2002

It's a Wrap: Digital Video and Tutor Training

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Recommended Citation
Hickey, Dona, and Joe Essid. "It's a Wrap: Digital Video and Tutor Training." *The Writing Lab Newsletter* 26, no. 6 (2002): 13-16.

It's a wrap: Digital video and tutor training

All tutors, no matter their level of experience, run into difficult moments with writers. Certainly, we have all met writers who are:

- angry at their professors
- expecting only grammatical assistance
- reluctant to make any changes
- older than the tutor and not certain of the tutor's expertise
- hoping for a "fix" from a tutor who will do the writer's work.

Skilled tutors can, of course, adapt to most situations and respond ethically to these and other typical "trouble spots." The situation is very different for novice tutors. The problems outlined above, while common enough, may not crop up during a novice's apprenticeship. At our university we train tutors during a semester in which a new tutor might observe a half a dozen tutorials and conduct, under varying levels of supervision, a dozen more. Every year in our program, a few trainees come to me worried about the outcome of a tutorial. Some ethical line may have been crossed, a writer may have left the conference angry or confused, or a professor may have contacted the writing center with a complaint.

While we have gradually improved the content of our training course, including more "sample" papers, guided apprenticeships with faculty members and their classes, and exercises such as mock tutorials, students and faculty alike hoped we could better prepare apprentices for a range of ethical and pedagogical dilemmas that can occur.

For this reason, we began to consider adding video tutorials to our library of materials. Traditional videotape appealed to us early on, but it lacks the interactive nature of our other training materials and in-class exercises. A linear videotape may work very well to introduce and demystify a writing center's services, a use Sara Sobota has made of video at Coastal Carolina University, but the audience for our project is the novice tutor, not the new visitor to the center. Since our staff has access to some high-end video editing equipment and a staff well trained in Web design, we decided to try an experiment with digital video (or DV), a Web site with multiple video clips for different approaches to "tough tutorials." We quickly realized that the Web site could also include the texts of essays used in the tutorials, scenario notes, and a Web-based response exercise. After obtaining a university grant to purchase a computer for editing and higher-end Web design, and with a borrowed DV camera in hand, students in the training class designed the five scenarios above and we began filming.

A hidden agenda?

Our pedagogy for the project was straightforward, although we had goals beyond training tutors more effectively. We hoped that tutorial excellence would influence faculty to change some of their own bad habits.

First, we never intended to replace our face-to-face training in the Writing Center. As the class members discussed the project, we all felt that tutors-in-training should experience common frustrations and develop workable solutions for situations they might not encounter in their observations and apprentice tutorials. Following the advice given in Steve Sherwood's "Apprenticed to Failure," we decided that we should deliberately fail with some approaches and ask apprentices to reflect on why other tactics backfire. Including failures has worked well for others using video; Sobota's informational videos for freshman writers include humorous moments when tutors provide bad advice or insult writers in a manner "exaggerated to highlight the absurdity of the actors' assumptions" (13). We also included several "over-the-top" failures, with writers storming out of the center, slamming doors behind them.

A second reason for the project was to train a staff that is widely dispersed and often not in touch with "home base" for weeks at a time. While the writing center has a regular staff of tutors, our WAC program uses "Writing Fellows," trained alongside the peer tutors, who work across campus after being assigned to classes. Preparing them for such independent work means giving them the most flexible training possible. We also have a goal of providing follow-up training for existing tutors and Fellows. With over 40 tutors and Writing Fellows working in a given semester, we find that ongoing training (timely e-mail, new Web resources, a printed newsletter) works better than mandatory staff meetings and seminars. We have found that even when we pay undergraduates to attend meetings, we are fortunate to get a 50% turnout.

We also wanted to impress our colleagues and superiors even as we alter their perceptions of how best to include and assess writing in their courses. Our Writing Center and WAC program are "sharers" rather than "seclusionists," as Michael Pemberton might call us (qtd. in Cogie 47). Our reports to professors emphasize the collaborative nature of peer tutorials: tutors and writers meet to discuss an essay; the faculty member gets a report—with notes from the tutor and writer—and a chance to ask tutors or the Writing Center Director any ques-

tions. Through the Web and other methods of publication, WAC and the Writing Center make faculty aware that *their* peers consider work with a tutor a sign of motivation, not of laziness or lack of ability. We are also proud to be perceived as using "cutting edge" technology for training tutors, even as we maintain a face-to-face tutoring operation (we do not yet have an OWL). On our campus as on most others, departments and programs increasingly compete for funding, space, and grants. By using technology judiciously and with students actively involved (a goal of the university's strategic plan, we often note in funding requests), we gain the respect of colleagues, alumni, and administrators. We have a strong reputation as a unit that "does technology right," and that has consistently helped us to increase our budget and obtain new equipment and facilities.

