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Yu Hang Kwan, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Corresponding email address:

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Establishing an Online Writing Centre: Understanding Writing Consultants' Perceptions and Experiences of Synchronous Virtual One-to-One Tutoring

Yu Hang Kwan, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Abstract

Considering the insufficient studies of the maintenance of self-access learning support and the implementation of remote writing tutoring during the coronavirus pandemic, this article fills this gap by describing two undergraduate and two postgraduate writing centre consultants' perceptions and experiences of synchronous virtual one-to-one tutoring via web conferencing. The four consultants' views were elicited through individual semi-structured interviews, which were then transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic content analysis. The interview findings revealed that the four consultants all considered synchronous virtual tutoring a viable alternative to face-to-face tutoring. While the undergraduate consultants highlighted the convenience and efficiency of web conferencing, the postgraduate consultants encountered personal challenges and issues with web conferencing. Three recommendations for consultant training and tutoring are proposed: using a collaborative writing tool, sensitising consultants to skills for facilitating online interactions, and reminding students of the 'netiquette' for web-based tutoring. In light of the continuing technological advancement and the increasing demand for distance education, the findings and recommendations will offer a point of reference to writing centre administrators and consultants for the implementation of synchronous virtual tutoring and the inclusion of web conferencing skills in consultant training.

Keywords: online learning, peer-tutoring, perceptions, web conferencing, writing centre

The COVID-19 outbreak led to a sudden surge of studies of emergency remote teaching (ERT), which refers to temporary shifts in instructional delivery from face-to-face to live-streaming through the use of video-conferencing software (VCS) because of school and university closures necessitated by large-scale crises or emergencies (Hodges et al., 2020). The COVID-19 era, as Moorhouse and Kohnke (2021a, 2021b) described, was the first time for the worldwide implementation of ERT. This affected millions of learners globally and was new to many teachers and learners who were accustomed to face-to-face teaching and learning. Driven by such circumstances, a significant body of research has dealt with a wide range of topics in ERT, such as the ways frontline teachers across the globe have modified their assessment and feedback practices to cope with the drastic change to ERT (Yu & Xu, 2021), as well as their use of VCS and e-learning management systems for remote teaching

and learning purposes. The need to support language teachers for ERT led to the conceptualisation of a model of e-classroom interactional competencies by Moorhouse and colleagues (2021, 2022). This model proposes three strands of competency: technological competence (that is, the knowledge of web-based technologies and the ability to tackle technical glitches), online environment management competence (that is, the ability to organise the virtual classroom through, for instance, lessons and materials design), and online teacher interactional competence (that is, the ability to manage interactions in the virtual classroom through, for instance, extended wait-time) (Moorhouse et al., 2021, 2022).

Among these important research areas, one line of inquiry is university teachers' and students' perceptions of ERT. An example is the interview study conducted by Moorhouse and Kohnke (2021b), surveying nine tertiary English-for-Academic-Purposes teachers' motivation. Both researchers observed that these teachers could fall into two groups: thriving and surviving. The thriving teachers appreciated their online teaching experiences, as their mastery of new pedagogical skills could be beneficial to their career advancement. In contrast, the surviving teachers found classroom rapport-building a challenge and began to doubt their professional competence. Turning the spotlight from teachers to students, some studies elicited students' perspectives on online learning. A survey conducted by Xiong and colleagues (2020) showed that less than half of the over 1,000 tertiary students found their online learning experiences neither effective nor satisfactory, although respondents having higher ICT proficiency and an affluent family background found online learning more effective and satisfactory. A similar observation was made in Yeung and Yau's (2022) study, which surveyed 145 tertiary students' perceptions of COVID-19-induced online learning. Part of their findings identified a number of socio-economic, technical, and pedagogical issues, revolving around a lack of stable network and electronic equipment, insufficient working space, and the limited quantity and less-than-satisfactory quality of student-to-student and student-to-teacher interactions. The existing body of work on university teachers' and students' perceptions of ERT, as exemplified by these studies, has described the challenges and issues with online learning, but they often concern whole-class instruction rather than out-of-class individual learning support. That is to say, there has been a lack of attention to the extent to which such challenges and issues would also apply to web-based one-to-one tutoring, which differs from classroom teaching in terms of communication settings and interactional dynamics.

