring. As you can see here [in the image], competence is the foundation upon which the more sophisticated levels of caring build. In interviews, we ask questions that help us to establish what these applicants are like as both students and as employees. We are looking for already established behaviors—like being prompt, acting appropriately in the work environment, and completing work on time, to name a few. These are habits that we won’t be teaching in the training course; however, they are habits that will ensure their success as individual employees who will be part of a team.

The second level of caring is courtesy, or service excellence, which we desire to see in our applicants, but we know that they can hone over time. For us, this happens when we acknowledge every person who enters the Writing Center. Courtesy involves communicating clearly with students that their goals are at the forefront of every session. It means never saying “I don’t know” to a student without also saying “so let’s find out together.” We will always make a point to get a student to the right person and resource, no matter what. Courtesy is something that every tutor can hone and refine when we, as a unit, are clear in our expectations and transparent about how to achieve them.

The third and most important level of caring is compassion, which moves the tutor beyond service excellence. Maya Angelou’s words ring true here: “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” According to Fred Lee, “compassion appears to be an action that springs spontaneously from a person who is ‘inspired’” (58). And what this means for us as Writing Center staff is that we aim to inspire our tutors, as employee, because when we do, our tutors create incredible experiences for the student-writers with who they work. And they are experiences that encourage students to learn to use the Writing Center strategically, repeatedly, and over time.

As you can see, this image demonstrates how the three levels of caring build together to determine a student-writer’s satisfaction with their experience at the Writing Center. It takes all three, especially compassion, to deliver a truly memorable experience: one worth coming back for.

With the second and third levels of caring in mind, we are now ready to briefly share three activities that we designed to help our tutors dive into their capacities for caring in online spaces.

Our first activity is having our new tutors watch a brief collection of recorded session introductions and endings by seasoned tutors. They discuss what they saw seasoned tutors doing and saying, with close observations of those talking points that the introductions shared across the board. And then, in preparation for their upcoming first sessions, they write their own script or outline for opening and closing their sessions. We found that every tutor made sure to be consistent in the information they requested and shared while also showcasing their own personalities and ways of connecting with others.

Over the years, we knew that the opening and closing of sessions look different depending on the student writer: the first-time Writing Center visitor needs one type of introduction while the seasoned Writing Center student-writer needs another. While we had spent plenty of time talking about why and what the bookends should include, we had never thought to script the experience until we went online. Being online means that the new tutor can use talking notes much less obtrusively. And it also gives the tutor the chance to practice talking about who we are and what we do, and to learn to adjust those points according to the audience.

And the tutors use their scripts for the first several weeks—sort of like training wheels. We have found that it is really all the little details that help a tutor connect with their students. This simple activity placed courtesy at the center of the tutor’s very first sessions. With the scripts, we were seeing that each session could begin and end with clarity, and over time we could help new tutors move from these prescribed actions to larger ways of thinking. Few tutors continued using their scripts by the end of the term, but the impact remained: consistent, compassionate service.

Our second activity is having new tutors observe sessions, identifying the deliberate moves tutors make to bring a session from satisfactory to exceptional. In the beginning of the training program, new tutors will watch a session from a seasoned tutor. They take notes on any strategies or behaviors that elicit more comfort and openness in the student-writer. New tutors will also jot down anything they think the tutor could have handled differently, and they submit reflections of each observation based on these notes. As they gain experience tutoring, these observations allow new tutors to be exposed to new styles of tutoring and incorporate strategies they find effective into their own tutoring.

When we operated in-person, so much of how we witnessed compassionate tutoring was from overhearing and observing other tutors in action. Because we all shared the space, the writing center was a constant learning environment, and these early observations were easy to schedule. Having that stripped away left what felt like a void in our training.

When preparing for the online training program, we realized this was an opportunity to be more intentional about tutor-to-tutor observations. Just as we could have tutors record their scripted introductions, we could also record entire sessions—with a writer’s consent, of course—from tutors who were experts at fostering loyalty through authentic, purposeful connection.