The scenarios

The class filmed these five representative scenarios in Fall, 1999 and a few students helped to edit tape and produce the Web materials between January and August of 2000.

The angry writer: Laura, a freshman in a rigorous humanities course, hates the class, does not want to write a paper, thinks her professor gives vague assignments, yet has never had much trouble with writing before. Ann has to control her own emotional responses and somehow get Laura to care about her paper and about working with a peer tutor. We invented several patently bad reactions by Ann, including becoming angry at Laura (with Laura storming out), patronizing Laura too much, and criticizing the professor. More effective approaches from Ann include acknowledging Laura's anger, focusing on the paper, and noting in an ethical manner that Ann, too, has had trouble in challenging classes.

The fix-it shop: Luke is in a terrible fix. Siobhan wants him to write her paper. Luke tries a variety of heuristics and tactics. Some of them backfire, others work well. We probably filmed more approaches to this scenario than for any of the others; the actors had been in the same situation, especially with friends who came to them for help. The actors wanted to simulate the ways in which a tutor can get a writer to do her own work through the use of techniques such as glossing and nutshelling ideas, through asking a range of specific and general questions, and through using Rogerian techniques of repeating key words to the writer and then asking for more detail about these "code words" not fully explained in the essay (Flower 90-95). Bad techniques were easy to film: Luke did everything from breaking our honor code by writing the paper for Siobhan to overreacting to Siobhan's request for unethical help, enraging her by repeating, in a condescending way, our policy on plagiarism.

The reluctant revisor: Lisa has always been rewarded for her work, but suddenly she has been sent to the Writing Center. Emma sees some areas for improvement in Lisa's essay, but Lisa wants to cling to every word. Emma tries a number of techniques to acknowledge the strengths in the draft while showing Lisa that some areas remain unclear to her. Depending on Emma's approach, Lisa either leaves overwhelmed and unsure about her writing ability or goes away from the tutorial confident, feeling that she has written a solid paper that requires some thoughtful reworking.

The grammar tutorial: A professor wants Bryan to get help with almost every grammatical rule. As Bryan rattles off the list of inexcusable errors from the professor's referral form, Daisy sees different grammatical or other, less local patterns of rhetorical weakness in the essay. Daisy tries the effective approaches of working first with the most pressing rhetorical problems in the paper, then assisting Bryan with the most serious and repeated sentence-level errors. However, in other scenes intended to demonstrate poor practice, Daisy also offends Bryan by insisting that his word processor has a grammar check and such work is beneath her. She also fails to use effectively our online writing handbook in one scene, while in another scene uses it effectively to reinforce a point and to give Bryan "something to take home."

The nontraditional student: Susan has a busy life: children, job, volunteer work, classes. Her work for classes has become overwhelming. Hannah has a tough job because she does not have a lot of experience with older students. Hannah tries too hard to treat Susan like a peer, and this approach backfires as Hannah's bland reassurances about "college" clash with Susan's experience as a nontraditional student. In an alternative scene, Hannah approaches Susan professionally and works on specific aspects of the paper. Yet another scene has Hannah trying to address every problem in Susan's work and overwhelming her with advice. This scene contrasts with others in which Hannah focuses her advice and Susan responds more favorably.

The process of making the videos

After the student teams had selected the five scenarios, they divided the tasks for the filming. Two students worked as actors, and another provided the paper (with intentional errors) that became the basis for the tutorial. Two other students wrote scripts and a variety of storyboards. Each storyboard charted the course of the tutorial using a series of cartoon images and dialog boxes, and at every point where a tutor could try a different tactic, the designers sketched out the results. We then shot film for each panel on the storyboards.

For the day of filming, we has asked the actors to study—but not memorize—the dialogue in the scripts. The student and faculty "crew" asked the students to improvise dialogue for each scene sketched out in the storyboard, paying careful attention to any "rich bits" of dialogue from the scripts and using only those words verbatim. We had not expected such good acting from the students. Their success probably came from their experience as tutors. By the day of filming, everyone in

the training class had worked as an apprentice tutor for nearly a semester. This on-the-job experience let the tutors simulate the give-and-take of a difficult tutorial very effectively.

Several "takes" were done for certain scenes. In the weeks following the filming, a Writing Fellow reviewed all the tape and noted which takes worked best, which had good moments, and which went in *Media 100*'s "blooper bin." We then began the process of digitizing the film and making the *Quicktime* movies now available. At the same time, we worked out the fine points of the Web design, finally settling on the graphics and menus now used. We tested a mock-up of the site with as many versions of *Netscape* and *Explorer* as we could, both on PCs and Macs.

Technological aspects of the project:

We put this aspect of the project last, because we believe that pedagogy should drive technological choices. After deciding our purposes for the scenarios and the ways in which readers would interact with the materials, we turned to Web design.