While much research on the utilisation of web-based technologies for whole-class teaching has been available, a few prior studies reported on participants' perceptions and experiences of out-of-class remote language tutoring. Focusing on the provision of synchronous online language support, Andersson and Nakahashi's (2019) post-session survey results found that online tutoring was generally perceived positively. This finding corroborated Wolfe and Griffin's (2012) comparative study of face-to-face and online writing centre conferences, which revealed students' appreciation of the convenience of remote tutoring when it comes to saving commuting time. Both studies, however, identified some issues with online tutoring, such as students' inappropriate selection of locations for the conduct of online meetings and consultants' concerns about online interactions being hindered by the lack of non-verbal cues. Wolfe and Griffin (2012) also noted that students' and consultants' perceptions of online consultations could be different, as shown in two of Lee's (2012, 2014) studies. Lee (2012) found that approximately two-thirds of the tutees indicated a clear preference for traditional face-to-face writing consultations. The tutees' less-than-positive attitude towards online consultations was in contrast with the tutors' perceptions reported in Lee's (2014) study, which showed that tutors generally found hybrid and virtual tutoring satisfactory, considering it an alternative and useful instructional tool that might complement, if not substitute, face-to-face tutoring. Meanwhile, the tutors' confidence in hybrid and virtual tutoring was not high, having reservations about their effectiveness which could mainly be attributed to their tutees' inactive online learning behaviors and the use of the text-based asynchronous consultation platform, which restricted tutor-tutee interactions. Overall, these studies have enhanced our understanding of the implementation of remote writing tutoring, but they were not situated in the context of ERT and did not reflect the emergent use of VCS necessitated by a global health crisis.

In light of the insufficient studies of the maintenance of self-access learning support and the implementation of remote writing tutoring during the coronavirus pandemic, the aim of this paper is to explore how consultants working in university writing centres feel about conducting writing consultations via VCS to individual students in the virtual environment during the COVID-19-induced on-campus class suspension. With this aim in mind, the following discussion will present interview findings from part of a larger multiple-case study of synchronous virtual writing tutoring in light of this research question:

How do university writing centre consultants describe their perceptions and experiences of synchronous virtual peer writing tutoring?

The contribution of the paper is two-fold. It adds to the burgeoning literature on ERT by gauging the effectiveness of web conferencing in the maintenance of out-of-class one-to-one communication support services in the time of a public health threat. This article also adds to the writing centre literature by giving writing centre administrators an idea of the affordances and constraints of web-enabled remote writing tutoring and raising consultants' awareness of the effective use of web conferencing for more satisfactory online tutoring.

This paper will proceed as follows. The next section will introduce the research context, the consultants involved in this study, and the collection and analysis of the interview data. Then, the consultants' perceptions and experiences will be described separately to reveal 'the particularity' (Stake, 1995, p. xi) of individual cases, followed by a discussion that highlights some commonalities and variations and draws pedagogical and research recommendations.