Returning briefly to our mission statement, we want writers to visit us repeatedly over time, and that requires a good amount of buy-in. Lee describes how “it takes something memorable to turn an ordinary, satisfactory experience into something special . . . Loyalty is generated by memorable things that happen that we didn’t expect” (50). All it takes is one brief, special experience to create the kind of loyalty that paves a path toward long-term writing development.

Our main measurement for loyalty is repeat visits. According to Lee, loyalty must be earned, and the greatest impact on loyalty is compassion. Courtesy comes in as a distant second, while competence has the lowest impact. We used recordings from tutors who had demonstrated consistently that students were eager to come back and work with them again. Each week, tutors in training would observe a new recorded session where a seasoned tutor modelled compassion—the kind that leaves a lasting impression on our student-writers.

The other way we use observations is at the end of the training program, when the director and lead tutor will observe a tutor’s session to see if they are ready to move forward with us. Because these sessions could now be recorded, we asked our trainees to select a session they believe reflects the best of their tutoring. This has led to incredibly productive conversations because we have a common reference point for each tutor’s self-identified strengths.

The best part is, we are now building a backlog of amazing sessions we can share for years to come. Sessions you can pause to take notes on, go back and watch again, and share no matter if we’re in person or online.

The third and final piece we’d like to share with you comes with a bit of backstory about the culture of our Writing Center. When we were still in person, our center buzzed with conversation, not just between tutors and their students, but among tutors talking with each other, telling a story about an engaging session or grabbing the nearest APA expert to weigh in on a citation question.

We value this atmosphere of open communication because it builds community within our team. Peer mentorship is important to us, as our observation methods show, but we also value building friendship among tutors. Pedagogical research has found that “creating a learning community requires emphasizing the overall positive interdependence among members and having them work cooperatively with each other” (Johnson & Johnson, 2017, p. 291). This interdependence allows tutors to pay kindness forward with their students, too.

The shift to online services posed a challenge to our established culture, and we discovered, as I’m sure all of you did, how quickly a lack of face-to-face contact can become isolating. After trying things like more frequent staff meetings and weekly office hours, we finally found success in implementing a live tutor-to-tutor chat support system, facilitated through the free communications program Discord.

If you have never used Discord before, here is a small example of what it can look like [image]. It is easy to create text chats, separated into as many different topics as needed to keep conversations organized. There is also the option to join a live voice chat, with video and screen sharing capabilities. The nice thing about the voice chats is they are relatively unobtrusive. Once a tutor joins a voice chat, it will display their icon, signaling to others that they are available to talk. It is the virtual equivalent to our tutor lounge, where tutors used to gather before and after shifts or during downtime. Discord is certainly not the only option out there for live chat support, but we have found great success in using it.

Here we can engage in real-time discussions that anyone can join at a moment’s notice. Tutors use Discord to socialize, debrief with each other during downtime, and, perhaps most importantly, seek out mentorship about specific questions and issues they face. Through this live chat support, we watched the re-emergence of the culture we missed so much: making care and support a daily practice.

Not only that, we believe it came back stronger than ever. It no longer mattered whose shifts overlapped; no one had to be around the right people at the right time to have their questions answered. Compassionate guidance can now be handed down *from* any tutor *to* any tutor at any time. Not to mention all the bonds formed from sharing media recommendations and hosting easily accessible social hours.

Speaking from a leadership position within the Writing Center, the drop-in voice chats have made it easier to check in on tutors. We’re asking for all our tutors to be courteous, compassionate individuals, and since they are pouring so much of themselves into their students, it’s only right that we should be pouring into our tutors. With everyone connected on the same platform, it became so easy to set up a one-to-one talk with a tutor and provide a space to share any doubts they may be having about their tutoring, acknowledge the difficulties of adjusting to new online features, or monitor their overall emotional needs.

Ultimately, the pandemic has challenged our notions of what is possible in maintaining and even improving a healthy and compassionate work environment virtually for our tutors, and now that we have the option to return to in-person tutoring, we won’t settle for returning to “normal,” because we don’t want to lose everything we have gained from being online.

Thank you so much for joining us, and please contact us if you have questions and/or comments.

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