We wanted a completely Web-based project using off-the-shelf, free technologies that could work on any modern PC or Mac browser, such as *Quicktime* and standard HTML tags. Our primary audience on campus has a lot of "bandwidth" available (T1 connections in all buildings and dorms) and most students now have computers in their rooms. For this primary audience we developed a "high bandwidth" version of the project in which each video scene ranges between 5 and 40 megabytes. For off-campus audiences with slower network connections, we began work on a "low bandwidth" version with video scenes compressed to about 1/5 the size of the on-campus videos.

We discovered that even the "low bandwidth" version does not work well over a modem. This occurs since our campus Web server does not fully support streaming video at high speeds. Even when the Writing Center brings its own streaming video server online next year (something that will better support those with modem access), we will provide by request CD-ROM versions of the low-bandwidth version at our cost plus a few dollars, to those requesting them.

We have been asked by several people at conferences or on campus, impressed by the quality of the video scenes, whether we would soon "take the project commercial." We answer with a resounding "NO" every time. Granted, a commercialized project under the aegis of a large academic publishing house might gain a more professional level of design and a wider audience. We anticipated, however, a *free* or "shareware" product that writing center professionals and tutors could employ in their training. In the cyberpunk spirit that "information wants to be free," we will continue to take advantage of our campus' ample resources and share our intellectual property. Frankly, we fear that a commercial publisher might simply price an enhanced version of our project beyond the reach of centers with small budgets. On the other hand, the free or low-cost Web and CD versions produced by us fit the collaborative model of writing center work and the free exchange of ideas and best practices among teacher-scholars like ourselves.

Other design notes

Those contemplating a similar project should be forewarned that a heavy investment of time is needed. The filming itself was a joy: we completed all five scenarios in eight hours of filming one weekend. We even hired a caterer to provide food and had members of the groups help on "the set" with adding scenes, critiquing the story-board, and setting up camera angles and lighting. Then the time-consuming part began. Although *Media 100* and the related video equipment we used are not terribly difficult to master, we spent over 100 hours from January to July 2000 marking tape, coding the Web pages, digitizing scenes, assembling the edited clips, and compressing the video master copies with the *Media Cleaner Pro* software. Without two Writing Fellows assigned to help, the project would have been nearly impossible to complete in two semesters.

For the "broadband" version of the videos, we set the frame rate for the compression at 30 and the audio at 44.1 Khz. These settings provided good results, conveying the body language and nuances of speech used in the scenarios. The videos became much larger than we planned, of course; we had the naive idea that the entire project would fit on a single CD-ROM, but in fact barely 10% of the broadband version would fit. When preparing the "lowband" copies of the videos, we reset compression to 8 frames per second, keyframes at one frame in four, and audio to 11 Khz. We have burned a few copies of the "lowband" version, and it neatly fits onto a CD-ROM. As the project expands to 11 scenarios next year, we anticipate providing a dual-platform CD with compressed versions of the files.

We chose Apple's *Quicktime* for delivering the video. We had also considered *Realplayer*, but we found that *Quicktime* offers a less-restrictive licensing for streaming the video over our campus network. Given our desire to make these materials widely available on campus and free or at very low cost to others, we decided to try *Quicktime* as a good cross-platform solution.

What we could not do

Our intention had been to capture many different approaches to a difficult moment in a tutorial. We found, however, that our storyboards were not detailed enough. While filming we asked the actors to brainstorm, and they quickly devised other scenes that we then shot. This added some depth, but we still did not achieve the "choose your own adventure" multiplicity of outcomes we had originally imagined. We also could not capture every possible outcome in a given situation. Following our own best instincts as peer tutors, we decided that we would present common outcomes for given tutorial strategies.

Next steps

In the Fall 2000 training course, apprentice tutors designed and filmed six additional scenarios for:

- An ESL student (not *all* ESL students, but a Japanese writer new to the thesis-support pattern of American academic prose)
- A demoralized writer
- A friend who wants tutoring (shot "on location" in a noisy, cluttered dorm room)
- A writer with an offensive paper
- A student athlete
- A writer with a strong paper.

The ESL tutorial presents special challenges. A Japanese student volunteered to act in the scenario, and she is very sensitive to the needs of our second-language population on campus. We want to avoid cultural stereotypes (lumping together all "Asian" writers) while showing tutors how different educational backgrounds influence writers' ideas in areas such as the structure of papers, the use of digressions, and the citation of sources. As a longer-term goal, we would like to extend our services as video editors to our first-year composition program. We hope to develop a set of online exercises to help peer-critique groups work together more effectively. This project might include multiple drafts of essays, videos of group interaction, and write-to-learn exercises for students.

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THE WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER

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