The Present Study

Research Context

The present study was situated in Hong Kong, where face-to-face was the mainstream teaching and learning mode in higher education prior to the local COVID-19 outbreak in January 2020. The integration of information and communication technology in local universities tended to supplement in-person classes and be confined to asynchronous online learning, as in the use of learning management systems such as Moodle, where instructional materials were shared, and whole-class discussions were held (Xiong et al., 2020). Even during the one-month school closure caused by the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) epidemic in 2003, the emergency online learning was asynchronous in nature. This included downloading self-access documents and videos from the Internet (Chan, 2021) and receiving teacher written feedback on assignments via e-mail (Chan, 2003). Described as the 'biggest online learning experience for students so far in Hong Kong' (Chan, 2020), the large-scale use of web conferencing for the delivery of live-streaming classes, which was uncommon in local higher education before the pandemic (Kennedy & Fox, 2013), was triggered by the territory-wide social unrest in November 2019 and then shortly the local COVID-19 outbreak (Crawford et al., 2020; Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021b). Following the government's enforcement of physical and social distancing policy and the official mantra 'Suspending Classes without Suspending Learning' (Yeung, 2020), all university teaching

and learning activities shifted from face-to-face to synchronous virtual, regardless of teachers' and learners' readiness for ERT.

This paper is part of a larger study of writing centre peer tutoring in a leading research-intensive English-medium university in Hong Kong. The writing centre, largely modelled on the North American writing centre framework, offers one-to-one consultations in which consultants discuss students' writing and assist them in becoming critical readers, autonomous decision-makers, and careful proofreaders of their work. Each semester, the writing centre consultant team has about 40 paid, part-time student-consultants, consisting of undergraduates, research postgraduates, and taught postgraduates from ten faculties of the university. The consultants are either returning (that is, those who served on the centre in the previous semester(s)) or new (that is, those who just joined the centre), serving the writing centre clientele who are government-funded undergraduate and postgraduate students of the university. As the local coronavirus situation at the time of this study remained unstable, all instructional activities at the university, including writing centre tutoring, were fully online via Zoom, a web conferencing tool for real-time one-to-one and group meetings. In the synchronous virtual consultations the author observed, it appeared to be common for consultants to screen-share the student's work so that they both could go through it together, although some other strategies were noted by the writing centre deputy director, for instance, asking students to write in the 'Chat' box and using a shared document (personal communication, January 11, 2022).

Participants

The data for this paper came from four trained consultants¹ working at the writing centre within the 2020/2021 academic year. Two of them, Antonia and Belinda (pseudonyms), were new consultants who joined the writing centre in the spring semester of 2021. They were second-year undergraduate consultants and had a one-and-a-half-year experience of university English academic writing. The other two, Carmen and Desmond (again pseudonyms), were returning final-year research postgraduate consultants. Carmen joined in mid-January 2020, which was just one week prior to the coronavirus outbreak in Hong Kong. Desmond served in the writing centre since its establishment in September 2018, so he was the only one among the four consultants who had face-to-face tutoring experience before the pandemic. The four consultants all attended a one-week intensive pre-tutoring training for all new consultants prior to their very first tutoring at the writing centre. However, the training Antonia and Belinda attended in January 2021 included a discussion

that invited consultants-in-training to brainstorm together ways of making online consultations interactive and student-centred, while the rounds of training Carmen and Desmond received, which were in mid-January 2020 and late-August 2018, respectively, did not prepare consultants for the delivery of synchronous virtual tutoring.

Data Collection

The findings to be presented below were taken from individual semi-structured interviews conducted with the four case study consultants. This method was selected as it fits the aim of this paper, which is to explore the university writing centre consultants' 'lived experiences of, thoughts about, and feelings for' (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 377) emergency remote tutoring during COVID-19. The interviews, which lasted for 45-80 minutes, were audio-recorded and done in English either online via Zoom (for Antonia, Belinda, and Carmen) or face-to-face (for Desmond). Desmond's interview was conducted away from the writing centre, enabling the consultant to talk freely about his tutoring. One section of the interview concerned the consultants' self-reported perceptions and experiences of contingency synchronous remote writing tutoring. Specifically, the four consultants were invited to share their thoughts on these four core areas:

- experience of VCS and degree of satisfaction with the use of the virtual tool (Zoom) for writing consultations;
- perceptions of the use of virtual tools for writing consultations;
- key skills for the delivery of effective virtual writing consultations; and
- possibility for virtual consultations to replace face-to-face consultations.

These areas, which expanded on the research question, served as prompts that guided the interview (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014). Additional and follow-up questions were also asked to elicit data that could enrich the consultants' descriptions, for instance, Desmond's comparison of his face-to-face and synchronous virtual tutoring experiences.

Data Analysis

The analysis and interpretations of the interview data followed a three-stage thematic content analysis recommended in the methodological literature (Miles et al., 2019). The first stage, involving the verbatim transcription of the audio-recorded interviews and back-and-forth reading of the interview transcripts, was the initial identification of emerging ideas. These preliminary ideas, together with the four core areas set off in the interview guide, led to the generation of a coding scheme which listed the themes and their corresponding sub-themes. In the second stage, the transcripts were re-read and coded using the coding scheme,

which could keep the analysis consistent. During this process, the coding scheme, including the connection between the themes and sub-themes, was also collated, and extracts were chosen from the transcripts that illustrate the themes and sub-themes. The final stage was to summarise the results by, for instance, identifying areas of convergence and divergence among the four consultants, and situating the findings in the literature on contingency synchronous virtual education. It is believed that through this analysis, the themes and sub-themes would shed light on the overarching theme, that is, consultants' descriptions of their perceptions and experiences of contingency synchronous remote writing tutoring.

Findings

This section describes the four writing centre consultants' individual perceptions and experiences of synchronous virtual peer writing tutoring, beginning with the two undergraduate consultants, Antonia and Belinda and then the two research postgraduate consultants, Carmen and Desmond.

Antonia

Consultant Antonia was a second-year undergraduate majoring in law. She joined the writing centre in mid-January 2021, and this was her first time to hold synchronous virtual consultations. She found the use of Zoom for writing tutoring 'very satisfactory' (as reflected in her rating of '6' for her Zoom tutoring experience) and reiterated in the interview that this consultation mode was convenient in terms of time and efficiency, thereby fitting her self-perceived personality as a 'very efficiency- and results-oriented' person. She also mentioned that the web conferencing tool was 'quite easy to use', in particular, the screen-sharing function, which was 'very effective'. Antonia said she was aware of some issues with synchronous virtual tutoring, but simultaneously she stated affirmatively that 'the pros outweigh the cons'. Her preference for online over face-to-face consultations is clearly reflected in her comment: 'if these consultations weren't conducted on Zoom, I'll probably wouldn't have signed up for peer consultant'. An interesting idea that she mentioned in the interview to substantiate her support for synchronous virtual tutoring was a cost-benefit analysis. The crux of her 'analysis' was that this consultation mode has the advantages of convenience and efficiency that face-to-face tutoring lacks:

I think that online online is very, very efficient I feel. Because um let's say if it were in-person, for example, and I have to take one hour to go to [the university]. Only preparation I'll spend is probably that one-hour commute hour to that one-hour

commute to [the university]. Realistically that's the only preparation I'll make. But because of Zoom, and I can just do it I just hop on Zoom and then help online. Then I can afford to do more preparation in that regard.

In other words, Antonia believed that web-based tutoring enabled consultants to save time or make better use of time for more pre-meeting preparations, instead of wasting time on travelling to the university campus for face-to-face consultations.

Belinda

As a new consultant who joined the writing centre in mid-January 2021, Belinda delivered synchronous virtual tutoring for the first time. In common with Consultant Antonia, she also described her perceptions and experiences of synchronous virtual tutoring as very positive. In the interview, she often underscored the convenience of web conferencing in support of virtual consultations. By 'convenience', she basically pointed to physical location and time. To her, virtual consultations could be conducted not only at home using a computer but also at any place with Internet connection using alternative electronic gadgets such as iPads or smartphones, without the need to commute to the campus simply for a half-an-hour consultation. Her justifications for the convenience of web-based tutoring could be illustrated in these two interview excerpts:

it's quite short like 30-minute consultation session and if I have to make like an-hour-long commute to school for a 30-minute consultation session like I think it's not worth it.

you can just go to a place of Internet connection. You don't even need like a computer. You can just use an iPad or phone. I've done phone consultation exact but it worked. But but it's so convenient for me and probably for the tutees as well.

Belinda's perceived convenience of web conferencing was why she thought virtual consultations, in her words, 'work[ed] just fine' for her and could definitely replace face-to-face consultations, as reflected in her giving a rating of '6' (meaning 'very satisfactory') for the possibility for synchronous virtual consultations to replace face-to-face consultations. However, having experience using Zoom for attending lectures and two other virtual tools (that is, Discord and Google Meet), she found Google Meet better than Zoom and indeed recommended using the former as an alternative writing tutoring platform for three reasons: higher stability of the use of virtual backgrounds, unrestricted length of meetings, and the fact that it is free. Despite her minor criticisms about Zoom, she gave a rating of '5' (1 = not satisfactory; 6 = very satisfactory) for her level of satisfaction with the use of Zoom for

writing tutoring as she believed consultants and writers would be familiar with the screen annotation and sharing functions on Zoom.

While the two undergraduate consultants appreciated the affordances of web conferencing for out-of-class individual writing tutoring, the two research postgraduate consultants raised some challenges and issues. The following will delineate Carmen's and Desmond's perceptions and experiences of synchronous virtual peer writing tutoring.

Carmen

Consultant Carmen was a fourth-year research postgraduate doing her PhD in education and had almost no VCS experience prior to the pandemic. Since the pre-tutoring training she attended did not cover skills for the delivery of synchronous virtual tutoring, she admitted her unfamiliarity with how to do tutoring online and use the web conferencing software, Zoom. Yet in the end, she gave a rating of '5.5' (1 = not satisfactory; 6 = very satisfactory) to reflect her satisfaction with the use of Zoom for writing tutoring, commenting that this was 'the best we can do' given the physical and social distancing policy. She also reiterated nearly ten times that Zoom worked well for writing tutoring. However, she suggested using Google Docs instead of the screen-sharing function, which she described as 'tricky' as only the consultant or the writer was in control of the screen. Despite the issues, including Internet connection and 'the lack of being in-person with the other person', she regarded these as general issues with remote education instead of Zoom's faults. While she had positive perceptions of synchronous virtual tutoring, she disagreed strongly that synchronous virtual tutoring would ever substitute face-to-face tutoring because each consultation mode has its own affordances and is thus 'definitely going to be different'. Arguing that both tutoring modes play a complementary role, she repeatedly suggested allowing writers the freedom to choose either face-to-face or synchronous virtual consultations, 'depending on what works for them'.

Meanwhile, Carmen described two challenges related to consultant-writer interactions. The first one concerned the uncertainty on her side when writers did not turn on the web camera and show non-verbal cues:

sometimes I'm not sure the student can hear me are like they a lot of them don't put video on so that's kind of even more difficult because I can't see what they're doing or like if they're even there anyway.

In view of this, she suggested consultants be, in her words, slightly more 'pushy or forward' by prompting more often and asking softball questions to check the writers'

presence. The absence of non-verbal cues also led to the difficulty in rapport-building, which she thought could be easier to achieve in face-to-face consultations. The second challenge was the existence of a sense of informality, which Carmen illustrated using two authentic scenarios. In the first scenario, she had difficulty communicating with a writer taking the Mass Transit Railway and having the consultation over the phone. In the second scenario, she met a writer who left in the middle of the consultation after receiving a call. She attributed this to the effects of consultation modes:

I feel like if it wasn't in-person, she would not have left so suddenly. She would have maybe ignored her phone or stayed a little bit longer, but because it was over Zoom or over like our computers, like there's that sense of informality and that sense of like distance between us, so she felt like 'oh this is more important' so by and then she left.

These challenges faced by Carmen were echoed by Desmond, whose case will be described below.

Desmond

Having tertiary teaching experience in and outside Hong Kong, Consultant Desmond was another research postgraduate doing his PhD in applied linguistics. As already mentioned, in this study, he was the only consultant who had experience with face-to-face writing consultations, so he was able to share his feelings about face-to-face and synchronous virtual tutoring. Prior to the coronavirus outbreak, he had some VCS experience for educational purposes, including research-sharing in a webinar and an online guest lecture, and using Camtasia for a flipped classroom project during his previous teaching in Taiwan. Desmond felt positive about Zoom, commenting that it was 'quite easy to use' and 'very accessible to the beginner'. He also gave a rating of '6' (meaning 'very satisfactory') for his satisfaction with the use of Zoom for writing consultations. However, he stressed that synchronous virtual tutoring was 'a must' as there were no other alternatives in the light of the physical and social distancing policy, and the use of VCS was just 'a mediation' that should not override the purpose of writing centre peer tutoring, that is, to alert writers to their writing issues.

Although Desmond appreciated the affordance of web conferencing for out-of-class individual tutoring, he underscored his preference for face-to-face tutoring three times in the interview. Meanwhile, he described two issues with synchronous virtual consultations, one of which concerned the inconvenience caused by Zoom's screen-sharing function. Although, as

mentioned earlier, he praised Zoom for its ease and accessibility for beginners, he described the screen-sharing function as ‘very distracting’. The reason was that in a Zoom meeting, the speaker is only allowed to share only one content on the screen at one time, and he found it troublesome to switch to another content when trying to screen-share different content with a writer in a consultation, although he knew that these additional steps could protect the speaker’s privacy. In his view, it was easier to use a computer to navigate directly from one application window to another one in face-to-face consultations.

Besides the perceived troubles involved in screen-sharing, the second issue that Desmond raised concerned consultant-writer interactions. While he claimed that he ‘would particularly reduce [his] tutor talk’ in face-to-face tutoring, he had difficulty controlling the pacing and amount of talk, as well as observing writers’ non-verbal reactions. The interactional challenges he encountered in synchronous virtual consultations are illustrated in this truncated interview extract:

when I’m doing the online consultation [...] I would have to be kind of rushing out all the time [...] when dealing with the tutee face-to-face because you can tell you can tell very easily whether she’s satisfied with the something you just said or whether she’s she needs more help.

In his opinion, in face-to-face consultations, he was able to notice writers’ para-linguistic cues, including gestures, based on which he could adjust his speaking pace accordingly. In connection with his preference for face-to-face tutoring, he further described writing centre peer tutoring as, in his words, a ‘social activity’ that would probably be established better through physical presence and in-person contact with the writers.

Discussion and Conclusion

In view of a shortage of studies on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the provision of out-of-class individual learning support, this article reported on how four university writing centre consultants described their perceptions and experiences of synchronous virtual writing tutoring. The interview data revealed that the four consultants all found synchronous virtual tutoring a viable alternative to face-to-face tutoring under the physical and social distancing policy. Such a convergence was reflected in the consultants’ indications of a high level of satisfaction with the use of Zoom for writing consultations, echoing Lee’s (2014) finding that the writing tutors in her study generally found virtual consultations satisfactory and considered it an alternative to face-to-face consultations. The

consultants' sharing also led to the identification of a range of salient themes that offered insights into their synchronous virtual tutoring experiences, including strengths and limitations of the web conferencing technology for writing centre tutoring, additional interactional skills for remote tutoring, suggestions on the delivery of remote tutoring, etc. Although this study only involved the cases of four consultants, and thus the findings cannot be generalisable, an interesting observation that emerged from the interview data was that there seemed to be a connection between the consultants' academic levels as undergraduates and research postgraduates and the divergence of their self-reported perceptions and experiences of virtual synchronous peer writing tutoring. This key finding will be discussed below.

The two undergraduate consultants, Antonia and Belinda, had positive perceptions and experiences of synchronous virtual writing tutoring, which could be deduced from the ways they highlighted the convenience and efficiency of web conferencing in the interviews. This coincided with the findings reported in prior studies of writing centre tutoring (Wolfe & Griffin, 2012) and COVID-19-induced ERT (for instance, see Erlam and colleagues (2021)) and was described in theoretical discussion (for instance, see Anderson (2011)) as one of the advantages of distance education. The two consultants' support for synchronous virtual writing tutoring might probably be justified by two reasons. The first one concerns the physical location of the university writing centre, which is accessible by public transport yet not near the hub of the Hong Kong territory. For both consultants, commuting between their homes and the university campus usually took approximately two hours, which could be utilised for better pre-consultation preparations. Another reason could be that the two undergraduate consultants, the same as other undergraduates, must attend several courses each semester and finish the coursework, which were identified as sources of academic stress among undergraduates (Ng et al., 2016). Their orientation towards efficiency and time-saving, in tandem with the flexibility brought by web conferencing, might account for their preference for synchronous virtual writing tutoring, because they could not allow the part-time paid writing centre job to override their full-time studies.

The two research postgraduate consultants, Carmen and Desmond, however, were slightly critical of synchronous virtual writing tutoring, although their perceptions and experiences of it were certainly not negative. Unlike undergraduates preoccupied with a number of courses and the associated coursework (Ng et al., 2016), both consultants were in their ultimate year of study and near thesis submission, so the need for convenience and

efficiency would not be their main concern. Instead, the personal challenges and issues they shared in the interviews mainly revolved around the quality of interactions and a sense of informality, which were again reported in not only prior studies of the shortcomings of online education (for instance, see Cornelius (2014) and Rehn et al. (2018)) but also the more recent work on COVID-19-induced ERT (for instance, see Moorhouse and Kohnke (2021b) and Yeung and Yau (2022)). The two consultants' less positive view on synchronous virtual writing tutoring might perhaps be attributed to their background as educational researchers (and, in Desmond's case, his years of university English teaching experience prior to his doctoral studies). Both consultants were probably informed by some influential theories in education studies that underscored the centrality of interactions in teaching and tutoring, and could thus be more sensitive to issues in teaching and learning and more likely to be aware of the quality of consultant-writer interactions or, more specifically, writers' involvement in consultations. Such concerns about interactional quality could be understandable, as interactions were found to be a crucial factor that could influence students' online learning satisfaction (Sher, 2009), and the absence of non-verbal cues in the online environment could negatively impact student involvement and interactional quality (Yeung & Yau, 2022).

Another area of divergence between the two undergraduate and the two research postgraduate consultants was their perceptions of the possibility of replacing synchronous virtual consultations with face-to-face consultations. The two undergraduate consultants were uniformly positive about such a possibility, again referring to the convenience and efficiency of VCS as justifications for their stance. The two research postgraduate consultants, however, remained doubtful about this because of interactional issues, including the difficulty eliciting non-verbal feedback from writers and establishing rapport and personal touch with them in synchronous virtual tutoring. Both consultants also added that this consultation mode might, at best, serve a complementary rather than substitutionary role. Their concerns, which were also noted in Wasilik and Bolliger's (2009) survey study of university instructors who had frustration about the lack of face-to-face interactions in online teaching despite their general satisfaction with it, might be justified by two reasons. First, the consultants' uncertainty surrounding the effectiveness of online tutoring reflects the general perception that online interaction is inferior and superficial (Ko & Rossen, 2017; Martinez & Olsen, 2015) and lacks a sense of connectedness in the light of physical distance (Rose & Adams, 2014). A similar line of argument was put forward by Lee (2012), who referred to Ryan's self-determination theory and Wenger's social learning theory to explain that conventional face-

to-face writing consultations allowed learners to satisfy psychological needs and achieve comfort and security by communicating with a real person. Another reason might be related to the two research postgraduate consultants' unfamiliarity with synchronous virtual tutoring given their limited web conferencing experience, which was in contrast to the two undergraduate consultants' richer web conferencing experience accumulated through conducting writing centre tutoring as well as taking university courses online. It has been suggested that students' web conferencing experiences, along with their digital literacy and skills, are likely to be commensurate with their effectiveness and satisfaction with online teaching and learning (Xiong et al., 2020).

In light of the two research postgraduate consultants' concerns about synchronous virtual writing centre tutoring, some recommendations for consultant training and tutoring could be considered. The first recommendation, as Consultant Carmen suggested in the interview, is to introduce the use of Google Docs as an alternative to screen-sharing. As the latter allows only one participant to control the screen, Google Docs, as documented in the literature on collaborative writing (Ting, 2020), has the advantage of enabling both the consultant and the writer to involve in the writing process simultaneously by adding annotations and texts to the same document during the consultations (Andersson & Nakahashi, 2019). Using this application, writers may, for instance, revise their writing on the spot and seek consultants' immediate feedback. Another two recommendations are related to strengthening the quality of consultant-writer interactions. First, while appreciating the strengths of VCS, consultants may need to be sensitised to some potential interactional issues with web-based tutoring and some skills for facilitating online interactions (Moorhouse et al., 2021, 2022; Rehn et al., 2018), including but not limited to pacing and maximising writers' talk via, for instance, asking softball questions to check their understanding and presence in the consultations, especially when writers choose to turn off their web cameras. Related to this recommendation, a further suggestion, made by Consultant Carmen, is to create a list of 'Frequently Asked Questions' that outlines the common issues with synchronous virtual writing and ways used by other consultants to overcome these challenges. Second, writers could be reminded of the 'netiquette' as well as the affordances and constraints of video-conferencing (Moorhouse et al., 2021, 2022), such as staying in a non-distracting environment with stable Internet connection (Andersson & Nakahashi, 2019), giving constant verbal and non-verbal feedback to their consultants, and participating respectfully in the

consultations which are still a form of institutional talk between a member of the university writing centre and a student.

It is hoped that these findings and recommendations will offer a point of reference to writing centre administrators and consultants for the implementation of synchronous virtual tutoring and the inclusion of web conferencing skills in consultant training. To further this line of inquiry, future studies may consider the following suggestions. First, given that this paper is based on the data from the author's multiple-case study, a follow-up investigation involving a larger number of university writing centre consultants needs to be conducted to gather a wider range of ideas for tutoring via video-conferencing. Second, it would be worthwhile to examine actual online consultations and/or contrast them with face-to-face consultations to gauge the similarities and differences between the two consultation modes and to add insights into consultants' self-reported perceptions and experiences of synchronous virtual writing tutoring. Third, as this study only interviewed writing centre consultants, it would be equally vital to collect writers' views and see if they share similar perceptions and experiences of synchronous virtual writing tutoring as the four consultants. Notwithstanding the limitations of this study, the findings will serve as a baseline for more studies of the use of VCS for the provision of synchronous remote individual tutoring not only in the time of crisis, but also in the future owing to the continuing technological advancement and the increasing demand for distance education (de Jong et al., 2018; Martin & Parker, 2014).

Note

¹ With the approval from the university ethics committee and the writing centre administrators, an invitation was sent to all writing centre consultants for possible involvement in this study. By the end of the 2020/2021 academic year, four complete cases were collected from the four consultants mentioned in this article.

Notes on the Contributor

Yu Hang Kwan is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Applied English Studies, The University of Hong Kong. His doctoral thesis is a multiple-case study of synchronous virtual writing centre peer tutoring at a university in Hong Kong. In addition to writing centres, his research interests include discourse analysis, pragmatics, and second language writing.

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